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Need for Innovative Praxis in Environmental Education

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Abstract: Environmental education had been incorporated into the Indian curriculum for the past twenty one years. Students get acquainted with ideas of sustainable development, conservation, afforestation and the ill-practices towards Nature. However, there is a lack of practice of the theory incorporated into the curriculum. Often, Environmental Education never moves beyond the textbook. There is a need to update and include relevant measures of Environmental Conservation in curriculum, based on the dynamic changes that our Environment is facing today.

The paper analyzes different strategies to revamp the theoretical curriculum on Environmental Education to inculcate the application level of ecological practices. Applied Environmental Conservation will introduce a Green Culture in young minds. They will get an opportunity to experience real life challenges in practising conservation and to find innovative solutions. The paradox of mass usage of paper to consolidate textbooks and assignments on Environmental Conservation was challenged with the online mode of education introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic. Environmental Education should lead to the development of a mindset that tries to analyze the challenges faced by Nature and to arrive at intelligent practices of conservation.

Keywords: Environmental Education, Indian curriculum, conservation, application, ecological practices, Green Culture, innovative solutions, paradox, Covid-19 pandemic, mindset

Environmental education is a staple course in the Indian curriculum. Environmental education starts from the basic level learning in primary classes and had advanced to specialized research areas after post graduate studies. Nevertheless, an Indian student spends a considerable amount of time in his learning space engaging with EE (Environmental education). The pressing question is the lack of praxis that prevents constructive conservation of the environment. The literacy rate and the population rate of India are steadily growing, but not the afforestation rate.

The foundation of the present trajectory of EE was laid in the National Curriculum Framework in 2005. But aspects of the present trajectory were found even in pre-colonial times, "The education system in India had incorporated certain aspects of environment in school curricula as early as 1930. The Kothari commission (1964-66) also suggested that basic education had to offer EE and relate it to the life needs and aspirations of the people and the nation" (Gopal).

Even after several years of experimenting in the field of EE, there is a dearth in the innovative praxis of the theories incorporated in the curriculum. The prospective environmentally concerned citizens are unequipped in their student lives to deal with real life problems faced by the environment. The students are not trained to observe nature, identify problems and arrive at solutions on their own. An average student develops to the range of Ajayan, a character in the novel 'Roots' by Malayatoor Ramakrishnan. Ajayan mistook the paddy-fields to be grassy lawns and later he

exclaimed them to be 'rice trees' (Ramakrishnan 5). In such a dour scenario, if a farmer explains the "milk grain stage of rice plant" (rkmp.drr), it would become unintelligible even for a post graduate student who had traversed the EE curricular system.

The curriculum is taught in such a way as to induce rote learning of theories and case studies. Often, prescribed activities in the textbook remain as skipped passages or dwell in the imaginative realm of the students, but never transformed into practice. Since alternative valuation practices loom under the question of reliability, the present system of education cannot forgo the evaluation based on theoretical knowledge. Hence, EE stagnates in the boundaries of theory and the way it is taught never exceeds textbook learning. Students are acquainted with technical terms like sustainable development, industrial hazards, deforestation, rain water harvesting, ozone layer depletion and the ilk, without ever thinking of its real life implications.

The paradox of using paper for printing textbooks and for writing assignments on conservation of forests resonates in the poetic lines, "Trees are poems that the earth writes upon the sky./ We fell them down and turn them into paper that we may record our emptiness" (Gibran). It could be argued that the usage of paper in the curricular framework amounts to a small fraction in comparison to the wastage of paper by other means. The argument gets fuelled by the traditional learning and evaluation practice that give prime importance to pen and paper technique. But the very idea got challenged by the Covid-19 pandemic that compelled the education system to switch to online mode of learning completely. The pandemic was a blessing in disguise as far as the environmental conservation is concerned. It also taught us that we are able to adapt according to the change in times and to fashion our needs based on the available resources. If we were able to pursue a paperless system in online education during the prime of the pandemic, it is possible to chisel a paperless system in offline education too. The challenge lies in addressing the possible loopholes and finding effective solutions for the same.

Conservation of trees and afforestation is only one section of the broad spectrum of challenges and solutions that constitute EE. The situations are dynamic and so must be the innovative praxis to address the issue of Environmental conservation. Since the childhood experiences shape an adult, it is essential to inculcate innovative praxis in school level curriculum of EE. Along with imparting theoretical knowledge, students must be given opportunities to test them. For example, students can be taught biodegradable waste management by setting up a simple biogas plant in their school premises. They should be instructed to dispose biodegradable waste, such as leftover food after lunch, in the biogas plant. For Vermicompost, spicy food items should not be contributed. Plastic and other wastes should be segregated in both cases. The practical side of this theoretical knowledge could only be achieved through real life praxis. The manure thus obtained could be used by students to nurture the plants they planted.

Students can be encouraged to seek measures to minimise the usage of paper. Writing on both sides of the paper, using recycled paper and avail oneself of online resources are some alternatives that would conserve trees. Alternative fiber papers like those made of bamboo, cotton and even stone are other options and they are effective in conservation because "...trees can take decades to grow, most tree-free fibers grow seasonally" (The Green Room).

Students should be given the opportunity to investigate the soil erosion rates in barren lands and in fertile lands so that they understand the importance of trees and soil in meeting our daily demands of food. Close observation of nature is essential to

develop survival tactics in case of an emergency like a natural calamity. Say, in the case of Kerala, the recurrent flood during monsoon is an emergency situation. Nature can provide safe points in such a situation, if one is keen enough to notice them.

If we are able to teach a child to find a friend in a tree, then she will learn to protect it. Emotional attachment with nature is a quality essential for setting up the foundation for EE and also for the development of a good human being. This alone could prevent the senseless sham of planting numerous saplings all at a go for the sake of the Environmental Day celebrations on June 5th, and digging up the same spot for making pits for the sapling-planting-ritual for the next Environmental Day. The student should be taught not only to plant saplings, but to nurture them life-long. Wrapping this practical wisdom in a tinge of philosophy, "The planting of a tree, especially one of the long-living hardwood trees, is a gift which you can make to posterity at almost no cost and with almost no trouble, and if the tree takes root it will far outlive the visible effect of any of your other actions, good or evil" (Orwell).

Applied environmental conservation will inculcate a Green Culture in young minds. There is a need to update and include relevant measures of environmental conservation in the EE curriculum, in relation to the dynamic changes that our environment is facing today. Students should get an opportunity to experience real life challenges in practising environmental conservation so that they get trained to develop innovative solutions for the unknown future. EE should lead to the development of a mindset that understands nature as a fellow being.

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Abbreviations

EE – Environmental Education
NCF – National Curriculum Framework