

Reconstructing Contents and Methods of Teaching for Dalit Children

The Background

This project emerged out of the several processes that Deshkal Society has initiated in recent years particularly in the field of education and development at large. Our journey began with research and documentation of the Musahar community who are often referred to as 'Dalits among Dalits' and occupy the bottom rung of society in the middle Gangetic plains. Descendants of a Chotanagpur tribe, the Musahars are scattered all over the paddy-growing areas, providing the so-called unskilled labour. In this regard our work on culture and development made us to understand that the reality of the Musahar community was generally being captured from a position outside of that reality. The realization was not simply that development had failed

Musahars, but that mainstream perspective of development was profoundly alien to the native perspectives of Musahars. In the process we had to unlearn to look development from the lens of the Musahar community. We became aware that it was only from the mainstream perspective of development that the Musahar community looked backward and stagnant.

Similarly, our engagement with establishing an agenda for Dalit Studies began with another contemporary challenge that higher education in India is facing with respect to teaching and learning about Dalits. We realized that even though considerable research existed on Dalit communities, what had been so far lacking was a perspective from which that literature might be integrated into education. There seems to be a continuous and calculative silence with regard to Dalits in literature, social science subjects etc. We have been engaged in developing a new perspective called Dalit Studies- both as an autonomous discipline and as a critique-cum-restructuring of existing disciplines of Social Sciences and Humanities. Our purpose has been to intervene in the system of higher stud-



ies in order to sensitize it to the Dalit issue, and our initiatives in this regard through workshops, seminars and discussions have succeeded in generating interest and ample support from academia, media and policy makers. With our persistent efforts in this direction, we have been able to develop M.A. level syllabi of Ancient Indian History, Modern Indian History and Hindi. The experience and lessons gained during these initiatives prompted us to take up this research and documentation project on Reconstructing Contents and Methods of Teaching for Dalit Children with financial support from IDPAD programme at ICSSR, New Delhi.

Purpose of the Project

Experiences gathered from our previous initiatives and the critical review of our own work led us to ponder as to why contemporary education fails to comprehend and confront with the existing social reality. We started with our modest effort to construct a teacher's manual on primary education with a Dalit perspective. Much to our surprise, we found that grass root reality of public schools in rural and semi-urban townships had drastically changed, and we were confronted with the following basic questions in this regard:

- Is contemporary school education successful in fulfilling expectations of Dalit communities?
- How far have the schools in villages been sensitive in dealing with the impediments encountered by Dalit children who have been excluded from formal education historically?
- Are schools in villages successful in reducing social distance between children of different communities?
- Is the contemporary school system capable enough to produce self-confidence among Dalit children and in building their capacities to avail newer opportunities that comes with education?
- How have the schools been changed by the increasing participation of Dalit children?

Given the complexities surrounding the issue of educating the children of oppressed communities, the key objec-



tive of our research and documentation was – i) to develop a perspective of school education with the framework of pluralism and diversity; and ii) to develop strategies to translate this perspective in actual classroom practices.

The Findings

The research and documentation on the children of Musahar community conducted during the project indicate that school as an experimental space offers myriad possibilities of institutionalized mechanisms to shape both cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes. The central question that arises here is what is to be done to make school education liberative and emancipatory in

the Indian context? A conspicuous common understanding that has emerged from this research project is that at one level it is a creative engagement with reconstructing a perspective that places more emphasis on helping students to gain better understanding of oppression and inequality and ways in which social problems can be eliminated. Such a perspective to pass the litmus test of plural ethos of Indian society will inadvertently require maintaining an ideal balance between the recognition of legitimacy of the multiplicity of values on the one hand and the necessity of maintaining the coherence of a democratic society on the other.

In terms of pedagogic practices, the experiences gathered during the project point to the need to focus on complexities and conflicts inherent in all people's experiences and identities, but especially on those salient to people who have been oppressed. Such practices will lead to flourishing of what is called as "culture of dissent" which involves creating public cultures of dissent where issues can be debated in terms of proposed pedagogies and institutional practices. What is at stake here is not mere recognition of difference. Similarly, the point is not simply that one should have a voice; the more crucial concern is what sort of voice comes forth as a result of one's location, both as an individual and as a part of collectives. Besides, the culture of dissent must work to create pedagogies of dissent rather than pedagogies of accommodation. Such efforts will require going beyond the naïve principles of "unity in diversity" towards an understanding of the more definitive pedagogic framework and practices that is needed to reshape and eliminate entrenched patterns of exclusion and oppression.



During our engagement with this research project we were also able to understand that to achieve these normative goals, building a perspective and developing methodologies will require radical shifts in the relationship between school and community. Education being more of a social process than as an outcome will definitely require invoking the traditional roles of community in constructing a powerful and democratic set of mechanisms for radical social transformations. We strongly felt that participatory mechanisms organically emerging out of collective processes will facilitate the process to reconstitute the participation as subjects, as historical actors where participants are not only implementing rules but are part of the historical experiment of reconstructing knowledge. Further such mechanisms will also open new channels to problematize the issues encountered in everyday life and reflect on collective solutions thus paving the way for creation of an active citizenry—one that learns from its own experiences and culture—not just for now but also for future generations.