

Similarly, our engagement with establishing an agenda for Dalit Studies began with another contemporary challenge that higher education in India is facing with respect to teaching and learning about Dalits. We realised that even though considerable research exists on Dalit communities, what has been lacking is a perspective from which that literature might be integrated into education. There seems to be a continuous and calculative silence maintained with regard to Dalits in Literature and Social Science disciplines. We engaged in developing a new perspective called Dalit Studies, both as an autonomous discipline and as a critique-come-restructuring of existing disciplines of Social Sciences and Humanities. Our purpose has been to intervene in the system of higher studies in order sensitize it to the Dalit issue. This experiment has succeeded in generating interest through workshops, seminars and discussions drawing ample support from academia, media and policy makers. Following our persistent efforts we have been able to develop post graduate level syllabi of Ancient Indian History, Modern Indian History and Hindi.

Given the complexities surrounding the issue of educating the children of oppressed communities, the central objective of our research and documentation is that of developing a perspective of school education within the framework of pluralism and diversity and developing strategies to transform this perspective in actual classroom practices.

Participants at the conference will include, besides leading scholars and thinkers on Indian education, scholars from those parts of the world where similar reorientation has been tried and experimented with. Such interaction will not only enrich, broaden and situate our own understanding but also facilitate in generating a process of cross-fertilization of ideas and sharing of experiences towards building up a plural perspective and meaningful public action policy on school education. The conference has following broad themes:

Theme 1	School Education, Pluralism and Marginality: Theoretical and Pedagogical Issues
Theme 2	Home, School and Community
Theme 3	Textbook, Teaching Medium and Method of Teaching
Theme 4	Caste, Class, Race, Gender and Classroom
Theme 5	Knowledge of the Oppressed, Power and School

Deshkal Society is involved in understanding, documenting and disseminating key issues of social, cultural and economic aspects of the society. We take up themes for research, documentation and advocacy that have often been subjected to neglect at large. Deshkal also tries to enhance the capacity of marginalised communities by ensuring their partnership in knowledge-based activism. In addition, it has been our primary concern to place these activities in the mainstream discourse. To meet these ends, we have devised our strategy such that we can influence emerging of the ground-level issues being considered by policy-makers, bureaucrats, developmental agencies and media personality at the national and international fora. This process has been a two-way dialogue between global and local voices in which both can raise queries and issues on an equal footing. We thus try to ensure that we prepare a long-term planning to bring about a substantial change among them.

Important Dates

Submission of cv and abstract	30th July, 2007
Submission of Paper	30th September, 2007
Confirmation to Authors	1st November, 2007

Date: 14th-16th December, 2007

Venue: India International Centre, New Delhi

Coordinator

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Organizing Partners

Council for Social Development, New Delhi
 Asian Development Research Institute, Patna

We welcome the institutions interested in joining this process.

School Education Pluralism and Marginality

(First Circular)

Comparative Perspectives

14 -16, December, 2007

International Conference



Deshkal Society
 in association with
 Council for Social Development and
 Asian Development Research Institute



School Education, Pluralism and Marginality: A Perspective

In recent years, analysis of school education, pluralism and marginality in plural democracies has moved into new territory. Globally the raging debate over plural education has permeated every facet of academic endeavour following the dismal failures of the twentieth century- the holocaust, the decimation of Europe in the two World Wars, the repeated annihilation of social order in the Baltic states, the manipulation of Asia and Central America by two warring superpowers and the post-colonial abandonment of the African continent. In plural societies across the world, academicians, policy makers and civil society organizations working in the field of school education are now increasingly embroiled in discussions and debates as never before.

With the advent of mass communication and mass travel, the increasing speed of global economies and the migratory ebb and flow of lives, contemporary societies everywhere are confronted with the need to address the issue of taking differences into account in dealing with diversity in their midst. The emergence of multiple identities within the majority and minority groups challenging the assimilationist ideologies of liberal democracies in recent decades has lent urgency to this compelling necessity. Given the unique and intensive role of education in the socialization of future citizens of every origin, and its pivotal position between the private and public spheres, 'school' as an institution is particularly challenged by the diversification of its clientele, their needs and their expectations that cultural or religious particularities be taken into account.

Over the years two parallel discourses have dominated the school education in plural democracies. One has been the discourse over the role of education in nation-building. This discourse has sought to stress the need for the diversity of groups and communities to be brought into the national mainstream with the objective of moulding a nation out of the diverse cultural heritage. The second discourse is concerned with the preservation of cultural diversities and creating opportunities for the diverse groups and communities that have a their stake in the educational process in particular and the nation in general. Educational policies and processes have vacillated between these two divergent discourses. However, the dominant thrust has been towards creating some kind of national homogeneity through the educational process. This has had the effect of fragmenting the educational discourse: Five effects can be easily articulated:

- Confinement of individuals in a permanent and immutable cultural identity which has had the effect of depriving them of the freedom to choose their 'cultural formula'.
- Reinforcement of the borders between groups and the increase of the likelihood of intolerance and of rejection of the Other.
- Accentuation of the difficulty of access to equality of opportunity for marginalized and minority groups.
- The stigmatization and marginalization of students from marginalized and minority groups who are ascribed to a socially depreciated identity.
- Fragmentation of the curriculum under the impact of particularistic claims as reflected in controversies over contents of textbooks and supplementary reading materials in schools.

In the light of these emerging problems, dilemmas and complexities the challenge before school education in contemporary societies is to firmly build pluralism in the educational process. This can be done through orienting education around a number of predispositions and values such as:

- Acceptance of diversity (cultures, religions, values and gender) to render possible intercultural understanding, tolerance, and democratic deliberation on deep moral disagreements.
- Concern for social cohesion (for a principle of collective belonging for a common civic space) to encourage loyalty to political community (local, regional and national) and moderation in ethnic and religious identity assertion.
- Empowerment of marginalized and minority groups and communities for social equity and equal benefit from the law through promoting solidarity with the struggles of oppressed, marginalized and excluded groups and communities.

Any reorientation of school education would be difficult without seeing its content, the educative process and the students within a common framework. It is possible to prepare the most objective and impartial textbooks and teaching materials, but such intervention would fail to make a dent until equal emphasis is placed on the teacher and the modes of transacting knowledge and information within a plural

framework. The teacher is the key to the transaction of the teaching material. Most carefully produced texts can become irrelevant if the teacher's mode of transacting pluralism or acceptance of diversity is deficient. Thus, the issue of building pluralism in the educational system and process has to be seen primarily as a pedagogic process with the teacher and his role in transacting knowledge and values as central. The crucial questions of concern here are how should one go about constructing a perspective on school education that would stand up to the ethos of plural societies so that education becomes the practice of emancipation? What will be its constituents? How does one translate this perspective into actual classroom practices?

Background

This conference is the outcome of several processes that Deshkal Society has been initiating in recent years in the field of school education. Deshkal's journey started with seeking clarity on the seamless web between education, rights, social equity, and capability in the context of the Musahar community who are often referred to as 'Dalits among Dalits' and occupy the bottom-rung of society in the middle Gangetic plains. Descendants of a Chotanagpur tribe, the Musahars are scattered all over the paddy-growing areas, providing the so-called unskilled labour. It started with our moderate effort to construct a teacher's manual of primary education with a Dalit perspective. Much to our surprise we found that grass root reality of public school in rural and semi-urban townships has drastically changed. We had to unlearn ourselves in order to be close to contemporary reality.

Contrary to our perceptions, influenced largely by Dalit narratives on school education in biographies of Dalit authors, we were confronted with a situation where power equations as well as the nature and instruments of violence in public schools have undergone a transformation due to the increasing presence of Dalit voices in these schools deserted by upper and middle class/castes. The experiences and perceptions of this second generation learners are different from those of previous generations. And they have acquired more subtle forms of complexities of the multilayered self. Writings and drawings of children that we collected and analysed seemed to be handicapped by under-representation of Musahar children's cosmovision of the world around them appropriated by national iconographies and narratives. The realisation was not simply to look at the access and participation of Dalit children but looking beyond it in terms of perspective which has been profoundly alien to native perspectives of Musahars and removed from the transforming contemporary grassroots reality.