



Sustainability and Education: Restoring Dignity of Communities in the Classrooms and Beyond

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ABSTRACT

The sustainable development goal#4 speaks of “ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”. In the course of the pandemic, a 2021 survey report (covering 1400 children in classes 2 -8 across 15 states) stated that that only 8 per cent of the children in rural areas and 24 per cent of children in urban areas seemed to studying online regularly in the country, so it is all the more pertinent that we examine what do we mean by equitable education in a pandemic ravaged world? This paper primarily examines the sustainable aspects of the National Education Policy 2020. In doing so, the paper argues that the provision of vocational education (the concept of “bagless days” in schools) can be located within the broader ambit of SDG4 in particular SDG 4.3 that speaks of vocational education. In formulating this, one can attempt to reconcile community centric learning practices and indigenous knowledge with modern day curriculum. In this regard, particular attention is paid to the fishing communities in the state of Kerala. By taking a case study approach, the paper argues that it is only by educating keeping the indigenous knowledge of the communities at the center of the broader educational system – particularly of those communities who have a peaceful co-existence with nature - that we can envisage a right to education that is premised on right to life with dignity. A mixed methods approach is used in the paper combining qualitative methods such as ethnography in the coastal village of Munambam in Kerala and quantitative metrics such as the basic statistical indicators that the UN has set out as metrics to measure progress with respect to SDG 4. Finally, the framework of “doubly engaged ethnography” by Pacheco-Vega and Parizeau [1] is examined, which this paper argues is relevant for social work practitioners and educators who work with vulnerable populations so that we move beyond deficit narratives.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Re-building Lives and Values

In her remarkable essay written at the peak of the pandemic, 'Pandemic is a portal' writer Arundhati Roy speaks of the need for the imagination to consider the pandemic as a portal-as a way to "to break with the past and imagine the world anew" [2]. In this pursuit of re-imagination and re-building that we need to undertake, there can be no better road map than that of sustainable development.

The idea of sustainable development was first conceptualized in the Earth Summit at Rio de Janeiro, Brazil with Agenda 21 being set, the objective being that there is a need to comprehensively cover aspects of human effects on the environment and ensure inter-generational equality. This was followed by the formulation of Millennium Development Goals – a set of 8 goals that 178 countries sought to achieve by 2015. However, it was evident that there is indeed greater disparity than ever and there is need for a more exhaustive framework and goals to ensure equity in a world marked by extreme distress and inequality. Further, there was the need to acknowledge more fully, than ever, the effects of human intervention on the environment – an aspect that many felt did not receive adequate emphasis in the MDG. The United Nations sought to fill this was the gap with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) [3].

The sustainable developments goals provided the concrete roadmap to attaining the sustainable development. As a document it is important to note that it is not only set out a vision, but also concrete implementation strategies. Indicators of achieving each goal is clearly laid and periodic assessments are done by the countries to ensure their commitment to the Sustainable Development. Perhaps most noteworthy are the 5 Pillars (or 5 Ps) associated with SDG – People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership. In keeping this in mind, the 5 Ps, the overarching objective of human-nature interdependence is brought to the fore, as is the fact that, we need to cognizant of the need for not only material wealth but need to value how we can achieve it with peacefully by building partnerships across all sector and regions. Most

importantly the fact that we can never forget that people and the planet work together in sync and we cannot continue on the path of reckless pursuit of narrow goals like Gross Domestic Product or National Income.

The 17 goals are intrinsically important, without doubt, but this paper focuses on SDG 4 set out the objective to "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all." Ten different targets are set out with accompanying indicator(s) for each target to ensure the ambitious goal is achievable.

What sets apart the SDG 4 is perhaps the value placed on the people at their best capabilities. In prioritizing education as a SDG, the instrumental and inherent values of learning are being prioritized. Both the aspects will be examined in the paper. However, it is important to begin with examining the current state of the education in the country and why it is a matter of grave learning crisis that the future generation is facing?

In the course of the pandemic, 'Locked Out: Emergency Report on School Education' a survey report that covered 1400 children in classes 2 -8 across 15 states across the country, pointed out that only 8 per cent of the children in rural areas and 24 per cent of children in urban areas seemed to studying online regularly in the country. Even as experts pointed out to the severe learning loss that is inevitable as schools remained closed for over 17 months in the country, the crisis seldom gained space in the discussions that occurred in the corridors of power. The United Nations has pointed out the across the world, 20 years' worth of gain in education has been wiped out with an additional 9 per cent or 101 million children in classes 1-8 falling below proficiency level in reading alone. In India, the learning loss of the country's 230 million children is simply enormous; with 82 per cent children in the class 2-6 (based on a sample of 16 thousand children from over 1100 public schools across 5 states) showing loss of one specific mathematical ability from the previous year [4]. To put it succinctly and without exaggeration, we are facing, without a doubt, the biggest learning crisis of our lifetime. While this is not unique to India, it is important that the specific context of the inherent inequalities in the country, based on caste, class, gender and

region of domicile, there is a compounding of the magnitude of the crisis.

With keeping the intersectional nature of inequality in mind, the paper attempts to provide a preliminary analysis as to how existing policies particularly - the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 can help us tackle the issue. For this purpose, the paper primarily examines the sustainable aspects located within the NEP 2020. In doing so, specific attention is paid to the provision of vocational education and how the vocational education can, when implemented, holistically, assist in bridging the issue of learning loss as well as impart a community centric learning approach in our schools. The broader aspect of community centric learning – although not stated explicitly in the SDG 4 is embedded in the 5 pillars of Sustainable Development – specifically if we take the pillars of people, planet and partnership. This aspect is also reflected in the analytical framework of doubly engaged ethnography, the proposed method of how to work with vulnerable communities without relying on the deficit models whereby the marginalized communities are portrayed as lacking (without education/illiterate, without health/unhealthy etc) ignoring in the process the structural factors of oppression. In taking the doubly engaged ethnographic framework, there is an acknowledgement of power and privilege and most importantly the dignity of the community and individuals are taken in to consideration which makes the process truly inclusive. It in that same spirit, that educators and activists have asked for a compassionate approach when the schools re-open and children return to classroom, that the school authorities equip themselves so that they can cater to the need at the current level of learning of the children i.e., at the level where they (children) are rather than where they are supposed to be.

Given the inequality existing in the society, the issues faced by the fisher community provides ample scope to highlight problems within the existing paradigm of development in the state of Kerala, India. In the context of the paper, the possible role of education is explored to mitigate inequality (that has worsened due to the pandemic). In this endeavor, focus on the role of vocational education as envisaged in the National Education Policy is examined. While there is a rich literature on the role of education in building human capacity, there remains gap as to what can be the way moving forward in the specific context of the pandemic. Vocational

education keeping in mind the differing needs of the communities such as the fisher communities can help in overcoming not just inequality but also to ensure that education is imparted with dignity. In doing so, the possibility of using doubly engaged ethnography is attempted in the paper.

1.2 Organisation of the Paper

Following the introduction, the methodology is discussed briefly after which the situation of education – particularly schooling, is discussed. This is followed by examining the concept of vocational education and the specific features of the National Education Policy 2020 that can be made use of in order to charter a path of equitable learning and outline a sustainable path to education. The case of the fishing communities in the state of Kerala is taken up for closer examination in this aspect and the potential of developing a framework is explored in the concluding section. Within this, the methods of imparting community centric learning are explored through looking at the analytical framework of doubly engaged ethnography as developed by Pacheco-Vega and Parizeau [1].

2. METHODOLOGY

The methods used in the paper follows a mixed approach with relying on statistical surveys such as Annual Status of Education Report by the Pratham Foundation (referred to as ASER various issues) – for the years 2006-2016 for decadal comparison and 2021), Locked Out: Emergency Report on School Education (the report has been referred to as 'Locked out' throughout the paper), as well as statistics from the Transforming Education for Sustainable Futures survey by Indian Institute of Human Settlements titled 'Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on Education, Livelihoods and Health' (the report has been referred to as 'Batra et al. [5]' throughout the paper), to understand the situation during and immediately following the pandemic for the years 2020-2022.

Among the surveys, Locked out was carried in 15 states and Union Territories, data being collected from deprived hamlets across 1362 households, with nearly 60 per cent of households being from Schedules Caste/ Scheduled Tribe communities and 60 per cent sample households residing in rural areas. The survey was carried out in August 2021 (The definition of deprived has not been provided in the report).

The survey undertaken by Batra et al. 2021 covered three areas: Delhi, Bangalore and Trichy. Delhi as a site for exploring school education, Bangalore for higher education and Trichy for understanding the plight of the informal workers in the city. Considerable emphasis was also placed on the health- both physical and mental on the respondents.

The ASER and World Bank provide time series data that the paper has made use of. In addition to this, the paper also relies on ethnographic field notes prepared (as part of PhD dissertation field work) from a coastal village in central Kerala during the years 2018-2019. A semi structured interview schedule was used for gathering information and around 35 in depth interviews, 3 Focus Group Discussions and 2 group interviews were conducted. The use of quantitative and qualitative data thus generated, also helped in triangulation.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Education in India: A General Overview

Writing on the deconstruction of educational policy, Velaskar notes that the educational inequality in the Indian context has “historical, sociological and political significance” [6]. Therefore, it follows that the distinctions of caste, class, gender, religion region are reflected in the ideal and policies pertaining to education in India. However, this was a recognition evident in the Indian constitution whose makers set out to create the principles by which the inequalities can be mitigated through the role of state. But it was only in 2009 that the Right to Education (RTE) was recognised as the fundamental right of all citizens and a duty of the state to provide free and compulsory education to all the children aged 6-14 years.

3.2 Education as Good: Nature and Provision

Here, it is also important to recognise that the nature of education that makes it the duty of the state beyond that of the (extremely significant) social justice perspective. For this, the nature of education as a public good or rather, more accurately as a *merit good* needs to be brought to the fore. Public economists term education as a merit good which has two distinct features:

- 1) It is impossible to recover the costs of consuming the good/partaking in the service

provided without investing an optimum amount – an option that is not exercised by any private good/service provider given how high the initial cost can be. Further, even if there is the possibility of recovery, the gestation period/ the time period is extremely long and spread out across decades if not more

- 2) The benefits of consuming/partaking are not enjoyed by the individual alone but rather is reflected across all individual and the society in general i.e., there is a spill over of benefits

These features fundamentally change the economics of provision of education – i.e., the shift from an individual welfare to social welfare view point which is exactly why there is a need (from a social justice point of view) for the state to engage in the sector [7]. This social centric view point hints that the benefits accruing from an educated person is not restricted to that person alone, but rather has far ranging benefits to the society as well. In speaking of this, one should keep in mind that the benefits are often beyond that of employment, (an important benefit, without doubt) for example, a greater civic mindedness and forming an informed citizenry.

In the case of India, in particular, even as private players show interest in investing in education, the scale at which the activity needs to be undertaken (the entire population, to be precise) is simply beyond their scope. Further, marked by extreme inequalities, the state needs to step up. While this has been largely understood, the Indian education is wrought with several issues – beginning with the inadequate state provision for education as reflected in the budgetary statements over the years. In fact, in 2020-21 the union budget outlay for education showed a 6 per cent reduction, a move many economists and engaged citizens point out, will further worsen the unequal situation.

Accompanied by the low investment by the state in education (less than 3 per cent of the budget outlay) perhaps not surprisingly, issues of quality of education imparted remain. This has been pointed out almost consistently in the Annual Status of Education Report brought every year since 2006 by Pratham Education Foundation. Keeping in mind, these are children who go to school regularly or at least semi – regularly, the decade 2006-2016 data showed that reading levels were abysmal with 53.1 per cent children in class 5 and 83.8 per cent children in class 8

being able to read at the level of children in class 2 in 2006 and further, this dropped to 43.8 per cent and 73 per cent respectively. The situation is similar for basic operations in mathematics (ASER, 2016). The ASER further points that there is an important consideration that needs to be taken into account, the fact that many of the school going children in the said period (2006-2016) were first generation learner which means further vulnerability as teaching levels and learning levels drop in the classrooms with little to no scope of complementary learning possible at home. Over the past two years, with an estimated 230 million children being out of school, one can only imagine the learning loss incurred for this specific cohort of children.

3.3 Surveys and Statistics in the Pandemic Times

From a survey of 1362 households, it was reported that only 28 per cent children in rural areas were studying regularly. When the question is further narrowed down, to online learning, the figure is just 8 per cent children who are able to study regularly. If one were to see the case of rural SC/ST children, 4 per cent of children were able to study regularly. Where children are reported to be studying regularly, the resort has been towards private tuitions- to which access is again determined based on family income (Locked Out, 2021).

Lack of access to smartphone was a crucial issue with 49 per cent households in rural areas reporting that they have no access to a smart phone, with the corresponding figure being 55 per cent households in the case of SC/ST communities. In rural areas, 42 per cent of children in grades 3-5 were unable to read a single word of the simple test sentence and 45 per cent of the SC/ST children were able to read more than few letters. This has happened even as the government – both central and state- have made commitments to scale the use of digital technologies in classrooms relying on Ed tech platforms. Thus, the pandemic has shown how an already unequal system has continued to be even more so.

There are also worrying instance of discrimination. For example, the Locked out report points to the open case of casteist remarks on the utility of educating the Dalit children were made by at least one teacher in Jharkhand. (Locked out 2021: pp.21) the question asked was “Who will be available to

work in the fields?” This points to the existence of barriers not just of entry into these (educational) spaces but also of the continuing practices of discrimination that occurs even as children from marginalised communities’ gains entry.

While these issues have always been inherent in a caste-based society such as India, the learning loss along with return to caste based social norms will be a strong deterrent for the children of the marginalised households to return to school and continue education without being pushed out by discriminatory attitudes.

While this is the present scenario of in group differences in education, if we were to compare the pre lock down scenario taking into Census 2011 statistics, we can understand “the loss of progress” that has occurred among the disadvantaged communities. For example: the illiteracy rate in the survey sample of 39 per cent for children in the age group 10-14 in the SC/ST households is to be contrasted with the illiteracy of 9 percent which was the figure reported for the children in the same age group according to Census 2011. So, one can conclude that there has been a serious regression in terms of the educational achievements of the most marginalised sections.

From the discussion above, it can be concluded that we are facing – globally as well as nationally an unprecedented learning crisis and therefore we need to pay attention to the tools and techniques that perhaps help us bring back not only children to the classrooms but also ensure dignity in the classrooms so that we develop a more equitable classroom and society. I turn to one such possible tool that has been in existence in the higher education curriculum but was brought closer to the schools via the national education policy NEP 2020: vocational education.

3.4 Vocational Education

Vocational education has been a consistent part of the higher education scenario in the country. Institutionalized since the Education commission headed by D S Kothari from 1964-1966, VE was considered as the panacea to the issue of unemployment, to the educational crises in not just India but also developing economies in South Asia like Pakistan and Bangladesh with Sri Lanka having policies starting as early as the 1930s [8] In India, even before its

institutionalization, Mahatma Gandhi advocated for what came to be known as the Wardha scheme. The Wardha scheme advocated during the All India Educational Conference in 1937 stood for eliminating the distinction that it considered to be artificial between physical and mental labour as well as strongly advocating for doing away with the inferior status associated with many forms of physical labour followed on the basis of the caste system [8-10] However, the institutionalization of VE through narrow focus and on the basis of poor implementation led to a segregated approach to schooling with distinct differences in the attitude towards those who preferred VE to the mainstream education. The latter was the better funded (though still below recommended level) and better maintained system and VE continued to be regarded as the inferior option. However, one can clearly see that with the unemployment rate being the highest in the last twentyfive years, followed by the increasing precarity brought out by the pandemic has again brought to the fore the so-called inferior alternative, “vocational education” This needs to be considered as one of the most important contributions of the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020).

The focus of this paper is on the aspect of bagless days as has been recommended in the NEP 2020 and how this can be a feature that is embedded within the broader ambit of SDG4 in particular SDG 4.3 that speaks of vocational education. In formulating this, one can attempt to reconcile community centric learning practices and indigenous knowledge with modern day curriculum. To illustrate this more clearly, the case of fisher communities in Kerala, India is taken in this paper.

3.5 Fisher Communities in Kerala, India: Outlier

The state of Kerala is renowned for its achievements in the field of the social development most particularly in the field of education and health even at relatively lower levels of per capita income. The development experience – in effect a strong public investment in education and health – came to be known as the Kerala model of development. As an illustrative case study, the experience of Kerala and other relatively poor but socially well-off places, challenged the conventional wisdom that was the mainstay in Economics of public investments hoping to increase the income of the people and then the social indicators would be

gradually increasing. Further, this pointed at how the state can directly intervene to provide services to its citizens placing their welfare at the center of all decisions and still economic growth could be guaranteed. Thus, a welfare distributive approach could be the more equitable alternative to the traditional income generating model as had been considered in the mainstream policy circles. It must be mentioned here, that the Kerala development experience was relatively egalitarian owing to not just state policies but rather the equal pressure exerted on the state by the people who demanded the welfare as their constitutional rights. The rights language as has been used is crucial to the context of state provision. This is also reflected in the Right to Education, the Right to food campaign. It is important that as citizens that these remain integral to our civic consciousness because it is the entirely antithetical to the concept of individual’s ability to pay for a service or good and the ability to pay determining the right to enjoy the service or good.

As had been mentioned in the section discussing the nature of good/service like education, the ability to pay is only possible within the market economy for a select number of goods called private goods which have the features of exclusivity – excluding those who do not possess the purchasing power from enjoying the good/service as well as rivalry – the feature by which as more is consumed by one person, the amount available for consumption for the next person is reduced considerably. When education is turned into a marketable commodity (the commodification of education) especially higher education, the existing inequality in the society gets reproduced in the sphere of education as well.

The Kerala development experience thus, came to lauded for its relatively inclusive nature and for recognizing the implications of the progressive state on the people (Parayil, 1996). However, it has also been pointed out that even within the development experience, there were exceptions and that few communities were relatively backward vis a vis other/general [11]. Among them the fisher communities are taken to be the focus of the research. Previous research has shown that the fisher communities in the state have been an outlier to the mainstream development in terms of the social and economic indicators [11-13]. Among this, education is a particularly stark indicator of the outlier status of the fisher community. The term outlier to the

Kerala model of development was coined by John Kurien in his 1995 article 'Kerala model: the central tendency and its outliers'. While there have been improvements, nevertheless, three decades after it was pointed out, the gaps in achievements remain. The structural factors underlying the exclusion have been to a large extent investigated thoroughly. However, missing in the discourses, particularly academic discourses, is the lack of respect accorded to the communities and how this has led to many withdrawing from the occupation. The idea of lack of respect or the shame and stigma associated with certain professions have been examined by scholars. However, within the fishing community, there are few of such studies. Martha Nussbaum in developing the central capabilities approach, building on Amartya Sen's work speaks of the need to live and perform work with other fellow beings with feelings of self-respect and non-humiliation. This paper argues that in bringing the idea of fisheries to the fold of vocational education, the most crucial element is that of getting rid of the stigma attached to the profession of fishing [14,15]. Although the brave rescue efforts during the floods of 2018 and 2019 can be considered as a crucial turning point as far as the perception of the fishing community is considered, however, there is a need to do more. The gap was again sadly evident when at the peak of the pandemic, the fisher communities and the resident of Chellanam, a coastal town in Ernakulam, Kerala were facing imminent danger from not only the pandemic but also the flooding [16] Further, even recent reports show that the struggles of the fishing hamlets against corporate finance greed, such as that happening in Adimalathura and Vizhijam, often fall on deaf ears or equally, cruelly, are dismissed as the price that is required to be paid for 'development' [17-19].

While fish continues to be an important constituent of diet and the fishing community is yet to claim their importance in the mainstream Malayali society. Therefore, there is the separation of the commodity from the community that labours to produce. The lack of dignity was perhaps most evident during the flood of 2018 when the fishermen while rescuing the stranded people were treated as untouchables [20].

In taking the issue specifically about vocational education, scholars have identified potential for offering fisheries as a vocational subject- this has been especially encouraged with respect to aquacultural activities [21] in accordance with

this, combined with the objective of modernization of the fisheries sector, regional technical schools were set up in 1968 that offer of 100 merit scholarships to children of fishermen. While the Regional Fisheries Schools were sought after, the conditions continued to worsen over time with fewer children from fisher families opting for the residential options provided in these technical institutes [22].

It has been pointed out, that while these were successful in providing education to the students, the educated fisherman remain an elusive character meaning that with the increase in education, people seldom continue to take up fishing as a vocation. This was a sentiment that echoed during the fieldwork.

As Sebastian, a 60 year old fishermen who is the third generation fisher in his family, recounted:

"There is no way, my children will take up fishing... they are all educated. I made them so, so that they did not have to struggle like I am even at this age..besides, there is no fish in the water left for them!" (Fieldnotes, 2019).

Thus, education is seen as the opportunity to exit the profession and the current generation of fishermen are likely to be the last generation of small scale fishermen. It is important to note that even as the regional fisheries schools celebrated their golden jubilee in 2018, there are fewer students than ever before and perhaps the time is right to re-imagine these spaces of learning. The concept of vocational education has been largely restricted to few activities even as fisheries provide an attractive opportunity. Santhakumar et al, 2018 point out that conceptualising of fisheries as an academic subject can perhaps serve as a useful mechanism. Fisheries as an academic subject can be taught and fisheries as a pedagogical tool can be envisioned to learn other subjects eg: navigation, geography, ocean science.this is in addition to skills such as deep sea diving [23,24]. Most importantly, the sustainable aspect of small scale fisheries can be brought to the fore using the vocational education and the concept of bagless days as mentioned in NEP 2020. This also translated into involving personnel from the fisher community.In addition to help preserve intangible heritage of community knowledge, especially if they are the last generation likely to be involved in fishing, there is also the important aspect of dignity that can be accorded to the communities – a recognition that is long overdue to this 'outlier' community. In understanding and

focusing on community centered learning, especially in the coastal states of the country, the issues pertaining to the natural resources too can be highlighted. As communities who are the most susceptible and vulnerable to climate change, the knowledge of these communities can be crucial in the preservation of species and in building a world that does not center around the people alone. This would be a true realisation of sustainable development involving the pillars of people, planet and partnership.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The paper, is an attempt to re-iterate the fact that it is important to recognize that as we dealt/deal with the aftermath of the pandemic and the uncertainties of livelihoods, we are perhaps heading towards a unprecedented learning crisis in the schools across the country as well as world. In recognizing this, we need to be cognizant of the differential learning abilities of the children in the school and young adults in the colleges, alongside the intersections of caste, class, religion, gender and region of domicile. It is important to restore confidence among the young pupils as well as make use of this situation to radically alter the education for the better.

In this radical alteration, the paper argues that the framework of “doubly engaged ethnography” by Pacheco-Vega and Parizeau [1] can be considered and adapted to suit the contexts of learning. The framework can be relevant for social work practitioners and educators who work with vulnerable populations so that we move beyond deficit narratives and we recognize dignity as being among the central the capabilities that Martha Nussbaum argues for [25].

In breaking down the framework, Pacheco-Vega and Parizeau outlines three important considerations to be kept in mind:

1) Positionality: In dealing with positionality, one needs to be cognizant of the various levels of identification that are of relevance in the field/classroom as well as outside of the setting. When communities are engaged in learning environments, one needs to be cognizant of the different role the educator has to take. For example, similar to when research is undertaken with marginalized communities, the researcher always faces the issue of being an insider/outsider. While it is extremely difficult to prescribe, each

situation requires careful ethical analysis on an ongoing basis. Positionality, of course, needs to be accompanied by reflexivity, and classrooms can be a great place to begin thinking of power dynamics. Pacheco-Vega and Parizeau notes that ethnographers such as Carole McGranahan argue for developing “ethnographic sensibilities” even without being in the ‘field’ [26,27] and there is no reason why we cannot begin developing this through vocational education in the schools.

2) Engagement versus exploitation: it is of utmost importance that as communities are engaged in the producing and imparting knowledge through vocational education, there is freedom and flexibility in the exchange of information and ideas involved. For example, due credits are given to the communities, proper citation practices especially when work is presented outside classroom setting as well as acknowledging oral and literacy traditions inherent to the community [28] In addition, to this, engagement with communities must take place over a period of time, giving enough time to set relationships that are balanced. Given that vocational education can be begun through school, as has been proposed in NEP 2020, there is ample opportunity to explore and establish balanced relations with communities’ who are willing to share the knowledge.

3) Representation: Finally, and perhaps most significantly, it is important to ask question on how do we represent communities that are extremely vulnerable within the classrooms as well expose children and young adults to communities in distress? Specifically, each community has their traditional knowledge as well as practices associated with their vocation. For example, in many of fishing communities where the field visit was conducted, women were not actively part of the process of fishing. On further enquiry, both caste and religious practices where important in determining this gendered division of labour. Therefore, when fishing communities explain their practices, how do educators engage in the question of division of labour while not being guilty of propagating a caste and gender-based division of labour? These have to be tackled being cognizant of the fact that the socially embedded practices can be equally imbalanced, simultaneously ensuring that communities do not become represented as “backward” or “primitive”

In outlining the three ethical issues while engaging with communities, one is hopeful that as we deal with the learning crisis of our lifetime, we pay attention to the fact, that our existing systems and the core fundamental of education need to be revamped to be made more resilient and adaptable. It is worthwhile also to keep in mind that the word education traces its origin from the Latin word *educere* meaning to “set free”. In the process of freeing of the minds, we need to get rid of our own prejudices and inculcate a sense of dignity within and outside classrooms. Vocational education can provide a pathway of doing that and involving communities such as the fisher communities in the coastal states can perhaps be a way of restoring the ideal of democracy – from the classrooms and beyond.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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