

Need for Culturally Attuned Curriculum for the Himalayas – making education more relevant to social-spatial context

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*“Culture is what makes us who we are, it gives us strength, and it provides answers to many of the challenges we face today”
- Director-General of UNESCO, Irina Bokova.*

The paper focuses on the need to imbibe cultural components in the curriculum in the Himalayan regions, mainly TBHF (Tribal, Border, Hilly, Forest) regions, to make the process of education more meaningful and relevant to the children. The paper begins by describing the unique features of Himalayan regions, the challenges in the education system and the rationale for a paradigm shift in the approach towards education and in the curriculum itself, to be more appropriate to the socio-cultural-geographic context. Further, the paper asserts the reasons for integrating culture education in schools by discussing key aspects such as cultural lag experienced by youth, the changes and challenges brought about by globalization, parents' perception that influences schooling and enrollment rates and the international paradigms and efforts on culture preservation.

Moving further, the paper will discuss some initiatives that can be taken to tailor the curriculum to make it more culturally relevant to the communities in these regions. It will discuss the possibility of incorporating the local events, habitat, lifestyle, materials, language, etc. into the curriculum. Feasibility of altering the national curriculum to project the TBHF communities in a positive light through advocacy and sensitization of the state/national education department and establishing web-based resources for extension of indigenous language and dissemination of information on cultural events will also be discussed.

In addition to these efforts, initiatives would be suggested to adopt a wider inclusive set up by also considering the needs of adult unemployed population, deprived of education and lacking skills to be gainfully employed. Vocational courses, transition programmes with special focus on creating employable skills among women will also be explored.

Education in the Himalayan Region

High altitude Himalayan regions, especially, TBHF areas, face severe challenges and inadequacies in the education system/the process of education due to issues like extreme climatic conditions, lack of adequate infrastructure in schools, inadequate number of teachers, curriculum that is not in sync with the socio-cultural realities of these regions and absenteeism of teachers. For instance, more than 90% of schools up to elementary are multi grade due to a lack of teachers and a limited number of students; 27% of the primary schools are staffed only by one teacher. 77% of the students revealed that teachers remain absent for an average of five days every month, regardless of the seasonⁱ.

Pragya initiated surveys have revealed that female literacy is less than 7% in very remote villages of Tawang; 65% of children from marginalized groups like nomads in Leh are out-of-

school and one-third child population drops out before completing eight years of schooling across high altitude belt. The gender disparity in literacy rate is as much as 27% in Chamoli. Girl children are more prone to dropping out; in Tawang, Leh, Lahaul and Chamoli only 1-1.5% of female population from the region have completed graduationⁱⁱ. Causative factors for low enrollment and drop out rate among girls are the lack of separate facilities for girls (for instance, separate toilets, rest rooms) and long distance between the school and homes, which raises concern among parents regarding the safety of the girl child.

The curriculum in schools is disconnected with cultural context, comprising topics/examples from mainstream Indian cities. Therefore, the children living in remote areas find these concepts to be abstract and difficult to fathom. As such, it creates a feeling of alienation and lack of total integration with the teaching process, materials and knowledge imparted. Moreover, a Pragma survey revealed that there is a serious dearth of co-curricular activities like physical education and art classes in the curriculum. Nearly 80% of the primary schools have no open space for physical activitiesⁱⁱⁱ. Student assessment is carried out mainly through written examinations, giving rise to a higher number of failures due to the unsuitable education system, unaligned to the cultural and social attributes of the communities in these regions.

Under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan started under the Right to Education Act, one of the goals for intervention is to achieve inclusive education. This includes special focus on children with special needs and provides a framework for identification, functional and formal assessment, appropriate educational placement, preparation of Individualized Educational Plan, provision of aids and appliances, teacher training, resource support, removal of architectural barriers, research, monitoring and evaluation and a special focus on girls with special needs^{iv}. To achieve this goal of inclusive education, there needs to be paradigm shift in the curriculum designed for these regions. Some of the measures that could be taken could be: localizing the course content to be in tune with the socio-cultural-spatial uniqueness of these communities; encouraging the use of local language; structured integration of modules in schools for creating awareness on community-specific values and traditional knowledge/practices/beliefs.

A culturally responsive pedagogy acknowledges the legitimacy of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups, learning contexts both for curriculum and teaching strategies. There is need to examine the curriculum and develop certain adaptations for tribal areas based on an 'inner curriculum' in which a person uses his or her own values and life lessons to enhance an already established course of study and to inspire learning. The curriculum needs to be designed in a manner that helps the children to apply the knowledge imparted in class to their daily lives. This could be ensured by using examples from the events and objects/realities that children are familiar with and experience in their immediate surroundings. The teaching materials used could also harness the materials available locally; local language(s) can be used as the primary language of instruction; the curriculum could be more closely aligned with the events, objects of daily use, flora and fauna, weather patterns, etc. that children are familiar with and have experienced, being a part of the community/location. The syllabi should incorporate the local history, geography and culture of the regions. Apart from opportunities for intellectual stimulation, co-curricular education comprising of art and craft activities, motor activities and sports, unstructured activities for language and personality development also need to be incorporated into the schooling system for holistic development of children.

The perceived irrelevance of formal schooling to life in high altitudes needs to be addressed by creating education modules that are more attuned to the cultural context and address the specific requirements of livelihoods in the region. The introduction of culture component in the education system in these areas, and also vocational training would provide the children and

uneducated/unemployed youth with specific employable skills and help them professionally. Imbibing cultural aspects in the course module would also be effective in curtailing school drop out rate. This would enable a smoother transition from schooling to livelihoods and thus enhance the value of education in these regions. In addition, it is also important to create linkages with institutes of higher learning and scale up advocacy efforts with state/district education and human resources departments for pursuing these goals so that even parents in the community will feel a sense of security and purpose in sending their children to school.

Need for integrating culture education in schools

Globalization and cultural lag experienced by youth vis a vis elders:

Globalization, tourism and technological advances have brought benefits to the regions in terms of creation of job opportunities, improvement in road and communication networks, exposure to people from other communities/countries and their way of life. At the same time, it also influences the psyche and perspectives of people, creating a pattern of consumerism and materialism. The youth and children, having had limited exposure to these realities earlier and being in an impressionable age, do face the pressures of the changes they see around them and adapt to these in their own ways. These new changes and developments may steer the youth away from traditional, conservative ideas and cause friction within the family or society at large. The society's resistance to change and non-acceptance of modern ways may lead to a perception among the youth that the elders in the community are not forward thinking and thus create a chasm in this society that has been united with close familial bonds.

In addition, due to the alien curriculum taught at schools, there is a sense of contempt amongst the elders towards external influences and modernization of their society. The older generation is wary of the replacement of traditional knowledge and skills with 'bookish' learning of modern ways and link young people's pursuance of education to a lack of respect for their cultural heritage. Thus, this cultural lag may lead to a breakdown in the social and family relationships in these regions, developing into another set of problems of conflicts and strife among communities.

Declining awareness and use of local language among the current generation due to cultural dilution, homogenisation of cultures:

The medium of instruction used in schools is English or/and Hindi. Due to globalization, there is a trend towards westernization of culture across the world and a movement towards homogenization. This is a process by which some/most popular language, practice, culture dominates over the other lesser popular cultures and practices^v. For instance, English language has become a predominant language in many South East Asian regions, necessitating introduction of English language at the pre-primary and kindergarten level.

The languages of powerful group(s) have spread, compressing the languages of smaller cultures^{vi}. And as the big languages spread, children whose parents speak a small language grow up learning the dominant language. So, if they are not spoken, they become extinct. Infact, Survival of Tribal People, an INGO reported in 2008 that an indigenous language dies on average once every two weeks.

The need for culture education arises because culture is being diluted. Globalization has become almost an unstoppable force, creating effects like cultural dilution, diffusion and homogenization. However, culture is an individual's, group's and community's practice passed down by generations and because cultures create identity for each of us, it needs to be preserved. Education, being a very important and essential step towards individual and societal development, must therefore have components of cultural education.

To accurately assess students' skills and abilities:

The school curriculum in these areas doesn't recognize the uniqueness of the socio-cultural-spatial aspects and therefore, seems alien and abstract to the students. Syllabus covering topics and events unfamiliar to the people in these terrains could be difficult to grasp and therefore would affect the success rate of students in these regions. It could also create a misconception that children in these areas have lower cognitive abilities than their counterparts in the plains who may be more exposed to advanced and modern concepts through more access to technology, better/more availability of teachers, exposure to the media, etc.

The parameters for assessments could be applied similarly to schools, but the topics for the assessment need to be more geared at a regional/local level, especially, at the primary schooling level. Children at the primary level learn better by seeing, touching, feeling and experiencing their surroundings. An idea that is not a part of their daily surroundings would be difficult to fathom, which could create feelings of inadequacy and frustration among children, eventually leading to behavior problems. The curriculum designed should therefore include cultural components but also be dynamic to incorporate the changes and developments that these societies also experience.

Cultural education for culture/context specific jobs:

The aim of education, apart from developing the personality of children and gaining important life skills, is also to build up practical skills among children/youth that will help them to obtain a source of employment in future. In context to the Himalayan regions, a study done by Pragya found that 62% of students perceive the present syllabus to be excessive and mostly irrelevant to their cultural context, 47% in Lahaul and 75% in Leh and Tawang.

A curriculum that is generic in nature and doesn't take into account the uniqueness of the areas may possibly only contribute to "bookish" knowledge without equipping children to deal with their daily circumstances. It wouldn't help children in applying the knowledge to immediate situations nor would it give them scope for developing problem solving skills in the real immediate issues they face. A disconnect between the course contents and the actual opportunities for implementation/action/work available in the area would render the knowledge insufficient and lacking. Either the education system needs to imbibe cultural realities into the curriculum or, in the absence of that, having a more neutral/pan-India syllabus, the state and non-state actors also need to create linkages to enable children to achieve higher education and create actionable plans for developing some sectors/industries in the area where the children's knowledge and abilities could be utilized. Creating industries or service sector opportunities may be limited in these areas due to the high altitudes, lack of concrete and durable roads and commercial infrastructure and flow of funds and investments. Therefore, culturally attuned curriculum would be a more feasible option; it would also help retain children/youth in this area and prevent the side-effects of migration on the social fabric and systems in these areas.

Enhances parents' perception and retention of children in schools:

One of the barriers in children going to school is also the perception among parents that the inputs provided in school do not gear the children towards obtaining a gainful source of employment. This results in parents assigning household or farm-based chores to children rather than sending them to school, which leads to low enrollment and high child drop out rates from the education system. A Pragya study found that 48% of parents have no interest in sending their children to school as they believe that education they would receive would not help them in securing a job.

Therefore, a curriculum that incorporates the cultural practices in the community and factors in the cultural scope and nature of jobs, would be more agreeable to the parents and would enable retention of children in the schools. It would also make the process of education more participatory, by making the parents a stakeholder too in the education system, which will eventually benefit the development of children.

To support UNESCO initiative to preserve intangible cultural heritage – Endangered Languages Programme:

Intangible cultural heritage, as the name suggests, goes beyond the tangible aspects such as monuments, sites, artifacts of cultural importance; it comprises of intangibles such as language, oral traditions and knowledge that trickles down from one generation to the next, the traditional wisdom and belief systems that are not documented or recorded for the progeny. It also includes the process of creation of skills and methods for performing arts, carrying out religious events and rites, observances about nature and the co-relation between natural elements.

With special emphasis on language preservation, UNESCO has taken the initiative to preserve endangered languages. This initiative has emerged from the data provided by the latest UNESCO Atlas of World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing, that there are around 2,500 of the 6,000 languages spoken worldwide, which are currently on the verge of extinction. India, being a nation with wide linguistic diversity, tops UNESCO's list of countries having maximum number of dialects endangered. The list identifies 197 Indian languages as being endangered^{vii}.

The integration of cultural components in the education curriculum, such as indigenous language and social practices, would also be aligned to the aims of UNESCO's Endangered Languages Programme, which is to support the continued existence of indigenous languages, support communities, experts and governments by producing, coordinating, and disseminating tools for monitoring, advocacy, and assessment of status and trends in linguistic diversity.

Curriculum Enhancement and Upgradation as a Point of Intervention

In view of the above discussion on the uniqueness of the Himalayan (TBHF) areas, gaps in the education system and in recognition of the imperative of culturally attuned curriculum, the following measures have been suggested, to safeguard the cultural heritage and its associated attributes by making some changes to the curriculum.

Contextual coverage of topics in Geography and Science:

Retaining the broad domains of coverage of topics in Geography and Science, such as, climate, vegetation, modes of transport, etc., the curriculum could emphasize specifically on these attributes in the cold deserts. That is, climate, flora and fauna, weather, type of soils, etc. in these regions. These specific contextual information would then be tied up with hazards of extreme climate, risk of natural disasters, prevention and preparedness during harsh winter climate, etc. as the syllabus progresses grade-wise.

Similarly, lessons could include information on the crops, farming practices, livestock and their uses, sources of livelihood in these areas and why these resources need to be utilized in a sustainable manner. Awareness and knowledge of vegetation and habitat in these regions would also help in the conservation effort of wetlands and endangered species of plants, birds and animals. Rather than focusing on pan-India hydro-power projects, wildlife sanctuaries, rivers, etc., focus could be on area specific wildlife sanctuaries, eco-tourism projects, wind and solar energy projects. Thus, it would serve as a two pronged strategy to contextualize the information and also tie into conservation and preservation efforts.

Social science and general awareness module:

Festivals are an essential part of the socio-cultural life of the people. In addition to focusing on the mainstream/broadly followed festivals, the social science and general awareness courses could have a special focus on local festivals, the reasons for celebrating these, the rites and food preparations that accompany these festivals. For instance, the communities in these areas, being nature dependent and mainly following agriculture as their occupation, the festivals are usually connected with agriculture and are associated with ritualistic gaiety either to thank God or to pray for bumper harvest.

The curriculum could include the festivals, folk songs and dance forms, also with information on prominent artistes, award winners from these states. The various dance forms can also feed into the co-curricular component of schooling. Knowing the dance forms and what these depict would enable transfer of traditional knowledge and beliefs from the elders to the younger generation, thus preserving the cultural traditions and heritage.

Similarly, general awareness component could include knowledge on national award winners, prominent sportspersons, from these states/areas. This generates a feeling of pride, esteem and belongingness towards their cultural roots. For instance, textbooks could be revised to include current achievements and news, such as, the Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh being conferred the Lifetime Achievement for Peace Award by the United Nations-affiliated International Association of Educators of World Peace (IAEWP). Tuki also received the Green State of the Year Award on behalf of the government of Arunachal Pradesh given by the International Body Clean Up The Earth (CUTE)^{viii}.

Theme based approach for education:

The curriculum at the primary stages of education could systematically cover thematic areas and concepts that children in TBHF experience in their immediate surroundings. For example, a theme of festivals, wild and domestic animals, birds, clothing, diet and food crops, modes of transport, etc. Since children at younger age learn better by observing their immediate surroundings and events, the topics covered in the nascent stages of education must be closely

aligned to the phenomenon children observe and are familiar with. At the higher standards, the curriculum could still be geared to the local context with focus on building problem solving, decision making skills among children. Extra component of general knowledge could be introduced to create awareness of the innovations and advances in India and other countries.

Altering the national syllabus/course content to create a positive perception about these communities:

The national/state syllabus needs to be altered so as to not stereotype TBHF regions and communities merely as tribal dominated backward communities. Emphasis should also be on the cultural-geographical diversity and richness of these regions. The media especially highlights these regions in case of a security threat and tends to overlook the festivals and celebrations in these areas. The government and the media could play a more proactive role in highlighting the uniqueness of the culture and heritage by greater coverage of these events in textbooks or through documentaries telecasted in schools. Visual imageries create a deep impact among children, and therefore, the images of dance forms, costumes, places of historical significance, could be provided in textbooks in mainstream Indian cities to create curiosity and intrigue children about the diverse forms of art, craft, topography, costumes of these regions. Thus, creating a positive image of the communities not only creates respect and dignity for the people in the minds of 'outsiders' but also gives a boost to the morale of the local communities with a greater feeling of pride for their culture and way of life.

Mother-tongue as a compulsory subject:

"Just as we let a whole generation lose the capacity to cook so we are in danger of making the same break in the transmission of our cultural language."

- Liz Forgan, Arts Council England, chief.

UNESCO Atlas of World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing has identified 197 Indian languages as being endangered.

An endangered language is a language that it is at risk of falling out of use, generally because it has few surviving speakers. If it loses all of its native speakers, it becomes an extinct language. UNESCO distinguishes four levels of endangerment in languages, based on intergenerational transfer:

Vulnerable: Most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains (e.g., home).

Definitely endangered: Children no longer learn the language as mother tongue in the home.

Severely endangered: Language is spoken by grandparents and older generations; while the parent generation may understand it, they do not speak it to children or among themselves.

Critically endangered: The youngest speakers are grandparents and older, and they speak the language partially and infrequently.^{ix}

In order to preserve the indigenous languages and also to facilitate easier understanding and communication of ideas and concepts, indigenous languages need to be imbibed into the education system in these regions.

The indigenous language could be made the primary medium of instruction for the lower grades. Parallely tutorials could be conducted for English language. Or, language association could take place by first naming the object in the mother tongue and then accompanying it with the English/Hindi term.

Introducing extracurricular component in schools:

Extra-curricular activities could be started to include recitation of poems in local language, narrating stories or fables, beginners' art classes (on weaving, for instance), dance classes for the various forms of dance, etc.

For instance, a folk dance of Sherdukpens, a small community of West Kameng District of Arunachal Pradesh, Bardo Chham could be introduced at schools, with the help of dancers or performers in the area. Giving such inputs could trigger the curiosity of children to attend events showcasing these dances or enroll for learning these dances and participating in regional forums and competitions.

Similarly, play-acting and drama courses/classes could be conducted at schools based on the folk tales, fables, poems written by writers from various tribes in the region. For example, several writers from the various tribes of Arunachal Pradesh have been writing in Assamese sporadically. Amongst them, children's fiction writer Kengsam Kenglam, short story writer Wangsang Jongsam, poet and author Kalung Borang, essayist H K Zorang, Dr Chou Kedar Gohain, Dr Pegba Rigu are some noteworthy names^x.

Integrated web resource centre:

An integrated web based centre can be set up for inter-linking cultural, sports, art activities and competitions among schools/state level to be maintained in IT centre at schools. The service could also involve a databank of cultural programmes, art courses, events update, literary events/groups, updated regularly on the portal for channelizing student's interest into specific actionable activities.

Vocational Training Hubs, Resource Centres and Collaboration with Administration

In view of adopting a broader inclusive set up to involve uneducated/unemployed youths in the regions to develop skills for employment, vocational courses could be offered in local arts and craft, cooking local and other cuisines, carpentry, masonry, electrical repairs, mechanical skills, special training modules for girl dropouts for livelihood options. Acquiring these skills would also help in bridging the gap of manpower which could arise because of growing tourism and infrastructural development in these areas. The locals would be able to obtain these jobs, rather than dependence on migrant workers from other regions.

For creating sustainable livelihood options for women, their skills in art and craft could be harnessed. For instance, Arunachal Pradesh has a rich tradition of bamboo and cane handicrafts and also wood carving and carpet weaving. A wide variety of crafts such as painting, pottery, basketry, mask making, etc. are also found among the people of Arunachal Pradesh. The importance of these skills needs to be recognized and systematic efforts could be taken by the Ministry of Human Resources/Labour Ministry to channelize the women's skills in these activities to create market linkages and infrastructure, generating sustainable livelihood options.

Conclusion

Any education system that is not closely aligned to the cultural, social, geographic context leaves the progeny 'dangerously exposed' without the basic understanding to recognize themselves and their culture. It deprives the generation of their birthright and their identity and hints at the failure of the state to ensure continued existence of various cultures. The importance of cultural education is more in TBHF areas due to their unique characteristics and also their isolation from mainstream India. The education system needs to be more responsive and reflective of the socio-cultural-spatial realities in these areas, and not be based on abstract/generic ideas from so-called progressive states in India.

Culture education is very important in TBHF areas, especially in the formative years of schooling since children learn and grasp concepts better by integrating their visual (seeing things around them), auditory (hearing sounds in their surroundings), tactile (touching and feeling objects in their surrounding) stimulators. A curriculum that is detached from what children see, hear, feel in their immediate surroundings may not register with children easily, thereby, creating incorrect/inaccurate perception of their cognitive development and abilities.

Involving a module or component of culture education would not only benefit children, but would be able to elicit the support of parents in the process of education, in terms of retention of children in schools and increasing enrollment rates.

Many countries are now gearing their syllabus to include cultural component in the education system. A recent example is of the international congress instituted by UNESCO and China on emphasizing the role that culture plays in achieving sustainable development. The congress will bring together about 450 policymakers, leaders from development institutions, representatives of the private sector, civil society, academia, and the arts, and is expected to provide substantive input to the discussions on the framework for the post-2015 development agenda. Its goal is to inspire governments, civil society, businesses and communities to harness the power of culture in addressing the world's most pressing challenges^{xi}.

Review of cultural education, tailoring it to the ground realities and making it contextually relevant is necessary in order to enable children to have the chance to experience a wide variety of cultural experiences.

“Cultural factors influence lifestyles, consumption patterns, values related to our interaction with and stewardship of the natural environment. It also encompasses local and indigenous knowledge systems and environmental management practices which provide valuable insight and tools with which to tackle ecological challenges, such as the loss of biodiversity, and land

degradation, and climate change, not to mention its key role in enabling people to lead satisfying intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual lives. This power is increasingly recognized by countries across the world. We need now determined political will to act on this recognition, to mainstream culture in all development strategies and programmes at global, regional and local levels, to integrate culture within national development goals”
- Director-General of UNESCO, Irina Bokova.

ⁱ B. Gargi and F. Mashqura. Protection of cultural diversity in the Himalayas: A Background Paper for a Workshop on Addressing Regional Disparities: Inclusive & Culturally Attuned Development for the Himalayas.

ⁱⁱ B. Gargi and F. Mashqura. Protection of cultural diversity in the Himalayas: A Background Paper for a Workshop on Addressing Regional Disparities: Inclusive & Culturally Attuned Development for the Himalayas.

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^{iv} <http://ssa.nic.in/inclusive-education/overview-on-inclusive-education/OVERVIEW%20OF%20INCLUSIVE%20EDUCATION.pdf>.

^v <http://prezi.com/wpnce2af40za/globalization-and-cultural-dilution>

^{vi} <http://travel.nationalgeographic.com/travel/enduring-voices>

^{vii} <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/newdelhi/areas-of-action/culture/intangible-cultural-heritage>

^{viii} http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2013-01-17/guwahati/36393582_1_nabam-tuki-peace-award-world-peace

^{ix} http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_endangered_languages_in_India

^x <http://www.museindia.com/viewarticle.asp?myr=2010&issid=31&id=1946>.

^{xi} http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=44823&Cr=culture&Cr1=#.UYx_NaI_tRU