



# TRANSFORMING EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE FUTURES

India Hub Synthesis Report



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# TRANSFORMING EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE FUTURES

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## India Hub Synthesis Report

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Transforming Education  
for Sustainable Futures

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# ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

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<b>ABBREVIATION</b>	<b>FULL TERM</b>
BEIED	BACHELOR OF ELEMENTARY EDUCATION
BRs	BAREFOOT RESEARCHERS
GNB	GENDER NON-BINARY
GNC	GENDER NON-CONFORMING
IISR	INDIAN INSTITUTE OF SCIENCE EDUCATION AND RESEARCH
NBR	NILGIRI BIOSPHERE RESERVE
NCF	NATIONAL CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK
SDGs	SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS
TESF	TRANSFORMING EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE FUTURES
TGT	TRAINED GRADUATE TEACHER
VBVT	VISHWA BHARATI VIDYODAYA TRUST
YF	YOUTH FELLOWSHIP

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# INTRODUCTION

**“Social exclusion and inequity have deepened over the years due to the convergence of diverse private interests and the withdrawal of the state with traditional conditions of social privilege.”**

This document presents a synthesis of the insights that have emerged from commissioned research under the India hub of the TESF network. A total of 23 projects were commissioned across diverse areas and methods of enquiry, various geographical sites and communities with a range of research questions and points of intervention, to explore the dynamic relationship between education and sustainable futures. A map of India indicating the TESF India research project sites, themes and participants is presented in [Appendix 1](#). The commissioned research was designed to address key Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that the TESF Network is committed to: quality education; sustainable livelihoods; sustainable communities and cities and climate action; and cross-cutting themes of reducing inequalities, poverty, and gender equity. This it was able to do by foregrounding marginalised voices and decolonising research.

The TESF India background paper highlights how social exclusion and inequity have deepened over the years due to the convergence of diverse private interests and the withdrawal of the state with traditional conditions of social privilege. The wedge between the Constitutional aims of education and market-based reforms has become sharper as the practice of education prioritises narrow economic self-interest over crucial public and social concerns. A major fallout of this shift has been the decoupling of concerns of social justice—embedded in the Constitution-centred policy perspective on education—from those of quality education (Batra et al., 2021).

The research projects range from examining the meanings and purposes of education through the lens of marginalised diverse communities; problematising education to understand how social, gender, economic, environmental, spatial, and epistemic injustice is sustained and perpetuated; examining intersecting urban vulnerabilities in the context of the SDGs, specifically the linkage between spatial, social and environmental justice; exploring methods of wider public engagement and social learning using the performing and fine arts and interdisciplinary engagement; to exploring how school, higher and professional education, including teacher education can be transformed to develop critical knowledges, capacities, and teacher and student agency towards developing a socially and environmentally sustainable and just society.

While the projects address a multitude of challenges of contemporary education systems, and those related to issues of urbanisation, sustainable cities,



environment, and climate action, cutting across social and gender inequity, some also offer future pathways for transformation and change.

The synthesis report attempts to weave emerging insights with existing knowledge to answer some of the critical research questions at both the TESF network and TESF India levels. The overall approach in synthesising key research insights, perspectives and co-produced knowledges relies on the framework of “critical realism”, which embraces different points of view, ontologies, forms and sources of data. The dialectical logic inherent in critical realist philosophy (Roy, cited in Gorski, 2013) is particularly suited to engage with broad ontological and epistemological questions, intersectionality and research methods. This conceptual frame helped us to attend to processes which stress the central role of participants' knowledge, particularly those who are marginalised—whose lived realities are often glossed over, voices unheard; and to the explanatory accounts of the lived experiences of those with social privilege and advantage. The approach enabled us to draw upon eclectic methods which are critical, thematic, decolonising and transforming.

We first attempt a thematic analysis of some of the key project findings. The process of identifying these themes was guided by two major questions that emerge from the TESF foundations paper and the country background paper—one, of problematising education to understand its role in the current crisis of unsustainable development; and second, the potential

role transformative education can play towards creating environmentally and socially just societies.

The most frequently appearing themes have been woven together to pull diverse strands of thought and insight emerging from diverse projects. We have been deliberative in drawing upon the diverse contexts, ontological and epistemological meanings of each project. In doing this, we have looked for consistencies, inconsistencies and triangulations of the findings within each research. This approach has helped us examine closely the world views and knowledge systems of individuals and communities that have been consistently excluded through colonial research orientations, methods and practices (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). Given how the colonial epistemic frame, in nexus with upper caste dominance in India disrupted early post-colonial efforts to root quality education within frames of social equality and fairness (Batra, 2020), it was critical to decipher the ubiquitous coloniality in different arrangements and levels of education.

The synthesis report aims to present evidence-based arguments around how educational arrangements, curricular and pedagogic approaches across school, higher and professional education, require critical interventions to enable education to play a transformative role towards sustainable futures. Insights from the field are substantiated with existing knowledge to address a diverse audience including researchers, academics, policymakers and diverse communities.



School Children in Gudalur, Tamilnadu





*The Mega City of Mumbai - Photograph by Alfarnas Solkar - unsplash.com*



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# CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES

## **The TESF Network began with the premise that sustainable development involves critical application of ideas of sustainability to local contexts.**

Several approaches have evolved over time to refine the idea and construct of sustainable development—from growth-led approaches that emphasise “inclusive growth” to environment-oriented approaches that emphasise “de-growth”; from rights-based approaches emphasising basic human needs to the capability approach that focuses on developing human capabilities and to some extent enabling natural systems to flourish (Tikly et al., 2020). Despite attempts to become inclusive and address diversity, these approaches continue to operate within the dominant development frame of economic self-interest of some regions and people over others.

The term “sustainable development”, therefore, becomes opaque, as development is popularly understood as progress brought forth through capitalist modes of production. A TESF India research project that attempted

to co-create knowledge with an indigenous community in central India, begins with the premise that “close association between capital, trade, and the development of environmental regimes in the neoliberal era on the one hand and the appropriation of the sustainability logic by international actors on the other hand (Ramakrishnan, 2001), necessitate a critical examination of the notion of sustainable development” (Sunny, 2023).

For instance, Naidu et al. (2010) critiques the idea of free market environmentalism which gives way to imposition of capitalist property rights over natural resources in India as processes of primary accumulation. While such policies lead to increasing growth, they do not effectively address issues of social, ecological, and economic sustainability.

More recent decolonising approaches expand the idea of development to include diverse perspectives, and worldviews of the colonised and marginalised. This compels us to address the conceptual contradictions that the dominant frames of development create. For instance, ecological degradation and livelihood loss is part of modernity, development, and the economic growth story. Decolonial critique problematises the instrumental orientation of education towards known futures (Amsler & Facer, 2017), and questions the teleological temporality of coloniality-modernity (Facer & Sriprakash, 2021). The fundamental question therefore is: what is it that we want to sustain?

This report is divided into sections that discuss each of the major themes emerging from the research projects, beginning with this fundamental question that was the central focus of one of the projects that engaged with a tribal community in parts of central India.





*Bharia youth collecting medicinal herbs*



### 3

## WHAT IS TO BE SUSTAINED?

The aforementioned TEF India study examines the nuances of ecological and social relationships in a tribal<sup>1</sup> community where individual competition for capital is not considered the fulcrum of development. This world view could help reinterpret ecological sustenance and social relationships. The examination of such premises becomes crucial for a critique of “development” that lies at the root of climate change, and deepening inequalities. It would be meaningful to reflect on the implications of ecological and social relationships for people living outside the active ambit of capitalist development but are perpetually threatened by dispossession.

The larger question of sustainability, therefore, “is not only that of environmental protection of the forests and ecologies in which the people live, but also that of listening to their voices that represent a different world view in human history, geography, culture, and economics. Their agency at the local and global levels needs space that is always denied. This can lend a more balanced view of concepts like wellbeing, that can hold ecological and social nuance, which the rhetoric of capitalist development is unable to” (Sunny, 2023, p. 5).

Not yet desecrated by large-scale development projects, the *Bharia* lands in the Patalkot valley of central India offer a meaningful site for research on sustainability. Unlike huge dispossessions faced by most other tribal groups in Madhya Pradesh, the state with the largest number of tribal people in the country<sup>2</sup>, the practices of the tribal world view are relatively more prevalent among the *Bharia* community.

This is reflected in the alienation that schoolgoing children from the *Bharia* community experience in

mainstream schools, yet wish to be part of the larger goal of becoming “modern”. Many people, especially those in formal employment, feign ignorance of *Bhariati*, their tribal language—perhaps an outcome of a new sense of “indignity” that modern institutions and employments seem to inculcate? One of the schoolteachers shared that she taught the *Bhariati* language as a government schoolteacher until the government discontinued the teaching of the language in 2011.

The realities of the *Bharia* language gives us one of the most profound examples of the duality between self-esteem and prestige that non-tribal hegemonic society embeds in the tribal people. The continuous need to camouflage on the one hand, and the concrete need for identity on the other, continue to weave into the lived experiences of educated *Bharia* people.

What the *Bharias* experience is a narrow range of selective knowledge that demands to be internalised. This is challenging not only pedagogically, but also in terms of knowledge representations. Whose knowledge? Knowledge for free markets or for a diversity of social and economic life? The study reveals how education has been hijacked for an exclusive knowledge creation for capital, a process that legitimises a particular sort of development (Sunny, 2023).

The study highlights the need to reclaim public (state) education as a democratic space and one that is representative and inclusive of diversities of ecological and social relationships. For education to become a site of such critical anticipatory practice it needs to be transformed to play this critical role.

The TEF network envisions such an education—one that can enable “existing and future generations of learners across the lifespan, in formal and informal settings, to realise the rights, freedoms and capabilities they require to live the lives they have reason to value and to protect and co-evolve in a more harmonious relationship with the natural environment of which human beings are an integral part so that natural and social systems may flourish” (Tikly, et al. 2020, p. 23).

<sup>1</sup> In the context of this study, “tribe” is more appropriate than “indigenous”. Tribe as a term indicates the social structure or the organising principles of a social order that is distinct from caste, class, and gender societies. This implies their relations with nature and with each other in society.

<sup>2</sup> As per the 2011 Census, there are 1.5 crore tribal people in Madhya Pradesh, comprising 21.1 per cent of the total population of the state.

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# PROBLEMATISING EDUCATION, ITS ARRANGEMENTS, DISCOURSE, AND PRACTICE

Much of the educational discourse and practice that characterises contemporary India has been deeply influenced by colonial roots and reshaped by three decades of neoliberal reforms since the early 1990s. Educational reform measures adopted in India since early liberalisation led to systemic changes in the provisioning and practice of school education, teacher education and higher education. Commitment to the Constitution-led policy framework was gradually subverted by a polity committed to privatising education and a bureaucracy committed to incrementalism and sub-optimal solutions to the several challenges of universalising quality education (Batra, 2021).

Decades of educational reform in a weak fiscal and policy environment that neglected human development and social justice in favour of economic development led to: limited state investment in education; inadequate expansion of the pool of teachers, especially in the most educationally challenged states; lack of professional support to teachers; divesting teachers of agency; narrowing curriculum to a disconnected set of learning outcomes; reducing teaching to lower order cognitive thinking and skills; and a de facto public policy that undermined the potential role of teachers in achieving equitable quality education. While efforts have been made to create a globally competitive workforce in India, specifically via increasing private investment in higher education, the need to engage with critical development goals, ensuring liberal constitutional, democratic values and social inclusion, and furthering environmental sustainability received little attention. Several TESF India researchers problematise the role and structures of education in contemporary India. In doing this, the projects investigate the meanings and

purposes of quality education and foreground promising transformative approaches, pathways and practices. A unique contribution of these projects is their attempt to unravel explicit and implicit inequalities that are often sustained via an education system that is unequal and discriminating. These include deconstructing ideological debates around coloniality and modernity, the institution of patriarchy, impact of climate change on the most vulnerable, urban and spatial injustice, and the upsurge in casteist and communal behaviours in contemporary Indian society. The projects reveal ways in which social structures and norms perpetuate and sustain caste-based, religious, and gender-based discrimination against women and girls, marginalised groups including Dalits<sup>3</sup>, Adivasis, and transgender, non-binary individuals. Although there are Constitutional provisions to address and redress these issues, social hierarchies take new forms and continue to exclude and shape the lived worlds of the marginalised. Iniquitous educational arrangements and learning environments operate to maintain status quo of an unequal social and economic order.

For instance, despite being referred to as Adivasis<sup>4</sup> or the “first inhabitants,” India’s indigenous communities (some of the most marginalised sections of Indian society) are often the last to be considered in discourses of development. In the name of progress, they are meted out an education that is alien to their life, history, and experience in all aspects, as indicated in [the study mentioned above](#). “Tribes ... have never been put or seen in the same footing as members of the larger society in terms of their access to rights, whether civil, political or social. They have been seen invariably as those who have had to make place for mainstream society and the

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<sup>3</sup> The term Dalit was used as a census classification of “Depressed Classes” prior to 1935, after which the term Scheduled Caste was used. The term is rooted in the historical and political struggle of the “Depressed Classes”, a term used by Dr B.R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), himself a Dalit.



**“Adivasi communities across India find themselves navigating mainstream social and political systems that are indifferent to their needs from a position of social, economic and political disadvantage.”**

agencies that spearhead their interest, viz, the state” (Xaxa, 2005, p. 1367).

Hence, Adivasi communities across India find themselves navigating mainstream social and political systems that are indifferent to their needs from a position of social, economic and political disadvantage. Existing scholarship establishes that private ownership of land, stringent forest protection acts, and rapid development of the surrounding areas have led the Adivasi communities to a point where the possibilities of returning to their traditional ways of life are highly limited (Muralidhar, 2018).

Examining the phenomena of urbanisation in the northeast region of India, Mehzabeen (2023) argues that indigenous communities have not been given their due recognition. Living in the plains and the hills, these communities have tremendous understanding of the ecology of the region, the drainage patterns and their challenges, ways of managing water, landslides and the environment. A substantial portion of the Guwahati city was for instance, under the ownership of the tribes. When the city began settling and expanding, many of the indigenous people were “pushed” out, the consequence of which is visible in the reduction of forest cover, increase in slum population, increasing pollution and

solid waste generation.

For tribal communities, co-existing with the forests or the wetland is a natural way of life. In the present context of fast-paced development, forces of modernity including greed of land acquisition has led to a nexus between the corporates and the state in the region of northeast India. Development appears to be “happening” sans people. Despite having culturally embedded practices of environmental preservation, “urbanising” forces of “development” have changed societies and people’s social and economic lives. The paradox is that while issues related to indigenous knowledge of the region are often discussed in relation to livelihood and conservation, they are rarely heard of in the context of developing sustainable cities in the northeast, even in spaces of higher learning, argues Mehzabeen (2023).

In the international and national policy discourse, education is often suggested as the bridge that will help them access and navigate the modern world. While we saw a glimpse of the contradictions between the identities and social ethos that tribal communities value and what the modern world offers them, a deeper dive into their educational experiences offers more compelling evidence of such contradictions.



<sup>4</sup> Adivasis is a collective name used for the many indigenous peoples of India. The term Adivasi derives from the Hindi word “adi” which means of earliest times and “vasi” meaning inhabitant and was coined in the 1930s, largely a consequence of a political movement to forge a sense of identity among the various indigenous peoples of India. Officially, Adivasis are termed Scheduled Tribes, an administrative term used for the purposes of “administering” certain Constitutional privileges and protection for peoples considered historically disadvantaged. However, this administrative term does not precisely match all the peoples called Adivasis.

## EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF ADIVASI COMMUNITIES

Some of TEF India research problematises several educational constructs, issues and questions related to the education of Adivasis. [Research](#) reveals that several Adivasi communities of Gudalur in the Nilgiris district of the state of Tamil Nadu in southern India and in parts of central India find the mainstream education system alienating as it fails to accommodate the diversity of needs and aspirations of the peoples.

The Adivasi child enters the school from a position of disadvantage, as the mainstream system does not even accommodate their language. The ethos of the school is coloured by discrimination against the Adivasi community from their teachers and peers. School textbooks depict the Adivasi communities through misinformed narratives and stereotypes and do not make space for the knowledge and varied perspectives that the Adivasi child brings to the classroom. The assessment system in schools promotes a culture of competition inconsistent with the Adivasi values of unity and cooperation that the children grow up with (Jayakumar et al., 2023).

Studies indicate that the Indian education system has contributed significantly to the marginalisation and neglect of Adivasi interests (Maithreyi et al, 2022; Subrahmanian, 2003). Mainstream education causes children to feel disconnected from their language and culture (Gupta & Padel, 2019; Sundar, 2010). In India, as also observed in TEF research, language barriers for tribal students in classrooms become major disadvantages that connect to significant disparities in school performance, skill building, and capacity development. These barriers experienced early on in a child's life reinforce not only the circle of poverty for tribal communities, but also the lack of opportunity in societal participation and the stripping of cultural identity and pride (Mohanty et al., 2009). TEF research unravels several forms of such hegemonic practices.

While the enrolment rates of Adivasi children over the last two decades may indicate otherwise, low attendance, poor performance and high dropout rates call into question the efficacy of the current education system in liberating Adivasi communities (Xaxa, 2011). The blame for these outcomes is often directed towards the students, their parents, and the community. Several studies indicate that dysfunctional schooling systems play a much more central role in keeping children out of school than poverty or lack of interest in education (Vasavi, 2003).

Research reveals that "the mainstream education system does not recognise the contemporary conditions, predicament, diversity of aspirations and needs of most adivasis" (Veerbhadranaika et al., 2012, p. iii). The current system fails to provide adequate, relevant and quality education to most Adivasis on account of the systemic marginalisation of their interests and lived experiences. As a result, the Adivasi child develops a sense of self, mired in feelings of insecurities and inferiority.



Children from the Adivasi community of Gudalur district in Tamil Nadu have come to fear education. They are homogenised and stereotyped by the school authorities by setting lower expectations and making lesser efforts to help educate them. One of the younger participants shared the following:

*“Teachers never bother to find out if we understood. If one child in the class gets it, that’s good enough for them and they just move on to the next thing. Some teachers do make the effort, but only just enough to make us pass the exam, saying that it is enough if you learn that much”* (Jayakumar et al., 2023, p. 21).

Adivasi communities have long-standing traditions of environmental conservation, which often involves designating parts of the forest as Devrai or sacred groves. Analysis of school textbooks with the aim to seek culturally informed content reveals that texts only briefly mention community-level efforts in environmental conservation. They portray the government as the primary player in promoting forest and wildlife conservation and forest-based communities as exploitative of forest reserves,

*“It is a pity that even protected forests are not safe because people living in the neighbourhood encroach upon them and destroy them”* (Grade 8 science textbook, p. 82) (Kawalkar et al., 2023, p. 37).

School curriculum is seen to be a form of epistemic violence on tribal students especially as it denies any engagement with their world view, culture and social ethos intimately connected with the natural world they inhabit (Kawalkar et al., 2023). In doing this, school texts not only deny students a holistic understanding of the topic but are also guilty of propagating biased information against peoples that are largely forest dwelling communities.

The state-sponsored middle school science textbooks on the other hand take a one-sided approach towards conserving the natural environment. Texts depict biosphere reserves and sanctuaries in a positive light without addressing how certain state-led conservation projects adversely impact the lives of the local people. Texts vaguely allude to the Constitutional rights of Adivasi communities on forests, deliberately avoiding any discussion on everyday conflict between the local people and the Forest Department. Lived experiences, knowledge, practices, questions, and concerns of Adivasi students are neither addressed in school texts nor are they brought into classroom discourse and discussion. The textbooks clearly have a utilitarian and anthropocentric approach to forests and wildlife conservation, treating forests as resources and justifying extractive practices for “human welfare” (Kawalkar et al., 2023).



Children pointing out the diversity among leaves





*Children engrossed in a game of their own creation at Chembakolli Adivasi village*



## INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE, EDUCATION AND EPISTEMIC (IN)JUSTICE

Researcher interaction with Adivasi adults helped understand the “self-sufficient lifestyle, resourcefulness, and hard work that, over generations, turned barren terrains into arable land, their knowledge about forests and rivers, and lived experiences of displacement” (Kawalkar et al., 2023, p. 4).

Community members have a strong connection with the natural world, extending beyond survival needs. Their relationship with nature includes spiritual, cultural, and philosophical dimensions and mutuality. It is complex and multi-dimensional. Communities also have cultural and economic practices related to forests, such as maintaining a diverse subsistence base, recognising the shared interests of communal land, and practising sustainable harvesting. These practices facilitate long-term coexistence and offer valuable insights for broader environmental conservation and sustainable livelihood initiatives.

Learning from within their community, Adivasi students demonstrate a deep understanding of the interconnections between different species, adopting an eco-centric perspective of the natural environment. They hold a strong ethic of respect and care for all forms of life, including the smallest creatures like caterpillars and leeches. When discussing stakeholders in the forests, they give equal consideration to every species and non-living elements, showing concern for even the tiniest life forms in the mud, such as in the case of drought caused by deforestation. The Commons are seen as a necessary resource that must be shared among all stakeholders, emphasising the importance of equitable access to these resources. The forest, rivers, and hills are integral parts of their village and their natural and social environment, as evidenced in children’s drawings. Their deep cultural and spiritual connection to the forest is reflected in their mutualistic relationship and sense of responsibility towards it. Despite their dependence on the forest, they do not view it in a solely utilitarian manner.

**“This is not only a pedagogical challenge but also a challenge regarding the representation of knowledge. Whose knowledge is being taught? To what purpose is it being taught?”**

However, these world views are conspicuously missing in the utilitarian depiction of nature in school textbooks. Research points to the limitations of the current textbook approach to nature, which assumes a binary between humans and nature. This narrow perspective exerts “symbolic violence” (Bourdieu & Paaseron, 1977) on Adivasi students, denying them a space to share their experiences and knowledge on issues central to their lives.

The elimination of Adivasi world views and perspectives along with values such as “happiness” and the idea of “development” is conspicuously vivid in curriculum and pedagogy. TEF projects observe that in schools a limited range of knowledge must be accepted as true. This is not only a pedagogical challenge but also a challenge regarding the representation of knowledge. Whose knowledge is being taught? To what purpose is it being taught?



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## THE ADIVASI WORLDVIEW: REVEALING NEW MEANINGS AND PURPOSES OF EDUCATION

The complex socio-ecological dynamics of the *Bharia* people, everyday experiences, livelihoods, ecological relationships, their memories, oral histories, and reflections on the impacts of state policies and institutions reveal how alienating the education system is for this community (Sunny, 2023). A close examination of the Adivasi view of the natural and social world in many of these projects reveal a refreshing perspective on what education can aim to do towards sustainable ways of living, learning and earning.

The culture of the *Bharia* people is shaped by a sense of responsibility towards the forest and each other. Just like *Korkus* and *Gonds* in the Kesla block of Madhya Pradesh, a state in central India (Kawalkar et al., 2023), and the *Bettakurumba*, *Kattunayakan*, *Mullakurumba* and *Paniya* communities in Gudalur (Jayakumar et al., 2023), the *Bharia* community too have a diverse and multi-faceted relationship with forests. Despite their diverse dependencies on forests, the tribal communities do not view them merely as a resource. The cultural norms and economic practices of the community with regard to the forest, including the recognition of collective ownership and harvesting sustainably for a diverse subsistence base, are aimed at long-term cohabitation. However, this relationship and worldview is neither acknowledged by state agencies nor reflected in their curricula and schooling experiences.

*Bharia* children often have to travel long distances to reach school. The job opportunities that are primarily available to individuals with an education are limited to positions such as peons and *chaukidar* in the Forest Department as well as roles like *nakedar*, *anganwadi* workers, and teachers in schools. Students who do not excel in school and study only up to Grade V tend to return to farming and forestry to earn a livelihood. Some educated youth also choose to work seasonally as agricultural labourers.

Research demonstrates that these communities have a well-grounded and nuanced understanding of their predicament. In their reasoning, mainstream schools promote individualism and competition that stand in direct opposition to Adivasi values of solidarity and cooperation. Education seems to be taking children away from their community rather than bringing them closer to it. The communities are acutely aware of the long-term implications of this alienation on their shared identities, as it leads to weakened leadership and participation within the villages (Jayakumar et al., 2023).

The community understands the purpose of education as one which enables their children to navigate their home world and the modern world with knowledge, dignity, and character, and to lead contented lives. For them, schools as well as the villages are key sites of learning, and these operate in tandem to meet the need for a culturally relevant education for Adivasi children. TESF India research establishes the need to reclaim the village as a site of learning by creating channels of learning in both academic and traditional Adivasi knowledge forms, thereby strengthening relationships across various generations and building leadership within the Adivasi youth.

The misrepresentation of knowledge and reality in school textbooks and classroom discourse is a consequence of several factors. Prominent among these is the exclusion of Adivasi and other marginalised community experiences and realities, in policy and educational practice, hence, undermining diversity. School curricula and texts are also known to undermine the voices of children and to present abstract knowledge in the form of discipline-centred information capsules that disallow most students to resonate with, and hence, to think critically. Some research explored the epistemic frames within which school knowledge is located.



*Students during a school function in a tribal region*



*In conversation with Adivasi communities*



## PROBLEMATISING FRAMES OF EPISTEMES AND LEARNING

Some of the projects provide deep insight into how voices of the marginalised, when examined closely, reveal new perspectives that challenge existing frames of thinking about certain constructs. Three projects offer expanded constructs of citizenship, water, and city margins via an analysis of the lived realities and voices of the marginalised voices.

The analysis of school texts that engage with water as an area of school study reveals that there is “a greater emphasis on the geographical, physical, and scientific aspects of water compared to water history, heritage, social gender, equity, and water justice. Segregated between science and geography, the study of water can often be decontextualised from the local context and lived experiences of the students” (Chhavi et al., 2023, p. 8). Curricula does not provide an opportunity to observe and problematise local questions and issues around water. Hence, the texts do not provide the support

students require to build interdisciplinary knowledge and systems thinking in environmental education. [The project](#) demonstrates how such capacities can be developed through interactive and visually engaging pedagogy. This is discussed in detail in the section on transformative pedagogies.

Attempts at decolonising research have sought to include voices of people who have been historically marginalised. The child's voice is one such voice, and in the context of India, the voices of children from specific groups are even more marginalised. While all children are dependent and vulnerable, it is important to remember that they are vulnerable in different ways because they come from diverse contexts. Even as they grow out of childhood dependencies, the extent to which they will continue to be subordinate adults will vary based on class, caste, race, gender, and community (Appell, 2013).



**“To listen to children’s voices, at the very least, deepens our understanding of a construct like citizenship, and if allowed more, can show us how to reimagine it.”**

A [TESF India study](#) examines how children articulate their understanding of citizenship through the key concepts of liberty, equality and fraternity, which are guaranteed to all citizens by the Constitution of India. Protest sites and a public library for Dalit children and children of a religious minority were chosen as sites of research for their history of providing education outside of school through purposeful activities.

The children’s responses across the three sites reveal a dissonance between what is envisaged as citizenship through curriculum and schooling, and the children’s lived realities and experiences. Inequalities based on class, community, gender and caste that determine access to the kind of schooling children receive clearly impact children’s articulation of ideas around rights and citizenship.

Engagement with children in this project reflects how children are part of the world and how their experiences can contribute to a richer and more nuanced understanding of the present human condition. This can lead us to re-examine structures of education and work towards processes that enable equity and social justice. For example, one boy from Shaheen Bagh, spoke of wanting the freedom and confidence to speak up when he sees adults doing wrong things such as a policeman taking fruit from a fruit seller’s cart without paying for it. Such responses if brought into the classroom can become rich sources of learning. If we are committed to including diverse experiences and voices to develop our understanding of the world to see how it can be construed and constructed more equitably, then we must glean meaning from the voices of children as well and find ways to integrate those into classroom learning (Mishra, 2023).



Using art and writing to understand children’s construct of citizenship: Hum Hindustani



This research demonstrates that the dissonance between theoretical explanations conveyed through textbooks and children's lived experiences can be discussed by focusing on the everyday. The everyday creates fissures in the normative understanding of community, identity, and belonging, and allows for stereotypes to be deconstructed. For example, the experiences of discrimination along the lines of caste, class and gender demonstrate that the idea of "ham sab ek hain" (we are all one) is not always practised, thereby fracturing the normative idea of Indian citizenship being an all-inclusive identity.

Interactions with children reveal that the role of schooling in transferring even a normative idea of citizenship is limited. In many cases, the Constitution and citizenship were not even being discussed in class. It is argued that by listening to children's voices, it is possible to co-create new knowledge and understanding about citizenship. An important idea that has emerged from listening to the children in this project is that of citizenship as connected to habitation, of a citizen as being one who resides. When asked who a citizen is, the children used phrases like "rehne-wala, jo is jagah par rehte hain, jo entered hain, ham log, poore log, India ke log". To be a *rehne-wala*, a resident, is to be a person with no other qualifying markers other than the fact that you inhabit a space. No documents that prove place of birth and no cut-offs for date of birth (Mishra, 2023).

If we keep children's voices at the centre, we privilege another notion of citizenship—not in terms of rights, but in terms of care. We are forced to reconsider who is a citizen, a person worthy of liberty, equality and fraternity. We move away from trying to identify the appropriateness of categories and documents that prove those, to think instead about which human being is not deserving of these fundamental human rights? This is a humanistic idea that moves beyond critiquing the challenges of liberal citizenship and offers us a way of engaging so as to create a more empathetic, compassionate and equitable world. To listen to children's voices, at the very least, deepens our understanding of a construct like citizenship, and if allowed more, can show us how to reimagine it. In a writing exercise on the idea of fraternity, the following poem (translated from Hindi) emerged through a dialogic process with children in Govandi<sup>5</sup>:

### **My People**

*Those friends who are with me in difficult times  
Are those my people?*

*Those neighbours who fight on small things  
Are those my people?*

*Those people in my family who gave money for my sister's  
wedding  
Are those my people?*

*That grandmother who is always suspicious of me  
Are those my people?*

*Those people at Kitaab Mahal library who give me a  
chance to try everything  
Are those my people?*

*Those people who walk into Taj Hotel  
Are those my people?*

*Those teachers who listen to me and counsel me  
Are those my people?*

*Those policemen who take money from the rich and  
falsely accuse the poor  
Are those my people?*

*Those people in the Powai chawl who on April 14 celebrate  
Ambedkar Jayanti with me  
Are those my people?  
Those people who tear down mosques  
Are those my people?*

The questions that the young writer ponders upon in this poem invite us to examine the idea of belonging from a lens of care, resonating with the ideas of the educationists (Tagore, Gandhi, and Krishnamurti) who sought a pedagogy that would develop compassionate critical thinking in young people. The poem asks us to look at fraternity in a contextual way, recognising dissonance but holding out hope. It is the child's voice that pushes us towards this understanding. Perhaps, it is time to listen to that voice, to actively honour the commitment of keeping the child at the centre of change and reimagine how we look at citizenry (Mishra, 2023).

The everyday also holds possibilities for imagining new ways of understanding and being. For example, the Dalit child in Govandi who has grown up with Muslim friends and neighbours and feels a strong kinship to them will find the idea of community based only on caste or religion incomplete. Engaging with the everyday

opens up possibilities of understanding intersectionality between caste, class, religion, region, and gender that are all part of shaping children's identity and their understanding of it (Mishra, 2023).

[A project focusing on the margins of a city](#), examines how structural vulnerabilities inhibit the educational experiences of children in slum settlements. The study explored the lived experiences of children at the margins of a mega city to examine educational processes within the frame of the state-margins relationship (Rajan et al., 2023). Interactions with schoolteachers reveal that the school keeps the child and their milieu at a certain distance. Teachers openly talk about the 'failing' milieu of the children as something that not only legitimises violence against them, but also grounds the need to keep children and their milieu at a distance from the life of teachers and the school.

The politics of caste in a city like Delhi comes to the forefront when we engage not only with how children view schooling but also how they express themselves in different artistic mediums. Some children draw, many

are interested in making reels on social media platforms like Instagram. The angst of these young children and teenagers reflect in the content they put out on social media. The artistic expression not only uses violence to express frustration but also at times involves the use of prop guns for the content (Rajan et al., 2023).

Educational experience, it is argued, could be a rallying point to examine the thinking and practice of developing cities. Though many educational interventions are planned by the state and a range of civil society organisations for children of families living on the margins, they often neglect the complex life experiences of these children, thereby reproducing various exclusionary dynamics of the urban educational landscape.

Research highlights that voices of the marginalised, including those of children, their perspectives, knowledge and the everyday, enable the deconstruction of conceptual contradictions and gaps around questions of the urban and spatial injustice, identities and rights, and sustainability.





## THE PRIVILEGED AND CASTE-BASED INEQUALITY

The caste system in India and the structural inequalities perpetuated by casteism are a significant challenge to creating a just society. Projects (discussed under various intersecting themes) demonstrate how the politics of caste operates in cities, how caste prejudice intersects with gender and other inequalities in the everyday and within school, higher and professional education spaces. School teaching for most women often becomes an extension of the socially expected role of service to upper caste society. The problem is exacerbated because the education system, including libraries and curricula, does not fully acknowledge and confront this complex issue.

As libraries have been seen as safe spaces for collective conversations, diverse collections, and dialogue on sensitive subjects, [a TEF India project](#) worked closely with a select sample of seven library educators from privileged backgrounds on questions of caste (Noronha & Choksi, 2023). The aim was to examine their knowledge, attitudes, and practices on caste issues through reading caste literature, reflective discussions, and introspective journaling; and to develop their preparedness to conceptualise, design, and pilot a library unit on caste with children from privileged backgrounds.

Cognising the fact that a significant proportion of the upper caste “educated” citizenry in India sees caste as irrelevant in their lives and themselves as “casteless”, the project focused on examining how engaging with caste by the privileged via critical collective reading could open entry points for educational engagement with and among children on this question.

Although the National Curriculum Framework 2005 (NCERT, 2005) and social science school texts<sup>6</sup> tried to address questions of caste discrimination, socio-economic inequity via curriculum and pedagogy,

**“During discussions and explorations, it became obvious how systemic the denial of caste is among the privileged.”**

it fell short of emphasising the preparation of the schoolteacher in engaging with these questions in the everyday classroom (Batra, 2005). It is no surprise that an empirical study revealed that 44 per cent of students denied the prevalence of caste even after engaging with the NCF-oriented social science school texts and barely a quarter of the sample accepted that caste discrimination still exists (Mittal, 2020).

Learning more about caste among the privileged can result in denial, guilt, and/or false empathy—all of which serve as barriers to change. Through collective engagement, investigators and research participants realised how the dominant educational discourse has subverted positions and texts in ways that blind the privileged from understanding how positions in society reproduce these “fallacies”. In gathering material for the project, it was discovered how limited the children’s collection is on this topic across Indian languages, and when presented, how it almost always presents the child and their experience from an oppressor point of view (often written by a Savarna)<sup>7</sup> evoking pity, sympathy, care and concern, but at arm’s length to the positions of privilege that sustain oppression. However, Dalit

<sup>6</sup> Texts written based on the (NCF), 2005.

<sup>7</sup> The term refers to the three higher-ranking members of the caste system





## PROBLEMATISING SKILL-BASED LEARNING AND LIVELIHOOD

Documenting social transitions and working on the linkages between education and livelihood, [a project examined the shifting landscapes of education and skills](#) in the small town of Sangli, bordering the states of Maharashtra and Karnataka, with a deeper purpose to understand the linkages between education and employment (Paranjape & Tukdeo, 2023).

The study revealed that students who enrol in vocational courses are often academic underperformers in school and are from disadvantaged backgrounds. The inadequacy is reflected in the lack of funding of vocational institutions, recruitment and professional development of teachers, and active collaboration with industries. Upon completing their courses, most students work in the unorganised sector in the initial years. Despite provisions, very few students take the route of lateral entry to study professional or academic courses. These factors make the institutional culture that shies away from being innovative and adventurous.

The project documents the space of livelihood education as one riddled with stories of struggle, compromise and exclusion raising several questions around opportunities that link education with livelihoods. The structure and belief systems of these institutions confirm the speculation that mainstream education rarely recognises the importance of vocational and skill-based education. The teachers in these institutions confirm that the courses are not rigorous, reinforcing the popular bias that vocational education is not a career choice for the academically bright students. Very often these are students who are dealing with several social and financial challenges in their lives. As reflected in what Aftab shared:

*"I come to the college at 7:15 and attend classes till 11:30. I head home and then go to the garage where I stay*

*from 1:00 pm to 8. I can do oil-badli, repair brake-pads, headlights, fixing tyres etc. I got 1,500 for three months. I'll probably get paid better in the next six months"* (Paranjape & Tukdeo, 2023).

The challenges faced by the students are compounded by institutional apathy and the teachers' low expectations of these students. Despite their need and relevance, vocational skills and the institutions offering courses are perceived to be less rigorous and less important. The battle of perceptions and prejudices is also connected to material reality.

Given the strong history and presence of caste in every occupation in India, it is fairly easy to separate high-risk, physically demanding jobs from that of the white collar, and the class-caste locations of those who engage in the different forms of work. While students may eventually earn good money, most of them spend their initial years working on a meagre salary. Studying in vocational institutions revealed some of the obvious ways in which social reproduction in education occurs. While the policy proposition (GoI, 2020) to expand vocational education and introduce skill-based training is a useful step, it does little to restore dignity and aspirations among students entering vocational programmes. The study argues for the need to reimagine vocational courses to enable a growing young population to find meaningful work that promises to enhance their quality of life.

This and other studies indicate how education and industry together have fortified the exclusive purpose of creating knowledge for capital and as a way of legitimising a particular kind of development. It has also reinforced different forms of exclusions in service of neo-liberal policies.

# GENDER, IDENTITY, SOCIAL DISADVANTAGE AND EDUCATION

The nature and extent of economic, social and gender inequalities and intersectionality between different forms of inequalities raise critical environmental and social justice concerns. To address multi-dimensional and intersecting inequality as a system, we need to view educational access, quality of education, and developing capabilities and agency as a continuum (Batra et al., 2023.). [A TESH India project investigated the lived experiences of transgender, gender non-conforming \(GNC\) and gender non-binary \(GNB\) persons](#) in the Indian science ecosystem to understand how active and passive denials become major accomplices in sustaining processes of exclusion and discrimination in a policy environment that sustains gender and social inequalities. The findings present comprehensive insights into the mechanisms of exclusion that transgender persons face while accessing science education. These mechanisms of exclusion are attributed to the gendered nature of science institutions, exclusionary, discriminatory curricula, and an epistemological discourse that constantly “erases” their

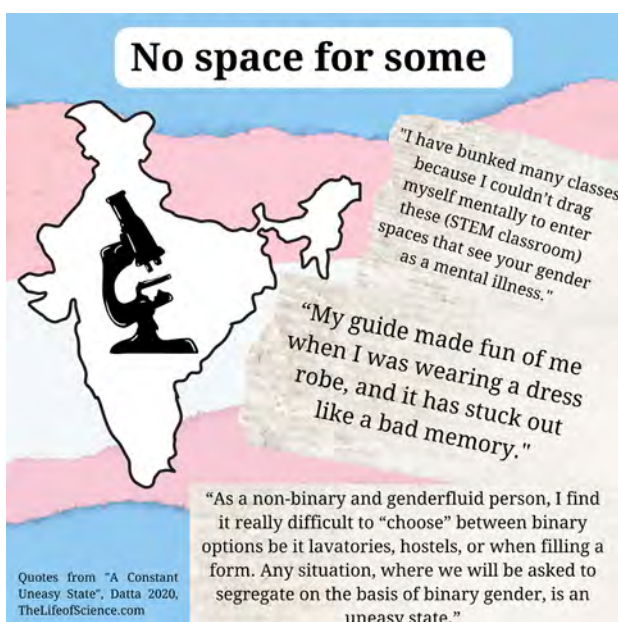
trans-identity (Datta, 2020, 2021; Kondaiah et al., 2017). It is argued that the perceived-value neutrality of science contributes to the different ways in which GNC and GNB persons feel excluded in the Indian science ecosystem.

Examining published personal narratives and news reports at the intersections of gender, caste, disability and science; judicial proceedings in cases filed by transgender persons in the context of education and employment; and select policy documents enabled the contextualisation of the trans-rights discourse in the larger context of equitable science education in India.

Despite the policy provisions, even the “well informed” members of the science community in higher education do not facilitate gender non-conforming roles. Hence, despite legislative, judicial and policy interventions that aim to make science higher education in India inclusive of and accessible to transgender, GNC and GNB persons, it remains an unwelcoming space for non-binary identities. Interviews with transgender individuals reveal that, unlike other marginal identities, science in higher education has a far more formative role to play for trans-identities. This is because, during the process of entry into higher education, social identities are more or less shaped. As shared by a research participant:

*“[In science institutions], we are not just learning content – we are also forming communities and identities. We are shaping who we are in the world ... part of what you learn in an IIT is that there are statuses in the world, and that these statuses matter for what doors will open for you and what doors will not open for you. What an IIT cultivates beyond learning is a certain amount of conceit” (Datta et al., 2023, p. 24).*

Complicating this journey is the structure and infrastructure of the ecosystem, seeped in cis-heteropatriarchy and ableism. The research participant added:





*“...all conversations, be it curriculum, be it social life in the hostel, be it home life, there was a masculinist narrative. The way people would behave and interact made it very hard to really be part of the group. ... I could distinctly note that my social capital in that space is rock bottom” (Datta et al., 2023, p. 24).*

The possibilities of intersectional political solidarity between different marginalised groups were explored to enable crosstalk between feminist and queer critiques of science with anti-caste and disability-rights critiques of science to develop unique intersectional frameworks for science studies in India.

Four registers are proposed to explore these discourses—that of the nature and culture of science and science institutions, infrastructure, affirmative action and curriculum—and highlight how these registers offer possibilities for political solidarity. It is argued that political solidarity-driven activism potentiates transformative and productive ways to challenge different forms of gendered, casteist and ableist violence in science higher education in India (Datta et al., 2023).

The educational journeys of another set of youth from marginalised sections of society in the city of Pune, Maharashtra were explored (Tambe & Dyahadroy, 2023). These are first-generation higher education learners from families engaged in stigmatised occupations<sup>9</sup>. Most of these young adults do not receive any institutional support when they enter the higher education space. They rely on either private coaching centres that may be affordable or seek online help. All of them face academic difficulties especially in accessing curriculum content and managing the academic pace of the institution. However, they do not view this as “institutional failure” but as “individual failure”. Most shared that teachers pay attention to only meritorious students. They are acutely aware that this affects their learning process; they lose interest in learning, feel alienated and end up either dropping out or somehow complete their degree with “poor” performance. This directly impacts their work and further education pathways. Thus, most of them underline how they are academically ill-equipped and lack the competencies required in the job market.

Apart from providing employment opportunities for

**“Narratives suggest that in India, caste exists in modern spaces such as courtrooms, markets, classrooms, friendships, and the city neighbourhood .”**

young aspiring adults, higher education is also a space to develop social and cultural capital. However, limited education of their parents, their stigmatised occupations, the locality where they live affect their subject choices, with whom they become friends, and what they are able to do after school. Across the six occupational groups, the educational background of parents and their occupation produces social and economic disadvantage as well as stigma for these young adults. Most of them admit that they refrain from discussing their parents' occupation, if they are in mixed groups and also avoid going to friends' houses or inviting them home. Most of these young adults also do part-time work to support their education and other expenses, which leaves them very little time to engage in extracurricular activities or spending time with their friends.

By consciously excluding themselves from situations, such as avoiding discussion about their parents or not inviting friends home, they manage to stay away from the stigma attached to their parent's occupation, caste or neighbourhood. However, processes of social exclusion within everyday contexts of higher education institutions are part of their daily lives. In the case of students whose parents are either sanitation workers or waste pickers, stigma is more embodied and intersects with the caste. Some of them underline how they are often humiliated by their classmates or teachers. Narratives suggest that in India, caste exists in modern spaces such as courtrooms, markets, classrooms,

<sup>9</sup> Occupations characterised by low caste status, socially stigmatised, often with increased hazard exposures, lower pay scale, and no job security

friendships, and the city neighbourhood. Even so, most see themselves responsible for not being able to “cope with academic pressure” despite getting “help” in the form of freships and reservation<sup>10</sup>.

The study argues that different conceptual tools are required to make sense of academic (curriculum and pedagogic practices) and non-academic (their experience of space) experiences of first-generation learners. There is a need to turn the gaze back on various stakeholders in the space of higher education, including teachers, administrative staff as well as policymakers. Institutions need to facilitate the process of converting Constitutional opportunity to enter higher education into a substantive opportunity, enabling them to transgress the stigma of caste and occupation in order to facilitate intergenerational mobility.

Gender-just classrooms are imperative to realising a gender-just society. Social norms, including patriarchal norms are often reproduced and perpetuated in schools through biased curriculum, gendered textbooks, hidden curriculum and even gendered views of those who educate. The key towards a gender-equitous classroom is a gender-conscious teacher. With this background, an analysis of the gender component in the curriculum of the Diploma in Elementary Teacher Education (DElEd) programme offered at District Institutes of Education and Training (DIET) under the Kerala State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) was undertaken (Anilkumar & Subair, 2023).

The curriculum was found to offer very limited engagement with gender with just one chapter under the topic of inclusive education in the third semester of the programme. This was found to be violative of the National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (NCFTE) 2009 guidelines, which require at least one full course on gender in a teacher education programme (NCTE, 2009). The existing chapter on gender was found to be bereft of conceptual engagement, highly didactic with contextually alien content, disallowing preservice teachers to relate to and reflect on the gender norms they experience in their everyday lives.

The project developed a dialogue-based pedagogical intervention to engage preservice teachers critically with issues of gender to cultivate gender consciousness

among them. How preservice teachers were impacted by aims and process of interventions is discussed in the section on transformative pedagogies.

Developing space for dialogue in a social context which is highly conservative and hierarchical was full of challenges. The educational culture and learning environment of the institution is steeped in memorising textbook content and reproducing it for examinations. Students were used to didactic teaching approaches since school. This made it difficult to enable their mindful engagement with concepts, deep academic discourse and scholarship on gender.

Rigid age-based hierarchy in the class posed a major challenge in creating a safe space for dialogue on gender. Students feared repercussions of speaking openly about gender discrimination they face within the institution. This was particularly frustrating as many had begun to see gender discrimination, but were unable to do anything about it (Anilkumar & Subair, 2023).



*Challenging gender-based hierarchies in a uniformised educational culture*

<sup>10</sup> Reservation is a system of affirmative action in India that provides historically disadvantaged groups representation in education, employment, government schemes, scholarships and politics



## TEACHERS, TEACHER KNOWLEDGE AND GENDER

Teaching at the primary school level has traditionally been seen as a gendered vocation—suitable for women—allowing them to balance “work” with primary domestic responsibilities as mothers and wives. It is no coincidence that pay scales of primary school teachers in India are the lowest in the education hierarchy. Even though women continue to be associated with the teaching of young children, this trend of “feminisation” is largely an urban phenomena.

The indiscriminate mushrooming of unregulated low-fee-paying private schools during the pre-pandemic period saw a simultaneous rise in the hiring of women teachers who could serve at far lower costs. [A TESE India study](#) reveals that the teacher workforce in the low-fee private schools in Birgaon, a small town in Chhattisgarh, a state in eastern India, is primarily composed of women under the age of 30. All of them belong to lower-caste communities with working-class backgrounds, and are paid much below the minimum wage mandated by the state. The schools, however, are run by male directors, often actively invoking their caste status, while leading an all-female staff. What came as a revelation was that the school heads openly expressed their gendered beliefs, such as, “men are the best teachers but don't pursue teaching careers” and “women are best suited for teaching younger children due to their maternal instincts”. One school head expressed preference for unmarried female teachers, citing that they come with fewer responsibilities and domestic tensions compared to married women. The social affiliations of teachers also shape their access to employment. Findings indicate that the type of work and subject allocation to teachers were associated with their caste, class and family affiliations.

Teachers' working time constitutes the bulk of unwaged, unaccounted for, and invisible labour. The salaries of

teachers appear to be arbitrary and lack a clear basis for determination. No correlation was found between salary and factors such as experience, education, or hours worked. Thus, working women as teachers are looked upon more as women whose labour can be exploited by considering it as non-work. Such circumstances lead to a relationship of extreme exploitation, strikingly similar to the unpaid domestic labour that falls on women within a family. Evidence indicates a reinforcement of Brahmanical and caste-patriarchal norms as the disciplining forces of teacher labour (Khemani et al., 2023).

Teachers' lives in these schools are shaped by the dynamic between waged and unwaged labour that intimately governs the conditions of their work. While on the one hand, the low-fee private schools rest on teachers' labour in order to deliver education and ensure a steady stream of fee-paying students, on the other, they are able to ensure low-cost labour by maintaining extremely high teacher turnover. Thus, while the cheap reproduction of a devalued teacher labour force is indispensable, it is simultaneously an obstacle to the functioning of low-fee private schools. It is argued that maintaining the precarity of teacher work conditions is in the interest of low fee-paying schools in order to keep costs low.

Notions of teaching as a “noble” vocation speak not only to gendered notions such as maternal caring, but very strongly to the historical domination of education by the upper castes and the oppressive system of social inequality. The study reveals that the identity of a female teacher is merely an extension of her identity as an ideal housewife, or an unemployed local youth committed to service of the community (*seva bhava*<sup>11</sup>). In this context, acquiring either experience or skill must necessarily fit within the prescribed experience of the teachers' social

11 *Seva bhava in the caste tradition means “servitude”.*

**“The gendered notion of school teaching... (including)...recruiting women teachers on low wages across all shades of private schools, have further entrenched Brahmanical-patriarchal values associated with the teaching profession”**

position. Teaching, for most then, becomes an extension of the socially expected role of performing seva in and to caste society, thereby denying it the status of real work as a professional. The social and legal denial of experience as a working person, serves to severely devalue teachers' labour and relegate it to the status of “nonwork” (Khemani et al, 2023).

The popular notion of school teaching, especially at the pre-primary and primary levels is highly gendered. From early policy interventions during “Operation Blackboard” (MHRD, 1987) when every school was mandated to have two women teachers in primary classes, to the trend of recruiting women teachers on low wages across all shades of private schools, have further entrenched Brahmanical-patriarchal values associated with the teaching profession.

Several Bachelor of Elementary Education (BEEd) graduates also face the challenge of a non-responsive education system—one that shows little regard for teachers who are empathetic towards children and are keen to teach using critical pedagogic approaches. Teachers are often made to feel that non-teaching administrative work is far more important, whereas

during the BEEd they learnt the criticality of designing contextually relevant and inclusive learning experiences for all children.

‘Among some of the structural challenges faced by BEEd graduates, the battle for the legitimacy of their degree for direct recruitment as well as promotion to the Trained Graduate Teacher (TGT) scale continued till this project ended. This was despite a court verdict favourable to BEEd degree holders by the Indian High Courts in 2018 (DHC, 2018). The entrenched problem of viewing the teaching of young children as feminine activity, that requires no professional education or robust knowledge continues in policy thinking and the dominant educational discourse.

As the synthesis report is being written, the revised Recruitment Rules (RRs) for TGT positions have been notified by the Government of NCT of Delhi, including the BEEd degree as essential qualification for direct recruitment to TGT posts<sup>12</sup>

TESF India research has laid bare some of the structural, epistemological, and epistemic mechanisms of exclusion and marginalisation in different educational spaces and ecosystems. All of them, some directly and others indirectly, also throw light on formal and informal pathways to transformative pedagogies.’



<sup>12</sup> Government of the National Capital Territory of Delhi (2023). Delhi Gazette, Wednesday, June 28, 2023, circulated by the Govt of Delhi Directorate of Education via letter no: F.DE.3(32)/E-III/TGT-RRs/2015/PF/1028-47, dated 06.07.2023.





Cooperation as part of school culture

# TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICES

Developing a vision and strategy for sustainable development needs to consider specific historical, geographical, political, social, and environmental contexts that represent a specific region and society. Drawing upon some of the TESF India research, the previous section demonstrated how education and knowledge systems have been status-quoist, and how they can be problematised to identify entry points for transformative practices. This section presents key insights concerning questions of how education can be transformed to achieve social and environmental change towards sustainable futures.

Analysis of social, gender, environmental, economic and educational inequalities indicates that most private efforts in the space of school education<sup>14</sup>, higher education<sup>15</sup>, professional education<sup>16</sup> (including teacher education<sup>17</sup>) are not able to achieve the goal of quality equitable education for all, in a society that is highly stratified, and exclusionary with a high prevalence of poverty and inequality. The larger question of democracy and critical citizenship, understanding and sensitivity towards social and cultural diversity and care for the planet requires us to consider education as a public good. Research indicates that it is critical to strengthen the public system of education, reform underperforming government schools, appropriately regulate and incentivise private providers, engage with concerns of the teacher and their education, and explore and deepen the knowledge that is required to address intersecting inequalities, issues of diversity and social injustice (Batra et al., 2023; Kewalkar & Himanshu, 2023; Jayakumar et al., 2023; Mishra, 2023; Noronha & Choksi, 2023; Roy & Varghese 2023).

In this larger perspective and as argued above, existing education arrangements, the nature of provisioning and quality do not assist in realising sustainable futures and need to be fundamentally transformed. Select TESF India research demonstrates how education can play a critical intermediary role in facilitating interlinkages

between the multiple sustainable development goals and targets, such as quality education, reducing inequality, gender inequality, sustainable cities and communities and climate action (Anbuselvam, 2023; Tambe & Dyahadroy, 2023; Roy & Varghese, 2023; Vijitha et al., 2023). The question of knowledge(s), and the agency of teachers and citizens, in engaging with and shaping them, becomes central to the understanding of these interlinkages. For this reason, some of the epistemic frames within which much of education rests are revisited and re-examined (Anilkumar & Subair, 2023; Datta et al., 2023; Mathur et al., 2023; Mishra, 2023; Sawhney, 2023; Sunny, 2023).

Critical examples of education for sustainable development are found in some of the TESF India research that has focused on documenting interventions that address key issues of marginality and the minority question, glossing over identities and homogenisation of curriculum and pedagogy, and caste and gender-based discrimination and the forces that are often complicit in sustaining them.

## 13.1 Transformative pedagogies in higher education

A [TESF India project](#) maps two educational interventions in the civil society space to understand how their academic, administrative, and cultural designs foster social and ecological justice to offer pathways for collective reflection and learning. The study draws upon the theoretical frame of critical pedagogy to understand these interventions. Across the two sites, learning was seen as connected not just to learning scientific facts or developing perspectives but as a fundamental re-examination of how one relates to and lives in this world. Re-examining one's own journey and understanding connections between self and society is integral to what education means.

<sup>14</sup> See Khemani et al., 2023.  
<sup>16</sup> Shetty et al., 2023.

<sup>15</sup> See Tambe and Dyahadroy, 2023; Batra, 2021  
<sup>17</sup> TESF India-IHS.(2023). School and Teacher Education Atlas.



**“As a girl brought up in a rural agrarian community, I had completely bought into the restrictions placed on women. I thought this was the norm, and hardly questioned it ...”**

For more than a decade now, Baduku-Samvada and Visthar have striven to create meaningful and sustainable livelihood opportunities for young people, through an education that combines self-reflexivity, technical skills and an in-depth understanding of the social worlds we inhabit. Students are equipped to reflect upon and question social hierarchies of caste, class, gender, religion and region, while learning a repertoire of professional skills.

Both institutions offer learning spaces that affirm new ways of thinking, and re-learning how one relates to the social world. This often involves unlearning how one has been socialised. A faculty member at Baduku, a former student of Samvada, shared the following:

*“As a girl brought up in a rural agrarian community, I had completely bought into the restrictions placed on women. I thought this was the norm, and hardly questioned it ... it was through a course I pursued at Baduku that many of my fundamental beliefs about gender came to be questioned”* (Ravikumar et al., 2023, p. 32).

Everyday life struggles were an important part of the journey as a faculty member recalls. He shared that as an IT professional his views of the world were “formed in the crucible of conservative capitalism”. He had not questioned gender roles or hierarchies, and at first wondered if as a man, he could work as a “gender trainer” since most gender trainers he saw were women. Encouragement at Visthar for men to speak up for

gender equality along with facilitating gender training for over 15 years has fundamentally changed him, he shares. He remains deeply reflective of his own social positionality.

*“As a dominant class, dominant caste, cis-heterosexual, able-bodied male, I have been living with unearned privileges all my life. At times I worry if it is hypocritical of me to question and challenge patriarchy, class, caste, ableism when I have been an unquestioning beneficiary of this structure for more than half my life. Though I am far more conscious of these injustices now, there are patterns of behaviour that I replay which suggests that I have not been able to fully remove those ‘abuses’ of power. For example, my occasional expressions of anger, both within and outside the classroom, reflect the power I have not been able to let go”* (Ravikumar et al., 2023, p. 33).

Even as this educator is deeply sensitive and reflective about his own positionality, he writes about the difficult task as an educator to enable the privileged to understand and reflect on their privileges, but not shame them. This ability to respond sensitively to privileged learners requires that privileged educators find a way to acknowledge and accept, but also work with their privilege. A Visthar educator's reflections offer an important way forward:

*“I am trying not to abuse the power I have. This is a work in progress. I make mistakes. I can be open to criticism and recognise when I am abusing power. I have come to accept that I can never be fully rid of those marks of privilege. I can try to change myself, but it will never be enough. And that is okay”* (Ravikumar et al., 2023, p. 33).

Narratives reveal that working towards social justice is hard work. To build a more socially just world for all, classrooms catering to diverse students need to find a space for all voices, empathy and care for each other. The need for such care-work has been emphasised across Baduku and Visthar. This emphasis has been something that the institutions have arrived at, by realising the extent of mental health support youth require. The need to build resilience among young people, especially those from marginalised communities, has been emphasised across conversations. Individual narratives of both teachers and students reveal that an educational ecosystem that develops an understanding of connections between individual biographies and socio-political histories can be

empowering for young people. An education that enables the unlearning of privilege without shame is what “critical pedagogy” looks like in practice.

## 13.2 Transformative practices in teacher education

A [TESF project](#) examined the impact of a four-year integrated pre-service teacher education programme—the (BE)Ed. Using a socio-historical and policy frame, the project examined the personal and professional development of (BE)Ed graduates. Their lived experiences were captured through individual narratives of their journeys during the (BE)Ed, current work profiles and career trajectories. The aim was to understand the ways in which (BE)Ed graduates are able to cultivate, negotiate and exercise their intellectual agency as elementary school teachers working in highly hegemonic and structured school systems.

*“The most amazing thing about the programme, for me personally, was the ethos we followed as a team (teachers and students). Coming from a traditional government school, I had never tasted “freedom” in a system. Knowledge always came in the form of a textbook, and there was absolutely no scope to discuss what I thought. In this programme, I experienced “democracy”, “dialogue” “forming opinion”. I completely transformed as a person. From a person who hated books, to someone who knew all the books in the library, I transformed” (Sawhney, 2023, p. 11).*

*“I learnt to dialogue in (BE)Ed. I used this in work. We work with Muslim communities in Haridwar. I noticed that the interaction of teachers with the community was often prejudiced. I started dialoguing with them on this topic. During the (BE)Ed, I had learnt that to dialogue, you must first learn to listen. I would try not to get disturbed by their statements and first listen to them completely. Then I would share my position. I think I was able to make a change. Another area where I initiated change was when I asked male members of the staff to procure sanitary napkins for school as there seemed to be a cultural discomfort with procuring women’s articles. I was able to initiate some change in attitude over time.” (Gupta, 2023, p. 36).*

The narratives capturing the journeys of (BE)Ed alumni, as teachers, curriculum designers and teacher trainers reveal their efforts to play agentic roles within existing

institutional and policy constraints. They came across as individuals who are aware of their positions in the education hierarchy yet continue to exercise and negotiate their intellectual agency. They do not thoughtlessly comply and conform to institutional orders. As reflective and reflexive thinkers, they create a culture of possibilities within their classrooms. They do not perceive themselves as mere “subject teachers” but as mediators who scaffold learning amongst their students in meaningful and engaging ways. This is possible via pedagogical practice that provides them the space to retain their identities, self-worth, and presence in the classroom (Sawhney, 2023).

*“I understand teacher agency as having the freedom to make teaching decisions based on my students’ needs and context...Having agency means that I would have the freedom to refine my teaching goals, modify course material, and (re)design learning materials and assessment according to my students in that particular moment of time... a teacher should also have a say in the other domains of not any students’ needs but also her own, in terms of the basic infrastructure, ambience, rules and regulations and non-teaching domains which impact teaching-learning processes. Agency also comes with a lot of responsibility and taking it away also takes away the responsibility.”*

When asked to give examples of how they exercise their individual agency in highly structured and hegemonic school systems, they speak about creating spaces for dialogical processes, respecting experiences, and subjectivities of children. They also draw upon their (BE)Ed experiences of theatre, storytelling, and self-development in their own classrooms.

The (BE)Ed created a structural space for reading and studying children’s literature during preservice teacher preparation, enabling response-based language classrooms. Teacher educators shared stories of how they not only built libraries of children’s literature in their colleges, but also built a discourse around it. Fighting for space for children’s literature in traditional synthetic phonics classrooms has been challenging but rewarding.

The study highlights key teacher preparation processes that create a learning culture of critical dialogue and reflection. Central to this pedagogy, that seeks to turn the lens from the study of the “other” to the study of the “self”, are concerns for the self, wholeness, and healing.



**“I had to also talk about my queer feminism from that caste lens. We keep talking about ‘inclusion’ but hardly ever initiate discussions around gender and sexuality.”**

It is argued that these “self-development pedagogies” seek to disrupt the traditional classroom by creating intimacy that breaks the culture of silence, creating space for personalised voices of resistance, passion, emotion, inner quietness, stillness and interbeing.

*“For the longest time, I had never reclaimed my caste identity, which is Dalit. But I realised, this is very important for me, and to also talk about my queer feminism from that caste lens. We keep talking about “inclusion” but hardly ever initiate discussions around gender and sexuality. We look at it in binaries and ignore that “others” are as much a reality—transgenders, queer communities. Such discussions need to begin early-on in schools so that some of our children grow up to understand that it is “normal” to feel and be different” (Sawhney, 2023, p. 13).*

The work lives of the BEIEd alumni are seen from three frames — expression of resistance and agency in work life, including structural challenges to expression of agency and agency of taking collective political action.

A number of narratives refer to how engagement with gender, class, caste, religion, disability and other margins influenced their location and the nature of negotiations in familial and social spaces. Their time in the BEIEd gave them the opportunity to formulate their position on many social issues and forge their personal philosophies. In many instances, the BEIEd alumni used further education to ward off pressure to marry after graduation and were able to take a stand on the issue (Gupta, 2023).

*“In the workshops I realised that I walk with my eyes cast down, I do not observe the world as I walk and how much space do I claim? Even now where I stay, the space that boys claim is much more than girls...they wander all over. I started having arguments with my parents on issues like this during BEIEd. They said, “Since you have started going to college, you have started speaking a lot”. My brother was very fair and I was dark complexioned. Whoever came to my house said that it would have been good if the girl had been fair and the boy darker. I used to stay away from these people...It took me a long time to get out of this... It is possible that my motivation to study was to prove my ability...but now I know skin colour does not matter, I study because I want to” (Gupta, 2023, p. 20).*

They seemed to have a sense of wanting to change things around them, changed much but also struggled with the emotional wear and tear that was part of the process. Holding resistance and positivity together in a single stance seemed challenging and they seem to alternate between the two emotional states—compassionating and resisting.

*“We learnt to communicate and empathise with the other person, even if our perspectives were not similar. We do not have to put ourselves and others on the cross. If your view opposes mine, you are not my enemy, I can listen to you” (Gupta, 2023, p. 24).*

*“After BEIEd I think I realised my privilege as a person—a “normal” Hindu person from a certain caste” (Gupta, 2023, p. 26).*

Narratives highlight the need to foreground a “personal curriculum of the learners” and through its testing in the field of life, politics and ethics, arrive at a deeper understanding of their location in the world. Self-reflexivity makes for a keen understanding of the possibilities of one’s life, the capacity to make a choice and also take responsibility for it. This helped them to claim a sense of personhood in even difficult or humiliating contexts and negotiate for the freedom for self-expression. By their own account, the development of critical self-consciousness sometimes made their lives difficult but worthy.

Situated forms of agentic action and subtle forms of resistance offer hope as BEIEd graduates find ways of working around the dominant neo-liberal discourse which sees teachers merely as implementers of changing national policies in education. Alumni

narratives, which delve into the past and present stories of teaching, highlight the power of engaging with education in various contexts from teaching in different schools to becoming counsellors to going for higher education to interpreting policy in the development sector (Kalra, 2023).

Insights from this project reveal the subtle forms of resistance that teachers and teacher educators have repeatedly used to protect their professional spaces, to keep the integrity of their work and do their best to test demands for mechanically teaching.

In an action research TEF India project with pre-service schoolteachers, dialogue-based pedagogy was used to engage students with the hegemonic social structures that foster patriarchal values in everyday society. The intervention began with the premise that developing a gender-conscious space in the classroom is essentially a political act. For many students it was refreshing to experience a dialogical classroom. They felt that they were not forced to study; instead of being told, they were encouraged to express themselves and exchange views freely. One participant said,

*“Teachers usually talk about critical pedagogy, dialogue, Paulo Freire and all. But in the class they won’t even let us speak a word. But your approach was different. We were able to share our viewpoints openly...Instead of simply teaching you made us do a lot of activities to get us to*

*understand the concept. We felt that we came to form our opinions on this other than you telling us how things are”* (Anilkumar & Subair, 2023, p. 33).

Many experienced a significant change in the classroom environment after intense engagement during workshops. For instance, the group of men who were explicitly averse to engaging with women and often expressed hostility towards them, shared that listening to women participants helped them know their woman peers much better. One participant said,

*“When we were asked to talk about the problems of gender we face at home, and when I heard Rohita chechi (name changed) share the problems she faces at her husband’s family, that is when I realised she goes through so much to come to the class”* (Anilkumar & Subair, 2023, p. 31).

Watching and hearing women talk openly and confidently about menstruation helped in changing their perception about women. The intervention witnessed the emergence of empathy in students, seeing value in diverse perspectives and understanding the importance of giving space to others. One of the men who used to have serious conflicts with women classmates said that, *“Now I have the tendency to listen completely before responding. Even if I don’t like the person, I listen to them before pushing away (rejecting) what they are saying”* (Anilkumar & Subair, 2023, p. 30).





Students have now adopted the technique of dialogue to talk about the common problems they face in their institution. They give everyone a chance to talk, listen to each other carefully and encourage students who rarely speak in class to speak up. The intervention and assessment of its impact demonstrate possibilities of transformative pedagogies in cultivating gender consciousness among schoolteachers during pre-service programmes.

Nevertheless, several challenges came in the way of instituting dialogue-based pedagogies. Even though the intervention led to visible changes in the culture of the classroom and students were keen to engage deeper with gender concepts and issues, the larger institutional ethos and entrenched practices of rote learning and individualised assessment inhibited progress. Hence, the major question is: can gender workshops based on techniques of dialogue make a lasting impact, when all other subjects are taught through “telling” and the institutional ethos is one of conforming to, rather than challenging norms?

The study provides some evidence of shifts in the culture of the classroom and in the way students handled institutional challenges they faced. Participants displayed better unity, better communication, and a developing empathy for each other. A peer support system emerged as an important outcome of the dialogue framework. For instance, a dialogue ensued on the topic of imposition of the saree (a traditional Indian

dress for women) as a “uniform” for women students. The boys in class supported the women students' idea of not wearing sarees to the institute. All students took out a rally against the imposition of the saree, especially when teachers insisted that all women students should wear sarees. Since men and women students came together in resisting collectively, the teachers could not impose their will on them. This led to other institutional changes including providing space to students to express themselves and argue with reason against certain entrenched practices (Anilkumar & Subair, 2023)

### 13.3 Knowledge, curriculum and transformative practices in schools

A critical enquiry of school textbooks helped develop an authentic understanding of the alienation the marginalised face in school; and how co-producing interdisciplinary knowledge enables an interface between natural and social environments that forest-based communities have nurtured for millennium (Kawalker et al., 2023).

#### The Pitchandikulam Forest's Eco-Schools programme

bridges a significant gap in the current education system by connecting practice and theory through the act of practical ecology. Practical ecology includes the various actions one can take to contribute towards the health of the environment at the individual, population,



Practical ecology on the roof of a state school

community, ecosystem, and biosphere level. Initiating action grounds ecological knowledge by creating live feedback loops that validate information and helps take enquiry and active participation forward.

The process involves exploring how to set up a garden in schools, using the principles of practical ecology employed by the Pitchandikulam Forest during the process of restoration. Documentation of interventions with students and teachers demonstrate how formal education systems with state support, have the potential to mobilise capacity, individual and collective agency for tackling the effects of environmental degradation and climate change.

The Eco-Schools programme serves as a model of holistic environmental education, which can be customised for place-based education. The Garden Schools module engages students and teachers in creating gardens as learning spaces in schools. This helps develop an understanding of the dynamics of garden creation in schools using participatory methods that enable teachers to become part of decision-making. This enhances the teachers' ability to continue creating gardens beyond the scope of the project.

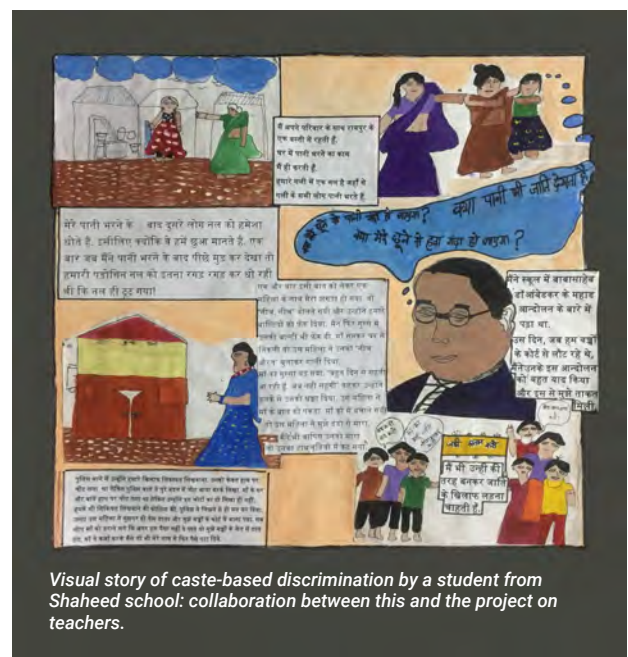
One of the visions of the organisation is to engage with as many diverse stakeholders as possible across different landscapes when providing practical ecology services. This required basic understanding of the many verticals that emerge when considering a given landscape. Hence, the exercise of developing a curriculum involved engaging with diverse stakeholders across different landscapes. A manual was also created to provide support to educators and teachers who are the key people to execute the programme. The manual will be accessible on the website so that it is available for non-commercial purposes (Anbuselvam, 2023).

While developing transformative modules on the topic of "water" for middle school students, a researcher demonstrates the use of systems thinking in engaging students with the scientific aspects of water knowledge, as well as how questions of water values, hierarchical, socio-cultural practices such as the caste system, are deeply implicated in the study of water.

Water is an excellent example for inter as well as transdisciplinary conversations and learning cutting across all disciplines. Education for sustainable development seeks to produce learning outcomes that include core competencies such as critical and

systematic thinking, collaborative decision-making and taking responsibility for the present and future generations. In concurrence with these objectives, the teaching plans developed and implemented under the Water Classrooms project integrate several aspects of critical thinking and collaborative learning in the pedagogical framework. The teaching plans are interdisciplinary, including physical and scientific aspects of water as well as social relations around access to water such as gender, caste, and power structures. They are student-centred and inquiry-based; use visual, interactive and experiential learning as well as provide learners with the space to reflect on their experiences. While encouraging students to view the world around them, they facilitate them to problematise environmental concerns and engage in informed and multidimensional problem-solving. The understanding of water is developed via local as well as a global perspective. Water modules were designed to provide a platform to promote empathy building and a culture of dialogue amongst learners (Mathur et al., 2023).

The study reveals that inculcation of various skills, perspectives and reflexivity developed via interdisciplinary water modules, enabled learners to engage with interconnected global and local water challenges including climate change, environmental degradation, loss of biodiversity, poverty and inequality. Interdisciplinary frames can also help close the knowledge-action gap towards sustainable futures through education.





## RE-IMAGINING EDUCATION FOR INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Keystone Foundation is a not-for-profit registered trust established in 1994, with the vision of working with indigenous hill communities in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve (NBR). The Foundation bases its efforts on the understanding that conservation of natural resources and human development are intrinsically interlinked. Through eco-development initiatives that focus on livelihoods and ecology as an integral whole, the organisation contributes to the well-being of both communities and the environment simultaneously. Over a quarter century, Keystone's projects have spanned the three states of the NBR, with communities across 150 villages. The organisation learns from and works with pastoralist *Todas*, artisan *Kotas*, hunter-gatherer *Kurumbas* and *Nayakas*, agriculturist *Irulas* and *Soligas*, all of whom make up the unique sociocultural diversity of the Reserve.

Education from the field is a prime means by which the Foundation tries to build capacity and empower local youth towards conservation. To this end, Keystone works with schools on nature education programmes and climate change curriculum to encourage youth to become conservation leaders. The Nilgiris Field Learning Centre (NFLC) is a partnership between Keystone Foundation and Cornell University where half a dozen Cornell undergraduates and the same number of Adivasi youth are brought together to engage and learn from each other, each year. Through this education programme, Keystone has had the opportunity to develop curricula based on learning from the biosphere, mentor students in community-engaged research projects, and learn how to blur traditional boundaries and advance an encompassing, integrated approach to conservation of people and nature.

The first phase of the course is classroom-based with a curriculum curated to examine the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve: grasslands, wetlands, wildlife, shelter, food gathering techniques. Learning is based on observation. Cornell students bring strong analytical skills and

**“ This large capacity to serve their students’ needs is a testament to the alternative model of education ...”**

theoretical knowledge to this exchange, while Adivasi youth bring nuances drawn from their lived experience of ecology and culture, making connections to their local language, water, resources and livelihood. In the second phase of the course, Cornell students live in villages with Adivasi youth as their teachers. Students are required to undertake specific projects on water and waste, agriculture, wildlife, community wellness and health and environmental governance. Indigenous alumni of the programme have continued to work on various projects within Keystone, some have gained employment in the local Forest Department, and many have gone back to pursue the academic programmes they had dropped out of.

The Vishwa Bharati Vidyodaya Trust (VBVT) is a community-driven organisation that works with the four Adivasi communities of Gudalur, in the Nilgiris, on issues related to their education and identity. In 1995, a *mahasabha* (a large meeting) consisting of 200 Adivasi leaders called for a culturally appropriate and nurturing learning system. In response, VBVT set up a school with a mission to recognise and value Adivasi culture and languages. Over the years, the community has faced a multitude of issues related to the education of their children, varying from low enrolment to the lack of inclusive learning spaces.

Over the last 25 years, VBVT has been working on establishing culturally appropriate and relevant learning systems for Adivasi children, with the active participation of the community. The Vidyodaya school establishes strong basic learning foundations for the children of Adivasi communities. This learning experience not only includes knowledge development, but also the skills to learn, build self-confidence and good character, and set goals in life. Students take charge of their own experiences, expressing their wants and needs. Teachers are key to forming this safe space for students based on strong positive relationships, where students can share anything, and teachers listen and then act on these thoughts and ideas. With rigorous training, teachers at Vidyodaya, many of whom are members of local tribal communities themselves, understand the backgrounds of students and the cultural, social, economic, and ecological contexts within which they teach their classes, allowing for deeper connection with students.

The school also invites parents to come to school whenever they want to participate in classes: telling stories, playing music, observing lessons and more. This community input within the classroom values the “informal” learning, placing these experiences at par with the formal curriculum structures for knowledge exchange, skill development, confidence in Adivasi culture, and goal setting. Outside of the classroom, the Trust puts much effort into outreach and follow-up support for students within their own communities. The staff visit villages, meet parents, conduct after school activities at village learning centres, and check-in with students on many aspects of their lives to ensure

barriers do not stand in the way of their education as much as possible. The Vidyodaya Trust strives to keep students in school and support them throughout their development to pursue higher studies and go on to work on jobs they enjoy and have a good life.

Vidyodaya also works within the system to introduce alternative approaches to hiring teachers and creating a welcoming and accepting environment for Adivasi students at the local government school. All teachers are non-tribal, but Vidyodaya's strong relationship with the government school has ushered in a cohort of culturally sensitive government educators who invest time and energy into building loving and trusting relationships with their students. During the coronavirus pandemic, these teachers visited the villages where their students live to meet parents and develop a better understanding of the children's backgrounds. This large capacity to serve their students' needs is a testament to the alternative model of education that Vidyodaya spreads both through the Trust's own institution and within the local government school.

Hence, community-driven schools can function as model schools, which can concretise the community's vision of education for the government. There is potential for government schools to create a space where it actively listens to the community members and designs spaces and policies for Adivasi education based on what they hear and understand from the people. For instance, endowing members of the community with decision-making power in Government Tribal Residential (GTR) schools is a substantial change in the direction of greater inclusion and equality.



Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, Tamil Nadu



## THEATRE AND OTHER CRITICAL WAYS OF ENGAGING, KNOWING AND RESEARCHING

Projects that focus on theatre and the arts as counter-imaginaries of pedagogies that maintain status quo help surface conflicts and dilemmas in a manner that allows participants to speak of their vulnerabilities in a safe space, learn to self-reflect, empathise and question hierarchies of power. [Research](#) demonstrates how education can be re-imagined using diverse ways of knowing such as theatre and the arts. Different ways of knowing enables bridging gaps between head, heart, and the hand; between theory and practice; and between knowledge and action.

Concerted workshops using theatre of the oppressed techniques and embodied therapeutic practices, enabled a group of young women<sup>17</sup> to connect to some of the most oppressed and vulnerable parts of their selves, listen to these parts within, and view the world from the perspective of these reclaimed parts of self. This brought in a huge shift in perspectives and realities.

Creating spaces to listen to the oppressed or shackled parts of the self at a personal and collective level, creates an awareness of the limiting nature of structures and systems that one is part of, with the potential to shake things up. As a result, participants also began to raise questions about funding, financial accountability, and a sudden change in fee repayment policies that the organisation (*Sanjhe Sapne*) was putting in place.

What earlier seemed like suppressed voices, transformed into perspectives grounded in resilience, critical thought, and agency. Political theatre and radical self-care, it is argued is an embodiment of social change—a process of becoming able to witness things the way they are and acting from that space of clarity and wisdom (Vishwanath, 2023).

Weaving together political theatre and embodied therapeutic practices was seen to have an alchemical effect. Testimonies of the participants reveal that creating spaces for play, rest, rejuvenation, and self-care is a political act. It is a demonstration of radical love for ourselves, our communities, the earth, and all her beings. Embodied or body-based practices are, it is argued, the simplest and powerful way to connect with nature.

The real question is do we risk such “education”? An education that breathes through, moves through and dismantles structural discrimination and hierarchy? An education that will not reproduce generations that are led by fear and continue to pay obeisance to agents of discrimination within and without? Do we dare to sign up for an education that paves the path for a world that is equitable and just?

This intervention project highlights the urgency to create spaces in which such processes can breathe, make their potential felt, and reverberate in the hearts and at the cellular level of social workers, educators and community level practitioners—as they are capable of evoking transformation at a structural level, shifting power dynamics, and paving new paths and ways of being (Vishwanath, 2023).

Apart from demonstrating a direct and critical impact on all women participants, this intervention rippled change across several dimensions and realms of these beings<sup>18</sup>. It leaves behind a strong legacy through the short-term plans articulated by *Kalaa Dhari*<sup>19</sup> committed to creating more spaces to decentralise well-being and political transformation and co-creating networks.

<sup>18</sup> These young women from different parts of the country were being trained in an organisation called *Sanjhe Sapne* to become educators and development workers

<sup>19</sup> The project has produced a video playlist to reach out to teacher, educator, activist, and social worker networks to encourage the viewer to experiment with theatre, art, and well-being practices in their own communities. See *Kalaa Dhari*. (2022). *Theatre of the oppressed & embodied therapeutic practices*

[YouTube. https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLGSuldDzXEniSSJP3RkD0AFW8PKjeTJIQ](https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLGSuldDzXEniSSJP3RkD0AFW8PKjeTJIQ)

<sup>20</sup> *Kalaa Dhari* is an organisation founded by the PI during the course of this project. It works around Womb Centred practice, Comprehensive Resource Model based trauma healing and therapy, and Theatre of the Oppressed workshops

Another project set out to map the idea of agency and its relationship to transformation. Using the lens of theatre and the performing arts, this project explored the diverse perspectives and challenges that shape the experiences of those who are excluded or marginalised in the education system, and through these perspectives and challenges, aimed to better understand the idea and praxis of agency. Findings highlight that performance can foster social imagination and aid in understanding how social structures and forces shape our lives and identities.

The use of theatre and performing arts helped both educators and students to unravel the pedagogies of oppression—the ways in which education reproduces existing power relations and hierarchies in society. It creates educational processes that interweave the intrapersonal with the social. It opens spaces to question and challenge the status quo without posing threats to identities. This process can be truly transformative. Narratives indicate that performance as pedagogy can contribute to an awareness of one's own values, beliefs, and actions, and how they affect oneself and others, as well as promote a culture of dialogue, respect, and inclusion in the classroom (Arora & Gamat, 2023).

The research study undertaken with first-generation learners from families who work in stigmatised occupations, analysed the struggles of the youth. The study was also framed as a pedagogic space for select students of the Department of Women's Studies at Pune

**“The use of theatre and performing arts helped both educators and students to unravel the pedagogies of oppression—the ways in which education reproduces existing power relations and hierarchies in society.”**

University, who were involved in the research process. Most of these students and researchers came from privileged backgrounds. The pedagogic process involved preparing students for research, exposing them to grounded knowledge on the theme via talks by activists and scholars; collecting data along with researchers, as observers, interviewers, writing field notes; and participating in debriefing and reflective meetings (Tambe & Dyahadroy, 2023).



*Savouring the thrill of the inner revolution*



The involvement of students in this research led the project leads to engage with pedagogies that proved to be transformative. Several insights emerged from this experience. A key aspect was developing critical empathy. The pedagogic engagement revealed three moments of developing critical empathy, beginning with the premise that “empathy is not just about attempting to ‘know’ or ‘feel’ how another feels...but about seeking to understand the structures of feeling and the feelings of structure that produce and mediate us differentially as subjects and communities who feel...” (Pedwell, 2012, p. 294).

Critical empathy involves complex processes of confrontation, conflict and negotiation, and solidarity. It also involves feelings of shame, a difficult emotion to experience and navigate, but which has transformative potential (Tambe & Dyahadroy, 2023). Rege (2014) underlines the significance of critical empathy for not making caste a burden of Dalit women alone. Both Rege and Pedwell ask for “recognizing oneself as implicated in the social forces, that create the climate of obstacles the other must confront”. They urge for dialogic engagement and self-reflexivity on the terms set by the marginalised when they place the burden of empathy on the privileged. This is reflective in the responses of the privileged library educators for whom learning more about caste resulted in denial, guilt, and false empathy—all of which served as barriers to change but were transformed into opportunities for critical self-reflection (Noronha & Choksi, 2023).

In the first two debrief meetings students expressed overwhelming guilt about researching the marginalised, about “exploiting” them by taking their time and encroaching their privacy. The feeling of guilt was expressed through anger and a sense of betrayal for sending them “unprepared” to the field. The reflexive discussions enabled the project leads to understand their sense of guilt about their privilege, as against largely an absence of guilt in the everyday of neo-liberal times.

Collating and listening to life narratives, confronting, and reflecting on guilt and empathy during critical discussions led to a major shift in the students' affective and intellectual understanding. They could make sense of their own worlds in comparison to the worlds of these first-generation learners. They were intrigued by the sense of immense pride, achievement, and hope

with which first-generation learners told stories of their educational struggles, the social order entrenched in material inequalities, their sense of obligation to their parents, their perspective on education in terms of dignity and aspirations, and the instrumentality (via employability) for moving away from their parents' stigmatised occupations.

Cultivating empathy meant learning not only to read lives and world views of others, the meanings that others give to their actions, but to also refrain from projecting one's own interpretations on the actions of others.

The journey of developing critical empathy involved confrontation, reflection, and visceral knowing. This was possible because of critical engagement with debates on feminist reflexivity, politics of field work and experience; because of regular dialogue that informal worker organisations had with the urban youth on questions of education and dignity. This pedagogic engagement was an exploration and a concrete manifestation of Ambedkarite ideas of *pradnya* (critical thinking), *karuna* (empathy) and *samata* (equality), which are argued to be central to transformative practices.



Theatre and art in education for young women

# THE URBAN, EDUCATION AND SUSTAINABILITY

Developing sustainable cities demands addressing the specific challenges of universal access to water and sanitation, energy, health and food security, infrastructure and protecting the urban and regional environment. Cities, to become sustainable, will also require an education system that is committed to social and economic transformation, enabled through local empowerment and implementation of other dimensions of sustainable development in urban areas.

Yet, in India, this wider sustainability and linked education for sustainable development (ESD) goals are under considerable pressure from employment-led educational aspirations in professional education. This is exacerbated by processes that effectively limit access, in both school and higher education systems, to relevant knowledge in the name of quality and merit and prioritise market-facing skills in the formal sector in a country where over 80 per cent of the urban livelihoods are in the informal sector. Hence, much of the education for and in urban areas is either instrumental or irrelevant to the needs of everyday life of ordinary citizens.

## 16.1 Problematizing education in and for the urban

Education has historically played a key role in reproducing economic and social inequality in Indian cities. It has helped exacerbate spatial inequality in cities by constraining universal access to quality education, in spite of a commitment to the Right to Education. Urban India, as the locus of these contradictions and contests has thus become an important site to study the reproduction of inequality, informality, and hierarchy via school and higher education.

Two TESI India projects interrogate these questions in very different contexts. The first within the margins of the national capital Delhi, one of the largest mega-urban

regions of the world. The second, in cities along the north-eastern peripheries of India.

The first project explores the role that educational processes at the margins of the city play in maintaining their subservient status vis-à-vis the “city” and how alternative knowledges can be generated to aid transformation in these spaces (Rajan et al., 2023). It does this via an ethnographic study of the functioning and experience of the state in the *basti*<sup>20</sup>; its influence on the life experiences of *basti* children and communities, and how it affects their lives through the exercise of power, and sometimes violence.

The project shows how the intersectionality of caste, class, religion, gender and language and spatial inequality has a direct impact on the education of children at the urban margins. The experience of informality and illegality of the *basti* often denies them identity, recognition and dignity and status. The school is also an active site where multiple forms of exclusion are practised. The learnt experience of the *basti* child, is often that education is not the pathway to economic or social mobility or her claim to the “right to the city”.

The second project explores the urban challenges of India's north-eastern states, critically examining the conceptualisation of “sustainable cities by higher education and capacity building institutions” (Mehzabeen, 2023).

The urbanisation of India's north-eastern states is complex, small town-driven and poorly understood, because of a mixture of borderland peripheralisation, geopolitics, significant ethnic and cultural diversity, and inadequate state responses to urbanisation. These cities and towns typically concentrate poverty, inequality, scarcity of land, poor basic services and limited mobility, inappropriate governance arrangements and little sensitivity towards the environment.





*Cultivating hope: Urban food systems*



A review of higher education programmes in public universities in the region (and those outside the region working on north-eastern studies) shows that there is a serious gap in research and knowledge on urban, environmental and climate questions. Sustainable development is emerging as a theme in some regional universities, but the perceived low level of urbanisation in key states (except Mizoram) implies that there is no real demand for an education programme on sustainable cities. This is also a reason that there is not a single urban planning education institution in the region.

## 16.2 Interface of education with urban sustainability

Two TESI India projects provide insights into the contribution that education can make to the potential for greater urban sustainability. Both are located out of the city of Pune, one working on water systems and the other on urban farms and food systems, with the potential for cross-learning on these two crucial themes.

[The first project explores the potential of local urban food systems](#) to promote socio-cultural and ecological sustainability (Dutta & Hazra, 2023). The project co-created knowledge across academic institutions, civil society organisations and individuals leading to the production of an illustrated handbook on *Cultivating Hope: Exploring Food Growing Possibilities in Indian Cities*. The handbook touches on a range of urban farming processes from composting and saving seeds to watering, mulching and harvesting.

The project recognises that “food is a fundamental aspect of our everyday life, with deep connections to sustainability and social justice” (Dutta & Hazra, 2023, p. 3). It problematises the current ecological crisis and the “wicked problem” of climate change and unsustainable food systems as linked to the convergence of conventional industrial food systems and unsustainable urban development.

The handbook can help citizens, communities and city administrations reimagine sustainable food systems in cities. Aware that there are institutional barriers to expanding the practice of urban farming, the project also created a policy brief to address the needs of policymakers.

The project created “actionable knowledge” resources for urban residents to contribute to establishing sustainable food systems. It also confirmed the value of experiential learning and acquiring the skills to practice sustainable farming linked to expanded notions of sustainability, labour, care and community engagement that sit at the heart of the implementation of sustainability (Dutta & Hazra, 2023).

[The second project on developing water classrooms](#) explores multiple dimensions of urban water systems in the city of Pune - from traditional stepwells and reservoirs, and colonial water supply systems to the everyday challenges of water shortage, access, pollution and flooding that the city currently faces, which are core targets of SDG6 on clean water and sanitation.

This work comes from the Living Waters Museum (LWM) and the Centre for Water Research (CWR) at the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISER) Pune, one of India's leading higher education institutions focussed on the sciences. It touches on key themes of urban sustainability using water as an organising principle from source sustainability and improving water, sanitation and health (WASH) linkages to the multiple values that diverse communities and end-users attribute to water (Mathur et al., 2023).

The project uses water classrooms as a transformation pedagogic practice to help middle school students imagine just, resilient and equitable water futures, using simple techniques like estimating their own water use and physical and virtual water footprints. It uses a range of teaching modules to explore questions of water sustainability from personal use and local choices to global concerns. This curriculum was co-created with urban water experts, grassroot organisations, educators and scholars by challenging reductionist notions of thematic knowledge and shows how a meaningful interface can be built between practitioners, community-based organisations, higher education institutions and educators to touch on a key theme that relates to the everyday life of students.

The project also used cross-disciplinary systems thinking to engage students with the social dimensions of water and their relationship with questions of hierarchy, caste and water values. Based on feedback from the TESI process, a water privilege game was



created that helped students identify unequal access to water by different social groups in society and explore “water-actions” to facilitate more equitable access. This enabled them to engage with a range of social, economic and ecological dimensions of education for sustainability. This provided impetus to close a serious gap in contemporary school textbooks which look at water as only a physical and natural phenomenon, with few social or cultural attributes.

The limited collaboration between TEF India food and water projects illustrates the potential to join multiple dimensions of SDG localisation, as water, food and waste are closely linked to each other, especially when facilitated by a more circular economy.

In a different geographical and ecological context, the Auroville Foundation through its Pitchandikulam Forest (PF) programme has used its five-decade long experience of forest and ecosystem restoration to create an Eco-Schools programme in Tamil Nadu, largely situated in urban areas in and around the megacity of Chennai. The programme helps teachers and students transform school campuses into ecologically rich environments to establish a base for holistic environmental education. It does this through tree plantation, establishing vegetable gardens, seed forests and improved waste management in schools to enable hands-on learning for a set of student Eco-Stewards in each school. This has helped students develop sustainable livelihood skills and an understanding of potential climate actions that can be taken in their context.

A research team helped design and test a curriculum for these Eco-Schools, develop a manual on creating school gardens in diverse ecological contexts and a teacher training programme to assist in the future scale-up of the Eco-Schools programme across various bioregions of Tamil Nadu (Anbuselvam, 2023). This could establish a practical connection between education for sustainable development and local practices of biodiversity conservation, climate action and providing safe and inclusive green spaces in sustainable cities.

Reflections on the Anthropocene and climate change are still in their early stages in India and clearly need more attention in education and public discourse. As an early innovator in this space, Science Gallery Bengaluru, as part of their TEF India project, organised a month-long

residential Summer School on Carbon with scholars, artists and young participants from urban areas (Phalkey & Kamak, 2023). Five Open Courseware modules were developed. The project tested the effectiveness of interdisciplinary learning that links research, teaching, and public engagement to transform perceptions and actions on climate change, attempting to link Climate Action with education for sustainability. It also identified the lack of interdisciplinary learning resources on climate as a serious challenge for educators.

## 16.3 Addressing questions of urban sustainability in education

Two TEF India projects based out of the megacity of Mumbai provide insights into the challenges that formal and supplementary programmes face when addressing questions of urban sustainability, especially when it comes to the scale of operating in Indian cities.

[The first project critically examines the system of professional architectural education in India](#), its curriculum, pedagogy, professional certification and practice and their collective contribution towards improving spatial justice in the built environment and construction practice (Shetty & Gupte, 2023).

The project tests the hypothesis that trained architects are unable to engage with the building needs for India’s rapidly growing population, despite quintupling capacity over the last decade and graduating over 25,000 architects a year from about 400 departments and schools of architecture in the country. In addition, the quality of much of the built environment created by architects for the poor and vulnerable often add to spatial inequality.

The counterfactual that it tests is that the agents who actually build 95 per cent of the buildings in the country (i.e. small contractors, artisans, households and communities) have limited disciplinary and professional training, even though much can be learnt from their knowledge and innovative practices. This results in poor quality of the built environment in most of India’s expanding cities, especially in the informal settlements.

The research concludes rather dismally that in spite of the large professional education ecosystem for architecture that consists of a governing Act, National

Council of Architecture, large higher educational establishment of over 400 institutions, thousands of architectural offices and many journals—structural constraints make it difficult to change the direction of conventional construction towards building more sustainable cities and communities.

This is also a crisis of educational regulation, with a dramatic shift from state-led education pre-liberalisation to a shift to state and private institutions from 1990–2010, and an explosion of poor quality private educational institutions post 2010, leading to a glut in supply and poor wages for most young architects. There is also a serious curriculum challenge, with primary focus on technical education around design, building sciences and professional education with less than 10 per cent of the delivery time dedicated to the humanities and little or no engagement with the social or sustainability sciences in the formal curriculum. What is actually taught, is often much worse—which speaks to the challenge of building a future bridge towards education for sustainability within this sector. Given that less than 20 per cent of these educational institutions had any engagement with research underlines the additional challenge of shifting the knowledge base and the capacities of the faculties at many of these institutions.

The project identifies a set of policy, curricular and pedagogic propositions that would help ameliorate the current situation of architectural education in India. The greater challenge is to engage, support and help transform the informal sector that does most of the building in the country.

[The second project based out of PUKAR](#) in Mumbai seeks to address the question of whether a reciprocal relationship between education and urban sustainability could be established. And, if so, what would it look like in the context of a city like Mumbai where there is stark reproduction of inequality and unsustainable practices in everyday life?

The project examines the impact and effectiveness of an NGO-led Youth Fellowship (YF) programme as a supplementary education programme. It asks if the YF helps bypass the structural limitations of the education system (as identified in architectural education projects) to help urbanise sustainably by “making research accessible to marginalised youth and equipping learners

with the agency to respond to how cities are changing, participate in knowledge production and nurture relationships with residents across gender, caste, religion, class and sexuality” (Ambekar et al., 2023).

The YF started as an NGO programme focused on drawing in youth from marginalised social backgrounds, but has been accredited since 2018 as a diploma programme at the Centre for Lifelong Learning, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, a reputed higher education institution. The alumni of the programme “Barefoot Researchers” (BRs) “use the city itself as a learning lab to build new knowledge without the intermediary of a formal structure of learning that tends to otherwise distance them from their contexts... enabling them to reflect upon themselves, challenge the prevalent wisdom to make arguments about their future and become problem-solvers for the future of their cities” Patil-Deshmukh et al., 2016, p. 198).

The research shows that BRs have been able to build the confidence to challenge the dominance of male, English-speaking and upper-caste researchers, which is a significant achievement as most are Muslim, Dalit, Adivasi women, who are working-class or poor residents of the city's informal settlements. It also found that “understanding, valuing and critically reflecting on lived experiences was vital”. This was operationalised through activities, practice, discussion, and encouraging whole-body learning. There are a range of open questions about post-fellowship trajectories of the BRs and their need for decent work, social mobility and what kinds of “action” they can usefully be engaged in.

Findings of BRs focus on urban themes as diverse as education dropouts in informal settlements, non-functioning of toilets, child marriage and the practice of triple talaq. As an example, a research project that touches on key questions of urban sustainability examines why a local river is highly polluted and regularly floods, who is responsible for this and what actions can be taken to address this. This programme is ripe with potential, yet little has been taken from the realm of research to community-led action. One way to enable this would be to give visibility to the research undertaken by BRs and to ensure that these become case study materials for those studying urban planning and city design. Another way would be to harness the capacities and knowledge of YF graduates by institutionalising ideas that are community-driven.



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## CONCLUSION

**The projects of TESF India reveal a complex and dynamic picture of a range of inequalities in the country.**

The projects of TESF India reveal a complex and dynamic picture of a range of inequalities in the country. A nuanced understanding of individuals and communities on the margins has revealed the impermeability of formal education spaces and structures in altering equations of hierarchy and power. Structural inequalities are often glossed over and are seen to camouflage the magnitude of the problem of sustaining and reinforcing these in and through education. The projects capture how a range of structures, implicit and explicit processes prevailing in Indian society over generations have favoured the privileged and are intensified by India's "economic growth and development story". Research and interventions have brought to the surface some of the ways in which oppressive and unequal structures have deepened inequalities, in particular, over the last three decades.

India's contemporary education system serves the interest of the free market and thus accords priority to developing specific skills over human capacities to relate, cohere and be just. This has limited human agency. For instance, in privileging universal, decontextualised knowledge, curriculum tend to undermine and invisibilise knowledge systems that are rooted in diverse social contexts and communities. Such knowledge leads to an education system that excludes and disempowers. Hence, the key question that has been glossed over in India since colonial times is the question of addressing inequality in and through education.

Researchers at TESF India, through studies such as those that examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Batra et al., 2021), have gained a more nuanced understanding of various inequalities and the manner in which these are sustained in and through education. For instance, field evidence highlights the compelling need to weave caste into a structural analysis of schoolteachers' labour. This would serve two purposes: to uncover hierarchies within the educational workforce with caste-class locations; and to unravel how experience and skill are understood with respect to teaching and how teachers work comes to be (de)valued within the intersectional frames of western formulations of professionalism, caste-Hindu notions of seva, and Brahminical notions of ideal womanhood.

Some of the key insights that inform the work of educating Adivasi children include the following: curriculum needs to be relevant to indigenous contexts,

including language, culture, knowledge, and history. The longer first languages are used in the classroom, the larger the benefits to students' learning foundations. Indigenous-centred education must focus on revitalising traditional language and culture with the participation of Indigenous communities. Educators who come from non-Adivasi communities need to recognise, re-evaluate, and alter the epistemic, ontological, and pedagogical contexts and assumptions they bring into their teaching.

Alternative systems that operate within state structures, such as schools run by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs have the flexibility to cater directly to Indigenous groups and can hold influencing power both as an example for other models and within formal education structures. Tribal communities must become part of conversations that concern their children's education and their future. Higher education institutions need safe spaces dedicated for Indigenous students to validate and promote their work, foster surrogate campus communities away from home, and provide institutional support services.

Research indicates that the location, planning, design, and operation of educational institutions are key to contributing to environmentally and socially just,

sustainable cities and communities. Some of the critical focus of TESF India research is on how to bridge gaps between capacities, knowledges and skills that liberal and professional education impart and the sensibilities, dispositions and agency required to achieve sustainable livelihoods, mitigate climate change and adapt to its effects, and support sustainable cities, communities and socially just societies.

Research demonstrates that social and environmental justice issues are closely intertwined, yet they are often perceived as disconnected from each other. This raises questions about the seriousness of policymakers and environmentalists in addressing either concern. For example, projects such as the Satpura Tiger Reserve, which aims to protect the environment and its wildlife, could come at a significant cost to the local Adivasi communities who have been living in the surrounding forests, rivers, and hills for generations. These projects have the potential to disrupt their lives and livelihoods.

Projects have attempted to understand how diverse cultures offer diverse means of education and pedagogic approaches that are transformative and emancipatory, across a range and domains of education levels, namely school and teacher education, higher and professional



*Field visit to Gudalur by the Bristol team*



education. For instance, theatre and the arts help surface conflicts and dilemmas in a manner that allows participants to speak of their vulnerabilities in a safe space, learn to self-reflect, empathise and question hierarchies of power. Here, vulnerability becomes an entry point for transformative pedagogies. Pedagogies that seek to turn the lens from the study of the “other” to the study of the “self”, seek to break the culture of silence, creating space for personalised voices of resistance, passion and inner reflection.

Interventions also highlight that adopting egalitarian and dialogical methods of learning to “include” the marginalised is only part of the transformative journey. Pedagogies that enable “privileged” educators to find ways to acknowledge and accept their role in sustaining caste-based, gender and other social inequalities is equally critical. Narratives suggest that learning more about caste among the privileged can result in denial, guilt, and shame. All of these could create barriers to change, unless pedagogies enable the “unlearning of privilege without shame”. This involves developing “critical empathy” and an “ethics of care”. The journey of developing “critical empathy” is

found to involve confrontation, reflection, and visceral knowing. Engagement with gender, class, caste, religion, disability and other margins influence the location where privileged learners come from and the nature of negotiations in familial and social spaces.

TESF views education as the most critical agency for a sustainable society; for a society rooted in the ideas of equality, liberty, justice and fraternity. In keeping with resistance theories and critical pedagogies, education has the potential to challenge social inequalities, critique and resist established norms, and facilitate social transformation to create an environmentally and socially just world. The deliberative and political aims of education have been at the centre of anti-caste and anti-colonial struggles in India since the early twentieth century. The current political climate in India prompts us to revisit these political philosophies as sites of education are being morphed into battlefields of competing ideologies that coerce people to adopt homogenous identities based on religion, thereby threatening the multi-layered plural social fabric that has characterised the Indian people for millennia.







Learning environment that engages children



Learning environment that engages children



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## APPENDIX A

Map of India indicating the TESF India research project sites, cross cutting themes and participants.

