

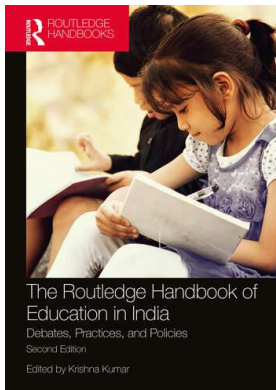
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An experiment in rural education

The revival of Anand Niketan

Nidhi Gaur

After 68 years of independence, India is struggling to mark its presence in the ‘developed’ world. A majority of our population still lives in villages; the agricultural sector still contributes significantly to the country’s gross domestic product (GDP); we still consistently miss deadlines for achieving 100 per cent literacy; and our prime minister still has to make emotional pleas for civic responsibility while burdening the citizens with cleanliness tax. These are a few indicators that we are far from our goal of modernisation.

Touraine (1998), while arguing for the importance of intercultural communication through comparative studies, differentiates between modernity and modernisation, which helps us in understanding the probable causes and resolution of the aforementioned issues. He defines modernisation as ‘a movement, something willed, a mobilisation at the head of which is in any case the state, whatever the social forces on which it depends’ (Touraine 1998: 451). For a country with a colonial legacy, modernisation through state machinery presents itself as a safe and quicker way of development because of the belief that ‘developed’ countries have gone through the same path. This implies state initiative and responsibility for setting up industries, expansion of cities, and other agents of modernisation. In other countries, the bourgeoisie/capitalist class performed this task while the state kept checks through taxation. In India, the state chose to partner with this class to speed up modernisation.

Touraine argues that ‘modernisation through state machinery’ is a misconception, for the ‘developed’ countries went through a process of modernity, which is an individual-centric process. He defines modernity ‘as a set of attributes of social organisation’. This implies that modernity is not just a process of industrialisation but also a process of social upheaval leading to the discrediting of the older order and developing a new social order.

Ursula Franklin (1999), in her authoritative work *The Real World of Technology*, explains how social re-structuring paved the way for the Industrial Revolution. Franklin quotes Foucault’s influential work *Discipline and Punish* to illustrate changes in the social structure in the seventeenth and the eighteenth century, particularly in French schools, hospitals, military institutions, and prisons. Application of discipline accompanied with detailed hierarchical structures, drill, surveillance, and record-keeping were applied to all these organisations. In the 1740s, La Mettrie wrote *L’Homme-machine*, that is, man-the-machine. In this book he described how the human body was ‘an intricate machine, a machine that could be understood, controlled, and used’

(Franklin 1999: 53). Foucault illustrates how this idea of a human body led to the training of the human body into compliance, which was translated into organisations such as schools, hospitals, military institutions, and prisons. This, Franklin says, was the social setting prior to the Industrial Revolution. It was this blueprint of the society that factories took and through machines made more controlled, stringent, and invasive. 'The new patterns, with their breakdown of processes into small prescriptive steps, extended quickly from manufacturing into commercial, administrative, and political areas... Planning thrived as an activity closely and intimately associated with the exercise of control' (Franklin 1999: 55). So, a social structure that rendered itself readily to the control and management of the human body evolved.

In turn, the change in the structure of society and the nature and organisation of work and production during the Industrial Revolution became a pattern onto which our real world of technology with its much more extended and sophisticated restructuring is grafted.

(Franklin 1999: 56)

India encountered Industrial Revolution partially during its struggle for freedom. The already established culture of compliance was more deeply ingrained in Indian society through colonial rule. But conflicts of caste, religion, and language added layers of complication. The process of state-run industrialisation that began after Independence rested on this social setting. Machines, as was true in Europe, did not bring about social change. But they strengthened the centralisation of power and control, which was already established by the British through the system of inspection and bureaucracy. Machines helped in making this control more invasive and stringent through their application and development of technology in administration and governance. This industrialisation required a compliant workforce to thrive on and a replica of Western education with its emphasis on training, drill, examination, and timetabling was established – the kind of schools that Foucault critiqued most convincingly.

This industrialisation was the modernisation of India. The process of becoming modern necessitates popular reorganisation of the society. Thus, making it a discontinuous process wherein older social structures have to be replaced by new ones. It has to be individual-centric and has to move from the bottom reaching the top, changing the entire structure in between. Taylor (1991) explains this change as a shift from honour to dignity; from ascribed status to achieved status. In the Indian context, it would mean questioning the caste structure and discrediting it. However, it is a gradual process, which the 'developed' countries went through to pave the way for a democratic and liberal society. It included the process of colonisation of India and other countries.

India's journey on this road began only after Independence. Our nationalist leaders understood the importance of social change in the whole modernisation process, but they believed that industrialisation would gradually modernise the society. India definitely converted some towns into cities. But even in cities, which were to become the face of modernity, we achieved it only in material terms. Socially, we are still traditional. Caste and religious fanaticism are still going strong, if not thriving. Modernisation has only added to our problems with over-populated cities, pollution, and violence. The government is forced to levy a cleanliness tax on its citizens to develop their civic sense in order to stop them from dirtying and destroying public infrastructure and keep the streets clean. This is a clear sign of our lack of belongingness and ownership of our own country. While we are dealing with these issues and looking for possible solutions, it would be worthwhile to look at the alternative to modernisation, that is, modernity, and if it could present a means of social reorganisation.

In 1909, Mahatma Gandhi presented an alternative to Western civilisation in his classic work *Hind Swaraj*. He defined 'swaraj' as living fearlessly. He interpreted it as 'swa-par-raj', that is, rule

over oneself. It rests on three pillars – self-awareness (truth), self-reliance (productive labour), and self-discipline (11 vows). Being truthful for Gandhi meant searching for one's truth and following it with absolute conviction. Disciplining one's mind and body through the practice of 11 vows and productive manual labour gives individual inner strength. Creating objects of everyday utility not only makes an individual self-reliant but is also rewarding for his/her mind and soul.

Modern scholar Charles Taylor (1991), in his influential work *The Malaise of Modernity*, perceives authenticity in an individual as a sign of modernity. He notes that this ideal of authenticity demands a definition of self in relation to others. Therefore, an authentic self can only be actualised through dialogue with the significant other. Gandhi also saw *swaraj* as a lived experience of an individual in the context of a community. Here, education plays a vital role. It can initiate the process of *swaraj* at an early age within a community. But what kind of education can create a conducive environment for the development of mind, body, and spirit as is required to experience *swaraj*?

Gandhi hinted at this kind of education in *Hind Swaraj*, in which he critiqued Western education as a mere learning of letters that would alienate the rural Indian child, developing in him an attraction or need for the city. This alienation would lead to an ambiguous personality because of conflicting values of the school and home. He quoted Thomas Huxley to present his ideal of education:

That man I think had a liberal education who has been so trained in youth that his body is the ready servant of his will and does with ease and pleasure all the work that as a mechanism it is capable of; whose intellect is a clear, cold, logic engine with all its parts of equal strength and in smooth working order ... whose mind is stored with a knowledge of the fundamental truths of nature ... whose passions are trained to come to heel by vigorous will, the servant of a tender conscience ... who has learnt to hate all vileness and to respect other as himself. Such a one and no other, I conceive, has had a liberal education, for he is in harmony with nature. He will make the best of her and she of him.

(Parel 2009: 99)

Gandhi found such potential in the teaching of crafts. The next section illustrates this point through classroom observations of some crafts taught in Anand Niketan. In this paragraph a brief explanation of this scheme is presented. Gandhi believed that a process of education centred around crafts could create a meaningful context for the learning of letters. It could become a bridge between the school and the home environment of a child since the practice of crafts facilitates development of the body, mind, and spirit. He advocated the mother tongue to be the medium of instruction.

Mahatma Gandhi called it 'Rural National Education through village handicrafts' in the foreword of the curriculum of the scheme that Dr Zakir Husain termed 'Basic National Education' (Gandhi 1938). By calling it rural, perhaps he wanted to differentiate it from English education, and with the addition of 'through village handicrafts' stressed the rural context of a school in which a teacher will live, as well as a selection of crafts from among the varieties being practised in that village. In other words, he wanted to stress the decentralisation of village education with little interference from the government. This was a vital part of his vision of a self-sustaining village society.

By self-sustaining village society, he did not mean an absolute self-sustaining, closed rural society. This needs to be interpreted in the context of the more popular idea of modernisation. What he meant was a self-reliant but interdependent rural society, and one that needs to be juxtaposed to the present state of the village to the city, wherein the former is an unequal/inferior

partner of the latter. Its population is considered backward and a burden when it migrates to the city. Examining the relationship between rurality, modernity, and education, Krishna Kumar (2014), in an important paper, illustrated how the village has lost its relevance in modern times even in the construction of knowledge. It is the binary opposite of the city, which is modern and so, 'For the village, there is just one way to liberate itself from this binding relationship, and that is to develop into a town according to the agenda of evolutionist modernity' (Kumar 2014: 40).

In Gandhian vision, the village retains its dignity and its self-reliance and becomes an equal partner to the city. It also has something to offer to the city in lieu of its demands. The village can negotiate and survive with its dignity intact. He strongly believed that the progress of independent India is through the wellbeing of its villages. Hence the focus should be on strengthening the village community. He saw the core of Indian culture in the live tradition of crafts, which was the key to their self-reliance and creative self-expression. It was fundamental to their experience of *swaraj*. Critics of Gandhi see this as his legitimisation of casteism and untouchability. However, he took steps to reform the village society through constructive programmes. A craft-centred education aided in that reform by drawing out crafts from their rigid caste boundaries. These were taught to children from all castes without any bias. In this manner, he imagined mobilising a large mass of India's rural population for social reorganisation with the spread of modernity. After all if encouraging girls to play alongside boys and take up careers and become professionals is expected to create a more equitable society, encouraging children from all castes to learn all kinds of crafts should also de-stigmatise craftwork. Craft-centred education was to play a vital role here by questioning and diluting the structures of caste through separation of caste and occupation.

Another important aspect of modernity is the application of science and technology. Here, one can say that learning from the experience of the West, Gandhi strongly advocated the role of science but warned against an over-reliance on technology. He was suspicious of technology that would replace workers, leading to their deskilling and reducing them to appendages of machines. Some of these issues were raised in the British Parliament also through questions such as: 'Was it morally right that, in the name of trade, prosperity and efficiency, the mode of work could change so drastically that many people became uprooted and deprived of their livelihood?' (Franklin 1999: 58). Gandhi warned about the use of that kind of technology.

Displacement of the rural population by making the village, where a majority of Indians live, irrelevant in modern society has led to a situation of crisis. It has stripped villagers of their right to livelihood and a dignified life by compelling them to migrate to cities and labour as domestic workers and live in urban slums. It has also created problems of overcrowding, seething competition, pollution, and violence in urban India. Also, the present nature of the application of science and technology rooted in exploitation and control over nature has led to a range of environmental issues, such as global warming.

These glaring issues compel us to look for viable alternatives for a better future. Gandhi's vision of an alternative Indian civilisation based on *swaraj* presented one such possibility. Craft-centred education, specially designed for rural children, was an integral part of this vision. In the light of the present circumstances, a re-examination of craft-centred education will help in four ways. First, it will be able to provide quality education to rural children who are the future of the country. Second, it can help in the socialisation of children. Gaur (2016), in her doctoral thesis, argues for the potential of craft-centred education in dealing with gender issues through socialisation of children. Third, as Srinivasan's (2015) recent doctoral thesis brings to the fore, the hollowness of higher education in India can also be addressed by listening to Gandhi. Fourth, science in craft-centred education facilitates a harmonious relationship with nature, as presented in the following section.

Gandhi's emphasis on science is inherent in the practice of crafts. It comes in the use and repair of tools and implements, modifications of existing tools and implements as per requirements, developing an understanding of raw materials used through their careful observation and manipulation, and exploring the process of making through creating the desired object. Students applied this understanding/knowledge of science in informal activities too. This became the thread for dialogue between home and school spun by children themselves. This was a subtler but lasting form of reform that Gandhi tried to initiate through schools, when children started understanding the world around them through minute observations of processes and their questions and reflections on these processes. A glimpse of this is presented in the following section on Anand Niketan.

Revival of Anand Niketan

Anand Niketan was a village school founded by Mahatma Gandhi in 1938 in the Sevagram ashram premises. It was part of his ideal vision of a self-sustaining village, complete with a village school where crafts practised in the village were taught not as hereditary occupations but as educative work that would facilitate the development of mind, body, and spirit. Teachers lived in the school or ashram premises and in some cases the classroom was an extension of the teacher's house. For example, the art room at Anand Niketan was in front of the cottage of the art teacher, celebrated artist Devi Prasad, who also designed it. The two rooms were so close that at night when children put their clay objects in the kiln, they would use their teacher's kitchen to make tea and pakoras while waiting. Similarly, the music teacher's cottage was next to the music room.

The school was shut down in the 1970s and was reopened in 2005 by some Gandhians with the help of the Jannalal Bajaj family. Now it functions from 9.30 a.m. to 5.30 p.m. in summer and from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. in winter. Gardening, spinning, embroidery, stitching, and weaving are some of the crafts taught in the school. Some classroom observations are described in the following paragraphs.

The school appears to be a vast, open space dotted with trees and cottages. The vastness of the sky is just as overwhelming as the feeling of sand under one's feet. The quiet and serene surroundings and the chirping of the birds is welcoming. On the porch of a cottage on a rainy day I saw a group of Class V girls sitting and talking. Since it was lunch, I thought they were eating but I found them with small bowls of water cleaning a transparent paste. They had scratched some 'dink' sap from the bark of the neem trees around. The dirty sap was being cleaned to make gum. First, two girls cleaned it with their hands. Two other girls then gave it a rinse with water and kept the clean 'dink' on a piece of white paper. A chain was thus formed. They stored it in a bottle with water. In some time, it would get mixed with water, they said. This was not a learned technique but a childhood instinct. They were aware of their surroundings and thought of an activity around them. They broke the activity into smaller tasks, divided the work among themselves, and executed it well. There are two points to note here. First, the ethos of the school provided the children with an opportunity where they could devise such plans and work on them without fear. They lived among trees, birds, and animals and had developed an intimate relationship with them. Second, they were attentive and observant and comfortable in trying out their instincts. They knew the creative process and could confidently pull it off.

Gardening

In a gardening class, a teacher was helping a student prepare soil with a large fork. The girl followed his instructions but found it difficult to push the fork because she was not applying

enough pressure at the right point. The teacher stood by her side watching and waiting patiently for her to look up and ask for help. He would then repeat the instruction. While this was going on, another student was handling the fork on his own. I asked him what he was doing. He explained that he was preparing the plot for sowing. I asked him about the seeds he would sow. He said he was still thinking. 'Spinach takes more time to grow than fenugreek, but then its produce is better and sells more. Last time, I planted spinach', he said. A student was taking out spinach, another was measuring his produce, and some others were watering their plots.

I observed a group of students plucking fenugreek from a plot. They were busy talking when I joined them. One of them was talking about the recent appearance of berries on the shrubs near the ashram farms. They were all planning to go there after helping their friend harvest fenugreek from her plot. Then one of the girls got up to get a rope to tie the produce. Another one ran to the school and ashram to inform people about the produce, so that interested buyers could come and buy. A third stood in a queue to weigh the produce. The other two were still plucking. As soon as the rope was brought, they took the produce to the weighing scale. Two of them weighed while the third jotted down the weight in a notebook, after which the produce was tied up. Soon, a group of teachers arrived to buy fenugreek. Details of the sale and purchase were diligently noted. Once the job was done, the girls ran to the other side of the garden to pluck the berries. At this point, I noticed a small rocky gate-like structure on one of the plots. I went and asked about it. A student told me that it was the grave of a frog that was killed in the process of preparing the plot.

After the initial set of instructions on how to use a fork to prepare a plot of land and different kinds of seeds and their needs, children worked independently on their plots. But things like speed and keeping up with others did not appear to be a concern for anyone. They decided on everything from the choice of seeds to the processes of sowing, watering, and harvesting. There was no right answer or the right way of doing it. They learned by doing. They learned from their failure. Helping each other and working with each other came naturally and it was neither encouraged nor discouraged by their gardening teacher. Not even once did the teacher ask the children to work silently or to focus on their own plots or to do their work. The students took responsibility for the task at hand and did it on their own.

Each plot looked different not only because of the variety of crops, but also because each child had embellished his/her plot with their choice of materials. The thought of making a grave for an animal that died during working reflects a student's relationship with nature, which developed from his gardening experience. The instinct to decorate their plots and to give them an identity also reflects their sense of ownership.

Science

It was 11.45 a.m. and the sun was warming up the winter noon, making the Class V classroom comparatively colder than outside. So when the bell rang, the science teacher entered the room and suggested holding the class on the porch, provided they shifted there quickly with their mats and bags. The teacher brought her chair outside to sit. The next few paragraphs describe this science period and analyses the classroom interaction as well as its content. Since the Maharashtra State Board of Education (MSBE) teaches all its subjects in the Marathi medium, an attempt has been made to translate the discussion in English as accurately as possible.

The teacher opened a science textbook provided by the MSBE and announced that this was an introductory class on a chapter titled 'The Chemical Properties of Plastics' that they would be dealing with in the next few classes. She did not ask the students to open their textbooks, but some of them opened them anyway. After speaking for about ten minutes on the properties of

plastics described in the book, she asked if the students had any questions. Many hands went up immediately. The discussion that followed is given below:

STUDENT 1: What if we bury a plastic bag in soil for a long time? Would it stay there as it is?

TEACHER: Yes, it would.

STUDENT 2: How does plastic decompose? How much time does it take?

[There was complete silence in the audience as the students appeared eager to hear their teacher's response.]

TEACHER: It does not decompose at all.

[The students expressed shock on hearing this with some repeating her words. A minute later, a third student told the class that Kurkure, a spicy snack brand, was said to contain plastic. She then asked, 'What happens to plastic when it enters our body and is not digested?']

TEACHER: I know everyone likes to eat Kurkure because of its taste, but it is harmful and we must avoid eating it.

STUDENT 4: What happens to plastic, if it does not decompose?

STUDENT 5: I have seen big machines on Discovery channel. Maybe they destroy it.

[Just then the bell rang, and the teacher left, but the students took a little longer to get back into the class. They were still talking about plastic among themselves.]

Two kinds of classroom interaction could be observed in this description. One, the teacher used Ausubel's technique of an advance organiser to acquaint the students with the concepts of the new chapter so that they were able to assimilate new information. Here she was the actor and her students were listeners. The equation changed completely when the floor was opened for questions. The students who had been listening so far were now actively asking questions while the teacher answered them. The kids could also respond to each other's questions. Together the group was actively engaging with the newly acquired information in accordance with the knowledge they already possessed.

The focus of this active engagement was the fact that plastic is a non-biodegradable substance. The children had learned from their intimate engagement with the environment (including gardening) about nature's law – anything that is born will die. Their experience of composting was a major source of the counter-questions they asked. However, personal experiences and information acquired at home was also used effectively when a girl talked about Kurkure. She was talking about a rumour that Kurkure contains plastic in some form. However, its manufacturer, PepsiCo, rubbished these rumours.

The practice of gardening facilitated experiential learning among the children and showed that experience is more pervasive and deep-rooted, and has strong roots in a person's affective domain. This was evident in the questions asked, which were rooted in both cognitive and affective domains of learning. At one level, they were drawing inference from nature and its law that whatever is born must die after its due time. At another level, on realising that manmade objects are disturbing the law of nature, they became concerned about their implications for their surroundings. This concern for the environment was facilitated by their experience.

Spinning and weaving

In the spinning room, the weaving teacher was struggling to set up a handloom for Class VII. During the summer vacations, two teachers had gone to Guwahati for ten days to learn weaving. They planned to introduce weaving in Class VII in January. By the end of the semester, the students were expected to weave at least one mat – and, if possible, a mat for Class I students too.

Two looms were to be set up in the spinning room and students were to learn it as and when they got time.

Working on a handloom requires a strong body since the loom is attached to the weaver's back for support. But the excitement that the sight of the loom generated among the students who were spinning was far more than any worry about their frames. Some of them who had completed spinning gathered around the teacher to observe her weaving. They started asking her questions about the loom and what she was doing. They wanted to know the product they would get after the process and also when they would be allowed to work on it, and so on. The teacher explained to them the terms '*tana*' (warp) and '*bana*' (weft). The loom then had threads in two colours, one used as '*tana*' and the other as '*bana*'. They quizzed her about the eventual design and the colour that would be prominent. They then started discussing which two colours would look good together. The teacher let them help her out.

The students' questions about the colour and design of the final product reflected the degree to which they could imagine it even in the early stages of weaving. They could already tell which one of the colours would dominate the pattern, as they had noticed that the *bana* went through the *tana* only once, which meant addition of a single thread. In her design, however, while moving the *bana* from one end of the *tana* to the other, the teacher was using double threads of the *tana* together. This 2:1 ratio of *tana* to *bana* meant that the colour of the *tana* would dominate the pattern. The teacher explained that since the yellow thread wasn't enough for use as *tana* and the white thread also looked dull, she had decided upon using yellow as *bana* to add colour to the mat. Crafting products leads to an early understanding of breaking down a task into smaller ones to create a desired final product. This question–answer session indicates that the natural urge to observe and ask about something new was given due space in a class of students who may not be weaving for another two years.

Conclusion

This chapter began by distinguishing between modernity and modernisation. The distinction between the two is essential to realise their deep-rooted implications for our everyday lives. Modernisation is state-imposed development resting on the use of technology. Modernity is an individual-centric approach resting upon the growth of the individual leading to the progress society. India chose to modernise itself, with Nehru referring to dams as the temples of modern India. However, Gandhi presented another alternative based on the principles of modernity, but it ran into controversies even before its trial. This was his alternative to Western civilisation and was explained in *Hind Swaraj*. From this alternative concept derived the scheme of education he proposed, also called craft-centred education.

Gandhi's scheme of education was a rare experiment in education for several reasons. One, it was not an isolated scheme but an integral part of his alternative to Western civilisation. Two, the village was the foundation of this alternative as it presented itself as the site of modernity. Three, it was rooted in modernity and the concept of individual freedom, but unlike Western civilisation it aimed to develop direct ties with neighbours through self-reliance and interdependence. It saw modernity as an individual experience and aimed at strengthening the individual to strengthen community. Thus, modernity was a popular struggle and not a top-down approach, and it translated in the same way at the national level, depending on the demography and its strength and then building on it. It would have helped the nation develop an identity and stand on its own.

Gandhi saw the potential of craft-centred education in countering caste by diluting it through its separation from occupation. School would then have become an agency to introduce children from across classes and castes to learn crafts, which were given an inferior status in society. This would have separated caste from occupation, and learning it in school would have brought out the science of crafting. This would have not only dignified craftwork but also brought out its inherent scientific approach that was passed on over generations. It would have created a social awareness of the value of crafts. This separation from craft and caste would have diluted the hierarchical structure of caste through a healthy exchange of crafts across castes. It would have given other academic opportunities to lower-caste children who then had a fair choice to choose a field and have a career in it. This field could be any craft or any academic discipline. Similarly, it would have given an upper-caste child the choice of a variety of activities to make a career in. In this manner, the community would have interacted in many other constructive ways than just traditional castes. This separation would have been the first step towards change – a change that dignified the strength of the human hand and mind and its potential to create a civilisation.

Social change is a slow and gradual process. The first section of this chapter explained how even the developed world took nearly two centuries of social reorganisation to lay the foundation for the Industrial Revolution. Feminists and social activists are aware of how this change occurred from generation to generation. Therefore, this separation would have certainly paved the way for an initiation of the gradual process of social change.

We have already mentioned the understanding and application of science in the first two sections. Science in craft-centred education is seen ‘as an approach to knowledge’ (Kumar 1996: 2368). This education facilitates the development of scientific temper. The school also upholds this view of science. Students are observing, hypothesising, experimenting, reflecting, comparing, analysing, and manipulating objects not just in the class but in routine activities too. All the above examples show how students are taking responsibility for their learning and are actively engaging in various classroom situations. They come up with activities, break it into smaller tasks, divide these tasks among themselves, and do them. They are operating on the environment and looking for tools and materials from the environment that can help them complete their task. They are active and independent. They are taking decisions and going forward with those. Science is applied here for strengthening the individual worker/craftsperson. It retains the labour-intensive model. Implications of this alternative would have affected rural–urban relations and our relationship with technology and our concept of time and efficiency that are intimately connected to technology.

The idea appears convincing, but the desired growth is slow and its path is unknown as it remains uncharted. It unfolds as we grow. This has two kinds of problems. First, we have the impatience to catch up with the world, so we are always worried about our speed. Second, we fear that the idea may not unfold as it is envisioned, and since we don’t have any examples we find ourselves ill-equipped to deal with the problems that may be presented during the process. But still it presents a worthy alternative that needs to be given a fair trial.

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