

INDIGENOUS EDUCATION: ALTERNATIVES TO CULTURALLY HEGEMONIC EDUCATION

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Abstract: Education is an underestimated vehicle for development and this is only being realised now. Countries strive to attain goals of skilled resourceful labour, which, in turn, would actively contribute to the economy and development. But in a bid to achieve the aims set, the programmes and the laws override the actual needs, the language and cultural rights of minorities, especially indigenous people. In a manner, the purpose that education served during colonial rule is replicated in the context of the nation today, wherein the government/elite/dominant/majority assume the role of the coloniser through the process of “institutionalised colonisation”. This is a form of modern-day cultural hegemony, which could be detrimental to growth and development.

Introduction

Paulo Freire (1985) claims that “education is politics”. Indeed, there can be little doubt that education has characteristics in correspondence with the goals of those who control it.

This article draws much from the above statement. Its main aim is to understand the prevailing form of cultural hegemony perpetuated by a country on weaker sections of its society using the dependency model. Education is often used as a political tool of unification and for the creation of a homogeneous national identity, resulting in the loss of the unique culture of particular communities. The article is divided into two major parts. The first analyses and outlines the problem while stating present-day manifestations of the same. The second part provides an alternative in the form of the indigenous model as a valid and legitimate solution to the aforementioned problem.

The White Man’s Burden

In the year 1899, Rudyard Kipling wrote a poem called “The White Man’s Burden” wherein he spoke about the burden of civilising the brown and

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the black populations of the world upon the shoulders of white men. He enunciated this by using words like “half devil half child” and “wild” to describe the “captives” and “newly caught people”. From this poem stems the notion of the whites being superior, more civilised among the rest, and being in a position to impart knowledge and teach the rest their advanced ways (Kipling “The White Man`s Burden”).

An entire era of colonisation was driven by this thought, resulting in the emergence of certain countries like Britain, France and Russia, with a majority of white populations conquering large parts of the world. These countries, which as a result of years of colonisation, developed a hybrid culture—a mixture of the culture, people and customs of both countries. This give and take was not always smooth, and it did come with turmoil and aggression, but mostly it took place through acculturation. Now, acculturation can be defined as the one-sided adoption of values, cultures and norms of the dominant culture when two cultures come in contact. The result is obvious—the conscious or unconscious adoption of British ways over years led to the birth of a new way of life in colonised India. Some old indigenous culture patterns withered away and many others existed in a morphed form after much incorporation/mixture of British culture. Many Indians imbibed that the ideology of the West was culturally, morally and intellectually of a superior race, which formed the crux of the theory of orientalism, formulated by Edward Said.

Orientalism gave birth to a new form of studies called oriental studies, which are based on the idea that the East (Orient) is a mystical and backward land inhabited by savages of which little is known about, while the West (Occident) is everything that the Orient is not, representing advancement, technology and development. The East was understood in terms of the theory and the models of the West, which were taken as a yardstick, thus enforcing a continuing comparison between two intrinsically different and thus incomparable spheres (*New World Encyclopedia*)

Today, in the twenty-first century, all colonised nations have assumed independence but a colonial hangover remains. This is the reason why English is an important language in India and is not taught as a foreign language, like it is in schools of Germany, despite it being one. Colonial rule has thus had a lasting impact on many colonised countries years after independence, and it is still being felt.

Dependency Theory

This “borrowing” of models and systems from the West can be observed in the case of India immediately post-independence in the emergence of sociology as a discipline, where Western methodology, research and models like those in the British and American academia were heavily borrowed from before Indian methods of research picked pace, spearheaded by G S Ghurye and Iravati Karve, among many others. This is aptly put down in the paper “Higher Education Co-operation and Western Dominance of Knowledge Creation and Flows in Third World Countries” by Ishwanathan Selvaratnam (1988), which discusses about the world being divided into the “information rich” and “information poor” countries, with Third World countries falling into the latter category.

Universities in Third World countries represent the presence in their midst of a Western academic and intellectual heritage and cultural phenomenon even today. A remnant of this can be found in the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) in India today, which are modeled on the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

However, it is not always Western countries that are the dominators; there is also the possibility of the elite/dominant/majority/government within a country to assume such a role. It could possibly be to serve the purpose of unification and for the creation of a homogeneous national identity as it was in the case of Mexico, wherein the local communities of Chiapas were subjected to receive education from teachers of low skill and in Spanish, thus sidelining their primary language. Although bilingual programmes were in force, there was much disparity between theory and practice. The main objective of the national leaders of Mexico was to integrate the Indians into the mainstream through assimilation and acculturation, using education as a political tool in this endeavour (Reinke 2004). And by way of schooling, the cultural hegemony is being established and maintained and continuously reinforced in the minds of the dominated (Robert 1975). For this purpose, education becomes a powerful tool for indoctrination and manipulation. Macaulay`s influential minute of 1835 is a fitting example of this (Macaulay 1835). However, it is possible to provide a solution or an alternative to education. It lies in providing relevant and culturally appropriate pedagogical practices that conserve and evoke a sense of respect for one`s own culture and traditions.

Indigenous Education

Indigenous education may be defined as the learning and teaching processes locally derived, that is, in the community context. Some indigenous education is “traditional”, having continued for a long period of time (McDowell 1980)

Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have for long been denied access and participation in education systems. Historically, the majority of indigenous Australians have been excluded from the political, education and employment systems. Up until 1962, most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were excluded from participating in the electoral system, thus being denied their basic right and being denied validation as citizens and even representation. Though the situation has improved, one of the major barriers to attaining equal status in Australia is the attitude that pervades society whereby aborigines are still considered to be unable and incapable of achieving success. Unfortunately, their success is measured by a culture that is often the complete opposite of theirs (Brady 1997)

Indigenous education and the movement surrounding it often revolve around certain aspects such as the quest for self-determination, which is interrelated with indigenous people`s struggle to conceptualise and control their community-specific education. Others issues that the indigenous people struggle with include the attempt to maintain their culture, what constitutes knowledge and how is it taught, the effort to acquire power with regard to decision making and education, battling society`s perception and expectations, and problems of language and teachers (Vargas-Cetina 1998).

Maintenance of Culture and Language

According to the Canadian Indian activist Harold Cardinal,

Unless a child learns about the values that shaped him, the history of his people, their values and customs, their language, he will never be ready to know himself or his potential as a human being. The Indian child who learns about his heritage will be proud of it. His schooling should reinforce and contribute to himself as an Indian. (Vargas-Cetina 1998)

This idea is cemented as a right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights UDHR (Brady 1997).

Recently, the state government of Odisha needed the services of tribal storytellers to initiate learning for tribal children with an emphasis on multilingual education. Thus researchers from the state`s ST and SC Development, Minorities & Backward Classes Welfare Department went

searching for storytellers who spoke the Gutab language in Gadaba tribal community. It took them three days to find a storyteller who was fully conversant in the language. As per the 2011 census, among the 84,689 Gadaba tribals, very few can speak Gutab fluently. And it is believed that the language could become extinct in two decades, facing threat from Odia and the dominant tribal language Desia. In another instance, among the Gonds, the second largest tribal community (8,88,581) among the 62 tribes living in Odisha, less than 1% can speak the pure Gondi dialect (Barik 2016)

When an indigenous group stops speaking its language, the language disappears from the face of the earth (McCarty 2003). Thus the preservation of these languages becomes increasingly important. Since language is intertwined with culture, it becomes a very important means to strengthen culture-based curricula. However, there is the danger of falling into a simplistic policy division, with English reserved for science and technology and the mother tongue for “rootedness” and ethnic identification (Ismail 2005). While not falling into this trap of over-simplifying the issue of language, the presence of a local as well as a world language in their education system has become increasingly important for the integration of the indigenous community in the larger society while they preserve their distinct culture.

Challenges Related to Teachers

The primary problem with the government-appointed teachers in the indigenous communities of Mexico was that they were not bilingual. The medium of instruction in the classroom is primarily Spanish, which causes a sense of disassociation in the minds of the indigenous children who do not speak the same language back at home. They are thus forced to constantly shift identities while inhabiting the two spheres. Moreover, using a language that the children are not familiar with and do not associate with only leads to ineffective teaching and further increases the number of dropouts (Reinke 2004).

Also, these teachers often do not belong to the community and thus lack the “lens” or the required experience (Ismail 2005). Skills and values of the aboriginal students valued at home became irrelevant in the school space, giving rise to the phenomenon of cultural discontinuity. There is often a clash between the teacher’s and the student’s knowledge systems. Thus teachers’ initiative and professional sensitivity become of utmost importance (Deer 2013).

Another problem faced is that a majority of the teachers that the government (Mexico) assigns for the indigenous communities are of a low level of expertise and are inexperienced. With time, when teachers gain experience, they are moved to the city and other young teachers take their place (Reinke 2004). When Nigeria set out to enforce mass education as part of its national policy in 1977–78, about 70,000 out of 1,95,750 teachers were unqualified or untrained. To further achieve the goals, there will be further dependence on under-qualified teachers (McDowell 1980).

What Is Taught?

In the setting up of an indigenous form of education, the issue that arises is of the incorporation of the culture and traditional activities of the community within the schooling structure.

Parents have traditionally relied on children`s assistance in economic activities such as farming and household activities, which now take a backseat since children are forced to attend school for most part of the day (McDowell 1980). Thus there has been much debate on the nature of this combination, that is, the question of it being an add-on subject to the main syllabus versus “it being all they do” (Ismail 2005)

Two possible outcomes from this thought could be that if indigenous knowledge is taught as a mere subject that occupies only a small portion of the entire curriculum, it would lead to the potential distortion of its dynamic and holistic nature by its possible compartmentalisation to fit the syllabus. Institutionalising culture without radically altering the existing public school model would reduce culture to the visible and essential while barely skimming its deeper and abstract meanings (Ismail 2005). This can be observed in the case of “aboriginal studies” being introduced as a subject in Australia (Brady 1997).

It thus becomes an evident necessity for there to be community involvement in determining education and curriculum so that there is an adequate balance of theory (math, science) and practice (farming, agriculture, tradition) (Vargas-Cetina 1998).

It is believed that in the event of education being completely of an indigenous nature, without any influences from outside or without ideas and values of the wider society, would also be detrimental. A school structure in extreme isolation to its surroundings would lead to fewer people from the indigenous communities getting access to a college education due to the vast difference between the approach and methodology taken towards education on the

different levels. This system as an alternative might not work for it does not guarantee the same degree of secularism, scientific temper and global exposure as a combined approach of traditional and modern education might have. Thus as seen in the case of Mexico, the Zapotecs have used international connections, the internet, technology, platforms like the World Bank and numerous non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to help them enhance and reconnect with their culture, rather than closing off to the global forces (Reinke 2004).

An NGO called Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences, a residential school based in Odisha, accommodates about 25,000 tribal students. This NGO attempts to strike a balance between intellectual learning, vocation and sports, and its success can be measured in terms of international awards to its credit. It has been majorly successful in its endeavors to strike a balance, with having produced an under-13 rugby team that has represented India in competitions in the UK, though it is not just sports that the children excel in. Many have gone to acquire diplomas and degrees in various fields, including some who have secured a place in Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology, an extremely selective institute. However, the most important aspect is its healthy approach towards retaining and promoting the culture and traditions of the children (Lab et al. 2016)

Padma M. Sarangapani (2003), however, questions if formal education and indigenous knowledge acquiring systems are compatible. She has done extensive research relating to education with the Baigas, a small adivasi group inhabiting the regions of Central India, with a literacy rate of 5%. Formal education in this region exists in the form of the *ashram shalas* (besides the regular schools), which are run by the Tribal Welfare Department. These shalas are required to have a different curricula, more suited to the languages and ethos of the tribal children, but they function like most mainstream government schools, promoting Hindi over Baiga-boli and Chhattisgarhi, which are the regional languages. The schools run quite irregularly, and when they do, the teaching–learning process involves meaningless memorisation of texts. Hence, for the most part, the Baiga children are disinterested and do not attend school, nor do their parents compel them to do so (Sarangapani 2003).

The Baigas have the reputation of having extensive knowledge of the forests, herbal medicines and magical treatment of illnesses and diseases. They are known to be well versed in the application and the transmission of medicinal knowledge. Children in this community by the age of eight

develop a holistic sense of the plants and herbs in their environment. While one could incorporate themes like taxonomic and herbarium into the school structure, turning each plant into an object to be observed and talked about may amount to simplifying the way in which the plant is known in a living dynamic culture, or accord it with properties and dimensions that are of no interest in the Baiga system. These knowledge systems might not survive the de-contextualisation that examinations would bring. Thus in Sarangapani`s opinion, indigenous knowledge systems would better survive if kept out of the purview of the formal modern educational system (Sarangapani 2003).

Thus, the way forward is a subsequent give or take between the traditional and the modern where one emerges as prominent over the other at different times, but it is crucial to find a balance.

Conclusion

This brings us to the question as to why the popular idea of development surrounding tribal communities deals with the issue of integration or assimilation and not empowerment.

A transformational approach to education would be where the curriculum is amended to suit the social action approach, where students take action in an effort to rectify problematic social issues (Deer 2013).

An interesting approach to education is that used by an NGO called Laya, which functions in the East Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh. It deals with adult education through informal workshops where the teaching modules include topics relevant to the context of tribal communities. For example, the module on law educates them about people`s rights vis-à-vis the police, the role of panchayats, the role of customary laws in the tribal context, national and state policies relevant to tribal areas like the forest bill, displacement policy and the land acquisition act. Moreover, these workshops teach them how to form a sangham (association), to present a problem to a government representative, to write letters and petitions, and so on. This sort of education is very empowering in nature and equips tribal communities with the knowledge required to lessen exploitation through middlemen, moneylenders or the government. Women of the village are included in workshops regarding domestic violence (Laya)

Bottom-Up Approach

Government-recognised autonomous educational institutions, much like the charter schools in Canada, could be a valid alternative. Indigenous

community-based or “bottom-up” education becomes an interesting solution, but this also entails a top-down recognition of this process (Reinke 2004).

A bottom up approach to education in the context of the indigenous community would include schools consulting and working together with indigenous people (local elders, parents, nurses, doctors, monks, nuns, priests and other members of the community) by inviting them as guest storytellers or co-teachers to class to tell their stories or to sing, act, dance, perform puppetry, etc. while developing the curriculum. The teacher`s role might have to change from being a transmitter of knowledge to a mediator and facilitator of learning. (Omolewa 2007)

Taking Learning Out of the School

Most indigenous cultures sustain their knowledge systems by transmitting it down generations orally or through apprenticeships. In Africa, attempts are being made so that every individual develops a particular skill. For this particular purpose of learning through apprenticeship, training centres have been established to transfer the knowledge of skills and crafts of a chosen profession. Thus there is little problem of access to acquiring most kinds of available knowledge of skills and training. Practitioners include traditional weavers, master craftsmen, wood workers and members of esoteric guilds (Omolewa 2007). Thus a possible sustainable option could be to do away with the presence of a school altogether and have learning outside the confines of the physical school through the means of apprenticeship.

The problem put forth is that every simple need is institutionalised. Schools are designed on the assumption that there is a secret to everything in life; that the quality of life depends on knowing that secret; that secrets can be known only in orderly successions; and that only teachers can properly reveal these secrets.

The value attached to licences has made skills scarce on the education market. Once one realises this, we will learn to acknowledge the existence of many skilled people outside the teaching profession and outside the school system (Illich 1971).

Thus Ivan Illich proposed a model of skills exchange, which if applied to the indigenous context would mean established networks that function and stretch from within the community. He calls for an application of something he terms as “learning webs”. This model is supported by “skill models” who make their skills and talents freely available for educational purposes (Illich 1971). In this case, these can be elders, peers or specialists of a craft or certain

knowledge, within and around the community. This would debunk the myth that education is only credible if taught in the formal schooling system, which has for long rendered indigenous people increasingly incapable of organising their lives around their own experiences and the resources within their own communities.

This could prove to be a great low-cost and sustainable model regulated entirely by the community. It would allow indigenous groups to be well equipped with handling businesses or small enterprises and all of this from within the community. Also, the notion of education or learning being irrelevant to the occupation they choose to pursue or their way of life would become redundant. This would also establish an educational relationship between man and his environment and promote positive self-motivated learning, thus breaking the long continuing process of dependency of indigenous people on dominant majorities who have dictated and defined education processes for them among many other things (Illich 1971).

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