

Reconstructing Contents and Methods of Teaching for Dalit Children

Background:

This project is the outcome of several processes that Deshkal Society has initiated in recent years particularly in the field of education and development at large. Our journey began with the research and documentation of the Musahars 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 Musahar reality is being captured from a position outside of that reality. The realization was not simply that development has failed, but that mainstream perspective of development is profoundly alien to 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 is only from the mainstream perspective of development that Musahar community looks 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 exists on dalit communities, what has been so far lacking is a perspective from which that literature might be integrated into education. There seems to be a continuous and calculative silence maintained with regard to Dalits in literature, social science subjects etc. We engaged in developing a new perspective called Dalit Studies- both as an autonomous discipline and as a critique-come-restructuring of existing disciplines of Social Sciences and Humanities. Our purpose has been to intervene in the system of higher studies in order sensitize it to dalit issue. This experiment has succeeded in generating interest through our workshops, seminars and discussion drawing ample support from academia, media and policy makers. In this direction based on our persistent efforts we have been able to develop M.A. level syllabi of Ancient Indian History, Modern Indian History and Hindi.

Aim:

Experiences gathered from our previous experiments and in our own critical review of work lead us to ponder about 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 of primary education with a Dalit perspective. Much to our surprise we found that grass root reality of public school in rural and semi-urban townships has drastically changed and in this context we confronted with these basic questions:

- Is contemporary school education successful in fulfilling expectations of Dalit communities?
- How far schools in villages been been sensitive in dealing with the impediments that Dalit children encounter 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 capacities to exploit newer opportunities that comes with education?
- How schools have been changed by the increasing participation of Dalit children?

Given the complexities surrounding around the issue of educating the children of oppressed communities the central aim objective of our research and documentation in the whole process we could understand as—one developing a perspective of school education with the framework of pluralism and diversity and—two developing strategies to transform this perspective in actual classroom practices.

Conclusion:

From our research and documentation involving the children of Musahar community during the project we could positively conclude 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 out

this research project is that at one level it is a creative engagement with reconstructing of 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 at on one hand and the necessity of maintaining the coherence of a democratic society on the other.

In terms of pedagogical practices experiences gathered during the project we should take note of the fact that it needs to focus on complexities and conflicts inherent in all people's experiences and identities, but as especially salient to those of 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 proposed pedagogies and institutional practices. We have understood that what is at stake 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 that comes 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 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 pedagogical framework and practices that is needed to reshape and eliminate entrenched patterns of exclusion and oppression.

Similarly, during our own engagement with research and development in the project we could also able to understand that to achieve the normative goals of both of these two- 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.