

# UNESCO FORUM

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**As part of UNESCO chair activities at the IGNCA, a national workshop on cultural dimension of ecology and education was held in New Delhi on 3 to 8 August 1995. Creative workers from NGOs', professional ecologists, anthropologists, humanists, artists, philosophers and scholars in the area of education were invited to present case studies.**

## 1. Issues In Natural Environment

### 1.1 Wisdom Tradition

The workshop brought to the fore the indigenous knowledge and experiences vital to enduring solutions to ecological crises. Traditional societies still hold the view that humankind and earth have physical and spiritual dimensions that are symbolically reflected in each other. This workshop provided a collection of splendidly imagined and beautiful conceptions of humankind's relation with Nature. The traditional vision of nature reflects that the ancient understanding of the environment is holistic.

The Gaddis, a nomadic group, inhabiting the Western Himalayas, consider their land not only a mere reflection or a replica but the real kingdom of Shiva. Their movements coincide with the migration pattern of their God. Their notions of space and time as well as their eco-cultural configurations are conceptually derived from the upward - downward movement of Shiva. The annual calendar of activities is divided into two halves that represent two distinct modes of life. Their environment is at once immediate and physical on the one hand and eternal, metaphysical and transcendent on the other. Nature and its forces are revered and the most sacred act is the preservation of their purity, done through the maintenance of moral and ethical order.

The traditional water management system in the Kashmir valley takes us back to the Nilamatapurana. It records how the valley was elevated out of water and left under the care of the Nagas, of whom Nila, the son of sage Kashyapa, was the chief. The term Naga stands for a spring. Springs are the main source of water in Kashmir. 'Naga' also means snake. The sacredness of water is echoed in the worship of snakes. Being a hilly state, the problem of irrigation is complicated in many areas. In the 8th century King Lalitaditya introduced a new device, the water-wheel, for raising water to the higher plateaus called *tol* or *dip well*. This inexpensive method is still used in many parts of the Valley.

The examples of Warlis and Dhangars of Western coastal areas of Maharashtra represent a way of identifying the life-cycle with nature, which in turn is reflected in their festival, cropping systems and rituals. Infact, they would not see those as distinct, separate entities, but as a whole. They do not make distinction between their material worldview and the cosmic worldview.

The role of women in ecological management is very significant. Women do all major work with the exception of ploughing, which is done by men. Women are regarded as the backbone of economy. They are now active in the ecological movement known in the Uttarakhand region as *Chipko* movement, that has brought the women of the region into the mainstream of public life. It is guided by communal rural folk and not by the professional leaders.

For traditional societies, life revolves around the perennial contemplation of seed. The origin of the universe is attributed to the primeval seed, hiranyagarbha. The indigenous knowledge of the seed and the soil and the womb is critically important for environmental management. Such knowledge is founded upon generations of experimentation and observation. There are three factors which make tradition operative: power, wisdom and intention. Wisdom without power is lame; intention without wisdom is blind; and tradition without wisdom, power and intention is orphaned. Within the tradition there are categories of suddha and shubha different from what 'pure' and 'auspicious' mean.

## 1.2 Ecological Degradation

The new culture of modernity interprets earth as a deposit of natural resources meant for human exploitation. It is rapidly consuming the earth's resources. Forest fire in the hills is one of the causes for ecodegradation. There are two major causes of forest fires. The first, intentional fire set by the villagers, and forest department in order to get a good growth of grass following the rains, to reduce the chances of large fires, and to destroy pine leaves; as they inhibit the undergrowth. The second one is accidental fire caused by human carelessness. Nationalization of the private forests of over eighty hill tea gardens in Darjeeling district in West Bengal led ecological destruction in the tea gardens. Efforts of modernizing agencies in the name of development among the tribal peasants are causing many problems. Discarding traditional methods of cultivation has made them dependent on the market economy. An integrated awareness has to be created and we can convince people of the enduring value of the traditional method. We have to protect them from modernizing agencies.

**Ramakar Pant**

## 2 Experiments in Primary Education

The workshop emphasized upon a serious thought on the concept of education. The term education has come to be used for the ability to read and write. As corollary issues regarding curriculum, medium of instruction, language, teaching aids and equipment loom large as of primary concern in the context formal education. This is gross delimitation and distortion of its indigenous meaning and connotation. Education, in the Indian world view, has been regarded as preparation for synchronous, harmonious living in the present as also future states of existence. Certainly then, education percolates the multiple dimensions of life instilling the potential to meet situations effectively and efficiently. Against this holistic backdrop, literacy appears to be only a part of the complete system. There was simmering discontent with the present day monolithic structure of education so ardently upheld in the social system.

The experts, all grass-root workers from different parts of the country-Bihar, Orissa, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Delhi-elucidated the multiple aspects of education ranging from the traditional to the modern systems; method and technique to content and curriculum; and from universalization to contextualization initially within the micro-context of their own works and later at the national and international levels. Among others, three broad themes of, (i) education for transforming village children; (ii) education for the culture of peace; and (iii) education through the arts surfaced repeatedly for discussion.

In an unique experiment for deprived children, primary level night schools have been initiated at Tilonia. The enrolled boys and girls learn to make papier mache puppets from waste paper, toys out of match boxes, train tickets, seeds and plastic bags. The management of the school is controlled by an elected body of older pupils providing them with collective responsibility and encouraging them to operate in a democratic set up. This tied up with an overview of science education in village schools of Hoshangabad. The workers developed skills and attitudes enabling the children to derive knowledge directly from the environment and from their own experiences. This strikes at the very root of the current practices-erecting buildings for schools, formulating and adhering to abstract syllabi and confining the content to textbooks.

The mission has been independently pursued at, (i) Orissa in evolving an approach which lays emphasis on realizing how to think rather than what to think;(ii) Pune in coalescing language study; learning to listen, speak, read and write; understand numbers and units of measurement, general knowledge, health and hygiene into a single programme for children. This is closely interwoven with the enhancement of their creativity by social graces, adeptness in civil behaviour; and (iii) Bodh Gaya in strengthening the character of children and nurturing them as agents of social change and transformation.

Ideologically aligned, the N.K. Bose Memorial Foundation school at Varanasi fosters education as the art of intelligent living, the training of the mind and awakening of the heart. The mentor fondly remembered his pupils engaged in prayer and meditation, yogic exercises, and in pursuit of the arts, poetry recitation and story-telling. It is here that Hindu and Muslim children of a riot prone area together develop love for the country and respect for their own culture and traditions as also those of others.

Closely knitted with these objectives, a Gandhian discussed his experience in seeking to realize education for value creation at Rangaprabhat where story telling and theatre have been employed for inculcation of values and ideals in children. In another endeavour, the position of dance in growing up was explained. The dance equips the children with the gamut of cultural knowledge, rote typologies and techniques to balance out emotions and drives, making for mental stability and poise.

Much like dance and drama, puppetry has been used as a vital medium for educating children. The role of puppetry in generating social awareness, sense of responsibility and personal growth in children was brought to the fore. The specific cases in which participation in puppet making, manipulation, script writing and voice training has led to improvement in discipline, behaviour and memory of the slum children were cited. In another experiment with slum children, the use of photography in promoting creativity and self-expression was demonstrated.

In talking about the visually handicapped children, an artist exhibited relief work by finger nails as a technique of imparting knowledge of geometric figures. The understanding of forms and shapes on the one hand and designing them independently on the other gives much joy and sense of achievement to these children.

The one fact which stood out boldly from the discussions and deliberations was, shared that a meaningful education system, prepare the children for life and not for mere subsistence. Experience is to be placed before memorization. Each experiment is a flame kindled providing light and direction to others.

**Nita Mathur**