

## India in the Classroom

Vijayshree PS



It was nearing the end of the academic year and the 5th grade Environmental Science Karnataka State textbook awaits its readers to complete its pages.

I am always excited about the opportunity to teach the chapter *Our India – Physical Diversity*, since it appears to capture characteristics of the different regions of India- historical places and the flora and fauna of these regions. This is an account of one such experience.

At the start of every chapter in the textbook, there is a set of aims for the particular lesson. The aim stated for this chapter is that *the students know about India's unique natural setting*.

### After studying this lesson you,

- Understand the physical map of India.
- Know about the Himalayan Mountains, plateaus, plains, coastal plains, river basins and desert.
- Understand how the factors of natural environment influence the life of the people.
- Know the effects of physical factors on art and architecture.
- Know about the important characteristics of weather and the climate of India.
- Know about the plants and animals of India.

I entered the class armed with the textbook. A physical map of India lay in the corner of the classroom, waiting to be opened. I set about the task by trying to understand the students' previous knowledge. So, the session began with a simple question, *What is India?* The students responded, *It's our country*. When asked what the uniqueness of India is, I was expecting to hear something around the aspect of unity in diversity, since I had taught a similar topic to 9<sup>th</sup> graders at some point. To my surprise, the students were quiet. Realising that these were younger students, I reframed my question and asked about places they have visited. One boy mentioned that he had been to Mysuru and a girl shared that she visited her grandparents' place during summer vacations. Soon there was

excitement in the class with every student wanting to share about their family trips and travels. I decided at that point to do a preparatory activity for this chapter with a clear objective: that of making the students understand the meaning of diversity.

To begin with, I introduced myself and the place I hail from and the language spoken at home, following which, the students also shared information about their native place and their mother tongue.

There were seven students in all. So we grouped them into three teams. I asked the teams to pick up a piece of chalk and marked three specific areas on the black board- one for each group. The task at hand was for the team members to discuss and write their responses on the blackboard for the questions I asked.

Each team picked up a specific area on the blackboard- like owning their own spaces - and were ready for the questions. Next, they picked a name of a place for their respective teams. One group picked Bengaluru, another Tamil Nadu and a third group picked Mysuru. These were the places they were aware of or had lived in. The students had to answer all the questions specific to the place they had chosen.

The objective of this activity was to draw out some differences between these places and then move to the more complex notion of diversity. My first question to them was *What is the colour of the soil in that place?* The students appeared confused! I asked them to discuss within the groups and come up with a response. It took a few minutes to arrive at a response that they agreed upon unanimously. The answers they gave were red soil, black soil, and brown soil.

The next question was, *What is the colour of water in that place?* Initially they said white. With some probing and encouragement, they said orange, blue, and even dark brown! As they moved to the third question, the students began to get confident. Gradually they began to write whatever they had experienced, secure in the thought that they were



not going to be judged for their response. The last two questions were about the animals and the green leafy vegetables found in that place.

At the end of the activity, the students were delighted to see the blackboard filled with their responses, with not a single empty space.

The students were struck by the differences they had noted between places at short distances from each other, of not more than six hours of travel. I could now see that the seed of the notion of diversity had been sown. The activity had served as a preparation to begin the lesson on the physical diversity of the country.

We also discussed how the world differed in terms of the food, the weather, soil colour, taste of the water everything changes'. At this point, we used the map of India to locate Tamil Nadu, Bangalore, Mysuru and the river Kaveri. The students got a sense of national borders and lines demarcating borders between countries.

I wanted to wind up the day by setting a context for the introduction of the big chapter ahead. The

textbook provides factual information on physical aspects, climate and art and architecture of the different regions in the country. I felt that the lesson must go beyond mere facts and be made more interesting. The subject needed to be approached by making students appreciate diversity in the country. At the end of the activity, they were excited to learn more about the diversity of our country.

The activity also raised the students' interest and curiosity about the vastness of the earth. After the activity, there was an animated discussion and students wanted to know about cities and rivers on the map of India and the nations on the globe. And to my astonishment, they began raising interesting questions. At the end of the session a girl asked, *What happens if we keep moving away from the land? Where will we reach at the end?* And one of the boys who had kept quiet through much of the session said, *Do you want to go to the sun, moon, away from the earth?* There was much laughter. I was glad to see the children opening up. I ended with the promise of taking the discussion forward the next time.