

Gandhian Critical Pedagogy: Reflections Towards Decolonising the Nation

-Arzuman Ara
Associate Professor, Dept. of ELE
EFL University, Shillong Campus

Abstract:

Decolonisation has been a process of undoing the *doxa* that dominate our mind and life making us enslaved to false-consciousness and leading to inequality and violence in the society. Political occupation and encroachment, imperialism in all its forms, capitalism, communalism, caste, gender and similar other forces that invade spaces and divide the human beings into categories and classes are the means of colonization. Colonization is not just territorial; it can be psychic and corporeal.

Critical Pedagogy evolved through the pedagogic praxis of the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, that aimed at creating *conscientization* (raising a critical awareness) as a means of liberty, equality and harmony in the society. Critical Pedagogy stresses that the individuals need to be aware of their own position in the society, and an informed critique of the social forces by a conscientized individual can empower her to resist the forces of oppression leading to a life of truth and harmony.

The present paper aims at exploring the Gandhian principles and philosophy of education that aims at *conscientization* and empowerment of the individuals, so that *poorna swaraj* is possible. Mere political independence from the British is not enough to get a liberated nation as “India could still be ruled by the English without the English men”. Gandhiji believed that, “the good of the individual is contained in the good of all”. Gandhiji elaborated on the forces that discriminate people and result in violence that impedes individual liberty as well as social harmony. He suggests basic education and praxis of truth that eliminates *doxa* and false-consciousness, so that, *sarvodaya* (wellness for all) becomes a possibility for the liberty of the nation. Gandhian principles of education for understanding truth, education as praxis for a life of truth, education for collective wellness, educational skill for a life resisting (capitalist) materiality and dependence etc. are similar to the tenets of Critical Pedagogy. Gandhiji elaborated his ideology and pedagogic approaches in his *Hind Swaraj*, *Constructive Programme* and *Nayee Talim* (Towards New Education). The present paper will attempt to elaborate how the Gandhian principles can be accepted as critical pedagogy that have the principles of decoloniality as well.

Key Words: Gandhi, truth, critical pedagogy, *sarvodaya*, *poorna swaraj*, *doxa*, *conscientization*, liberty, decolonization.

Introduction:

We often mention that education is the backbone of a society. Education has always been in a privileged position as an instrument of making the society and its progress. With the rise of Critical Theory, scholars have started critiquing the role of education from sociological point of view. It has prompted to see education as a site of contestation in the light of ideology, culture, class, power structures and so on. As education is seen as a ladder of social upliftment, it is also seen as a hegemonic “apparatus” of social control, domination, and oppression. A number of thinkers have thrown light on the paradoxical and dichotomous nature of how education is imparted in our contemporary society with different objectives and ideologies having different layers of domination in the pedagogic structures. The name of Michel Foucault and the scholars of the Frankfurt School are prominent in this regards. In the light of that, the current article attempts to understand Indian education with reference to M. K. Gandhi. We are all aware that Gandhi was in favour of an education system that is rooted in the soil of India. His critique of the materialist modernity forms a very relevant part of the decolonialist pedagogy. Gandhi, along with his idea of *swaraj*, also offers new thoughts on education for decolonizing the mind, and thereby, the nation.

Gandhiji’s criticism of Colonial Indian Education and the imperialistic bend:

The contemporary Indian education system is based on the colonial model which had the objectives of imperialism and cultural subjugation. In the name of promotion of science and liberal education, Western colonialist objectives, Eurocentric ideologies and white supremacist cultures were promoted to a great extent. The initial objective of the British in introducing western education in India was to produce a community of clerks with working knowledge of English. Later, this objective took a turn to “... to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern—a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and intellect” (Macaulay, 2006:202). Macaulay’s contention was aimed at a cultural subjugation and hybridization of the Indian natives. Such objectives can clearly be read through the Foucauldian viewpoint on power and subjectivity as the natives were targeted to be “civilized” and “disciplined” who would no longer oppose the

British rule. Similarly, the evangelical interest of the missionaries was aimed at religious transformation more than providing liberal education. Alok Mukherjee points out that,

“... the Utilitarian and evengelical reformers had completely different ideological positions: the former promoted an education that equipped students with practical skills whereas the latter sought an education that gave them Christian values. Yet, they were in agreement that English was the right vehicle for the education of the lower social orders.... Underlying these educational objectives was the hegemonic agenda of ensuring submission to the existing social structure by developing an appreciation of the taste and manners—the culture—of the higher social orders through an accessible ‘vernacular’, that is English, This agenda was to be taken up with greater anxiety that grew in regard to the ‘threat’ to culture by forces of philistinism and barbarism, with significant implications for the curriculum and purpose of English Studies. ...whereas in England, the trajectory of English education cut across class, in India it intersected race as well as class. Hindus were the Europeans’ lesser brethren, in a fallen state due to the loss of their golden past. English education was to restore them to their lost Aryan civilization, through initiation into its modern *avatar*, namely European (or, specifically British) culture. 2009:176-77

Gandhiji was a fervent critique of English education. He finds that such education is “false education” as it does not help “character-building” (1953, 2004, *Towards New Education*, p. 2-3). He finds that, “Higher education makes us foreigners in our own country and the primary education being practically of no use afterlife becomes almost useless” (ibid, 4). He further adds, “It is worth noting that, by receiving English Education, we have enslaved the nation. Hypocrisy, tyranny, etc., have increased, English knowing Indians have not hesitated to cheat and strike terror into the people” (ibid, 5), and it has made a “factory for making Government employees or clerks of commercial offices (ibid, 6). He could realize that, “It was conceived and born in error, for the English rulers honestly believed the indigenious system to be worse than useless. It has

been nurtured in sin, for the tendency has been to dwarf the Indian body, mind and soul” (ibid, p.9).

Gandhiji’s contestation of such an education is similar to that of Critical Pedagogy. An education that dwarfs a human being can be called “half-education” – a term popularised by Theodor Adorno. In his *Theory of Half Education*, Adorno expresses that education is facing a threat of becoming “half-education” (*halbbildung*) – a reduced form of education that does not ensure full human growth. “...he argued that *Bildung* had come to be stripped of its normative content, its relation to a good and just life. It had thus been reduced to a good that could be owned, like many other goods, and offered on the market of well-being and happiness. *Halb-Bildung* merely made people competent and fit for the existing social order, whereas originally, *Bildung* had also been meant to equip them to radically question that order” (Blake et al, 2003:40). Exercising half-bildung makes education a field of conflict between the forces that make an individual conform to society at one hand, and, autonomy and emancipation of individual on the other. Gandhiji critiqued the affects of western education vehemently. He finds that, “...the Government schools have unmanned us, rendered us helpless and godless. They have filled us with discontent, and providing no remedy for the discontent, have made us despondent. They have made us what we were intended to become, clerks and interpreters” (TNE, p.3). Similarly, in Gandhiji’s understanding, Western education has created an unrest and a tension in the society as a class of people have started cheating and inflicting terror, thereby threatening the very thread of a harmonious society.

Gandhiji’s Critique of Cultural Hybridity and consumerism promoted by western education:

For Gandhiji, it is an “unnatural system” (ibid. p.8) that is promoting “sin” among the learners as it is not ensuring full human growth. Macaulay’s envisioned English education for Gandhiji was equivalent to “slavish imitation” and “slavery” (ibid, 4-5), and he says, “...it has put a severe strain upon the Indian students’ nervous energy, and has made of us imitators (ibid, 7). Gandhiji’s critique of English education can be aligned to the concept of “alienation affect” as used in Critical Pedagogy. The pecuniary interests behind education have been the objectives of making money and create a consumerist society. Needless to say, that such a society exercises

inequality. Human beings here have become subjects to alienation in their own world being imbued in an alien world of money and commodity. An unnatural greed and an urge to possess more and more have taken over the place of human empathy and fellow-feeling. The social and historical world of man, thus, has become a perverted world. Greater part of humanity is reduced to “abstract workers” and human beings and their labour are sold as commodities. This amounts to “loss of human reality” and “devaluation of life” and “alienation of man” in their own society. Rationality, here, has become a political rationality where individuals have become subjected to domination and society is under some sort of authoritarian stability. Reason here has turned into capitalist irrationality. Such educational exercise reduces man’s potential for counter thinking and critical thinking. For Gandhiji, education in the modern age, thus, is repressive. Similarly, as such an education is producing only clerks; it can also be called an apparatus that is producing “One-dimensional man.” Glyn Richards (101) explains it further that, “...there is truth in the contention that the imposition of an alien educational system on Indian nation was a moral injury; it alienated those who participated in it from their own kith and kin and from their cultural heritage.” Gandhiji found English education to be irrelevant for the Indian people as he says, “No country can become a nation by producing a race of imitators” (TNE,p.8). Western education was a means of promoting western modernity which Gandhiji considered “disease of civilization” (TNE, p.6). He suggests that the objective of making money should be discouraged as education is for *swaraj*.

Education for swaraj:

Gandhiji believed that education is important. Unlike Aristotle, education for Gandhiji is not for “completing” the nature. It is, rather, full realization of the natural potentiality of one’s nature. Gandhiji says, “By education, I mean an all-round drawing out of the best in child and man—body, mind and spirit. Literacy is not the end of education nor even the beginning. It is one of the means whereby man and woman can be educated (*Harijan*, 31-7-37, as mentioned in Patel, 2015:15). Glyn Richards (1991:97) considers this platonic in nature, as Plato suggested “gymnastics for body, and music for the souls as necessary prerequisites of a balanced education.” Education for Gandhiji was not just mere information, but rather an instrument of nation-building and liberation and a praxis to live a life of truth. It is an education that can build

“courage, strength, virtue and self-denial”. Following the Gandhian principles, we can say that, liberation for Gandhiji is in *swaraj* or self-rule. The concept of *swaraj* has encompassing meanings and significance. *Swaraj* can take place when one lives a life of truth and integrity that leads one to be “self-regulated and self-disciplined” (Patel, 14). Gandhiji added “self-realization” as an integral part of it. Therefore, he focuses on a dynamic education that will not make ‘one-dimensional man’ rather for him, “True education...is that which draws out and stimulates the spiritual, intellectual and physical faculties of the children” (Patel, p.16). Gandhiji’s understanding of “self-realisation” can be aligned to Paulo Freire’s idea of “conscientization” or “coming to awareness”. Freire’s concept of conscientization is often translated as critical thinking, and critical thinking is also a means of self-realisation where the individual understands her selfhood and her position and background in the society. Critical consciousness helps the learners to question, and challenge the normative educational policies and practices leading to attain *selfhood* and gain control over one’s own life.

Gandhiji understood self as “an empirical self embodying the real self-atman” and “self-knowledge is knowledge of God, which is knowledge of Truth” (Richards, 104). Gandhiji does not find any conflict between the physical empirical self and the atman here. Rather, awareness of the dimensions of one’s past—the heritage and culture—and belonging to the roots are the means of knowing the self.

Change in the role of the teacher and learner:

Critical pedagogy redefines the role of the teacher and learner. Our academic practices in the classroom are often teacher-centric. The teacher is like all-knowing monolith and students are empty vessels to be filled with the teacher’s knowledge. Freire calls it a “banking model of education” (Freire1993: 52), which has the features as –

- (a) the teacher teaches and the students are taught;
- (b) the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing;
- (c) the teacher thinks and the students are thought about;
- (d) the teacher talks and the students listen—meekly;
- (e) the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined;
- (f) the teacher chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply;

- (g) the teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher;
- (h) the teacher chooses the programme content, and the students (who are not consulted) adapt to it;
- (i) the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his or her own professional authority, which she and he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students;
- (j) the teacher is the Subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects” (Freire 1993:54).

This is oppressive in nature and undemocratic as it silences the learner in the teaching-learning process. It subjects the students to a “culture of silence” which can be termed as “symbolic violence” on the students/children following Pierre Bourdieu’s point of view -- “*Symbolic violence* refers to the malformations school culture effects upon individual’s perceptions and beliefs” (Gibson 1986:55). In his letter to Tagore, Gandhiji considered such schooling as “prison house.” To get rid of such a situation, Gandhiji attempted to redefine the role of the teacher in his experimentation in Tolstoy Farm. Focusing on moral training and character building, Gandhiji considered the teacher as a model for the youngsters. He says, “I did not find it at all necessary to load the boys with quantities of books. I have always felt that the true text-book for the pupil is his teacher” (TNE, p.18). However, despite a father-like position, the teacher is a partner in learning in Gandhiji’s scheme of education- “On Tolstoy Farm we made it a rule that the youngsters should not be asked to do what the teachers did not do, and, therefore, when they were asked to do any work, there was always a teacher co-operating and actually working with them. Hence whatever the youngsters learnt, they learnt cheerfully” (TNE, p.16).

Pedagogy of Praxis:

Gandhiji advocates a pedagogy of praxis in his advocacy of vocational education as a means for “the highest development of the mind and the soul” (Patel, 17). Vocational education helps in the growth of the “whole person.” “The fact that the whole person in the boys and girls

has to be developed through a vocation automatically saves the schools from degenerating into factories” (Patel, 17). Mahadev Desai explains it as, “This does not mean supplementary literary with manual training, but making manual training the means of literary and intellectual training” (The Year Book of Education, 1940, p.441, cited in Patel, p.17). This is also active and experiential learning which is directly related to the living experiences of the learners. This can help a learner to learn the basic skills of life. Vocational training in craft can employ the learners’ creativity that is helpful for intellectual growth as well.

Education for Character Building and Controlling the Senses:

Gandhiji had aligned his understanding of knowledge seeking with the Vedic practice of *Brahmacharya* which sees learning as seeking the divinity (Brahman). *Brahmacharya* helps the students to practice self-restraint and simplicity. Gandhiji advocated that this can save the students from the poisonous wind of impurity coming from the West (To Students, p.43), which seduces the students from the path of purity and self-restraint (p.44). Gandhiji believed that, “The end of knowledge must be building up of character” (ibid, p.39) and said, “We can attain Swaraj only by dint of sterling character” (ibid, p.40). He says, “A truthful boy, a brave boy will never think of hurting even a fly. He will defend all the weak boys in his school and help, whether inside school or outside, all those who need his help. A boy who does not observe personal purity of mind and body and action is a boy who should be driven out of any school. A chivalrous boy would always keep his mind pure, his eyes straight and his hands unpolluted” (ibid, p.39).

Gandhiji has given a warning that, “All your scholarship, all your study of Shakespeare and Wordsworth would be in vain if at the same time you do not build your character, and attain mastery over your thoughts and actions” (ibid, p.44). Thus, building character would make attain *swaraj*. Western critical pedagogues have stressed upon making the students autonomous in their thought and action so that they can be free from oppression. Gandhiji too have voiced in the similar tone.

Pedagogy for Social Change:

Gandhiji’s aim was social change through education through *sarvodaya* and *swaraj*. An individual attaining *swaraj* can only make the society self-reliant. Through education,

elimination of social oppression like untouchability could take place. Again, vocational training is of economic value that can be “a kind of insurance against unemployment” (Harijan, 11-9-37, in Patel, p.18). This enhances “self-support” which is also a means to attain swaraj. Besides, self-supporting education is also related to non-violence. Thus, education is not for status, but for making the community self-reliant, because, “...the good of the individual is contained in the good of all” (*Sarvodaya*, p.5).

Language for decoloniality:

Gandhiji favoured oral education in his design of basic education which is similar to the ‘dialogic education’ of the critical pedagogues who emphasized on the thought of “the word as/is the world” (Freire, p.33). We are well aware of his advocacy of mother tongue education (three-language formula). Mother tongue education makes a natural extension of home in the school. We have spoken about education for swaraj earlier. To extend the contestation further, we can note that, in Gandhiji’s understanding “...the self is rooted in the human community. It is the community bound together by language that makes it possible for the life of individual to be meaningful and which gives him a sense of identity. An individual’s thoughts, feelings, and experiences cannot be logically independent of his environment and the nature of that environment directly influences that individual’s sense of identity” (Glyn Richards, p.104). Hence, mother tongue education is also related to self-respect and self-realisation.

Education for truth and Ahimsa:

Through understanding the fundamental truth of nature, one can grow as complete human being. Critical pedagogy’s major objective is a holistic growth of human being through conscientization for which one needs to know the truth and reality. While western critical pedagogues emphasize upon understanding the truth and social realities, for Gandhi it is a praxis of living. Gandhiji’s truth is integrally aligned with ahimsa. This is significantly helpful in elimination evil from both an individual as well as the society. Gandhiji fought against communalism and discrimination, therefore, building tolerance and harmony was also a part of his scheme of education. Therefore, knowing more about other religions is also important in Gandhian design of education as “basic ethics,” and not as “denominationalism”. This can

“cultivate toleration and breadth of vision” and make one “appreciate one’s own faith better” (Richards, 108). It can liberate one from a narrow approach of dogmatism and imbibe the qualities of unity, catholicity, and toleration (the most important characteristics of higher education). Gandhiji stressed on adherence to truth and love as essential qualities for the students because “Truth will make you brave and fearless men...Love will make life bearable for you, because love has a special quality of abundance of love in return” (To Students, p.40).

Gandhiji was not in favour of the class structure produced by education. Elitist education that makes one look down upon manual labour and illiteracy is elitist “...that alienated a man from his fellow man, created barriers in society, and amounted to a denial of essential unity of mankind” which can despise human dignity is himsa in Bapu’s eyes.

Conclusion:

Gandhiji’s educational thought are not beyond criticism. But given the circumstances, one might strongly believe that it is one of the ideal alternatives. “Since it is not possible for an ideal system of education to be embodied in a particular empirical form it might be argued that he has to hold on to that system which approximates to the ideal...He proposes a system of education which he thinks meets the needs of the people of India and in so doing he acts in accordance with the religious and ethical ideals acquired within his own form of life and which he calls Truth” (Richards, 110).

We find a lot of similarities between western critical pedagogy and the Gandhian thoughts. Dialogic pedagogy, understanding one’s own background, pedagogy of praxis, and education for social change are the major points of similarity. What the western thinkers meant to be autonomous with conscientization, can be understood in terms of *swaraj* in the Gandhian paradigm of education through truth, ahimsa and character-building. Nonetheless, both Gandhiji and the western critical pedagogues aimed at liberation and social change for a better future for mankind. In today’s world when materiality and capitalism have webbed the life of people in the modern world, Gandhian critical pedagogy can pave a way to liberation and *swaraj* which can help us in decolonizing our mind, our life and our world.

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