

# FOUNDATIONS OF LIVING

**The Principles and Practice of Basic Education**

A wise man . . . built his house upon a rock, And  
the rain descended, and the floods came, and the  
winds blew, and beat upon that house, and it fell  
not; for it was founded upon a rock.

by

**Marjorie Sykes**

ASHRAM PRATISHTHAN

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Foundations of Living was written in 1947 just after the  
independence. The school described in the first part was founded  
in 1917. The basic school was to be found in the 1920s.  
The school was founded by a group of people who were  
convinced that the only way to bring about a change in  
the life of the people was to start with the children.  
The school was founded in 1917. The school was  
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**Publisher's Note**



Gandhi's "last and best gift" to the Nation is Nai Talim.

Gandhiji entrusted this work to the late F. W. Aryanaya-  
kamji and Asha Devi, both of whom dedicated themselves for the  
cause till the last day of their lives. Susri Marjorie Sykes is one  
of the few sincere persons devoted to the cause of *Sarvodaya Samaj*,  
and represents in her life the true spirit of Nai Talim. She too  
worked with the Aryanayakams.

We are extremely glad to republish this booklet, *Foundations  
of Living*, on this unique occasion of the holding of a National  
Education Conference at Sevagram, and hope that it may contribute  
to serious re-thinking on the vital problems of education in which  
all of us are engaged.

JAI JAGAT

Ashram Pratishthan,  
SEVAGRAM (442102)  
Wardha (Maharashtra)  
10th October 1972

**Prabhakar**  
Secretary

## Preface to 1972 Edition



*Foundations of Living* was written in 1947, just twentyfive years ago. The schools described in the first part are schools of 1947; the basic schools were to be found in the Champaran District of Bihar; they were being developed under the auspices of the State Education Authorities, and by administrators and teachers many of whom had been inspired by contact with the Hindustani Talimi Sangh at Sevagram. The essay is the fruit of a visit to these schools, and reflects the experiences and the thoughts which arose out of many happy and informal exchanges of ideas with the Bihar workers.

It has been decided to reprint this essay in 1972 because it is felt that its principals are still valid, and that it is our task to apply them in our own generation. In essentials, educational needs and problems have not changed during the past twentyfive years; they have only become more critical and urgent. If I had been writing afresh today, I would probably have made only one change of emphasis. I refer to the following short passage towards the end of the essay :

"The life of the human family as a whole can only grow to its full strength and beauty by accepting and obeying the ultimate laws of the universe to which it belongs. The aggressive, selfish, careless exploitation by the human race of other forms of life, and of the resources of the world which is our home, wounds the life of the world".

It is only during the last ten years (since the publication in 1962 of Rachel Carson's famous book *Silent Spring*) that some men at least have begun to realise the serious and perhaps fatal nature of the wounds which our limitless greed for possessions and profits are inflicting on "space-ship Earth". It is a measure of the prophetic greatness of Gandhiji's life and work that in 1947, and long before, he had opened the eyes of his fellow-workers to some extent at least, to the folly of some forms of "modern" economics. In 1972 the implications of this aspect of his teaching both for education and for society ought to receive increasingly serious attention.

Sept. 16, 1972.

**Marjorie Sykes**

## 1. CHILDREN AND THEIR SCHOOLS

J. P. is six years old. She and her mother are sitting next to me in the bus on our twenty-mile journey home. J. P. crouches near the outer edge, her eyes on the road, her face shining with pleasure, counting—counting the furlongs, the mile stones, the lines of bullock carts, the herds of buffaloes, counting anything that can be counted, for the sheer delight of counting. At home, she scrambles round the hillside collecting sticks and twigs. 'Look what I've made, three brooms—one for you, one for mother, one for me . . . See, come and see, I've swept the yard'. She had swept the yard most thoroughly, lifting things up, replacing them, going into all the corners. A little later she finds me preparing a meal, and perches herself on the corner of the kitchen table. 'Do let me cut up the vegetables too'. We work together for a while, then we hear visitors coming. 'You go and talk to them', says J. P. (She finds grown-up talk, in English, merely dull). 'I'll cook. I can cook'. When the visitors have gone, I return; the vegetables are bubbling in the pot. She pleads to be allowed to handle a small garden knife; we adults hesitate a little, wondering whether she may cut herself, but in the end we agree. Very soon we see a set of straight rods, stripped and peeled with commendable skill and neatness, assembled on a flat bit of clean ground. J. P. is completely absorbed—she is building a house.

This is how one small girl in her seventh year spends her free time and her holidays, of her own free choice. Every one who knows children well or remembers his own childhood, will know that there are many like her. Children love to cook and clean and build and help Mother. They want work, real work, to do

But the school which J. P. attends makes no use at all of these active childish interests. She loves to use her hands, but her teacher never thinks of manual training as a means to stimulate and develop her mind. Her school does not even make intelligent use of her zeal for counting—in school counting is a mechanical routine. She and her school mates sit cramped on cumbersome benches; the teacher talks, but their attention wanders, they fidget and whisper. Very often the teacher's only idea of

'discipline' is to scold, or slap, or rap them on the head with a ruler. The children grow resentful, for they have a keen natural sense of justice. The result of repression in school is rowdiness outside. They 'let off steam', as we say, and the energy that might have been used up in enjoyable work is spent on noise and destructiveness.

Our city and village schools are not all so bad as this, but there are far too many in which the physical and intellectual energy of our children is being wasted in this way. The Basic Education movement is a challenge to start a completely different kind of school, in which this tremendous energy of childhood will be welcomed and used, and harnessed to creative activity, physical and mental. How is this done? What happens in a Basic School?

Some of J P.'s contemporaries, four, five and six years old, are attending a 'pre-basic' school. They sweep to their hearts' content, they collect kindling, they help to prepare and cook their 'lunch', they polish their tumblers, they sit and eat together, and they clean their vessels and put them away. They clean cotton, they pick out the round black seeds count them, weigh them, and then plant them in a tiny garden, and build a tiny fence. They see older children and teachers spinning, and many of the little ones pick up taklis and set to work too—sometimes with very good results. All the time their muscular control and co-ordination is growing stronger and more delicate. Like a good 'nursery school' in any country, the 'pre-basic' school offers the healthful open-air life, the balance of rest and activity, and the ordered security which little children need; it lays the foundation of clean and orderly habits; but it does not use any equipment which would be foreign to their own home traditions or beyond their parents' financial reach.

The Basic School where the older children go is a long, low, simple building standing in a couple of acres of land. There is a small, neat flower garden, a well, a simple latrine screened with bamboo or palm leaves. There is a village a few fields' distance away; within a mile, in another direction, is a second village. Children come straggling accross the fields into school; the boys are in the majority, but there are girls among them too. They get out brooms, buckets, garden tools. Some sweep, dust and arrange

classrooms, laying out equipment in readiness and order; some clean the garden paths of weeds and grass, hoe the beds, sweep up dead leaves, carry away the refuse to a compost pit. The teachers have arrived, and they also are preparing for the day's work, but they do not stand and 'supervise' the cleaning. The children work under their own leaders. A bell rings; the tools are put away, the children gather, neat and orderly, in an open space for their morning assembly. There is quiet, a simple song of worship, quiet again. The Headmaster reads the notices for the day. A boy of ten years, elected leader for the week, gives the word of dismissal. Classes are beginning.

Here are the youngest, the first-grade children. Their *taklis* are hanging on the wall, each in its little holder of hollow bamboo, marked with its owner's name. The children take their *taklis* and winding frames and settle down to work. The teacher calls out two of them and sets them to weigh the bundles of prepared slivers, count them out in twos or fives, supply them to their class mates as they are needed, and keep the record on a slate. After they have had a little practice, another pair takes their places. The other spins; when a child's *takli* is full of yarn he goes up to the teacher and she checks his counting of the rounds as he winds them on to the frame, and then watches him record the correct number on the paper which is stuck on the frame for that purpose. Another child comes up, then another, then the teacher turns to see that the record of slivers is being well kept. These are beginners—there is intense and happy concentration on the mechanics of spinning. The talk, the physical activity, the number and reading games based on the work, the stories, singing, writing and other social enterprises, will come a little later in the day.

Grade 2 has begun work differently; there is no hard and fast time-table. These children are intensely interested in their *safai*, in the names of tools and processes involved in it, and in the mechanics of reading and writing. The teacher is encouraging this enthusiasm, and oral and written composition is in full swing, based upon the morning's orderly duties. After three quarters of an hour, may be, they will be busy ginning or carding.

Grades 3 and 4 use both the takli and the charkha. For part of their craft period they are divided into groups, for cotton cleaning, ginning, carding, slivering and charkha spinning, then they all come together with their taklis. They are skilful now, and their whole attention is no longer absorbed by the process itself. As they spin, teacher and children talk over local and national news, discuss the growing of cotton, or learn a new song together. Grade 5 children are preparing from the raw cotton, all the yarn they need for their own clothes; they are able also to gin and card cotton and make slivers for the little ones, and to begin some of the simple types of weaving. In the higher grades the country looms are installed, and the children's yarn is woven into cloth.

By the time the children reach the fourth and fifth grade they read with ease and enjoyment. During the mid-day recess the little school library is a popular attraction, and many children settle down to read a book or magazine. Others wander round the garden counting the fruit. The biggest of the young trees, planted by these same children when they were little beginners, are bearing now, and if you are lucky enough to visit them at the right season, you will be charmingly offered a few treasured guavas, and told of the great day when the whole school feasted and made merry over its own groundnut harvest.

Every Basic School should have a garden, but some schools are planned so that gardening and agriculture take the place of weaving as the central productive activity of the older children. Seven acres of land surround one such school, providing both wet and dry cultivation in addition to the neat vegetable plots which the little children tend. As we draw near, one sunny August morning, the rice fields near the school building are alive with little boys of ten and eleven, planting out their rice seedlings and revelling in the mud. A class of older boys is going out to cultivate its vegetable garden. Two large fields, planted with maize and sugarcane, complete the picture: the maize, a fine crop, is nearly ripe, the sugarcane is vigorous and healthy. These fields are the great pride of the older boys, for every process, from the first ploughing to the wearisome, necessary routine of guarding the crops, has been done by their own labour.



## India

The work in the fields has not been an unthinking rule-of-thumb routine. The children have learnt something of the different varieties of seed, and chosen their strains to suit local conditions. They have studied fertilizers, and they know how much seed and fertilizer they need per acre of their land, and how much the initial outlay on their fields must be. They know what interest they would have to pay on this capital, supposing they had had to borrow, as their fathers might do, in the local market. They know something of the opportunities for cheap credit. They know the current prices offered for the crops they are ready to sell, are prepared to calculate their yield and their probable profit. In other words, the enterprise of raising a crop of maize has been the natural focus of much study of botany, soil chemistry, bacteriology, arithmetic, and economics, much practice in exposition, both in speech and writing, and much experience in co-operative organization and equitable division of labour.

Nor do these young farmers accept, unquestioned and untested, the statements made in books. They experiment for themselves. Here in a corner are twelve neatly labelled, equal rows of sugarcane. These, the children explain, represent an experiment in which they are treating three different strains of cane by four different methods of manuring; their growth is being observed and the results recorded; at harvest time the yield of each of the twelve rows will be measured and compared.

The workshop in one wing of another school is a busy place; some two dozen boys of 13 or 14 are engaged, in twos and fours, in various occupations. Here is a couple sawing planks. They are making cots for the hostel. Some one else is repairing charkhas, others are making penholders, handles for garden tools, shelves, windows and many other homely, useful things. Another whole section is working in metal; they are making bolts and nuts, hinges, simple field and garden tools, and household utensils. They offer to supply bolts at an anna each and say that they would cost four annas in the market town. They repair spindles, and supply many small necessities and conveniences for the building and equipment of school and home.

These boys too have studied the nature of their materials and the economic conditions of their craft. They know something of local timbers, their seasoning, their price, and how they

can be most profitably worked. Their knowledge of their trade is intelligent and experimental, and their knowledge is not limited to their trade. In the classrooms, for example, a keen discussion of national and local government is being carried on. It has arisen from the celebration of Independence Day and involves a considerable study of modern Indian and British history. The boys' daily diaries are neatly written and clearly arranged and reveal a great variety of interest. They record that during the previous week they made a special study of the poet Tulasidas.

In the afternoon we visit a class where the teacher is telling a story. It is a great story—of the Buddha's tenderness and compassion, or the Christ's heroic love, or the Prophet's courage for truth. When the story ends there is a short period of silent spinning. It is quiet, the hands are occupied, the thoughts are free. Perhaps many children may be thinking of the story they have just heard. There is food here for the spirit, a suggestion of the ultimate values and standards by which men live. Then the period is over, and ten minutes later there is shouting and laughter as the garden is watered or a drama practised for next week's festival.

The festival day has come. In the evening we walk over to the village, conducted by some of the children. On the outskirts is a simple but adequate latrine. 'We made that', our hosts explain, 'like the ones in school'. In some cottage courtyards are the beginnings of little vegetable gardens, 'like the ones in school'. The village is clean—the whole school community has been working to make ready for the day. A team has been busy cooking, and the feast is ready in an open space. The children and their guests sit down and eat, all of them together, whatever their caste or creed. Their parents do not join them—such doings are too new and strange and they will not easily change their ways. But they look on, not hostile, but interested and pleased, and they muster strong to see the entertainment that the school has prepared for them. The seeds of a new India are being sown.

## II. BASIC NATIONAL EDUCATION

THESE are not imaginary pictures; they are descriptions of real events in real schools. The schools are few and scattered and it has cost the teachers years of patient hard work to overcome the suspicion and hostility of the villagers and to win their confidence; there are many other basic schools, perhaps even the majority, of which the villagers are still suspicious. This may sometimes be the teachers' fault: but far more often it is the fault of circumstances beyond the teachers' control. They struggle very often against difficulties too great for their strength.

But if the basic school is still under suspicion in many villages it is still practically non-existent in the towns. Village Panchayats may often be slow to recognize its value, but University Boards of Studies are slower still. All competent critics agree that the psychological basis of Nai Talim is sound, and that its method and technique are in line with the best educational work in other countries. It has been shown clearly that children who are taught by this method compare very favourably with the products of the old schools in their intellectual achievement; in general knowledge, and in social and scientific understanding of their environment, they are much superior; and in the 'tool subjects' of reading and writing, spelling and arithmetic, they are at least the equals of the children taught by the old methods. Responsible committees of inquiry from 1940 onwards, have reported unanimously that Basic Education, 'Nai Talim', is good education, and that even in the hands of mediocre teachers and in difficult circumstances it 'draws out' and develops the children's powers of body, mind and character. Why then do we not adopt it? Why do intelligent citizens, who do not share the social prejudices which sometimes influence villagers, still prefer to send their children to the old, bookish schools? Why is there no popular demand for something better?

Gandhiji placed his ideas of Nai Talim before the nation in 1937 under the name of Basic National Education. When words are used too often, as these two words 'basic' and 'national' have been used, they tend to lose the sharp edge of their meaning and become dull and blunted. We need to recover their original freshness. What do we mean by *national* education? What do we mean by *basic* national education?

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In India for more than half a century the idea of 'national' education has been associated with the whole national movement for political, economic and cultural freedom. Indian leaders have demanded that national education should have Indian cultural traditions as its basis, not foreign ones. *Indian* languages, *Indian* literature, *Indian* history, *Indian* philosophy are the centre of interest, and foreign cultures take a secondary place. 'National' education also means that the interests of India as a whole are put before any sectional interest, whether provincial or sectarian. In this movement Rabindranath Tagore led the way; Santiniketan, and other schools inspired by national ideals, played a great part in India during the first half of this century. In the best of them there was no narrowness; Indian national feeling did not conflict with true local patriotism, or with religious loyalty; nor did it conflict with the most universal human sympathy. Rabindranath Tagore made Santiniketan, at one and the same time, a growing point of the Bengali renaissance, an inspiration to the national movement, and a world-famous centre of international friendship. He demonstrated that a man can live fully in all of these 'concentric circles' of interest.

These ideals of national education are good and true so far as they go, and they are fully accepted in the daily practice of Nai Talim. Basic schools do aim to give their children an entry into Indian national culture, while at the same time they are helped to appreciate their own special regional or religious heritage, and to develop a wider outlook as citizens of 'one world'. But these ideals alone do not go far enough or deep enough. A *basically* national education has to begin by asking what the Indian nation as a whole ought to be giving to *all* its children, and then it has to see that they get it. *Basic* national education must challenge not only foreign and sectional education, but also class education; it must serve not only the privileged minority but the whole child population; it must plan for the welfare of *every* human being in India.

There is no conflict between what is 'basic' and what is 'national' in education. My needs as a human being do not conflict with my needs as an Indian, though as an Indian I may satisfy my needs in a particular way which is determined by the geography and history of my country.

But there is a real and deep conflict of opinion about what these basic primary human needs are. This conflict is bound to continue so long as we do not agree about the nature of man and the meaning of human life. If we regard man as merely a clever animal or a complicated piece of chemical mechanism, we shall regard his basic needs as essentially physical and material—the fuel to run the machine. So long as food etc., can be had in adequate quantity, the methods by which it is secured are unimportant. But if we regard human life as more than the life of the body, then the *basic* needs of life are more than physical. If we value spiritual quality, and believe that the saints and poets and creative thinkers of the world are the true representatives of humanity, then we shall insist that our physical needs must be supplied in ways that will increase the spiritual quality of personality, and not in ways that stultify or destroy it. In the end our standards of social and educational good are derived from our fundamental belief about the nature of man. What is man, and in what does his welfare and happiness consist?

Nai Talim, as Gandhiji planned it, has a definite answer to these questions. It is not merely a good educational technique : it is an educational technique based upon a distinctive philosophy. Dr. Zakir Husain once called it 'an efficient technique of teaching allied to a revolutionary social ideology'. Vinoba Bhave insists that it is a new *idea*, not merely a new system. This new idea is based on an ancient faith, the faith in the creative spiritual nature of man. The ancient faith has been clothed afresh in the language of today. The new vision, the new idea upon which Gandhiji built his whole programme of Sarvodaya, is that the whole of our living, including our schooling, must be in harmony with this high estimate of the dignity of human life. This, he proclaimed, is the rock of truth ; this is where the foundations of society must be laid, if they are to be secure.

The real reason why Nai Talim does not make quick progress in India is that people as a whole do not fully understand or accept the *idea* which inspires it. There are some who do not want 'Hind Swaraj' according to Gandhiji's programme, because they do not accept his interpretation of the nature of man and the foundations of human welfare. This is an honest difference of outlook which has to be recognized and met. There is also the

heavy weight of inertia : it is always easier to remain in the old ruts of habit, and many are passively content to do so. But there is also a third type of opposition ; many people, especially in the towns and especially among the 'educated', do not want any fundamental change in the present system because they themselves profit by its continuance.

These opponents are fully aware of the faults of the system they support. They know that it was never intended to benefit the nation as a whole, and that it is, in effect, a class education for the middle classes, the bourgeoisie, who form the bureaucracy of Government. It aims merely to secure a certificate, a ticket of admission to a secure niche in the administrative machine. Because its purpose is narrowly utilitarian, it cannot deal with the fundamentals of living, but only with its superficialities : it inevitably becomes materialist, egoistic, second hand. Independence of thought, zest of life, generous adventure, all that goes to build a wise, vigorous, wholesome manhood, are beyond the range of its endeavour.

All this has often been said, and it is on the whole a true analysis of our situation. There are many honourable exceptions, teachers who are real *gurus*, schools where children are taught to think and taught to serve. But so long as these teachers and schools are tied to the system we have inherited from the past, they are working in chains. Vinoba remarks that when India won her independence she would not tolerate for one day the flag of the old regime. Why then does she still tolerate the bondage of its education ?

The reason is, plainly, that the educated people whose voices count in 'public opinion' are the products of the old regime, and have a strong vested interest in continuing the system. This education has made *us* comfortable, it has given *us* 'safe', salaried jobs, and we hope it will do the same for our children. Comfort makes us conservative, and behind our conservatism there is both guilt and fear.

We know, if we ever stop to think where the national wealth really comes from, that our education and comfort are paid for by villagers who never enjoy the just reward of their own labour, and whose own children have to remain ignorant and illfed.

The village labourer feeds us, clothes us and educates us—we ourselves are incapable of doing our fair share of the wealth-producing work of the world. We are, to put it bluntly, parasites; and so we are afraid of change, we are afraid of the revolution which a serious acceptance of 'basic' and 'national' ideas would bring about in our own lives. Consciously or unconsciously, we sabotage these ideas. We know that we have built our house upon the sand, but we hope that it may last our life-time before the winds and stroms sweep it away.

### III. THE FOUNDATIONS

SUPPOSE however that we do decide to abandon our 'safe' education, and throw away our certificates, and make 'whole' vigorous, wise manhood' the aim of our schools, where does Nai Talim lead us? What is the rock upon which Basic Education is founded?

Nai Talim or Basic Education, is based upon the belief that every human being needs to *make*, needs to *love*, and needs to *know*.

He needs to *make*. He has within him a creative urge that finds satisfaction when he can look upon the work of his own hands and see that it is good. He makes a farm or garden out of a wilderness; he makes fine tissues from raw cotton; he makes things of use and beauty from the raw timber and the rough metal. He makes a harmony of rhythm and sound, and calls it music; he makes a harmony of colour and form, and calls it art. By doing these things, it is true, he supplies his physical 'animal' needs, but he satisfies at the same time his *human* need for creative craftsmanship, and he rejoices in work well done for its own sake. All over the world, in the religions which reflect his picture of the universe, he has set the master-craftsman, the master-artist, among the gods. Work, patient loving mastery of a craft, is not a mere physical necessity, it is a part of the pattern and meaning of life.

Secondly, man needs to *love*, and to be loved. He needs to express and share his hopes and plans, his successes and his disappointments. He needs to belong to a group, to a family and a clan, by which he can be upheld in weakness and to which he can give his strength and skill. He needs to be a member of a team, and to accept duty and responsibility in the service of his fellow-men. Certainly man's social habits aid him to supply his material needs, but they too, like his creative impulses, are felt to be part of a pattern of living that goes far beyond material necessity.

Thirdly, man needs to *know*. There is in him a desire to discover, and to understand, which has nothing to do with any practical use to which the new knowledge may be put. There is in every normal human child a spirit of pure, objective disinterested inquiry. He sets himself to find out the nature and meaning of what he sees around him. He questions and experiments with all kinds of things that have no bearing upon his immediate physical needs. The history of science shows that inquiries which man has undertaken to satisfy this pure thirst for 'useless' knowledge, have often led indirectly to some very useful practical inventions. But the spirit which wonders and questions, which seeks knowledge and understanding for their own sake, is something much deeper and much more universal, than the desire to find easier and better ways of supplying humanity with its physical needs and conveniences.

If these are man's *basic* needs, then the progress of human society must be measured in terms of its success in satisfying those needs. That society is the most fully human in which every member finds scope for his creative powers, for his social impulses, and for his intellectual curiosity. 'There is no true progress,' says a French student of Sarvodaya, 'except towards peace, freedom, and content'. This is to put the same essential truth in different words: peace is the fruit of true social living; contentment is the fruit of satisfying work; and the *basic* freedom is the freedom of the mind. A great deal of what is commonly called 'progress' nowadays is not progress at all, it is merely the accumulation of material conveniences. To say that India is 'backward' because she has fewer motorcars, or radios, or electric lights in proportion to her population than are possessed by France or U. S. A., is simply to admit that one's idea of progress, and of human life, is materialist. But 'a man's life does not



consist in the number of things that he possesses'. A man is rich if his life holds a wealth of soul-satisfying work, a wealth of friendship and family affection, a wealth of opportunity to grow in wisdom and knowledge. It is very doubtful whether the 'progressive' countries have really made any progress in these matters in recent years.

Our progress in education must be measured by similar standards. Good education must draw out and develop these distinctively human powers of creative activity, unselfish co-operative living, and intellectual curiosity and wonder. The growing human being has very simple, but deep needs. He needs a chance to develop his physical strength, his manual skill and his intelligence; he needs to serve and to love, and to find joy in his dealings with other men and with the world around him. Joy does not depend on material possessions, it depends on the free full development of the *whole* man

#### IV. LABOUR AND SCIENCE

NAI TALIM is based on the principle that the best, simplest and most natural way to wholeness of manhood is through active, useful work. Our bodily needs have to be met by bodily labour and so bodily labour is a necessary part of the pattern of the good life. It is unmanly, unjust, and untruthful to shirk our share of this labour and so put the burden of it upon others. Nai Talim is centred on a handicraft, on the production of primary physical needs, because labour is the key to the meaning of life. Productive work is a practical expression in daily living of the meaning of truth and non-violence.

In growing his food, in making his clothing, in building and furnishing his home, in shaping his tools, a man gains health and vigour of body; he develops a sure eye and a sure touch; he tastes the craftsman's pleasure in work well done; he exercises and trains his intelligence; he enjoys the satisfaction of working with other men, and with parents, wife and children, for their common good. He learns to understand and co-operate with the laws of life, to be 'at home' in the world of nature and of man.

Such intelligent purposeful work is capable of 'calling out the best in child and man. body, mind, and spirit', and make possible 'the highest development of the intelligence and the soul. It satisfies not merely the physical needs, but *all* the basic non-physical needs of human nature.

Therefore the *immediate* end of the work programme of a basic school is something material and practical; to make cloth, to grow crops and vegetables, to prepare compost, clean and repair buildings, cook meals, and so on. These are things the child can understand: they appeal to his deep-seated desire to be an active and useful member of society. He works with his teacher and his classmates, planning, executing, recording and assessing the results. The 'acid test' of his efficiency and success, as Gandhiji said, is its economic value, the amount of usable cloth, food, manure etc., actually produced by his labour.

Because Nai Talim is tested by its material results, it is often said to be a narrowly vocational or utilitarian type of education. This is not so. The aim of Nai Talim is to educate the whole man, not to train a farm labourer or a factory 'hand'. The *immediate* end of its programmes is certainly efficient material production, but their *ultimate* end is the maturing of the child's personality in strength of body, alertness of mind in qualities of accuracy, thoroughness, patience, good humour, friendliness and unselfish service. The soul grows through joy, and joy is best found in good work done, difficulties conquered and beauty achieved. Success in the immediate end, in production, is essential to success in the ultimate end, but the *ultimate* end is what determines the programme and spirit of the school. Basic education is not a mere vocational training; its purpose is humanist, liberal, and cultural, in the best sense of those terms.

Both for its immediate end of productive efficiency, and also for its ultimate end of free, stable, vigorous manhood, the basic school must make the fullest use of the achievements of the human spirit. It must use the wealth of scientific knowledge; it must use the riches of literature, philosophy and the arts. 'There must be no narrowness', wrote Vinoba Bhave, 'in our vision of

Nai Talim. We are out to build up a great India ; therefore our intellectual training must be broad-based. Let us spend our lives in the village, but let us nourish them on the culture of the whole world. This can only come about by the yoking together of ahimsa and science . . . Nai Talim means the partnership of ahimsa and science ; from that partnership we can create heaven upon earth'.

This is the place to deal with the criticism that Basic Education is opposed to scientific development and technical and mechanical progress, and that in making handicrafts the basis of education we are 'putting the clock back' and turning our backs on the achievements of the twentieth century. This criticism is at the back of the often repeated statement that Basic Education may be a good type of education for villages (where technology is still primitive) but is unsuited for the (technically more advanced) towns.

There are two things that must be said in this connection.

1. When people speak of 'science' very often they really mean technology, and so thought and argument become confused. Science and technology are two distinct things. Science is essentially a discipline of the mind ; it is a method a tool, for the investigation of the nature of the world, and its driving force is the human impulse of pure disinterested curiosity. It is the result of man's efforts to understand his environment by disciplined observation and analysis. Its primary aim is not practical utility but intellectual comprehension.

Nai Talim places a very high value on the development of this objective, inquiring attitude of mind. But for real comprehension of their nature, essential processes must be carried out in their simplest form. The child who draws water from a river or a well, and watches the level rise and fall with the season, has a more realistic and more *scientific* knowledge of the sources of water supply than the child who turns a tap in the bathroom. The child who uses a takli and gains a *practical* mastery of the twist and strength and evenness of yarn, has at his command the raw material of a *scientific* comprehension of the processes of spinning which he will never gain by turning a handle or pressing a switch and watching a machine do the work. As an aid to the

scientific understanding of the essential nature of our environment, the hand-tool and the experience of personal mastery over matter which can be gained by its use, are of far greater value than a machine which eliminates the need for skill. 'Advanced technology' may be the enemy, not the friend, of the spirit of scientific investigation. Does even one in a hundred of the people who press an electric switch understand anything of what happens inside it?

2. Mechanical 'progress' is only of value in education or in society if it helps forward the fulfilment of humanity's basic needs. These needs, as we saw, are the need for creative work, for loving unselfish service, and for knowledge and understanding. In fulfilling these needs man provides at the same time for his simple physical necessities. Mechanical aids are not good or bad in themselves, they are good or bad as they help or hinder man's development as *man*. The immense technological developments of the last century have resulted in a huge increase in the production of material 'goods', but they have also taken away from very large numbers of people the experience of joy in creative work. The workers no longer understand the process of manufacture, and cannot share in it as a team. Men are no longer masters of their tools; they are servants of a machine. The meaning of work, and with it the meaning of life, have been degraded, because we have acted on the assumption that all that matters for our welfare is the number of things that we possess. Technology is merely a tool for increasing material production; its use must be secondary to the basic aims of life. 'What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?' Nai Talim is not opposed to machinery, but it insists that machines must be kept in their proper place. They are tools, they must not be tyrants.

## V. THE NATURE OF NAI TALIM

THE characteristics of Basic Education, as an attempt to work out these principles in practice, may be recapitulated under five heads.

First, Basic Education is *child-centred*. The natural interests of children reflect their need to understand the world in which they find themselves and to find their own place in it. As we saw at

the beginning, their freely-chosen activities show their impulse to learn, to construct and to share in the family work. The child of five or six years old is interested in the living plants and creatures which he sees around him, and in all kinds of inanimate objects which he can manipulate and master. He is interested in people, in his parents, brothers and sisters, and in other children. He is deeply interested in how things are done, in dressing and undressing, sweeping, cooking, cleaning vessels; in how men plough and fish and weave, in the potter's wheel and the carpenter's hammer and saw. A large part of the 'play' of young children consists in imitation of the serious adult activities of the community; they are happy and absorbed in any occupation which satisfies at one and the same time their love of manipulations, their social interests, and their urge to creative and productive activity.

The syllabuses which have been worked out for the various stages of basic education are really a series of suggestions as to how these natural interests and occupations of children can be made the starting-point of their education, of the 'drawing-out', of all their faculties. These activities give plenty of scope for counting and calculation, and so for arithmetic. It soon becomes clear that reading and writing have a practical use, and they are therefore eagerly learned. Cotton and grain and vegetables have to be weighed and measured, prices calculated, profit and loss recorded, planks sawn to size and buildings planned. When gardening and farming become a serious enterprise, it is of urgent practical importance to learn something of the soil and its variations, of the different plants in all their stages, of the birds and insects which are the farmer's friends and foes, of the care of stock, and of the significance of months and seasons. The manuring of a crop, the planning of a home, the preparation of a loom, can all lead into very wide fields of knowledge and interest, if only they are dealt with in a scientific spirit. That does not mean that a lot of second-hand 'scientific' jargon should be introduced: it means that the children should be encouraged to ask questions, to try experiments, to make discoveries, to reason out cause and effect.

Secondly, Basic Education is *dynamic*. Every text book of educational principles and method reminds us that 'education' means a *drawing-out* of the latent, undeveloped potentialities of

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the child, and insists that we are *not* to think of the pupil's mind as an empty box which we must stock, little by little, with logically arranged, conveniently divided little packets of information. Yet most of our schools go on stuffing their pupils with this kind of verbal information, and measure their success by their pupils' ability to repeat it in examinations. We do not ask whether they can think independently, reason clearly, or apply familiar principles to a new situation. Basic schools try to change this, and to remember that the child is a living creature, and that what it needs is a healthy, rich, nourishing soil to grow in. The syllabus is not so much 'information' which each child, at the end of each grade, is required to reproduce in the form in which it received it. It is an indication of the kind of food which ought to be present in the 'soil' of the school and community environment; that is to say, in the teachers' own field of interest, or in the books in the library, or among the craftsman, the musicians and the wise elders, of local society. Different plants grow in different ways, each taking from the soil what it can assimilate and use. Children do the same. Given their freedom they will not all ask the same questions, or read the same books. The fact that they cannot always reproduce verbally what they have read or heard is no proof that it has not been assimilated. Healthy life takes what it needs, and transforms it. The only way in which we can assess the development of a living child is by the methods we apply to the living plants; by its vigour, sturdiness and self-reliance (mental and emotional as well as physical) and by the quality of its flowers and fruit. Dynamic education, education through life, must transform our static syllabuses and our static examination systems. And first and foremost it must transform the teachers. Most of our teachers do not need training, they need conversion;\* they need to be turned right round, mentally, to look at their work from a new point of view, to see life with something of the eager, experimental interest of the children they teach. Without that conversion, mere training in a new 'technique' will only end in replacing one static system by another.

Thirdly Basic Education is *co-operative*. Human beings are not solitary animals; they grow and live in families and in communities. The basic work of the word, even in the most

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\* conversion means, literally, *turning round*.

primitive societies, is a co-operative enterprise. To base education on real work, to aim at real production, means teaching children to work *together*. This practice of co-operation must go right through the planning, the organization and the execution of every piece of work. It must influence the incentives that are employed and determine the way in which the things that are produced are to be used.

At present the spirit of competition is still far too prevalent in the average school, largely because parents and teachers, who have themselves been educated under a competitive system, cannot conceive of any other incentive. One is constantly told that children will work for a prize, or for the honour of being 'first', or for a certificate, but that without these inducements most children would not work at all. This is a libel on child nature. So far as it is true of school children, it is one of the shameful results of the utilitarian, egoistic aims of our educational system. The terrible consequences of this competition for external rewards are only too painfully clear. Our examination-ridden classrooms are no training grounds for truth or non-violence.

But the lesson of real life is that the *best things* (material things, and also intellectual and emotional and spiritual things), can be had only by working together for the common welfare. Therefore in Basic Education there is no setting of one child against another; careful records are kept of the individual's progress, but the goals are common goals, and they are to be attained by the united effort of a group of children working together.

Let us take as an example the treatment of the work of spinning. It would be very easy to introduce the element of competition into such an outwardly individualist occupation. A teacher who makes the old false assumptions about incentives would set the little ones to 'see who can do most', and call for a handclap or cheer for the winner. But in a basic school the children themselves (with the teacher to restrain them from setting an impossibly high standard), have decided how much yarn they will together aim to produce in a week. At the end of each day's spinning they add up to find their total group achievement, and measure it against the goal they want to reach.

If it falls short, everyone must try to do a little better tomorrow. This method puts the whole affair on a completely co-operative basis. This is only one example. The very powerful influence of suggestion is at work throughout the school day, silently teaching the children that co-operative work is the normal, natural, right method of managing one's affairs.

Nevertheless, as has been said, the individual is not lost sight of in the group. The teacher keeps careful record of his progress in the various aspects of school life; and the child himself is required to keep his own individual record of the day's work, of the decisions of his group, and of his own plans, interests and achievements. The record in its simplest form begins as soon as he has mastered his letters. By the time he has completed his course the daily practice in self-expression on subjects within the range of his comprehension which is afforded by class discussion on the one hand, and on the other by the writing of his diary, has given him a readiness and clarity in oral and written exposition which is notably superior to the average of the ordinary school.

In this way personal responsibility and individual talents are developed within the framework of a co-operative community, and in these simple concrete ways the Basic School child experiences the essentials of democratic freedom, which is freedom within the limits of laws freely accepted for the common good.

Fourthly, Basic Education is *non-violent*. There is a sense in which this quality is implied in what has gone before. Because it is child-centred, it does no violence to the child's natural impulses; because it is dynamic, it respects the infinite variety of human personality; because it is co-operative, it trains children in the mutual respect, the willing acceptance of law, which is essential for a non-violent society. But this non-violence is not simply the negation of violence. It is, to go back to Gandhiji's words, 'that which gives true freedom'. Freedom is a *positive* thing, it is a condition of healthful growth, whether physical, mental or spiritual. The basis of freedom is the knowledge of what things are truly to be desired. Simple healthful food, clean clothing, good shelter, good health, the pleasure of music and of rhythmic motion, the creation of beauty with one's own hands,



the joy of friendliness and fellowship in work and play, these are the things that count. These make up the happy atmosphere of a good basic school. To accept this standard of true wealth is to be set free from the craving for gold and silver, for luxurious clothes, or for artificial entertainment. The non-violent society knows what true wealth is, and being content with that, has no need to envy its neighbour. Contentment, self-restraint, the willing limitation of possession and desire, are an essential part of the ethic of Nai Talim.

This scale of values is not complete, and is not secure, unless it is founded upon a truth even deeper than the welfare of society. If the good of the nation, or even the good of humanity, is the ultimate standard of reference, there will always be a danger that the intangible 'goods' of character and intellect will be sacrificed to the supposed welfare of the group. In other words, there will be a danger of 'totalitarianism', in one form or another. The ultimate 'good' of the individual and of society can only be secure if they conform to the very nature of things, in religious language, to the will of God. Unless Nai Talim breeds individuals who can stand up against social pressure in the name of what is ultimately right and true, as Gandhi himself did, it will fail humanity at a vital point.

Finally, therefore, Basic Education sets truth in the highest place. The most delicate task of education, and the supremely important one, is to help the growing personality to feel and respond to the claims of this absolute standard of truth and goodness. Every child has to learn that his self-regarding and aggressive impulses must be sublimated and re-directed, because his own life can only reach its full flowering and fruition in the community of his fellows. But this alone is not enough. He must also understand that *the life of the human family as a whole can only grow to its full strength and beauty by accepting and obeying the ultimate laws of the universe to which it belongs. The aggressive, selfish, careless exploitation by the human race of other forms of life, and of the resources of the world which is our home, wounds the life of the world in the same way as a selfish aggressive child wounds the life of the family.*

This means that the *basic* virtues, which are the foundation of lasting freedom, are wisdom and charity. Wisdom is a hold on the ultimate, absolute truth, though it may be very simply

expressed. A wise man is one who sees the pattern of life as a whole, and shapes his own life to fit the pattern. Charity is a hold on the ultimate goodness; the truly loving, charitable soul sees the ultimate goodness reflected in the many, in all the individual lives which he meets, he feels a deep reverence for these varied personalities, he does no man any violence.

The other virtues of humanity must serve these two.

Honesty, loyalty, courage, a clear and alert intelligence, a sure and skilful hand and eye, are all good qualities. Nai Talim aims at developing them, as we have seen. But in themselves they are *secondary* virtues: unless they are founded on wisdom and charity, they can too easily be twisted to serve sectional interests or materialist philosophies. That is what has happened in Hitler's Germany, and in many other totalitarian and tyrannical states; honest men have given their skill and intelligence, their loyalty and courage, in the service of a fundamentally false and violent way of life. Only an education in wisdom and in charity can claim to be basically truthful and non-violent. If Nai Talim fosters wisdom and charity it is a spiritual education, whether or not it uses the name of God.

If India chooses Gandhiji's path, she will set to work to develop a society which respects and values human personality, and which measures progress in terms of peace and freedom and content for all, down to the humblest citizen of the remotest village. In this development the teacher and the school have a central place.

The small village communities of India, which so largely satisfied their own needs and controlled their own affairs, were also the soil which nourished her greatest thinkers, poets and saints. These communities came near to the non-violent ideal, and that ideal is still alive in the heart of India. The aim of Nai Talim is to make it, by conscious revolutionary purpose, the foundation of a new but stable Indian society. The lovely culture of the past endured because it was founded on the rock of truth. The new culture may be built of different materials, enriched by contacts with other lands and with wider knowledge, but it must be founded on the same rock, on the same evaluation of man's true nature and need.

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“ At this fateful moment in our history we have the extreme good fortune to have had presented to us a pattern and philosophy of education of such universal and fundamental worth that it may well serve as the type for bringing into being the new India which is the desire of many of us. We have no sympathy for hero-worship, and feel that there should be no withholding of criticism of an educational plan because it was presented by our great leader. With some details of Gandhiji's programme of basic education we may not agree. However, taking his concept as a whole, it presents the seeds of a method for the fulfilment and refinement of human personality, the wisdom and excellence of which will become more apparent through the year . . . inherently the concept is one of the world's great contributions to education ”

**Report of the University Education Commission (1950) p 557**

“ The movement of Basic Education launched by Mahatma Gandhi, . . . centering round some form of manual and productive work and linking it intimately with the life of the community, was a landmark in the history of education in India. It was a revolt against the sterile, book-centred and examination-oriented system of education. It created a national ferment which may not have transformed the quality of education at the primary stage, but which has certainly left its impact on educational thought and practice. The essential elements of the system are fundamentally sound, and with necessary modifications these conform a part of education, not only at the primary stage but at all stages.”

**Kothari Education Commission Report (1969) p. 208**