

Book Release Function
of
School Education, Pluralism and Marginality: Comparative Perspectives

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A book release function of the book *School Education, Pluralism and Marginality: Comparative Perspectives* was organized by Deshkal Society on 10th July 2012 at the Asian Development Research Institute (ADRI), Patna, Bihar. Shri P.K. Shahi, Hon'ble Minister, Department of Education, Government of Bihar formally released the book, and addressed the distinguished audience of academicians, social scientists, researchers, development practitioners and social activists. The programme was chaired by Dr. Shaibal Gupta, Member- Secretary, ADRI, and moderated by Sanjay Kumar, Secretary, Deshkal Society.

The programme began with a warm welcome to Shri P.K. Shahi, the Hon'ble Minister, and the distinguished participants by Mr. Sanjay Kumar, Secretary, Deshkal Society. Mr. Kumar shared in brief about the making of the book and its rich collection of essays by prominent social scientists from India and abroad. He emphasized the importance of the book and its relevance for a wider audience, both academic and non academic.

A brief summary of the book was then presented by Dr. Manoj Kumar Tiwary, a freelance Consultant and Researcher in the elementary education sector. Summarising the focus of the book beautifully, Dr. Tiwary said that the fundamental questions the book deals with are- Is education an instrument for transformation or for the maintenance of status quo? Is it possible for education to be vested with a revolutionary agenda or is it merely a device in the hands of the State to ensure control and conformity? Is education a part of pluralizing impulses or the homogenizing ones? In other words, can it be used to nurture and promote diversity, even as it creates uniformity and standardization? These are difficult questions with which the authors have attempted to engage with.

The search for an answer to these questions has taken the authors of the volume to different parts of the world. The book, therefore, has essays on education from societies as diverse as USA, UK, South Africa, New Zealand, Sri Lanka and of course India, which gives us a richness of a comparative perspective. Locating the book in the contemporary context of challenges faced by the elementary education sector, Dr. Tiwary further said that it is now widely recognized that all modern societies contain within their fold marginal groups and communities, even though size may vary. The recent thrust in the social sciences on multiculturalism is simply a way of recognizing the significant presence of groups and communities living at the margins even in the developed countries. All the people, groups and communities at the margins have faced fundamental dilemmas relating to the prospects of their upward mobility. Their precise dilemma can be understood as the following syllogism:

- a) The awareness that their backwardness or marginality is historically constituted and is a carryover from the traditions and histories of their societies.
- b) Modernization in general and modern education in particular, provides a unique opportunity to them to move away from the margins and towards the mainstream of social life.

- c) The resultant integration, though incrementally beneficiary, entails the loss of their culture and a perpetual humiliation through contact with “cultural superiors”. Thus the breakdown of isolation and marginality comes at a great cost – loss of culture and freedom. It is painful to have to give up ones culture and freedom; it is also painful to remain poor and at the margins. What to do?

This, in a nutshell, has been the dilemma of the Dalits and tribals in India, the Mapuche in Chile, the Maori in Aotearoa, New Zealand, and Roma in Europe. Is there a framework of education that can retain their autonomy, break their isolation and yet prepare them pedagogically for modern life? This is one big question the book tries to critically engage with. It is a complex question and the authors of the book, to their credit, have dealt with it in a complex manner, without reducing it to any simple formula.

Dr. Tiwary further gave a brief overview of the various chapters of the book, and said that it was an extremely valuable resource for social scientists, researchers, policy makers and practitioners for three major reasons. One, at an operative level, it discusses the inner world of education – teachers, students, curriculum, textbooks examinations. But at the same time, it also looks at the world of education in a wider setting – democracy, pluralism, multiculturalism, nation-state and modernity. Retaining the focus on the pedagogic aspects intrinsic to education, but also on the multiple socio-political aspects extrinsic to it, imparts a richness and complexity to the volume. Two, the many case studies have made possible a comparison across cultures and societies. This has enlarged the range of possibilities, both at the level of problems and of solutions. And finally, all the discussions and case studies are eventually geared towards building a solution-based approach. All the problems and constraints are examined in the light of what *can* and ought to be done. Admittedly such a focus has made the book unrealistically optimistic at places. But this goes to the credit of the book and its authors and editors that the exposition of all the problems has been done with a view to finding a solution.

Shri P.K. Shahi, the Hon'ble Minister was then requested by Mr. Sanjay Kumar to address the audience. Shri P.K. Shahi started his speech with his humble confession that although he was minister of education, he was new to this field, and, therefore, often used his commonsense in making policies and taking decisions. He cited an example of when he went to U.S. to study the community schools, and, in a function there, when he told the gathering about the huge number of students whose education was his responsibility, he was not believed for the first time. He further emphasized that he was aware about the condition of infrastructure and the poor quality of the teachers in the rural elementary and primary schools. He said that many of these teachers do not know correctly even the names of the 12 months in a year or that of the days in a week. He pointed out the book is a significant contribution in advancing the understanding and knowledge of the real condition of education, not only in India but also in different parts of the world. He congratulated the editors for compiling a highly relevant book, and appreciated the contributors for bringing out serious issues and suggesting some important solutions for the challenges faced by elementary education in the contemporary context. He also said that only around 11 % of the population of Bihar was living in urban areas and availing better educational infrastructures, and he has a huge responsibility to improve educational infrastructure for the 89 % of the population living in villages. He concluded with the hope that in the coming years the situation in rural areas also will significantly improve.

Dr.Shaibal Gupta thanked the minister for his appreciation and encouraging words. He further thanked Mr. Sanjay and Deshkal Society for bringing out a book with a highly relevant and dynamic content, and said that there were very few books of this kind available today.

The programme ended with a vote of thanks by Dr.P.P.Ghosh, Director, ADRI. He thanked the Hon'ble Minister for sparing time from his busy schedule for the programme, for sharing his insights about the problems he faces in policy making on education, and for his efforts and commitments for improving the condition of elementary education in Bihar. He further thanked Mr.Sanjay and Deshkal Society for their commitment towards the down trodden and the cause of education. He concluded by thanking the distinguished guests for their honored presence and participation in the programme.