



DIALOGING EDUCATION

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In conversation with Vivek Vellanki

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Why are we Dialoging Education?

Vivek Vellanki

Where we started

It was a cold winter morning in Delhi. Professor Poonam Batra and I met around the tables at the Regional Resource Centre for Elementary Education. As always, she added some extra coffee to her cup and I added some more sugar. In my hand were several copies of a short note. I had finally managed to put on paper the ideas for starting a podcast series on education. She gave the note a quick glance and asked me a few questions. With much excitement, she said, “Yes, we should do this!” Two weeks later, we were seated in the library at India Habitat Centre. Our first guest was Yusuf Sayeed. Against the dim sounds of Delhi traffic, we discussed education policy in South Africa. This was the beginning of Dialoging Education.

It has been over three years since we recorded our first interview. In this time we managed to conduct many more interviews. These conversations have been deliberate yet sporadic and spontaneous—recorded in office spaces, dining halls, homes, and some times in the back rooms of academic conferences. The text in this book doesn’t always capture this setting. Which is another way to say that these interviews are best served with the audio. We present these interviews in both formats, with the idea that each medium affords particular advantages. The transcripts allowed us to provide additional data, resources, graphics that supplement the interview. While the audio provides richness in context, presence,

and emotion that does not always translate into written texts. But before we go into the details of what is in this book, it might be useful to discuss why we started the series?

In several ways, public dialogue around education is limited in India. This is not to say that people are not talking about education. On the contrary, education is constantly being discussed: in living rooms, on buses, in offices, and on the street. However, the gap lies in creating opportunities for the general public to access the scholarship in the field. The last few decades have seen an array of rich scholarship in education, covering several key areas—curriculum,

pedagogy, schooling, equity, etc. We wouldn’t be wrong in assuming that this scholarship would enrich the conversations that are already taking place. At times by presenting a nuanced perspective and at other times presenting critical positions on general assumptions that the larger public holds.

This particular podcast series, Dialoging Education, is a humble attempt to bridge the gap and create opportunities for an enriched dialogue. The interview process seemed to be a method that would allow for a discussion of rich scholarship while presenting it within a conversational tone and style, potentially making it appealing to a wider audience. The use of audio was an attempt to present the

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“voice” of the scholars—in all its complexity and nuance. We continued to transcribe the interviews in order to use multiple mediums to convey the “same” message. In part because we wanted people to be able to choose the medium that speaks most to them. It is also an attempt to return to the textual, in a different way. We tried to break the linearity of text by including data, graphics, and images that add to the ideas in the text. We realize that this is not the only way. It is one of many possibilities. As we explore this possibility, we learn from the pioneering work of others and our own mistakes. Our hope is that this work speaks to you and that your comments, feedback and suggestions can enrich the process as we look to take this work forward.

What is in the book?

Now, a word about what is included in this book. The interviews included in this book have happened thanks to a mixture of spontaneity, co-incident, planning, and convenience. As I mentioned earlier, interviews have been recorded across the country and in several locations. We made the best of the small budget and the tiny but brilliant team that we had. The generosity of each of the interviewees included here has been the most important factor for this work seeing the light of day. However, there is another factor that binds these interviews together. A common thread weaves together the series and also the work of the scholars included here. This is the focus on equity, social justice, and democracy. While we stay close to these issues and the questions they bring with them, the interviews will make clear that we do not present a common/singular idea on these issues. The ideas discussed here are sometimes in agreement with one another and at other times, they stand in contradiction. In certain instances, you will notice a perspective that shifts the frame drastically. We stay with this plurality and complexity while being grounded in questions of equity, social justice, and democracy in relation to education.

The interviews and this book are divided into four themes. In schools and teachers in

“A common thread weaves together the series and also the work of the scholars included here. This is the focus on equity, social justice, and democracy.”

neoliberal times, Dave Hill sets out a provocative discussion on the ways in which teachers can be dangerous to the status quo. Poonam Batra provides an overview of teacher education in India and discusses pioneering programs that are pushing the thinking on teacher preparation. Yusuf Sayeed presents a history of policy and practice in post-apartheid South Africa, while also drawing comparisons to India. Kiran Bhatti discusses the decision of the Rajasthan Government to close public schools and the repercussions this might have on the right of children to free and compulsory education.

The second theme of foregrounding the marginal begins with S Anand's discussion on BR Ambedkar's life and the persistence of caste based discrimination within educational institutions. Chayanika Shah presents insights on the relationship between gender and science, answering the question of “Where is the gender in Boyle's law?” Amman Madan reminds us about the myth of meritocracy and the need to move the conversation beyond merit. Jyotsna Jha deliberates on the relationship between poverty and education by drawing upon her extensive study on schooling conducted across India.

The third and final theme of rethinking education and childhood begins with the playful conversation with Arvind Gupta. He encourages science education that embraces engaging with the materials that we are surrounded by in our daily lives. Kamala Mukunda shares her insight on the relationship between education and psychology, bringing together her experience as a psychologist and as a teacher. Usha Mukunda argues for open libraries, which according to her can be radical spaces where everyone is welcome and conversations are abundant. Samina Mishra shares her pioneering work in film and art that challenges dominant narratives of childhood.

As this compilation is put out, we realize that it is a small yet significant step for Dialoging Education. However, we take no credit for “starting” the dialogue. This series is only an attempt to continue the dialogue, to move it further, to share the

pioneering work of scholars in a different form. We hope that this works speaks to you. We encourage you to share your comments, feedbacks, and suggestions with us. This conversation will help us improve Dialoging Education and to build a series that speaks to you and to the issues in education.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge the efforts of several people that make such work possible. The leadership and insight of Professor Poonam Batra has guided the growth and development of this series. Bharat

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Suri and Malvika Gupta worked tirelessly to ensure that the interviews were enriched with other data and images. Alex Nashcarr, Kim Fernandes, Sheetal Paul, Sonu Darnal, and Malvika Gupta carried out the unexciting but crucial work of transcription. Chintan Girish Modi, Kandala Singh, Malini Sood, Simran Luthra copy-edited the interviews with an eagle eye precision. Yogender Dutt has translated these interviews to Hindi while retaining their essence. Devolv Studio did the design and layout of the interviews. Itika Singh edited the audio interviews, making them a pleasure to listen to. Kriti Srivastava, Praveen and Ramjavan Pal, supported the series in myriad ways, all of which can't be named here. Thanks are also due to all those who supported, encouraged, and helped this work develop.

We hope you will enjoy reading these interviews and that they will push our dialogue on education.

Vivek Vellanki is currently a doctoral student in Curriculum, Instruction and Teacher Education at the College of Education, Michigan State University. These interviews were recording between 2012 and 2015 when he was a project officer at the Regional Resource Centre for Elementary Education (RRCEE), University of Delhi. His research interests include exploring transnational educational reform, critical theory, and examining caste, race, and gender in education. He can be reached at vivek.vellanki@gmail.com



Vivek Vellanki



Schools and Teachers in Neoliberal Times



EPISODE 7 APRIL 2014

'Teachers are dangerous to the status-quo'

In conversation with Dave Hill

Dave Hill is a university academic, an activist and a political leader all rolled into one. His scholarship has engaged with understanding and critiquing neo-liberalism, and its influence on schooling, teacher education and education policy. Noting the several changes that are taking place in education on a global scale, he argues that teachers are dangerous to the status quo. It is a provocative exhortation that might unsettle or inspire you. Either way, it is one that must be heard.

Vivek Vellanki (VV): *You have worn several hats over the course of your career. You have been a school teacher, an activist, a politician, contested the election at some point, and now you are a university academic. What brought you to education?*

Dave Hill (DH): What drew me to education was my experience, experiences of my family, and therefore of my class, which is working class. I was the only one in my family ever to pass the selective 11 plus exam which 20 percent of children in England pass. I was one of the small minority working class children who passed the exam. So I went to a grammar school, whereas my two brothers and all the boys and girls in the neighborhood went to what we call the secondary school. 70 odd percent of the population goes to the secondary school. At that time, I did not realize that seven percent also go to the elite private school. I had no knowledge of that in the neighborhood where I lived. So I was plucked out into a totally different type of schooling system. We had the uniform, my brothers did not; and we had a school library, my brothers did not. We had teachers with degrees; my brothers did not. We were

told that we should stay on in the school and take exams; my brothers were told no exams, and you leave school at the age of 15. You keep your nose clean, you work hard, and you get a job in a factory. So, from the age of eleven, I was very much aware. I have a twin brother. I am very close to him. We are not identical. And, in fact, both my brothers, like my father and grandfather, are carpenters. My path was very different. I saw those differences, and I became angry. I thought it was unfair. I did not become bitter or angry for myself, but I became angry and bitter looking at the conditions of my class as compared to the conditions of other classes.

Until I was 15, I had never heard of university. Somebody said that I was pretty clever, so I should think of going to the university. I always wanted to do something and I was always political. I joined the Labour Party in England on my sixteenth birthday. In those days, it was a good traditional social democratic party, with good redistributive policies. I was always politically active and, when I was at university, I wanted to do something which would serve my community, serve my class. And so what was there? I decided to become a teacher.

VV: And then you taught for two years?

DH: Well, my first job was in the poorest part of London, in Brixton, which is actually one of the main areas for immigrants. There were kids from the West Indies, from Portugal, from Malta, Cyprus, as well as kids from England. It was a very mixed community, and I was teaching the most difficult children. I taught there for two years and, while I was there, I was active in the union. We had some strikes, and even though I was getting very good results with the kids, the head teacher came to me and said, "Look, I have to tell you that, if you want a promotion, you are not getting it here." So that was the first job I was moved on from.

VV: But now you are at the university, you have written a lot on education itself, and your focus has been on class and on looking at capitalism. So how does one begin talking about neo-liberal capitalism? And how does it affect education?

DH: When I first started writing and talking about neo-liberalism, 15 to 20 years ago, you had to explain it to people. You had to tell people what neo-liberalism means, and what its impacts are. By now, I am at a very fortunate position. I go to very different countries, and I no longer have to explain what neo-liberalism is. People know neo-liberalism is privatization. People know that neo-liberalism is poorer working conditions, that it is precarious work with short term or zero-hour contracts. People know that under neo-liberalism, the boss is the administrative head. They know that there is no longer collegial, collaborative, democratic management. People know that under neo-liberalism, what the boss says is what happens. There is very little dialogue. People know that in neo-liberalism, it is repressive if you do not toe the line; you are in danger of losing your job; or of being sidelined; or of not being promoted. So what is neo-liberalism? It is the establishment of so called free-choice. But free choice of what and for whom? It is a restrictive choice.

And within that neo-liberal system, there is the degrading of the whole of the public sector, the whole of the public service. This affects education in very concrete ways.

What is happening in the USA and Britain (and if it has not happened yet in India, it will) is that the government is giving state schools to private corporations. They are still state schools and, as tax payers, we still pay for the education of our children, but the control of the school is taken away from the local democratic, elected council municipality, and is given to rich business men, to rich business women who have a chain of schools. Some organizations have a chain of some 37 schools. Stephen Ball writes a lot about this, in a book called Global Education Inc. Eventually these chains of schools, schools that our children go to, that our relatives teach at – these schools simply become parts of the portfolio of a transnational company to be bought and sold. And because they are privately run, they can just be closed down. There was a case in California, where there was a charter school, as they are called in the States. The school was making a loss for the company. The teachers and kids turned up one morning. The school was closed down. A school is supposed to be doing public service. What is the purpose of a private company? It is profit. How do you get profit? You get profit by reducing the wages and lowering the quality of working conditions of all the workers. That is actually how you get profit.

VV: In your work, you note that this process does not happen by itself. It is accompanied with the public denigration of teachers, denigration of public institutions and state run schools. This is happening a lot in India. In some ways, it is the signal for the onset of neo-liberal reforms in education. Is this a worrying sign?

DH: It is a common sign, as I have said. I have travelled a lot and spent a lot of time in the United States, in Greece, Turkey,



"Visual representation of Ken Robinson's Changing Education Paradigms (RSA Animate)"

Britain, also a little in Australia and in India. This is common, there is a list of what neo-liberalism tries to do, and how it does it. And what you have just quoted, the vilification, the denigration, the attacks on school teachers and doctors and nurses, and all public sector workers, the attacks on them—constructing a picture of them as lazy, overpaid, serving their own interest, and not the interest of the children—are very common.

But of course the attacks also take place at the material level, at the level of the working conditions of the teachers. So we see in India, as in England, teachers being dismissed in large numbers.

VV: *While a lot of critical scholars do focus a lot on schools, children, students, you have written about teachers. In your work, you do say the teacher becomes the natural target of neo-liberal capitalism. Why do you say so?*

DH: Now I think this can be exaggerated, and some writers do exaggerate the role of teachers. I think we must not underestimate the role of teachers. Teachers are dangerous for neo-liberalism, for the status quo. Perhaps they should be dangerous in all systems, because we never want static spaces; we never want simply the status-quo. And I say this about the communist society, the socialist society, just as much as I say that about capitalist society, a socio-democratic capitalist society or a neo-liberal socio-capitalist society. We must always have critique.

“Teachers are dangerous for neo-liberalism, for the status quo. Perhaps they should be dangerous in all systems, because we never want static spaces; we never want simply the status-quo.”

Why are teachers dangerous? The role of teachers is absolutely fundamental. To use some technical jargon, it is absolutely fundamental to the capital-labour relation, by which I mean it is absolutely fundamental to the perpetuation and continuation of capitalism. What does capitalism want schools to do? It wants schools to do two things. It

wants schools to produce labour power, that is to say skills, personalities and attitudes, in a tiered hierarchy, in a ladder. The capitalist states and the transactional capitalist class want little money spent on the education of the working classes, more money spent on the education of the supervisory managerial middle classes, and far more money spent on the education of the elites; so that is the first purpose of education under capitalism.

The second purpose of education under capitalism is—as Althusser talks about education being an ideological state apparatus—to produce ideologically quiet, subordinate, submissive citizens. This is not about the ruling class. They can be as critical as they want. This is for the mass of the population. So they are very happy if the working class only learns the basics as long as they learn not to make trouble. That is worrying.

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Coming to the role of the teacher, well, teachers are the facilitators of the production and the reproduction of labor power. Without teachers, the workers do not exist. Teachers are potentially dangerous. And in many cases, they are dangerous for capital. I wish we were more dangerous. That is because we can suggest, we can propose, we can illuminate, we can question, we can place in front of students from the age of five to the age of 25, alternative past utopias, alternative present utopias, and alternative future utopias. In other words, we can present different visions of the society, which says the workers should work, live, buy, consume, and die. But for people like us on the left, education is about a far fuller life.

Marx wrote about this in the Communist Manifesto. In fact, education is about a far fuller life, a life not devoted to individual self-gratification, although we all need to be happening to please ourselves. But a life which also has a large socio-solidaristic collective

community function. So that is why we are dangerous, especially us older ones, because we remember when things were like this—when the working class was strong enough, and was able to protect and propagate a different vision of what life should be like.

VV: *The re-orientation of the teacher has come with a lot more control over the teacher, a lot more rigidity. In your work, you also note that this is being made possible through changes to teacher education. The duration of teacher education has been decreasing for the last 20-odd years, with greater control on what is actually being taught. What has been the trend in England?*

DH: Well, I could have said exactly the words you have just said, you have perfectly summarized what has happened in teacher education in England. I started in teacher education in 1973. So I have been a teacher trainer. I have seen and I have lived through the changes, and sometimes been expelled from teacher education as too dangerous.

Things changed in 1992-93 in a very major way. All the regulations were changed. And till 1992-93, I would teach a lot of sociology of education, politics of education, philosophy of education; we would offer critique; there would also be liberal lectures and conservative lectures. Some of my comrades and I had a Marxist perspective. So, the students had a choice. In 1992-93, the government completely changed the regulations. Just about all sociology of education disappeared; there is actually no sociology of education now in British teacher training, there is actually no politics of education, there is actually no philosophy of education, no psychology of education. Now there is a long list of competencies or standards, and they are called different things in different countries. And these competencies have always a few commitments, a multi-diverse society and so on. So the curriculum has changed, the surveillance has changed, the location has changed, and also the duration has changed.

Four year degrees have almost disappeared. Now almost all degrees are for three years. It is called teacher training and not teacher education, so it is very symbolic. Teacher training is now de-theorized, de-critiqued, it is now simply skills training.

VV: *This is interesting because in India, recent policy documents and a lot of reports have been emphasizing improvements to teacher education, to increase the duration of the programmes, to locate them within the universities. But it is also a time of great tension because the neo-liberal influence of countries like the US, England and what is happening there is very perceptible. How does one critique it and how does one really challenge these opposing forces?*

DH: Well, a number of us try to critique it in our writing, especially writing on the Internet. For example, one of the articles that I have written has been downloaded 60 thousand times. In The journal for Critical Education Policy Studies some articles are read by 20 thousand, 30 thousand, 60 thousand; now that is not 60 million, that is not 600 million but it is not six and if you publish in the print journals then some articles are read by 20-30-40 people, and they cost a lot of money to buy which is why not many people read them.

We work at the ideological level, again I will make a distinction between ideological and material level; we work at the ideological level in our writings but also in our speeches, through our trade unions we criticize these things and through political meetings, public engagements, public lectures.

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And of course, in our jobs, in my lectures, a few others and I have tried to bring in these issues. This is not meant to sound heroic, but teachers in universities and schools are frightened. It needs brave comrades, it takes severe courage. It needs bravery. I know how some of your colleagues and comrades in India are being harassed and oppressed, and are in the danger of losing their jobs. As I said I go

to Turkey a lot, and I know that the left wing teachers and lecturers there are also under great threat, so it does take courage; but if people lead by example, then others become impressed, and say well, it is possible after all to bring in critique of these policies in our lectures. There is also the party political meeting. As well as public engagements and discussion like this one; this is where we sharpen our theory and our critique.

VV: So actually coming back to the idea that teachers are dangerous to the status quo, how do we reimagine teacher education and orient it towards equity and social justice? According to you what would such a teacher education programme be and do?

DH: I think we have to learn alternative analysis, perspectives, histories etc. so I think it has to be critical. I like how Henry Giroux speaks of teachers as 'transformative intellectuals', so I try to develop from that. I think that the curriculum of teacher education and where we place the students matters. We should place them in impoverished areas as well as in rich areas, sub urban areas, and we should also place them in alternative sites of learning like prisons and orphanages. They obviously need the practice in the schools but students need perhaps 50-60 percent of time actually in the university (or whatever forum, it can be under a tree) sharing experience, having discussions and lectures with professors and teachers.

I think a teacher should be the following; I am going to list now 5 or 6 words that guide my choice, and they decide on what should be on a teacher education programme. I think teachers should be first of all intellectuals, proud to be intellectuals. As Gramsci said, all people are intellectuals but teachers and professors have the luxury of being paid to have the job of being an intellectual. So, all teachers should be intellectuals. All teachers should be critical. And by critical, I actually would be quite bold here, I think we should teach Marxism, because for the rest of the social universe, they are living in capitalist pedagogy, they are living within the capitalist social world so I have no hesitation

in saying that all students should be taught Marxism, how to critique in Marxist terms. Teach them to critique in other terms as well; I am not a dictator, not an authoritarian. I believe people should have choice, but people are not given that choice, of fundamental change. They are given the choice between tweedle dum or tweedle dee; they are given the choice between color red, pink, or mauve all very close to each other. Never given a fundamental choice.

They [teachers] should be public intellectuals, now public means not just going home, watching the television and eating dinner at the end of every day. Public means standing up, in public meetings; it means joining the community association. It means joining trade unions, it means joining the protest movement when the police have killed

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somebody. So teacher should be critical, public, intellectuals and another word, transformative. We are there not just to hear our own voices. We are there to try to transform people's minds and lives. Now of course, to try and transform people's lives, to help people get skills, life skills, work skills, there is nothing wrong with that. We are training teachers, so we need to have teachers who have teaching skills but we also need to transform people's consciousness and to envision building a just society.



Dave Hill

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David Stanley Hill is a political and educational activist. In his long career he has taught in London's East End, at Tower Hamlets College in 1996–1997, and after that at the University of Northampton in between 1997 and 2010, where he was Professor of Education Policy. Since 2012 he has been Research Professor of Education at Anglia Ruskin University, Chelmsford, England, and pays regular visits to Athens, Greece, and Limerick, Ireland, and Ankara, Turkey. Hill writes from a classical Marxist perspective, focusing on issues of social class, the relationship between social class and 'race', neoliberalism, socialist education, and Marxist critiques of New Labour policy on schooling and teacher education.

Data and Image Sources:

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EPISODE 13 JULY 2015

Teacher Education in India: Past, Present, and Future Directions

In conversation with Poonam Batra

Teachers are expected to be know-it-alls and to maintain high moral and intellectual standards and yet there is little thought or discussion about how teachers themselves are taught and prepared. What are the institutions that perform this function? What is the nature of teacher education programmes? How have they changed historically? Poonam Batra has worked in the area of teacher education for over 20 years, teaching, designing new programmes and curricula and contributing at the level of state policy. In this interview she discusses the present state of teacher education, its importance, and its historical trajectory in India. Most importantly, at a time when teachers are being publically denigrated and a neo-liberal discourse is fast reducing education into a commodity, she shares with us the hopes she has for the future of the teachers.

Vivek Vellanki (VV): *How did you come to be interested in education? Is there a memory or experience that comes to mind?*

Poonam Batra (PB): Well, it actually goes back to my passion for children. Very early in life, I used to have questions in my mind as to why there are children outside our school who cannot come in and study. I think as I grew up, it was my passion for children—the desire to reach out to them—that transformed my thinking and approach towards this issue. When I specialised in clinical psychology at my master’s level, I found a very interesting niche (space) where I could reach out to people. It was a suicide prevention centre for adults called “Sanjeevni”

VV: *This is in Delhi.*

PB: Yes, this is in Delhi. While I was pursuing my master’s, I started volunteering at Sanjeevni and during this period I realised

that perhaps that was my calling—to try and reach out to those who are distressed psychologically. And, it is then that I wondered why we see so many people go through several stresses of life and breakdown, so to speak, and are not sort of integrated enough to take charge of their lives. I also felt that in order to address this problem, there was a need to get into education, to sort of pre-empt or rather address several of these issues—to make people more whole, more integrated, more positive in their dispositions. It is with these thoughts that I joined the Jawaharlal Nehru University to pursue research in education.

VV: *You first did your master’s in Psychology and then came into education. So, what was your initial area of work in education?*

PB: The Zakir Hussain Centre in JNU offered a very interesting basket of courses because the vision of the centre was to look at education from an inter-disciplinary perspective.

Consequently, we took courses in economics of education, sociology of education, psychology and history of education. During my MPhil, my research was on understanding children's thinking. I always had an activist-orientation and wanted to make a difference on the ground, so I abandoned research for about 10 years after that and I came back for my doctoral research much later, in 1989.



Prof. Poonam Batra

During those intervening years I also explored what Eklavya was doing in Madhya Pradesh. I visited them and got interested in the work they were doing in the field of science and social science education. Back then, they were just beginning a programme in primary education. I started working with them and that became my site of doctoral research. That's where I really got the opportunity to try out some of my ideas, my thinking on work with children. That led me to explore a whole range of issues. Following my stint at Eklavya, I also worked in Mirambika for some time in Delhi in the Aurobindo Ashram, a free progress school based on Sri Aurobindo's ideas. But I realised that the Madhya Pradesh government schools where Eklavya was working represented a much more complex and larger reality. I felt that that's where I should go, realising that you cannot engage with education without looking at the larger political, social and economic contexts.

VV: *In your work, you have consistently talked about transformer education. You have talked about four pre-requisites: access to schooling, adequate teaching-learning environment, appropriate school curriculum and an empowered inclusive teaching community. According to you, how have these been dealt with in India?*

PB: In my view, all these four have to be

addressed simultaneously for anything to really happen. As far as access to schooling goes, I mean physical access, it is something that India for the first time took on as a crusade only in the early 1990s i.e. post-NPE, 1986. Even then we did not address questions of socially equitable access and therefore, the second point, i.e., the need for an adequate teaching-learning environment becomes critical. In this context, both social and psychological access become important—are children really able to access learning? Because merely being present in the school does not mean that the children are learning. I think, to a great extent, we have been able to provide physical access, we can be proud of that, but I am not sure whether we have yet addressed the question of the teaching-learning environment and the question of social access adequately. We still have several issues to address within the classroom.

The appropriate school curriculum, the third point that you have mentioned, is something that we have managed to address extremely well ever since the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 came into being. We have a cutting-edge school curriculum framework; we have a cutting-edge set of school textbooks, which have been acclaimed internationally.

“If the teacher is kept away from curriculum design and engagement, then the teacher cannot become either empowered or even inclusive in her understanding and in her disposition while engaging with children.”

As far as your fourth point goes, even the NCF falls short of looking at the teacher as a partner in the whole process of designing and transacting curriculum. It does recognise the fact that curriculum is not just about subject-content, it is about the entire realm of teaching and learning processes, the context in which the curriculum is transacted; yet, it falls short of looking at the teacher as the critical link between curriculum and children. And, I think that's the question - the need for an empowered teaching-learning community, which I address as the fourth pre-requisite. If the teacher is kept away from curriculum design and engagement, then the teacher cannot become either empowered or even

inclusive in her understanding and in her disposition while engaging with children.

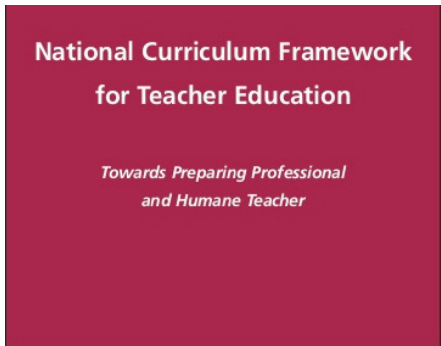
VV: *In your work you have drawn attention to several policy documents that have emphasised the need to focus on teacher education and for creating this empowered teacher community. The reality on the ground however is very different. Could you tell us a little more about this paradox and what that difference is?*

PB: Well, I would say it is a paradox or may be several paradoxes, and also, there are several layers in these paradoxes and they have changed form over the years. If we look at the post-independence period, it is true that there are several policy related documents, right from the Kothari Commission, that have stressed on the significance of educating teachers through long duration programmes connected with university life, as well as school life. One of the best commission documents I have looked at regarding teachers is the Chattopadhyaya Commission, which looks at the teacher and society.

The paradox here is that despite this profound policy articulation on the issue, there has been very little political will or initiative or even the resources for Government to be able to take this seriously and take it forward. There has always been this bureaucratic argument that we don't have enough resources and hence we cannot address the problem of teachers and their education. I think we need to understand this in a larger historical context of the early nation-building years. Perhaps we, as a nation failed to bring elementary or mass education on the agenda of the new state. Nehru was very clear that we need to set in motion processes that will lead to excellence in higher and technical education because we need to create a force of people who could take India towards industrialisation, modernity and so on.

The village schoolmaster was completely marginalised in this process because school education was not given priority. Consequently, the teacher actually got marginalised from the nation-building process itself. That's what I argue in my work. And later on, this paradox has, sort of, evolved into newer forms. For example, while the NPE 1986 had a separate, dedicated chapter on the need to revamp

teacher education, and this was finally cognised in a policy document, the task was never taken seriously in terms of action on the ground. And soon after, in early 1990's, we jumped into the economic reforms era. Here again, although the teacher and the entire school system did come into focus, with the social sector becoming a priority for the Government of India, the teacher was looked at, as an object of reform, rather than the education of teachers as a point of intervention, or the classroom as a point of intervention. The individual teacher became the target and therefore, the paradox is that while you chose to prioritise the overhauling of how teachers are prepared, in-effect the teachers were being given all kinds of in-service training to 'motivate' them as if that was the key problem. The problem actually was how they were being prepared; how they were not being prepared and what the gaps were.



National Council for Teacher Education
New Delhi

The NCFTE published in 2009 provided new directions for teacher education curriculum

So, those paradoxes have continued and we have added a few more to the list in recent years. The most recent paradox is a curriculum discourse that has unfolded through the National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (NCFTE), which is the teacher education curriculum framework. This is a very progressive framework, aligned very well to the NCF, 2005 and is

actually ready to take off. However, policy measures taken over the past couple of decades ever since reforms have entrenched deeper into the market, are antithetical to this curriculum discourse. That is the most recent paradox we are facing at the moment.

VV: *You have continuously referred to teacher education institutes being insular or stand-alone. What are you alluding to and how according to you has this affected the education of teachers?*

PB: Yes. This is something I feel very strongly about. Typically, teacher education institutes, even within the university, those that offer B.Ed., have no engagement with the larger University system. The majority of teacher education institutes are merely affiliated to a university. They are not even physically present within university campuses and that's what I mean by physical isolation. They are physically isolated from spaces of higher education where knowledge generation happens. Therefore, what I am trying to argue is that teacher education or teacher preparation is happening outside the systems of higher education and these are mere affiliations on paper; physical isolation has eventually led to intellectual isolation and that is the deeper problem. If you look at the elementary education sector, that's not even part of the university system. Elementary school teachers are prepared in state institutions, such as the DIETs¹, which are completely severed from sources of knowledge generation.

VV: *You are referring to the D.Ed and...*

PB: Yes, the D.Ed, diploma in elementary education, which earlier used to be one year junior basic training certification. Post-NPE, 1986, all teacher training at the elementary level is done through a two-year diploma programme offered by DIETs and private institutions. These have mushroomed all over the country in private spaces run by private actors and therefore, they are not even interested in forging any links with the university. Even the B.Ed institutes, more than 95% of them, are in the private sector²; they are merely affiliated to some far-flung universities. They have nothing to do with how departments function and how university faculty operates. The teacher educators in most of these

institutions actually never even participate in what are called refresher courses for the faculty of universities and undergraduate colleges. So, they have been left out of a university system; they usually do not get any of the benefits that university faculty receive. I would attribute this largely to the norms designed by the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) in the past. The NCTE norms have as a matter of policy expected teacher education institutes to remain exclusive and hence isolated from other institutes of higher learning; to have their own campuses, their own libraries, their own laboratories. In fact, these norms have even demanded a physical wall around them to maintain exclusivity!

So, I think it's the norms of this kind, obsessed with some kind of exclusivity for the teacher preparation institutes which has led to this isolation. What the NCTE and other policymakers did not realise is that teacher education and education per se is a meta-discipline and that you cannot do without engaging with multiplicity of disciplines. Having suffered this physical isolation for so long, the intellectual isolation of spaces of teacher preparation has become so entrenched that frontiers of knowledge within sciences, social sciences and other disciplines, could never be drawn upon to engage with the discourse of educating teachers.

VV: *How do you think this has affected teacher education programmes or the student teachers who are a part of this programme? What according to you is that gap?*

PB: Well, I think the gap is at several levels. One is the curriculum itself, because the curriculum has remained frozen in a certain period in time. In our country I would say, one can even make the claim that the B.Ed. and the D.Ed. curricula are frozen in colonial times. It is only now, very recently, that we have started some process of revisiting and redesign. This is one kind of isolation - that the teacher education curriculum is not informed by the frontiers of research in different disciplines.

The second kind of isolation happens at the level of teacher educators, those who teach and prepare teachers. They may be coming from several different disciplines and hence we

have psychologists, sociologists, and faculty with specialisations in science, mathematics and so on among our teacher educators; but they are not necessarily in touch with their own parent disciplines anymore. They may rarely engage with their parent disciplines, either by way of knowledge exchange, faculty exchange or any other way, but always as an individual initiative. For the majority of teacher educators, their understanding of their disciplines tends to remain frozen in time and continues to stagnate.

The third level at which isolation happens is when student teachers are in an exclusive physical environment, they never get the benefit of a corporate life of a larger university or an institute of under graduate study. They miss out on opportunities to attend public lectures, cultural activities, seminars, study sessions across disciplines that are part of university life. So much so that many of them wouldn't even have an understanding of what a university is all about.

VV: Interestingly, the Justice Verma Commission on Teacher Education (2012), which you were a part of, looked at some of these aspects and recommended certain changes that were to be made to teacher education. Could you tell us a little bit about some of the recommendations that have been made?

PB: This is the first time that a commission looking at teacher education has cognized several of these anomalies. This is also the first time that the Supreme Court had felt the need to intervene in the academic aspects of preparation of teachers apart from administrative concerns. The commission takes cognizance of several of the issues we have just talked about. So, the recommendations made by the Justice Verma Commission (JVC) are manifold.

The first is the recognition of the fact that more than 95 percent of teacher training institutes across the country are within the private sector, existing as no more than teaching shops. Consequently, one of the major recommendations is that Governments - both central government and state governments, must invest much more in the preparation of teachers.

The second most important recommendation is that there should be no more stand-alone teacher education institutes. This means that we try and locate teacher education programmes in composite institutions, such as, undergraduate colleges of liberal arts and sciences, and universities which do not yet have departments of education. The NCTE has already compromised on this issue and has included in the revised norms another definition of composite institutions – institutes that have more than one teacher education programme. The actual recommendation of the JVC was to ensure that teacher preparation happens in a multi and interdisciplinary learning environment.

The third important recommendation is the need to change norms and recruitment rules for appointing faculty for preparing teachers, i.e. teacher educators. At the moment, by definition, largely, anyone with a M.Ed. degree can teach any subject in a BEd or DEd programme. Through the Justice Verma Commission recommendation, we have tried to make a case for the need for faculty well-grounded in social science theory, philosophy, science theory, mathematics and other core disciplines. These are some of the significant recommendations.

Another critical recommendation is that of creating a task force that can examine the NCTE and its functioning in order to revamp the entire organisation. At the moment the NCTE does not have any academic capacity as an institution. There are several recommendations around that. Several committees set up to examine each of the JVC recommendations and suggest a road map for their implementation submitted their reports in 2014. However, in terms of action, we have not been able to move beyond notifying the new norms where we have managed a few things. This is certainly not enough in terms of what the recommendations suggest.

VV: Is this report available online for people to read?

PB: Yes, the report is available.

VV: Do you hope that some of these changes will translate into practice eventually?

PB: Well, we have been able to increase the duration of the teacher education programme, which is another important JVC recommendation. As a result, the B.Ed. is now a two-year programme after graduation. The M.Ed. is also a two-year programme. Taking advantage of this change in the duration of B.Ed. and MEd, we can offer specialisations and prepare teacher educators who are well-grounded in some of the pedagogic and subject specific fields.

These changes have happened because revised norms were notified in the Gazette of India in November, 2014 as a consequence of pressure from the Supreme Court. Many departments have already developed their new courses for the two-year programmes on the lines of NCFTE, as per the JVC recommendations. How well the NCFTE ideas and vision have been translated into the curriculum and how they will be transacted is a matter still to be seen.

VV: *In your writings, you also talk about moving towards a process-based teacher education programme which looks at teacher education within the nodes of process rather than the existing, sort of ritualised forms of programmes that exist. What do you mean by this and are there any teacher education programmes that are already either attempting to do this or doing it successfully in India?*

PB: By process-based teacher education I mean many things. One of the critical aspects that makes me use this term is the fact that, so far, the school teacher has been looked at merely as an implementing agency. And that is the sense we get even from the NCF 2005. It also talks about persuading, orienting teachers rather than including them in curriculum design processes. Therefore, when I say process-based, I mean that teacher preparation is a process and the teacher or the developing teacher will need to be engaged with several aspects of teaching and learning in that process. This also means that we do not look at school curriculum as a given. It implies that the teacher is prepared to look at curriculum afresh from the view point of what a curriculum should look like, what are the existing curricula like, why are certain curricula

considered more robust and well-designed, why are certain curricula not really designed for the kind of contexts specific children may come from. There cannot be a fixed set of principles of curriculum designing. Curriculum is an issue, which can only be deliberated upon meaningfully keeping the context in mind.

Given the diversity of our country, it is not possible to have a uniform curriculum and I do not think that the NCF or any other curriculum document has ever said so. So, in a process based teacher education the teachers are really engaged with every single aspect of school life, with a teacher's profession and with the demands of that profession. It implies that the teachers should be able to proactively engage with the children they are teaching; their developmental trajectories; the contexts they come from and in what kind of a political and economic context are we talking about education at any given point. Take for example the new economic discourses that are entering into the classroom today. We are talking in terms of learning outcomes, efficiency and productivity. This is a purely economic discourse that is drifting us away from deliberating on more critical aspects of educational practice, such as the philosophical aims of education that thinkers like Dewey, Gandhi or Tagore, for example, have talked about; and challenges of teaching in diverse classrooms. We need to bring back the idea of education as social transformation, which is possible only when we look at learning experiences, and the shaping of learning experiences as the centre of education; and teacher preparation rather than focussing on learning outcomes alone.

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VV: *The public denigration of teachers and their work over the last few years has really heightened. It is affecting both, the professional status of the teachers and the work that teachers actually do every day. As someone who*

is really trying to work towards changing this reality, what are your hopes for the future? How can some of these be realised?

PB: That's a tough question. I am not sure whether I have answers to this question but I have hopes for sure. It has taken us several years to reach this stage where we have actually been able to articulate a curriculum for the preparation of teachers, where we are talking about the need to integrate different knowledge domains and the need to push the envelope and to make the entire background within which we prepare teachers much wider than what it is today. However, the neo-liberal context in which we are currently; a powerful constituency of people and groups who have entered the field of education are trying to reverse these achievements and reduce education to mere skill preparation and skill development.

VV: You mean scripted lesson plans, assessments...

PB: Absolutely, the blueprints to help navigate through the academic year in the school. Here, the idea of teacher as implementing agency has become further narrowed to mean somebody who can be given blueprints of lesson plans to be transacted in the classroom. Here, we are contending with several issues, even the issue of marginalisation of knowledge, because the moment we deskill the teacher, we are also assuming that knowledge is in the cover of the text or the lesson plan and there is nothing beyond. On the contrary, real education is about creating and constructing ideas and insights within classroom discourse. In the course of preparing a new vision for teacher preparation in the NCFTE, we have also cited the example of the B.El.Ed. – a four-year integrated, interdisciplinary programme that tries to bring all these elements together. This programme has received recognition and has been notified in the revised NCTE norms. Consequently, my hope is that having a robust curriculum discourse in place, there will be takers for this model. I am hopeful there will be people within the country who will take advantage of this opening up of the norms and will come forward

and prepare teachers in a different way. I am also hopeful because this is the first time that the revised NCTE norms include a separate section on curriculum framework that provides a vision and direction for designing teacher education programmes. This is something new. The earlier norms only spoke about physical spaces; the size of classrooms and the number of books; but now we are talking about how to address issues of diversity as

“The earlier norms only spoke about physical spaces; the size of classrooms and the number of books; but now we are talking about how to address issues of diversity as important part of teacher preparation; how to focus on issues of inclusion and gender and the nature of reading materials.”

important part of teacher preparation; how to focus on issues of inclusion and gender; and the nature of reading materials required for a variety of foundation and pedagogic courses. I'm hopeful that this is something that people can't now brush aside easily, and hence, they will have to address these issues.

VV: That is a big step.

PB: Yes, that is a big step because now while preparing teachers you cannot neglect some of these concerns anymore, for instance, issues of gender. My hope also comes from the fact that there is an implementation committee that has been constituted to oversee the recommendations of the Justice Verma Commission. I also happen to be a member of that committee. But, at the moment, that committee is also lying low and I am hoping that we will be able to reactivate that committee. If we succeed in that, then, you still have a push from the Judiciary, so to speak, to keep the recommendations alive and to make sure they are implemented because several of the committees have, as I have said, given significant road maps. I have hope because I think a process has been set in motion but we also need to guard ourselves against the probability that these processes can be stalled for years.

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Poonam Batra is Professor of Education at the Central Institute of Education, University of Delhi. She has published internationally and domestically in areas of public policy in education, elementary education curriculum and pedagogy, and teacher education. She has co-authored a number of key educational policy documents as well, including the Justice Verma Commission Report on Teacher Education (2012). She can be reached at batra.poonam@gmail.com

Endnotes:

¹District Institutes of Education and Training were set up post-NPE, 1986.

²More than 95 percent of all teacher training institutes, offering DEd or BEd are in the private sector.

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Education Policy and the Pursuit of Equality: Perspectives from South Africa

In conversation with Yusuf Sayeed

In 1994, the apartheid regime in South Africa came to an end. However, the ramifications of enforced segregation continued to persist in several institutions and contexts. Yusuf Sayeed's work has closely examined education in post-apartheid South Africa and the ways in which the legacy of apartheid continues to affect issues of quality, access, and equity in education. In this interview, he discusses the pursuit of equality in South Africa and makes connections with similar efforts in India and across the world. He brings into question the role of the private sector and argues that the fundamental problem is the abandoning of the idea of education as a public good.

Vivek Vellanki (VV): 1994 is an important year in South African history and it brought about significant socio-political changes in an attempt to undo the unjust practices perpetuated during the apartheid regime. The apartheid government had severely impacted all spheres and institutions of society including education. Can you give us a brief account of the educational system that existed during the apartheid years?

Yusuf Sayeed (YS): To put it very briefly, the apartheid education system was marked by racial and class inequality. It was a system of enforced segregation for the four classified racial groups which were further sub divided into multiple ethnic groups. In effect this meant that a white minority racial group monopolized the best of the education system while the remaining black majority, that included Indians, was denied equal access to educational opportunities. They were offered a less than good quality education, an impoverished curriculum and this resulted in grossly unfair and inequitable educational outcomes.

VV: The significant influence of the apartheid government in education – institutions, curriculum, policy, governance, and practice – has been highlighted in your work. However, with the establishment of the democratic state in 1994 there was a political push for equality and social justice. How did such a political vision translate itself in the domain of education and what are some of the major trends over the last few years?

YS: Since 1994 there have been a number of significant educational changes in South Africa. I will briefly recount few major ones that significantly impacted the pursuit of equality and social justice. Principally the first biggest shift was an educational policy act which drew its inspiration from the Constitution, which provided for free and compulsory basic education for all children irrespective of race, gender, color, creed, and sexual orientation. This was the first commitment to educational equality in post-apartheid South Africa and it was a system in which race no longer featured as a key criteria of opportunity,

process, and outcome in terms of education. This translated in different ways in terms of educational opportunities. To begin with, there was equalized per capita expenditure per child, irrespective of race. Yet as I pointed out in my work¹ it doesn't mean that all racial and class groups had equal spending on education. It simply meant that the state equalized its spending but then this excluded private income which I think has gross inequitable outcomes. In terms of the democratic governance of the system, fundamentally we had one central united education system. The national department of education had established national norms and standards and managed the education concurrently in the nine provinces. In terms of school governance a key fundamental shift was the establishment of democratically elected school governing bodies in roughly 27,000 schools. Yet, as I argued later this does not necessarily mean that there was greater equality but as a result, certainly at the formal level, we had a greater substantive democratization of the school process. In terms of the curriculum the most obvious and visible sign of change was the ending of a racially based system of education, in which historically the black majority was portrayed in pejorative and negative terms. The new curriculum promised and delivered a curriculum free from all forms of racism. I think the establishment of an integrated education and training system is a noteworthy change. The argument being that all forms of education training had parity and one did not privilege academic education and general education at the expense of vocational training. So in a nut shell those would be some of the major changes in post-apartheid South Africa.

VV: In your most recent work² you write about a contextual conceptualization of quality that departs from the dominant notion of quality as being universal. What is a contextual conceptualization of quality and how does one understand it at the level of praxis?

YS: I think in a more contextually specific understanding of quality we are reacting to the idea of a standardised notion of quality which is being propelled through

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arguments about what this might look like in terms of overcoming segregation. One thing

international assessment. We are also reacting to the idea that quality means the same thing to a child irrespective of the context under which learning takes place. So contextually specific understanding would be contextual at a number of levels. It would be contextual at the level of the country we are talking about; it would be contextual at the level of province or state. But fundamentally it would be contextual at the level of the institution i.e. the school itself. A contextually specific understanding of quality for me would have a number of characteristics: one would be about teachers who would actually have a much clearer understanding of the learners they are working with, what kinds of learning experience they bring with them to the classroom, what are the kinds of home environments the learners come from. This would imply that the teachers don't make assumptions of who the learners are and do not assume that the curriculum they are working with can be taught in the same way to every specific learner. That would be one approach to a contextually specific understanding of quality that we are speaking about.

VV: Recent policy documents, in India as well, are starting to articulate broad visions with progressive ideals. But the question that seems to persist is how does a policy document that has a broad vision on equality, negotiate and materialize with in the local site of action i.e. the school? What have been your findings within the South African context and do these provide any pointers to India that has a race equivalent in caste as a basis of segregation?

YS: I guess this is the million dollar question. How does one generate policy that at one level speaks of a broad vision but yet takes into count contextual realities, and how do you do it in context where you are moving from a system of great inequality to one where you want greater equality. I am not quite sure; I don't think we have fully worked out the answers yet. But we have some ideas, some insights, and some

is certain for us, it is about teachers, teacher support, and teacher development. Any policy vision ultimately at the end goes through and is mediated fundamentally by teachers. And in that sense, fundamentally, what makes a difference to equality and the eradication of inequality, whether it takes the form of race or caste, is how the teachers mediate, what I call, their private classroom world. Because at the end of the day the negotiations of equality in contextually specific settings relies on the teacher in their private world when they close the door, assuming they have a door or they close the metaphorical door of their classroom. So in terms of teachers there are certain things we need to consider. I think one of them is about how they are trained, so initial teacher training makes a difference. I think more critically it is about how they are supported post training, so continuing professional development makes a difference. But fundamentally I think and this is hard to talk about because one does not want to jump into narrow constructions of accountability, but at the same time it is about teachers' accountability. How accountable are they to the children they serve or to the local communities they serve? And in that sense is this about the opening up of the private worlds of their classroom to more public scrutiny? It is about holding teachers more accountable for equal actions or equalizing activities they can promote through their performance in the class room. But I think it is also about creating a culture of teaching in schools where teachers act as peers to each other. It's about breaking the isolated individual nature of teaching so that teachers learn as much as possible from each other. I think that's one way in which one can deal with quality. I think it also relies on school student representative council particularly in secondary schools because when we are talking about equality and democracy it is not just about school governing bodies with parents and teachers, it is also about giving students a voice. It's about giving students a share and shape in the kinds of education they have. I think that's another way to break patterns of segregation. But I think none of those things in and of themselves will necessarily result in greater equality, they

are necessary but not sufficient conditions. I think we still need to assert the centrality of the government or the state which must take an active interventionist strategy to promote equality in order to overcome historical legacies of inequality. The simple example is when the state ensures that the teachers who would teach in schools where the marginalized are educated are the best teachers. It's about how the state intervenes to ensure that there is equitable distribution of teachers such that those schools that need the best teachers get the best teachers and also those schools that are short of infrastructure get the infrastructure.

“I think we still need to assert the centrality of the government or the state which must take an active interventionist strategy to promote equality in order to overcome historical legacies of inequality.”

VV: *You were part of a comparative study between India and South Africa that focused on education exclusion analysed through the lens of policy implementation³. The study explored the role of caste, which is an ascribed category governing social exclusion, operating similar to race in determining educational opportunities and outcomes for individuals. Can you tell us about the findings of the study?*

YS: I think the finding of the study in headline terms was that in both contexts inequality, in, through and as a result of education is a fundamental problem. The forms of inequality may differ with the context but at one level there are few similarities in the way they are constructed. To take for example, the notion of educability was used by Ramya Subrahmanian and Sarada Balgopalan in the Indian context to describe how teachers in India operate with the deficit notion of children from marginalized or underprivileged backgrounds. The idea of educability was in a way used and constructed to suggest that children from such background were not able to be educated; they were uneducable in a sense. Therefore the problem was with the children and not with the school or institution. I think a key finding in both the contexts was the failure to translate grand intentions and statements in policy into very practical, realizable, concrete actions at the

institutional i.e. at the school level. Hence we spoke much about the policy gap, the difference or the distinction between what the policies intended and what the outcomes are at the institutional level. This I think speaks to us very clearly about the extent to which well intentioned, progressively designed policies take seriously the agency of the individuals who are the front line implementers of the policy. In this case the schools, teachers, and officials who work at the institutional or at the local level.

“The idea of educability was in a way used and constructed to suggest that children from marginalized or underprivileged backgrounds were not able to be educated; they were uneducable in a sense.”

VV: *You have argued for the central role of the teacher in realising educational equality⁴. Drawing from such an understanding, teacher education becomes crucial as a process and teacher education institutes become important spaces of learning. In India, despite recommendations made by several committees, teacher education has remained largely isolated from universities and institutes of higher learning. South Africa has taken a much different approach towards teacher education. What are some of these changes and do they hold any pointers for teacher education in India?*

YS: I will talk here about four fundamental shifts that might hold pointers for India. The first one is the integration and merging of teacher training colleges into universities. The intention was to inject a stronger theoretical and research based content into teacher preparation and bring the best practices of colleges, which is about practice based teaching, into the university setting. While the intention had been noble, at another level the intention was about cost effectiveness. The unit cost of training teachers in universities is lower than in monothetic dedicated teacher training institutions. So, it was not only noble, it also made economic sense from a government point of view. I think the one question to be asked is whether in the integration process we get teachers who are both academically competent and also capable performers, as I call

it, in the class room? In other words can you really merge the best of both worlds and do you succeed in developing better teachers as a consequence? For me in South Africa the jury is still very much out on this aspect. I don't know where it stands; there is research that argues both ways but I think that there is also a lack of research. The second big shift in South Africa was an attempt to introduce a more professionally oriented but a more accountable teacher appraisal and development system.

Bringing the development and performance appraisal together and allowing schools to be responsible for it, primarily, was a positive step but did not work out well. Maybe there is need to think a little more about their separation because

when you appraise performance and tie into developmental purposes you have all sorts of adverse effects. I think the third change in teacher education was the need and failure to actively involve teachers in the process of curricular change. This is especially the case when you are making a substantive deep seated curriculum change such as outcomes-based education which is fundamentally going to affect pedagogic practices in the classroom. You need to give teachers more time to prepare and you should not do it by cascade, short term workshop training. Pedagogic practice shifts slowly and it requires deep seated professional development programmes as opposed to episodic short term training programmes. I think that's one of the other lessons that one can learn about teacher education. I think the fourth aspect is a global problem and not just restricted to South Africa - how do you motivate teachers? And I think that South Africa has tried both i.e. compulsion and motivation. I think historically, without laboring the point both have had their adverse problems and consequences.

“Pedagogic practice shifts slowly and it requires deep seated professional development programmes as opposed to episodic short term training programmes.”

VV: *Standardised testing is becoming a global phenomenon and a lot more countries are participating in tests such as PISA and TIMSS⁵. While PISA hasn't yet reached India at a national scale, its effects are visible and imminent. You've critically analyzed the role of International and national standardised tests in significantly driving outcomes in schools and restricting quality debates to scores and rankings⁶. What has been the experience in South Africa and has standardised testing affected practice?*

YS: One of the big shifts in South African educational policy over the last 18 years is that there has been a slow and steady but a significant shift towards more and more testing; both, national testing and stronger participation in international tests. I think that there are a number of problems with this kind of testing. The first one

is that it mistakenly assumes that quality can be improved by testing learners often. Certainly testing learners tells you something about

performance. But actually improving quality is about changing pedagogic practice, changing instructions, how teachers teach, changing materials and so forth. So, in other words it is not about testing, it's a bit more. I think the danger of the global emphasis on standardised testing is that it tends to conflate narrowly accountability with performance and testing. It also assumes the narrow proxy indicators, performance in math and science, as the

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definition of good quality education. While test scores are important, the pursuit and meaning of education is more than just math and science score. It has to be about how children learn to become a part of society, what kind of civic awareness they have particularly in racial and other societies that might be segregated on lines of religion, caste, gender, etc. It's about how people learn to understand and live with each other across divides. Secondly, I think that it is a mistaken assumption that participating in international tests is somehow about quality. In another article of mine I wrote that participation in international tests is becoming about countries wanting to look modern. It is about suggesting that you are suddenly open and modern because you are participating in this modern test, and for me that is a fallacy.

VV: *Over the last few years there has been increasing research on low-income private schools and their role in solving the crisis of education inequity. You have been extremely critical of such an argument and in your work you have said "privatisation and the global quality imperative potentially undermine quality"⁷. Why are educational quality and privatisation incommensurable with one another?*

YS: My starting point is very straight forward and simple. It is to say that education is fundamentally a public good and that it is not reducible to a private good. And for me that assertion flows from a number of assumptions. One of it is that you cannot privatize public education. I think the problem with the discourse of privatisation is that it assumes that there is a certain group of people who can buy themselves out of the public education system and that is fundamentally unequal because the poor can't afford to buy themselves out. Although James Tooley⁸ would argue that low fee private schools





me be clear that I am not against decentralization. I think participation is important but when it has unequal consequences we need to be clear about the conditions and forms of decentralization we choose. And that is why I would think that the assumption that educational quality can be improved by promoting private education is wrong. The fundamental problem is the abandoning of the idea of education as a public good and

education as a right of all citizens. Every citizen, in any nation-state, is a public citizen and not a private consumer citizen.

might be the solution and he does but I think he is wrong⁹. I think the problem with low fee private schools is that they emerge in the absence of good quality public education. It is not so much about choice as it is about compulsion. And I think in a sense the question we have to ask is not whether the low fee private schools are growing or why parents choose these schools but what is wrong with the public education system that compels them to go to low fee private schools? Secondly, I feel that there has been a strong push for private education and for me the problem is not that the private sector can't have a role in education. However, the assumption that the private sector, private corporations, or private social responsibility programmes do not have an agenda of their own is naïve, to say the least. It assumes that they can act benignly in a public education system without any interest of their own. And I think that's a mistaken fallacy. I think it is also a mistaken assumption that the only way to improve the quality of the public education system is by creating a competitive alternative force in the form of private education. The idea is that you make the public system better by bolstering the private system. I am not yet convinced that this is the best way to improve the public education system. The public education system must be improved by changing teachers' practice, supporting teachers, giving schools necessary infrastructure, and also involving parents and community a lot more directly without some of the adverse effects of decentralization. Let



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⁵PISA is the acronym for Programme for International Student Assessment; TIMSS is the acronym for Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study.

⁶Sayed, Y. (2010). Good quality education in and through the GMR. *Norrag News*, (43).

⁷Sayed, Y., & Ahmed, R. (2011). Education quality in post apartheid South African policy: balancing equity, diversity, rights and participation. *Comparative Education*, 47(1).

⁸Tooley, J. (2009). *The beautiful tree : a personal journey into how the world's poorest people are educating themselves*. Washington, DC: Cato Institute.

⁹Tooley's work tries to argue for an increased role for low fee, including for-profit, private schools in education. His claim, arguably, is backed by a portrayal of failing public schools and increased sections of the poor accessing private schools. Several researches have responded to Tooley's argument, indicating the complexities that have been ignored in his work.

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EPISODE 9 DECEMBER 2014

'There is a right for the child to have an education and that right must be preserved at all costs.'

In conversation with Kiran Bhatta

In August 2014, the Rajasthan Government decided to merge several of its schools, citing reasons of low enrollments and an effort to consolidate resources. The government order, which was passed in a hurry, led to several schools being closed down and the students enrolled in them having to relocate to other schools'. Kiran Bhatta wrote about the changes that ensued and the consequences for children, parents and teachers. In this interview, she discusses this issue in the context of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (RTE) and the need to defend public provisioning of education.

Vivek Vellanki (VV): *In your recent article², you have written about some of the changes being made to government schooling in Rajasthan. Could you tell us a little bit about this: background and context?*

Kiran Bhatta (KB): The Rajasthan government actually has a history of supporting and to some extent pushing the private sector in elementary education. The current Chief Minister [Vasundhara Raje] in her earlier term had provided a lot of subsidies to the private sector to set up schools, and had also forged many public-private partnerships in the area of elementary education. However, with the passing of the RTE there is a lot of emphasis on government schools and public sector involvement in

government schooling. The norms under the RTE require basic facilities of infrastructure, amenities, adequate number of teachers, etcetera. Earlier, and even within the RTE, there is a requirement of access .i.e. schools should be close enough for children to be able to come to them without any problem. A large number of schools have been opened in different habitations. Presumably, the Rajasthan order which has resulted in the closure of

Status of government and private schools in Rajasthan

Year	Number of Govt. schools	Enrolment in govt. schools (in lakhs)	Number of private schools	Enrolment in private schools (in lakhs)
2012-2013	78870	68.14	31948	55
2013-2014	85685	65.40	33658	57
2014-2015	72200	60.73	33889	59

seventeen thousand schools is related to the fact that some of these schools have very low enrolment. There could be less than fifty [children] in the entire primary and elementary section. And the government perceives that in this way the resources are spread too thinly and this makes the schools economically unviable. It is for this reason that they have decided to merge them with the senior secondary or higher secondary schools that are there in the vicinity. So that is the background to this order and the merger that has taken place.

VV: *You have worked extensively on the Right to Education and its implementation. The changes that you describe seem to be running against the provisions of the RTE Act. What are some of the contradictions that actually emerged with these closures?*

KB: One of the things [that gets affected] is the physical access that has been made possible in many areas, which is why there is a provision [in the RTE] for schools within one kilometer for primary, and three kilometers for the upper primary stage. Now, with the closure of these schools, many of the children that went to these schools find that they have to travel larger distances to have access to senior secondary schools. So that is one sort of direct violation, and this is a violation even of the Rajasthan state rules, because every state has defined the parameters of the so called neighborhood within which the primary and the upper primary schools would be located, and for Rajasthan the parameter is in fact two kilometers. Now some of the children affected by this order have to travel much more than that to get access to their schools. So they have violated their own laws. It is not just the Central law but the State rules as well.

The other contradictions that have arisen are, for instance, the fact that many schools for girls have been merged with co-educational schools. Now that may not be a direct contradiction of the law, but it clearly makes it difficult for a girl to access her right to education, which she was able to do in the girls-only schools.

“I would not say that merging schools is outright a problem, however the point is that there is a right for the child to have an education and that right has to be preserved at all costs.”

Rajasthan is still a traditional society where there is a lot of opposition from parents to send their kids to a co-educational school. Also, Rajasthan has a very low female literacy level. I think this has some serious consequences for the education of those girls. Similarly, many Urdu medium schools have merged with Hindi medium schools. This again raises a question about the rights of those children who were accessing Urdu medium schools.

VV: *You have also discussed other consequences, such as the fact that it becomes difficult for children to go to some of these schools, for example if they have to cross the highway.*

KB: That is right. So, it is not just the distance per se, as in some cases it makes it worse because they have to cross the national highway. And again, if you are talking about primary level children, that creates the possibility for accidents to take place. For some of them it means that they may have to go to another neighborhood, and given the caste configuration etc. it might raise concerns about, say, Dalit children having to travel through upper caste neighborhoods, or for girls it could raise concerns about safety.

VV: *In your article you have hinted that one could also ensure that facilities are provided to the students by the state, travel for instance. But even if that is provided, you note that there are issues within the classrooms that affect teaching and learning. What are some of these issues?*

KB: I do recognize that if you have a school with very few children, say less than fifty for instance, then providing enough teachers and amenities may spread the resources thin. Although normatively speaking, the RTE does guarantee that, it should not be a problem. But from a purely administrative, practical point of view, maybe the government wants to see how it can use its resources more efficiently or effectively, and there is a scarcity. One cannot deny that.

And so I would not say that merging schools is outright a problem, however

the point is that there is a right for the child to have an education and that right has to be preserved at all costs. Now, if by merging you are preventing children from getting to school because it is too far for them to walk, then some alternative has to be thought of, like providing a bus or some other form of transport to make sure that those children are able to actually get to school, because otherwise they may end up dropping out.

The other thing is that if you are merging, that is adding children from another school to an existing school, then in the existing school enough facilities must be provided to incorporate these additional children; so more space, more classrooms, more teachers, more toilets... whatever it takes so that the RTE norms in terms of infrastructure and pupil-teacher ratio are also not violated.

Unfortunately, as it often happens and has happened in this case, the government does not do any preparatory work before passing an order and then implementing it overnight. So if they had to merge schools, they should have chalked out the schools that needed to be merged. How many children would be affected? Where can they go? How can they be facilitated to reach the schools without any problem? What kind of increase is required in the income of the schools that are taking these children in? How many more teachers and classrooms? All of that preparatory work should have been done before the order was passed and actually implemented. In the absence of preparatory work, what has happened is that many children have willy-nilly dropped out, and many others have actually joined private schools which are more locally available to them. And whether that was part of the intention of this merger—to actually push children into private schools—is still a question. So yes, I think that there are varied consequences of this merger and of this order.

VV: *Also, is the speed at which the order has been pushed through a concern?*

KB: The government order has been pushed and implemented almost overnight and I think it has been done in a rush. I think there are issues regarding some of the clauses of the RTE Act which need to be looked at. They may

have been put there with a certain purpose, but the ground realities might make it difficult in some cases to implement in exactly the way it has been conceived, and so there are certain modifications and amendments that need to be made. I think it has now been nearly five years since the RTE Act was passed. It is okay to relook at it and modify it, keeping in mind the larger parameters and the spirit of the Act. I think some changes can be made, but they need to be put out, there needs to be public discussion and debate on them, and then they can be implemented. Rather than to pass an order overnight without having had any kind of discussion, which in the end has affected the lives of many children.

VV: *In the process, have you had the opportunity to speak with teachers and children or hear about some of their concerns?*

KB: Yes. So as I said, many parents, the ones who could, have quickly put their children into private schools so that the child does not lose a year in the process of figuring out what is going to happen. Many of them have simply dropped out because the parents cannot send their child so far away. Some of them have managed to go there but they are finding it very difficult because there is congestion, they do not know [what is going on], it is mid-term and it has happened after the school year started so they are potentially in a drop out situation themselves.

Another interesting implication of this in Rajasthan is that the primary sections of Rajasthan come under the Panchayati Raj department, so the teachers' salary is also paid by them, whereas the secondary section is under the Education department. So the teachers of the schools that have merged, the smaller primary schools, actually do not know where they stand now. Whether they will now be under the Panchayati Raj or not has not been properly communicated to them. And whether the Panchayati Raj ministry is in fact prepared to pay their salaries, and if it doesn't, then what happens to them? So in a sense, it has actually affected the teachers as much as the children.

VV: *You have already said that you are not against thinking about the possibility of merging schools to address the issue of low enrollments.*

What are the possibilities and alternatives according to you?

KB: Yes, if you ask me, at a very personal level I think that I like the idea of the neighborhood school, which the [RTE] Act talks about. It has been left to the states to determine for themselves and that is fair enough. In different areas, the neighborhood might mean different things as the topography (and other parameters) matters. We have a federal structure with education as a concurrent subject. The idea of having a school that is in the neighborhood of the child: easily accessible, where the teacher and the children are known to each other, I think that makes for a better learning environment. So I still support the idea of a neighborhood school even if it is a small school with fewer children. Yes, it does mean that the resources per

“The idea of having a school that is in the neighborhood of the child: easily accessible, where the teacher and the children are known to each other, I think that makes for a better learning environment.”

child will amount to more, but I think it is worth that investment in children and in primary education. It will not happen everywhere in the country, there would be a few pockets where you would find that sort of situation. Perhaps some of those pockets are anyway isolated and marginalized and they need that little extra push. I think as a nation and as policy makers of society, we should be willing to give it that little extra bit.

So therefore one of the clauses in RTE, which calls for a PTR ratio of 1: 30 per school, I think is definitely a clause we need to revisit. Because if there is a school with about 55 children, you still have only one teacher across five classes, and that makes it very difficult for that one teacher to cater to all the needs of Class One as well as of Class Five. And even if there are 55 children, why can they not have more teachers, specific to their own needs? I think it is not a cost that we should be unwilling to bear, and we should think about that. But if it is absolutely not possible, then at the least they should, if they do merge the schools, provide extra resources,

be it facilities, transport, or whatever else.

VV: *Over the last few years, this discourse of the failing government school has heightened. In report after report, we hear that children are leaving government schools. You write that to improve government schools and provide greater opportunities for children, the government should increase funding and provide better infrastructure. Now, with the current government in place it seems to run against their idea of ‘maximum governance-minimum government’. Why do you say this? Why do you think the spending should be increased?*

KB: I think amongst all the nations we spend the least in terms of the budget reallocation to education. As far back as the mid-sixties, the Kothari Commission had asked for 6% of the GDP, and we are still hovering around roughly 3 to 3.5 [percent], which is really too low for what is required. And with the requirements of RTE we should have increased [our spending], we still have not increased that, and so we are nowhere near maximum government in education in any case, but if that mantra is now going to be used as a way of further reducing [spending] then I think we are missing the point here altogether.

I think that there are certain areas of government/governance which are clearly in the domain of the public sector, and education is one of them. And after the RTE and the 25% clause, when it was contested by the private sector lobby in the Supreme Court through the PIL, I think the Supreme Court did lay down the fact clearly that education is a public good and a public service where there is a dominant and critical role for the state to play. So that comes with the need for resources and budget reallocations. You cannot provide it without putting your money where your mouth is, in a sense. So I think the government does need to re-evaluate the priority it has given to education all this while. And the whole idea of having the RTE as a fundamental right is that the amendment in the constitution makes the right to life equivalent to the right to education. The resources should also match the commitment that has been made in the constitution. So maximum governance should not in this

“Amongst all the nations we spend the least in terms of the budget reallocation to education.”

case mean reduction in the financial allocation for basic education, but unfortunately it seems to be the case because even the recent cuts in the social structure spending include education. It is a huge cut of about eleven thousand crores. This is really very disturbing because not only does it mean that you have not been able to enforce the RTE, it also means that you are really giving the message that education is not a priority for this government. And basic education has always been [a priority for governments] across the world. Universalization of education has always been brought about by the public sector. And once that basic has been achieved, yes there could be a role for private education facilities etcetera but we have not reached that goal yet. So I really don't think we have a choice but to think about investing and yes, it does mean a bigger role for the government and it should not be contrary to their mantra.

“Universalization of education has always been brought about by the public sector... So I really don't think we have a choice but to think about investing and yes, it does mean a bigger role for the government and it should not be contrary to their mantra.”

VV: Time and again we hear discussions around the amendments to the RTE. What are some of your biggest concerns?

KB: I am not sure actually. It is true that time and again we hear, but I don't also know precisely where those noises are coming from or what exactly is in the mind of the government. We have very little information coming directly from say, the Ministry of Human Resource Development, which would presumably lead any conversations about the amendments. The only thing that I think appears more than anything else is the idea of having exams. That is the one [idea] that I have heard about more. I am open to the idea of amendments but they should be publicly debated, discussed, and it should not be done just overnight without a larger public discussion on it. The provisions in the [RTE] Act were very carefully thought through and it took a long period of debate and consensus building before each of the provisions were added. Perhaps some of them need a further round of discussion, but that round of discussion should take place with all the stakeholders involved, before the government rushes into anything.

And yes there are certain difficulties in implementing this clause of not having exams, but I think CCE is a superior method of evaluation and of providing education. But unfortunately, enough has not been done to back it, and it is because it has not been backed in the way it should have been with training etcetera that it appears to be failing. But the answer is not to just reverse it, you know that tends to be the case, if something does not work immediately then it goes the other way, but it has not been actually given thought. I think that it would be better to give it a shot before you decide to reject it. There may be some other aspects (which we have already discussed) we need to look at but in the end whether there are amendments or not, there needs to be a wider public discussion and only then should decisions be made.

Budget cuts in Social Sector

(In Crores)

Name of the scheme/ budget head	2014-2015	2015-2016
Child Budget	81,075.26	57,918.51
Mid-day meal scheme	13,215	9236
Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)	18,195	8,335.77
Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)	27,758	22,000

Kiran Bhatta is a senior fellow at Centre for Policy Research (CPR), Delhi. She researches governance issues in elementary education, working to build systems of transparency, accountability, and community monitoring. She has focused in particular on developing a methodology for conducting social audits of the Right to Education Act (RTE) that includes finding local solutions through greater engagement with the lower bureaucracy.

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Endnotes:

¹In December 2014, after the completion of this interview, the Rajasthan government rolled back the order for mergers, asking schools with an enrollment of 30 or more to continue in their existing location. However, there is a lack of any systemic data or study on whether the students have returned or how the students have been affected in the process.

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Foregrounding the Marginal

Bhimayana: Caste, Ambedkar, Art, and Pedagogy

In conversation with S. Anand

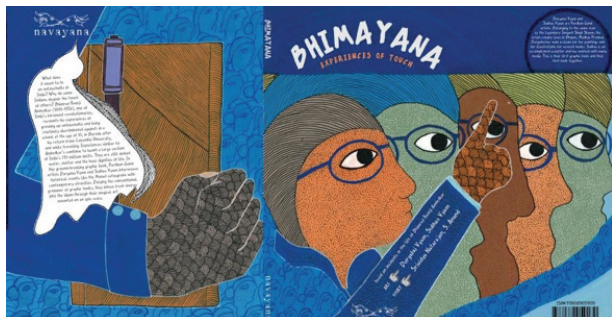
Bhimayana is a graphic novel that narrates Dr B R Ambedkar's experiences of being discriminated against. Using a graphic form inspired by Pardhan-Gond art, Bhimayana breaks popular conventions of graphic narratives published in the West. The narrative of Bhimayana is interlaced with contemporary events and brings to life Ambedkar's story in a compelling way while retaining its subtleties. In this interview, Anand reveals that although the book was not planned for children, it has potential as a pedagogical tool to explore questions about caste based discrimination. Anand talks about the book, its relevance in contemporary times, Dr Ambedkar, and his personal journey in engaging with the issue of caste based discrimination.

Vivek Vellanki (VV): You have co-authored the book *Bhimayana*, a graphic biography of Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar. Can you just take us through the idea of the book, and how it came about?

S Anand (SA): The book is an attempt to conscientise people about Ambedkar, his personal experience and how this still rings true for a lot of Dalits. The first time I encountered these fragments of Ambedkar's autobiographical writings was in one of the volumes which I had not paid attention to. It was sandwiched in about 18 to 20 pages, and was called Waiting for a Visa. It was not clear what visa he was referring to. He seemed to have jotted down these fragments over a period of about 20 to 25 years. So the earliest incident is about his school, and then he talks about riding

a cart with his brothers and other siblings, and being denied transport, and all kinds of hassles that he faces. And then he moves on to describe the incident where he returns from Columbia, and tries to find a boarding place in Baroda where he had to serve the Maharaja who had sponsored his education.

All this was news to me, and it was Ravi Kumar, my friend and partner at Navayana who drew my attention to that. And in 2003, when we set out to launch Navayana, we did four small



booklets. One of our first books was called Ambedkar: Autobiographical Notes. It was around 40 pages. And since then, it occurred to me that one should do some kind of illustrated version of it. Back then I was not even familiar with the term 'graphic novel'. All I knew about was comic books like Amar Chitra Katha, Tintin, Asterix and such. So the idea was to render this (our material on Ambedkar) into some kind of an artistic and illustrated book, which was meant not just for children.

As a child, I was denied the exposure to all this and there are a lot of adults in India who have no idea about this. The first image that occurred to me was that, here we are, we all know about Gandhi going to South Africa, being thrown off the train at Pietermaritzburg but we are never made to think about why he was travelling first class in the first place. And we are talking about 1893, just two years after Ambedkar was born; so Gandhi could afford a first class ticket, and he was asked to get off and to share another compartment. And if you read Gandhi there, he talks about being thrown along with the kaffirs which is the equivalent of using the word 'nigger'; back then everybody did use it. He is revolted by the idea that he could be parceled with the common people, and then, he is thrown out of the train.

Gandhi had to travel all the way to South Africa to experience discrimination. However, if you are a Dalit, you may face acute discrimination right at your school, or in your immediate surroundings. One might not even be allowed to go to school and, if one does go, might be asked to sit separately. Then we [need to] dig up all sorts of issues—as to how Dalits managed to enter schools. What did the British do and why did they start Panchama shools in Tamil Nadu? Why did they start separate schools for the 'depressed classes', as they were called then?

Ambedkar says, in a little editorial note, why he wrote this [Waiting for a Visa]. He says that he wrote this in order to enlighten the foreigners about the preponderance of discrimination.

And he does not limit this to his personal stories; he starts bringing in examples of others who write letters and document atrocities. So when I decided to do this book, then the task became – which artist should we go to. In 2007, we had done a book with Durgabai Vyam, Kancha Ilaiah's Turning the Pot, Tilling the Land, and I felt that may be this kind of art, which is not realistic but suggestive and conceptual, could be turned into a graphic novel.

“Gandhi had to travel all the way to South Africa to experience discrimination. However, if you are a Dalit, you may face acute discrimination right at your school, or in your immediate surroundings.”

VV: *The book is subversive at a number of levels. It provides a departure from the comic conventions of the West, and also interlaces historical details with contemporary events. You have put in a lot of newspaper clippings about recent incidents of discrimination and atrocities against Dalits. What prompted you to make this choice, and how did this fit into the theme of the book?*

SA: We first storyboarded the book in terms of adapting it into comic narrative. Back then, the storyboard was also biased towards the western style of comic art. It was done by Srividya Natarajan, an old friend and a novelist who lives in Canada. However, she had no direct interaction with the Gond way of thinking; to be specific, the Pardhan Gond way of drawing things. Gond art, in its origin, is something they do to decorate their walls and houses. Every year when there is a festival, when there is a karma dance, or when there have a wedding, they redo their houses. So these are both murals and also abstract geometrical patterns and conceptual images on their walls. And these are ephemeral; they would disappear every year and reappear in a different form the next year, so that is how it began.

In the 1980s, Gond art started moving to Bhopal, through J. Swaminathan who had founded Bharat Bhavan in Bhopal. He managed to invite the illustrious artist Jangarh Singh Shyam and a whole lot of others followed him to Bhopal. And for the first time in the 1980s, Gond bhitti chitra, as it is called, started making its way into paper and canvas. In the late 1990s, Tara Books in Chennai started using Gond art in children's books. Later, some critics and commentators

have called it problematic because it infantilises Gond art and equates it only with children. I don't see it entirely as a problem because children do like good art and it could equally be used to general readership. When we started with *Bhimayana*, we did not think of it as a children's book at all; it could be used in schools, and with a general audience as well.



'Digna' art on a cowshed in Patangarh, by the Pardhan Gond tribe in Central India. Photograph: S. Anand¹

There is no realism or perspectival art, and there is no sense of sequential art; whereas most graphic novels are sequential art. So the challenge was not to do violence to the way the Gonds think and imagine, and yet to help them to frame the story in a sequential way. That took a lot of effort because for a year we were just thinking without arriving at a solution. Durgabai suggested that Subhash Vyam, her husband, and somebody who is also an equally talented artist, and I did not know about it, would collaborate on this. I was a little hesitant about this but later it was Subhash who managed to use a very clever device, which is called the digna. So it was a long and arduous journey simply because it took us about a year and a half to crack it. But once the digna pattern was used to break down the pages, the free-flowing nature of Gond art could be transcribed into a kind of sequential form. All thanks to Subhash and Durga who managed to crack it, keeping it innovative and yet sequential. At the same time, they also managed to break the norm of western comics. For instance if you read someone like Joe Sacco who is one of the best practitioners of the modern graphic novel, you will never find a bird or a tree or a dog or any of these objects in his work. Whereas in *Bhimayana*, when young Bhim is thirsty in a classroom, Durga drew an

image of a fish struggling to get out of him. So you have to read the book in many layers and levels simply because if you just read the words on the page you might get a sense of the story but the visuals work at very many levels. And there are also some images that we have left without any verbal commentary to guide them.



Durgabai and Subhash Vyam working on *Bhimayana*

VV: *Like you said, the book needs to be read at multiple levels and layers. It deals with Ambedkar's youth and experiences of untouchability, and also his struggles in early youth towards a more egalitarian society and emancipation of Dalits. All of these seem to be lost in our history textbooks and also the dominant discourse. How important are his ideas in contemporary times?*

SA: Dr. Ambedkar's ideas resonate even today. When you spoke earlier about newspaper clippings, and how the Dalit children were denied water in schools, it was not just an issue for Ambedkar in 1901 when he was 10 years old; these kinds of incidents are prevalent even today. And at least in the kind of schools that I studied in during the 1980s, Ambedkar was not even a fleeting presence or a mention. So for me the book tries to address that huge gap. And the fact that we do it creatively, not like Children's Book Trust, though they have their own place, is important. In this book, we have tried to do it differently in terms of combining the imagination of Gond adivasi art with Ambedkar's experiences. I think it is relevant simply because Dalit experience has been kind of invisibilised in a lot of textbooks. Other than the fact that now, belatedly, NCERT textbooks do mention Ambedkar's experiences, to be correct they do not really talk about Ambedkar's childhood experiences much. There are one or two references to the cart

driving scene, and the fact that he could not get a house in Baroda but they are fleetingly done. The new NCERT books are talking about other Dalit autobiographies, giving some excerpts from Urmila Pawar's work or a poem from Namdheo Dhasal, and these are coming because of the contemporary Dalit movements, so this book fits into a larger group. At Navayana, we also did this because we are responding to the times we are living in.

"Dalit experience has been kind of invisibilised in a lot of textbooks."



Bhimayana by Navayana Publishing 2011

VV: *Interestingly, this book came out in English and then you translated it into several regional languages. You have also used it with students and schools. Though you did not start out imagining this as a book primarily for children, you seem to have come around to seeing it as an important pedagogical tool. Could you please share your thoughts on this?*

SA: The regional language editions are now out in six Indian languages. It is there in Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, plus English of course, and in three foreign languages as well. Interestingly, the French publisher is a children's book publisher, MeMo. Eklavya, the Hindi publisher, did three thousand copies, and Eklavya mainly focuses

on the issues of children. Yes, the book has evolved into a pedagogical tool. I tried lobbying with organizations like UNICEF to take it and adapt it. I also tried approaching the Ministry of Social Justice, and Dr. Ambedkar

Foundation and various other government-run institutions but all these things came to a naught. It is a four-colour book, and the price is a key factor. In English the price is Rs. 395 for a paperback whereas in Tamil, Telugu and other languages it sells between Rs. 200 to Rs. 220 and in Malayalam it is only Rs. 190. If you have the state agencies taking it up, printing about hundred or thousand copies, and making it supplementary reading in schools, then it becomes possible to bring down the price of the book dramatically because these things can be reduced if you have huge print runs. One does not have to worry about sustainability and access once there is that kind of support. So my dream would be to collaborate with the state and central boards of education and try to make the book reach a wider public.

VV: *The book has already been used in some schools. Do you have any experiences to share from that? How do you specifically view the book as a pedagogical tool within the classroom itself? Do you see it shifting the discourse and bringing in some of the experiences that both you and I did not have in our childhood?*

SA: When we did a set of launches of the book, we took Durgabai and Subhash along. For instance, when we went to Chennai, we would have a public event with 50-60 people; then we would get in touch with a school and there would be about 300-400 children from the secondary classes packed into a room, and we would make a small visual presentation to illustrate the finer points of the book. My experience has been that children are much better at cracking open the coded and the conceptual nature of Gond art. This is something I did not anticipate, to be frank. And whether we went to Bangalore, Kerala, Chennai or Delhi, we found that children have a much better enthusiastic response to the book, and schools have sometimes purchased 20-25 copies. But I do not know how well it has been used in the context of a classroom.

However, if it is done, I think that the teacher can just introduce it and the students have enough imagination to carry on with it. There is a hostel called Sakya hostel in Chennai where they had adapted a play out of this book, and they had performed it very beautifully. I have only seen the photographs of this. So it is very much possible to use it as a pedagogical tool.

VV: *The book continuously goes back to Ambedkar's own experience in school, the oppression he faced in school, and the humiliation he continued to face upon returning from the west with prestigious degrees. Several Dalits across India seem to be reliving this narrative. You have written about it in blogs, newspapers, magazines and have noted that the issue is often turned against the Dalit students to further humiliate them. In one of the articles, you write, "What they do not do is sensitize the predominantly upper class faculty and students. It is those who discriminate who need help".² Can you talk to us about this?*

SA: When the book came out, people did ask me, "Who is this meant for? Are the Dalits going to read it? Can Dalits really afford this kind of expensive four-colour book?" From the beginning my idea was that the Dalit movement has carried on the Ambedkarite tradition. Especially in Maharashtra, these experiences of Ambedkar have been translated into songs. Scholars like Sharmila Rege have documented this, and Badri Narayan has talked about it in the context of Uttar Pradesh, as to how alive these experiences of Ambedkar have been as far as the Dalits are concerned. So, yes this kind of a book is not meant for Dalits as such but they also happen to read it. However, it is to sensitize the non-Dalit, the privileged caste and the privileged class person, to open their minds to the ideas presented in it, and the wonderful art helps them enter this. Amar Chitra Katha has also done a book on Ambedkar but it is weak; young Bhim, as a student, is made to look abject in it. In Bhimayana, the shift is in terms of art and also... a lot of non-Dalits write us mails, get back to us and say that this book has made them rethink the whole issue and therein lies the minor success of the book. But in a huge country like India, even seven to eight language editions with modest print

runs, as I said earlier, might not be able to make a dent. It is necessary to take it, largely, to a non-Dalit upper class audience, especially to teachers who need to be familiarized with this, and should know how to deal with these issues. They need to be sensitised because they tend to be the most discriminatory.

If you read Joothan, Om Prakash Valmiki's autobiography translated from Hindi into English as well, most of his traumatic experiences come from his school where he is told, "Now that you are a son of a Valmiki, so go sweep the yard." We still see news reports where Dalit students are asked to clean toilets and classrooms. It is the ultimate way of humiliating a person, saying, "This is your station in life and this is what you are meant to do, don't think that you can get educated." I think that in most of the social science discourse and public discourse we have really not thought about the sickness of the mind of the non-Dalit who discriminates. The Dalit has every reason to embrace a kind of humanitarian logic, and move towards a kind of liberatory space. Whereas the non-Dalit is sicker in his or her mind in terms of wanting to retain the privilege and the privilege comes, simply put, by denying others an equal space. So that battle is crucial, and I hope this book contributes a little to that battle of ideas.

"The non-Dalit is sicker in his or her mind in terms of wanting to retain the privilege and the privilege comes, simply put, by denying others an equal space."

VV: *Finally we would like to hear about your own personal journey. You are a Brahmin yourself. In 2005, you wrote, "I could not be someone who keenly engaged with Ambedkar's ideas, interacted with the Dalit movement and yet kept intact the Brahmanical core." There has been a shift, what are some of the events that brought about this change? And what role did education play or not play in this process?*

SA: I have studied in schools in Warangal, Hyderabad, Chittoor, mostly in Andhra Pradesh. And yes, you are right that I was born into a Tamil Brahmin family and, however much I might want to turn myself into a kind

of an anti-caste person, it is not a social location I can choose to exit. But it does not mean that I continue to stick to that kind of an ideology which comes through parents and the immediate family circle. All our food habits, the way we treat our friends, and who we choose to make friends with and don't make friends with, all these are kind of over-determined by the social context and where we come from. And as far as the question about school textbooks and college textbooks making an impact on my thinking about this, I would say nothing.

It was only during my M.A. days, those are my personal experiences again, I had a girl friend whose term paper I wrote once and then I had to write my own term paper. I thought I gave a better shot at her paper, she was a non-Brahmin, and she got lesser marks than I did. Then the penny dropped, it was clear that they are not really evaluating what you are writing but who you are, sometimes. Recently in Delhi University, the authorities instructed students to write, both, their roll number and their name. A name is a giveaway, suppose you are Vivek Iyer or something, it becomes very transparent – who you are, and where you come from. Even without knowing your name, teachers in these autonomous institutions do know whom they are evaluating in a class. So these were personal experiences that had an impact on my thinking.

I was, at the same time, buffeted by the first Mandal and Ambedkar centenary, both of which came back-to-back; plus of course we had the Babri Masjid demolition at the same time... the fact that in a hostel atmosphere, the Dalit students wanted to put up Ambedkar's image in what is called the common room, where the television and the newspapers are kept, became the site of contest...the non-Dalits resenting it and the Dalits wanting to put it up...for them, it was like if Gandhi and Vivekananda could be there, Ambedkar should also be there. So these are interactions that helped me open up.

I felt that as an individual it was not just about an intellectual engagement but the need to completely rethink one's approach to everything that constitutes the self. So that journey roughly began in my M.A years and then I started reading a lot of books on and by Ambedkar. Back then, it was very difficult; even today it is very difficult to get hold of

Ambedkar's writings as volumes published by the Maharashtra government. They make it an insurmountable task to get hold of those volumes. It was a slow and steady process, and I think it is an unending process. There are friends in the Dalit movement who would say that whatever you do there is this identitarian tag that you are stuck with. And I accept that it is there, the fact that I run Navayana, and I have the social and cultural capital to be able to do this, or to conceptualize and pull off a book like Bhimayana, all these are part of the privilege. But I think that it is better to use this privilege in a critical way rather than saying that I am locked in this identitarian thing. I also take a lot of encouragement from the fact that Ambedkar did work with a lot of non-Dalits. If you see how the Mahad satyagraha happened or if you look at several initiatives that Ambedkar took, a good number of positive thinking non-Dalits did collaborate with him, though they were a minority. However, let me be clear, that doesn't excuse all the atrocities and prejudices they might still practice.

VV: *There is a famous quote by Ambedkar that has found prominence in the book and also on the merchandise related to the book. Could you share that with us?*

SA: Ambedkar's famous quote comes from a speech where he exhorts Dalits to "educate, organize and agitate". It is in that context that he says, "Ours is a battle not for wealth or power, it is a battle for the reclamation of the human personality." It is not just a slogan for Dalits but should also be adopted by non-Dalits, and it is a slogan or call that resonates with any kind of struggle for liberation. Be it in Kashmir, or Manipur, Palestine, or among the Adivasis. It has a universal global resonance, and I think it is important for the non-Dalits to realize that they need to reclaim their human personality as well.



S. Anand

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S. Anand is the publisher of Navayana, an independent press that focuses on issues of caste from an anti-caste perspective. He is the co-author of Bhimayana, a graphic biography of Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar. He can be reached at anand@navayana.org

Data and Image Sources:

<http://bhimayana.com/bhimayana.jpg>

<http://gulfnews.com/news/asia/india/staying-in-touch-with-ambedkar-1.1101163>

S. Anand Photo - http://www.thehindu.com/multimedia/dynamic/02215/22NDMP_ANAND_3_2215295f.jpg

Endnotes:

¹Photographs borrowed from Anand, S. (2013, March). Ambedkar: The Fight for Justice: a new graphic novel. Retrieved April 4, 2013, from <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/blogs/ambedkar-fight-justice-new-graphic-novel>

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Feminism and Science: Teaching and Learning 'Science in the Making'

In conversation with Chayanika Shah

Science is often touted as a neutral pursuit. One in which scientists don't bring their social baggage or subjectivities. Chayanika Shah disagrees vehemently and in this interview makes a case for examining the relationship between gender and science. Sharing her own experience as a PhD student in physics at IIT and subsequent engagement in teaching and research, she illustrates the ways in which science is gendered. If you are thinking, "Where is the gender in Boyle's law?" then you must read on, she has an answer!

Vivek Vellanki (VV): *You did your PhD in Physics from IIT in the 1980s, and you have written about the experience: "There is a common understanding shared by society that science and science institutes are male domains in general, and Brahmin male domains in particular." What was your experience as a woman and a student of science in IIT?*

different from the other students. In fact, I think the first feminist struggle that we had on my IIT campus was naming our hostel as Hostel 10. Earlier, it was known as the Ladies Hostel, and we said that since we were "students like everybody else", and since the other hostels were named Hostel 1 through Hostel 9, ours should be called Hostel 10. So back then it was a continuous claim to the space as a student and as an equal, to not emphasise the fact that we were women (definitely not ladies) and hence different in any way.

Chayanika Shah (CS): Actually, this is a post-facto realization. While I was there, I and others like me, never thought of ourselves as being

Enrollment of Women in Engineering

Year	1984-75	1979-80	1985-86	1989-90	1994-95	1999-2000
No. of women enrolled	1300	4400	12200	15800	24900	63100
Women as percentage of total enrolment	1.5	3.7	6.9	7.6	8.3	16.2

Now when I look back, I feel that it was, and it is, a very masculine atmosphere. When I went, there were 70 girls among a total student population of 3000. So obviously we were being looked at as weirdos. I wrote about this too, they used to say that there are three genders: the male, female, and the IIT female. It was their way of sniggering at IIT females. Women at IIT, at that point, would try and be like the men, and would try and ignore all these barbs. In 2011, however, again, I read something in which the men at IIT were still trying to argue that women are not in IIT, because they look horrible, they are not working hard enough. And so the men still continue to say that there are three genders: male, female and they call them non-males now.



Evelyn Fox Keller

I think that this is a kind of totally masculine atmosphere—what it is to be a very small minority in a large number of students—to be one girl student in a class of 60, has to be experienced to be understood. And these are not just any ordinary men. They are men who have got approval from across society for being the brightest and the best of the lot, and have the arrogance of being that way. They belong to upper classes and usually they belong to the upper castes too. There are multiple things that work for them, and so they are totally normative in some manner.

.....
“There is definitely a space where you feel you don’t want to be this woman that is being made fun of. So I negate my own self in multiple ways to become like them, to become acceptable.”

All of us who are marginalized in any way, who do not fit in there—whether it is because of caste, whether it is because of gender, or whether it is because of caste and gender—feel an extreme sense of marginalization, but do not articulate it because all of us want to be a part of that student culture, and so we do not want to express our difference. It takes a very long time, it took me almost 20-25 years, and reading many other women’s accounts, like Evelyn Fox Keller, who also took many years to talk about her own personal experience. So it is also reflecting on other women’s experience of being in the sciences, and of mine, being in a male-dominated science and technology institute, and seeing that the problem was not really me—the problem was a lot in the culture of that space.

VV: *But, like you have written, it is also a question that has been negated. Historically, the gender difference in science has been discussed largely as a difference in numbers. You note that this is not a sufficient engagement, and you have just spoken about how it is a more complex issue. What is missing now?*

CS: So one of the reasons why a certain section of people are not there in any domain, like why women are not there in science, could be that they are inherently not capable of being in that domain, right? And in the sciences, one assumes that everybody is being tested on their merit and their work, and that there are no other biases that are coming in. So you are imagining that if people are not there, then they are not good enough. But it sounds funny, even today, to say that only upper-caste, upper-class men—white men in the US and Brahmin men over here—are the ones who are brainy enough to do something like science. It is a statement that should make us pause and think. Is it because others are not capable, or is it because there is something happening here which makes you feel like you do not belong here? That you-do-not-belong-here works in multiple ways. Within an institute, it works in marginalizing you, in ways in which people

make fun of you, or people are very derogatory towards women in general. And that itself puts you in a defensive mode of sorts, which you don't recognize then. But there is definitely a space where you feel you don't want to be this woman that is being made fun of. So I negate my own self in multiple ways to become like them, to become acceptable.

All these biases are evident if we look at the numbers carefully. If you look at the number of women that are continuing in science, you see that it is not only because of societal reasons that the numbers have gone down. Of course, those are reasons partially—that society itself does not think women are fit enough to do science. Women do have double burdens at home. Even if they are married to scientists, it is not as if the male scientists are going to take time off to do things at home. But over and above this, there is a whole thing of how you recruit. If I think that women are not good enough, I do not recruit them in the same manner. I do not encourage them to come in in the same manner that I would encourage somebody else. So my biases then percolate—in my recruitment, in how I look at their work, in how I evaluate, in how I give grants, in how I cite papers, and in so many other ways.

VV: *And in your recent article you have drawn attention towards this. You cite reports and research from India and the US to emphasize the gender discrimination within institutions of science. Tell us some more about this.*

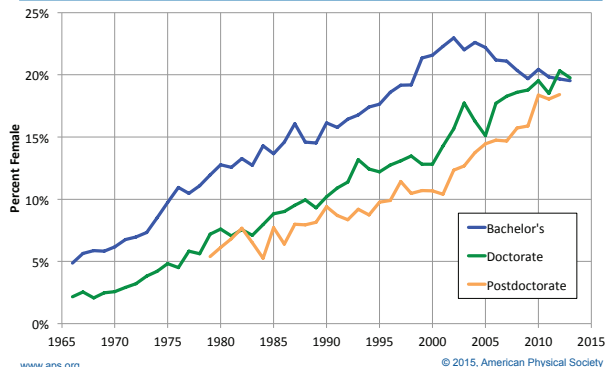
CS: As I look more closely at it, I feel that the number of women (and the percentage of women) who come into the sciences as compared to other disciplines is not very different until the graduation/post-graduation level. Within the sciences, we do not have data that is further segregated to show that there are more women in the softer sciences and fewer women in the harder sciences. But in the last 7 - 8 years, there have been

studies by women in physics, in particular, across the world, to see why there are not enough women in physics, and these have been country-wide studies. The first study that was done in India looked at women in the sciences and located their problems completely in society. A later study, however, chose to look at women within the sciences post their doctoral degrees and those who had dropped out of being in active research. I think what was crucial in the study was the realization that we do not only have to talk to people who are there. We need to talk to people who are not there to understand why they are not there, and whether their decision to not be in the active research phase is because of societal reasons, or because there were reasons within.

I think that this shift helped give a new perspective, and hence the demand from these women changed. They said that we have to change the ways in which academia operates, we have to make policies which will encourage women to be there—this is from within. This is not a study done by sociologists. They are talking as scientists, and they are saying that the problems are not only outside. The problems are within the institution, because the institution is not gender-blind, it is very gendered. And it is operating at every step: in recruitment, in promotion, in grants, and in so many other ways. Now women have become

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Women in Physics



The percentage of US bachelor and doctorate degrees awarded to women in physics and the percentage of women postdoctoral associates in physics

more vocal and are speaking more openly, and we see that the problem is not that society forces people to come out or does not allow people to continue, the problem is only partially there. A lot of the problem is also within the institution itself, and how it is gendered, it is masculinised, and how the way in which it is structured does not allow women to come in.

“The problems are within the institution, because the institution is not gender-blind, it is very gendered. And it is operating at every step: in recruitment, in promotion, in grants, and in so many other ways.”

VV: *In your article you have taken a further step, and said, “The gendered character of science institutions draws from a general masculinisation of every aspect of science itself.” To borrow from your article and turn it around, where is the gender in Boyle’s law?*

CS: This is a tricky argument that one has to make continuously, in the sense that masculinisation is seen as only related to men, right? True, it is inhabited by men. But masculinisation is a wider concept, and I get this from feminism: it is something that privileges men. It is not only about being men, in the same way that feminisation is not only about being women. This whole social process of masculinising a certain space or feminising a certain space privileges men and marginalizes women. But masculinisation is more than being men, and this is the understanding of feminism that I am bringing here. The often quoted apparent neutrality of science—that science is something that is done by scientists, and scientists do not bring any of their social baggage to the work that they do—is, I think, a masculinisation. And I can explain why I call it a masculinisation. It is emphasizing the objectivity with which these scientists approach science. It is making science into a project, which reinforces the fact that there is

some objective truth about the world, which is separate from the subjectivity of the world.

I think that this separation itself, and the need to make this separation, is a gendered act. It is not about being men, it is not about oppressing women, it is not about men having power, it is more than that. It is about saying that the world is structured in a manner such that there can be this separation between the objective and the subjective. And I think that is called masculinisation. It is the method of science, which is completely cut off from any kind of social rooting, which is in itself a masculinised version of science. What one sees from the history of science, and from looking back and understanding, is that there cannot be this kind of dichotomous separation of the objective and the subjective, of nature out there and society here, of study here and nature there. There cannot be this kind of separation because they always influence each other, and this understanding I think is shifting the understanding of science as being masculine.

Every time I speak of a feminist critique, people ask this question—so if women did it, would they not have Boyle’s law? Is the feminist theory of gravitation going to be something different? The point is not that as a woman I would see a different theory of gravitation, but maybe as a woman, as a feminist, I would ask a very different question to explain this world. Maybe I would not look for a simple law to explain everything in the world. Maybe that is not what my quest would be.

“The point is not that as a woman I would see a different theory of gravitation, but maybe as a woman, as a feminist, I would ask a very different question to explain this world.”

Maybe we would look at the world very differently, maybe we would not use the same methods and many of these things have been proven wrong

in the last few years, like that the method of physics has to be applied to all sciences, and that the method of science has to be applied to all social sciences. We have already changed all of that. It has come because we have realized that this dichotomy does not operate. And it is good for even physics, the hardest of sciences, to acknowledge that this dichotomy is false

in itself. And so when we are saying this, you understand that you will not get a feminist Boyle's law. But you will get a placement of Boyle's law within the knowledge of science in a manner which would be different—it would not become the most crucial thing.

"For people to understand masculinisation maybe they have to learn feminism and they have to learn feminism beyond women's oppression. I think that is the key, the turning point."

And I think that there are multiple descriptions of this, of various things within science that we feel are very gendered. For people to understand masculinisation maybe they have to learn feminism and they have to learn feminism beyond women's oppression. I think that is the key, the turning point.

VV: You have just pointed out a very interesting and important aspect—you spoke about the nature of science and the history of science, something that is not taught in schools. As a student of science, I never read about it. But feminist studies in science have provided a new direction to this debate on science education. The shift is, as you have noted in your paper, from readymade science to science in the making. Would you be able to explain this a little more?

CS: I think one of the reasons why I found science very distant and different at the point when I decided not to continue research was that I found it very separated from my everyday life. Looking back at the history of science, the sociology of science and science studies in general, I feel that this is one area in which science is lacking, as we talked about earlier. The separation is so intense, that what we teach actually is only the final product. We never bother to talk about the historical context within which these discoveries were made. We never bother to talk about the impact of these things on society, even to that extent. We do not bother to talk about what the debates were when these ideas were being talked about. Somewhere, contextualizing these theories within the

process of science in the making is what one is saying is doing away with the separation—bring it closer, bring it together, recognize that there is an impact of society on science and science on society, and do it within education. This is something that might engage and keep many people, who are marginalized in different ways, whether they are women, whether they are people of color, or whether they are Dalits in this country, all people who feel that this is a domain that is not accessible to them, who maybe will now feel that science has become more accessible because it has become more real, more connected

to our lives and to the world that we live in, and it actually makes science richer. That way, you are talking about science as something that is created by human beings, ordinary human beings. And so it is a knowledge system that has evolved from amongst society, and it is as cultured as any other knowledge system. I think that what we try to do in courses and what we try to talk about within education is that when we teach science, let us not teach it as a final product. Let us teach it as it evolved, along with its history, sociology, location, and the debates surrounding it, all of which are very crucial. This is something that we have completely lost out on. Scientific method is something that we think all scientists know by themselves, but it is not something that we are teaching at all. Yet, all of us have a notion of science being objective, because of the fact that we teach it in this manner—that it is just knowledge that people get from somewhere and that tells us about the world.

VV: You have played a prominent role in drafting a course on science education that draws on feminist studies in science and inculcates the aspects you have spoken about. It is a significant shift. How have students responded to this course? And how has your own understanding shifted over the last few years?

CS: To start from the end, I think my understanding—to come to this, what you asked earlier—of science in the making and science as a final product is through the engagement of teaching this course. So it has also helped me understand debates in education and debates in science studies. I

came into this field with my understanding of feminism and my understanding of science as I was taught. I engaged with the discipline of education and the discipline of science studies and that has influenced my understanding of the feminist critiques as well. I am locating feminist critiques as one kind of critique, along with many others. There are postcolonial critiques, and other critiques of science, and I would place feminist critiques as one of them. Similarly for education, one looks at how other subjects are being taught and tries to see where science is different, and how it is differently looked at by placing it in a context.

As far as the course went, I think I had been very lucky because we had very few students and again, I think the question of science education comes up, of whether you want to go for it or not. The other thing is that people are looking for pedagogy courses. So they do not really want a course that does not talk about pedagogy as much or in equal terms. However, this course talks about pedagogy as well as critically looking at science. We have had a few students, but we have had very good students. And in every batch there have been a couple, two or three students, who have continued the engagement with

science education in this manner. And that for me is a very big achievement, because there are not too many people talking about things like this. So in that sense, what a course should do—in terms of igniting willingness in some people, to take these ideas forward and to make this discipline richer, is something that this course has managed to do even in its short run of four or five years.

And it has not always been easy, because it shakes a lot within you. The most that people react to is bringing feminism to science. They do not react to bringing history, philosophy or sociology to science, but bringing feminism to science is like the last straw for them. But this does move people; it moves them to think a little differently. In whichever way or place people already are, if they are ready to rethink, they move ahead. If they are not ready to rethink, and we have had students like that too, who feel like this is taking it too far, then their arguments get built more and more. So I think it gives some space for engagement to every student. It is not that everyone starts thinking the way I think, that is not the purpose of the course. But it makes everyone start thinking, and I think that is what the course needed to do, and in that sense I think it has been a successful course.



Chaynika Shah

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EPISODE 8 MARCH 2014

'To talk of merit alone is only part of the picture.'

In conversation with Amman Madan

Merit, it is a word that is tossed around with great alacrity and has come to occupy a high pedestal. In this interview, Amman Madan employs his sociological tools to shine light on the history of merit and brings into question the myth of meritocracy. He shares data to illustrate how merit is tied to questions of caste, class and gender inequalities in Indian society. Now, to turn the word on its head, his argument has merit !

Vivek Vellanki (VV): *In India, we are in the middle of a public debate on reservation and merit. Within the middle class and popular media, merit has been made the 'holy cow' that has to be worshipped, something that is sacred and cannot be questioned. However, you demand that we engage with this question more critically. Why do you think this is important?*

Amman Madan (AM): Firstly, I would say that taking merit seriously is very important. The fact that so many people believe it is an important consideration tells me a lot about the kind of society we are living in. It is a society that emphasizes on achievement rather than birth. It is an emphasis on individual hard work, on individual efforts. The reason, however, for us to step back and look at merit from another point of view is that merit may or may not be achieved only through individual hard work. That is what we want it to be. It is very important that in our society it is an individual's work which actually decides where that person is. But in practice, we find that there is a very substantial component of history—of the kind of

family one is coming from, the kind of situation and its own injustices—which seriously affects what comes to be defined as merit. While one continues to see the importance of the notion of merit, it is important to also see it in its reality. We aspire to be a society which is primarily based on merit but in practice we are not really there.

"In practice, we find that there is a very substantial component of history—of the kind of family one is coming from, the kind of situation and its own injustices—which seriously affects what comes to be defined as merit."

VV: *You have looked at the emergence of meritocracy in India, and across the world. It is relatively new, and you write that it emerges from a system in which opportunities and resources were historically distributed based on where one was born. Could you tell us a little more about this?*

AM: What we have had in many parts of the world, until relatively recently, is a system where one's family had a tremendous role to play in what one did. So if one was the child

of, say, a jeweller, one tended to follow in those footsteps. If one was from an agricultural family, one had a certain kind of a career. We are slowly and painfully making a transition into a society where my family does not have the sole say in what I can become, what I can aspire, or even what I think is good. We are slowly making a shift away from there but we have enormous problems in that. Amongst the problems is, for example, what are the number of jobs in this country, which are available on the basis of merit? Actually, it is a very tiny number of positions. What we are talking about are jobs that are achieved through competitive exams or white-collar jobs. Probably not more than about 20% of the employment in this country. This is a miniscule number. Most people have to do other things, and those other things are again being achieved primarily through family networks.

On the other hand, even when we think of who gets those white-collar jobs, how education operates and how education is moving people into certain kinds of positions, we find huge socially created unequal patterns over there. If one is born into a middle class professional family, one has very different life chances compared to being born in a rural agricultural labourer's family. Once one begins to understand these dynamics, it becomes clear that to talk of merit alone is only part of the picture.

When we are talking of merit we assume that we are talking of individually created efforts. But how much of it is individually created efforts and how much of it is coming from the social background? We have to become very aware of that. We have to move towards a situation where rewards and motivations are actually for participation in society, which is what rewards should be. Rewards are not something in themselves. They are usually a system for a society to encourage certain kinds of behaviours. But that should happen not because of the family one is born into but because of individual abilities; or how one is able to, through one's own efforts, cultivate individual abilities.

VV: *In what has been the emergence of meritocracy in India, caste has been a big determinant. It has been one of the ways in which people have either been allowed or denied*

access to various opportunities. So how old is this idea in India, and how important is it?

AM: In India, we have had a mixed kind of understanding of how rewards are given, and how people are chosen for certain kinds of work. It has been a mix of family, caste and ability. So, for instance, we might find that if a king had to choose a general, it's a mix of family background and ability. As a system, however, there was no formal emphasis on the idea that only merit had to be taken into consideration. We have so many documents from the medieval period, which tell us about how kings would appoint people at various levels. Even formally, there was, at many times, an acceptance that a person at this position will come from this set of communities. Now this is a sense of closure in society.

What we see as a formal system is moving away from this. A big break comes when the British enter. It is very interesting to note that the British also had a system of partial closure, partial openness in their own country, and they go through a series of political and social revolutions, so that by the time they come to India in the middle of the 19th century, which is when they are setting up many of these things and they seem to have developed—at least their elites—a certain kind of commitment towards openness. It is a mixed story. In India, they are not very comfortable with being completely open but the kind of school system they set up over here has a formal emphasis on far greater openness than we saw ever before. Or on a more precise note, not ever before, but at many points in history.

VV: *But even till the late 19th century, for instance, Jotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule's struggle in Maharashtra, there were struggles within society demanding access.*

AM: That is right.

VV: *So, merit is not an extremely old idea. We could say that it is less than hundred years old in terms of its acceptance in the social milieu.*

AM: As I was thinking, I was wondering whether I should give it a date or periodization. But we do see it as a growing idea. We find shades of it at many other times in the past as well but usually within a community. So, for example, within

Jats, the decision about who will become the leader of the community will be based on a mix of who that person is, what kind of family that person is born into, and also personal abilities. But as a large scale principle of society, this is something that is gradually evolving.

VV: Meritocracy essentially rides on the idea that there will be an equality of opportunity, which is not ascribed. Sociology has looked at this idea critically. There have been a lot of studies which have looked at how merit is legitimized, and what functions that serves. Will you be able to tell us a little about studies that have discussed this idea?

AM: At one level, we see that there have been advantages in thinking of how to move people between different roles in society by taking an open approach to that. A big argument in favour of education is that society as a whole benefits from it because instead of having a small limited talent pool, one now has a much larger talent pool. Instead of saying people at higher levels can come only from X group, we say people can come from any group. So, every society, which is even slightly stratified needs processes of role allocation, and those

processes of role allocation are what we usually call merit. The content of that is merit. The big question here is: Are those

processes of role allocation fair? Are they correct? Sometimes, every society will have some sense of merit. But is that the right sense of merit? Take a simple example: We may have

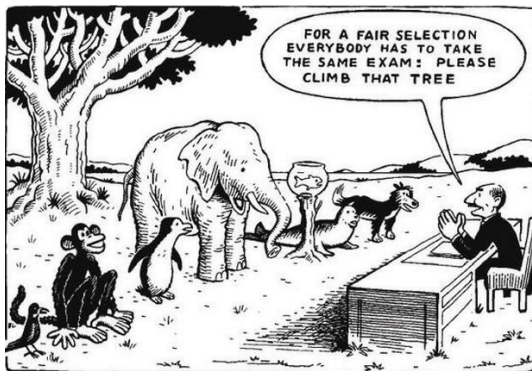
a society in which there is a huge amount of social difference between the middle and the top, or even the bottom and the top. So anybody who wants to go to the top actually has to struggle extremely hard, be very, what we call 'competitive'. This is another way of saying that this person has to make sure that he/she is much better than everybody else, and does not allow other people to catch up, or to work collectively, or doesn't share things with others, so as to insist on maintaining a sharp difference. This also means

that in such a society, you will find that to get to a higher level, people will have to be much more exploitative and dominating.

This is one sense of merit. It need not be the only sense of merit. It depends on what kind of society we want to create. We may want to create a society which does not believe that it is not just one percent of the society that goes to the top but we have a much fairer and broader distribution of wealth and dignity in that society. What merit is in the second kind of society can become very different from what merit is in the first kind of society. Some people will say that whatever merit is in my society is something that I will defend. So, for example, I may say that in my school system, I am not expected to understand what I am reading but I am supposed to mug it up and produce it; and this is merit. Other people may turn it down, and say: Is this really merit? The kind of person whom we are producing, it is only that exam system which is declaring that this person is meritorious; in another sense, this person is not meritorious. The more meritorious person may be the one who says, "I will not mug up things but I will engage with them. I will try to understand them."

"Every society will have some sense of merit but we also have to take a step back, and ask that moral question—What kind of merit do we want to support?"

There have been a large number of people who tend to justify any kind of merit. So every society will have some sense of merit but we also have to take a step back, and ask that moral question—What kind of merit do we want to support?



There may be people who will justify a particular kind of merit, and be critical of the other. For example, one may be critical of a school culture, which says that competition, and getting on top is what matters. Saying that instead of this, one would perhaps like a school culture where we say to excel is important and is crucial; but to excel by being a good human being and by being a person who cares for other people, who works with other people and believes in collective excellence. These two will create very different cultures, and very different kinds of societies. That is also the problem of which kind of merit one really wants to push for.

VV: *This idea of looking at merit in its complexity has come about through sociological studies, which have looked at it critically. Are there some from the Indian context which indicate these differences and complexities?*

AM: You will find several Indian social scientists talking about these things. For instance, the work which immediately comes to mind is of the writings of Padma Velaskar. There is a lovely paper by her, which points out how conventional schools are quite arbitrary such that they are basically designed around the lifestyle of middle class and upper caste children. That is her argument. And that arbitrary design, which is an expression of social power because that is that best way to run a school, makes it very difficult for children from rural backgrounds and from castes—which are not trading, or priestly castes—to fit into the system. They find that, willy-nilly, they are left out. Not because it is a better system but because it is designed to be convenient to certain groups.

Avijit Pathak's work comes to mind, where he asks questions of, for example, aspiring towards a life of consumerism becoming a key subterranean motivation for driving people, so to speak, excel in education. And he asks: Is this what we really want young people to do? Is this what we really want adults to do? If not, then what kinds of aspiration towards excellence do we really want people to look at? And just then he draws into discussions on the nature of consumerism, and other

“Those who are not the middle class, are not there, not because they lack merit, but because of a social structure which is preventing them from acquiring merit.”

possible sources of meaning which Indians can possibly look at. So we find that there are several Indian scholars who are engaging with this question very seriously. Trying to ask a) How has merit been used as a concept in our society to legitimize a certain system of power? and b) If not this, what are the other constructive ways of thinking about merit?

VV: *One of the most popular metaphors that is used when we are talking of merit and reservation is that of running a race where everyone starts at the same line. But clearly what you are saying indicates that the metaphor doesn't hold true when we are talking about merit because it is so complex. In your article, you write, “My own estimate is that somewhere around 80% of the relevant cohort are denied the opportunity to even sit for competitive exams after class 12” (Madan, 2007, p. 3046). So you are saying that the claim that it is the same for everyone does not hold true. Am I right in that interpretation?*

AM: Yes. Actually I would revise that figure to a more unfavourable figure. That time my guess was about 20%. Now I have been looking at the NSS data of 2009-2010. The number of people who are getting into any kind of tertiary education, any diploma course, anything after college, as soon as they finish school, is less than 9% in 2009-2010, out of the 17-24 year age group. This is not the 20% GER which the Government of India is talking of. That is of all ages. So what I am actually understanding from that is that less than 10% of the people are in any position to get into any kind of tertiary education. For the rest of the 90%, it is not that they have better things to do than

to get into higher education, and to perhaps seek white-collar jobs. It is out of a sense of frustration. It is a sense of not having opportunities. It is a sense of not having the resources. That is what is shaping this situation. So for more than 90% of India, it is not that they do not want to also aspire for other kinds of things but simply that they cannot do it.

By the way, out of those less than 10% who do go into tertiary education, most of them get

Drop-Out Rates in School Education (in percentage)

Grade	All			SC			ST		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
I-V	28.7	25.1	27.0	29.8	23.1	26.7	37.2	33.9	35.6
I-VIII	40.3	41.0	40.6	46.7	39.0	43.3	54.7	55.4	55.0
I-X	50.4	47.9	49.3	57.4	54.1	56.0	70.6	71.3	70.9

Drop-out Rate is the percentage of students who drop out from a given grade or cycle or level of education in a given school year.

into very poor quality tertiary education. So actually we are talking of a very small fraction of those who get into middle class jobs. That is another story—the size of the middle class. Those who are not the middle class, are not there, not because they lack merit, but because of a social structure which is preventing them from acquiring merit; even accepting whatever is the dominant notion of merit which one is not sure is the right one. But even there, it is not a clean race. It is a race in which some people are being tied up, some people are being denied legs, and then they are being told: Everybody, run! And this is not a fair race. If you want a fair race, alright, give everybody a good education. Then one will say: Alright, this is a fair race.

VV: *The odds are already in favour of the dominant groups. You have actually extended that idea and written “to question merit is to question individualism, to doubt the justice of the job market, and also to puncture the legitimacy of consumerism.” (Madan, 2007, p. 3049) It is a very intriguing idea—to connect merit to all these larger social processes— tell us more about this?*

AM: It is fine when all these young people are talking about merit. They are seeing it as a legitimation for all that they aspire to, even the kinds of rewards they are seeking or getting in a society. So everybody who gets into a white-collar job, and especially because there is such great enormous social inequality in India, it is the upper kind of white-collar job which will provide some of the things which many

people just take for granted. You know, simply getting medical care, not being in a situation where falling ill will devastate one’s family.

But the white-collar job is a very important thing for most people to aspire towards. And with that come a lot of other cultural processes which legitimize, which make it acceptable to be doing such a thing, and it is a part of that whole package. It is not just an economic return; it is a social return, and it is a sense of aspiring towards a certain lifestyle. Merit is used as something to justify all of that. So you find young people asking why you are studying so hard, mugging up things, or studying for something which is of questionable moral worth. And the answer usually one gets is, for example, typically one of the strange arguments I keep hearing from young people who aspire to the civil services - it is not so much about serving the country but having a white colored Ambassador with a red light on top.

Now this is a symbol. It is a symbol of power and rank. Or you will find people working because they want to buy a 30,000 rupee mobile phone. There is a series of meanings connected with that. People do not aspire just for money. People are aspiring for a large lifestyle. As I was talking to two of my friends in education, schools, education and merit are not something which stand alone. They are part of a much larger society in which class and culture are deeply intertwined. And these become ways of justifying the kinds of positions which people are occupying.

VV : *You have been teaching sociology for some time now. You've taught at an IIT, which is in some ways the hotbed of merit. Now you are teaching at Azim Premji University. What are some of the ways that you would suggest to rethink merit? In your article (Madan, 2007), you suggest that to rethink merit we have to think about the teacher and her/his practice within the classroom. How is that possible?*

AM : There are many things which need to be re-thought. Let us take one small example – say, if I am operating with the worldview of feudalism and the worldview of caste, only some people have merit and others do not. You see, this is being translated into a structure of thought, and of how to look at society, how to do things. When this structure is carried into the classroom, it leads to a situation where the teacher looks only at those who the teacher thinks are the bright children. Maybe about 10 or 15% is the class he/she is really talking to. The rest are the others—at various levels. The hard work which the teacher puts in is with those few. If one changes this, if one thinks not of a notion of merit which is fundamentally coming out of the acceptance of a deeply unequal society, of typically of a caste society, or of various other kinds of societies in which we accept that only some will have merit and others will not have merit into another kind of position. The second position being that you never know how people will grow, you do not know what kind of abilities will flower. So if you work with everybody and encourage people in multiple ways, we just don't know who all will grow in which ways, we don't know what will be the final distribution of abilities—whether it will still be just 10%, or it will be something very different. So a part of teacher training—and many groups I see are already doing this and many countries also emphasize on this—is where the teacher is working and is trained not to work just with 10% but to pay attention even to the weakest student. If anybody requires maximum effort from the teacher, it is the weakest student.

I was talking to teachers at a school run by an adivasi organization in Tamil Nadu and I asked them: What is the difference between your school and others? It was so interesting. Teacher after teacher told me the same thing, and this is also what some of the students told

me. They said what is different between our school and other schools is that if somebody doesn't understand, the teacher explains it again and the teacher pays attention to those who do not understand something. And then I was talking to one of the girls who had passed out from this school, studied somewhere else, and then came back to be associated with that organization, and she said, "When I studied in other schools, people were nice to me. Nobody explicitly discriminated against me, and I made friends. But one of the big differences I found was that the teacher would not try to make sure that everybody understood. The teacher would teach something and move on. This shift, it requires us to understand the issues involved. And to me, this is not a repudiation of merit. What I am arguing is not that merit is not important. Merit is extremely important. Having a society in which role allocation is on abilities rather than birth is extremely important but we have to understand that I cannot start off with a template that only 5% will have ability. I have to work with everybody and then see who has what. And leaving aside, of course, the other question: Do I want a structure in which only 10% will eventually get to the top? Or do I want a structure in which there is a different system of distribution of roles? That is another kind of question. It means: What kind of economy do I want?"



Amman Madan

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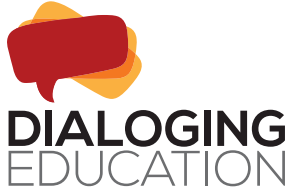
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EPISODE 12 MARCH 2015

Poverty and Education in the time of Right to Education

In conversation with Jyotsna Jha

*Poverty and its effects on education have been studied in some detail worldwide. However, in recent years, the focus on school education has ignored the ways in which poverty affects participation in schooling. In this conversation with Jyotsna Jha, co-author of the book *Elementary Education for the Poorest and Other Deprived Groups*, we talk about this tenacious link. Based on a study conducted in 2005, this book explores the various ways in which poverty affects school participation. With data from across India, this book is a useful starting point in this conversation where Jyotsna Jha talks about the need to deliberate upon poverty and education at a time when elementary education has been legislated as a fundamental right.*

Vivek Vellanki (VV): *Let us begin with your book, *Elementary Education for the Poorest and Other Deprived Groups*, in which you argue for a need to engage with issues of poverty while discussing participation in elementary education. What is the connection between the two, and why do you think it is important to examine elementary education?*

Jyotsna Jha (JJ): Dhir Jhingran and I decided to explore the relationship between poverty and education at a time when everybody was saying that poverty was no longer an issue. We felt it was very simplistic to assume that poverty was not an issue in education participation at the elementary stage. We also felt that, on the other hand, to say that poverty was the reason for non-participation would also be a very simplistic statement. And therefore what we tried to do was to explore the relationship in a manner that would help us understand how poverty interacts with education and how it unfolds; the different manner in which it impacts the family and

the child, which in turn impacts schooling. That was the whole premise with which we began, and in a way what we wanted to understand. We realised that we were correct in saying that poverty and participation in schooling is definitely connected. But just to say that is not enough, it is also the different facets of poverty which must be understood.

For example, at a similar level of poverty, there could be two families in two locations behaving very differently vis-a-vis education of their children. So we tried to basically understand the processes that help them behave differently. And there we felt that, for example, livelihood choices have an implication even if the income level remains the same. So it is possible that families that migrate at times have greater cash in hand as compared to families who are more stable. Even with less cash, the latter can send their children to school more regularly. And therefore, children belonging to migrating families are more vulnerable in that sense.

VV: The data from your study also indicate that school participation is dependent on various other identities such as gender, caste and religion, and these seem to override the economic position of children's families. Could you tell us a little about this?

JJ: I would say that these interact with poverty rather than override, and what actually overrides in a particular situation is different. But as researchers, our job is to understand the trends, and understand how they interact so that we can have solutions. And there we felt that again if we disassociate poverty from these identities, we will not understand it completely.

“When you see a systemic effort to not sustain say Urdu as a language, not promote it, not encourage it, using state public money, then you take it as an assault on your identity and you feel insecure.”

So, for example, a Dalit family in a majority Dalit village actually responds differently as compared to a Dalit family that lives in a minority Dalit village. The concentration matters; the sense of subjugation, the sense of powerlessness changes. If you are in the majority, you behave very differently, and the same thing holds true for Muslims. Muslims in UP behave differently, say, in comparison to Muslims in Maharashtra. There again, social movements among Muslims have taken a different direction, say in Maharashtra or Kerala as compared to UP. And then the symbols are important. For example, in our study, it was very clear that Muslims from UP and Bihar kept raising the issue of Urdu. Urdu, more than anything else, is a symbol. You know it is a language associated with Muslims, and therefore they also start seeing it as that. However, in reality, a large number of Hindu writers have historically written in Urdu and continue to do so. Yet the association is so strong that it is part of your identity. And when you see a systemic effort to not sustain say Urdu as a language, not promote it, not encourage it, using state public money, then you take it as an assault on your identity and you feel insecure. So the fact that you know that Urdu medium schools are not there, or that Urdu is not taught as a language, seems an insult to your identity or as an indifference of the state towards

your identity. So these are the ways in which poverty interacts with other identities. And we basically try to understand these ways so that policy can have an answer and respond.

VV: That makes understanding school participation really complex. You write, “Children seldom remain out of school for only one reason.” What responses did parents and children draw in relation to participation in school?

JJ: Now I won't remember what exactly they said. It was a while ago. But I remember what emerged was that there are various things working in combination; social norms in particular. For example, the commonly held perception that in the south of India more children attend school as compared to the east of India. One major difference between these two areas was the social norms attached to education. Whether they are poor or not, in the south of India, everybody sends their children to school up to a particular point. This did not exist necessarily in all parts of the east of India.

Now even in that situation, something suddenly happens. In our study, health emerged as a major reason. Since the public health system is so weak and delivery so poor, the moment you have one incident of illness where the care of a family member demands more money, it becomes the reason for withdrawal of a child from school. We found that very common. It was not only health that was the cause of concern. The child was already vulnerable because the family was barely surviving and still sending their child to school. Suddenly, a crisis came, which pushed her or him out. So basically, it is a combination of factors, and how it operates is not something that is possible to theorize completely. Equally important is to acknowledge that poverty limits participation but school is important. In fact, it makes schooling even more important. And I mean if I bring it down to a personal level, I happened to attend a government school during my childhood. I always feel that I came with social capital. I had an educated, literate environment at home. My home was full of books and full of discussions on all kinds of issues, right from local to global. Therefore, my needs from

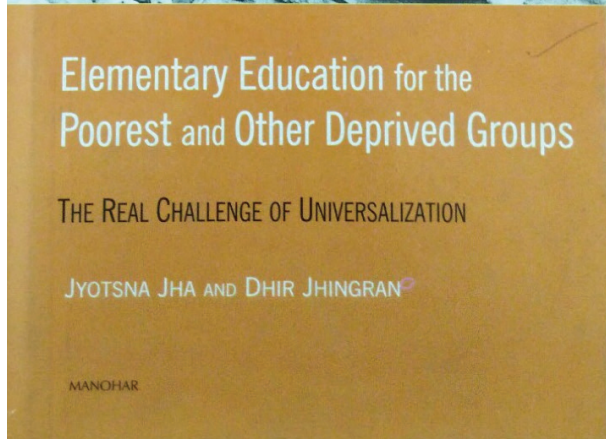
the school were much less as compared to children who are now attending government schools. They do not have that environment at home; the school has to provide that. Our effort actually was to illustrate that the school has to understand that these issues are important – the issues of identity, the issues of poverty – so that they can counter and respond.

VV: Within public imagination and discourse, there is an effort to sideline this complexity. There is a preponderance of the image of an out-of-school child as being involved in child labour. You have also written that it is a narrow interpretation, and children's vulnerability to crisis needs to be viewed as a reason for child labour. Why do you say this?

JJ: It is more complex than that because if you start viewing all children who are out of school as child labour, it is simplistic. While I respect that position, I do think that it is a strategic position rather than a well-argued position. For example, organizations like MV foundation take that position. As you know, these families are sending their children for earning, and therefore they are not sending them to school. Now, if we continue to hold that position, we will not look at all the other aspects. We miss out on something. For example, what does school not do? There is lack in school. The [government] school functioned well till the point middle class was using it. This was when the students and children all came from the same class. It worked well. When the middle class withdrew from sending their children to government schools, what happened was that the teachers continued to come from the same class and children came with much more diversity. They brought in different kinds of languages; they came

from different kinds of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. The teachers were at a loss, and the school could not respond.

If you talk to teachers, they usually say, "Oh, the students don't come regularly, and therefore they cannot learn." Now that is not the solution. It is possible that they do not come to school regularly. However, unless you understand why they do not come regularly, what is it that will make them come regularly, and if they do not come then how is it that we have to tailor our mode of interactions and learning, we will not find a solution. And therefore, you have to get out of this mode of blaming each other—parents saying that teachers do not teach anything, and teachers saying that parents do not send their children regularly—in order to find a solution.



VV: But is there some kind of common agreement that the government is not doing enough, both from the parents' side and the teachers' side?

JJ: No, teachers actually say that the government is doing enough. Teachers, I think, always blame parents. That has been my experience. They always blame parents, and I have rarely found them blaming the government. And parents always blame teachers. I think both are misplaced. Both have to make an effort to understand each other. I also think that we do not engage with parents enough. Even with the whole issue of teaching in the mother tongue, I think the fact that everybody wants English medium is fair enough. They see English as a means of power. You and I can speak English, and then we go and tell them, "No, no, it is important that you learn in your mother tongue." They do not understand that. I think that they are capable of understanding if we reconceptualize how we approach them.

VV: Your study also looks at differences within infrastructure and facilities in school. What kinds of differences did you notice, and how did these influence participation? It is not just poverty in the sense of family and other things; infrastructure is also a consideration, isn't it?

JJ: I still have some pictures in my mind from that study, and from my engagement with the field in later years as well. One thing that stands out is that the socio-economic status matches the infrastructure status. So it could have undergone some changes because of heavy investment in infrastructure but what happens is that if you have a population that is more demanding and powerful, the infrastructure seems to be better. The power can come from caste; not necessarily the upper caste but the dominant caste. The number of teachers appears adequate which leads to a more acceptable pupil-teacher ratio (PTR). So I am almost sure that if you take the top 5 percent of schools with the best infrastructure (including the PTR), and the lowest; and map them to the socio-economic status of the students, you will find a correspondence. There is a correlation, and I think it is because of powerlessness. Because you are powerless, nobody is bothered. The popular belief is that, "those students do not

go to schools regularly, so why invest there? They are not interested in education. They will start grazing their cattle, and the girls will get married, so why invest?" This kind of an attitude and disparity in provisioning exists even today. Since the study, I have also heard things like this: "Oh now the government has done everything. There is a Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, and still the children are not coming, what else do you do?"

VV: One of the biggest policy changes since your study has been in the implementation of the Right to Education (RTE) Act, and within it is the promise of 'free schooling for all' but the interesting thing in your study is that you draw attention towards the cost of schooling despite education being free. This, you contend, has an influence on participation. Could you tell us a little about this, and share your thoughts on how this might be looked at in the light of the RTE?

JJ: Cost is definitely an issue. I think that it is still an issue despite the RTE because cost, as is well known and as we have also argued, is not only about tuition fee. Cost is about everything else too – clothing, food, the survival of not only the child but also of the whole family. And participation is linked with that. Rural India is highly cash-starved. I think Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) has made some difference. That is my impression from field visits, and also going by some of the research studies. Despite the NREGA, cash starvation still exists and affects schooling. But the biggest issue that has emerged

"Too much attention has also been paid to the 25 percent reservation in private schools...the way things are happening, it is making neither private schools nor public schools responsible."

since the enactment of the RTE is that most state governments look at it as a scheme than as a fundamental right that has to be assured. I think that the RTE too centralized and scheme-bound. There is need to look at it afresh in order to ensure its implementation. Too much attention has also been paid to the 25 percent reservation in private schools. Perhaps I am a little tentative in whatever I am

saying because when the act came I did feel that to make the private schools responsible was a good move. But the way things are happening, it is making neither private schools nor public schools responsible. That is the problem. So private schools are not even ready to take it up as their responsibility. They are adhering to the reservation more because it is a forced measure and there is a problem in that. And the government also has not tried to engage them in a discussion where it is transferred as a responsibility. And I do not know whether this will happen, given the commercial nature of private schools. So it is not only the private effort but also the question of the commercial nature of schools. And that is a bigger issue. With such emphasis on private schools, the government, rather than putting all its efforts and improving government schools to compete with private schools, is slowly withdrawing. That is why people keep citing western countries. At least the western countries I have lived in and I know about, they all take pride in the fact that so many private schools have now become public schools. Now if you have that kind of competition, then you have no issues, but you need a different mindset and I also think that it is actually a social issue. It is not only the government, I actually think that our middle class has become so self-centred and myopic that they have lost the leadership that they used to give to the society through the 1950s to 1970s. I think it is a big problem that needs to be tackled.

“The government, rather than putting all its efforts and improving government schools to compete with private schools, is slowly withdrawing.”

VV: Are you planning to go back to this study, and look at what the changes are?

JJ : I definitely want to. I am looking for some kind of funding or even some minimum support. I would like to go back to those areas, and spend some time there, two years from now.



Jyotsna Jha

Jyotsna Jha is currently director of Centre for Budget and Policy Studies (CBPS). She has a PhD in Economics from Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). Her research primarily focuses on education and gender. She has worked as an advisor of Education at the Commonwealth Secretariat, London, for five years. She has actively worked with educational policy planners, administrators, teachers and professionals at various levels both nationally and internationally.

Data and Image Sources:

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Rethinking Education and Childhood



EPISODE 4 MARCH 2013

Teaching Science: Open the lab, pick up the trash

In conversation with Arvind Gupta

One would usually find Arvind Gupta in a kurta, plugging away at everyday objects, busy turning them into toys. He has dedicated his life to popularising science and his work has reached several parts of the world, thanks to the numerous books he has written and his videos. We talk to him about his journey into education, how he stumbled upon making the famous Matchstick Meccano and what drives him to continue doing the fascinating work he is known for.

Vivek Vellanki (VV) : *Let's begin by discussing your journey with science, education and teaching, in the 1970's when you were studying at IIT Kanpur. How did it all start?*

Arvind Gupta (AG) : Well, I came to IIT Kanpur from a very small town, Bareilly in Uttar Pradesh. My parents had never been to school. My mother came from a highly educated family. Though she never went to school because she was a girl but her brothers had a very high level of education. Society discriminates very badly against women. She understood the value of education, so she sent all of her children to the best school possible. In 1970, I appeared for my 12th standard examinations from the Government Intermediate College. I did very well, I topped my District and I came to IIT Kanpur. It opened up a new world for me.

Coming from a very small town, IIT Kanpur was truly world class; a library which opened from 8 in the morning to 12 at night. We could borrow 10 books. There was this beautiful computer centre and a wonderful peer group and faculty, most of them trained in the U.S. So this opened up a vast and a very challenging

new world full of opportunities for a boy from a small town. I went to a convent school. You could see the kind of contradictions in IIT Kanpur. The USA pumped in 200 crores in setting up this engineering college but there were a lot of contradictions. There were two major schools – the Opportunity School and the Kendriya Vidyalaya. But the children of the mess servants or the maalis (gardeners) could not get admission in these schools.

So some of our students set up an organisation called 'Sahyog'. We would go from room to room collecting five rupees and with a plea to help a child go to school. Many people would slam the door on our faces but some people were extremely kind and they donated money. Six of us would volunteer and would bunk one day to go and teach in this school. This was my first experience of teaching children and my first few steps into education. A good institute has a way of seeping into the skin without you knowing it. I think this is the hallmark of a great institute - not just the technical stuff that you study but the wonderful exposure you get. A worldwide exposure! So much for engineering! At that time it was a five year

engineering course, but for the first eight semesters, we had to do a course in the social sciences, philosophy, sociology, development and underdevelopment, logic etc. I think that makes you not a unidimensional person but you can look at various problems from various angles and a slightly more holistic view.

VV : *You have written a lot about turning trash into toys, and one of your most famous books **Matchstick Models and Other Science Experiments** has been reprinted in several languages. The use of matchsticks and valve tube to make models is not only fascinating but opens up endless possibilities. Can you tell us how you came up with this idea, and what are some of the interesting designs that children have made?*



AG : In 1972, Dr. Anil Sadgopal was invited to IIT Kanpur as a guest lecturer. I was a backbencher listener, and here was a person who did his PhD from California Institute of Technology.

He was a molecular biologist and worked with a leading cutting edge institute –TIFR, worked with Prof. Obaid Siddiqui, who is a fellow of the Royal Society and he chucked his job to start a science teaching programme in the heart of India. The truth was that our village schools have no science labs. Children learnt science by mugging up definitions, formulae – and in exams they just spit it out! Children never dirtied their hands. Dr. Sadgopal thought that this was a very mutilating way of doing science.

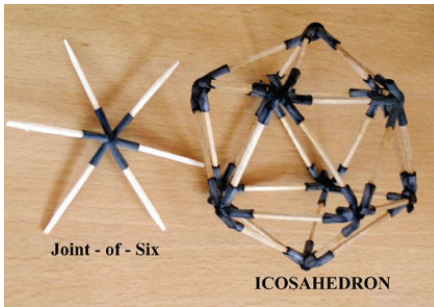
“Our village schools have no science labs. Children learnt science by mugging up definitions, formulae – and in exams they just spit it out! Children never dirtied their hands.”

In 1975, I finished my engineering and joined Tata Motors. I used to wear green overalls and weld, or shape or work on a lathe machine. After two years, I just realised that I was not born to make trucks. Often you don't know what you want to do in life but it's good enough to know what you don't want to do. I remembered listening to Dr. Anil Sadgopal, and I spent a month in Kishore Bharti and then later on I took a year off. Tata Motors gave me leave for a year, and I spent this time in a very poor village.

There was only a weekly bazaar. People would spread their wares on the roadside and I thought I was going to spend a year there so I went to the market and just bought every trinket. There were some mirrors, bangles, little boxes, other trinkets, and while I was getting my bicycle inflated I found this cycle valve tube hanging. It was 10 paise per foot, so I asked them to give me 10 feet.

I am fascinated with materials and in the first month I was doing some experiments with matchsticks. One day, willy-nilly, a matchstick went very snugly into a cycle valve tube and I put another matchstick from the other side so it was a flexible joint-of-two. This was the beginning. In the first month, I made a lot of two-dimensional shapes. You could make triangles and rectangles and octagons and pentagons and then you could poke a hole and make a joint of three, put two across and make

a joint-of-four, joint-of-six, you could make a whole lot of three dimension shapes, and this was using material which was absolutely local! If you don't have a matchbox, you can't light the home fire. If there is one mechanical contraption used in our six lakh villages, it is the bicycle, so these [cycle valve tube and matchsticks] were local and thus was designed the very famous Matchstick Mecanno. In 1985, I wrote my first book and it found a very good response. The book got translated into over 12 languages. It did very well because there was something original in it. It was not a cut and paste effort. It was something which reflected our own reality – had the smell of the soil.



VV : So now you have been called the toy maker, the toy inventor and the genius that converts trash into toys. In this process you have managed to disengage school science from the traditional lab, and attempted to locate it in everyday objects. Why is such an engagement important according to you, and does this have any implications on how we approach science in our schools?

AG : Well, I have visited 2500 schools in my own country, and worked in 20 countries. Every school I go to, I insist on seeing the science lab because of the deep fascination that I have for the subject. Every school, irrespective of the label whether it is a municipal school, a village school, a big international school, irrespective of that, you can see burette and pipettes and if you have a perceptive eye you could see a grime of dust on all the equipment because all this stuff was meant for the inspectors and not the children, which is utterly shameful.

It's a shame – the way we approach science.

Often curriculums are highly political and narrow. Life is much broader. Before a child comes to school, a child has done a hell of a lot of science. The school has no way of

“Before a child comes to school, a child has done a hell of a lot of science.”

knowing what a child has done and we have this standard boring curriculum which

we try to plaster onto every child but there is so much science involved in cooking which the child is party to, in transportation, in walking, in engaging with society. Everywhere, if you open the faucet and the water comes out, there is a hell of a lot of science in water, where it comes from, and how it flows.

Children are doing science all the time without being told. We thought if we can take science out from this very dry, dreary classroom kind of a boundary and put it back in the hands of the children with empty matchboxes or refills or newspapers, bicycle tubes, things of everyday use can become things to doing science experiments, the children would take it in a much better way.

VV : You have been engaged with popularising science and have worked extensively in this pursuit. You have a lot of books and a lot of videos to your credit but there is a question that precedes this –why is popularising science important?

AG : Well, we live in a democratic country. We are not an authoritarian state. In a democratic country, the fruits of science must reach the most marginalised sections, the poorest sections of the society. It's not that I am just an advocate for science but I think it would be extremely nice if more children wrote poetry, created art and wrote great stories, studied literature because science is not a holy cow at all. Scientists have made the atom bomb or the hydrogen bombs and it's all so shameful.

“In a democratic country, the fruits of science must reach the most marginalised sections, the poorest sections of the society.”

Today more than half the research in the world is war research. So science needs to be faulted on these points. But having said this, science has also provided solutions to several everyday issues; suppose there is a water pump and the water pump is the safest way of drinking water anywhere in rural India because if you have exposed water bodies, they get polluted but if water comes from 200 feet below the ground then it is relatively filtered and relatively safer for drinking. So everyone must understand how a pump works. We have a book called Pumps from the dump and we have thirty pumps on our website. We are flooded with letters every day from teachers across the world including American teachers, and they say for the first time their children have actually understood how pumps work by making these pumps.

VV : *In your writing you have often indicated that current school systems, text books and the pedagogic approach are all detrimental to such a pursuit. Can you discuss some of the issues with the current school systems, specific to India?*

AG : I praise the NCERT curriculum, because when Professor Krishna Kumar was the director of the NCERT, I think something extremely positive was done, for instance millions of children who study in municipal schools or village schools, probably the text books would be the only book they would ever read in their lives, there would be no story books, no supplementary material. He [Krishna Kumar] said if we can take the best people in the country, the best writers, and the best illustrators and pour creative energy into our school books, we would be playing our small delta role and this is what he attempted to do in the five years.

Today the NCERT books, trust me, have set bench marks for the private sector. So this is what the NCERT could do and they did it. They have done very positive things but there is a hangover from our colonial times with the Chalk-and-Talk method, the lecture method, where children mug up and spit it out. These are still very much in force.

Science is like swimming. It doesn't matter if you have a PhD in swimming but unless you

actually jump into water and splash your hands, you are never going to learn swimming and the same is very true of science. You may learn all the formulae, all the definitions correctly but unless you mess around, dirty your hands, make actual models, relate them to theory to see what the results are, your knowledge would be incomplete; it would be one sided.

I think we need a pedagogical shift. I think there have been the right noises; all progressive schools are talking about the project method. You can also see the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme, which was I think the most pioneering science experiment. It was the largest activity-based science programme in the country where 1500 village schools were involved, over 100,000 children were studying science. This was shut by the Madhya Pradesh government, which is utterly shameful.

“Science is like swimming. It doesn't matter if you have a PhD in swimming but unless you actually jump into water and splash your hands, you are never going to learn swimming.”

VV : *You have spoken of the state of higher education as well and children's progress into secondary grades. In one of your interviews you said, “Today the IIT coaching industry alone is pegged at Rs.10,000 crores. These shops bludgeon the children's intelligence and creativity with the connivance of their parents, the brutality must end.” Can you talk to us about this?*

AG : I feel very strongly about this. These figures are actually outdated, the industry might be much larger because anyone who wants to get into IIT has to go through these coaching shops, these sweat shops. Earlier it was after your tenth standard exams that, you went to a coaching institute and you went for two years but now they are trying to catch them from the 6th or 7th standard. They are put through these horrendous sweat shops and the children's entire sense of curiosity, figuring things out gets lost.

I can talk from my experience. 40 years ago, there were no coaching institutes. We were just bright children, and we were curious to understand how this world works. Even at the

IIT, we did very interesting things. We could see that the mess servants' children couldn't go to school so we built a school for them. If there was any injustice, we raised our voice against it but I think nowadays because the parents have invested so much into their children and in the coaching institutes to enter the IIT, so they go with a very clear intention and a vengeance just to crack certain answers and go abroad and many of them go into finance and areas not even remotely related to their training but because they are bright they are able to do it.

Earlier the undergraduate programmes in the IITs were for five years and there were a lot of social science courses. If you remember, Professor Yashpal committee which was set up to give recommendations on how to make the IIT education slightly broader, give them a wider perspective. The Committee suggested that IITs must have artists in residence, sculptors in residence and within the IIT curriculum the social science aspect should be considered very seriously. You see, it's the social science which gives us values for society and if you look at any problem, the technical aspect is only small; there is a much greater political aspect to any problem.

“You see, it's the social science which gives us values for society and if you look at any problem, the technical aspect is only small; there is a much greater political aspect to any problem.”

VV : Moving to what you have been doing about this problem, *your website* has been a great source of books and reading material. This emanates from your own strong belief in access to text and material as being integral to the process of education. Can you talk to us about this?

AG : Well, there is a slogan on my website, and which has been stolen from a young Oxfam poster of the 70s, it says “Somewhere there are engineers helping others fly faster than sound but where are the engineers helping those who must live on the ground.” This brings us very close to the contradictions of our times. I have been to thousands of schools and everywhere I have found that the libraries are locked. There may be a nice principal or a librarian but it was closed in most of the places. Even if there was a library, the books were not accessible to a child. Modern technology enables us to share

the world's greatest riches almost for free.

Project Gutenberg was a great dream, and they have this slogan “A million books for a billion people”. Each and every book in the world, in every language, can be digitized and made available for free. This was pedestrian technology, 10 years ago. This is what, in a very humble way, I have attempted through my website. Passionate books on education, environment, science, mathematics, peace, great children's literature from across the world, we get them translated into Hindi, into Marathi, into several languages. Then we make PDFs and upload them on our website. Today there are 4000 books on our website (www.arvindguptatoys.com), and everyday thousands of books are downloaded. This makes us feel a little happy because digital books are the future.

Being born in India, a Hindu, this is like my atma. I don't know what atma or paramatma is but once I die this website will be floating in cyber space somewhere. It will be a true

manifestation of my atma. There are thousands of books in our very rich languages. We have 22 official languages and many books are not being

reprinted because they are unviable for the publisher but these books can be digitized and they can be put on our website. Today you have to wait 60 years after the death of the author before the book is in the public domain. These copyright laws were made in the cave ages, the dark ages. The world has moved far beyond that and we need to reconsider them. Books which are 20 years old or out of print should be digitized and they should be put on the website for the benefit of all the children and humanity at large.

VV : You have a deep love for children's literature as well, and I think we should end this interview with your favourite book – one that you think all of us should definitely read.

AG : One of my favourite books, which I have also translated into Hindi, is Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes. It is based on the

true story of Sadako who was two years old when America dropped the atom bomb on Hiroshima. She was nine kilometers from the epicentre and Sadako survived. After the reconstruction of Hiroshima, she started going to school. She was a very popular girl and one day, several years later when she was practising for the school relay race she started feeling very dizzy and fell down. She was taken to the Red Cross hospital nearby. She was diagnosed with leukemia, blood cancer. She was extremely despondent and then her friend Chizuko came and told her that there is a legend in Japan that if you fold a thousand cranes made using small paper squares, then Gods grant your wish. On the first night, Sadako folded two paper cranes. That was her only hope for living. In six months, she folded 565 cranes and then she passed away.

Today there is an international society of paper cranes. Every year, two crore children fold these paper cranes and they are sent to Hiroshima and this is their message – “This is our prayer, these are our tears. No nuclear war.” Most of our literature is only about war but it is very difficult to find a book on peace in India, so I translated this one and it has come into seven Indian languages. I would very much like to translate many more anti-war books. I love peace and hate wars. This book can be downloaded from the website. I translate books for three hours a day into Hindi. There are more than 150 books in Hindi, which can be downloaded from my website.



Arvind Gupta

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Arvind Gupta has written 25 books on science activities, translated 170 books into Hindi and presented 125 films on science activities on Doordarshan. He has received several honours, including the inaugural National Award for Science Popularization amongst Children (1988) and the Third World Academy of Science Award (2010) for making science interesting for children. He shares his passion for books and toys through his popular website <http://arvindguptatoys.com> and can be contacted at arvindtoys@gmail.com

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Education and Psychology : Rethinking the Tenacious Link

In conversation with Kamala Mukunda

*Have you read about psychologists who experimented on rats and dogs? Kamala Mukunda takes a dig at them in her book *What did you ask at school today?* She makes a compelling case for teachers to pay close attention to psychology and for teacher educators to delve into psychology that can critically inform practice within the classroom. Sharing her own experience with teaching for close to two decades, she talks about the need to move away from standardized assessment and towards “authentic assessment”.*

Vivek Vellanki (VV): *In your book *What Did You Ask At School Today?* you write that as teachers and educators we must pay close attention to psychology. Why do you say that?*

Kamala Mukunda (KM): I have been a school teacher for the last 18 years. I teach middle school and senior school. But before that, I was studying for a PhD in educational psychology and, at that time, I was all set for a career in research and so on. Then, by a series of chance happenings, I got this chance to work in a fantastic school in Bangalore, and I was hooked. I just never looked back, I never went back to the research life. I was so happy being a teacher. So over the first few years enjoying teaching, I kind of thought I had left my life [in research] far behind. And then gradually I discovered, in discussions with colleagues, other teachers, parents, and even in my own work, that the same themes and questions that had excited me as research student in psychology were coming up again and again. Of course, in much more immediate and concrete ways!

Kamala V. Mukunda



**WHAT
DID
YOU
ASK
AT
SCHOOL
TODAY?**

 **A Handbook of Child Learning**

For instance, a teacher would say confidently, that children of this age are not ready for X or Y, or someone else would say I cannot figure it out, how a certain student is so smart but she just cannot get math. And so questions about motivation, development, intelligence, and all these questions would come in that 5-10 minutes tea-break, how it is in the middle of classes, and it would be on the tip of my tongue [to say something!]. I thought: Can I share something from all that I have studied and read? But how do you summarize decades of research and all these interconnected ideas? How do you do it in the five-minute tea break?

So almost out of this frustration, an excited kind of frustration, I said I would start writing. And then I would share it, and if people have time to read, let them read. So I went about it like this, there were questions that had come up in daily life, in teaching practice. And then I would connect it in my mind with the whole vast quantity of literature. I would read as much of that as I could get, digest it, and write it. It would have to come through my lens of course, but I would write it in as straightforward and direct a way as was possible. I also tried to keep it simple, but there is a limit beyond which it is not possible to simplify it. If one oversimplifies, that would make it simplistic, and some of these things are very complicated. Then I just felt like there is no point in shortchanging teachers like that, so give them everything that they need to know, and be as straight forward as possible. And yes, that is how the book came about. And I am just so happy over the years to see that people have enjoyed reading it. It has been difficult sometimes; people would say I had to read it with a notebook and a pen next to me. But that is great! Or somebody else will say, I read it along with somebody else. I think that is perfect. It is not a piece of fiction; it does need to be read and reread. Also some people have gone into reading the references and have read more. And I know at least two people who have been inspired to write themselves. I am so happy to hear things like this.

VV: For you, the connection with psychology and education happened because you studied psychology. You write that the connection is also not so obvious, but it is important. So what is the connection there? Why is it important for teachers to look at psychology?

KM: Yes, after all this is the medium of our work, it is the material that we are working with – children’s minds, our own minds, brains! I mean if you were a potter, you would have to understand the medium of clay. No matter what you do, you have to understand the medium, and this is our medium, more than anything else. And I find that in a typical B.Ed course, at least not in the better ones, the treatment of psychology is very dry, and even if it not dry, even if it is exciting, it still does not seem to have any relevance to that first day of school, when you are standing in front of your class. And it should have. The same questions all these professors are sitting there in their departments, and they are working on it, and for whom? It is supposed to be for us teachers to make those connections. It is like if medical researchers were doing research but nothing was translating into medicine, then what would be the use?

VV: In that sense, What Did You Ask At School Today? is not the conventional book on psychology and education.

KM: Yes, it is not.

VV: In the introduction you write, and I know you are taking a dig at some of these researches, “you would not read in this book about the familiar rats running through mazes.” Can you tell us a little bit about the book, and what makes it different?

KM: Yes, actually one earlier thought, as a suggestion from somebody was: Can you write a good textbook for a B.Ed course? But when I started doing that I realized one would have to put in some of those obligatory chapters, you have to put in history, you have to put in methods. As I was doing it I felt, that this might put people off. So I decided to start from the other end, not from the typical textbook point of view but from the questions that come up in teachers’ and parents’ minds. So in that sense, there are things that have not found a place here. There is hardly any methodology except when it makes sense in the context of a particular study, and definitely nothing about the rats and the mazes.

VV: And you have also, in a good way, given emphasis to some of those people who usually

do not find prominence in psychology textbooks.

KM : Yes, that is true. I cannot really defend myself by saying it is a good thing. It is just my choice, not to give too much importance. That is a personal thing I have. Some thinkers in almost every field, and psychology included, tend to become big names, big stars, and they come up with their particular theory. I mean they were brilliant people, so I definitely do not

want to deny that. But the other mode of finding out about things interests me more. When

there are many people whose names do not become very big, but they are all working in the same field, and are also confirming each other's work, I find this very valuable. So of course, Piaget, Montessori, and Vygotsky are all brilliant people, but then there are like hundred people today working on information processing or cognitive psychology and socio-cultural theory, and that work does not throw up big names, but I find their work very valuable.

VV : *So talking about the medium, you addressed the issue of learning and teaching from the lens of child development. You write, teaching is a particular human skill, what do you mean?*

KM : Yes, this has its roots in something called evolutionary psychology. So let me put it in a simple way: human beings are born very immature as compared to a new-born of any other animal species. We have very few instincts at birth. But we are born with a tremendous capacity to learn, which also means that we can learn to fit into nearly any environment. So this is a great thing about human beings. This capacity to learn is actually life long and going hand in hand with it is the instinct to teach, the tendency on the part of the adults and the older peers in the environment to teach. We do it to an extent that no other animal does. And then we have, in addition to this, language, both spoken and written, which expands the scope of teaching and learning even more. So, in that sense, it is a very unique thing. So then, a child does not have to rediscover everything right from scratch. Lots of things can be conveyed and taught, and you can sit

on others' shoulders and you can go further.

VV : *But this has thrown up some problems too, with the whole set up of the school and other changes in recent times; there is a growing emphasis on measuring learning. You have dedicated a complete chapter to discussing this. What are some of the issues with the current approach?*

KM : This is a field full of issues, so where does one start? Lots of people have problems with

assessment. One of the main problems is the way we look at it. We look at it as something that happens at the end of learning, rather than on the way. I am sure many would have heard of the difference between formative and summative assessment. That is one big thing that we still have in our country, the feeling that assessment comes at the end. That is completely useless in a way because what it should be is a way to keep adjusting your teaching and learning. So that is one issue. The other thing is that, yes, it comes at the end because it is used as a way to sort people, it is used as a way of deciding as to who gets the next set of resources and who does not. At least, if that were being done in a sincere way with integrity, you could say it has a purpose, but even that is being done so poorly. Just last week, there was this whole scandal of cut-offs at a university; it is so meaningless. I saw a young boy coming in for admission, he had 88.5% and the cut off was 90%. There is no conceivable difference between him, and the one who gets it. But it is as if we have to just create an elaborate machinery to come up with an arbitrary number to salve our conscience, to say yes-you-deserve-it to one person and to say no-you-don't to another. So that is another huge issue with assessment.

These are two broad issues with assessment but there are many issues that one needs to address while creating good assessment. Even if you have formative assessment, something that goes along as you are learning, even that has to be well created. People are not trained or taught to create good tests. I would

say that of teachers as well. I do not think we teach them how to ask a good question to figure out if their students have learnt.



VV : *You have suggested an alternative paradigm of assessment, “authentic assessment”, and you say that this is possible. Can you tell us more about this?*

KM : Yes, here I will have to be a little specific to my context, and I do not know to what extent this will work in other contexts. But the way we do it at our school [Centre for Learning, Bengaluru] is that we have a small class size, so we sit in a circle in such a way that I can see every student’s notebook, or if they hold it up, I can see it. And we throw questions at each other, so there is a sense of being in touch with each child’s learning every moment of the way. So that is one level of assessment. It is going on all the time. But it is in my head, it is not visible to the parents or other teachers. The second aspect of authentic assessment I think is for me as a teacher to sit down and think about the student every few months, may be six months and collect my thoughts, about their learning. And this, I think, will have to be qualitative, descriptive, in words; and in order to be useful, it has to involve a dialogue with the person I am communicating this to. If I am telling a student, ‘look, this is what I think about what you have done so far,’ it has to be back and forth. If I am telling another teacher or if I am telling a parent, we have parent meetings, report meetings, this is my own experience. Another way to make it authentic, which is in the research mode,

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“When you make a test, even the items that you put into the test, somebody, some individual subject is thinking about the items, and putting it in. Where is objectivity then?”
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is to create portfolios. To have a selection of student’s work over a year included, it could be his or her best work by the way, and it need not be a random collection. In fact, it should be your best work that you put forward, that you put in a portfolio. That gives anyone who reads it such a good idea, such a multi-dimensional idea of a student’s learning. So these are some of the examples, apart from others such as the use of rubrics, and so on, but I am just being brief.

VV : *What you are suggesting moves towards a more subjective assessment of learning, in the sense of where each child is doing it differently. In the current push and yearning for objectivity, could it be seen as a stumbling block?*

KM : It could be seen as a stumbling block but if I look at the alternative, which is objective, number-based, that seems to be removed of any meaning. For me personally, if I am in discussion with somebody, the subjectivity is not a problem anymore, because I am in dialogue with you about it, so you can ask me what I really mean, you can even say, “but I do not think so, I think he is like this.” We can even go back and forth, to me that is far more preferable to having something that is so-called ‘objective’, because, see when you make a test, even the items that you put into the test, somebody, some individual subject is thinking about the items, and putting it in. Where is objectivity then?

VV : *But there is a whole movement that is happening across the world and in India as well. Standardised tests such as PISA and TIMMS, most of these are trying to create a space where the child sitting in say United States, and a child sitting in India is going to answer the same question. What do you think about it?*

KM : I would first ask, what is the aim of this? What is the purpose? Why are we trying to equalize across such wide boundaries? I mean I would even wonder why we have to do it within India. The less standardizing and norming we do, the better in my opinion. But why are we trying to do this? Is it not a sense of measuring up, comparing and feeling relieved

or feeling anxious that I am not measuring up, or yes I am better than X. I do not know what any of this has to do with learning—finding out what I love to do in life, and what is it I have to do with all that. My counter question to this would be: Why are you doing it? I think it is just to feel secure, “Yes, we did well,” and when we don’t do well, as we did in India, then to feel anxious, and then to give excuses.

VV : Your book has been in print for a couple of years. What is the most unusual response that you have received for this book?

KM : I do not know whether it was unusual but I would say the most moving. See for me throughout reading and writing it, I had this feeling that I am speaking to, like a sisterhood or a brotherhood of teachers. But then I always wondered—will it reach them? Will it physically reach them? And will it speak to them? So every time I hear that it has spoken to somebody, I just feel so happy. Recently I was in Dharamsala, and somebody from the Tibetan administration in exile who works with the Tibetan schools showed me this box of hundred books, and he said, “I am taking it to Ladakh next week, because there are teachers in these remote areas in Ladakh, and I want to share it with them.” And I thought, “Wow! It will reach Ladakh. In my lifetime, I might not get to go there, but at least the book has.” So things like that make me feel very happy, and also the fact that it has been now translated into Hindi, Kannada, Tamil, and Malayalam. The more it can reach teachers, the better I feel.

VV : Are you planning to write any more books?

KM : Now that is a hard question. Instead of writing a book, I have decided to get into writing modules or helping with curricula for teacher education. I may be writing, I am still writing, but they are not coming together as a book yet. There are just individual pieces or chapters. I do not know what the future will hold for all that. I like this idea of open access so I am more interested in that. Doing things like this interview, for instance.



Kamala Mukunda



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Kamala Mukunda is the author of the book What Did You Ask At School Today? She currently teaches at Centre for Learning, Bengaluru.

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<http://i0.wp.com/cfl.in/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/campus1.jpg?resize=300%2C189>

<http://i2.wp.com/cfl.in/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/newsletter-2015-final.jpg?resize=980%2C600>

Kamala Mukunda photo - <http://cfl.in/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Kamala-Mukunda.jpg>

Unlocking Shelves: Fostering a Culture of Reading and Inclusion Through Open Libraries

In conversation with Usha Mukunda

Usha Mukunda identifies herself as a librarian. She has been successful in challenging the stereotypical image of the librarian as being serious, angry and detached. A conversation with her will also convince you that a radical rethinking of the library space is imperative—one in which everyone is welcome, and the shelves are all open. Don't you believe us? Read on...

Vivek Vellanki (VV) : *I am going to start with a clichéd question, why do we want children to read?*

They need to hear multiple stories, multiple voices, and that is how they keep that spark alive. I feel that is one very important thing.

Usha Mukunda (UM): You said you have a clichéd question! Well, there is a clichéd answer to this. And I think most people trot it out all the time. It is a wonderful skill. It is a life skill. It inspires, it gives information, it makes you think. I mean, though they are true I would like to go a little deeper to more fundamental things. Many of us have seen children at construction work sites. I am sure you might have stopped to look at them, and you will have noticed that they have an amazing creative ability to play with whatever materials are available. That has always fascinated me. They are making up games, they are doing things, probably imagining a lot. Now what happens is that at a certain point as they grow up, they either go to a school—which is also a dulling thing—or they do not. So there is a kind of stagnation at that point. I would say for most children what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has said holds true—that there is a danger of a single story!

The second is, it is like communing with the human spirit to read. Because you are reading and touching something that some other human has written from anywhere in the world, from any background, from any kind of situation. And for me that is very important. There is a quote by Julian Barnes. He says, "Nothing can replace the subtle communion between absent author and present reader." Somehow that touches me a lot because that is how I experienced books. It was an absent author but very present for me, as I read.



The third thing, which I also feel is very important, is that we talk about reading as exposing children to multiple things in the outer world but there is an inner world of the child, and it is very important that that grows and gets kind of clarified for oneself. And reading does that! There is a space for reflection, for introspection. This is as they get older. However, even young children have an amazing ability to reflect and ponder.

So these three things, I feel, are very crucial, which is why I feel reading is important.

"It is like communing with the human spirit to read. Because you are reading and touching something that some other human has written from anywhere in the world, from any background, from any kind of situation."

VV : In one of your articles¹, you have articulated a very interesting and provocative distinction between children's writers and writers for children. What is this distinction, and why do you think this is important?

UM : When I wrote it, it was so clear in my mind, what I meant by children's writers and writers for children. Now when I look at it, though this distinction is still very clear for me, I think I should think of some other way to call these two categories.

The children's writers, I think, are those who write from their own lives. They are in the book. They are not outside looking in. They are part of the story; they are part of whatever the child is imbibing, let us say, or reading.

Whereas the other lot, sorry to say; there are a whole bunch of them, who write down for children. They write what they think children will like, so there is not too much respect for children's intelligence and imagination. They assume they know what a child would like, and they dumb it down to some extent. Enid Blyton is one good example. I know she turned out hundreds of books and people still read them, but there is a kind of paucity in her characters, in her language, so it is like, yes, this is what children would like, and then you proceed to write. But there are

children's writers who write with honesty. I would say, with authenticity, either from their own childhood or from a memory of something very vivid that had happened.

I would also like to say that they [children's writers] write from a place of equality. They are writing for the child in themselves perhaps. I don't know if that is difficult to understand. But this is what I feel speaks, that is what speaks to children. When it is not contrived, you know. Now a large number of books have come out, because of the Right to Education, and with the insistence on having libraries, books where people have decided that they know what children will like. And that horrible-horrible thing—moral stories.

VV : So do you think in that sort of a distinction there is also an essentialising aspect to it? Where you essentialise the way you think children would read or what they should read. Do you think there is a bit of that?

UM : Absolutely, I think there is a lot of that, from an adult's perspective of what a child should read, should be thinking, should be doing, and then you almost kind of condition the child, which is a pity because it happens so subtly.

VV : In selecting reading for children, one often comes across this argument, the book is too harsh, it is too violent, or it deals with 'adult concerns'—injustice, inequality, discrimination. You support the view that no subject is inappropriate to discuss with children. Could you tell us a little more?

UM : When you say adult themes like injustice and so on, for a child, injustice is what happens in the school, in the class, on the playground. That is as real for the child as for an adult. So these themes are not far from the child. However, again, I would say that the treatment, the voice has to be true. When an author writes about violence or harshness, the voice has to be true. Then I think the child can relate to it. But I would not throw a child into a book without opening it up a bit. I would ensure that there is space to open up their feelings...their thoughts.

It is not like giving a talk about the book first, not like that because it is then already my perspective on it. I would like to listen to how a child would respond to violence, terrorism or the old bogey of the Reich and so on. It is something that they should not take too casually, nor should it evoke nightmares. Are you familiar with the book *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes*? It is about the horror of Hiroshima. It is written very sensitively for maybe 10 or 11 year olds. You may think how can a 10 or 11 year old comprehend what happened, and accept how it ends in death? But I think that is important to treat death with dignity. Even young children are ready for that. That is where a librarian, or a parent or a teacher can play a very important role. I would say, do not be afraid to bring up themes like this because

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they are already swirling in the child's head.

VV : *You have worked extensively in setting up libraries and supporting institutions towards this goal. Now as a strong advocate of open libraries, could you tell us a little bit about the concept of open libraries, and why you like to support it so much?*

UM : First, let me just take a moment to say something. I want to stress that it is not the experience that counts; it is the freshness which one brings to it. And for me the experiences may be happy memories of some things that worked, of some things with children that took off or not from which I learnt. But it is the freshness that I bring to every encounter, every situation and every activity, which I want to emphasize. Because otherwise people may say, 'oh yeah, she has got vast experience, she can do it'. That can be a burden both for you, and for the child, so let us put that aside.

Then your question was about open libraries. Yes, it has been a very strong reality for me. It

has not been just a concept, maybe because I grew up going to a school library where everything was locked. And I was given a book only during the library period. Anyway, that is a familiar story even now perhaps, so I need not go into it. The main thing I feel is that the spirit of openness—both for the child and for the adult—is important because something else is happening there, apart from the fact that books are on the open shelves, and you can go touch them, you can pull them out, you can look at them. Apart from all that, there is a beginning of trust happening. And that is an important thing for a child to take in or to absorb. So, for me, the open library has been very important, as a builder of responsibility, trust, openness; and open is not just open doors and open covers, but open in the mind too—to what they are reading, how they are reading, open to wheel chair access. Open in every way! Inclusive!

VV : *I can imagine most librarians, at least the ones I have met, cringing at this idea—that there are no locks, no shelves, that children can pick up any book they want. How would you convince some of them to make the shift, especially within schools?*

UM : I think it is a multi-pronged approach. One is that many of them may individually be quite happy to have an open library but they are afraid of the management; they are afraid of being penalized. So we have to work on that level first, which we have.

Through the Karnataka Knowledge Commission, we really brought in this directive that there should be no punishment for children if they lose books, but it does not mean that they can lose them uncaringly or willfully. I think communication with the children is for me the ground. So that is at one level. Then, hopefully the librarian will see that he or she is not a lone ranger. Library activity or a library process is a collaborative thing with teachers, with management, and most importantly with students, so having open access does not become a problem.

There is no need to feel like the whole burden of the world is on my head, and if

I open the cupboard, things will get lost. I can talk to the children about it, about why I am opening it. Why am I afraid? Maybe the librarian can even share that: "I am afraid of opening it because I think you will take it away." Collaboration for me is very important, and on a happy note I should say that there have been a number of government school libraries which have become open libraries.

Since you have talked about my near obsession with open libraries, I want to make a quick point. This is a new learning that has happened for me. I wanted

"The spirit of openness...is important because something else is happening there...you can go touch [the books], you can pull them out, you can look at them... there is a beginning of trust happening."

libraries to be open. And so I have been going around to schools, talking to management, may be persuading them, convincing them. But what I found finally in many schools was that the cupboards were opened but the materials in them were sub-standard. So the children had total access but to what? Horrible, awful books! So for me now, along with the open library, is the quality of the collection. These two have to go hand in hand.

VV : You have shared some interesting experiences where books have come back six months later, a year later. What has been your reaction to a situation like that? How do you respond?

UM : With great happiness! In fact, a hug is what goes with that returning. I know that basically they know I will be happy about it. I am not going to say why, what, because I know that the child would have made sincere efforts to look for the book. There is a process here, it is not that books are lost and I do nothing, and six months later they come. There is something else which is going on, which is asking friends to help to find the books, parents to help, I myself have given ideas sometime, I have gone into their hostel rooms, or homes! It is all on a light note. I mean it is not heavy. But when they do bring books back, instead of saying how I deal with it, I would say what I see is that they seem to be happy to bring them back. When I started working at the Valley School in Bangalore, a whole lot of books went missing

and I started putting up posters saying "Come back, come back Calling all books that are lost," like there was a warm welcome waiting for them. Then they came back! So is that something that strikes you as strange or fun?

One of my teachers in the library science course that I took—someone I can never forget, Prof. Gopinath used to say, "No book is ever

lost, it is being read somewhere by someone." And I think that is a good point. Of course if there are expensive books that are very rare, you might want to be

much more careful and have a word with the student, and say, "You know this is a very special book, and I am giving it to you like a caretaker," but by and large it is not so terribly difficult to replace the book. The first mindset we have to break is that they are doing it wilfully and maliciously. If we accept that it is carelessness or forgetfulness, let us work on that. Because we too forget, don't we?

VV : What are some of your favorite activities to introduce books and make the library a more welcoming space for children? Because clearly from what you have articulated so far, it is the space where fun things happen, and the hierarchy between children and adults is broken. So how do you enable that?

UM : I think, first of all, any activity that is different from the usual school routine, is a welcome break. Activities themselves have many subtly inbuilt learning skills, which are not perhaps apparent to children, which is why they are fun! For me a very important activity has been a book talk, which is given by students after reading a book. They share a little bit about the book they have read. They don't tell the whole story; they share bits of it. They share what drew them, or what struck them, maybe the illustrations, the page layout, the characters, or the setting. But a very interesting thing in this is the discussion that follows, the questions asked by others. Another unusual thing that I noticed about a book talk is that there are troubling issues which come

out very easily in a book. For example, having a girlfriend or boyfriend at a young age. Or maybe having some bad habits, or some other problems. These are related in the story so well that the child does not feel targeted feeling "Oh this is about me," but the child feels a sharing of that pain. It could be about losing a parent or parents getting divorced; there are so many possibilities. So in that discussion I feel there is a kind of opening or a space to be explored with no sense of shame. I might say, we have read that book and you feel a certain way about it, because you may be going through some of these things. Then they may feel ready to say, "Yes, it did feel a bit close."

A book talk is not only for students, we also invite teachers. It is a new space for the teachers to come and talk about a book that they have read. For the students too, it is interesting. They discover new facets. "Yes, this teacher is fun," "She has been reading a sports book," or "He has been reading some crafts book," etc. It is a glimpse of that teacher. The support staff can be part of this activity too I have found that very nice. Say if you are in a residential school, or even not, the woman who sweeps or cooks, may be you made sure that she reads some books. Then she talks about the book, and how she relates to it. That has been an amazing experience because the kids start feeling so respectful of this person. And that person feels good. So that is a very important thing to do.



The other activity I like very much is the treasure hunt. The treasure hunt is something I always start with. It is a game wherein clues lead from one book to the other, in the library. The first one is a clue to find a book. So they go hunting for the book. In that they find the second clue, and that leads on. At the end of it, they listen to a nice story. That is the treasure! But the nice thing about this is that they have to think about what the book might be, its location and the best part is, after one round they all say, "We want to set one for you." Setting a treasure hunt is much more challenging, because it requires an even greater awareness of the resources in the library. They send me out while they set it up.

VV : And you happily accept it.

UM : Oh, of course! First of all, it goes without saying that throughout, whether it is an activity, whether it is anything, the relationship between the adults and the children has to be comfortable and easy. Even now for me, whenever I have a problem in the library, of somebody taking away books without entering, or rats coming in, or creating a space for wheelchair access, I always have a discussion about it. I ask them, "What shall we do?" Then they feel a sense of ownership to the space.

VV : The way you put it, you envision the library as a radical space. Where some of these hierarchies and differences can be challenged, and be equal across class lines, across age lines. But with the advent of e-books, online books and repositories, do you feel that the space for libraries is under threat for children and adults both?

UM : "Radical space" is a nice way of putting it. I should use that! About the advent of e-books, for children, I can say confidently that the space is not really under threat. I notice that at the present time, children cannot sustain their interest in e-books for long. It is like a novelty. They read it for a while, but then they seem to come back to the library. My own grandson, who is quite a geek, has kept coming back to the library for this book or that book.

Because I think that reading an e-book is to quite an extent a lone activity. And this library is a social space. They do enjoy that. As you said, it is a radical space they like seeing unexpected happenings, new things and new ideas coming in. It is also a shared space, an interactive space. The library need not be a fixed place. I have taken children from libraries to bookshops to choose books. That is one way of combating the e-thing. They love that. Because they say, "Oh wow, I did not know there were so many books!" Or "Oh wow, if we go on Flipkart, we do not get to touch the book," So they come up with their own reasons about why something like this is exciting. And on such excursions, there is always a chocolate ice-cream at the end to make them enjoy the whole experience. It is an outing. It is socializing, discussions about books, so the library for me is not in just one place but it is a mind, it is a thought, it is a spirit. It can move anywhere. So I personally don't feel afraid. I am not setting up any competition, and saying no e- book. That is also important. Let us live together! That is possible. There are some things for which e-books are great, and there are some things for which the book is still fun.

VV : Would you like to leave us with any thoughts or message to our readers?

UM : I love this quote by Rabindranath Tagore, which he relayed on a radio broadcast in New York City many years ago. Talking about children, he says, "Their minds should be allowed to stumble on and be surprised at everything that happens before them, a mind that is always open in abundant hospitality." I just love that because it is not just for children alone, it is for us too. I think if we have that abundant hospitality, we can do many things with children without feeling a separation between 'us' and 'them'. I think that is most important. There is no barrier there. We create it.

I think if my readers are librarians and teacher librarians, I would like to say, that trying new

things is fun. I might have said a lot of things, and you might be thinking, "Oh god! How do I do all this?" But I think if you go into all this, little by little, according to your comfort level, but go into it, I think it is great fun. It has been



Usha Mukunda

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Usha Mukunda is a librarian who brought a twist to her life when she decided to pursue her masters in English Literature after giving birth to two kids. She has worked in The Valley School as a librarian. Mukunda has happily worked with children and books for nearly 30 years. She is a founder-member of Centre For Learning in Bangalore where she set up an open library.

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¹Mukunda, U. (2006). *Children and Reading*. *Journal of the Krishnamurti Schools*, (10). Retrieved from <http://www.journal.kfionline.org/issue-10/children-and-reading>

Sanitised childhood: Counter-narratives in Film and Art

In conversation with Samina Mishra

As a filmmaker and children's writer, Samina Mishra has grappled with the theme of childhood. Asking difficult questions and exploring childhood through the lives of children inhabiting diverse communities, her work stands to unsettle our usual notions about childhood. In this interview, Samina talks about her film 'Stories of Girlhood', her recent book written in collaboration with children, and the shrinking spaces for dissent.

Vivek Vellanki (VV): *The documentary film that you directed a while ago, "Stories of Girlhood" explores childhood and gender beyond restrictive parameters and challenges the usual notions of childhood. Could you tell us about the film and what drew you to this theme?*

Samina Mishra (SM): Actually there are three films; it's like a series. It was commissioned by UNICEF under their program for the girl child. As you know, UNICEF works in many developing countries on the theme of the girl child and India is one such country and they wanted films to showcase experiences of what it meant to be a girl child. So it was a commissioned film in that sense, but they didn't really impose anything more than that. So I was free to explore what I wanted to say about it. Now UNICEF's program for the girl child, at least in India, works on three [broad] thematic ideas: survival, development, and protection and participation. So we decided that the three films [each] would take up one of these ideas.

Because India is so diverse, this was an opportunity for me to somehow present that diversity with three films. So [we] located them

in three different areas, and that became one sort of overarching [feature]. Then within this the ideas of survival, development, protection and participation [were used]. I really wanted to be able to explore things which we somehow don't manage to talk about: like representations of children, representations of the girl children that [otherwise] don't get foregrounded. Though the picture is bleak, I also didn't want the films to have this thing of victimhood all the time. I wanted the representations of the girl children to be a little more complex because that is [how] it is. You may be in an extremely difficult circumstance, you may come from an extremely poor family and yet in your everyday experience of childhood you negotiate it and you will find the [space] to play and you will find the moment to make friendships. I wanted the films to be able to express that. So these were the kind of things that were guiding me to look for the stories.

VV: *The three films that are part of this larger narrative, portray the complex life-worlds of girls in different marginalized communities—set in Delhi, Punjab, and Telangana. Did the making of the films and your subsequent engagement with*

the issue change your thinking about childhood and gender?

SM: I am sure that everything we do in our practice, affects the way that we look at the world. And sometimes while doing creative work, the struggle is between what you go in with – ideas that are in your head and how you allow what you engage with and the material that you bring back, to also change your ideas; and at the end find something to say, which may not be completely resolved, but you are putting forward a way of looking at the world. So I don't know if I can say that very specific things changed. Of course before I began the work I knew the situation for girls is difficult. We all know that in India. But [then it's a matter of] the complexity of everyday life and how you negotiate that.

For instance in Punjab, the issue of foeticide in which women are also a part of the choice of giving up of a female foetus. It does make you think about it differently. We found out that every family in Amritsar district does the test and some people choose and some people don't. So for example when I interviewed this family, they said to me that it was the patriarch of the family, the grandfather, who didn't let them do this – that is abort the second female foetus. Normally if the first child is a girl, it is okay, but if it is the second one, then they abort. So it was the patriarch who didn't allow them. I wondered and asked them: "If he had wanted you to, what would you have done?" And the women laughed in such a matter-of-fact way, and said: "Well, maybe, we would have." It's a complicated thing, you know.

Also, does it mean that because he didn't want them to, he is a progressive man? I don't know. Does that mean that the girls are going to be given a share in the property? Probably not. The fact that the women would have agreed to have done that, if he had so asked them, would that have meant that they loved the child less? I don't know. So it's complicated.

VV: The protagonists in your film, the young people, young girls and the way they experience

childhood challenges some of our notions about childhood—that they shouldn't work and that they should only go to school. What was your engagement with this link between childhood, work and schooling?

SM: Yes, of course, we think that ideally kids should not have to go to work to support the family; but in the first film *Girls in a Neighbourhood* which is set in a basti in north-east Delhi, the girls are rag-pickers. They go and collect recyclable garbage, and what they earn is sometimes 20 rupees and sometimes it is 40 rupees, and it goes to provide food for the family, they have shared this in the film. Now the first reaction would be that this is wrong, that the parents should stop them and they should be told not to do this. But when the situation is so dire, it is impossible to separate the child from the larger context. So it is a question of class, and you cannot have a sanitized little

"You cannot have a sanitized little world of childhood, without looking at the larger question of class and inequality."

world of childhood, without looking at the larger question of class and inequality.

It is definitely very easy for middle class people to take this position and say that child labour is terrible. Of course, it is terrible. No one will encourage it, but you can't come down on the parents for example, because the parents are victims, as much as the children. No parent would want his or her child to undergo a hard life.

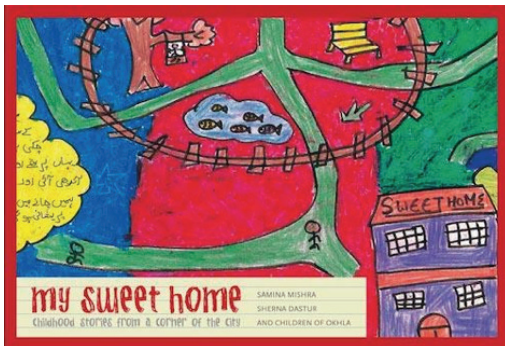
VV: You have recently been working on a book *My Sweet Home* and it looks at childhood and the everyday lives of children from a very different perspective, and you bring in some of these questions and concerns. Tell us a little bit about this book.

SM: First of all, people have been really pushing the idea of Indian writing for children, in the English language especially. Our kids grow up reading everything that comes from the West. When it comes to the question of stories from India, what are we talking about? So there is the Panchatantra [variety of stories] that gets pushed—all the folktales and mythology and all that. And then because it is the English language, there is another kind of India that finds itself in these stories. Today, children

living in urban areas lead very segregated lives and only mix with kids like themselves, so that there are fewer opportunities for them to mix across differences of class, caste and religion. For me it became an important question to explore if for that kind of readership, we could bring in stories that engage them with and open out another world for them to see? "Okay here is a child who is living in a very different way from me and yet there are some things that we have in common, there are some things which are very different and yet there are some things which are just like me. Oh he wants to do the same thing as me." So I wanted that and then this particular work came out.

I have done a film already in Okhla about identity. When the Batla House encounter happened, suddenly this space was in the news. Well it always is like that; more and more we human beings stereotype things in any case. More and more of it gets represented as—a Muslim ghetto, terrorists were found there, encounter hua tha (happened), that sort of thing. So because I work with kids, my immediate question was: how is it for the children who are growing up in that street for example, to suddenly have such a strong police presence, news vans? What is it like for them? So it really just came out of that question and I did a workshop with 20 children from that area through the Jamia University's outreach programme with the Jamia schools. The idea was for them to draw and write about their everyday life there.

VV: *It is quite rare to find a children's book that draws upon children's work and their representation of everyday life-worlds. That is what you are trying to do, to me that feels like a subversion to popular notions about space*



and childhood. It presents a narrative from the children's perspective that might dislodge some of our thinking. How has the book been received by educators, teacher educators and teachers?



SM: The book is not out in the market yet, but I have started using it and sharing it with both children and teachers. And so far I am really pleased with the response. The teachers particularly have felt that it has a lot of potential for them to use it in their own work and in the classroom. The children enjoy it as well. This notion that I started with, that there are things that we have in common and there are things that are different—we just need to engage and dialogue; that comes very naturally after I have shared the story. So for example, in my workshops after I finished the session, I asked them to write a little postcard to any one character from the book. So immediately that's the process, and you can see that. I did not tell them what to write, right? But you can see in what they have written, there will be things like: "Oh this thing that happened to you, some thing like this happened to me also." "Oh this thing that you said I also want to do that." Or "You live in such a different place from me." So that dialogue, the thing of engaging with someone in another world, another kind of world that came very naturally. I am very pleased about that.

VV: *And is the book going to be out soon?*

SM: I very much hope so. I mean it is a little expensive to produce such a book and the economy of children's books does not support that. So I am in the process of getting some

support, and then hopefully it will be out soon.

to you, seem to be shrinking. Do you see art as a medium of expression and dissent?

VV: *The common thread in your work, including the two examples that we have just spoken about, seems to be in extricating the everyday that all of us observe, experience and yet somehow seem to ignore. You take it out and place it back in front of us in a different form—as a film, as a book. How important do you think it is for educators, teachers and people involved in education to engage with these everyday lives of the children and the communities that they come from?*



SM: I think it is very critical. I feel it is also a little bit of a struggle. I can speak as a parent for example, because you know there is always some larger goal. As a teacher there is some larger goal. You know you have to get the kids to do well, finish, get higher marks, finish the class, whatever. As a parent it is the same thing that there is a larger goal that you are kind of getting overwhelmed with, but intellectually in my head I know that it is important to engage with the everyday much more because that will impact the larger goal. We struggle with this and it

is not always easy. We forget but we have to constantly remind ourselves that engaging with the everyday, being able to understand it, being able to bring change into the everyday - that is going to impact the larger goal. It is not always something that we can remember, because I know as a parent I fail all the time, I fail at it; but we have to remember it. We have to remind ourselves, we have to keep at it.

VV: *In an article that you had written from the location of somebody who works with children and as a parent as well, you spoke about the ways in which a large majority of children are now taught to conform, right from an early age. The spaces for dissent and expression, according*

SM: I would like to think so. I do think that generally there is less space for dissent for adults and therefore definitely lesser for children. If as adults we find that these spaces are shrinking, they are not going to give it to our children. The funny thing about this though, in the world of children, is that it has come along with this emphasis on allowing children to be, letting them be creative. If you look around you, especially for urban middle class kids, there will be workshops, there will be classes,

schools that push this kind of pedagogy; we want to nurture the creative spirit of the child. I find that very unfortunate.

Because on one hand we are saying all this, [but] there is no real dissent that is happening. The child is painting; the child is playing music, but is the child questioning why the world works in the way it does? Why is there so much inequality in the world? There is some superficial engagement with that. [Art and craft is a much-used phrase for primary education and we can

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see those set phrases in teacher-education courses as well. But does the teacher need to be able to draw well or does the teacher need to know how to ignite the creative process for children? Does she know what to show them, to read to them, to let them play with? And does she understand why she is doing that?]

We know children are made to do stuff from school, this sort of thing, but the real engagement where the child is going to make choices later on in life, which are going to make a difference, I don't know if we are doing that. So for me it is a conflicting thing, where I think children should be allowed to do all this but I don't find that it is [happening]. So self-expression is really important, but self-expression, for it to not become some wallowing in your own self in an insular way, needs to be fed with experience. What is that experience we are giving to our children? We are taking them to a mall, we are taking them to an air-conditioned school, we are taking them in an air-conditioned car, and we are taking them for a fancy holiday. So then that self-expression is going to be about those things and the child is not to blame for that. So we need to feed the children with something else and then allow them to express.

VV: *And your work is an attempt towards that?*

SM: I hope so. I mean I would like to think so.



Samina Mishra

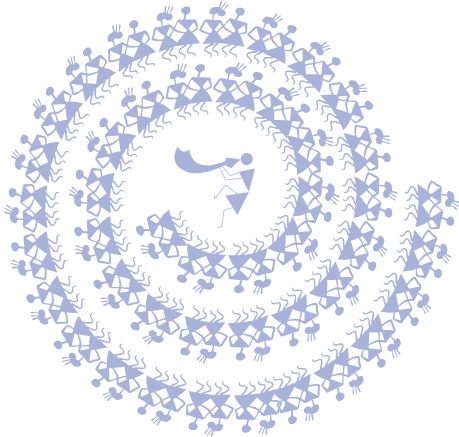


Samina Mishra is a documentary filmmaker and writer based in New Delhi, with a special interest in media for children. She is currently heading the Nehru Learning Centre for Children and Youth. Her films have been shown at festivals both in India and abroad. In 2010, she was awarded the Sea Change Residency by the Gaea Foundation, USA in recognition of her work across disciplines. Find out more about Samina's work on: <http://saminamishra.wordpress.com/>

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From the book My Sweet Home



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