

Book Review

Sykes, M. (1988). *The Story of Nai Talim: Fifty Years of Education At Sevagram (1937-1987)*. Wardha: Nai Talim Samiti.

It is in the time of violence that one thinks of peace. We are living in such times when the frequency, scale and brutality of violence are unprecedented. Today, the violent incidents are not limited to certain pockets and areas of the country. They are reported from nearly every street corner. There is an entire range of violence being reported from rape to murder, domestic violence to road rage, vandalism to lynching. In the face of violence, one feels a need to revisit Mahatma Gandhi's ideas on non-violence.

This gives us an opportunity to reconsider Marjorie Sykes book, *The Story of Nai Talim: Fifty Years of Education at Sevagram (1937-1987)*. Sykes was a British teacher, who migrated to India in 1928 to join Bentinck Girls High School in Madras. In 1937, through the reading of Harijan, she became acquainted with Gandhi's educational ideas. Later, she joined Nai Talim as a practitioner.

This 103-page long book is divided into twelve chapters. This book is indispensable text for the readers interested in the education in general and Nai Talim in particular for several reasons. Firstly, the book describes the practice of Nai Talim by a practitioner. This brings to life an educational programme, which otherwise appears to be an unrealizable scheme by the contemporary reader.

Secondly, she describes Nai Talim as a living being, a seed that was sown, which germinated and become a plant but died an untimely death. This life-cycle of Nai Talim is described through

deliberations in Nai Talim conferences from 1937-1957. In these conferences, practitioners deliberated upon different aspects of the curriculum such as the place of arts and crafts in Nai Talim, guiding principles for selecting a craft, importance of work in education, teaching of English, place and approach towards books in Nai Talim. The practitioners debated and revised the curriculum, and structure of Nai Talim on the basis of the consensus reached in these conferences.

Thirdly, the book presents Nai Talim as not just an educational experiment but shows it in a continuous dialogue with the society and the temporal reality. This dialogue included a broader dimension of social reconstruction of the village. This relationship had due space in the vision of the Nai Talim. For instance, pre-basic education consisted of educating the parents for wise parenthood. This education also involved initiating activities of oil-pressing, gur-making, weaving with the village. The practitioners and students of Nai Talim were also participants in the non-violent struggle for independence.

Fourthly, Sykes wrote the book when the period of Nai Talim had come to an end. Therefore, she reflects on the causes of the failure of the education programme. These reflections on the neglect of certain issues and of the failure to completely understand the scheme make Nai Talim appear to be a more human enterprise. These reflections not only engage the reader but they also come to learn the kind of educational decisions that were

undertaken and their far-reaching consequences. This provides a unique eye to the contemporary reader to evaluate the present system of education.

Fifthly, Sykes work shows how gradually Gandhi's initial proposal for an ideal education for rural children matured into a village reconstruction plan. In 1942, Gandhi broadened the scope of basic education to cover all aspects of an individual's life from 'conception to cremation'. This new broader scheme of education was called Nai Talim. It included pre-basic, basic and post-basic education. It began with the education of the parents in every aspect of human life such as agriculture, health, sanitation, cloth production, pottery and others. He called it 'education for the sake of life' (p. 61). Thus, education for him was an integral part of being alive. This makes this book indispensable for the contemporary reader.

Towards the end, Sykes says that Nai Talim survived the most

difficult phases during the struggle for independence when often teachers and workers were imprisoned but it could not survive the struggle in the post-independence phase. She describes the challenges the practitioners of Nai Talim faced from outside and also within the organization, which led to its untimely death. For instance, the teachers they trained for a year in Nai Talim methods were sent by the government to teach in regular schools, which created problems for these teachers. The teachers also could not become master craftsman, which harmed the spirit of Nai Talim. The government also recognized only basic schools (primary grades), which created a divide between the rich and the poor. All these reasons led to the untimely death of Nai Talim. By 1974, Sevagram school also closed down indefinitely.

In the end, Sykes shares her dream of a future of Nai Talim for the young readers and practitioners of a non-violent life.