The Concept of Nai Talim (Basic Education) and Its Relevance in Contemporary Education

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Abstract-

Nai Talim, also known as Basic Education, is Mahatma Gandhi's holistic philosophy of education that emphasises the harmonious development of the mind, hand, and heart through learning by doing. Conceived during India's freedom struggle, Nai Talim integrates productive work with academic learning to promote self-reliance, social responsibility, and moral development. This paper explores the conceptual foundations of Nai Talim and examines its relevance in contemporary educational contexts marked by skill gaps, social inequality, and the growing disconnect between education and real-life experience. Drawing upon Gandhian philosophy and the contributions of Vinoba Bhave, the study analyses core principles such as learning through work, community engagement, inclusivity, and cultural rootedness. It further discusses the pedagogical implications of Nai Talim for curriculum design, classroom organisation, assessment, and teacher roles. The paper argues that Nai Talim aligns closely with modern educational goals, including holistic development, experiential learning, sustainable development, and equity in education, as reflected in the Sustainable Development Goals. While challenges remain in implementing Nai Talim within formal schooling systems, the study highlights its adaptability in both formal and non-formal education. The findings suggest that Nai Talim continues to offer a viable framework for creating socially relevant, value-based, and learner-centred education suited to contemporary needs.

Keywords: Nai Talim, Basic Education, Gandhian Philosophy, Experiential Learning, Holistic Education, Learning through Work, Contemporary Education

1. Introduction

Nai Talim, or Basic Education, refers to Gandhi's philosophical and practical approach to education. It promotes the integral development of every child—mind, body, and heart—and emphasises learning through meaningful and productive work. Its relevance to contemporary education is underscored by growing acceptance of principles resonant with Nai Talim, including education that is both experiential and centred on work. Research asks to what extent Nai Talim can inform and improve contemporary education, to what extent its principles inform current education internationally and in India, and what implications such consideration holds for implementing Nai Talim

in practical, accessible ways today. This investigation into Nai Talim's theoretical foundations, core principles, pedagogical implications, contemporary contexts, implementation, challenges, and implications arrives at the conclusion that, while substantial barriers remain, expansive possibility for implementation exists at practical and systemic levels; that accessible, feasible applications exist for primary and secondary education, including in non-formal systems; and, that cognisance of both recent initiatives and contemporary challenges can accordingly broaden the awareness and adaptability of Nai Talim today.

2. Theoretical Foundations of Nai Talim

Nai Talim embodies a conception of education formulated by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi during India's struggle for independence from British rule. Although the term literally translates as "basic education," Nai Talim encompasses education for life as well as education through handicrafts.. sThe theory and practice of Nai Talim rely on four interconnected principles: learning through work, socio-economic relevance, equality and inclusivity, and national and cultural identity. (Kumar Jena, 2021) Nai Talim defines work as self-discovery and the medium through which all other subjects are learned. It integrates both academic and practical subjects in formal schooling while remaining relevant to society. In addition to schooling, the theory and practice of Nai Talim therefore extend to out-of-school learning rooted in community service and remain applicable in schools lacking opportunities for hands-on learning. (Srivastava, 2017)

2.1. Integral Education and Vinoba Bhave

Nai Talim articulates that education must fulfil the whole person—broadly identified as the mind, hand and heart—as the ultimate aim of education is self-realisation. This philosophy was further popularised by Vinoba Bhave as integral education. Bhave distinguishes three steps in the process of learning—"knowing", "doing" and "being." Knowing pertains mainly to intellectual education, doing encompasses technical and manual work and being embraces emotional and moral development. Bhave addresses especially the acquisition of knowledge through doing rather than knowing followed by doing. He emphasises on the significance of true education is to serve the country and humanity (Kumar Jena, 2021).

Basic education or Nai Talim was based on the principle of learning by doing, integrating book learning with handicraft activities. Gandhiji believed education should be closely linked to the physical and social environment of the student, especially in villages. He emphasised that education should establish a balance between body, mind, and spirit and be imparted through handicrafts like gardening, weaving, and carpentry. The education system was intended to be self-supporting and generate remuneration for teachers. Gandhiji advocated free and compulsory education for children aged seven to fourteen, with the mother tongue as the medium of instruction to enhance understanding and cultural identity. He also emphasised craft-centered education, considering it vital in the Indian context (Ferrer, 2018).

2.2. Education as Experience and Work

According to the master-thinker Vinoba Bhave, education liberates in the sense that it nurtures 'integral education', a term he uses interchangeably with Nai Talim. Educational liberation presupposes that the rising generations must be saved from the shackles of experience. Nai Talim, thus, aims at liberation through basic education, and is perceived as 'education through the medium of craft-work' (Kumar Jena, 2021).

This freedom from prefixed and classified educational branches in the so-called modern and formal education will logically be reflected in the prevailing regard for education as the imparting and acquisition of information. Such a presumption primarily Pvitiates such a broad understanding. The prevalent meaning of education is knowledge, while Bhave's explanation propagates 'education' and 'experience' as synonymous or, if per chance, the former is taken to encompass the latter, Bhave's interpretation offsets it by stating, 'when liberating the youth from one experience encourages further experience, it cannot be termed 'the liberation of education' (Akram, 2012).

As per Bhave, 'the human consciousness or the human instrument which undergoes education' is not only the mind, but the mind, heart and hand, which denotes the various faculties of human consciousness. Hand means operational knowledge which involves all forms of work – physical and mechanic, scientific, artistic, crafty, wholesome and useful. The work signifies the activities and investigations which furnish accurate and useful knowledge towards life and education. Indian independence struggle through the said Non-Cooperation Movement is one of the grandest historical illustrations of Nai Talim in actual action. Bhave combines universal and geographically determined education in 'a different manner', linking local handwork crafts with subjects like mathematics, science, geography and painting under a novel definition of Nai Talim – 'the education of life' (B. Ramose, 2011).

2.3. Holistic Development: Mind, Hand, and Heart

Scientific studies on holistic education show that education should develop not only intellectual and skill capability but also character and civic knowledge to create good citizens or noble individuals. The ideal of national education in Indonesia is to create intelligent, tough, independent, creative, and noble human beings. They are not only knowledgeable but also endowed with a strong character and moral or noble attitudes in their daily activities and interaction with others (Sutarman et al., 2017). The following paragraph articulates the message formulated by Vinoba Bhave, who underlined the importance of konsanjhi, namely, mind, heart and hand. Education should balance cognitive ability, skill development, and character building (holistic education) simultaneously. These three aspects hold a significant role in creating humans who can adapt to an evolving education and faster information development. These three aspects—cognitive intelligence connected to mind, physical intelligence connected to skill or hand, and affective intelligence connected to heart—are aimed at creating a good citizen. Policy innovator John Dewey advocated that education should emphasize experience rather than itself. Manners, morality, culture, and civilization should characterize experience as an exemplary way of behaving which should be acquired throughout school life. Moreover, education through work increases knowledge. Education will impart knowledge of self-governing life, autonomous living, and self-sustenance through a manual part rather than a circular office part.

3. Core Principles of Nai Talim

Nai Talim embodies education as empowerment for all to contribute as responsible citizens and actively participate in local communities and the nation's progress. Learning is vital for aspiring citizens. Vocational training, integrated into other subjects, enriches knowledge and skills. Education should be socially relevant, enabling individuals to serve their communities (Kumar Jena, 2021). Avoiding abstract definitions, Nai Talim emphasises 'learning through work' and 'community' as essential in all frameworks. Learning through work addresses current disconnects between theory

and practice and between students and society. Vocational subjects cultivate knowledge for applied, productive work within one's community. Curriculum content must evolve to reflect societal changes. Education fosters a range of values, such as self-confidence, commitment, and responsibility, towards oneself, others, the community, and the nation (Srivastava, 2017).

The political landscape in educational discourses perpetuates the long-standing demand for a democratic polity and the resolution of long-standing imbalances not yet witnessed in contemporary democratic polities. Inclusive education practices in classrooms, government education policies, and partnerships among various philanthropic organizations in the implementation of education at grass-roots levels possess enormous value for the enhancement of the status of education. The relationship among society, education, and educational theory continues to remain in the spotlight. In addition to power-oriented political discourses in educational centres and centres of deliberation, the existing links between education and culture as a question about the formative project of the community society into which the young man is born continue to remain essential and indispensable.

3.1. Learning through Work

The principles of Nai Talim give priority to learning through work at all stages. Such learning takes place through productive and creative activities using relevant local materials. The activities are not treated merely as an adjunct to education; they are positioned at its core to promote integrated and lifelong education.

Work is defined broadly. It includes creative activities that produce tangible objects, activities that contribute to developing the community, and activities that promote self-development. The primary emphases are on actual production, self-expression, and local relevance.

Learning through work has a number of benefits. It allows children to gain practical skills and generate useful knowledge. It opens pathways to discover talents, interests, career options, and life skills relevant to children's context. These experiences promote maturity, help understand one's place in society, and support the process of becoming a whole person. Learning through work thus addresses an array of knowledge and skill shortages exposed by the pandemic. Above all, work is a source of learning in both formal and informal settings throughout life.

Two common forms of work are craft and gardening. Children identify useful products, services, and opportunities in their own communities. These can include pottery, carpentry, construction, local architecture, tailoring, crafts, herbal products, edible plants, floriculture, and household gardening (Kumar Jena, 2021).

3.2. Community and Social Relevance

Education does not exist in isolation; it should be closely linked with the needs and aspirations of the community through the active participation of the community itself. The chief aim of education is to fulfill the needs of society termed as "community" in Nai Talim perspective (Kumar Jena, 2021). Community also occupies a centre stage in Nai Talim approach as well. Self-reliance of individual is only possible when person is well connected to community. The work of the individual is evaluated based on feedback from the society which is a part of learning as well. Education helps in developing community feeling among members of the society. Education also helps in fulfilling the needs of contemporary society through the philosophy of Community. Nai Talim

connects the outer world directly to the inner life of the mind, health, hand and heart through the philosophy of training for service to the community. The activities of the community influence the curriculum thereby making the programme more relevant. Project works like toilet construction, rain water harvesting etc. are taken up with sincere community participation which satisfy the community and mark the success of Nai Talim approach.

3.3. Equality, Inclusivity, and Democratic Values

The fundamental rights of equality, opportunity, and access to social goods rank among the most universally recognized human rights (Robb, 2013). Disparity among individuals regarding opportunity and access to social goods is synonymous with inequality, and it is those rights that impact the well-being of the individual greatest. Education stands out as a social good that has significant influence on access to other additional social goods, such as career attainment. Attention to social justice and equality cannot be overlooked in the contemporary study of education (Jahan Karim, 2004). Education for all, universalization, integration, and equity ranks among the most essential issues facing the world today. In a rapidly changing international context, education research, policy, and practice must examine systems through various prisms: historical, economical, demographic, and sociocultural. Attention must also be given to content such as knowledge prior to participation in educational policy, convention, and in the world at large.

In India, Nai Talim emphasizes rights and equity from a strong socialist, social democratic, reformist, constitutional, and Gandhian viewpoint. Nai Talim distinguishes general and democratic schooling in connection with the right to participate in governance by providing education in symbols and the means to read and write from a democratic angle. Nai Talim states that education is for adjustment to individual life with emphasis on communal living experiences and also emphasizes citizenship education and social reconstruction. Nai Talim calls attention to a balanced development of individual freedom and social security, individual rights and social responsibilities, and individual values and social values, setting such a balance as essential and more pressing than absolute equality during certain periods.

3.4. National and Cultural Identity

National integration is essential for nation-building and, in a multi-linguistic, multi-cultural country like India, schools have a crucial role in fostering national and cultural identity. Nai-talimi education can help achieve this objective. When viewed in context (Lall, 2008) , integrating work with study is considered the best means to gain first-hand experience, and meaningful construction of national and cultural identity. Further, cultural identity must not deny recognition of other identities, leading to pluralism in national and cultural identity.

Nai Talim addresses national integration by grounding education in the culture, environment, and economy of the community to which a learner belongs. Universalisation of elementary education in India has taken place with a multi-pronged approach, apart from availing of national and state subsidies. Basic education (Nai Talim) was introduced through khadi, and Nai Talim schooling took a head start in the country within three days of Gandhi's assassination. Khadi education then flourished and spread to all parts of the country, apart from learning centres for the auto-rickshaw sector in metro cities.

4. Pedagogical Implications for Curriculum and Pedagogy

Nai Talim emphasizes learning through productive work to engage with local environments and conditions. Various productive works, such as sewing, weaving, carpentry, gardening, and cattle rearing, facilitate the acquisition of skills and knowledge. Similar activities, like gardening and sewing, also establish links with science, mathematics, and ethics, enabling curricular integration with subjects that would traditionally be taught separately. As Bhave notes, "in addition to the quantity and quality of work, the pattern of harmonising work and studies in a life-centred and complete manner must be clearly defined" (Kumar Jena, 2021). Education should not only be viewed as mere knowledge acquisition but seen as an integrated approach to develop the physical, mental, and spiritual faculties of a child.

In an educational scenario where a child is compelled to work, only a part of the work experience is transformed into knowledge, because the work and knowledge are socially irrelevant to their life and environment. There is no self-engagement or feeling of responsibility, which is primary to the learning process. For Nai Talim to generate knowledge, several barriers must be overcome. The work and the human setting of the child must be established. An integrative connection must be established between "work, knowledge, pleasure and beauty." Only under these conditions is a knowledge-generating educational adventure possible (Olibie, 2013).

4.1. Curriculum Design and Activity-Based Learning

The Nai Talim framework proposes distinctive models for curriculum design and instructional organization. A sequential structure has emerged, with five phases identified: (1) stimulating perception, (2) practical application, (3) exploration and refinement, (4) theoretical formulation, and (5) consolidation and ownership (Singal et al., 2017). Simulation-based activities have also been integrated into less explored subjects like commerce and science. Knowledge extends across disciplines, encompassing skills like map-reading alongside subject-specific content.

Nai Talim emphasises activity-based, experiential learning. A comprehensive overview has classified Nai Talim methodologies under several headings: work that involves community, work that brings enjoyment or beauty, experiments, explorations, working with Nature, field visits, simulation games, learning that goes beyond the classroom, understandings of the community, and working with materials (sulaiman, 2015).

4.2. Classroom Organization and Assessment

Learning activities in Nai Talim classrooms are organized in such a way that students learn with appropriate formats and scaffolding to construct a deep understanding of concepts. The need to devise an effective learning environment makes flexibility in classroom organization crucial. A continuous review of the classroom set-up and developer feedback is considered. A well-organized environment supports a range of learning activities through which students can acquire different competencies, skills, knowledge, and attitudes in an integrated way. Teachers observe and analyze students' work closely to keep up with their progress and provide timely feedback.

Carefully planned classroom arrangement invites students to participate in the learning activities. Different tasks and activities are physically separated to help students to focus, explore, and develop a broader understanding. Although an orderly, stimulating environment is essential, Nai Talim does not require a fixed arrangement

of desks and chairs. Students are encouraged to design the layout and make their own choices about where to sit, developing their capability to arrange the environment according to their learning needs. Multiple assessments are widely used to figure out what students can do and understand at different points during the learning process. Since assessment is closely linked to students' learning progress, some educators regard it as "assessment for learning" rather than "assessment of learning" (Kumar Jena, 2021).

4.3. Teacher Roles and Professional Development

In Nai Talim, the teacher has a pivotal and multifaceted role, which reflects a significant change from traditional pedagogy. Roles include, but are not limited to, facilitator, motivator, resource provider, guide or mentor, evaluator and an actor so that pupils can learn from the teacher's actions (Kidwai et al., 2013). Nai Talim favours teachers who have a genuine regard for pupils' development and learning; who display a high degree of patience, diligence and commitment toward pupils; who work effectively with parents and the community; who perceive pupils as responsible, thoughtful human beings; who encourage pupils' initiative and creativity; who appreciate the hand and the heart alongside the mind; and who see themselves as learners. Mapping Nai Talim's principles onto contemporary descriptions of teacher professionalism—such as those proposed in Indonesia highlights ongoing requirements for collaboration and continuous professional development. Curriculum change involves pedagogical transition, which encompasses an ongoing need to address changing learning expectations, teaching methods, classroom changes and the integration of educational technology.

5. Nai Talim in Contemporary Educational Contexts

Education is a foremost instrument for individual and societal development. Providing everyone equitable access to quality education is especially important worldwide. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals articulate this issue and spell out the aim for universal basic education through inclusive, equitable, and quality provision. Inadequate emphasis on these principles in day-to-day academic environments often leads students, especially those from marginalized communities, to remain disconnected from the educational system (Kumar Jena, 2021).

Nai Talim resonates well with the essence of the Sustainable Development Goals focused on education. This concept, propounded by Gandhiji and further articulated and expanded by Vinoba Bhave, underscores the need for education to aim at the integral development of the individual through the heart, hand, and head, and also highlights the importance of learning through productive work, activities of social relevance, promotion of equality, and attention to one's own culture and environment. These themes are foundational to Nai Talim and find articulation in specific principles, which are useful in educational discourse today.

5.1. Alignment with Sustainable Development Goals

The concept of Nai Talim is closely aligned with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4, 5, 8, 10, and 11. The relevance of Nai Talim to SDGs was highlighted at a conference held by Smt. S. J. Naik College of Education, Dhamangaon Ril, Maharashtra, and the implementation of Nai Talim is also a tool for achieving the above SDGs (Peter Ifegbesan et al., 2017).

Nai Talim equates to Goal 4 (Education) of the SDGs. Goal 4 of the SDGs aims to ensure inclusive, equitable, and quality education and to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Nai Talim addresses inclusiveness, equity, and quality in

education. In spite of the democratic practice of providing opportunity for everyone to become educated throughout life, in the present society, the social status always adversely affects the opportunity. Services are also not satisfactorily available for participating fully in education, and neither public nor private means are sufficient (Kingston Gladstone, 2018). Nai Talim emphasizes the scheduling of education at each stage of life-cycle, and recognizes that education is not confined only to schooling. The personage of the student is very much more important than the school (Mika, 2017). Students are educated, trained, trained and educated, even after the schooling age. Nai Talim promotes arrangements to facilitate education and enable students to hold the democratic right of the access to education, which in turn helps in formation of the holistic character. Education, whether coordinated through schooling or not, needs to comprise the provision of service for fellow-beings. The code for education at each life stage of the Nai Talim makes the education system appropriately functional and it acts as guideline for determining the services, jobs, skills, and knowledge that the individual must acquire during the whole life in so as to accelerate one's holistic character formation.

5.2. Technology Integration and Hands-on Learning

Hands-on learning and the emergence of the maker movement have flourished in tandem with the proliferation of digital technologies, yet work-oriented, hands-on approaches to learning retain wider applicability. Technology integration may nevertheless attenuate the prominence of hands-on work. Digital fabrication, programming, and electronic components often substitute for traditional materials in maker activities and are sometimes pursued without sufficient connection to the real world. Such activities then bear a closer resemblance to computer-aided design activities than to fabrication. Furthermore, traditional crafts such as carpentry, weaving, and metalwork may become neglected in favour of more heavily digitized forms of makerspace activity. Digital activities that rely on templates or other features that reduce artful choice parallel this trend. Hybrid approaches that incorporate a blend of both technological and manual activity are desired, but they too may inadequately stress the importance of the physical in shaping understanding. Such combinations typically neglect entirely the mixture of make-and-break and exploration-in-repair that often characterizes early forms of technology play, an important precursor of artistry and therefore of the design-modification-guided learning that creators intend to support. Material-oriented activity at early and intermediary stages may be easier to engage in than code and digital fabrication, and much early technology understanding originates from such actions. In school systems already saturated by computations and simulations, work with materials therefore deserves explicit reaffirmation. (Mlandeli Philbert et al., 2014)

5.3. Inclusion and Equity in Modern Classrooms

In France, the obligation of a social minimum supported a widened access to culture in education, dated experience of effective widens classroom conditions. Barriers persist for majorities. Eliminated by the Nai Talim, respect phases yet arrive very low. Struggles to develop realised inclusive aspirations met many modern incorporated obstacles. The pedagogies capitalised named mainstream mediocrity, contextual mediocrity, and diffusion mediocrity: the first subordinated to controllable approaches—the two yield logic disrailed. Observations collection remains essential. Requires terms to distinguish attendance from the notion around which Nai Talim grounds the wider craftmanship.

6. Historical Implementations and Outcomes

Nai Talim and the Gandhian approach to basic education originated in 1937 in India, then under British colonial rule. Mahatma Gandhi suggested a scheme of education for children aged 7 to 14 as a means of liberating the country from tyranny (Kumar Jena, 2021). From the outset, the intention was that this education should include specific vocations. Without such consideration, establishment of the scheme could not proceed. At this stage, Vinoba Bhave—who later became a close associate of Gandhiji—clarified: "The central problem of education is to ensure all-round development of the individual. ... The art of living should be developed in children, not limited to a particular subject or vocation" (K. Krishnapriya & Rani, 2022). Specific vocations should serve only as means towards this end. For the nation, without the children's all-round development, no true freedom could be attained. To facilitate Bhave's plan, the term 'basic education' was coined. Subsequently, Nai Talim denoted not only the content of education but also its scheme, method, and theory.

Contemporary educational initiatives conceived in India bear conceptual similarities to Nai Talim yet differ in critical aspects, warranting careful consideration of their frameworks, educational priorities, implementation approaches, and observed impacts. Many contemporary programs closely target officially-sanctioned learning outcomes, whereas Nai Talim emphasizes the significance of skill and character development and selects complementary but different performance indicators, according to a set of underlying principles (K. Krishnapriya & Rani, 2022). The Nai Talim framework, therefore, explicitly recognizes the possibility of helping children develop additional knowledge and skill beyond formal curriculum requirements. Proponents of various contemporary programs have undertaken the undertaking of public comparisons to assess spatial and temporal scalability beyond local scope. Such indicators include the originality of referencing other documented programs, as coalescing clusters or collections outline common characteristics. Direct testimony from partnered schools indicates that, although pedagogy references many observed contemporary programs, far fewer contact—either formally or informally—concerning content and objectives (Ahmed, 2015).

7. Conclusion

Mahatma Gandhi pioneered basic education, known as Nai Talim, as a means of achieving multi-dimensional development and self-sufficiency. Emphasising development of the mind, heart and body, he believed that education should take place through real-life work experiences in a social context. These tenets are rooted in Gandhi's humane and developmental conception of work as a foundation of Nai Talim. The Nai Talim vision of Gandhiji is still relevant for education today and provides an appropriate educational approach for a self-reliant and capable population.

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Cite this Article-