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Culture Based Education: A Way Forward for Indigenous Populations

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Abstract:

Culture Based Education is a powerful agent of human empowerment, employment and skill diversification in multi-cultural societies. A country like India, with its invaluable cultural heritage has multitudes of different ways of expression, of art, of sustainable occupations, of languages and of life training. Education needs to reflect that diversity, not use a standardized brush, but celebrate the difference, so that students from smaller, fringe communities have voice and self-esteem. The paper explores methods of creating avenues for CBE in rural and semi urban classrooms of West Bengal.

Keywords: Indigenous, Culture, Education, Empowerment, Identity.

Introduction:

Classrooms with children from different cultures can be incredibly enriching, as education and human diversity mesh together. Environment is always dynamic, and all human beings, particularly children, are also changing, growing in that environment, according to their needs. Every individual child may have different needs as their socio economic and cultural circumstances are different. Needs may be physiological, psychological, Sociological, occupational, Emotional, Ethical etc. The only way to fulfil these needs effectively is through education. Education and life are correlated; one enhances and compliments the other. A Healthy society always will depend on its education system, as that education system systematically fulfills every individual's needs through his or her "All round Development". Such individuals, in turn, will become assets of society by utilising their skills, their creativity and their critical thinking. They will also further contribute to the education system too, by the development of new knowledge and concepts.

But that can only happen when students actively engage in classrooms, they take an interest in the subject matter, and enjoy the various facets of the learning process. Children, for that matter, even adults, generally take an interest in only those things which fulfill their specific needs and are somehow related to their life. If education is not related to their needs, then they are unable to connect with just bookish theoretical education, that they cannot find any use of. This is the scenario that is prevalent in many multi ethnic human groups, the specific example here being of Malda district in West Bengal. Malda district in West Bengal is home to a linguistically diverse population, and several local dialects and languages are spoken across its multi-ethnic communities. Here's a breakdown of the key dialects and languages in the region:



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1. Maldaiya Bengali (Malda Bengali)

- Who speaks it: The general Bengali-speaking population.
- Features: A regional dialect of Bengali with unique phonetic and lexical features.
- Notes: Influenced by neighboring districts like Dinajpur, Murshidabad, and Bihar.

2. Khotta Bhasha

- Who speaks it: The Khotta Muslims.
- Features: A creole-like dialect blending Hindi, Urdu, and Bengali.
- Usage: Used primarily in informal settings at home; formal education is in Bengali.
- Regions: Kaliachak I & II, Harishandrapur, Ratua.

3. Maldaiya Urdu

- Who speaks it: Many Muslim communities, especially the Shershabadia and Shaikh groups.
- Features: A regional variant of Urdu, often mixed with Bengali syntax and pronunciation.
- Context: Used in religious and cultural contexts; coexists with Bengali.

4. Hindi (Bhojpuri-Influenced)

- Who speaks it: Migrant populations from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.
- Features: Informal speech often has Bhojpuri or Maithili influences.
- Usage: Spoken in markets, homes, and among labor communities.

5. Rajbanshi

- Who speaks it: Some groups near the northern borders, though less prominent in central Malda.
- Notes: Related to Assamese and North Bengal dialects.

6. Tribal Dialects (Minority Groups)

- Some Scheduled Tribes in the district speak Santali or other Austroasiatic languages, though these are far less common than Bengali or Urdu.

There is a great tradition of Multilingualism in these areas, a beautiful sing song quality of colloquial speech because of the combination of these languages, as Code-switching between Bengali, Urdu, and Hindi is common, especially in bazaars, schools, and homes, and that leads to the fact that students often speak a special dialect at home and a formal language at school, and this is one of the problem factors for education here.

Specific challenges for colloquial speakers

Here are some common problems that might arise in the school for most of these students, particularly those from rural backgrounds with much less exposure to formal languages:

1. Language Barriers



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- Problem: Students from different linguistic backgrounds may struggle to understand instructions or communicate effectively, particularly when the medium of instruction is Bengali or English in some cases.
- Impact: This can and does lead to misunderstandings, reduced participation, and frustration amongst almost all categories of students, who stop interaction in most cases, and become either very quiet or sullen.
- Example: A student may not ask questions or participate in group discussions due to limited English or even bangla proficiency.

2. Cultural Misunderstandings

- Problem: Cultural norms and values differ significantly, leading to confusion or conflict, particularly in their everyday behaviour in terms of food, clothing, greetings, interactions.
- Impact: Behaviors seen as respectful in one culture may be interpreted as rude or inappropriate in another.
- Example: Eye contact may be seen as respectful in one culture and confrontational in another.

3. Curriculum Bias

- Problem: Teaching materials are centered around one dominant culture, and linguistic expression, in the sense that the textbooks in most government schools of West Bengal are more suitable and relatable to city dwellers. The teachers who are not locally educated also find it comfortable to use study materials in a language that they understand.
- Impact: This can make students from smaller, local cultures feel excluded or invisible, in a metaphorical sense. It has major impact on their self-esteem and their world view.
- Example: History lessons that focus solely on Western events and figures, ignoring other perspectives.

4. Stereotyping and Prejudice

- Problem: Students or even teachers may have unconscious biases or make assumptions based on ethnicity or culture.
- Impact: This can lead to labeling, lower expectations, and even bullying.
- Example: Assuming a student is good at math or bad at English based on their ethnicity.

5. Unequal Participation

- Problem: Cultural norms might discourage some students from speaking up or engaging openly.
- Impact: This can result in certain voices being marginalized in classroom discussions.
- Example: A student may avoid speaking in a mixed-gender group due to cultural values.

6. Adjustment Difficulties

- Problem: Students new to a country or culture might experience culture shock or social isolation.
- Impact: This can affect academic performance and emotional well-being.
- Example: A student may become withdrawn and disinterested due to difficulty adjusting.

Centralized content and decentralized process:



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Paulo Freire, introduced pedagogy with a new relationship between teachers, students, culture and society. He wrote “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” in 1968 in Portuguese and 1970 in English. This book was written when he was talking about the experiences of poor Brazilian adults. In 1969 he was invited to Harvard University as a visiting professor. Later he moved to Europe as a special Education Advisor to the “World Council of Churches”. In 1980 he returned back to Brazil finally and started his seminal work on Adult Pedagogy, using materials and techniques that were practice and experience oriented, and truly empowered the people.

. According to him "Critical Pedagogy " insists that social justice and democracy are not distinct from the act of teaching and learning. Critical Pedagogy is freedom from oppression through an incitement of the critical consciousness which encourages individuals to effect change in their world through constructive social critique and educational action so that they can reach their greatest potential or "Self -actualization". The term “Banking Model” is used in his book as a metaphor, where teacher is a active participant and pupils are passive recipients, who are thus dehumanised as empty receptacles and nothing more. aSuch an education cannot bring about positive growth in personalities and societies. He felt that Brazil, then was a ‘mutilated’ society where discrimination and illiteracy were widespread. Also, even at that point, there was ecological crisis and the burden was being borne by the marginalised communities.

In this context Freire’s book offers the modern reader enduring and significant ideas about “Developing a Critical Consciousness”, so that humans can experience pride and esteem in their work and achievements which are further enhanced by education. For that purpose, necessity of dialogue, discussion and experience is should be the key for social progress. The school acts as a precursor to assess the competing political, social, economic ideologies confronting people today. Freire contrasts oppression and liberation, throughout the text, calling them as two poles of human existence. The society in these fringe communities of Malda are comparable to the people Freire has worked for. They are oppressed not just by virtue of poverty, but also alienation from the so called ‘mainstream’ urban world of big cities. These people are unable to understand the meaning of Human as a free creature and accept their situation as their destiny. They fear their freedom as human beings, because of a risk of conflict or insecurities. As a result they suppress their voice, their language and experience finding representation in their education and meekly accept a curriculum that doesn’t interest them and they don’t understand.

Freire tried for them to become free and autonomous human beings by teaching children and adults through their lived experiences, respecting their work and culture. Such education is designed not to render the students as compliant objects to be controlled, but to overcome their fear of learning with the use of their realities. Key moments of their “Path Of Liberation”, from their own fear and hesitation are when these people from neglected societies understand the nature of the social world, not controlled by rigid laws but also as malleable subject of human agencies. They are able to understand that their Liberation is related to the construction and reconstruction of their world by way of their vision. Contextual and Culturally Relevant Education can provide this knowledge to them.

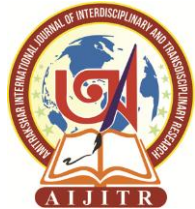
Freire advocates for education that is rooted in the real-life context of learners. This means using local language, culture, and everyday issues as teaching tools. The Impact can be immense, as Learning becomes more meaningful and accessible, particularly for indigenous or culturally distinct communities. Encouraging Empowerment and Agency by shifting the focus from passive learning to active engagement, Freire’s pedagogy fosters a sense of agency among the oppressed. Education is not just about acquiring skills but about becoming an agent of social change, and when that happens, learners move from being subjects of history to makers of history.

What can be done?

Taking a cue from Friere’s work, only way forward would be to Culture Based Education (CBE) should be introduced. Here are strategies and solutions to address the problems in multicultural classrooms:

1. Language Barriers – Solutions

- Use Visuals and Gestures: Incorporate images, diagrams, and body language to support verbal instruction. In fact, students from such diverse backgrounds need a lot of time to adjust to the school, particularly when they come from anganwadis to class 5. We have to give them at least 3 months for accepting their new



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environment, development of friendships with peers. Though it may take some time, a start needs to be made at least to train the teachers in their regional language, so the learning and understanding can, at least to an extent, be in their language. The initial period of settling them should be bookless, no textbooks are used at this time. Also, no strict class routine and time bound curriculum need be implemented, as they need their own space and some comfort to start the learning process. Their study time in school should be invested to activate their Affective Domain. Cognitive Domain is still easy for them to achieve, if their interest and curiosity is aroused. They can kickstart their learning process by the teacher providing them with concrete, physical examples which they can touch and feel, visualizing from their known environment. This way they will realize that there is no difference between their home environment and school environment, and they will feel safe and free. The anxiety and fear of the unknown that plagues them in a formal classroom can thus, be greatly reduced. Once they are psychologically ready, then we can check their 3R(Reading, Writing, Arithmetic), collect their daily based routine and family details and make a record. We may find at this point that students might also have their learning disabilities like dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, ADHD, Dyspraxia. In fact, these students don't respond in the class at all, so finding out what are their problems is not easy, and the teacher will have to engage them in various enjoyable, playful activities for gaining their trust.

- Peer Support: The teacher can pair students having major language difficulties with bilingual buddies or assign study partners. Group work would be a very effective way in making them feel they belong, they can share, connect, communicate and their confidence will tremendously grow.

- Simplify Language: Use of clear, concise language is very important for them to understand the teacher and also learn to speak and write effectively. The teacher will have to repeat words, and also use various audio visual aids to augment what is being spoken.

- Extra Language Support: Offer ESL (English as a Second Language) classes or after-school tutoring.

2. Cultural Misunderstandings – Solutions

- Cultural Sensitivity Training: The teachers have to be provided training for building awareness of different cultural norms. In many situations, the teachers belong to different areas of the state and picking up local language and norms take time, an intensive training in this regard can be very helpful.

- Open Dialogue: Create safe spaces for students to share their cultural practices and perspectives, so that their respect for each other and an interest in various cultures grows. This acceptability and accommodation is a great skill for them to learn to have a successful future anywhere in the country.

- Celebrate Diversity: Organize multicultural days, festivals, or classroom activities that highlight different traditions, in fact, subjects can be taught utilising local knowledge and traditions, of which these students are very well aware. Special books should be provided according to their social needs.

3. Curriculum Bias – Solutions

- Inclusive Content: Incorporate books, case studies, and historical perspectives from diverse cultures.

- Student Voice: Let students bring in examples from their own backgrounds that relate to the topic being studied.

- Review Materials: Regularly assess textbooks and resources for cultural representation and bias.

4. Stereotyping and Prejudice – Solutions

- Set Clear Rules: Establish a classroom code of conduct that promotes respect and inclusion.

- Intervene Early: Address any discriminatory comments or behavior immediately and thoughtfully.



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• Teach Empathy: Use storytelling, role play, and discussions to help students see the world from different viewpoints.

5. Unequal Participation – Solutions

- Flexible Participation Options: Allow students to express themselves in writing, small groups, or creative forms if they're not comfortable speaking up, and the teachers will have to always be very facilitative towards them.
- Encourage All Voices: Actively invite quieter students to share, and ensure dominant voices don't take over.
- Respect Communication Styles: Recognize that silence or indirect communication can be part of a student's cultural norm.

The school authorities and teachers will have to monitor class v students individually. School should maintain their records like their family background, physical health and mental health, prior knowledge, and socio-economic conditions as these are the factors which will, directly and indirectly, have an impact on their class participation patterns. The students who are more disadvantaged than others will need more positive interventions and encouragement.

6. Adjustment Difficulties – Solutions

- Mentoring Programs: Pair newcomers with mentors to help them navigate school life. The teachers can check their anxiety levels and language understanding capacity, what is the best way to get through to them, then make comfortable small peer groups where they can interact freely and gain confidence.
- Counseling Support: Provide access to guidance counselors or mental health professionals.
- Parent Involvement: Engage families through translated materials, cultural liaisons, or multilingual meetings. Mothers' orientation programmes, Teacher-Parents relationship enhances healthy school environments. Students feel homely feeling in their schools. Parents also feel the value of real education.

Teacher orientation programmes: Teachers need some background and training before they start teaching in these classrooms of complex cultural diversity. They try their level best, but sometimes, they too need help with specific problems of communicating with and teaching these children. Three months programmes can be started, should be made compulsory training for class 5 teachers, which will help them to adjust the socio-cultural complexities of their new school. This is needed for even local teachers, and the time duration of training will have to be higher for teachers who are from different geographies. There is an immediate and urgent need for teachers to be able to plan lessons based on their local interests, livelihoods and occupations which truly benefit these children in the long term.

An example in a day of CBE English teaching:

Every day the teacher should tell one story which helps their knowledge enhancement but also inspires them and sparks their interest (Vidyasagar's life story, Tagore's life story etc which creat moral values also)

The students should be encouraged to tell stories of the local heroes in the local language which can then be translated for the teacher by the students themselves, so that they feel their culture, their ideas are of interest to the teacher who is a representation of the world 'out there'.

After the story the teacher can ask them small questions to check their understanding level.

Then let us check their alphabets, words, sentence construction, knowledge of writing.

Simultaneously, English words can be introduced with regional language words if they are not familiar with English letters, they will learn letters through words like, we can start with "ANT "pictorially with its regional meaning, then say "A" is an English alphabet and a vowel, also we use "A" word as an article, and then try to teach them articles indirectly. After that, provide them more word each starting with A, N, T, to solidify the sounds in their memory. This



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way they will be familiar with all alphabets and slowly they will grasp words and sentences. First, they will learn simple words and then complex word like in Bengali juktaksar, exceptional English words.

Conclusion:

In this discussion we have highlighted factors that impact multicultural societies and how education can be the one important driver of cohesion and diverse expression in such societies. Adult literacy campaigns, community-based education projects, social justice movements are all started by a precursor, Culture Based Education with the help of alternative schooling systems that challenge colonial education models that homogenize education to the extent of alienation of cultures that are unique, local and increase the richness of living and civilisation .

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