
Reportage

Problems of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Children*

Executive Summary

The basic objective of this paper is to critically examine the contemporary reality of schooling of children belonging to scheduled caste and scheduled tribe communities, with a view of suggesting policy and programmatic applications, especially in the domain of curriculum, to improve their educational situation. Sharp, historical differences between and within these communities have been eroded by socio-economic change and have brought the SC and ST on greater common ground. However, considerable material and cultural diversity still exists, therefore, the need to maintain contextual sensitivity while analysing their educational situation.

In the post independence context of massive state supported expansion and democratisation of schooling and institution of positive discrimination policies to facilitate access, education has successfully served, albeit to varying extents and with marked regional

variations, as a key instrument of change and emancipation for the SC and ST. It has brought them self respect and socio-economic advance, raised political consciousness and empowered their identity struggles. However, educational disparities between the SC and ST and the rest of the population, in terms of quantity, quality, teaching – learning process and learning outcome, have been far from eliminated. The inequalities reflect the fact that theirs has scarcely been an equal integration into dominant society. Rather, in a society characterised by growing polarisation, their inclusion has been governed by relation and processes of exploitation, discrimination, displacement and oppression. Global economic forces have brought about greater ruin of large sections of SC and ST who experienced marginalisation by development processes. Poverty, unemployment and ill health are disproportionately located among them. Tribal have suffered large scale land

*National Curriculum Framework-2005, Position Paper, National Focus Group on Problems of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Children, 2007 NCERT, New Delhi. For details see, http://www.ncert.nic.in/new_ncert/ncert/rightside/links/pdf/focus_group/position_paper_on_sc_st.pdf

alienation and dispossession from natural resources and are reduced to economic and cultural subservience to non-tribal communities. Vast numbers of the Scheduled Castes have been unable to escape stigmatised occupations and social existence.

Such socio-economic conditions could not but create a disjuncture between survival needs and educational needs, leading to limited educational progress of the SC and ST. Our survey of quantitative expansion reveals the dismal contemporary scenario of inequality in access, retention and attainment at the school level. While an unprecedented rise in enrolment is evidence of strong demand for education among the SC and ST, accessing basic school is as yet a massive problem. Though school participation rates have increased, attendance rates are unsatisfactory at the primary level and worse still at the middle. Drop out, failure and low scholastic achievement afflict SC and ST to a far greater degree than non SC and ST school children. The cumulative impact is low rates of school completion. Gender disparities are conspicuous on all educational indicators revealing the under-education of girls. SC and ST communities have become increasingly patriarchal as a result of processes of cultural absorption. Gender and class along with tribe and caste constitute fundamental categories of exclusion. Furthermore significant inter-state, inter-regional and rural-urban disparities exist especially in politically neglected states and regions. Intra caste and intra-tribe variations are also sharp and indicate that the relatively more

marginalised of SC and ST groups, experience gross educational deprivation. Scheduled tribes appear to lag behind the Scheduled Castes in most states barring largely the North-Eastern ones, due to specific socio-historical factors.

Our exploration into the field reality of schooling of SC and ST children entailed a critical overview of basic educational provision as well as issues related to structure, content and process of the schooling. We find that historical inequality in diffusion has been mitigated to a great extent, but unequal provision continues to be the fundamental educational deterrent. Quality of mass education has declined to an abysmal level. Current policy changes have led to a rapid decline in teaching-learning conditions and have exacerbated the already grim situation in neglected regions and remote tribal areas. The cut in public spending on education has proved most damaging. It has adversely affected state provisioning of schools and teachers and encouraged in its place the most substandard and commercially oriented private effort or spectacular but unsustainable innovations. Ironically, as India stakes claim, as frontrunner in the world knowledge economy, her underprivileged children suffer the consequences of grossly inferior basic education. Several dimensions of educational inequality are conspicuous by their presence in schools for the SC and ST and signify the decline and dilution in educational quality. Diffusion is as yet inadequate in many parts, leading to situations whereby 'social' accessibility persists as a problem for the SC child and the absence of even

a poorly functional school remains a disadvantage imposed on a remotely located tribal child. Inferior learning opportunity is actualised in the poor quality of infrastructure, an inadequate and demotivated teaching staff, inadequacy of teaching transaction and in the provision of teaching learning material. The model of 'minimum levels of learning' further compromises quality in no uncertain measure as education gets diluted to literacy. School level policies of positive discrimination caught in the quagmire of bureaucratic apathy, politicisation, political patronage and corruption, offer limited coverage and an appallingly poor quality of service. State institutions meant to play supportive roles reflect patronising and derogatory assumptions about facilities befitting the SC and ST.

Curriculum has served as mediator of ideological dominance and hegemony, evident in the selection and structuring of knowledge, pedagogic practice, and in weak and distorted representation of subaltern groups, culture and ideologies. Curricular change supposedly aimed at indigenisation in post colonial educational policy, resulted in Brahmanisation as a key defining feature. The historical significance of structural oppressions of caste, gender, tribe and religion were made invisible by a school curriculum in which the dominant discourse was of cultural majoritarian nationhood. The Brahmanical construction of knowledge was evident in the eulogisation of specific forms of mental capacities, and dominance of Brahmanical language, literature, history as well as Brahmanical religion – culture practices,

symbols and modes of life in curricular content. By corollary there was a devaluation of manual labor, of "lesser" dialects, cultures, traditions, and of knowledge rooted in productive processes of lower castes and their socio- cultural habitat. Their knowledge, values, and skills found no place at all in the school curriculum. Nor did their stories, music, songs folklore or cultural and religious practices. Curriculum also retained its colonial character privileging knowledge of western hard sciences, technology and styles of life as also of the English language. The ideology of modernisation was adopted in truncated, superficial ways and the presence of liberal and democratic socialist values was largely notional. Phule and Ambedkar's thought critically adapted western liberal ideology towards the emancipation of India's downtrodden, radically transgressing narrow technocratic modernising elements. However the vibrant expressions of Phule- Ambedkarism and its vision for a new moral order for Indian society hardly found a space in a curriculum dominated by the thought of high caste nationalists neither did reflect upon varied other challenges posed by dalit epistemology, knowledge and protest. The Scheduled Castes and their issues remained peripheral and their representation, if at all in the curriculum, has been weak and distorted.

Curriculum did not acknowledge the cultural rights and history of the Scheduled Tribes either. The Scheduled tribes have a dual and contradictory relationship with education. On the one hand education as a central avenue of development and nationalism plays a part in the destruction of tribal language,

culture and identify and generates a negative self image. School regimen and curriculum fail to take account of tribal cultures, particular, of their culturally anomalous free and egalitarian socialisation and learning practices. Nor do they take cognizance of the special cognitive abilities of tribal children. On the other hand however, forces of cultural adaptation reinforce tendencies of alienation within the Scheduled Tribes themselves, who now look to schools to provide linguistic and social competencies that will facilitate their equal integration in dominant society.

Equal integration however has been difficult for both SC and ST. Schools themselves have served as sites of caste, tribe and gender power relations. An appalling body of evidence suggests that teacher preconceptions, bias and behaviour, subtle or overt, conscious or unconscious, operate to discriminate against SC and ST children. Teachers belong to alien cultures, they speak alien languages which becomes an obstacle to symbolic adaptation, motivation and learning. Most demeaning are the stated or unstated assumptions held by teachers of SC and ST children's 'deficient' cultures, habits, behaviour and styles of speech, of their inherent intellectual incapacitates and of their 'uneducability'. They lead teachers to adopt pedagogic practice and deliver teaching transaction that compound the situation of weak and discriminatory inclusion.

Indisputably the situation needs an urgent and serious response. The focus group has made several recommendations towards improving the larger institutional context without which meaningful curricular reform will be difficult to achieve. We strongly reiterate the need for equitable provision of quality education, a more focused, need based and responsive implementation of positive discrimination programmes, improved teacher recruitment policy and teacher working conditions towards enhancement of teacher quality, status, competence and self esteem. We suggest a critical resolution of cultural dilemmas for developing culturally sensitive and transformative curricular policies and programmes. It is essential that curricular and pedagogic approaches are rooted in critical theory and multiculturalism to nurture expansive cultural identities oriented towards the larger public good. Curricular goals of teacher education need to be recast with an emphasis on theoretical and experiential knowledge to gain an understanding of as well as sensitivity to SC and tribal communities. School curriculum and pedagogy must provide opportunities for every child's learning and her free, creative and multidimensional development. The culture and experience that the SC or ST child brings to the school must be integral to an egalitarian teaching learning process in fulfillment of the goal of a meaningful education for all children.