

# 1

## INTRODUCTION – A PERSONAL TESTIMONY

This story of the Sevagram experiment in *Nai Talim* is being put together by a seemingly unlikely editor – one who is British by blood and birth, a member of the nation whose rule over India was challenged from Sevagram itself. A teacher certainly, but one trained in that system of “Western” education which Gandhiji himself regarded as partially responsible for maintaining British rule; a teacher who spent her first ten years in India in Madras, working in one of the many privately managed schools, which, being “aided” financially by Government, were bound in important respects to the Government system. How did it happen that this particular British teacher got involved in the Sevagram experiment almost from the beginning?

In Madras, that August day in 1937 began like any other school working-day, with classes to be taught and office work to be done. When the mail arrived, personal letters were put aside to be read later. I went to my room after lunch, taking them with me. Among them was my copy of *Harijan*, dated the 31st July. I began to turn its pages and a short paragraph caught my eye: Gandhiji’s public description of the kind of education he would like to see made available to the children of India. Those few sentences drove everything else out of my mind. Excitedly I read them again and again. I still remember clearly the words that came into my head “Here is someone talking real sense about education at last!” I looked eagerly for the next *Harijan* and the next, and followed the controversies which Gandhiji’s proposals had aroused. I read also of the plan to call selected educationists together for a preliminary discussion that October. I had not met Gandhiji then. I was young and shy, and knew nothing of India outside the south. So it never occurred to me, in spite of my enthusiasm, to invite myself into that meeting. I know now that I would have been made welcome, but I have no regrets. Things worked out for me in another way.

My excitement about Gandhiji's ideas had not arisen in a vacuum. It was the natural result of a great deal that had gone before, right back to my own childhood. We children were expected to help in all the daily chores, the cooking and cleaning of a very simple home. My father drew a modest salary as head-master of the village school in a poor coal-mining community in northern England. It was an "ordinary" school, but he was not an "ordinary" teacher. He knew that children learn by making and doing things, and he spent long hours at home in the evening preparing things for them to make and do, while I, his own eldest child, watched and helped. He showed the school children how to make cardboard models that really worked – railway signals that moved up and down, a water-wheel that turned when one poured fine sand upon it to simulate the water. Real water would not do for a cardboard wheel, but the principle was the same. So maths and science were learned, and also manual skill and accuracy. Geography and history, poetry, music were linked up with the children's own experience. Once an assistant teacher came who had lived in Canada and knew how to make fire by striking a spark in tinder. Father at once arranged a demonstration and then let all the children try it for themselves.

When in 1928, I began teaching in Madras, I, asked my father to send me a simple guide-book about how to teach general science by practical activities using everyday materials. He sent me some books, which were used to plan many happy lessons in Madras during the following years. (This was forty years or more before it became "fashionable" in educational circles in India to talk of using local resources for teaching practical science).

Later on my students at Sevagram sometimes asked me where I had been "trained" for *Nai Talim*. "In my own home", I would answer, "by my father and my mother!"

As a schoolgirl I knew nothing of Gandhiji; in 1920-21 we were unaware of the great non-cooperation movement in India. But we were very much aware of the Irish freedom struggle, and our sympathies were all with it. Interest in the struggles of "colonial" peoples to assert their own identity persisted

during my university years at Cambridge, where we heard from our Indian fellow students about the national movement and its leaders. We also listened to appeals from many lands for help with education. Their young leaders wanted to establish schools which would preserve the values of their own culture and enable them to resist the increasing pressures of the West, and they wanted young British teachers to help them, as equals. I was attracted, and soon after completing my training as a teacher, I was put in touch with a school in Madras which needed help. I reached Madras in the autumn of 1928.

The Bentinck Girls High School had grown and developed from a tiny school begun in the time of Lord William Bentinck – hence its name. In 1937, when Gandhiji wrote his historic paragraph in *Harijan*, it had reached its centenary; in 1987 when *Nai Talim* celebrated its Golden Jubilee, the school celebrated 150 years of work. In curriculum and examinations it was part of “the system”, as I have said, but there was still considerable freedom in other ways. Two of my senior colleagues had spent time earlier in 1928 at Sabarmati and Santiniketan respectively, and had returned full of enthusiasm for what they had learned from Gandhiji and from Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore. One result was that the Bentinck children had learned to sing *Janaganamana* and were singing it joyfully, long before it became our national anthem. They knew several verses and liked especially the one which celebrates the comradeship between India’s great religious traditions.

Tagore’s example strengthened and confirmed our own conviction that the children’s mother-tongue should have a central place in their education. We were a two-language school with Tamil and Telugu-speaking streams; we saw to it that both Languages had their proper place of honour. Sometimes we invited distinguished women, who were taking a leading part in “national” activities in Madras, to tell the children about their work. Many of them had been educated in “English-medium” schools and found it easier to speak English than their own mother tongue. We had to persuade them to talk Tamil instead. “We want all the children to

understand”, we would say. “They won’t all understand your English. Please talk Tamil”. And they did.

We learned later that Gandhiji also insisted on the use of the mother-tongue, but in those days we thought chiefly of his shining honesty and simplicity. We were a poor school, most of the children came from humble families, the climate of Madras was always warm. So furniture was minimal and sandals were rarely used; teachers and children alike ran about barefoot and slept on grass mats on the floor; one small tin box held all of a girl’s clothing and personal miscellany. The simplicity of Sevagram when I first saw it did not seem strange – it embodied, with a special grace and beauty of its own, the simplicity of the village’ homes of the south and of the children whose way of life they had shaped.

I had not been in Madras many weeks when to my great good fortune I met Rajaji. He described Gandhiji’s constructive programme and all the nation-building activities which had been inspired by it. He himself was deeply involved in these activities, especially in his ashram at Tiruchengode. We teachers began to think what more we might do towards nation building on our own small scale in school, by helping girls to grow into worthy citizens of the free India of the future. At Bentinck, there were a number of things in our favour. First of all we were a “small” school (by present standards), that is, we had fewer than 350 children all told, from the kindergarten to the school final classes. We thought and still think that this was the right size; teachers and children knew one another and cared for one another; we were not too big to be able to feel and act like a big family. Secondly, the school which was under Christian management admitted on equal terms girls of any religious background, and of any caste high or low, and treated them all alike. Resident children ate the same food from the same kitchen, which they helped to run. Local children often brought their mid-day food and sat down to eat it in little circles under our many shady trees. Like children everywhere they sometimes failed to clean up. One mid-day, looking out from the staff room, we saw a senior Brahmin girl humbly and quietly clearing away used (and therefore “polluted”) leaf-plates left lying about by her careless juniors,

some of them children of the “lowest” castes. She at least, we thought, had caught the spirit of Gandhiji’s constructive programme.

The children themselves were expected to keep their classrooms and compound clean; we had no servants to do it. Some of the classrooms were simple thatched sheds, very pleasant to work in. Their lucky inhabitants happily planted flower-gardens around them and cared for them. All this meant a lot of cooperative team work; we deliberately extended this cooperative spirit to the sports and the academic programme. In physical education, our aim was not to train a few “star” performers, but to help every child to achieve the best that she was capable of, which meant that the gifted children helped the others. It was the same in the classroom. We gave no academic prizes to the “best” performers; instead we encouraged children to help one another, and watched for and praised the improvement which even the “slow” children showed, with hard work and friendly assistance. Oh yes, people told us that “children won’t work” without the artificial inducement of a prize. It is no and if it sometimes appears true it is because the “work” we expect from the children has no intrinsic interest or meaning for them. Some parents also protested, as one would expect, that they sent their girls to school “to study”, not to sweep floors or water gardens; other parents, however, including some of the national leaders of the city, deliberately chose to send their girls to us because of what we were trying to do within the limits of an “aided” school.

But there were limits to what we could do, and from about 1935, I had begun to feel more and more uneasy about them. One was the fact that troubled Gandhiji, that education was partially financed by income from licensed drink-shops. Another was my growing awareness of how irrelevant much of “the system” was to India’s real needs. There was something badly wrong, I thought, when a girl who wanted to be a nurse, and who was exceptionally well-qualified in personality and skills for just such a career, was refused admission to the training course because she could not “pass” in irrelevant subjects like formal English grammar. Another source of uneasiness arose in the context of the 1935 provision for

“communal” electorates. Issues of “conversion” became politically explosive because of their potential effect on communal voting strength. As I have said, the school was a Christian foundation. In previous years I had greatly enjoyed taking Bible classes with girls of all communities. We studied the great biblical teaching of public justice and “righteousness” in relation to the message of Gandhiji and to social justice in India. But after 1935 every “communal” institution, no matter how open and honest, might be accused of secret “proselytising”; the former easy, frank intercourse was shadowed by suspicion. I was dissatisfied with these governmental and other constraints, I longed to be able to work in an independent setting, especially after that August day when I first read of Gandhiji’s dreams and hopes.

In 1938 the way forward opened. Through friends who knew of my position, I received a warm invitation from Rabindranath Tagore to join the staff of his international educational centre at Santiniketan. I eagerly accepted, and in December 1938 I travelled to Santiniketan to arrange for my future work. But I did not go by the direct coastal route. Instead I went first to Wardha, to see for myself what was going on there and in Segaon, in the new village school and the training centre for teachers. For the first time I met Gandhiji, and was able to talk with him direct about his school and its ideals. I was captured, more fully than ever. What I found that December is a part of the story which follows.

## 2

### THE SOWING OF THE SEED

When Gandhiji wrote his articles in *Harijan* in 1937 he had been thinking about education for at least forty years. By 1896 he had spent three years in South Africa, but his wife and two little children had remained in India. When it became clear that his work was likely to take many more years, he went to India to fetch his family. He returned to Durban at the beginning of 1897 with three children, his own sons aged nine and five, and his sister's son who was ten. At once, the question of their education arose.

Right from the beginning, Gandhiji was clear about three things: the children should live at home, they should not be separated from their parents and sent to a residential school; they should learn in their own mother-tongue; they should not have any privileges which other Indian children could not share.

They should live at home because "the education that children naturally imbibe in a well-ordered household is impossible to obtain in hostels". The intimate relationships of the home were, Gandhiji believed, the foundation of all social and moral education, and that was what he regarded as of central importance. "I had always given the first place to the culture of the heart and the building of character", he wrote. Later, when he looked back on those years, he felt that his children had been able to learn the meaning of "simplicity and a spirit of service" by growing up in a home where these things were being explored and practised.

Gandhiji was equally emphatic about the use of the mother-tongue. "It has always been my conviction", he declared, "that Indian parents who train their children to think and talk in English from their infancy betray their children and their country. They deprive them of the spiritual and social heritage of the nation, and render them to that extent unfit for the service of the country". But in South Africa English was the recognised medium of communication, and in the schools Indian languages were taught badly if at all. Gandhiji

himself insisted on using Gujarati always when talking with the children, and did his best to make time to give them a general education through this medium. Whenever possible they would walk with him from home to his office, and talk about all kinds of subjects on the way. But his legal practice and public service left him very little leisure, and both he and they felt the inadequacy of the literary side of their education. Perhaps it was this experience of the practical difficulties in the way of a complete home education which led him to insist later on the need for organised schools.

This did not mean however that any school would do, at any price. In Durban, because of the general respect which Gandhiji had won in the white community, he might have sent his own boys to one of the elite schools which Indian children were normally not allowed to attend. This he refused to do as a matter of self-respect. They might have had a good literary education – in English, of course – but at the price of being party to an unfair discrimination against their own people. “I gave them”, wrote Gandhiji. “an object-lesson in liberty and self-respect at the cost of the literary training. Where a choice has to be made between liberty and learning, the former has to be preferred”.

So things went on till 1904. By then Gandhiji's main work was in Johannesburg, but his close links with Durban remained, and he encouraged friends there to start the *Indian Opinion*, which quickly became his mouthpiece. But the paper ran into grave financial difficulties and he was urged to visit Durban in person. His close friend Henry Polak saw him off from Johannesburg station and gave him a book to read on the twenty-four hours journey. The book was Ruskin's *Unto this Last*; it is well-known that the profound impression it made on Gandhiji led to the immediate establishment of the Phoenix Ashram on a hundred acres of land about fourteen miles outside Durban, and to the removal of the *Indian Opinion* press to this new site. There Gandhiji planned to put into practice the revolutionary idea that had come to him as he read *Unto this Last*, that a life of manual labour, of the artisan and the tiller of the soil, is the life worth living. He invited everyone connected with the press, and other friends



in Durban, to come and join in the adventure, to take up three acres of land for each family and become farmers in earnest.

Naturally only a few responded, although all the press workers agreed to live at Phoenix and work from there. But some did respond fully, including Chhaganlal and Maganlal Gandhi. The latter gave up his own business in Durban mastered the work of the press, and soon showed his genius for craftsmanship. Henry Polak, hearing what had happened, was delighted, resigned his own job with a Johannesburg newspaper. and came and joined also. He could not stay long, but he made a fine contribution. With six or seven families, and some growing children, Phoenix became a little village. Sooner or later, it would have to have a village school. Gandhiji planned to give up his own practice and retire there to work his own three acres and make Phoenix the centre of his service.

Outside pressures however were too great, and during the following years they led to the next great “experiment with truth”, the Transvaal satyagraha campaign. In 1909 Gandhiji visited England; on board ship on the way back to South Africa he set down all his challenges to conventional wisdom in his book *Hind Swaraj*. It contains, in the form of a quotation from Huxley, his ideal of an educated man:

*His body is the servant of his will and does its work with ease and pleasure .... his mind is stored with knowledge of the fundamental truths of nature; his passions are under the control of a vigorous will and a tender conscience; he has learned to hate all vileness and to respect others as himself. Such a man and no other has had a liberal education.*

After Gandhiji returned to Johannesburg he began to feel keenly the need for a place where the dependents of the satyagrahis might live while their bread-winner was in jail, and where the satyagrahis themselves might find a welcome when they were released. Previously they had been given monthly allowances “according to need”, but Gandhiji felt that this practice offered too much temptation to fraud, and too much risk that injustice might be done to the really deserving. What was needed was: a simple cooperative commonwealth

within easy reach of Johannesburg; Phoenix was much too far away.

The need was met by another good friend, a wealthy and successful German architect named Hermann Kallenbach. On 30<sup>th</sup> May 1910 he wrote and offered Gandhiji a good farm, well-stocked with fruit trees, about twenty miles away from the city. The matter was settled that very day and Kallenbach named the new venture Tolstoy Farm. Five days later Kallenbach himself with Gandhiji and two of his sons, moved to the farm and began to make arrangements for the colonists. Soon there were sixty or seventy people, men, women, and twenty or thirty children of all ages. They were a mixed crowd; among them were speakers of four Indian languages, Gujarati, Tamil, Telugu, Hindi, and adherents of four religious groups, Hindu, Muslim, Parsee, Christian. They came from many diverse social environments. They needed a school.

Gandhiji dreamed of finding out by experience and experiment “a true system of education” which would put into practice the ideal he had put forward in *Hind Swaraj*. He was already sure that the family was the starting-point, and Tolstoy Farm was being run like a big joint family. There was a common kitchen, which was possible because those who were habitual meat-eaters voluntarily gave up meat during their time there. The women took charge, and the children regularly helped them by turns, while Gandhiji himself came frequently to assist. The whole community, adults and children alike, were set to work on the farm, in the vegetable gardens and in the workshop. The children much enjoyed working with Kallenbach; he made them work hard, but he was also full of jokes and friendliness. Everyone shared in the sanitation work, and there was carpentry, and sandal-making, also led by Kallenbach. He had got himself specialising trained and he taught Gandhiji sandal-making in his turn. With all this bodily exercise and simple healthy food the children grew well, and there was very little sickness. Naturally there were some high-spirited pranks, and sometimes the work suffered, but not for long. There was a sound rule that children should not be asked to do things that their teachers did not do; a teacher would work with

them at every kind of labour, so things went fairly well, even though it was a completely new experience for all the children. Their Johannesburg schools had taught nothing but the “three R’s”.

At Tolstoy Farm there were regular school classes, two or three periods each day. These had to take place in the afternoon, and both teachers and children were often sleepy after doing a morning’s work in the open air. There were other difficulties; Gandhiji and Kallenbach, who between them did most of the teaching, had to spend at least two days each week in Johannesburg, and there were very few others who could help. All the same, some good work was done, and Gandhiji himself felt that with all its short-comings “the most substantial result of the (satyagraha) struggle is the school”. He himself undertook to teach the illiterate Tamil children to read and write their own language, which he had studied in jail. Of spoken Tamil, they knew far more than he did, and they used to act as his interpreters when Tamil-speaking visitors came to see him. For Gandhiji never attempted to disguise from his pupils his own ignorance. How often, in later years, the writer had to point out to the teachers who came to Sevagram to be re-trained for *Nai Talim*, that it does nothing but good for the teacher to say frankly, as occasion arises, “I don’t know that; shall we try to find out together?” Such honesty will win their pupils’ love and respect, just as Gandhiji did.

Besides language, there were classes in arithmetic and hand- writing. Gandhiji always lamented his own ill-formed, hand, and considered that education was not complete without good hand-writing. He surely must have enjoyed, in later years, the beautifully formed clear, attractive writing of some of his secretarial helpers, such as Rajkumari Amrit Kaur and Mahadev Desai. There were also classes in general knowledge, history, geography, science and so on. Gandhiji believed strongly that these were best taught through vivid, well-told stories and interesting talks; in his experience, he said, children learned more readily and more thoroughly through their ears than through their eyes, so while the school had some books it had practically no textbooks. There were a few

books about Islam and the Zoroastrian religion, and the notes on the “fundamentals of Hinduism” which Gandhiji had prepared earlier for his own children. All the classes about all religions were attended by all the children; the maxim was: “Equal respect for all religions and faithfulness to your own”, and there were no quarrels in Tolstoy Farm about religious differences.

So much for the education of the body and the mind. The education of the spirit did not, for Gandhiji, consist of familiarity with the teachings of holy books, it was a matter of life and practice. “The great truths common to all religions”, he was to declare later in India, “cannot be learned by words of books, but only by the life of the teacher”. The children did learn some of the great devotional hymns, in Gujarati, Hindi and English, whose music and poet might appeal to them at a deeper level than that of the mind alone. But the greatest emphasis was on conduct, on the spiritual qualities of mutual service, willing sharing, courtesy and industry. And these qualities of the spirit are “caught – not taught”, through the infectious enthusiasm, love and purity of those elder men and women who, whether formally “teachers” or not, shape the outlook and aspirations of the children around them. In Tolstoy Farm there were such men and women; the satyagrahis had, by their honesty and openness, so won the respect of the officials that they were set free without bail after their cases were heard, and trusted to come back to the court for sentence on the day fixed. One day a party of them who had spent the days of waiting at Tolstoy Farm nearly missed the last train into Johannesburg, the Station Master saw them running and held up the train for them, a friendly action inspired by their own courtesy and friendliness.

The Farm-school was comparatively short-lived. About a year after it began, an agreement was reached between Gandhiji and General Smuts which brought the satyagraha campaign to an end. The families began to withdraw from the colony and return to their normal lives. Most of those who remained had belonged originally to Phoenix, and after a time they too went back; two or three years later it was these Phoenix boys, led by Maganlal Gandhi, who preceded Gandhiji

and Kasturba to India. When Gandhiji himself reached India in February 1915, they were at Santiniketan; their presence and example, along with Gandhiji's own persuasive tongue, inspired the famous experiment in self-reliance in the big community kitchen which the Poet called "the key to swaraj".

So, in South Africa, the seeds of *Nai Talim* were sown. "My faith and courage were at their highest in Tolstoy Farm", wrote Gandhiji, and he often looked back with something like nostalgia to that period of personal experiment with education. He reflected much on his experience, but it was not until twenty-five years later, when a whole generation had passed, that in 1937 he placed before the Indian nation his vision of schools as they might be. Did he sometimes remember what Gopal Krishna Gokhale, whom he regarded as his own greatest teacher in the field of public service, had said when he visited him at Tolstoy Farm? "I will never do anything in a hurry; I will think about it, the central idea and the language I should use to express it". Gandhiji too continued to think about his own central ideas and of how they might be expressed through organised schools.

### 3

#### THE SEED GERMINATES

In 1930 Gandhiji had stepped out of his *ashram* at Sabarmati and turned his face towards Dandi and the sea. The world-famous “Salt March” had begun. It was the end of one era of his life and the beginning of another, for as he left the place which had been his home since he returned to India in 1915, he vowed that he would not return to it until India was free.

Three dramatic years followed – the years of the Gandhi-Irwin Pact and the Round Table Conference, then the tragic aftermath of renewed oppression and imprisonment. In 1932 came the Poona fast which focussed national attention on the position and plight of the “untouchables”, and Gandhiji’s declaration that he would make their human dignity his central concern. When he was released from jail in 1933 *Young India* had been replaced by *Harijan* as his means of communication with the nation.

But where was he to go, where would he find a base and centre for his service? His friend Jamnalal Bajaj invited him to rest and reflect in his own home in Wardha. Wealthy but humble-minded, Jamnalalji’s generosity had already made Wardha, with some of the villages nearby, a lively centre of experiment in the constructive programme. Vinoba Bhave was already at work there. Not long after Gandhiji’s arrival, the Village Industries Association was started, and found a home in Jamnalal’s beautiful garden-house on the fringe of the town. The estate was re-named Maganwadi in honour of Maganlal Gandhi, whose genius for craftsmanship had contributed so much to the development of khadi and other programmes in the early years. There, in Maganwadi, Gandhiji made his home from 1934 to 1936.

Meanwhile Mirabehn was exploring the villages with their large Harijan populations and their tradition of cotton production, and she chose the small village Segaoon as the centre of her own service. Asha Devi described the village to the delegates to the first conference of Basic Education in 1939: “It is a most obscure little village of about 700 people,

more than half of whom are Harijans. For four or five months in the year its fields are green, there is work for all, and a brief illusion of beauty and plenty. But for the rest of the year it lies like a speck of dust in the midst of the bare plains of the Central Provinces, hands idle in every house. There is no water except from the few dirty wells jealously guarded by each little caste and sub-caste. There are no hills, no trees, no natural playground for children. About 20 of the families have land, the rest are landless labourers, and most of them cannot afford to eat even the equivalent of the "C" class diet provided in the Government jails."

In this particular village Jamnalal Bajaj was the chief *malguzar*, and he too was eager to see what could be done. Mirabehn settled there, living in extreme simplicity in a hut near Jamnalal's guava garden just outside the village itself. But the life was too much for her physical strength, and during the mounting heat of April 1936 she struggled with ill health. News of her condition was brought to Maganwadi.

That settled the matter. Gandhiji sent word that he was coming to help, and on the 30th April he set out at earliest dawn for the five-mile tramp to Segaon. When he arrived, he found that Mirabehn had arranged a temporary "camp" – a little hut of bamboo matting, a screen for bathing by the well in the guava garden, a trench latrine. She spread a mat under a shady tree where he could deal with the inescapable daily routine of letters and material for *Harijan*.

That evening Gandhiji held his prayer meeting in the village. "I have come to your village to serve you all," he said, "but I know that some of you may look on me with distrust or fear because my goal is to remove untouchability. I look on Brahmins and Chamars (an "untouchable" caste) as equal in the sight of God, and I think it is a sin to distinguish "high" and "low" by the accident of birth. But I will not force my opinions on you; I will only try to persuade you by argument and example. I will also try to help the sick, and to encourage you to be more self-reliant by keeping the village clean and by reviving the various village industries. I shall be happy if you will cooperate with me".

But that first visit was very brief, for Gandhiji had already arranged a tour programme for May and early June. While he was away, the little "kuti," the cottage which was to be his home for the rest of his life, was built for him in village style on a plot of land given by Jamnalalji. On the 15th June he came back to Maganwadi and sent word that he would come to Segaoon the following day. Meanwhile the first monsoon showers had begun and the earthen door of the kuti was still damp. The little group in Segaoon spent the rest of the day in frantic efforts to dry it out. Then that night came a real storm with torrential rain. Perhaps Bapu would not be able to come after all? But as luck would have it, on the 16th morning there came a break in the clouds. "Can we go, do you think?" asked Gandhiji. "Oh yes" replied his nephew Kanu, with all the optimism of youth. So the little party set out, but they had gone scarcely half a mile when the heavens opened once more. Having started, Gandhiji refused to turn back.

Meanwhile the Segaoon party huddled in the new Kutu, listening to the steady, relentless downpour. "He can't come in this weather," they thought. But come he did. Mirabehn, peering out, was the first to see the little party approaching, drenched to the skin and smeared with the black mud. Gandhiji's comment, after they had all been towelled down and changed into dry clothes: "Well, I had to put up with all kinds of hardship in South Africa, but never before have I walked so far in such a storm!"

As soon as he had settled down Gandhiji began to urge on his companions the need to plan for work in the village. He gave an hour each day to eating for the sick, he tackled the worst quagmires on the "road" where bullock carts were apt to stick fast during the rains. (Segaoon had no proper approach road; a fairly good track ran eastward from Wardha, along the higher ground south of the railway line, but Segaoon itself lay on lower ground a mile or so further south, and this last mile was the problem). He started a little ashram farm, including also milch cattle, hoping that it could serve as a model for the village. Gajanan Naik came to help, and taught the villagers 'to tap the date-palms and make palm jaggery. Others started bee-keeping and pottery work, and started,



teaching the children in the village school (which was then run by the local District Council) how to spin. A weaving centre was opened.

Once Gandhiji was established in Segaoon he became acquainted in detail with what went on in the village school – no better and no worse, he realised, than thousands of similar village schools throughout India, “We are stuffing children’s minds with all kinds of information”, he wrote, “without ever thinking of stimulating or developing them”. The children “read,” but with how little understanding; they “wrote”, but what badly-formed ugly letter – “daubs” was Gandhiji’s favourite word. His mind went back to his own happy experience in the school in Tolstoy Farm. Things which, as he said, he had “seen through a glass darkly” for forty years, now became clarified by his own experience in Segaoon. Was it not time to “cry halt” to this lifeless so-called education and find something better?

In 1937 the opportunity came. Popularly elected governments took office in the Provinces of “British India,” and a majority of these governments were controlled by the Indian National Congress. Among the portfolios for which they were responsible were health and education. Gandhiji gave them his support, and used the pages of *Harijan* to suggest guidelines for provincial government policy. He pointed out that the basic problems were the same in all the Provinces, and needed to be tackled in the same way by all governments, whether they were Congress governments or not. But his special appeal was to the Congress-led governments. He urged them to focus their attention first and foremost on the needs of the villages, with no distinction of caste or creed. They should give up the salt tax and the liquor revenue and carry on a vigorous campaign against the drink evil; their jails should become workshops and reformatories. As for education, they must offer the people the kind of education which would supply their real needs in a way which would be within their means.

All through the earlier part of the year Gandhiji spoke a great deal about the problem uppermost in his mind and in many others: *can we have both prohibition and education?*

“The cruellest irony of the new reforms”, he said, “lies in the fact that we are left with nothing but the liquor revenue to fall back upon in order to give our children education. That is the educational puzzle .... but if only we will refuse to be obsessed by the supposed necessity of giving our children the exact kind of education that they get today, the problem should not baffle us.” Gandhiji’s great friend Rajaji, who headed the Congress government in the Madras Province, declared that “if people were generous minded, they would say that they would do without education and have prohibition instead. What after all is the benefit of this education? The drunkard gets intoxicated with his drink and the educated man gets intoxicated with his luxuries – he is no more cultured than the drunkard!” Rajaji is applying a fundamental principle; he rejects “this” (present) education because it panders to greed: his ideal is cultured simplicity, which as Gandhiji insisted is beauty, not shoddiness.

Gandhiji was already propounding in these talks two of his major themes: first, the whole of general education up to the “matriculation” standard should be treated as one integrated unit, and given in the village schools, using the mother tongue of the pupils, by means of a seven or eight years’ course beginning at the age of seven; secondly, this course should include the practice of a useful productive handicraft which would enable the schools to be self-supporting. To the very great majority of teachers such ideas were unheard of; they provoked a great many questions and much criticism, and it was in answer to these doubts that Gandhiji wrote his seminal article in *Harijan* of the 31st July 1937:

“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 only one of the means by which man and woman can be educated. Literacy in itself is no education. I would therefore begin the child’s education by teaching it a useful handicraft and enabling it to produce from the moment it begins its training. Thus, every school can be made self-supporting, the condition being that the State takes over the manufactures of these schools.

“I hold that the highest development of the mind and the soul is possible under such a system of education. Only every handicraft has to be taught not merely mechanically as is done today, but scientifically, i.e. the child should know the why and wherefore of every process .... I have myself taught sandal-making and even spinning on these lines with good results. This method does not exclude a knowledge of history and geography. But I find that this is best taught by transmitting such general information by word of mouth. One imparts ten times as much in this manner as by reading and writing. The signs of the alphabet may be taught later... Of course, the pupil learns mathematics his handicraft.

“I attach the greatest importance to primary education, which according to my conception should be equal to the present matriculation less English ....”

There speaks the Gandhi of Tolstoy Farm, with over twenty years of experience in India to confirm what he had learned in Africa. In the India of 1937 every sentence contained a revolution. Education is not putting in information, it is drawing out the hidden potential for good in each human being. It is not concerned only with the intellect, but equally with the body and the spirit. Literacy is just a tool, a means to an end. It is not an end in itself. It is not always necessarily the best tool available for attaining the real end, which is the highest all-round development of human being. It is certainly not the first tool for little education whose nature demands activity, purposeful work, Gandhiji wrote fifty years ago, but in the India of 1987 the old ideals and the old habits still persist; the revolution he dreamed of is unfulfilled.

Gandhiji's second paragraph is equally revolutionary. From the beginning he had seen that the vigorous manual work to meet the needs of a family or community was the basis both of physical health and of an ethic of generous sharing and mutual respect. But the link between the skills of hand and eye, and the development of the mind, was not so clear to him in those earlier days: on those long walks from home to office with his own children, and in the “sleepy” afternoon classes at Tolstoy Farm he does not seem to have used the children's work experiences to stimulate their interest in

their literary studies; he relied upon the intrinsic interest of the subject and on his own powers of vivid story-telling. "I must confess", he wrote in 1937, "that up to now all I have said is that manual training must be given side by side with intellectual training. But now I say that manual training should be the principal means of stimulating the intellect". This meant that the manual training must be "scientific". There must be full appreciation of the chosen handicraft in all its points of contact with natural science and human history, its standards of accuracy and beauty, the part it plays in the well-being of the people who practise it and in the enrichment of human life as a whole. Handicrafts taught in this way, far from being a mindless drudgery, could stimulate endless intellectual curiosity on a great variety of topics. They opened the door wide for research and discovery.

Then comes the third revolution. No more separate town-based High Schools, where children learn to look down on manual labour and village traditions. Instead, a complete all-round education in the village itself, free from the stifling burden of compulsory English. The demand for education in the mother-tongue was not new; Rabindranath Tagore had voiced forcefully and demonstrated it practically for at least forty years. But it was now put forward in the context of a complete village-centred plan for national education. "At a higher level", said Gandhiji, "those who require the services of specially trained workers must pay for the training of the engineers, chemists, financiers, etc. whom they may require. Standards of teaching, etc. in such colleges may be checked by the affiliating universities. Medical and agricultural colleges are in a different category. The training of doctors may be supported by the charity of the wealthy, but agricultural colleges which cannot support themselves on their own produce are not worthy of the name. The State should not provide college education except for those workers whom it needs to carry out its own responsibilities.

There is an echo here of Gandhiji's first all India non-cooperation movement. When, after 1857, the British government took over the administration of the Indian territories of the East India Company, it established the

“three C’s”. Councils, Courts and Colleges each of which in its own way was a means of bolstering its authority. As Pattabhi Sitaramayya pointed out, speaking at a Nai Talim conference years later, it was no accident that in 1920 Gandhiji should have called for a boycott of these same three C’s. Some of the national Vidyapeeths founded as alternatives to the Government colleges did excellent work, but the vision of a nation-wide integrated pattern of education came only in 1937.

Revolutions are disturbing and most people do not want to be disturbed. There were a few people of imagination and insight who welcomed Gandhiji’s educational revolution from the beginning, but most educationists voiced doubts. These doubts were mainly of two kinds that Gandhiji neglected literacy and literary education and that his work-schools would prove to be sweat-shops of child labour, “like the semi-slave plantations of Ceylon”. Many of the critics completely misinterpreted what Gandhiji had said, because as he himself pointed out their own pre-conceived ideas “blurred their vision”; but he answered them patiently, and the pages of *Harijan* during the later months of 1937 were filled with reports of the discussions. Discussions were to continue for many years. In 1938, J.B. Kripalani wrote a booklet which in Gandhiji’s words, was an attempt to answer the many doubts about what has been called my latest fad.... rind to show that this “fad” has a sound bottom to it.” The *Latest Fad* is still worth reading, especially for its insistence that Gandhiji’s educational principles were part and parcel of his whole philosophy, and derived like all his other programmes from his vision of a human society based on non-violence and truth.

Meanwhile, the time had come to move on from argument to action.

## 4

### **BASIC NATIONAL EDUCATION 1937-1944**

Gandhiji's friend Jamnalal Bajaj was President of the Marwari Educational Society of Wardha, which in 1937 was preparing to celebrate its Silver Jubilee. It was maintaining a High School, the Nava Bharat Vidyalaya, which had as its Principal a Tamil educationist from Sri Lanka E.W. Aryanayakam. Aryanayakam had worked previously with Rabindranath Tagore at Santiniketan and had married a brilliant scholar, Asha Devi, whose family also had close links with Santiniketan. The Secretary of the Society, Shrimannarayan, with Aryanayakam's strong support, suggested that its Jubilee should be marked by a National Education Conference to discuss Gandhiji's educational ideas. Srimannarayan put the proposal before Gandhiji and asked him to preside, and Gandhiji readily agreed.

The conference was held in Wardha on 22-23 October, 1937. Numbers were restricted; invitations were sent to men and women who were known to be concerned for a truly Indian education, and to nationalist educational institutions like Jamia Milia Islamia, the Gujarat Vidyapeeth, the Tilak Maharashtra Vidyapeeth, and the Andhra Jatiya Kalasala at Masulipatnam; some ministers and officials of the newly-established Provincial Governments were also included. Because of the limited numbers and the quality of the participants the conference proved remarkably effective and led direct to action.

Gandhiji placed before the conference the proposals which he had summarised in *Harijan*, earlier in the same month, as follows:

“Primary education, extending over seven years or longer, and covering all subjects up to the matriculation standard except English, plus a vocation used as a vehicle for drawing out the minds of the boys and girls in till departments of knowledge, should take the place of what passes today under the name of primary, middle and high school education. Such education, taken as a whole, can and must be self-supporting. Self support is the acid test of its reality.”

He had no wish to impose his ideas on anyone, he said, and he invited “free and frank criticism”, for he was anxious that the misunderstandings that had arisen should be cleared up. It was being said, for example, that he was opposed to literary education, that the children would be “exploited”, that he had included no “religious instruction” in his plan. His speech touched on many points that are still as relevant as ever, fifty years later: “The present system of education is not only wasteful but positively harmful. Boys are lost to their parents, to their village, to the traditional skills. They become helplessly dependent on minor clerical jobs; moreover they pick up evil habits and urban snobbery, and learn to despise the honest manual labour of the village on which we all depend.

“Far from being opposed to literary education, I want to show the way to give it .... to make our children true representatives of our culture, of the true genius of our nation. As for “exploiting”, do we burden the child when we save him from disaster? The children will become self-confident and brave as they help to pay for their education by their own labour. Why do I not lay stress on religious instruction? Because this system is to be common to all, Hindu, Muslim, Parsee, Christian, and I am teaching them all practical religion, the religion of self-help. The whole plan springs out of non-violence; it is an integral part of the discipline of non-violence and truth.”

The discussion which followed was rich in ideas. Vinoba Bhave, then heading the Nalwadi Ashram, strongly supported Gandhiji’s contention that for little beginners takli-spinning was extremely rich in educational potential. (The writer herself remembers being puzzled, in social history studies at Cambridge, by the many references to “spinning whorls” among the finds at ancient archaeological sites; many years later she realised to her delight that these little stone or clay discs were in fact the discs of ancient taklis whose bamboo or wooden rods had long ago rotted away).

Kaka Saheb Kalelkar quoted tags which were to become even more meaningful in the years that followed. “Let us”, he said, “rescue education from the four walls of the classroom....

Never allow your schooling to interfere with your education!” (How many people today, both inside and outside the Government, think that “education” and “schooling” are the same thing!). Asha Devi pointed out that Gandhiji’s ideas, like Tagore’s, derived in part from the ancient Indian gurukula, and that if we were to work them out creatively we should have to unlearn much of what we had learned, and start afresh.

The conference passed the following resolutions:

1. That free and compulsory education should be provided for seven years on a nation-wide scale;
2. That the medium of instruction should be the mother-tongue;
3. That the process of education throughout this period should centre around some form of manual and productive work, and all other activities to be developed and training to be given should as far as possible be integrally related to the central handicraft, chosen with due regard to the environment of the child, that the products of the handicraft should gradually be able to cover the remuneration of the teachers.

These resolutions were adopted as a national education policy by the next annual meeting of the Indian National Congress in February-March 1938. “All national progress”, it declared, “ultimately depends on the method, content and objectives of the education provided for the people”. An independent national education council, the *Hindustani Talimi Sangh*, was set up to guide and direct the development of a practical programme.

Looking back on this picture of “national education” after fifty years, one is impelled to ask certain questions about everyone of the four points described above. The first point fails to specify which seven years of childhood should be covered. Gandhiji was clear that the seventh year was the right starting place; by this age the children’s powers of muscular coordination have developed sufficiently for them to take pleasure in the skills of craftsmanship. But over large areas of India it had been the practice to send children to



school in the sixth or even the fifth year, and when this practice was followed in basic schools it could lead to disappointment and disillusionment, because the children had not yet reached the necessary level of maturity. (Our modern “English medium” nursery schools afford even more glaring examples of the harm that can be done by forcing children to learn things for which they are still too immature – Little children of only three years are expected to master an alphabet!).

A seven year period that begins too soon also ends too soon. Gandhiji himself had not only specified the fourteenth year as the earliest acceptable time for completing the course, but had declared many times that he would gladly extend schooling to the fifteenth or the sixteenth year. The *Talimi Sangh* itself recommended that the age-range seven to sixteen be accepted. This links up with the ancient saying of Manu, used by Vinoba Bhave as he carried forward Gandhiji’s educational thinking, concerning the significance of the sixteenth year as the gateway into responsible adult life, is it not time for educationists to reflect more seriously about this question?

There is another and very different query arising out of this first resolution of the conference: should education be compulsory? Is not “compulsion” out of step with Gandhiji’s whole approach? “All compulsion is hateful to me”, he had written in *Young India* (14.8.1924). “I would no more have the nation become educated by compulsion than I would have it become sober by such questionable means ... nothing is more detrimental to the true growth of society than the belief that no reform can be achieved by voluntary effort. A people so trained becomes wholly unfit for swaraj”.

“Compulsion” implies control by a State that has power to compel, Gandhiji had often declared that he regarded any increase in State power with “the greatest fear”, because of its tendency to undermine personal initiative. Does not Vinoba’s insistence that education should be free from State control reflect more of Gandhiji’s spirit than the formal resolution of the conference? Yet again and again, in Gandhiji’s own writings in 1937-38, we find him referring to State control

in terms of apparent approval: "The State takes charge of the child at seven and returns it to the family as an earning unit." The schools, he says, can support themselves financially provided that the State takes over their products for disposal, and so on. Yet in other passages he insists that experiments in Basic Education, to be useful, must be carried out independently and with no outside interference. Whatever be the explanation of these seeming inconsistencies, it is clear that the right relationship between education and the State is a live issue to which we need to give much more careful thought.

Other matters need not detain us long. J.B. Kripalani was quick to point out, in reference to the second resolution, that the real "medium of instruction" in Basic Education is work, not language; the mother tongue is a medium of communication, not of instruction. It was recognised equally quickly, by those who drew up the detailed plans for the school programme, that there are rich resources for education not only in the "scientific" practice of a craft, but in the child's natural environment and in the social relationships of which he is a part.

The first urgent need was for the training of teachers for these revolutionary schools, and in April 1938 the *Hindustani Talimi Sangh* opened a training school at Wardha which was directed by the Aryanayakams, and decided to start a school in Segaoon village under its own control. The Congress government of the Central Provinces, of which the Wardha District was then a part, was in active sympathy, and the old village school in which Gandhiji had seen so much to deplore, was closed down in order to give the new experiment the fullest scope.

It was these two schools, the Wardha training school and the Segaoon village school, which the writer found so stimulating and inspiring when she paid her first visit in December 1938. The atmosphere was full of pioneering enthusiasm and the excitement of new discovery and achievement. The training school had a practising school in Wardha itself, and a very careful record had been kept of the craft work done by the first two grades. children of

seven and eight years old, during the three- month period of July to September, 1938.

The craft chosen was cloth-making, beginning with spinning on the takli, but planned to cover, during the subsequent years, every aspect of the work from growing, ginning and carding the cotton to the dyeing of yam and the designing of the finished cloth. During the first three months the takli was the centre. Contrary to the gloomy predictions that the children would be burdened and bored they had found it a fascinating toy, and the improvement in productiveness between the first and the third months was remarkable, rising from 74 hanks of yarn in July to 251 in September. By the end of September some children were spinning fine yarn of 39 count while the average was a good useful 13; the lowest speed was about 100 feet of yarn in the hour, while the highest was over 500 and the average over 250. These results, obtained by a completely unselected group of children in an ordinary small-town school, were used to check the standards of production suggested in a syllabus drawn up by the Zakir Hussain committee.

The Segaon school also had made remarkable progress in other fields. When the work began, almost every child in the village gambled, caste attitudes were narrow and exclusive, there was apathy about cleanliness whether of person or of surroundings. A few months later the visitor found friendly, alert children in a simple but spotlessly clean school, who readily worked with the teacher and with one another to keep it so, and who were full of intelligent questions about the outside world from which the visitor had come.

Meanwhile a great deal was being done for the expansion of the work on an all-India scale. The organisational plan was to establish training schools in rural areas rather than in towns, and to build up a circle of village schools round about them as teachers became available, so that no teacher need feel lonely or isolated; each one might have the stimulus and support of a readily accessible group. A number of Provincial governments followed this plan on a larger or smaller scale: Bihar, Bombay, C.P. Madras, Orissa, U.P., and the "native state" of Kashmir. The Central Advisory Board of Education

approved it as a valid education experiment. The *Talimi Sangh* endorsed Gandhiji's own suggestion that the optimum number of pupils in a class would be about 25, and insisted that it should not exceed 30. (This is a much-needed restriction for any school, but it is alas very rarely enforced). The teachers must be adequately paid, and there should be no direct link between the craft earnings of a particular school and the salary of its teachers.

With regard to the content of education, a lot of thought was given to the principles guiding the choice of a basic craft. It must be rich in educational possibilities and in scope for cooperative activity; a proper place must be given to the planning; and evaluation of every undertaking; there must be room for initiative; children must learn to take personal responsibility for their own progress. As time went on there was growing consensus that the crafts which best met these requirements were those most closely concerned with the basic needs of human life, the production and preparation of food and of clothing, the use of clay and wood to provide both shelter and the tools and utensils of daily living.

Apart from the basic craft and its use as a medium for general knowledge of all kinds, the committee insisted that every school should include music and drawing as part of its regular syllabus. The Aryanayakams drew on their knowledge of the Santiniketan tradition and enlisted the help of their friends there, including the great artist Nandalal Bose, in preparing the syllabuses. By the autumn of 1939 the need was felt for an all-India meeting to review progress and plan the next steps. By that time there were 247 basic schools and 14 training schools scattered over nine Provinces and States. The Government of Bombay, which was actively involved, invited the workers to meet at Pune. When they did so in October 1939, the second world war had begun and the political situation was full of uncertainty. Nevertheless, the conference decided that no matter what the future held, Basic Education was too important to be discontinued. "A new ideology of education", they wrote, "based on justice, cooperative endeavour, productive work and respect for human individuality, is a most powerful guarantee of peace,

justice and humanity. It should be continued whatever the political changes". The reports of the children's growth in body, mind and character, even after little more than a year of experience, were very encouraging. The decision to continue was fully justified; the resignation of the Congress governments made little immediate difference except in Madras, where the basic training school at Coimbatore was closed in April 1940.

A year and a half later, in April 1941, a second national Basic Education conference met at Jamia Nagar (Delhi) at the invitation of Dr. Zakir Hussain. This was the writer's first experience of a basic education conference, and a very remarkable one it was. (In 1939 it had not seemed right to leave her comparatively new duties at Santiniketan for the long, time-consuming journey to Pune).

One of the outstanding features of this 1941 meeting was the space and time devoted to the place of the arts in education, the quality of the exhibits and the breadth and depth of the discussion. Speakers insisted that art must not be treated as a mere extra or luxury; artistic achievement is an integral part of all that is done well with the hand for use and for beauty. The artistic impulse expresses itself in the colours and patterns of textile design, in the shaping of pots and the building of houses, in the celebration of festivals with alpana, lights, music and dancing, in the making, printing and illustrating of lovely books and the fashioning of children's toys. Craftsmanship and artistry are thus two aspects of the same process.

An equally outstanding contribution to the conference was Dr. Zakir Hussain's thoughtful address on the place of work in education. "Work has its own ideals", he said. "It is not an amusement or a sport, it is activity quickened by a purpose. There must be in it a desire to do full justice to that purpose, and therefore a willingness to submit to the natural discipline of materials, methods and tools. It demands self-criticism that is unsparing, but it holds out the promise of a joy that none other can excel.

"To be educative for mind and body, work must be planned and the materials and tools prepared; it must be executed

and evaluated. Skill will result, but personal skill is not the end. Even self-discipline may be selfish in intention. Work must serve values higher than mere personal ends, values which we acknowledge and respect.

“A work-school is a society working for a common end. In its cooperative pattern of labour the mistake of one may mar the work of the rest. The quick will not be able to leave the slow behind. It teaches its members how to cooperate in spite of their differences of ability and temperament, it teaches them to accept responsibility for their social duties. But the school, like the individual, must work for something more than itself, or it will merely substitute corporate greed for individual greed. The small society of the school must serve the larger society around it.”

Such words are as relevant today as when they were first spoken. So are the thoughts with which Zakir Hussain followed up Gandhiji's own special message to the conference. Gandhiji had written: “The success of the effort is dependent more upon self-help than upon Government .... our experiment to be thorough has to be at least somewhere made without alloy and without outside interference”. Zakir Hussain took this up and developed in his own words Gandhiji's conviction that non-violence should be the foundation of education, as of all other national activities. and should enable us to build a “Good State” which can realise justice and equal opportunity for all.

In moving words he depicted our society as it was (and is) “where brother is turned against brother, which knows no song that all may sing together, no joys that all may share”. He called on his hearers to work instead for a state “in which one community will trust another; where the weak will not live in terror of the strong, nor the poor suffer insult and injury from the rich; a state in which different cultures may flourish side by side and each bring into relief the virtues of the other; where every citizen may be able to devote to the service of society the full resources of his personality, the finest qualities latent in his own nature”.

This Good State, he went on, may seem a distant dream, but it is the duty of national basic education to set a pattern

and work towards it, beginning today. For if we do not make a start. “we shall wreck by ignorance and inexperience the tasks of the Good State when the time comes”. It is for the “work-school” to pioneer, for even in the best ordered state there will always be room for experiment and discovery.

In addition to the presentation of these fundamental principles, there was vigorous exchange of experience between the various institutions and groups. Many had encountered suspicion and hostility the rich feared revolution, the poor wanted their children to herd cattle. Many refused to accept Gandhiji’s disregard of “untouchability”. Some, in the atmosphere of communal suspicion, led opposition by a section of the Muslim public to a scheme put forward by “a Hindu”. Much of this suspicion at the local level was slowly overcome; parents began to recognise the value of what appears in every report – the growth of the children in physical health and social self- continence, in alertness and interesting their surroundings, in readiness to help both at home and in the village. There are reports of play-centres for younger children run by the Basic School children themselves, of school gardens started on their own initiative, of school “shops” and “savings banks”, and in some cases of how crafts learned at school had been practised at home to increase the family income.

There were also questions raised which were destined to confront workers for years to come, both in Segaoon (now called Sevagram) and elsewhere. One was the disposal of the yarn spun by the children. The government should take responsibility, said the Basic Education workers, quoting Gandhiji. But the yarn was not in itself a marketable commodity and governments, faced with what to officialdom was an unheard-of demand, were very unwilling to cope with it. The teachers, themselves beginners, usually lacked the skills which came later and did not think of turning the beginners’ yarn into knitted garments, or asans. or skipping ropes, or blackboard dusters. Many of them also, familiar with the part played by spinning in the movement for national independence, saw it as a satisfying symbolic activity in itself They were blind to its limitations, if it is isolated from the

textile craft of which it is a part, and without which its meaning and purpose is lost.

Closely related to this was the question of tile qualifications and training of teachers. At the 1941 conference there were voices raised to ask whether the practice of appointing separate “craft” and “subject” teachers in the training schools was really in the spirit of Basic Education. The answer was clearly No. What then? Should the schools cease to demand “matric” as a qualification for admission to training and require instead that a candidate should have earned his or her own living, for at least two or three years, by the practice of a craft? The craftsman might of course have little conception of the scientific basis or cultural links of his own craft, but at least he would have reached a good standard of skill and craftsmanship. He would need to be helped to develop a broader general knowledge. The assumption behind the requirement that candidates should be matriculates was that they would possess this general knowledge – an assumption which was very seldom justified. The dichotomy went on; in Sevagram as elsewhere there were specialist craft teachers and other teachers who had some knowledge of a craft, but not enough to be able to support themselves by its practice. Yet their pupils were expected, by the end of their course, to be able to do just that!

It is not surprising that in 1941 there was much discussion of the need for books. The teachers needed books to enable them to understand how to use the crafts to awaken their pupils’ interest in various aspects of human knowledge and experience. The pupils needed books which would enable them to follow up their awakened interest and satisfy their curiosity. Both needed reference books, technical and general. Both needed to overcome the narrow outlook of the traditional schools where the only books were “textbooks” limited to a syllabus. “Books are there”, said the leaders of the *Alimi Sangh*, “not as a substitute for life and action, but as an aid to fuller life and more effective action. A good basic school should be teaching children to approach books in a spirit of discovery and a



spirit of discovery and a spirit of enjoyment, both of which are poles removed from the and textbook mentality”.

This was a held in which the Sevagram community could claim some real success. As it grew, it developed a library of considerable value, a library which was open to, and used by, teachers and children of all ages on equal terms. The writer, who at a somewhat later date had the pleasant task of taking charge of it, cherishes the memory of the three and four year olds who solemnly came in to demand “readers’ cards” and then sat down on the floor to enjoy the picture books which we kept for their convenience on a certain low shelf. She also remembers the adolescent boys and girls who were just beginning, at their own desire, to pick up a smattering of English. We had some well-illustrated, practical books in English on various aspects of gardening. They would sit and wrestle with these books, and it was amazing and delightful to see how much the students got from them, gaining not only in ideas, but in the self-confidence which comes from overcoming obstacles. The adult students in the teachers training class, accustomed as most of them were to school libraries where books were separated from their would- be readers in locked book cases, were astonished to find; that here they might browse unhindered from open shelves. For them, the library was a living example of freedom within the framework of well-understood and willingly accepted rules made by common consent for the common good. And both the “spirit of discovery” and the “spirit of enjoyment” were much in evidence.

The 1941 conference was full of life and promise. Psychologically it set the stage for what might have been solid and sustained progress during the following years. But it was over-taken by events, overwhelmed by political upheaval. A government at war, as the British government of India then was, tends to be suspicious of any kind of non-conformity, of anyone who does not give active support of the conventional kind. The leaders of the Basic Education movement were too closely associated with Gandhiji and Congress to escape this suspicion. Already, before the conference met, the Government of Orissa had closed down its own department of Basic

Education, stating that “it is not in the interest of the State” to carry it on further. It was clear that this was a political decision, not an educational judgement; it was not the end of Basic Education in Orissa, for an independent people’s committee, inspired by Gopabandhu Choudhary and his wife Rama Devi, was formed to carry it on.

The crisis came with the “Quit India” movement of 1942. At the beginning of August the teacher training class, formerly organised in Wardha, had opened in Sevagram; at the same time a new venture, the Anandaniketan Basic residential school, had also been opened there, providing a haven for the children of national workers when their parents faced the uncertainties of possible imprisonment. A few days later, fifteen of the twenty-one members of the *Hindustani Talimi Sangh* were in jail, including its secretary E.W. Aryanryakan. The Sevagram village school was not closed, but it carried on under very great difficulties. One of the school boys of those days, Atma Ram, remembers how he and other children used to carry cotton, spinning equipment and books to their teachers who were lodged in Wardha jail. There was much isolation; the struggling centres of Basic Education scattered over India found it almost impossible to keep in touch with one another; the forward-looking confidence of 1941 gave place to a grim, lonely fight for survival.

The next two years were dark, but the darkness preceded a new dawn.

## 5

### **THE UNCHARTED OCEAN: 1944-45**

During 1942-44, while Gandhiji was in jail, he had spent a good deal of time thinking about the two aspects of village regeneration which were nearest to his heart: health and education. Both health and education, in his view, involved the whole man and the whole society. He saw them as “the key to swaraj” at the grass roots. The two programmes were worked out together, and it is not surprising that they constantly overlap. In Gandhiji’s view, community health cannot be achieved merely by providing a clinic; neither can community education, the kind of education which can nourish and maintain the spirit of swaraj, be achieved, merely by providing a school.

Gandhiji’s expanded vision was marked by the use of a new vocabulary. From then on he spoke not only of Basic National Education, regarded as the minimum necessary equipment for the children of the nation, but also of Nai Talim, new education. On his seventy-fifth birthday, 2 October 1944, he made this the theme of a major speech. Education, he said, must not be thought of as confined to schools. It must continue throughout life, “from conception to cremation”; it must touch every aspect of daily living and help every man and woman to be a better citizen of their village, and, therefore, better citizen of India and the world. It must aim at expanding their mental horizons; it must inculcate a spirit of neighbourliness which would rise above narrower loyalties and do away with untouchability and with communal jealousies and suspicions.

As a genuine human community begins to grow, Gandhiji went on, it can undertake many kinds of cooperative endeavour for the common good. Landowners and landless, craftsmen and labourers, men and women, may begin to learn by practical experience what it means to work together. The work must be cent-per-cent swadeshi; it must include both agriculture and the other village crafts and industries, so that it leads on naturally to *poorna swaraj*, complete freedom. To

sum up, it must provide every opportunity for non-violent discipline and non-violent organisation in the practice of daily living.

Gandhiji was in fact calling for an all-round training in “non-violent democracy”, and developing the thought he had expressed earlier: “The real remedy (for exploitation and injustice) is non-violent democracy, otherwise spelled true education for all”.

During the weeks that followed October 1944, Gandhiji developed this theme of *Nai Talim* in a number of different ways, “The alpha and omega of education is the quest for truth”, he said. When asked where the quest should begin, he pointed to the parable in the *Taittiriya Upanishad*, which tells how a seeker goes out in quest of Truth (Reality, God) and finds it first in food, then in joy – in other words, in the satisfaction of human needs in their entirety, needs of the body, of the mind, of the spirit. On other occasions Gandhiji would say – and here the link with health was clear – that *Nai Talim* begins with cleanliness. This includes of course cleanliness of body and of the physical environment, not forgetting Gandhiji’s acid test, the bathrooms and latrines. It also includes the inward purity of heart which issues in clean speech, clean thought, clean aspiration.

In January 1945, the *Hindustani Talimi Sangh* brought together teachers from all over the country to confer with Gandhiji about these still more revolutionary educational ideas which he was now putting forward. The writer was one of those present; and the spell-bound silence in which she and others listened to Gandhiji’s opening speech is still a vivid memory. “So far”, he told us. “you have been in sheltered waters, I am asking you now to push out into the open sea. It is an uncharted ocean, and the pole-star of village handicrafts will be your only guide”. He urged us to treat the productive crafts with full seriousness. The experience of sharing in intelligent, planned cooperative work, in which every member is benefited by the labour of all is itself the real education. He challenged us to spin and weave not for a money market but for our own use, to grow and process in our own village all that is needed for a healthful diet, to build well-planned airy

homes and make our tools and equipment from materials available in our own locality. We should plan for the maintenance of the animals we need, for the provision of their fodder and our own domestic fuel, for clean drinking water and all other daily needs. This kind of cooperative independence is the basis of *swaraj*. Gandhiji had said twenty years earlier that the capacity “to resist authority, when it is abused” is the key to real freedom; but the capacity to resist depends on the independence of spirit which such corporate self-reliance would generate.

The principle that production would be primarily for personal and local use and not for a money market is contrary to the common assumptions which govern a great deal of village production. Yet it is becoming increasingly clear that diversified production of all the food and other crops needed in the daily life of the village means better nutrition and better basic security than the widespread practice of monoculture for a money market. Gandhiji spoke in the context of the national freedom struggle; his principles are as relevant as ever to the true freedom of the Indian village today.

Alas, we teachers in general did not fully grasp, let alone live up to, the new vision which Gandhiji was placing before us. We worked out programmes, it is true, for the various stages of life outside the range of the Basic School itself, we talked of “Pre-basic” and “Post-basic” education. But most of us thought of these programmes in terms of the “sheltered waters” of institutions. We did not launch out into the open sea of village life and learn to live among its currents. We did not take village handicrafts as our pole-star or make any serious attempt to feed and clothe ourselves, as the villager must, by our own “bread- labour”. And so we failed to make *Nai Talim* the spear-head of a silent social revolution, as Gandhiji believed that it could be.

Because we did not take village handicrafts seriously we have been unable to do anything to stem the tide of commercialism which has all but swept away India’s rich heritage of traditional craftsmanship. The people, with nothing but commercial pressures to guide them, have preferred the showy and often shoddy products of large-scale industry to

the simple, functionally beautiful articles made by their own village craftsmen. And so the craftsmen starve, and our country, which prides itself on “progress”, is in truth being progressively impoverished. This impoverishment is not only material; even worse is the impoverishment of mind and spirit, the loss of self-confidence and self-respect, which sap the foundations of freedom.

There was, to my mind, another failure. We were so fascinated by Gandhiji’s new ideas, even though we did not fully understand them, that we did not recognise what a lot of “unfinished business” still remained to be done in the Basic Schools themselves. For two years they had struggled for survival, and they had, survived. They needed, and deserved, our special and loving attention. But by and large they did not receive it. The practical tasks, and the unresolved problems, which had been identified by the 1941 conference at Jamia Nagar were never taken up as they should have been. The plan for an integrated village school for all the children up to the age of sixteen, which had been recommended to us by the *Hindustani Talimi Sangh* five years earlier, was never fully worked out. It might have been at the core of our whole expanded programme, but it was no longer at the centre of our interest.

## 6

### **THROUGH LIFE FOR LIFE: ADULT EDUCATION 1945-47**

If Nai Talim is to embrace the whole development of man and the whole period of human life, nothing of human concern can be left outside the range of its interest. It must include the education of the mother and the baby in the home and of all the adult members of society in their economic, social, cultural and political activities.

The question of *Nai Talim* in Sevagram village at once arose. Soon after the conference in January 1945 Shanta Narulkar, who had been working in the village school, volunteered to experiment with adult education under Gandhiji's guidance. Gandhiji readily agreed, and gave her a very clear picture of the principles on which he believed the work should be based. The worker, he said, should live in the village itself, not merely visit it from outside. She must remember that Nai Talim is education, not charity; therefore she should not do things for the villagers. but help them to see the need for themselves and show them how to supply it by their own efforts. She must also be clear that this new education does not depend upon money; it should be planned from the beginning on the basis of self-support, and there must be no money gifts from outside. The only "gift" Shanta might give was herself. "Give them whatever service they may need", Gandhiji had said, "in sick nursing or any similar work; but never give money. Adult education does not need money.

The original impact of Gandhiji's Ashram, which was situated on the outskirts of the village, had been weakened during the preceding years of political upheaval. The *Gram panchayat* which had been formed on his initiative had been dissolved in 1942 as a measure of protest against the then government, and there was no provision for law and order. The landlords merely collected their rent but felt no responsibility for this or other respects of village welfare. Disputes were sometimes brought to the Ashram for settlement, otherwise they dragged on, poisoning personal relationships. The lack of community spirit or civic sense

meant that attempts by some of the institutions of constructive work to help the village were not integrated into the common life but merely benefited some individuals. The Ashram maintained the small dispensary which Gandhiji had started; it also employed a *bhangi* to clean the village roads. The *Charkha Sangh* employed a few villagers as paid labourers, but did no khadi work in the village itself; the palm-gur industry which Gajanan Naik had organised was now being run not by the village but by the Village Industries Association in Wardha.

A village school may be, and should be, a power-house for adult education, and with all its short-comings the Basic School where Shanta Narulkar had been working was the closest and most regular form of contact between the constructive workers and the village. By 1945 it had opened its fifth grade; the children were being given mid-day meals to supplement what, as we saw earlier, was a very inadequate home diet. Children attended the school from almost every home in the village, and Shanta was therefore already in touch with their parents and the problems they faced.

Another regular means of contact was established in February, when the Ashram opened a Child Welfare Centre in the village as a kind of development and extension of its dispensary work. An English Quaker nurse, Barbara Hartland, known affectionately among Gandhiji's fellow-workers as Vasanthi Behn, took charge of this centre; the wife of the Headmaster of the village school, who had studied up to the fifth standard, acted as her assistant and was trained in the course of her daily work in the skills that she needed. The cost of this was initially borne by the Ashram – a matter which may seem to go against Gandhiji's principle that adult education does not need money. The centre however was originally conceived not as "education" but as "service"; later on it was to be integrated into Shanta's own plans for the education of the village women, and played a valuable part in the programme of wise parenthood,

By March Shanta herself had found and settled into a house in the Harijan quarter of the village, and began by making a thorough survey of the condition of every home,



the building, the food, the details of daily life. The wells were dirty and not properly protected, yet they were being used for drinking water. The houses were inconvenient and over-crowded. Grain rationing was then in force, but the distribution system was very faulty and caused the people much inconvenience and loss of time. Improvement was urgently needed in the provision of all these elementary needs of food, water and shelter, and improvement could be had, but only if the people felt some sense of responsibility for the common welfare and had some faith in their power to help themselves. These qualities, when Shanta began her work, were lacking.

The most urgent need was for clean water. Sevagram is well situated for water and many houses had their own wells; some years earlier the Ashram had built a well for public use in the Harijan quarter. But all the wells, public and private alike, were badly kept; they spread infection and bred mosquitoes. Shanta began by talking over the water problem first with individuals, then with groups and finally with the whole village. In the end it was agreed that the public well should be cleaned and repaired at their own cost. Some gave labour, others money, and the Ashram, as a local landlord, contributed also. At the beginning of the summer the well was cleaned; people saw, and smelled for themselves, the filthy stinking mud that was taken out. No further teaching was needed, before the end of that summer most of the wells in the village had been cleaned by mutual help, and the people, their interest aroused, went on to provide protecting walls and proper drainage for dirty water. The following summer the process was repeated; once more the wells were cleaned and a tradition of mutual help began to grow up. When people work together in this way the question of money does not arise; caste barriers begin to break down, and the natural leaders emerge. As time went by Shanta was able to get these natural leaders together and to encourage them to take responsibility and initiate action over many other matters of common concern.

The first steps towards better housing were taken when individual families began to rebuild or repair their houses.

Shanta soon found that after they had spent their money and given their labour the new house was little better than the old from the point of view of health or convenience. She would talk with them during the actual building work, and try to persuade them to put in a window or arrange separate housing for their cattle. She would also appeal to their sense of dignity and self-respect. “Why don’t you make the doorway a little higher?” she would ask. “Why should you have to stoop to enter your own house?” Or, “why should the women of the house have to go out into the fields in all weathers? Why not build a private toilet for them in a corner of your land; there is plenty of room in that open space where you are planning to grow vegetables – you can have both”. Slowly, little improvements were made, and in the end a Cooperative Housing Society was formed, acquired a small piece of village land and began to build houses for the families of labourers. Every detail of the plan and the budget was discussed with the owner beforehand, and he and the members of his family helped with the actual building, while the neighbours lent their bullock-carts freely to help with the work. In this way the owner learned not only how to build a house, but how to build it at a minimum cost. The families who had houses in the Cooperative Society’s settlement had to follow the Society’s rules, and they learned to live in a better, cleaner way than before.

The question of toilets in houses has already been mentioned, but a great deal more work was needed in this field. The people of the village were in the habit of using the approach roads as public latrines, so the entrances to the village were fouled and sticking. This was the reason why the Ashram had appointed, a *bhangi*. Shanta found that: he was very discontented, and complained that he was over-worked. She suggested that he might lighten his work by building trench latrines at each entrance to the village, and getting the people to use them. Very unwillingly he agreed, and he and she got the trenches dug and provided with palm-leaf screens for privacy, five compartments to each trench. The total cost of four such latrines including the split palm trunks used for squatting plates, was only twelve rupees. Little by

little the people began to use them, and under Shanta's direction they learned how to collect weed and under-growth from the roadsides to cover the excreta and eliminate bad odour. The roads became much cleaner, but the *bhangi* left in disgust. Shanta rejoiced in his departure; it was degrading that the community should become dependent on a *bhangi*; it was a part of self-respect that everyone should share in the needful scavenging.

The campaign for public cleanliness also had to include the problems of drainage and the disposal of dirty water from the houses. The area is black cotton soil, which makes drainage difficult in the rainy season, and malaria and fly-borne diseases were very common. The solution was that each house should have a soak-pit, so Shanta called together her group of "leaders", explained the idea, and showed them how easily and cheaply a soak-pit could be made. The leaders talked with the other village people, and on the next day of national celebration about fifty families made soak-pits in their own houses – a practical lesson in hygienic living. Like the wells, they were checked every year, and re-dug as necessary.

The group of natural leaders and influential villagers gradually developed into a kind of village executive committee. Shanta spent time with them, encouraging discussion of their common needs. "If you want something", she would say, "you must take the responsibility for getting things done. I will help you, I will teach you how to do things so far as I can, but you must take the initiative. I won't do anything unless you invite me, and unless you work too".

The first big practical job undertaken by this "executive committee" arose out of the difficulties of the grain rationing arrangements. Twelve villages had to draw their supplies from one shop in one village, and during the rainy season the paths from one village to another were often almost impassable. People had to forego a whole day's labour wages in order to visit the shop, and when there was some mistake or confusion about the ration cards they sometimes had to return empty-handed. Then cholera broke out in the village where the shop was situated. In this crisis Sevagram held a village meeting

and decided to set up a consumers' cooperative store; Capital was collected and the people contributed what they could, but the total was very small, and a loan had to be taken to purchase the first stock. The shop was opened on the *Charkha Jayanti* day in 1945, and the "executive committee" took turns to manage it, two men working together for two months at a time. They kept the accounts (and returned the initial loan immediately), wrote out the cards, and procured and distributed the grain – all as voluntary, unpaid public service. At the end of the first six months the books showed a deficit of sixty rupees which the ten members of the executive committee paid from their own pockets. From then on the shop began to show a profit, which according to the rules was used for village welfare; no interest was paid to the shareholders. The success of this first cooperative enterprise set the standard for other cooperative developments later.

One of these was a cooperative Grain Bank, whose profits were pooled for the benefit of the farmers themselves. This had great psychological value because it made the villager feel rich and independent instead of poor and helpless, and increased his self-reliance and self-respect.

Food and water, housing and sanitation – all these primary needs of the people became in this way media for adult education. There remained the need of clothing, and very early in Shanta's work she began to help the people to put this also on to a more regular footing. Spinning had already been introduced to the village through the work of the basic school; now, with the help of the *Charkha Sangh*, three looms were set up and village boys began work as apprentices. In the first year 1750 square yards of cloth was made and sold; later the number of looms and weavers increased, and other village industries (oil-pressing and palm-gur) were also developed as centres of adult education.

"Education for life", said Gandhiji to the new Adult Education Committee in September, 1945, "does not mean education for the duration of life, but education for the sake of life .... Adult education is a matter of teaching the art of living. A man who masters the art of living has become a complete human being. Keep this vision before you, let this ideal of *Nai Talim* inspire your work".

## 7

### **A LITTLE CHILD SHALL LEAD THEM: PRE-BASIC EDUCATION**

Gandhiji delighted in little children; one of the visits he had paid when he was in London in 1931 was to a Montessori School for poor children in Islington. In India there was considerable interest in Madame Montessori's methods, but the Montessori schools which were started were mainly in the cities, and tended to insist that exactly the same equipment should be used as in European schools. They had become in effect exclusive schools catering to the rich. "Nursery schools", which had originally started in U.K. to cater to the needs of the poor, also tended to be elitist, although a successful attempt was made in Madras, from 1935 onwards, to train nursery school teachers in Indian conditions and with Indian equipment. Shanta Narulkar, herself a highly qualified teacher, was familiar with these experiments; she spent the major part of her own time concentrating on the education of the women and of the little children. Her "pre-basic" school took the creative ideas of the "educational pioneers, Froebel, Montessori, Rachel Macmillan and the rest, and worked them out in the context of an Indian village.

It was recognised from the beginning that wise parenthood was a central and, important part of that "mastery of the art of living" which was the goal of adult education for men and women alike. All parents are educators whether they realise the fact or not. It is they who should provide their children with all that they need for their all-round development; watch over their daily needs; look after their health of body, and guide their intellectual and moral development. If the parents fail to understand their responsibility towards their children, the effort put into children's schools may be completely wasted; no teacher, however devoted, can take the place of the parents in caring for the welfare of the child, particularly during the all important years of early childhood.

Most parents love their children and genuinely desire to do their best for them. This natural affection is absolutely essential; no outward conditions however good, can

compensate a child for the lack of the knowledge that it is loved. But by itself natural affection is not enough; many parents, both rich and poor, have very little understanding of what the child's real needs are, even its physical needs. As for emotional and intellectual needs, it is often not even realised that such needs exist; the parents feel no responsibility for providing an all-round education which would do justice to the child's needs as a whole.

The education of the parents, both father and mother, is therefore the first step towards the education of the child. The baby's first impressions and experiences of the world into which it has been born are shaped by the attitudes of both parents. The baby depends on the mother for its first experiences of pleasure and pain; her health determines whether or not it is adequately fed; her knowledge or ignorance of mother-craft decides whether it is kept clean and in physical comfort. Both father and mother are responsible for the environment of the home where the child grows up, and for its first social contacts.

The little children of Segaoon village knew nothing of personal hygiene and sanitation because no one had ever thought of teaching them. No one thought of teaching them good habits because the adults did not themselves know what good habits and good conduct are. They never asked themselves how the children would grow up; neither the individual parent nor the village community as a whole was ready to accept the responsibility of helping them to become good men and women, and good citizens. Yet all the adults in a village ought to be concerned for the present and future welfare of all its children; it is a natural social responsibility which everyone should accept.

This responsibility cannot be discharged if either the father or the mother are ignorant of the elementary conditions of health and cleanliness. It is the responsibility of every father, as the principal support: of the family economically, to see that the first priority is given to meeting, the primary needs of the household for clean water, nutritious food and clean surroundings. Children who are clean and comfortable, who get regular food and sleep, are healthy and contented. Teaching the "how" of these things is part of adult education.

Another aspect of education for wise parenthood is to help parents to realise how much their own character, habits and behaviour influence their children. Almost all the young child's first impressions of life are received from his parents and other adults in the home. Constant petty disputes and quarrels destroy the child's sense of security and do a great deal of harm. A child who feels happy and secure is eager to explore and experiment with his surroundings. He needs freedom and activity; his natural healthy development can be hindered by needless restraints, just as much as by unwise indulgence. Later, the circle of happy home relationships should: expand and include the family's dealings with its neighbours and, with the school. In such an atmosphere of friendliness the child's need for affection and security is satisfied, and the business of living and learning becomes a happy experience.

The task of the pre-basic school is to set standards of excellence in all these aspects of the life of little children, and to keep these standards before the eyes of the whole village. In the Segaon school parents and children found clean drinking water, and simple nutritious food to supplement an often inadequate home diet. The teacher would show the mothers and grannies who brought the children to school how easily and cheaply they too might make improvements in the home diet. Children who came to school with vermin in their hair and clothes were made clean and comfortable: the teacher would then show the mothers how to get rid of the vermin, and it did not take long for them to realise that they could de-louse their own hair and clothes also. Children who learned at school to use a simple latrine were soon refusing to squat indiscriminately on the roads, and demanding a latrine at home also. In school there were songs and games and stories; in school there were toys made out of all kinds of scraps, oddments that could be picked up around the village at any time; many of tile toys could be taken to pieces and, put together again by the children themselves, and so help to stimulate their intelligence and, improve their muscular control and manual skill. At school too there were opportunities for little children to get the extra sleep which many of them needed.

All these things and many more became part of the Segaon pro-basic school and part of the life of the village. In this atmosphere of friendly cooperation good ideas and practices passed easily and naturally from one to the other. Child and adult education went on side by side. This is as it should be. If for any reason this mutual understanding and friendliness are absent the result for the children will be bad. It will mean that two opposing influences are contending for their loyalty, the home on the one hand and, the school on the other. The children will be forced to live in a state of emotional tension which may have a bad effect on their future development as members of society. Good citizens are not created by a state of civil war. School and home must agree upon what they want for the upbringing of their children.

In this regard the pioneer pre-basic school at Sevagram has never been surpassed. It became the model for hundreds of other *balwadis* (pre-basic schools) throughout India.



## 8

### **POST-BASIC EDUCATION: THE BEGINNINGS 1947-50**

Discussions about the nature and content of Post-basic education were initiated during the 1945 conference with Gandhiji at the same time as those on the Adult and Pre-basic stages. At that time the Basic schools themselves had not yet built up a complete seven or eight year course, but it was realised that some pre-planning for the next stage was desirable, and a sub-committee of the Hindustani Talimi Sangh was appointed for the purpose.

Even in the 1945 conference the old question of the place of English in “higher” education raised its head once more. If students were to do advanced work beyond the “matriculation” level, it was asked, should they not begin to study English during the later part of their Basic course? Gandhiji had expressed his own convictions about this very strongly seven years earlier, during the controversies which followed the Wardha conference of 1937. He had declared then that it was “gross superstition” to think that no one could do first-rate scientific or other research work without English. “English” education had done the country a great wrong, he said; it had, made even his own valued colleagues “strangers in their own homes”. “We and our children must build on our own heritage”, he wrote. “We must be able to enjoy the treasures of every culture and language through our own vernaculars .... only then can the world’s riches of science and, literature become the common property of the people. For a deep-seated evil such as this we need a heroic remedy” – i.e. the demonstration in practice of a higher education achieved in the mother-tongue with no dependence upon English whatsoever.

So far as the writer remembers her only contribution to the 1945 discussions was to urge, from her own small experience, that when a good foundation of general education has been laid in the mother-tongue those who really needed English (or any other language) at a later date could and did learn it with far greater speed and efficiency than under

the present wasteful system. The effective use made of English books in the Sevagram library by the post-basic students a few years later has already been described. It is clear from the memorandum which the *Talimi Sangh's* sub-committee on post-basic education prepared during the following months that they were thinking of post-basic education as post-matriculate education at the University level. The memorandum lists possible faculties, including some which could, not be directly productive in themselves, such as medicine, teaching, or the fine arts. What, they asked, did Gandhiji think? The fine arts, Gandhiji replied, should be part and parcel of everyone's life in the way that had been agreed on in the 1941 conference; they should not be regarded as a separate profession. He insisted that "self-support" should be the acid test. In 1938, he said, he had agreed to the qualifying phrase "as far as possible" being used with regard to basic education. Now, however, he had come to feel even more strongly about the importance of the principle. "Self-support is the symbol of freedom," he said.

It was not until 1947 that any post-basic school was actually begun. The first one to be organised was not in Sevagram but in Bihar. There the provincial government had recognised the basic schools as an educational experiment, and had carried them on even when the elected Congress government resigned and the permanent administrative officials took charge. The teachers were government employees and the work of the schools had not been disrupted by the Quit India movement of 1942. By the end of 1946 therefore a full eight-year basic course had been completed in the twenty-seven basic schools of the Champaran District, and in January 1947 a post-basic school was opened in Kamarbagh. This developed a four-year course. Two years after it had begun, twelve more post-basic schools were organised, by the Bihar government, and, in 1949-50 others were opened in Gujarat and elsewhere. When the seventh All-India Nai Talim conference was held in 1951 the first of these schools had four years experience; and the conference devoted a good deal of its time to the consideration of this programme.

In Sevagram itself preliminary work began in March 1947 with nine boys, eight of whom had been in the Anandaniketan residential school, and in July they were joined by six more basic school boys and four new probationers. To begin with the group was organised as a separate community with its own kitchen; in this small unit the necessary daily chores were easily managed and the boys were able to devote the maximum amount of time to work and study. They had no land; so they earned their living by weaving for the *Charkha Sangh*. During the first month they gave six hours a day to this work, and kept a record of their earnings. This showed that they did not need to spend so long on the craft in order to support themselves. During the second month, therefore, they reduced the number of craft hours, and devoted the time thus saved to their academic studies.

The studies were shaped largely by the boys' experience in six villages in the immediate neighbourhood. In October 1947, after the rains came to an end, there was a serious malaria problem. The post-basic boys cooperated with the Department of Public Health in its programme of malaria control carrying out intensive spraying of DDT in the six villages. (DDT was then "the latest fad" in public health, and it was not until three years later that warnings of its dangers began to be heard.) At that time, looking at the boys' interest in health and "scientific safai", plans were made to develop this as a major craft in cooperation with the Kasturba Hospital, which was by then expanding the work of the old Ashram dispensary.

The boys, especially those whose homes were in Segaoon, also cooperated closely in other aspects of the adult education which was being carried on in the village. They helped to run the cooperative grain bank and shared in the work of the night school for adults: sometimes they also helped in the village basic school when a teacher had to be absent on leave. They helped in the khadi programme, by making a house-to-house survey of the six villages with which they were specially in touch to find out how many families had spinning wheels in good order and in active use.

This year, 1947, was the year in which political freedom from British rule was finally achieved, at the price of the partition of the country and at an incalculable cost in human suffering. Gandhiji was never able to return to Sevagram to guide and inspire the work which he had started. The next two years of post-basic education were a time of quiet experiment, seeking the way forward. Staff were found of outstanding quality and youthful enthusiasm Radhakrishna, scientist and teacher; Banwarilal Choudhury, agriculturist; Dwarka Prasad Persai, expert in animal husbandry, and other young people to help them. Their wives and young families made their own special contribution to the community.

The original intention that post-basic education should give a central place to the production and processing of food, had not been forgotten. During that first year the *Hindustani Talimi Sangh* acquired farm land and began to organise self-sufficiency programmes in agriculture, dairy farming and oil-pressing. The experience of the following years resulted in the picture of a post-basic school which emerged from the conference of 1951. It should be a "school-village" where students, teachers and their families lived together, and maintained themselves as a community by their own planned labour. All the crafts needed for simple daily living should find a place in it, and its sufficiency should not be dependent on a money economy. In such a village the welfare of each individual member would be an integral part of the welfare of the community as a whole; any profits which might be made from any part of the enterprise' any surplus in production, should go into a common emergency fund which could be drawn upon in a crisis such as a serious crop failure following untimely drought or flood. "Self-support is the symbol of freedom".

Meanwhile, 1949 had brought a new challenge. The Government of India had begun to build up two new townships to rehabilitate refugees from Pakistan, one at Faridabad, a few miles south of Delhi, the other at Rajpura in the Union territory of Patiala. The *Hindustani Talimi Sangh*, at the government's request, undertook to make arrangements for the education of the children in these camps, and the fourteen

senior post-basic boys, with their teacher Radhakrishna and his wife Kamla, and two teacher-trainees from Bihar who were studying in Sevagram, went to Rajpura at the beginning of October to start the work. There they had the support of Bibi Amtus Salam, who had made Rajpura the base for her own constructive work.

The people allocated to the Rajpura township had come from Bahawalpur in Pakistan. This was a remote and backward area, and their standard of literacy was very low. Since their arrival in India about two years earlier nothing had been done about the children's education, but before any work of this kind could begin it was necessary to win their confidence. This was not easy for the people were understandably suspicious about the swarms of "social workers" who descended upon them, and, at first they were unwilling to accept the team of post-basic students who had been sent to help them.

The students and their teachers therefore set to work to study and understand the situation. Housing was very unsatisfactory; the people were crowded together in big tents, and there was much frustration and quarrelling over petty irritations. The post-basic boys decided that the first thing was to try to improve the housing and make camp life more convenient for the whole community; meanwhile they themselves camped in a big mango grove close by, in conditions of discomfort very similar to those the refugees had to endure; they took no steps to better their own conditions until they had done what they could for the township. Watching them, the people gradually became more friendly and cooperative, and soon it was possible to plan something for the children.

The people from Bahawalpur were largely illiterate and there were very few teachers among them. The Sevagram team collected some raw young matriculates, collected the children together in the mango grove, and began to organise schools. There were nearly three thousand children of school-going age, and by January 1950, most of them had begun to attend school. Four schools were organised, two for girls and two for boys; one of them was able to cater for children up to the

ninth grade. Similar schools were set up at Faridabad, a larger township and one where more teachers were available, but with even larger numbers of needy children.

These schools could not be basic schools in the full sense of the word, but from the beginning they included two aspects of community living, a daily period, of common prayer, and *safai*. Some of the older children were unwilling at first to join in the *safai* programme, but the younger ones enjoyed it, and the post-basic boys themselves took the lead with vigour and cheerfulness, so that attitudes soon began to change. A medical examination of all the children was arranged; about 1,600 children under twelve years of age were given regular milk as a gift from UNICEF, and their general health began to improve. As soon as equipment could be obtained the younger children began to learn spinning.

There were plenty of difficulties. The children had endured the terrors and seen the violence which accompanied partition; since then they had spent two years running wild in the camp; they had imbibed the beggar mentality of greed and petty jealousy which the distribution of free emergency rations inevitably encouraged. They were the innocent victims of tragic circumstances. The post-basic boys taught them how to manage their own school affairs through a general assembly (*am sabha*) in which all took part. They got them singing together, folk-dancing, playing team games and so gradually breaking down the narrow communal attitudes which were so common among their parents.

Side by side with the work in the school went the training of teachers. For the first three months there was a regular daily class for all the apprentice teachers, held outside school hours, where they learned *takli* spinning and something of the general principles of *Nai Talim*. Twenty-five of these teachers were then selected for an intensive six-month course in which the basic craft was spinning, with carpentry and sewing as subsidiary crafts. These trained teachers then took charge of schools up to the fifth grade which were organised as more fully basic schools. In the end four schools with 1,600 children were

continued at Rajpura. while the larger township of Faridabad had eight.

Adult education was not forgotten. With the help of the Punjab branch of the All-India Spinners Association spinning was organised and weaving begun. The post-basic boys tried to help the local people to manage this work on the same kind of cooperative basis as had been successful in Sevagram, where some of them had already had some experience. The results were encouraging not merely for their economic value, but for their therapeutic value in the mental rehabilitation of the people, and for the way in which the children's schools and the adult activities mutually reinforced one another. More progress might have been made in Rajpura but for the uncertainty about the future; in February-March 1950 the government came near to abandoning the whole project, and it was not possible to plan ahead until this major question had been settled. It was finally decided that the construction of the new township should go ahead, but by then the year of service promised by the post-basic school was coming to an end. The people who had treated the boys so coldly on their first arrival now wept to see them go.

## 9

### **NAI TALIM BHAVAN: THE TRAINING OF TEACHERS**

As we have seen, the training of the teachers was of crucial importance to the development of Basic Education. The vision and enthusiasm of the training school at Wardha in the early years made possible the work of the children's schools. As the work of the school in Segaon village developed it was decided that the teachers' training should be moved to these rural surroundings, and the new institution was inaugurated on 1st, August 1942. The emphasis at the opening ceremony was on the twin ideals of love and truth. Dr. Zakir Hussain told the assembled students that "in the book of education the first leaf is inscribed with the one word LOVE". The students themselves recited as their own ideal the great affirmation of the *Upanishad*:

'I will speak only the truth. That truth will protect me;  
That truth will protect my teacher.'

Gandhiji took up this theme in his a "May this prayer protect you", he said in his address to the students.

The time of testing came sooner than was expected. Within a fortnight the government had arrested not only Gandhiji's political fellow-workers but many of the constructive workers also, and the adult students of the new Nai Talim Bhavan were not exempt. The work was completely disrupted, and it was only after 1945 that it was gradually re-organised and stabilised.

It is not surprising that in the years that followed, after political independence, there was much give and take between the Nai Talim Bhavan and the Uttara Buniyadi Bhavan or post- basic school. One of the aims of the post-basic course in its early days was to prepare teachers for basic schools; the year's work at Rajpura and Faridabad which we have described was one way of putting this into practice. The boys had eight or ten years of basic and post-basic education behind them; they could practise and teach their craft with confidence. Nevertheless they warmly welcomed the help of the two Nai



Talim Bhavan students who joined them in Rajpura. These men were comparatively raw recruits, and they knew far less of the craft than the boys did, but they had a fresh enthusiasm and an adult maturity of outlook which were of the greatest value. The same sort of thing happened in Sevagram itself. The new but mature and able Nai Talim Bhavan students learned a great deal by helping to organise special programmes under the leadership of the Uttara Buniyadi boys. There was for example an Akhand Khadi Yagna, an exhibition to prepare for the Jaipur session of the Congress, a saranjam sammelan at Sevagram itself, and the Sarvodaya Sammelan which met soon after Gandhiji's death, in February-March 1948. In 1949 came the historic World Pacifist Meeting. This brought together men and women from all over the world, who were committed to the abolition of warfare as an instrument of national policy, to meet with those who had learned from Gandhiji to regard peace as first of all a discipline of non-violent daily living. It was a creative interchange, and a valuable education for the students and teachers who were present, in one significant aspect of *Nai Talim*.

At this period of the late forties and early fifties the Nai Talim Bhavan was a large and lively part of the Nai Talim community, alongside the Anandaniketan school the Uttara Buniyadi Bhavan, and the teachers of all departments with their growing families. After Independence it became the practice for the education departments of the various states of India to depute men and women graduates for training at Sevagram, so that on their return home they might help to develop teacher education or *Nai Talim* principles in the languages of their own state. Most of these deputies were young teachers of four or five years experience in conventional education, who were considered to show special promise. Others were more senior, with perhaps ten or fifteen years of work to look forward to before reaching retirement age. The very fact that they came together from every corner of India, that Nagas and Mizos from the north-east frontiers rubbed shoulders with brahmins from Tamil Nadu or Gujarat, and that Sikhs from Punjab came to know Muslims from Hyderabad, was in itself an educational situation of very great

potential value; for many the opportunity for cooperation between men and women students in work, study and recreation, was equally so.

It was at this point, in the late forties, that the writer was able to join the Sevagram staff and so reduce to some extent the heavy burden of teaching and organisation carried by others. Year by year we tried to improve the practical effectiveness of the training course. It became possible to extend it to a full agricultural year, a very desirable thing in a community where agriculture was a major craft. We required students to be present to sow their own cotton when the first rains came in June, and to harvest the last of their winter crops before they completed their course in April. They had enough time also not only to spin but to gain some knowledge of simple weaving; this was made possible by the planning and building of the Kabir Bhavan, the weaving hall which served the whole *Nai Talim* community. It was of great importance that teachers should be able to see the craft of cloth-making as one whole, as Gandhiji had pictured it from the first. Much the greater part of the actual work had been concerned so far only with little children, and there had grown up a tendency to think of spinning as a complete craft in itself. During the very first week we therefore suggested to the new trainees that in the course of their training they should plan to produce enough cloth to give each one of them one set of clothes. (It was amusing to see how quickly they began to reckon up how little would suffice). The amount of calculation, and of general knowledge, required to determine how many square yards of cloth and how much yarn of various counts would be needed for shirts, pants, saris etc., how much cotton must be grown, and how large a field would be required to produce it – all this provided a vivid demonstration, at the very outset, of the way that general knowledge of all kinds is linked up with the practice of a craft, and of the use of various means – observation, inquiry, reference books – in order to obtain that knowledge.

The writer, who was as new to weaving as were her students, seized the chance of sharing this activity with them, and began by designing and weaving a kurta for herself from

her own yarn. She designed a simple “check” pattern of lines and squares, in three colours, dyed the yarn for it, and then made an interesting discovery. She had already criticised the common practice of expecting child beginners to weave plain white cloth, arguing that the use of colour would be more stimulating and interesting for them. Now she found, to her delight, that it was also much easier; the thread-counting needed when preparing the warp for the loom was made simpler when threads of different colours were used. It was not long before some of the students were following her example, making little hand-towels enlivened by coloured stripes, on the simple Assamese looms available for beginners. Later Parsaiji’s wife Krishna Behn followed this up, helping students of all departments to develop the use of pattern and colour in many useful objects.

Two pictures of this work stand out vividly in memory. One is of the middle-aged teacher-student who came running, his face alight with boyish pleasure, to display the little towel which he had just completed. For the first time in his whole life he had experienced the joy of making something, something real and useful, with his own hands. The other picture is of a younger man, who as the course drew to an end spent every spare moment at his loom in Kabir Bhavan, so that in addition to his contribution to the community’s clothing he might take home to his wife a sari that he himself had spun and woven for her. A golden sari it was, with a deep red border. We were also able, with the cooperation of the District Board, to develop regular practice teaching in twenty village schools within a radius of seven or eight miles around Sevagram. Most of these schools taught only up to the fourth grade, and the only craft they had practised was spinning. Students went off to them, two by two, on bicycles, carrying with them the few bamboo rods, etc. needed to set up an Assamese loom, and demonstrated its use to the children with the children’s own yarn. There was much excitement; soon the older children were taking turns to weave, one inch at a time each, while the others began spinning with increased care and purposefulness, seeing before their eyes the use to which their yarn might be put. When *Ganesh Chaturthi* came

round we were led eagerly to the village shrine, to see three little towels, the children's work, lying in the place of honour before the image, "if they can make those", said pleased parents, "they can make their own clothes!"

In these schools it was also possible to replace the old-type annual "promotion examination" which determined whether children from the fourth grade were allowed to go on to a middle school by an evaluation of a different type. All the fourth grade children from four or five villages within easy distance of one another were assembled for a week's "camp" in the school in the central village, and lived together as a little community. They brought with them from home their basic rations, interested people in the village supplied them with vegetables and milk, they organised their own cooking, cleaning and sanitation etc., kept their records and accounts, wrote their diaries, and were tested for their skills in craft. Each school in the group also produced a public entertainment on one night of the week, and these were attended by parents and others from every village involved. There were songs, dances, games, jokes, and little "skits" about village life; the only rule was that every child in the class must: do some thing, they could not leave it to one or two "star" performers. The camps proved a most effective form of evaluation as well as an enjoyable one; soon the children of grade three were demanding that they too should have exams!

Friendly relationships with these villages developed further through the regular health work which was organised through the schools for the village as a whole. The importance of education in the principles and practice of good health had been recognised from the beginning. In 1939 the well-known Ayurvedic physician Dr. A. Lakshmi pathi had spent some time at Sevagram, where he encouraged and guided the students to begin a herb garden with local medicinal herbs. Then when the political situation became uncertain Gandhiji advised him to return home to his own state. He kept in touch, however, and many years later in 1954 he paid a second visit, only to be prevented by circumstances from staying on. In 1959 he came again and talked with Vinobaji about the possibility of setting apart about five acres of land at Sevagram where a herb garden might be established and students trained. By

that time the Talimi Sangh was thinking in terms of a rural university, and he proposed that it should conduct diploma courses in village health based on the simple village Vaidya Manual which he had prepared at Gandhiji's request. But the plan was never carried out.

Meanwhile, in 1955, Dr. Elton Kessel, who had met Asha Devi when she visited Chicago, joined the *Talimi Sangh* staff travelling overland in an old station wagon. Humble-minded, unassuming and simple in his habits, he soon endeared himself to the villagers, and began to work, in cooperation with the village school teachers, the Uttara Buniyadi students and the Nai Talim Bhavan, for the three things he regarded as basic to village health: safe drinking water, simple fly-proof latrines, and better nutrition. Thus befriended and supported, the village teachers responded, and many of the schools became real centres of community service for their villages. Dr. Kessel's book *Village Health* was based on this experience: it is written as "a guide to teachers", and seems to the writer, turning over its pages once more, to have much in it which is useful now as when it was first published thirty years ago.

Every year when a new group of teachers arrived in Sevagram we would invite Vinobaji to come over from Paunar, four miles away, for a kind of inaugural function. There was always some-thing stimulating and challenging in what he had to say, "You have spent your lives talking and being talked to", he would tell them. "Now give your tongues and ears a rest. Use your hands and eyes and minds to do and make something, in the field or the workshop, not the lecture hall". We did have some class periods, nevertheless, but the great majority of them were spent in analysing and trying to solve problems arising from craft work or community living, and textbooks were non-existent. On another occasion Vinobaji challenged the regimentation that so easily creeps into educational planning, even in *Nai Talim*. "You can't teach in exactly the same way in Sevagram as in Paunar", he declared. "And why not"? Because Paunar has a river and Sevagram does not".

Many of the teacher trainees did excellent work, and became valued members of the community, sensitive and

reliable. But when they first arrived they were by no means ready to accept the validity of Gandhiji's basic ideas, and some never fully accepted them, although they loyally cooperated in the life of the community during their training. Others however did come to respect and value not only the new educational techniques but the fundamental principles on which they were based.

The real problems began after they had returned to their own states. It was one thing for a Department of Education to depute a few men and women for a year's training; it was another matter to modify established custom in order to employ their new skills effectively when they returned. There was a great deal of human wastage; young men and women, eager to practise what they had learned, were sent back to conventional High School jobs and expected to fit in to the old pattern. Those who were assigned to training schools often found themselves in junior posts under seniors who were firmly attached to the old ways, and were not prepared to make any changes. Some of the senior men were luckier; because of their seniority they were put in charge of training schools, and were able to put their ideas into practice; they showed how much could be done and how much more might have been done if administrative lethargy had not been allowed to stand in the way.

The situation illustrated Vinobaji's contention that when we got rid of the old flag in 1947 we ought to have got rid of the old education too, closed down the whole system and started again with a fresh slate. As it was, the double-mindedness of education departments hampered progress in countless ways. Fortunately the *Nai Talim Bhavan* had other students, coming as individuals or sent for training from the new townships at Faridabad and Rajpura, or from other "Gandhian" institutions. Many of these have gone on to subsequent careers of increasingly wise and dynamic service – itself a sufficient reward for those who had the privilege of starting them on their way.

## 10

### **POST-BASIC EXPERIENCES: 1951-59**

By 1951 the post-basic school had settled down to work a three-year course in two major crafts of village life, agriculture and animal husbandry, along with various seasonal and other subsidiaries, such as oil-pressing, palm-gur and bee-keeping. They had been allotted 43.5 acres of land; some of their fields could be regularly irrigated, while others were “dry”, dependent on rainfall. The aim was that the post-basic community of 85 to 90 people, including the staff and their families, should be able to supply itself with food, and with cotton for clothing, by working its own land. Pasture land for cattle was available in addition to this, and a cooperative dairy including producers and consumers was organised by the post-basic students on behalf of the whole *Nai Talim* community. They also had their own animals, the care of which formed the basic of education during one complete year of the course.

The post-basic community now included boys from outside the region, who had completed their basic school course in Orissa; it also included fourteen girls. Boys and girls lived in separate hostels, and it was understood, that any special teaching needed by either sex should be given in their hostels, while all the post-basic courses as such should be open to both boys and girls on an equal footing.

Some of the girl students proved themselves to be exceptionally reliable and good in dealing with the cattle. Their records are impressive; they show careful observation and independent thinking. There was keen interest in Parsaiji's efforts to improve the milk yield of the local dual-purpose cattle by careful attention to cleanliness and nutrition. One girl made a special study of four or five individual cows, and recorded with a sense of happy achievement how one of them, during the year, had increased her milk yield from 18 to a record 26 lbs. (12-13 litres) a day. Another girl, an adivasi from Gujarat, described how heavily she had; felt her responsibilities weigh upon her when she first began. “You start thinking and then you learn”, she wrote. “And how much

you can learn from anything including the calves. They are like babies, they respond so well to your care and affection". She went on to give a lot of good practical information about what to do, and not to do, for feeding and bathing and sanitation, and finally came back to the parallel with babies "Let them go out and; enjoy themselves", she wrote, "let them have a garden in their *balwadi!*"

During their year in the go-shala post-basic students undertook excursions to see other work on animal husbandry, such as the Government cattle and poultry units at Nagpur. Their own practical experience made them intelligent judges of what they saw. They inquired into breeds and yields and the keeping or records; they raised questions about the policy of hand-feeding the calves rather than letting them suckle naturally. They were critical above all that while much had been spent on buildings, the standards of cleanliness left much to be desired. There were far too many flies and mosquitoes!

Other things also were learned from these excursions, how to save money by walking to the railway station (this meant Wardha; the Sevagram station had not been opened then); they travelled by the cheap slow trains; they carried and cooked their own food. They also learned, as their seniors had learned in Rajpura and Faridabad, that the disciplined routine of their community life could be practised anywhere. And they marvelled at and enjoyed, the Nagpur electric lights. In those days there was no electricity in Sevagram, and one of the items highest on the agenda of any newcomer was to learn the art and science of managing a hurricane lantern so as to obtain an efficient light.

Meanwhile the agricultural students were busy with their own experiments, learning effectively by their own mistakes. One year there was a serious groin shortage, and more cotton than the community needed, and this had to be corrected. Cotton could be sold; easily in the local market, and the boys' cotton fetched top prices because it was carefully and cleanly picked, But that led to dependence on a money economy rather than on self-sufficiency in kind. There was much to be learned about the skilful use of land resources.



An investigation was carried out into the value of the compost latrines which Shantabehn and Pawarji, the Headmaster of the Segaoon school, had introduced in 1945-47. The compost from the earliest ones, according to the Government bio-chemist who had analysed it, was “not at all inferior to village cattle manure”, but was rather low in nitrogen content, because too much earth and too little organic material had been used for covering. The post-basic boys tried to correct this in the use of their own latrines, and then carried out some controlled experiments with crops treated by different methods. They used urine mixed with water as a liquid manure, urine earth, and the matured compost from their latrines. Vegetable crops doubled their yield as compared with those grown in un-manured soil, and were at least 50% higher yielding than those grown with cattle manure, while cotton did even better. Quality also improved; coriander stalks did not harden so quickly, young pumpkins did not fall there was a dramatic improvement both in quantity and in quality in the orange harvest. In 1953 the results of all these experiments were incorporated in a useful booklet which gave detailed instructions, based on several years of experience, for the building and maintenance of such latrines.

The post-basic school, like the basic school, treated experience of the arts as an important part of education. Seasonal, national and religious festivals in which the whole Sevagram community shared provided many opportunities for celebration; music and colour were combined with lovely form and lovely words in a way which all could appreciate. Many of the foreign delegates to the World Pacifist Meeting in December 1949 said that the story of Christmas had never been so real to them as when it was enacted in the post-basic cattle-shed among the living cattle, with the youngest baby and his village parents in the central roles, and the soft light of the lanterns over them all. Other festivals, such as Ayudha Puja, or Diwali, or the Prophet's birthday, were observed with the same kind of simple beauty. No money was expended on them, but much loving thought and ingenuity went into using the colours and forms of nature, and all her free seasonal gifts, to create the gay decorations appropriate to each

occasion. The leaders in these enterprises were Asha Devi, with her great knowledge and love of the rich Indian cultural tradition and Devi Prasad, an artist with a deep commitment to non-violence, who ten years earlier had been a student at Santiniketan and was inspired equally by Tagore and by Gandhiji.

These celebrations were an eye-opener to the teacher-trainees in the Nai Talim Bhavan, many of whom had known only the commercialised “entertainment” of cities. But they were quick to pick up the idea. In 1952 they organised a special celebration of their own. They had spent a couple of months over a special work-education project, building a simple two roomed house in local village style for their Principal. When it was completed there was a triumphant procession which carried all her possessions, item by item into their new home; there followed music and readings and the traditional Indian “house-warming” ceremonies. Every year there were other celebrations of the music and the art, the culture and the cookery, of the many varied regions from which the students came.

In 1951 the Uttara Buniyadi Bhavan took the lead in a major special production, a kind of dance-drama of the pageant of Indian history called *Bharat-ki-Katha*. This undertaking involved almost the whole community, young and old together, each contributing according to his or her capacity. The planning and execution of the pageant was itself a great educational experience. It was performed for the first time at the *Nai Talim* conference in April 1951: it was evaluated, modified, and repeated when the Prime Minister visited Sevagram a few months later; it was repeated again after another assessment, at the *Nai Talim* conference of 1952. Such things were much appreciated, and inspired a good many people with new ideas of what other institutions might do. But their most lasting value was in the whole experience of the discipline (in the best sense of the word) which such projects entail for all who participate.

Perhaps even more significant educationally were the points where something went wrong, and the community had to learn what “unlimited mutual responsibility” for one

another's short-comings may mean in practice. There was, for example, the day when the accounts of the Uttara Buniyadi Bhavan store were found to be twenty four rupees short at the end of the month's working. The boy who had been in charge was unable to explain the discrepancy to the community, and it was decided that he must work "overtime" at some productive job until he had earned enough to make up the loss. The next month's accounts were right to the last pie!

On another occasion a boy had been guilty of serious neglect of his duties in the go-shala, a matter which involved not merely money but the well-being of living animals. The decision was to banish Idm from the go-shala and send him to work elsewhere, away from his own class-mates and friends. At the next *am-sabha* (general assembly) he publicly admitted his fault and asked pardon of the community, after which he was allowed back into the class team.

These lapses – thefts, quarrels, failures in propriety of behaviour – were all brought into the open at the regular meetings of the community. Although the defaulter was often annoyed at this public discussion of his conduct the overall effect was good. It helped everyone to understand the issues, and fostered a healthy public opinion and a vigorous sense of right and wrong.

The obligations of the individual to the community, and the duties of the community to the individual, can in fact only be learned in the creative tension, the give and take of practical citizenship, practical and purposeful community of self-government. One's own experiences in the rough and tumble of school democracy, one's own growing personal appreciation of the meaning of law and discipline, illuminate and are illuminated by the study of human society, history and psychology, to which they lead.

There is another field of creative tension which the Uttar Buniyadi Bhavan also experienced during these years. Human beings use the world around them, "exploit" the resources of their environment, to provide the material necessities and amenities of life. And this is what the Uttar Buniyadi Bhavan, as a community, was mainly engaged in doing. But there is

another way of approaching the world. One may contemplate it for its own sake, in a spirit of disinterested curiosity, wonder and delight. Both these approaches are a part of the rhythm of human experience; they do not contradict, but complement one another. Work and enjoyment, labour and leisure, practical farming and creative art, both sides are needed to know the world in its wholeness. Nevertheless, in the “rough and tumble” of the post-basic community a learning, it was not always easy to agree upon how far a boy, or girl, with marked artistic ability, should be allowed or allow himself, to reduce the time spent on common work to supply common basic needs, in order to practise and perfect the disciplines of his own chosen creative medium. Our schools can and should help their pupils to understand the roots of the tension, and the validity of both points of view. Then, every individual case can be approached as it arises, with compassion and a sense of responsibility, and some working compromise achieved. (In a non-violent society, ‘compromise’ is not a ‘dirty word’!)

In the fifties the Uttar buniyadi Bhavan at Sevagram struggled with this tension in the person of one of its Oriya students, Kalindi Jena. Since then, Kalindi has won wide recognition as a ceramic artist, both in academic circles and beyond, in spite of his lack of any formal ‘certificate’; he is ‘certified’ by the beauty and integrity of the work of his hands. Wilfred Wellock of England put the point well in his comment on his experience of the World Pacifist Meeting: “Education must be training in the art of living, and give its due place to every aspect of that art. Yet work remains the basic activity; it satisfies material needs because it makes a person a creator, and it exercises spiritual, mental and physical powers which are renewed by rest, meditation and enjoyment in all its forms”.

**THE NEXT STEP: 1955-59**

In January 1956 the first special Post-basic Conference was held at Sevagram. Both the Uttar buniyadi Bhavan itself, and the Anandaniketan Basic School, were working smoothly and with confidence, and it is perhaps a good sign that they had comparatively little to report. They were busy demonstrating the truth of Bhartrihari's saying that "intellect follows action", and finding education in joy-giving activity among the varied riches of the natural world. One of the pioneers of *Nai Talim*, Kakasaheb Kalelkar, had reminded the workers in 1954 that Truth, as it grows towards perfection, becomes "less vocal, less noisy. but more full of life".

There were many factors, both positive and negative, which were operating in those years to focus attention not so much on the techniques, the "how" of *Nai Talim*, but on its wider social applications, on the "silent social revolution" of which Gandhiji had seen it as the "spear-head". A major factor in this change of emphasis was the Bhoodan (land gift) movement which had been initiated by Vinoba Bhave in 1951, and which five years later was at the height of its vigour and influence. *Nai Talim* workers had always responded to national needs; they had stepped outside the conventional limits of their educational work both during the Quit India movement of 1942, and again to meet the challenge of rehabilitation in the refugee camps of 1949. They now responded in the same way to Vinobaji. Aryanayakamji expressed the feelings of many when he said to a Gujarat *Nai Talim* conference in 1954 that the time had come to link together the human resources developed through *Nai Talim*, and the land resources liberated through bhoodan, so that there may be "a reverent use of land and water for the good of all".

From 1952 onwards a lot of thought had been given by the *Talimi Sangh* to what they called *Uttam Buniyadi Talim*, mature and original study and research into the needs and problems of rural India such as might be developed in a rural university. In 1955 this "university" work had formally begun

at Sevagram, with a few young men who had graduated; from the post-basic stage. But their first decision was that they would respond as a group to Vinobaji's appeal for help in developing and strengthening the *Bhoodan* movement; they were especially eager to help to build up the villages which had declared themselves ready for "*gram dan*", i.e. for learning the art of living together as a cooperative village community, using the village land as a whole for the good of its inhabitants. In January 1957 the *Talimi Sangh* itself endorsed this emphasis. "The Bhoodan work of Shri Vinoba", it declared, "has now taken the form of Gramdan, and the time has come when through this programme the non-violent social revolution may be brought to pass. A non-violent revolution can come about through education". The resolution goes on to say that having completed its task of placing before the country a pattern of pre-basic, basic and post-basic education, "it is the duty of the Sangh to enter with all humility into the work of non-violent revolution".

Another aspect of this growing consciousness that education must not remain isolated from the totality of social concern expressed itself in the discussions that led to the "merger" of all the various associations and institutions of "Gandhian" constructive work into the *Sarva Seva Sangh*. From 1959 onwards the Hindustani Talimi Sangh was no longer a separate, autonomous body, but became part of this larger whole, as did the former All India Spinners Association and other similar bodies. Some workers however were inclined to doubt whether this formal "merger" was the best way to express the sense of common purpose, whether the cutting edge of a distinctive, specific task would not be lost. The need for shouldering specific responsibilities has been recognised by the establishment of special committees of the *Sarva Seva Sangh* to deal with special interests, *Nai Talim* among them.

During these years (1955-59) also it became increasingly clear that while *Nai Talim* was being developed in quality in the few centres, such as Sevagram, where it was being practised with faith and enthusiasm, it was not expanding into new areas in the way that might have been expected. Dr. K.L. Srimali, then Education Minister of the Government of

India, pointed out at the Post-basic conference of 1956 that while one of the fundamental principles of *Nai Talim* is that all children should be treated with equal respect and given equal opportunity for their growth, the recognition of basic education by government had in fact resulted in accentuating class structures. There had grown up three types of schools, basic schools for the poor, high schools for the middle classes, public schools for the privileged. “We don’t want uniformity”, he said, “but this division is fatal”. How right he was! Basic schools were “recognised” by government only up to the fifth grade and, in practice were often treated as inferior. No wonder that village parents avoided them if they possibly could, and, sent their children to schools of the old type to give them “better” chances of advancement. Throughout village India and especially among tribal peoples there sprang up a feeling of resentment, a suspicion that basic schools were a deliberate attempt by the authorities to “keep them in their place” and deny equal opportunity. The failure to recognise even post-basic education as a qualification for college entrance meant that even parents who realised the value of *Nai Talim* feared, with good reason, that if they sent their children to basic schools they would deprive them of the chance of higher education.

The conclusion was drawn very clearly by Shri Aryanayakarn in his Presidential Address to the *Nai Talim* conference held at Rajpura, Punjab, in 1959: “A state which does not accept the principles of social and economic equality for its people, and equality of educational opportunity for its children, cannot carry out a programme of *Nai Talim*” And, he went on, the failure was not only in the state, but also in the people themselves “The principle of education through productive work cannot be practised with success because as a nation we think that education loses caste if it comes into contact with productive manual labour. This attitude to work permeates all levels of society – the craftsman and the labourer long that their children should find a place among the “educated” classes who do not work with their hands”. In his message to the previous conference in 1957 Jawaharlal Nehru had pinpointed a third fundamental difficulty, namely

free India's failure to outlaw violence in the management of its internal affairs and external relationships. "We talk of peace and non-violence", he said, "but we indulge constantly in something the very opposite of it". Vinobaji took up the point in his address to the same conference : "Education and defence are generally thought of as two different things. But in non-violence education and defence are one and the same; non-violence is not complete if they are thought of separately".

At the Turki conference in 1957 it was made clear, moreover, that the responsibility for the impasse could not all be laid at the door of the government or the general public, Shri Aryanayakam reminded those present of the shortcomings of the workers themselves. "We must own that after twenty years we are still very deficient. Would all the teachers who are working for *Nai Talim* today have the faith to go on alone, without government grant or the full backing of the community? Are they trying to follow *Nai Talim* principles in their personal, family and social life? If we apply such tests we should find very few whose lives are vehicles of *Nai Talim*. In addition, we have failed to make the teachers master-craftsmen: we have taken matriculates and graduates from the existing system, and it was not reasonable to expect from them something as revolutionary as this".

It is interesting to see how this Turki conference took up, after a gap of 16 years, issues that had been before the conference at Jamia in 1941. Gandhiji's message to Jamia Nagar, that the experiment should be tried out unalloyed and without outside interference, was echoed in Aryanayakamji's call at Turki for a programme that was "pure and unadulterated, limited to the number of genuine teachers available". When he said at Turki that "we should seek for our teachers among the peasants and craftsmen of our countryside and city streets", he was repeating a suggestion made at Jamia Nagar and ignored ever since. "These men", he said, "are the heirs of fine traditions; their humility, honesty, skill and joy in achievement are great qualities. Where these are united with an alert mind and a quick sympathy, we have the makings of a teacher of the calibre we need. The time has come for a fresh vision and a fresh start".



Another theme which echoes the concerns of 1941 is that of the control of the state over education. In the intervening years the old “white-skin” rule in Delhi had been replaced by a “brown-skin” rule, but the general framework of bureaucracy remained unchanged. In 1941 the obligation of the state to provide education had been, by and large, accepted. In 1957, following Vinoba’s lead, it was strongly challenged. Should not education be independent of Government authority? Should it not be a natural function of a responsible local society? The question had been asked, more than fifty years earlier, by Rabindranath Tagore as he shared his dream of an India that there was little chance that society would be ready to resume its natural obligations for the welfare of its children except in the context of the non-violent social revolution to which Gandhiji had devoted his life.

The years 1959-61 mark a tuning-point in the history of Sevagram, but not, at least outwardly, any turning towards the “fresh vision and fresh start” for which Aryanayakamji had called. Partly because of the wider perspectives set before them by Vinoba, partly for more personal reasons, a number of those who had shared the developments of the last twelve years moved on to other areas of constructive work. Radhakrishna went to the Gandhi Peace Foundation, Parsaiji to contribute his knowledge and experience of cattle breeding in a wider field. Banwarilal Choudhury to live and work in his own native village and district. Shri M.A. Sathianathan, who had done much to build up the post-basic laboratory and, set its scientific standards, also moved on to other fields. Devi Prasad accepted the invitation of the War Resister International to work for non-violence in the international field. The writer herself spent the next few years experimenting with the training of workers on a smaller, more intensive scale in the Nilgiri Hills and later at Jayaprakash Narayan’s suggestion, in the Peace Centre in Nagaland, where she renewed her friendship with a number of Nagas who had formerly been her students in *Nai Talim Bhavan*.

The *Nai Talim Bhavan* was carried on for a number of years under the faithful and expert guidance of Shri K.S.

Acharlu; in a sense it gradually worked itself out of a job as men and women who had been trained and inspired there assumed the full responsibility for teacher training in one state after another. No new craftsmen-teachers such as had been envisaged at the Turki conference were found to take their place. Shankar Prahlad Pande also continued to devote his wisdom and experience to the Anandaniketan school, but both that and the Uttara- buniyadi Bhavan were slowly undermined by forces beyond their control.

Sevagram (Segaon) village was not exempt – how could it be? – from the pervasive failure of confidence in Basic Education which was described earlier in this chapter. In 1960-61, while Aryanayakam and Asha Devi were absent on a fairly extended visit to Europe, a High School of the conventional pattern was opened in the village, and drew the children away from the Nai Talim schools, while with the development of local post-basic schools in a number of states the Uttara Buniyadi Bhavan was no longer needed for other than local students.

The Aryanayakams' foreign tour was the result of the convergence of a number of threads of interest – one was the series of stimulating and happy contacts which Sevagram had developed with “seekers” from outside India in the fields of education and non-violence. The first of these was Dr. Arthur Morgan, who visited in 1949 as a member of the Universities Commission, and developed as a result his picture of Rural Universities. He had been followed by the members of the World Pacifist Meeting, a number of whom, including Wilfred Wellock, found the experiments in Nai Talim of special interest. Shortly afterwards, the involvement of Service Civil International (SCI) in the rehabilitation work at Faridabad and Rajpura opened the way for some of its workers to spend shorter or longer periods at Sevagram during the early fifties, and to participate in its work. A notable contribution had been made by Max Parker, especially in the applied science of the workshop. It was agreed that any University level work should be primarily concerned with serious research into real village technology, such as the possibility of a bullock-operated irrigation pump as a substitute for the Persian wheel. The

need for research, and for a mutual bond of give and take between practical work and scientific investigation, was one of the major concerns which Aryanayakamji had placed before the Turki conference.

That was nearly thirty years ago. Why was it that during the next ten years the Sevagram story seemed to some of its best friends to have come to an end? Why did they feel that after about 1961 a period of “stagnation” had begun, rather than a new and exciting phase of “non-violent revolution”? While the Kothari Commission in 1966 paid tribute to the creative ideas embodied in *Nai Talim*. and, spoke strongly of the need for its ethical and spiritual ideals to be incorporated in the education of the nation, nothing significant actually happened. Travesties of the “work-experience” recommended by the report soon became as common as at an earlier period, the travesties of basic craft-education had been.

In 1967 Aryanayakamji died, unexpectedly but peacefully during a happy relaxed holiday spent in his own boyhood home in Sri Lanka. Asha Devi did not long survive him. One of her last efforts was to make an appeal for a memorial to his thirty years of devoted service, in the shape of a five-fold programme of non-violent education and research, using the land, buildings and equipment of the educational base at Sevagram. She proposed, first a Nai Talim Vidyalaya, a residential school with an integrated, complete eleven-year course from the seventh to the eighteenth year, based on community self-sufficiency in food, clothing, health and sanitation, cultural and recreational opportunity, and the management of its affairs by the full democratic participation of all its members. Secondly, there should be a department of agriculture and animal husbandry, combining practical work and scientific research, thirdly, a similar department of rural technology for village-based industries and engineering, and fourthly, a safai vidyalaya conducted in the same spirit, and following up the work begun by Dr. Elton Kessel in the fifties. Lastly, there should also be an international centre where short- term and other visitors might have facilities for studying Gandhiji’s principles and their development in practice.

The appeal fell on deaf ears; nothing was done. Since 1969 the face of Sevagram has been slowly changed, partly by the building up of the Medical College to which Dr. Sushila Nayyar devoted so much of her energy, and partly by the expansion of Wardha town and the building of the Wardha “industrial estate” along the Sevagram road. The Medical College was modelled on city lines; its hostels are of the conventional type: they have not been built, as some of us dreamed they might have been, as a model Marathi village, using the best of village traditions and village materials, and demonstrating the possibility and beauty of a cleanly simplicity. It seems that the time may not be far distant when the once remote and inaccessible Segaoon village may be little more than an out-lying, largely middle-class suburb of Wardha. In 1974 the Anandaniketan school was closed: the Kasturba Health Society now runs a school, in English and Hindi, which follows the conventional pattern. In that same year 1974, at a Basic Education conference in Tamil Nadu, a sympathetic outsider, Dr. Malcolm Adiseshiah, suggested that for any successful work-based education there were two pre-conditions. His pre-conditions were the same as those that had been pin-pointed by Vinoba: that there should be real democracy, real mass participation in decision-making, and that all colleges and high schools should be closed down for two years, and their students set to regular labour on farms and in factories. There still seems little likelihood that either of these pre-conditions will be fulfilled in the foreseeable future.

## 12

### REFLECTIONS ON A JUBILEE

What now, in 1957? After the “stagnation” described in the last chapter, do we celebrate the Jubilee of *Nai Talim* by preaching its funeral oration? Is there nothing left except to mourn its untimely death? Shall we resign ourselves to maintaining the vicinity of Gandhiji’s ashram, with his own cottage at its centre, as a museum and national memorial, perhaps utilising its strategically central position in India, and its physical amenities, as a conference and study centre for those who are, and will continue to be, inspired by Gandhiji’s vision of a just, non-violent, happy human world?

Before attempting to suggest any answers to such questions it seems needful to record, along with the achievements of *Nai Talim* in Sevagram, a personal reflection on the ways in which we seem, looking back, to have taken a wrong turning. The assessment which follows is an evaluation of actions and omissions for which the writer herself must accept her full share of our common responsibility.

Attention has already been drawn in chapter IV, to the ambiguity of the “seven year period” designated for basic education. Although in 1945 the plan for the Sevagram school had been extended to eight years, it was all too easy to equate the eight year period with what were called in the old parlance the primary and middle school stages of schooling, and to lose sight of Gandhiji’s insistence that Basic National Education should include in one integrated course the “high school” stage also. The Talimi Sangh seems to have forgotten its own recommendation that this integrated, programme should extend to the sixteenth year. The result was that post-basic education became accepted, even in Talimi Sangh resolutions, as being equivalent to the old High School, instead of being thought of, as was surely Gandhiji’s intention, as a new and better alternative to the wasteful system of “college” education. The long-term effect of this distortion of the original vision seems to me to have been a progressive lowering of

standards of achievement, especially in the basic schools and to some extent in the post-basic schools also.

Another result of this confusion of thought was to my mind, the weakening of the natural links between the village and the village school. There was in the early years in Segaoon a strength derived from the fact that the school was anchored in the social environment of the village. This was largely lost when its higher grades were transferred to the Talimi Sangh premises and organised as the Anandaniketan residential school. No doubt, at the time, there seemed to be compelling reasons for such a step. It seems nevertheless to have been a step in the wrong direction, because the school was no longer a model that any village could build on from within its own resources. We were reminded in the early chapters of this book of the high value Gandhiji had always placed on the home life of the children. If there were some whose circumstances made residence away from home necessary, could not the community have provided some kind of foster-home for them, and sent them along with the village children, to the village day-school? This is not a judgement, which the writer has no right to make, but a query.

If the post-basic school had been pictured and planned whole-heartedly as an education for self-reliant young people from the 16th year onwards, it might have developed even better than it did. "When a son reaches the age of sixteen", says Manu, "he should be treated as a friend" – that is, a responsible adult. Vinoba, commenting on this, has written as follows: "We should be satisfied with making: boys enterprising and ready for self-support from their sixteenth year. Then, if we are truly the boys' friends and not their enemies, we should show them how they can continue their education by their own efforts. We shall make sure that they have a good education up to the age of sixteen; after that neither government nor society nor parents should provide any financial support." This seems to me to be a valid extension of Gandhiji's educational thought, but it is not one that we have been able to follow because, as was pointed out in chapter V, we teachers have not been serious enough about learning to support ourselves by the practice of a productive craft.

And yet this is surely fundamental? How can we urge on, the children of the nation a goal which we do not accept for ourselves? As we have seen, this weakness in our own teaching skills was pointed out both in 1941 and in 1957 – and nothing was done. And yet it is not quite an impossible goal, even for those of us who were educated in the old ways. The writer came nearest to it in the early sixties, when in a little “gurukul” with a family of about eight students at a time; she and they farmed four or five acres of steeply terraced slopes in the Nilgiri Hills, producing their food, but not (in that climate) the cotton for their clothing.

This brings me to another query. The so-called gurukul mentioned above was a deliberately small-scale enterprise. When the post-basic community was first organised at Sevagram it was a small group of fifteen to eighteen boys, no more. And it was in those days that it most clearly and satisfyingly earned its own keep by its own labour, and the daily chores were accomplished with the least expenditure of time and energy. Were we right to organise the whole Talimi Sangh community, as we did shortly afterwards, round one central kitchen, catering for most of the year to two hundred people or even more. If we took as our ideal a “school-village” such as Lye talked of in connection with the Uttara Buniyadi Bhavan, would it not have been better education, more relaxed and realistic education, for each cottage in the village to have a little kitchen for a little family? The large numbers meant a continual danger, not always avoided, that the work would degenerate into drudgery, there was also the likelihood that the post-basic students, as the most experienced group, would have to carry a disproportionate and unfairly time-consuming share of the overall responsibility. An occasional large-scale get-together, a common meal for the whole community, could be good fun, good educational fun: but there might be neither fun nor education in carrying the burden of such an unnaturally large “family” day in and day out. Just as thought should be, and was, given to the optimum size of a class learning through a productive craft, so thought should be given to the optimum conditions for the daily life of a self-sufficient.

self-governing educational community. We didn't give enough thought to that.

One final comment before I share my dream of a possible, viable, purposeful future for a *Nai Talim* community at Sevagram. I do not think that as a group we were nearly as alert as we should have been to some aspects of rural life which have come to the forefront of our thinking in more recent years. There was a great emphasis on the production and processing of food as a major contribution to urgent national need, but there was very little emphasis on the basic conditions for the long-term maintenance of soil fertility. So far as I remember, there was hardly a word about the relationship between natural forest and healthy grassland and the well-being of agriculture. Planning for *Gramdan* villages did not always include the preservation of their natural wealth of woodland and wilderness, or any realisation of the principle of a good ecological balance. There was hardly a mention of the principles of non-violence as they apply to human relationships with the other living creatures of all kinds that share this planet with us, and with, whose well-being our own well-being is so closely linked. Gandhiji himself was sensitive to these things, and I know from my own friendship with him how much "reverence for life" meant to Aryanayakamji. But in general, it seems to me, there was far too little place given to these matters in the working out of our curriculum of work and study.

And so I come to my "dream" for Sevagram. It is a dream which is closely related to the thoughts I have just shared about the weaknesses and shortcomings of our work there over the last fifty years. It is a dream of now, during the next ten, twenty, fifty years, we might overcome our weaknesses and correct our shortcomings. It is a dream of what might be done by a group of people in Sevagram itself to keep the pledge which *Nai Talim* workers took forty years ago, soon after Gandhiji's death. At that time we promised to devote the rest of our lives "to breathe into education the spirit of truth and non-violence, and to prepare children and adults for a society in which co-operation shall take place of competition, and justice of exploitation where



freedom shall go hand in hand with responsibility and material with moral progress”.

We have in Sevagram a wonderful inheritance of land and trees, of buildings and equipment. Above all we have the imperishable memory of the man who in 1936 tramped into the village drenched to the skin, and inside it “a lighthouse” for all India and the world. Gandhiji’s ashram at Sevagram was what our friends in Western countries call “an intentional community”, because its members were bound together by a common intention; they were all committed to the same goal and the same way of life. Their way of life was symbolised by their acceptance of Gandhiji’s “eleven vows”; their goal was to realise, in personal, social and national life, that true freedom which is based on non-violence and truth.

I propose that we should mark the Jubilee of *Nai Talim* by encouraging the growth, in Sevagram, of a new intentional community, a *Nai Talim* community. I propose that the common intention, the accepted purpose, of this community should be three-fold—

1. to earn its own living from the soil by its own labour, in which all its members, adults and children together, should participate. In this way it should respond to Gandhiji’s challenge that self-support is the acid test of *Nai Talim*.
2. to organise its own life as a community on the principle of non-violence, both in the management of its own affairs and in its relations with its neighbours and the outside world. To discover by experience the meaning of Gandhiji’s saying that organisation is the test of non-violence.
3. to express in its own daily life and labour that respect for the living soil, and the whole living fabric of the world, which is an essential part of non-violent living. To express in its own organisation and interests an equal respect for the local and national cultural traditions which reflect the experience and wisdom of the centuries. (Respect does not mean blind imitation, to respect the past is not to be enslaved by it, but to appreciate the wisdom and insight behind the traditions it has handed down to us).

I believe that if we set out seriously to carry out this three-fold intention, we shall be amazed at the wonderful all-round education it will provide for the community as a whole and for every individual in it. It will nourish whole human beings, in body mind and spirit together, build up character, and draw out the full human potential of each.

But to bring this dream to life we need new recruits – young people who are inspired by this vision and ready for the adventure and for the daily hard work which its realisation will demand. They will need to be ready too for possible real hardship, when the rains fail and the storms destroy and everything seems to go wrong, they must be prepared to stick it out. And we need also the older men and women, we need the wisdom and the insight which the last fifty years have brought. We need bold spirits, old and young together – and I feel sure that they are there, and can be found.

Such a community might develop, by hard work and the grace of God, into something akin to Asha Devi's vision of twenty years ago. It might even come near to realising the dream Gandhiji dreamed for Phoenix Ashram in 1904, of a co-operative village of 3-acre family farms, with each family playing its part in the life of the whole – a model for the goal of *gramdan*.

We older ones shall not live to see this task completed; we pass the vision on. In so far as it is a true vision, its time will come.