

Teacher education for diversity in India: Socio-educational experiences of travel to a ‘margin’

Jyoti Raina

University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

Abstract

This paper is a reflective account of a travel that shifted the site of initial elementary teacher education from a metropolitan milieu of New Delhi; to the contrasting locale of a remote mountain region in the central Himalayas. This shift of site aimed to re-locate the concerns of quality schooling, diversity and ecological living to this new context. The possibilities of an emancipatory education for the marginalised children of these remote mountain regions may not emerge from mainstream schooling but are derived from an alternative educational imagination. This alternative educational trajectory is rooted in the children’s locale specific bio-physical reality, social ecology and recovery of traditional local knowledge systems. The field experiences at a new site are among the critical dimensions of teacher education for diversity. In comparison to the learning that takes place at an urban location of the initial teacher education programme the insights gained from experiences at this educationally ‘non-developed’ locale at the margins are central to teacher education for diversity. The visit deepened the understanding that a distinct locale specific alternative vision of educational development is not the same as mainstream notions of school education, economic growth and ecological living.

Keywords: *critical teacher education, Bachelor of Elementary Education (B.El.Ed.), transformative educators, emancipation.*

Diversity, emancipation, and social transformation have emerged as key issues in teacher education. Initial teacher education for diversity highlights the twin goals of educating for and in a diverse society (Hill, 1997) besides positioning schoolteachers as transformative educators in 'an explicit emancipatory' role (Hill and Boxley, 2007: 54). The National Curriculum Framework Review in India proposes a new vision of pre-service teacher education 'to create reflective practitioners who would have the promise of bringing about radical changes in the process of schooling for hundreds of millions of our children (NCF, 2005:101). India's teacher education policy, in an academic activist orientation in the recent two decades, has placed a renewed thrust on social diversity, quality education for marginalised sections of society and equitable inclusion (NCERT, 2005; NCFTE, 2009). The National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education reflecting this policy states 'The concern is to make teacher education *liberal, humanistic* and responsive to demands of *inclusive education*' (NCFTE, 2009:19, emphasis original). The trend in teacher education for including community-based experiences at varied places (Jones and Hughes, 2016) can be located in and as a response to these broader goals and concerns. Teacher education for diversity implicates a shift in the site of initial teacher education particularly if it is in urban confines of the institutional classroom to the diverse real worlds in which children grow up and go to school (Anyon, 2011). Fieldwork through travel offers possibilities at hands-on experience to counter the limited experiential offering of a mainstream urban education. Critical pedagogy in initial teacher education emphasises a counter-hegemonic examination of the locale specific aims of education including the role accorded to teachers. It recognises the structural impediments to securing socio-economic justice as well as need for thorough-going social transformation (Allman, 2000). It thus contests the limited focus in most initial teacher education programmes to fragmented disciplinary mastery of school teaching subjects, behavioural approaches to learning and classroom management which is less than adequate

to address the needs of diverse sections of society particularly marginalised children. The latter kind of teacher education tends to prepare teachers who continue to remain apolitical by framing predefined questions from existing textbooks dissuading schools to teach the young children from raising their own questions (Sleeter, Torres and Laughlin, 2004).

The Bachelor of Elementary Education (B.El.Ed.) Programme

It is against this theoretical and ideological critical teacher education background that the four-year Bachelor of Elementary Education (B.El.Ed.) degree programme, was introduced as an initial teacher education course at the woman's colleges affiliated with the University of Delhi in the academic year 1994-95. It is a process-based integrated multi-disciplinary programme, involving the study of human development, curriculum, learning studies, pedagogy and school disciplinary content through theory and practicum courses. It has been regarded as an exemplar in policy-texts (NCFTE, 2009) and among the most robust programmes of initial teacher education in India (Nawani, 2013). At the promise of its introduction lay the recognition of the social function of educators particularly elementary school teachers. These social functions were envisaged as establishing school-community linkages, promoting social justice and empowering the marginalised (Sadgopal, 2001). The programme follows inclusionary practices of academic empowerment by critical engagement, self-development and transformative reflective practice (Raina, 2018: 169). Recent commentaries have highlighted the programme's strong theoretical underpinnings which in turn point at 'the vitality of the transformative essence of teacher education' (Kaur, 2020:46).

This paper is a reflective account of the socio-educational experiences during travel to a new site supposedly in the margin of Indian society. The rationale for the travel is drawn from the author's own personal location within the critical

initial teacher education framework, as a teacher educator with the B.El.Ed. programme. The framework's 'thinking on teacher education' (NCTE, 2009:19) is liberal, inclusive, and recognizes the diversity of learning spaces and curriculum sites (Ibid: 19). It was with an aim to *relocate* the concerns of diversity, ecological living and quality school education to a new contextually powerful site that a week's field trip was organised for fifteen 3rd year woman B.El.Ed. student-teachers (henceforth participants) to a site in the margins. This is an alternative approach to initial teacher education for diversity aiming for 'critical hope towards transformation and justice' (Stachowiak and Dell, 2016).

Contextualising the trip

The trip was a striking shift in physical location from the capital megalopolis to an 'underdeveloped' remote, contrasting and rural part of the country. This new site was the specific locale of village Dehregaon in the rural central Himalayan mountain region near Ramgarh, in the state of Uttarakhand, North India. The change of place was characteristic of regional variation as well as urban-rural residence disparity in pursuit of *a diversity-conscious teacher education*. The attempt was to bring together an experiential understanding of issues of margins, unequal development, humanist dimensions of hill life and societies not so embedded within the dehumanising ethics of capitalism. The field trip also aimed to highlight how the vision of educational development is a distinct locale-specific category unique to a new site.

The travel seemed to be a necessary element of initial teacher education for diversity since due to the metropolitan location of the programme the participants belong to a common urban context, where the homogenised corporate college existence and city life may not provide adequate foreground to address concerns of diversity or make room for communitarian experiences. Coupled with this is the alternate relations between theory and practice that

student-teachers encounter in their field experiences (during the practicum curriculum); continue to remain located in schools that are in proximity to the main site of their urban teacher education programme it shades the understanding of diverse student populations perceived in relatively homogenous contexts as well as the participants own limited responses to student diversity (Bates and Rossaen, 2010). The inclusion of a rural community setting in remote mountain region as one more site of teacher education, even though a one-off rather than a regular part of their teacher education curricular engagement is a response to this exclusion. Recent educational policy literature in India has lamented education that lacks a fieldwork tradition (Venkataraman, 2016: 48), which is an invaluable aspect of educating for and in diversity. This visit aims to foreground the very different, close-to-nature non-urban ecology and society of this area, and its advantages as a very different non-capitalist, life world. in order to prepare participants for addressing the educational needs of marginalised mountain children by deepening understanding of ecological, cultural and economic context of their lives and imagine an alternative, distinct locale-specific educational trajectory.

The journey from middle class metropolitan urban living to the forested tracts of Kumaon hills of the rural terrain in another state of the country is a lived experience of contrasting realities. The site is the backwater of a ‘stagnant’ society, a ‘margin’ at the edge of urbanised living far away from the centre of the site of student-teacher’s own initial teacher education. It is nestled in the deep recess of land, mountains and forests. The traveller misses many a heartbeat on the curves at the convoluted, dilapidated and precarious roads. The state of Uttarakhand is among the poorest regions of the country with more than three- quarter of its population of primary producers still dependent on subsistence farming for survival as well as livelihood. The tough mountain terrain is a vulnerable fragile ecosystem of intense rainfall, precipitous slopes

and infirm soils presenting numerous difficulties of natural living. The hill people face and struggle against day-to-day challenges. The absence of means of transport necessitates walking long distances on bushy, steep paths. The access to modern healthcare, means of communication and a water supply system is non-existent. Another everyday challenge is dependence on the nearest natural spring or stream for domestic water use, which can be quite far. There is no post office, telephone or internet while electricity is erratic. For the children the daily walk of several miles through rough terrains to reach schools cannot possibly always be a pleasant one. The site can be clearly seen as the margin with its residents being perhaps the most disadvantaged people, anywhere in the country living on a periphery with a harsh terrain, absence of economic opportunity and no infrastructure. The struggles that Indian modern educators, Gandhi and Premchand, wrote about in their essays, stories, travelogues and novels; resonate in participants consciousness while living temporarily in the mountain landscape with the local people, something participants read about but don't necessary experience in the urban institutional scenario. There is neither commodification of daily life nor any financialisation of nature in this rural socio-political landscape but a symbiotic interdependence of man and nature constituting a unique eco-system that protects rare biodiversity and provides water as well as food security. The locale is of a simple life in which 'All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth, also befalls the sons of the earth'. (Chief Seathl, 1855). It is these local forests that keep alive numerous native species of trees, shrubs, grasses and medicinal herbs. The villagers depend on these on a daily basis for fulfilling the need for food, medicinal herbs, fuel, fodder and timber. These provide not only food, fodder, fuel, building materials, organic manure but also enrich the soil keeping food, water and medicine regimes alive. These land and water regimes have perhaps not degraded, as much as other ecosystems in other regions of the country, as the deep civilisation of the local people who, historical evidence

indicates, have lived here since ancient times; have revered the forests. Ecological living has been an integral part of the Indian way of living and scriptures, folklores and local traditions have been rooted in human culture-nature connect. As the lyrics of a popular Kumaoni folk song express ‘Soil ours, water ours, ours are these forests. Our forefathers raised them, it’s we who must protect them’.

Personal growth and development

Several ideas that the participants' initial teacher education curriculum engages with in various courses of education cease to remain an abstraction but become lived experiences incorporating the realm of a larger experiential reality. The trip is an experience of learning to be ‘a life in harmony with all existence’ (Tagore, 1933) in which learning from nature is a central process. This is an educational process that can create an opportunity to live in nature and observe its ways and rhythms which is invaluable for the growth as a learner.

The characteristic difficulties of natural living in this region offer valuable sideshows. The inevitabilities of walking the locale offer possibilities of being educated by the ‘open skies and the living trees’ (Raina et al., 2016) that cannot be imagined in an institutional city-based education and upbringing. This extensive walking offers possibilities in which ‘the mind thinks where the feet walk’ (Betto, 1997) uncovering the ‘thickness of ignorance about the earth I carry under my feet’ (Tagore, 1933) providing an education from mother earth ‘in the subtle suggestions coming from the earth to which our feet unconsciously respond’ (Ibid). A participant reflected

During the travel my thoughts often went back to plantation drives I observed in schools in the course of our school contact programmes in previous years. In these drives urban school children are taken to neighbourhood parks where they plant small samplings. These are occasions to chant slogans on the way on ‘greening the earth’

enthusiastically. There is something deeply educative about this walk from the school premises to a neighbourhood park with one's peers in the name of a school activity. The travel prompted me to realise in hindsight that a teacher is really not meant to teach in the classroom and knowledge is just not bounded in the four walls of a concrete structure called the classroom. I tended to re-look at the idea of the plantation drives sitting in the lap of a Himalayan village with plantation all around me. The plantation drive wasn't mere rhetoric but definitely some actual initiation of learning from nature. But more importantly why is it needed at all? That makes me interrogate the rampant urbanisation model of education, development and human progress.

Another participant states,

The travel taught me that it is life experience that contributes to true learning. One of our course readings the essay *My School* by Rabindranath Tagore became resonant in my mind as it states that it is the first experience of the child with the ultimate truth that human life is connected with the world around it, when child in the mother's womb experiences love, care and, receives nourishment through food at the same time. Since the day we came here my mind is filing with the idea this is the world we are born into and I seek an education that makes our life in harmony with this natural world. As we grow up we are banished and refrained from our essential nature as classrooms, textbooks and mechanical knowledge systems shape learning.

The fieldwork is a transformative learning experience by 'walking' into a conscious awareness of the transformatory potential inherent in the ideas of the educational thinkers from course curriculum and their relevance to one's own life.

Another sideshow of the visit was unveiled in the silver blue hue of moonlight spreading unevenly over the hilly forested tracts on which the sky was just a step away. This was an unbroken process, unlike the city street night lights which ubiquitously break into intermittent spots in urban life; attenuated only

by the sounds of rare nocturnal birds and animals. This bucolic natural background away from the usual hustle and bustle was a quiet time to step back to be with oneself and with nature. This was an exploration of a quieter rhythm of knowing, experiencing and living; slowing down and recovering our connection with everything that exists around us. The universe reveals itself in this solitude sailing towards self- knowledge at the sight of majestic mountain peaks reaching for the sky and the moon. One could almost hear the epigrammatic words of great Indian philosopher Swami Vivekananda walking en route from Nainital to Almora in the Kumaon Himalayas. It was here that he passed through one of the greatest moments of his life and resolved the greatest problems of his life which was his search for oneness of the macrocosm with the microcosm.

The participants have already engaged with multiple perspectives on personal development emerging from different traditions of philosophical-psychological-educational thought and explore the inner subjective methodologies through which the process of self-growth can be facilitated. The physical and psychological time that becomes available in these quiet moments offers further possibilities for personal growth and inclusion. There is a psychological deepening of awareness centred on recovering a personal connection with all that exists around us (Raina et al, 2016).

Yet another sideshow of the locale is the availability of the kind of fresh water that city dwellers can't even dream of, even though it means going a bit of a way to the nearest spring or stream. The conventional development discourse categorises this otherwise, as no infrastructure for water.

Travel as conscientisation

There is a conscientisation of the participant's 'modern' consciousness rooted in the experience of an alternate reality that exists geographically not very far from the metropolitan culture of materialism, urbanisation and consumption; in surreal distance from the urban daily predetermined routines. There is an initiation into an introspective retreat where the traveller can be with oneself as well as with the local people. The functional realities of the lives of the ordinary people are revealed particularly during personal contact with poor peasants, homeless pastoralists, local women, landless labourers and children. This inter-regional-cultural contact, in spite of not being a long-term immersion experience, offers valuable knowledge of the conditions that prevail in our country (far away from the metropolitan gaze) while recovering equality, conversation and a shared view of reality between the participants and the new site's residents. During this contact the mystic Himalayan locale simply juxtaposes multiple frames of knowing and being in an intermediate area experience. This is a creation of the lived experience of shifting versions of realities. This is the basis of an experiential intensification of consciousness, a transitional process that creates a liminal experience (McLaren, 1999). In the quiet walk on the natural paths with the golden sunrays touching the mountaintop the participants walk into a 'liminal states of consciousness' (YiShan Lea, 2013:310). This realm of liminality takes the knower into another plane of being providing a comparative lens with which to examine their urban existential location in reflective hindsight. As one crosses over to a liminal frame of knowing and being, there is the cognition of contradictions even in the use of terms to characterise ecological living namely consumption oriented parameters like carbon footprint, water and electricity audit, green school et al in the modernity scenario. Chillingly appropriate sound the remarks of India's father of the nation Mahatma Gandhi that the blood of the villages is the cement by which the edifice of the cities is built.

This travel, ironically to a site at a 'margin', challenges the participants to interrogate their own way of life, examine 'ideological philosophical strong holds, and alternative political referents potentially free our attachment to the status quo' (Ibid: 307). They are unlikely to remain participants, or, student-teacher outsiders. They tend to become the member-participants of this new locale by beginning to gain roots among the people. In the traveller-participants experiential juxtaposition of shifting realities is the potential for the shift of the site to be transformative. There is generation of referents to deepen understanding of multiple realities; diverse ways of being evolve an alternative transformative imagination of schooling, which may not be possible in the institutional setting of the student-teachers initial teacher education. The liminal states that the participants may have arrived at prepare them to envision the concerns of diversity, emancipation and quality schooling with special reference to this new site. An issue to reflect on is the growing impact of tourism on this remote area. Tourism is nascent here but beginning to invade the region's economy. The Ramgarh Bungalows, not too far from the site, are in part the hill station post-imperial legacy of the British colonial army, an army cantonment, and now a magnet for wealthy tourists, being promoted heavily online these days. Critical pedagogy entails an understanding of as well as attempts to block the nascent tourism influx from potentially disturbing and actually changing the landscape and socioscape in key ways that threatens to destroy its social and bio-physical ecology. The locale is a 'geographic alterity' caught up in the swirls of a modernity (perhaps not 2020/2021 during the pandemic and its catastrophe), but more broadly. Expanding tourism as an industry could be deleterious to the village life world on the economic margin for example the home-stay options for tourists are potentially opportunities for income of the villagers in light of many small resorts opening up in the District Nainital. The travel needs to be looked at also as an human encounter with an 'alterity' on the margins of Indian capitalist-consumerist society as also attempting the

becoming of a member- participant. Fieldwork, or travel, or shift of site, of this kind is an opportunity to develop a basic 'ethnographic imagination' in a more grounded way come to the threshold of a deep awareness of the ecological, cultural and economic context of the lives of those on the 'margins' and imagine a distinct locale-specific educational trajectory by narrative knowledging among other means.

Certain academic aspects of participants' initial teacher education prepare them for the development of a liminal state of consciousness supporting the processes of travel as conscientisation. For instance as part of educational studies student-teachers read a moving long letter *A Letter to a Teacher* (Rossi and Cole, 1970) written by poor village schoolchildren from a mountain farming community in Tuscany, Italy; who had been pushed out of state schools as they had failed examinations. The letter offers a critical perspective on why some children suffer from poor learning that is 'arising from within the world of the poor rather than being about it' arguing that lessons in school were disconnected from children's everyday life. In conventional schooling the poor get a poorer start from the very beginning as the culture of school demeans the poor and undermines their knowledge of the world. The school rejects how children write by not following spoken language by a logical pattern; lingers over grammatical mistakes blocking self-expression; offers a mathematics that 'never happens in life'; is indifferent to children's lack of background knowledge which was necessary to make sense of classroom lessons; ignores compelling political inclinations that connected children with their real world of factories and fields and avoided proceeding to topics that were tied to real life in social sciences like local history. These children were able to continue their education albeit with unconventional pedagogy in which they teach literacy to each other, debate current events, read newspaper articles and examine their own political beliefs. The reading of this ordinary letter is useful in envisioning comparative

educational destinies and the trajectory that lead to it particularly in understanding how each educationally backward region needs a distinct locale-specific emancipatory vision.

The travel is a social educational experience. It is also a self-study of teacher education practices, a sort of relational challenge (Russell and Berry, 2017) and a subjective point of view. Each participant may experience their own versions of experiential reality. This autobiographical mini-narrative is essentially an experiential account located within the author's own experiential reality and reflection. The author's high school attending son who accompanied her on this travel came up with his own alternative political referents or rather an episteme. In his words,

The experience of travel to an outlying area of India has shaped my vision of what constitutes economic development in a given region. The travel has been an influence that is different from the academic perspectives that I developed through my school education and metropolitan upbringing. I engaged with residents of two of the secluded villages Dehragaon and Hartola in District Nainital, Uttarakhand; in their natural mountain context during my summer vacation travel. I observed how the local forest provides wood, medicines, food security and the hills keep the water regimes alive. Art, music and culture has existed in this region since centuries. I was moved to see a place where nature has not been brutalized by human activity; and the social, cultural and ecological locale is conducive to human well-being. I experienced how easy it was to be simple, silent and contemplative while living in these villages. This was an experience so unlike my life in a megalopolis characterized by market economics, unregulated industrialisation, urban squalor, ecological depredations and stresses of modern living. As I revisit my textbook notions of economic growth and development in the specific context of this region I have no doubt that the dominant models will devastate the locale of its balance of physical nature, society and ecology. As a beginning student of economics I had a rather universal perspective of sustainable economic development and how it can be brought about in so called

underdeveloped regions. However my travel inspired experiential learning was that public policy aimed at inclusive development needs be based on a unique model for each distinct region of our country as also the world. In textbook economics when poverty is defined by dividing people in the categories of poor and non-poor, this categorization does not apply meaningfully to rural Uttarakhand since the forest provides resources for food, drinking water, healthcare and much more, even though the people do not own any economic assets. Another personal way in which this travel experience shaped me was that notwithstanding my main academic interest in STEM, I developed a critique of modernity which makes it increasingly difficult to celebrate science and technology as the basis for human progress. The villagers in these regions have sustained culture, livelihood and civilization, without modern science since centuries while the modern man has brought the world to the brink of ecological disaster in contemporary times. Today there is even talk of our common future being endangered by relentless material progress without factoring in the environmental costs. Economics is a theory and fact-based discipline but the experiential learning during the travel to the villages has introduced a critical perspective to my study of economics.ⁱ

Local nature-culture framework

The social ecology of the village Dehregaon region is rooted in a nature-culture complex embedded in an ecological worldview in which man is part of nature rather than separated from it. Nature refers to conditions of outer physical reality, to means of subsistence essential for people to live. Culture, on the other hand is a mode of conduct which can be emancipatory, the ways in which these means are organised providing legitimacy to given production systems (Mehta, 2005). The locale is guided by a simpler worldview of co-existence of nature and man. In this framework nature and culture are co-constituents of one another in the cohesive village community.

The hegemonic postcolonial material progress-based model of social and economic growth implicates introducing industrial science and technology in

market economics terms viewing 'ecological variables' as manipulatives. The agricultural socio-economic systems are not a capitalist mode of production but based on egalitarian economics of self-sufficiency and community cooperation. They aim at preventing destruction of the eco-system which is the life-blood of the region mainly the forest and the forested tracts of land while providing for a comfortable life based on drawing just enough to ensure local self-reliance according to the logic with which nature returns itself. In this locale nature has not been appropriated as merely a resource for material economic growth. Development based on an exploitative conversion of the rural resources to capital; and its people to labour cannot be viewed as emancipatory. The *raison d'être* of development draws from a critical examination of the twin ideals of greed and want in order to create an enabling environment for the poor ordinary villagers to live with dignity, leading the daily life without hardship. Emancipation means an abolition of daily suffering, fulfilment of basic wants, of the ordinary mountain folk in social and economic life, a collective liberation from the life of grotesque drudgery and intellectual engagement for all. This is not an anti-development manifesto nor is against modernity to the extent that it alleviates people's suffering. The development of a participatory, modern and democratic society that encourages equality, social justice and a scientific attitude devoid of de-humanisation need not necessarily be based on a complete rejection of modernity. In addition to the burdens of normative patriarchal structures of society a burning issue is the brutality of mountain women lugging water in head borne cans from natural sources like springs and streams which may be across long distances every day. This necessitates better roads, water supply systems, electricity, communication networks, waste management and a public transport. There is no gainsaying that this will also improve schooling, health, nutrition, income opportunities and a fair distribution of these income distributing opportunities so that the mountain people do not continue to remain, like their poor counterparts in other parts of the world, 'excluded from ordinary

patterns, customs and activities' of life (Townsend, 1979). The salience of this social ecology is invaluable in the pandemic times. What we have made of this world with modernity and capitalist modes of production has revealed its devastation as mankind struggles to makes sense of the pandemic moments.

The travel immersed the participants in an alternate nature-culture framework. This presented an opportunity to juxtapose the shifting realities that participants encounter in an intermediate area experience. Alternative visions emerge in this travel. These are based on deepening of understanding of the specific economic and ecological limit to material growth from the vantage point of the last man in this particular village milieu, through a greed-want lens. The travel generates political referents of re-thinking mainstream knowledge systems. ⁱⁱ

Development of an emancipatory educational trajectory

The local foreground

An emancipatory imagination of education, progress and economic development needs to be based on a vision that aligns with this existing nature-culture framework. It can be 'understood fully when seen within the specific socio-political and economic contexts within which it developed' (Holst, 2006) which is the mountain region with its unique social ecology. This context would not view 'ecological variables' as manipulatives nor introduce industrial science and technology in market economics terms that are characteristic of a hegemonic postcolonial, capitalist, material progress-based model of social and economic growth but is guided by a simpler worldview of co-existence of nature and man. The locale's rural agricultural socio-economic systems are not a capitalist mode of production but based on economics of self- sufficiency, frugal technologies, management of natural resources and community cooperation.

The socio-educational experiences of participants become part of this alternate vision. The participants deepen an understanding of the specific economic and ecological limit to material growth from the vantage point of the last man in this particular village milieu, through a greed-want lens. At the same time the development of a participatory, modern and democratic society that encourages equality, social justice and a scientific attitude devoid of de-humanisation need not necessarily be based on a complete rejection of modernity. It is here that a context-specific definition of emancipatory education becomes relevant.

An alternative educational imagination

Though there is a mainstream government school near almost every village in the hills (though not in village Dehragaon) mainstream schooling undermines emancipatory possibilities by its indifference to the functional realities of the rural mountain locale. This system of schooling based on the curriculum prescribed by the Uttarakhand state board assuming standardised, decontextualised notions of knowledge, learning and development is not rooted in the region's life, art, aspirations and nature-culture world view. An insight from the margin is that diversity does not do away with hegemony. The state's centralized board curriculum is a reflection of this process. Language is a key aspect of local ecology-centrism yet there is reaffirmation of a language marginalization. The local Kumauni language is spoken in the Himalayan villages in the region but not studied formally at school. Both government and private schools in the region teach in Hindi or English rather than in the local language. Children do not learn to write and read in home language Kumauni which disempowers them from achieving a kind of grounded 'literacy' in Kumauni which albeit a related language differs from Hindi in grammar and lexis. The pedagogical approaches of classroom-restricted teaching, rote learning, paper- pencil testing, indifference to local arts and inadequate provisions for integrating community-based 'locally produced knowledge

emanating from cultural history and daily human experiences and social interactions' (Dei, 2012:269); fail to provide children with meaning or motivation to learn. The mainstream system does little to blunt the subversive edge of education or challenge the condition in which local people live nor educates children on how to appropriate the resources available particularly in the forest. Teachers do not necessarily have a locale specific perspective or, concrete pedagogical strategies on integrated rural development nor are equipped with sufficient capacity to use the forest as a site of learning especially in view of other minimal classroom learning resources. With its alienating content, most of which is irrelevant to children's lives, schooling does not offer any life-affirming possibilities that contest the hegemony of mainstream epistemologies. The vision of an emancipatory education 'is not to train students to take their place in either the corporate order or the existing society but to encourage human agency as an act of social intervention' (Giroux, 2003:16). The conventional mainstream culture -neutral school education has little value, if any, as an emancipatory educational trajectory particularly economic empowerment, abolition of daily suffering and release from structures of oppression. It does not serve as a tool for social transformation, emancipation and humanization of people (Freire, 1972).

An emancipatory imagination of school education, progress and economic development needs to be based on a vision aligned with the existing local nature-culture framework. Emancipation through education would mean enabling access to the renewable resources that are available in the mountain ecosystem, alleviate people's brutal daily suffering and facilitate some economic empowerment. This is possible while maintaining a respectful relationship with the ecology in a nature-based economy.

The National Curriculum Framework, (NCERT, 2005) talks about preparing young learners as future custodians of the earth with essential knowledge of the natural and social world as well as the problems associated with it. It suggests that young learners be educated to appreciate local wisdom through traditions and customs as well as discover their linkages with wider concerns. The mainstream schooling with its locale neutral content alienates rather than cultivates these linkages. This alienation from the locale is exacerbated as the teachers are unable to connect children's life with the school curriculum in imaginative ways (NCERT, 2005) causing a whopping burden of non-understanding further leading to high dropout rates. A UN report on schooling for indigenous people has pointed out that cultural alienation from communities reduces what children learn from their own cultures (UN, 2009). In any case the purpose of schooling is not the integration of all children into a mainstream system that may be indifferent to the bio- physical as well as social- ecological realities of the mountain region.

The young women participants coming largely from the 'mainstream' themselves examine their own assumptions, against their own life, about what is mainstream and what is marginal and what it means to be humanising or emancipatory in a system of education; as against this new site of teacher education for diversity.

The conscientisation during the travel not only deepens their understanding of existing theoretical ideas about the multiple shades of diversity, marginality and inclusion beyond the classroom but these constructs begin to become the tools of self-analysis particularly becoming self-critical (Hill, 2016) in real world contexts. This is the process that can lead forward to an emancipatory educational trajectory based on an alternate educational imagination.

It is only a new educational imagination that can give meaning to the mountain children's lives as well as revitalise the process of local reconstruction and social transformation. Such an education has potential to be the central instrument for integrated rural development through quality schooling and increased opportunities for livelihood taking into account the region's specific bio-physical realities. It has potential to construct knowledge that is socially relevant to people's life, aspirations and practices. The vision of an emancipatory education draws upon an 'indigenous subjectivity that derives its strength from a knowledge system much different from the one that drives modern nation states' (Dastidar, 2016). A transformatory vision located around the axes of rural livelihood, traditional knowledge systems (for example ethnobotanical knowledge of plants), ecologically sane economic development and forestry, rather than the conventional schooling needs envisioning. Its possibilities are drawn from participants' engagement in locally relevant issues drawing from a meaningful context closer to the lived experiences of the community and consequent possibilities of action. School children's everyday lives become topics that are starting points of curricular enquiry so that the 'creation of knowledge begins where people are situated' (Dei, 2012:269). It is significant that this contextualisation and integration of the locally produced knowledge locates the process of knowledge production within people's lived experiences. This ensures the student-teachers start looking critically at how processes of production can lead to wealth inequalities and thereby connect these with the social processes, contests and the educational processes. There are peaceful, non-violent and non-capitalist possibilities inherent in the nature-culture locale that have sustained human civilization since ancient times.

This unfolds an alternative educational trajectory not necessarily requiring the introduction of western 'science' and its methodologies which tend to align to a hegemonic model of socio-economic growth. Its unconventional possibilities

are based on the social ecology rooted traditional knowledge systems of the local mountain people, by involving the people in the knowledge production process and using it for them. It centres on the recovery of traditional locale specific knowledge systems and the importance of the region's natural resources to economic development. A programme of rural livelihood especially increased income options would involve educating the local people on how to use the forest for agricultural, domestic and income generating purposes. The specific knowledge systems to connect children's life to the forest and the rest of their mountain locale may not be much formalised in the academic domain of urban teacher education or modern science and technology. For example, the mountain farmers have used their time tested traditional knowledge to work on land with natural farming methods using no capital, machinery, chemicals, or pesticides. The modern agricultural technologies have neither appealed to them nor has anyone used them. Yet the region enjoys food security. In an agriculture-based locale work is a natural aspect of children's life and practices that are part of their daily life and work can be reintroduced in the school curriculum. An idea, a path not taken that can shape possibilities in this context, is the innovative curriculum vision of basic education in which education was conceptualised as an instrument for revitalisation of village economy through craft-based education (Gandhi, 1953). The craft could also be agriculture which was envisioned as the centre of correlation around which all the school subjects' mathematics, science, geography, history and art were to be taught. At the centre of the curriculum would be productive work, farming in this case; that interweaves work, knowledge and schooling. In the rural Himalayan context such a local craft-based education would support the development of economically independent village communities in consonance with 'Gandhi's view of rural self- sufficiency in which villagers lived in a non-exploitative relationship with nature in harmony with their natural surroundings' (James, 2013). This would require framing of school students as part of a craft centred

labouring collectivity as opposed to textbook knowledge kind of individualising influence; which is economically empowering and creates true democratic inclusivity. It would empower the ordinary mountain family in myriad ways transforming education into a tool that establishes a more egalitarian, equitable, ecologically sustaining mountain society. This is the trajectory of a new educational imagination that is suited to develop a context-specific response to the Tolstoyian question: 'What shall we do and how shall we live?'ⁱⁱⁱ

In another arena emancipatory education involves broadening of the consciousness of girls and young women from remaining confined merely to the domestic discourse, gaining awareness about their own independent agency aided by knowledge as residents of their own eco-system. The forest, apart from guaranteeing a natural habitat and food security, by providing fruits, leafy vegetables, fodder and fuelwood; empowers women particularly as they play the main role in gathering forest produce and generates income options from selling the surplus produce. This financial empowerment with ecological sensitivity leads to emancipation as women who become persons in their own right and equal members of a mountain society. This is important as most men are away on work in this 'underdeveloped', money order economy which has scarce employment opportunities.

The other possibilities for emancipation follow up from the knowledge-based activism practised by civil society grassroots organisations that have made significant contribution to rural revitalisation. One such organisation that the participants engaged with aims at development of integrated rural development possibilities with its initiatives in education, which included a primary school, organised in ways that deepen engagement with community as well as reaching out to other schools in the region 'contributing to the overall improvement in the quality of education in the region' (Aarohi, 2016). Their work in education

connects schooling to people's ecology, science, economics and empowerment in innovative ways. Its imaginative efforts at natural resource management developed a unique product: oil of apricots extracted from hand-sorted apricot kernels (bitter almonds). These bitter kernels were not endowed with any economic value, till now. This simple innovation has fostered sustainable economic interconnection with the forest, reaching out to the apricot producing farmer, which is not driven by brute forces of capitalism and is ecologically sane as only the surplus forest produce is processed by manual non-polluting processes. Yet it is also sold in urban markets all over the north India. The basis for this innovation continues to be a certain kind of orchard agriculture that remains the mainstay sustenance practice in most Himalayan villages, and definitely in village Hartola. In a way this remains a guard against the deleterious transformative impact of tourism that an influx of urban capital and tourists, hotels and lodges can lead to. These have started appearing not in the village Dehregaon but in surrounding villages and locales. So far this initiative at rural empowerment has not disturbed the landscape and socioscape yet yielded opportunities for income of the villagers.

The working of the organisation seems to have followed the Chinese proverb 'Go to the people. Live among them. Learn from them. Love them. Start with what they know. Build with what they have, but with the best leaders. When the work is done, the task accomplished, the people will say "We have done this ourselves".'

Insights from the 'margin'

The goal of the visit was not to study nature or learn about the mountain society from a comfortable distance. Nor did it aim to generate ideas of ecological living, environmentalism or revival of Gandhian Basic Education philosophy; though these ideas may be entwined with the participants' experiential learning.

The travel attempted initial teacher education for diversity by shifting the site of participants' preparation to a new location at the 'margin'; that was in striking contrast to where the participants came from. The aim was to re-envisioning the concerns of diversity, equity, emancipation and quality education as well as a distinct locale specific notion of educational development. The travel to the new site provided specific experiential lessons on critical teacher education, inclusive schooling, and rural transformation; as also a broader emancipatory educational trajectory. The lessons are not merely 'keeping such concerns at the level of intellectual disturbance' (Raina, 2020:32) but actualising action upon them. The participants' socio-educational experiences served a reminder that,

BEIEd aimed to prepare elementary school teachers not to fit into the existing school education system but as future transformative intellectuals who would be the agents of social change and transformation. The rationale for its introduction was that elementary teachers who were prepared "differently" would transform the system with their teacher agency that was responsive to social realities (Ibid: 33).

The participants come close enough to the rural mountain society to experience the existence of knowledge away from the metropolitan gaze; which perhaps was the basis of the emergence and development of a distinct as well as new educational imagination. The travel took them to a lived site of counter hegemonic learning in which the mainstream schooling and the participants own existential meanings in an urban education were contested. They gained awareness of the limited scope or even inability of mainstream schooling to offer emancipatory possibilities for the marginalised children of these remote mountain regions. There is development of an alternative transformative vision that is rooted in the locale specific bio-physical reality, social ecology and recovery of traditional local knowledge systems. These emerge as the central components of an emancipatory education in this new site. The site at the

margin made it easy to invoke Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* the participants read in their education courses. The locale defines a problem-posing education which creates a dialogue with the natural environment teaching the participants to not only overcome 'silence' but also become truly human in their own world.

The travel was a simple yet robust project of hope with the participants knowing, learning and being into transformative intellectuals (Sadgopal, 2001) on their own and within the society they live in. Like the travel into outer space that lead to the beginning of an inter-planetary consciousness in human civilizational history, this one symbolised the emergence of a liminal consciousness in young woman participants to re-locate an understanding of emancipation, equity and quality schooling in a new locale. The travel became a resource of critical teacher education. It brought about a conscientisation; generating unconventional insights, emancipatory possibilities and an alternate educational trajectory; elements of teacher education for diversity.

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Notes

ⁱSiddharth Anand, Modern School, Barakhamba Road, New Delhi 110001. June, 2019.

ⁱⁱThe old adage 'Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts', resonates in the village Dehragaon locale. The declining Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in recent years and quarters has been ringing alarm bells among most sections of academia, policy makers and common people; as it continues to be looked at as main metric for assessing the country's economy. This is true for India as also for most other countries of the world. The pandemic year has exacerbated these concerns in the public sphere. Yet the deeper question of what it means to have higher GDP, who is benefitted by it, what does it mean for the last man or what it means for our collective future is often left unexamined. The environmental cost of economic growth viz climate change, pollution and unmanageable solid waste has become clear by now. So much so that the question: Towards a common future: The future is here: Are we ready? is considered worthy of asking. GDP does not take into account future output or even future prosperity. Also large sections of our populace particularly small farmers continue to languish in poverty. In October 2019 India's finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman delivered a speech at School of International and Public Affairs, Columbia University, New York. The speech had two highlights which were received with instant cheers by the audience. First that India had lifted 168 million of its people out of absolute poverty in the preceding decade, a populace greater than the total number of residents of many countries. Second India was on the path to become a \$ 5 trillion economy by 2025, one among the top 3 economies of the world. This would of course mean more job opportunities, material progress and better living conditions for more people. Further in her outlining of the future roadmap she mentioned something more important. That it was now time to include farmers of the country in the growth story and double their income. This is regarded as important because farmers constitute 50% of the country's workforce feeding the 1.2 billion plus Indians yet contribute only 17% to the GDP. The fetish for GDP does not know how to count what really counts in terms of our collective future itself.

ⁱⁱⁱHere is an example of how the civilizational heritage of local knowledge systems emanating from daily human experiences gets robustly embedded in a region's social history offering emancipatory possibilities. In India, Cherapunji in Meghalaya in spite of high rainfall of 5 metres has severe water scarcity whereas Jaisalmer, the least rain fed district in Rajasthan with just 160 mm of rain in a year because of 'patient dialogue with realities of nature' has always had drinking water (Misra, 2001: 11). This is located not within western modernisation but within a frame of indigenous knowledge system (Guha, 2016) consisting of a plethora of water harvesting and conservation techniques ranging from small *kundis*, narrow wells, vast step wells, family tanks and big reservoirs have been integral part of the local community's tradition. This tradition has evolved over centuries through a connect 'between men, earth, heat and water' (Raina, 2017). The knowledge of this water culture and the larger water systems of Rajasthan is not available at all in the 'modern' education or western science. The 'depth and height which people of Rajasthan have been able to achieve through several years of *sadhana* and through their own means' (Misra, 2001: 107) offers possibilities for not only other regions of the country but the 100 other countries where desert regions exist. The vision of an emancipatory education can draw from the robust civilisation local knowledge heritage in understanding how natural, social and cultural resources may be accessed and utilised as well as brought into viable economic structures.

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Author Details

Jyoti Raina, Associate Professor, Department of Elementary Education, Gargi College (University of Delhi), Siri Fort Road, New Delhi 110049.

Email: jyoti.raina@gargi.du.ac.in