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## **Humanist Education at Anand Niketan: An Intercultural Exchange**

### **Abstract**

Learning which is meaningful, relatable to one's life and surroundings, and exemplifies a sense of community, togetherness and love is part of students' schooling experience at the Gandhian school Anand Niketan in Sevagram. This paper emerges from an intercultural exchange project on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), which a group of Swiss student-teachers and teacher-educators, along with a professor and research scholars from Delhi University, engaged in at Anand Niketan. The theme for this academic trip was 'Cotton' – to understand the concept of ESD in the local, rural Indian context, while juxtaposed with and in contrast to urban, industrialised, and Euro-centric Western contexts. In this paper, we explore the humanist ethos of this school at Sevagram detailed through curricular examples of collaborative, multidisciplinary crafts-based learning and productive labour, and make critical reflections on the experience of intercultural exchange itself.

### **Introduction**

As one enters Anand Niketan at Sevagram for the first time, one is instantly struck by the sheer joy imbued in this space - the children, teachers, the air, trees, soil, scattered concrete structures of the school seem to be engaged in soulful interactions that are comforting and reassuring. The children and teachers appear to be as free as the birds and flowers that fearlessly partake in the everyday life here at this school.

A visitor may wonder if schools can really be this welcoming. Or how a school originally envisioned on the principles of decentralised, localised functioning and self-sustenance, to promote productive labour and craft-centred learning through a child friendly pedagogy and curriculum,

can possibly function as part of the present government system. Can such education be critical – unravelling and problematising the realities of the world around us – or is it an end in itself? Can the curriculum and ideology of the school stand the onslaught of the current neoliberal times? Some of these questions were answered over the course of the next few days at the school – and some even months later, continue to be reflected upon - where a group of Swiss student-teachers and teacher-educators, along with a professor and research scholars from Delhi University engaged in a project on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). The theme for this intercultural exchange was 'Cotton' – to understand the concept of ESD in the local, rural

Indian context, while juxtaposed with and in contrast to urban, industrialised, and Euro-centric Western contexts.

This paper in three parts, attempts to detail these intercultural reflections with the Swiss group at Anand Niketan.

### **Practising community, love and togetherness: *mil ke chalo***

The Gandhian principles of *Ahimsa* and *Swaraj*, among others, are deeply rooted and practised in the way of life at this school. The process of *Swaraj* for Gandhi denoted not only the rule over oneself, being free from oppression and dependence of any kind, but also extended to mean unifying and becoming one with oneself and with one's community (Gaur, 2018; Parel, 2009). Living peacefully, non-violently, truthfully and with frugality added to the other values one needs to inculcate in one's life to coexist with all. The students, therefore, rightfully begin their day by singing of harmony, freedom, love and togetherness, passionately encouraging one another to walk together, challenge oppression, end violence. The rhythm and sway of "Let's Walk Together" ("*mil ke chalo*") is such that it is hard for one to not hum the tune for long after it has been sung thus:

*"mil ke chalo, mil ke chalo, mil ke chalo/ yeh waqt ki awaz hai, mil ke chalo/ yeh zindagi ka raaz hai, mil ke chalo...aaj dil ki ranjishain mita ke aa/ aaj bheid-bhaav sab bhula ke aa/ azadi se hai pyar, jinhe desh se hai prem/ kadam kadam se aur dil se dil mila ke aa...yeh bhook kyon, yeh zulm ka hai zor kyon/ yeh jang-jang-jang ka hai shor kyon..."*

Though difficult to literally translate the song from Hindi to English, it is a call to walk together, putting our differences behind, emerging from oppression and divisiveness, towards freedom and love, away from hunger, violence and wars.

The lesson on togetherness extends to how learning is organised in the school. It is characteristic for work – labour that is productive, learning that is craft centric – to be undertaken collaboratively. The idea behind working with one's hands was to engage in learning that brings not only one's mind, but the body and spirit also into unison (Gaur, 2018; Kumar, 2015; Skyes, 2009). Gandhi's engagement with the nature of 'productive schools' extended across his earlier 'experiments' at Phoenix and Tolstoy Farms in South Africa through to the Basic School, Anand Niketan. He sought to challenge the historically entrenched social stigma and exploitation of caste linked to vocations and manual labour through the model of Basic Education or Nai Taleem, with craft and productive labour at its core (Rampal, 2010). It was also through the emphasis on crafts based education that Gandhi envisioned the anti-colonial struggle for '*swaraj*', for self reliant and sustained village societies. It has been argued by scholars that the Gandhian vision was not resistant to scientific advancement (Arnold, 2013; Kumar, 1993), although it did vociferously critique the Nehruvian ideal of 'development' (Jodhka, 2002), that saw large scale heavy industrialisation as the answer to India's poverty and unemployment in the post Independence era.

Students at Anand Niketan learn to progressively work the *charkha* – which historically symbolised *swadeshi*, *swaraj* and *satyagraha*, among other things (NCERT, 2014; Brown, 2010) in the national struggle for independence. Younger children of primary classes try their hands on the relatively simplified table-top *charkha*, practising hand-eye coordination in a playful manner; while older children go on gradually from a box *charkha* to a two or four spindle *amber charkha*. All this happens as

part of their co-curricular activity classes, scheduled in the afternoon hours. The students learn together – no matter the age – as well as assist one another in spinning, calculating the amount of thread being spun into units of *gundi*, fixing and maintaining their machines, so on. At one point of time, multiple age groups and grades could be learning and spinning together in one area designated for the activity – thereby, making multi-age learning and mentorship possible. Girls and boys unhesitatingly work with one another, without the teachers or school processes trying to segregate the students into gendered groupings. When Kiran's continuity of her thread being spun was broken, it was Pranav's gentle and encouraging assistance to re-work the piece of *kapaas* (cotton), that got her spinning again. On another note, it is significant to highlight here, that the *gundis* of thread being spun from raw *kapaas pedus* (small cotton balls/pieces) are sent to weaving units outside school (one of which we visited at Gopuri) to convert into cloth. This cloth is later stitched by the students to make a handmade product – bag, purse, pouch, etc. – in another one of their craft classes and then sold at their school fair. The shirts stitched in these sessions by the girls as well as boys of the senior-most class X, with their choice of cloth from home, is worn by them on their school farewell day. This sense of satisfaction from 'creating' something original is clubbed with the economic value that the finished product stands to generate, contributing to Gandhi's vision of economic self-sustenance of a school.

Another example is that of agriculture and their engagement with the school vegetable garden, which like the crafts, provides an interdisciplinary approach to learning (detailed later in section two). The presence and

guidance of teachers is ensured, but it is the support of learning with peers – juniors with seniors, or girls with boys – that stands out. Such cooperative peer learning is a fundamental aspect of Nai Taleem and comes through in all activities ranging from cooking, painting, to stitching, pickle making, seed preservation, so on.

The morning assembly is organised in a way that students find space to bring forth and share their first-hand academic endeavours through personalised presentations. The sharing happens without any nudging, bullying, and in the least intrusive way. It, moreover, prioritises a student's own voice, sense of thinking and creative expression – showing a unique and a non-bookish understanding of an experience, concept or reflection. When Kashika tried to do an impromptu translation of her Marathi write up into Hindi – for our convenience – about their recent field-trip to Baba Amte's Ashram, *Anandwan*, she hesitated and started crying. The whole school patiently waited for her to find the right words, and displaying empathy, applauded her effort to attempt a spontaneous translation from her mother tongue (Marathi) to another language (Hindi). It is a way of life for students to confidently put up doubts, engage in dialogues, or gently argue their cases – quite openly even during the morning assembly – and respectful disagreement and dialogical resolution to the same is common. One is reminded of such a dialogue between Gandhi and Tagore following differences in opinion and ideology, which were respectfully approached (Patel and Skyes, 1987). Harsh or demeaning reproach and reprimand by the teachers was never observed here – something which could otherwise be a common feature of a child's life, making her schooling experience undignified, undemocratic and oppressive.

Students display a deep sense of ownership of their school, and a spirit of community comes through in the manner in which they move around, explore, access and approach this space. They maintain and respect their school property, like the school toilets are regularly cleaned by *all* students in rotation – dismissing notions of caste inequality, rejecting socio-cultural taboos of pollution, and embracing dignity of labour. All present – students as well as their teachers – are living endorsement of fearlessness and togetherness. The ease with which a young child can approach the school Principal, Sushama *Tai*, practically hanging by the doors of her office or even onto her shoulder, calling out to her repeatedly, is the same as a senior student or teacher would approach her. All are free to move about the school at will – no doors are meant to be closed to anyone, spaces cordoned off, norms of access or timings prescribed. Be it *Kala Bhawan* or *Kabir Bhawan*, or the room where they stitch, draw or paint, or where their garden is, or where their play area and swings are – activity and congregational areas are as much one’s own as the academic spaces. Children can be seen confidently using these spaces even before or after school timings.

“*Mil ke chalo*” finds a unique meaning of its own in this community, which lives by and strives to base their education on ideals of respect, love and empathy, in a world where we prepare our students for cut-throat and self-destructive competitiveness.

### **Connecting with the ‘real’ world: multidisciplinary learning**

It is entirely possible to enlist the multidisciplinary and integrated nature of crafts-based learning at more than one place in this school. Take for example the spinning of the *charkha*.

Here one would apply mathematics when measuring, say, how much thread a student spins on an average in an hour – amongst a long list of other measurements and calculations she can do. Working with the local *kapaas* in hand, she enquires what Social Science would help her learn about the lives of farmers, minimum support prices, nature of cotton crop, seasonal changes, gendered nature of labour, so on. The economics of selling a finished product and its entire chain of distribution from farmer to retailer can be further discussed (NCERT, 2017). Moreover, she could design an enquiry about the science of crop protection against infestation of many kinds to get a healthy crop. Science can intersect with the Social Sciences as she spends time researching ways of local seed preservation and that of a people’s indigenous knowledge (for example, refer to this photo essay, Daga, 2015, Oct. 7). Much of this exploration can be done beyond the classroom or even the school through field visits where students can interact with, interview, record narratives of local farmers, craftspersons, government officers, women’s self-help groups, so on. The learning can be designed using a variety of educational media like news articles, farmers’ rally pamphlets, samples of the seeds/crop, so on. The session on spinning the *charkha*, thereby, de facto makes multidisciplinary ‘real’ world based learning as well as “critical craft learning” possible (p. 55, NCERT, 2005).

Since the theme of our academic trip to Sevagram was ‘cotton’ – on the lines of phenomenon-based learning (Spiller, 2017, May 29) – much emphasis was laid and effort made to go deeper into the socio-political factors of growing and working with cotton in Vidarbha. In this regard, activities were designed by the Swiss group, as well as by us from

Delhi University, in collaboration with the teachers at the school. The foci of these activities had been wide ranging. For example, the Swiss participants designed a group-based activity for the school students and teachers, which traced the journey of cotton in the case of an industrially made Swiss shirt versus a khadi shirt. It covered ideas ranging in the former (industrially made shirt) from environmentally toxic use of chemicals in production and transportation, labour exploitation, eclipsing local trade practices and small scale industries, to the latter's (khadi's) environmentally and socially friendly shirts, with the downside of them becoming expensive and available in limited designs.

An activity designed by us used an original narrative of a female farmer, Behnabai, in 'The case of uncertain cotton crop'. We worked with the latest data on demand, yield and profit/loss of genetically modified Bt Cotton in Haryana and Vidarbha (Gangan, 2018, Jan. 1; Saraswat, 2017), along with a preliminary understanding of the history of cotton in India (Menon and Uzramma, 2017). The session on this data lay the ground for an extensive deliberation by the students of their experiences through a collective discussion – "*samuhik charcha*". Ideas, again, ranged from the quality of the new hybrid seeds which cannot be used for the next crop, extinction of indigenous varieties of seeds ("*deshi beej khatm ho gaye*"), farmer loans and suicides ("*karz ki wajah se kisan aatmhatya karte hain*"), deficit of monsoon rains (when the "*talaab*" in the village has not been filling for two years, how will the fields get water for irrigation, one student remarked), to the role of brokers/agents, multinational corporations selling seeds, fertilizers, insecticides, thereby making farmers dependent on them ("*kisan company ke gulam hote*

*hain*"), and so on. Students' in their participation brought into focus their immediate realities, ground based experiences of activism, and textual understanding of concepts. What was interesting was that the sessions were held for the school students of classes seven to ten, so the small groups were mixed in terms of age and nearly evenly distributed in terms of girls to boys. Such a composition encouraged a dialogue and possibility of learning from one another across grades. Our work on creating Circles of Learning (Malik and Rampal, 2016a, 2016b, 2015; Rampal, 2008, 2005) between older and younger students in and out of school contexts, on sensitive issues of gender and sexuality, adds to this work on mixed age collaborative learning.

It is through the example of agriculture that one would like to highlight the applied nature of interdisciplinary integration of concepts at Anand Niketan. Unlike as in routine hobby classes elsewhere, the field or the garden in this school takes the form of a living entity that needs respectful caring, companionship, monitoring, tending, so on. It is evident at Anand Niketan that the tending of the field connects:

...ecology and environment of the school campus, weather, water and energy issues; cooking in the school kitchen, food and nutrition, health and hygiene; economics of gardening, sale or processing of surplus; management of green and non green waste, recycling; maintenance of the classroom, the school premises and the waste generated; gender and cultural issues; history and traditional knowledge systems, etc...linkages to mindful, cooperative and democratic living can be drawn... (p.2, Coelho, 2014).

At the time, the students were engaged in groups growing *meethi* (fenugreek). One group exclaimed that theirs had gone beyond the consumable stage because they were too late in trimming it, thereby making it bitter. The other group gladly worked on trimming, weighing and preparing to sell their produce. They also sold it to the ashram Guest House so that our group, including the Swiss teachers, could relish it for dinner the same day.

The students have a deep understanding about seasonal variations of crops being grown, about the nature of soil, amount of produce, the economics of its purchase and sale, the procedure to prepare compost, preservation of their own seeds, etc. Vijay of Class X very confidently showed us around the composting pits and detailed the nature of the fruit growing on the regal papaya tree adjacent to it. When it is their turn to cook in the school kitchen, they use some of these ingredients from their garden. They learn science, mathematics, garden economics, cooking, waste management, in and through the garden. They learn to work together, respect and nurture their own relationships and that with the garden, cooperate, make mistakes and learn at their own pace. The curriculum for the learning of Life Skills at schools needs to be grounded in this manner - in hands-on, engaging, self-sustained activities - to ensure that the spectrum of challenging aims of education, of embedding cooperation, empathy, love, respect, compassion, togetherness, creativity, motivation, ethics, conflict resolution, etc. in children's school experience is rendered more meaningful than textual readings limited to the classroom.

Some of the things they had produced in the field, the kitchen or during other cocurricular activities

were on display at the Republic Day celebration. From paintings, papier-mâché objects, soaps, hair clips, paper folders, to raw turmeric pickle and hibiscus *ambadi* drink or *sherbet* were on sale. Girls enjoyed selling paintings they had drawn as much as boys took pride in selling the pickle they had prepared with their male teachers, or the soaps and jewellery they had made. In learning to cook, stitch bags, purses, their own shirts and tending to their garden - amongst many other opportunities at school - the boys were questioning the culturally engineered notion of 'masculinity' and gender stereotypical roles in life. Some, by their own admission, were trying to challenge the gendering of domestic labour at home, by lending a hand in everyday chores. Albeit slowly, they did believe that more gender equitable relationships would prevail in their lives.

### **Reflections on an intercultural exchange**

The intercultural exchange during this trip happened at multiple levels. For the Swiss students visiting India for the first time, it was a unique cultural experience. The experience of freedom within the school, and engagement with learning in an inquiry based, collaborative, locally contextualised manner - especially in their craft related sessions - stood out as meaningful learning; not burdensome, as happens for a majority of students (MHRD, 1993).

Another significant component of this multicultural exchange of ideas, actions and commitments was the careful use of language in spontaneous translation from one group to another. The foreign group's mother tongue was French, though some spoke and all understood English. The students and teachers at Anand Niketan spoke Marathi, though some Hindi and

English were also occasionally spoken. Communication rested on much spontaneous translation ensured by the participants, and gestures, expressions, music and drawings were consciously incorporated to enhance interaction when words fell short or seemed inadequate.

The Swiss students were seeing, feeling, smelling, tasting their new surroundings and simultaneously translating them into art in their travel notebook – “carnet de voyage” – that they had been maintaining prior to their visit to India. They went from what they ‘imagined’ India to be, relying on information they could gather in Switzerland before arriving, from text, images or videos, to what they ‘experienced’ it once here. It was an art project designed by their Art teacher accompanying them on this trip, to understand cultural differences or similarities if any, help them observe closely, reflect and hone their sensibilities for this exchange. Seeing them comfortably sprawled on the floor, in the gardens, to draw what inspired or struck them, and to find the energy to draw and paint well into the night after a tiring and eventful day, was truly moving. They found inspiration in the new fruits they ate, never before seen flowers and leaves, the Indian toilet, intricately cut out blocks used in block printing, monkeys swinging on branches, *chai*, ceiling fans, among other things. We learnt from them how drawing does not require professional training and nearly everything can be translated into art so long as one can imagine, reflect and express freely. It was significant for all of us to participate in the school assembly in Kala Bhawan, what had been the home of art education inspired by the work of the legendary artist Devi Prasad. He had studied and trained at Tagore’s Santiniketan, and developed a deep

understanding and philosophy of the basis of art in education at Anand Niketan during its conception phase and even later, and encouraged sensitivity, joy and creativity (Prasad, 1998). He furthermore believed that students did not necessarily need an artist-teacher, but one who encourages artistic sensibilities and expression with the utmost respect. A liberated individual who is creative espouses togetherness and brings a spirit of harmony to one’s inner self and that of all humanity. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF, 2005), the position paper on Arts (NCERT, 2006) and the current two-year teacher-education programme (NCTE, n.d.) espouse the value of Art in Education, as a significant resource for learning.

In their pre-planned interactions with students in individual classes, the Swiss students used charts and videos to ‘show’ the students what Switzerland was about. Their presentations were a little clichéd with beautiful valleys, snow capped mountains, the story of Heidi, pretty looking Swiss cows, chocolates and cheese, but the discussions that followed, often initiated by some of the older school students, led to interesting insights. In class VI, while discussing their currency, students and their teachers tried to calculate the conversion of a Swiss Franc into Indian Rupees and enthusiastically wondered what they could purchase with equal amounts of the two currencies. They attempted to understand each other’s food, with students from both contexts explaining to one another the kinds of vegetables they grow in their countries and the ones common to both. To explain that they grow pumpkin in Switzerland, their art teacher (who spoke French) drew one for the school students – the connection made with this local vegetable in Sevagram was instant. When the Swiss group

explained that their country is a 'small' one, in the centre of Europe, the school students (with the help of their teachers) tried to establish what the centre for them in India is - arriving at Nagpur through a quick study of the map of India. Calculating the number of seats in the trains in both countries, the students in Anand Niketan tried to explain to their visiting friends what sleeper, chair car, three tier categories meant in Indian railways. They compared cows of both countries, with students at school explaining to the Swiss participants about their Gir, Kathiawadi, hybrid Jersey varieties of cows. Interestingly, some gestures and 'life-like' mime helped communicate to one another what they were trying to explain. To describe skiing, for example, one Swiss student recreated the sport by imitating the act of putting on skiing pants, shoes, a helmet, then moving left and right by her hips, making a fast moving "sheee-sheee-sheee" sound, to the amusement of all the children.

Indeed, this was a democratic intercultural 'exchange' where *all* learnt from one another, without it being a case of projecting any one or more culture/s as deficit and in need of being 'educated'. While the students at the school welcomed with open hearts their Swiss visitors, the latter learnt from them what in-depth learning, being reflexive, employing more than the cognitive to include affective, sense of empathy, awareness of the surrounding and larger social issues could mean. In a subsequent presentation at an International Seminar, at the Department of Education at Delhi University, the Swiss students through their "reflections" shared that the students at Sevagram have a notion of "why" they go to school, instead of being restricted to "what" they learn there - something, they added from their personal experiences, was not

common in Switzerland. The fact that the students of the school practised democracy, as a community, with respect, love, empathy for everyone, was inspiring for them.

It was a sense of coming full circle with the Swiss students requesting the school students to write "*mil ke chalo*" for them in Hindi in their notebooks, to get as tattoos on their bodies, as a reminder of their memorable trip to Sevagram. The phrase perhaps etched in memory by virtue of having been melodiously sung each morning for five days, resonated true togetherness for them.

### **Conclusion: humanist education**

In encouraging criticality, hands-on learning, drawing on local resources, or building a relationship with the surrounding world, the students' experiences of schooling become more meaningful. The substance of such an education lies not in cut-throat competition or scoring a hundred percent marks, but in establishing oneness within oneself and with all else around. In the current obsessive onslaught of the neoliberal times - increasingly edging towards marketisation, regimentation and corporatisation of education amongst other debilitating features - schools like the ones at Anand Niketan highlight the often forgotten aims of education to build a society that is compassionate, just and empathetic.

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