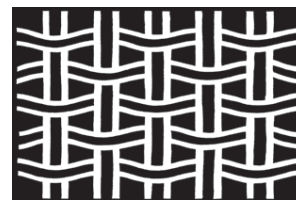


Taleemnet



Nai Talim at Purulia

A leaf straight out of India's education history

In his seminal work, *Hind Swaraj*, of 1909, M.K. Gandhi pointed out the defective nature of India's prevailing Educational Policy. In an attempt to draw out an appropriate education policy for the country, he convened a national meeting of educationists of the time.

They met at Wardha on 22nd and 23rd of October 1937. Under the chairmanship of Dr. Zakir Husain, there emerged a body of theory and practice of education known as Nai Talim or Basic Education – Buniyadi Shiksha.

In February 1938 at the Haripura Session of the Indian National Congress – presided over by Subhash Chandra Bose – a resolution in support of the new policy was adopted. The Provincial Congress Government then in office in several provinces accepted Gandhiji's scheme of Nai Talim for implementation.

In 1940, the Majhihira National Basic Educational Institution (MNBEI) was founded by Chitta Bhushan Dasgupta at Purulia, in today's West Bengal. Prior to its setting up, Chitta Bhushan Dasgupta spent time at Wardha in 1939 to receive his first lessons in basic education from Acharya Aryanayakan under the keen eye of Gandhi. Majhihira was deliberately selected for its remoteness, backwardness, poor economic conditions, social isolation, administrative apathy and inaccessibility as the site for setting up an ashram to impart education on the principles of Nai Talim.

Apart from the initial teething troubles in its first phase of initiation between 1940–1947, the institution faced many hurdles. During the 1942 Quit India Movement, it was declared 'unlawful' by the British government and closed down. The workers of the Institution were imprisoned. Even the school building, constructed with local help, was demolished.

In 1946 the interim Congress Government returned the confiscated property to the institution and compensated losses.

In its second phase of development (1947–1964) the institution expanded its activity of spreading and deepening the practice and value of Basic Education. Children from far-flung villages as well as urban areas were mentored here. The Institution had provision for spinning, weaving, carpentry, ironwork, gardening and agriculture, paper making, soap making, etc. Students were taught secular subjects with the aid and medium of these work-crafts. Aesthetic sensitivity was given as much importance as the development of craft skill. Dr. Rajendra Prasad, first President of the Republic of India, took interest in the working of the institution, offering valuable advice from time to time.



Chitta Bhushan and Malati Dasgupta (Jan 2007) Credit: Shyama Prasad Mandal

The 1970s saw ideological differences creeping in between the institution and the Education Department. The government withdrew grants. Vested interests wanted to see the institution turn dysfunctional. The struggle worked in the Ashram's favour and saw it rise again like a Phoenix. In 1991 under the auspices of the Human Resource Development Ministry, Govt. of India, MNBEI took up a comprehensive, innovative education programme. The 'Samagra Siksha Movement' was initiated in 100 centers in 100 villages. (All this, much prior to India's 'Sarva Siskha Abhiyan.') It endeavoured to promote the ideological perspective of Basic Education in the backdrop of contemporary needs: concern for the environment; village industries; crafts and sustainable agricultural supplementary options. The charkha became a tool for reestablishing the spirit of self-reliance amidst the younger generation.

Presently the Ashram school at Majhihira, upto secondary level, follows the syllabus of the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education. It retains many features of Basic Education, like spinning, safai, growing of vegetables, gardening, open air classes, instruction through play and work, etc. Even though the provision for weaving, carpentry and agriculture is still made available, these take a back seat under the obligation of completing the syllabus. The Ashram also runs a primary teacher's training institute. The work, library archives, and the ashram life itself attract many researchers, volunteers and visitors from within the country and abroad.

Malati Dasgupta, the daughter of a freedom fighter, a Maharashtrian from Nasik, came as a young bride to Chitta Bhushan in 1949. The place, language, culture as well as people in particular were all new

to her. Undaunted, within a year, she learnt Bengali and the local Manbhumi dialect. She started as a teacher at the Ashram School at Majhihira. Within a few years, Smt. Malati became the vanguard of the Ashram, retiring as its headmistress in 1982.

Both the Gandhian teachers today continue to be the guiding light of an institution that has stayed by its original vision, despite many odds. Their work has been acknowledged by prestigious lifetime achievement awards.

As Ailaan, the National Council of Rural Institute's newsletter aptly puts it, 'There is no dearth of people who can write volumes on Gandhiji. There are people who follow his teachings by the letter. But here is someone who actually implemented and practiced the spirit of Gandhian thoughts.'

Even today at 94, the charkha spins, as Chitta Bhushan dreams of the day a rural university will be set up at the ashram, making rural education come full circle, at least at Majhihira.

Dasguptaji takes recourse to quoting Khalil Gibran to express his emotional connect with Nai Talim, 'Work is love made visible.'

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(Source: based on web research)

– Nyla Coelbo.

"The Student's Prayer"

Don't impose on me what you know,

I want to explore the unknown

and be the source of my own discoveries.

Let the known be my liberation,
not my slavery.

The world of your truth can be my limitation;

your wisdom my negation.

Don't instruct me; let's walk together.

Let my riches begin where yours ends.

Show me so that I can stand on your shoulders.

Reveal yourself so that I can be something different.

You believe that every human being can love and create.

I understand, then, your fear

when I ask you to live according to your wisdom.

You will not know who I am

by listening to yourself.

Don't instruct me; let me be.

Your failure is that I be identical to you.

– Umberto Maturana