

Decolonising Education: Rethinking Early Childhood Education in Indigenous Spaces

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Abstract

This paper attempts to understand and rethink Early Childhood Education from the context of the life world and the worldview of rural and indigenous communities. It is an attempt to contextualise (and in the process indigenize and decolonize) the developmental and learning goals of pre-schoolers in two Open Learning Centres in two villages in Chhattisgarh in central India. Modern and urban understandings (which are also westernized understandings) of child development and child education continue to colonize the culture of existing pre-schools. This necessitated the creation of a space – Open Learning Centres called *Srijan-Shala* (Abode of Creativity) – where early childhood education shall be in tune with the indigenous life world and worldview. There is a stress in *Srijan-Shalas* on points of dialogue and possible commonality between the apparently “traditional” and the purportedly “modern”. This paper is a rigorous documentation of an attempt at building such a space and our journey through the painstaking process of training teachers in the ethos of a democratic classroom (where learning, playing and questioning are co-constitutive), creating indigenized decolonized curriculum and lessons, and birthing pedagogic practices and innovations that are caring. Women of the same village – who have received education and are the founders of Chinhari – teach in their respective *Srinjan-Shalas*, sharing their know-how of their own environment, cultural practices and traditions in a form of caring collective. The paper critically reflects on the birth and the sustainability of the idea of decolonized early childhood education in rural and indigenous contexts and communities.

Keywords: decolonisation, indigenous curriculum, Hamar Srijan Shala, early childhood education, community-based learning

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Introduction

This paper is a reflection on the process of setting up two *Srinjan Shalas* (translated as “Abode of Creativity” in English) in two villages (Mardapoti and Dokal) in the Dhamtari district of Chhattisgarh in India. The Srijan Shala works with children in the age group of 3 to 8. This does not reflect the typical age group of children under the purview of Early Childhood Education (ECE) which is 0 to 6 years. Though this age range is different from the perceived age bracket of children in the context of ECE, this was perhaps the first stepping stone towards our attempt to reimagine ECE in this particular space. The urge to set up the Srijan Shalas were three-fold: (a) access to quality education, (b) access to indigenised curriculum and (c) creation of democratic *class-spaces* (not class-rooms) for active, experiential and immersive learnings. The paper is divided into several sections. We begin with the question of Context and background – the larger background of early childhood education and the background of Chinhari in rural, forest contexts.

Context of Setting up ECE

Absence of quality school education in the villages, especially for younger children who did not have the capacity to move further from their home, served as the primary incentive to initiate questions and efforts around a possible Srijan Shala. The focus of ECE has shifted in many of the preschools in the urban spaces. From being a space for exploration, where a child constructs her own knowledge through her interaction with the world – human, animal, plant, non-human, divine, preschools have taken up the mantle of making them “school ready” and eventually ready for merely the job market (like teaching coding and robotics in ECE, including public speaking, speech and drama). “Under the impact of intense urbanization, children became a natural resource to be moulded by schools and fed into the industrial machine” (Illich, 2021, p. 86). The changing role of ECE was also a question we attempted to reflect upon in tandem with the ideas of “children as active learners”, “experiential learning opportunities” and “scaffolding”. The idea of ECE, to be carried out in specific places, (kindergartens and pre-schools), under trained individuals (EC Educators) was perhaps necessitated by the society where it emerged as practice and field of study. The role of the community in the life of an indigenous child needs to be considered when their early years are explored. The child grows up within the community, being a part of it. The community is the totality of the many worlds – human, animal, plant and the divine. The community deeply immersed in its traditional roots and yet standing on the threshold of modernity.

The Idea of Education

Homogenisation

Of all conflicts in the field of education, that between Imagination and Discipline is the most bitter and prolonged. (Tagore, 1961, p. 22)

Education in today’s context has been rendered synonymous with instructions and discipline. Dished out under the vigilant supervision of curriculum, administration, teachers and assessments, in tandem with an institution, it is always delivered. To ones who are assumed to know no better. They are conceived in the mind and boardrooms of people whose life and world view could be in complete or partial contradiction to the ones it is being framed for. Perhaps, it hence goes unnoticed that it is most often a “one size fits all” kind of curriculum. The centralised curriculum that runs along the length and breadth of the country (India), hardly

considers the diversity of the different states and cultures. The context of the rural and the indigenous children are completely overlooked.

Education has thus become a process, an endeavour, an effort – that is outside and alienated from the life worlds of many of the very children it seeks to educate.

Neoliberalism and the Human Capital

Education has thus taken this shape of being a business transaction where one can purchase the quality of services.

To be a scholar in the Middle Ages meant to be poor, even a beggar... The old university was a liberated zone for discovery and the discussion of ideas both new and old. ...The structural purpose of the modern university has little to do with the traditional quest. ...Students see their studies as the investment with the highest monetary return, and nations see them as a key factor in development. (Illich, 2021, pp. 50–51)

In schools what is taught is what is construed as knowledge and what counts as knowledge is a reconstruction based on selection under given market circumstances. The composition of the educational opportunities affects the choices of what is taught in schools which again reflects the classification of knowledge. For me, education is an act of deliberation. However, in a market-obsessed polity, education may paradoxically become a means to phase out certain voices or make them inaudible. This is done by the conversion of humans into human capital.

The Docile Worker and the Absence of a Democratic Classroom

One who remains contended with the world as it appears to be is perhaps not serving the function of an intellectual. An intellectual is restless-perpetually thinking, wondering and reflecting on his/her times. (Pathak, 2020, p. 41)

Everyone thinks, wonders and argues. What perhaps needs to be reasserted is space for dialogue and freedom of thinking in the classrooms. Dialogue is faith which perquisites understanding and respect for all those who are engaged in the process. “Only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking” (Freire, 2017, p. 65). Critical thinking, however, is no ordinary feat. It requires spirit, character and a distinctive mind. Educational spaces are devoted to creating docile workers rather than freeing the mind to question things around them.

The Idea of ECE: *Heartspace* in Education

The formative years of growing up, especially from birth to 5 years of age are most crucial in the development of a child. It is during this time that most of the brain synapses are formed as children are trying to make sense of themselves and their environment concretely and experientially. They are in a constant mode of exploration through their five senses, their feelings-emotions and abilities.

The crucial role of the early childhood years is often overlooked, in the context of the schools, in indigenous spaces. The languages of endearment that are used, the valuable everyday experiences, the idea of nutrition, the role of conversation and the physical touch through oil

massage, bathing, feeding, carrying and sleeping, are not included as important components in the process of development. The caring and care giving function of the community is replaced and reduced to the charts and insufficient “mid-day meals”, which delves neither into the questions of learning nor nutrition.

A child of pre-school age is not just a child between 0 -6 years or even 8. She is also a child from the rural indigenous world. Social Learning theories of child development shows us that children learn from their environment. Meaningful learning therefore cannot take shape without taking the society into purview: “we prefer to provide them with a children’s toy-world, lacking the imagination to remember that even if it was make-believe, it was always a grown-up world that we chiefly craved as a plaything of our early days” (Tagore, 1961, p. 67).

The two sections, education in general and early childhood education in particular, have tried to show that there are fundamental issues that need to be rethought. Educational praxis needs reimagining in terms of such rethinking. Action research on classroom pedagogy can show us the limits of current educational thinking and practice. The next section shall show what form such limits take in a particular indigenous context in the central Indian state of Chhattisgarh.

Journey – Inception, Idea and Conversations

What necessitated the birth of Hamar Srinjan Shala? It was through conversations with the Chinhari associates that we (I would use “we” as we thought of this together, dreamt together), came up against this obstacle of “learning environment”. There were schools, we didn’t talk about the lack thereof. What disturbed us was the pedagogy of the teaching learning process, the lack of motivation, the non-stimulating environment, the disconnect with nature and the rich natural environment, the understanding of “development” and the absence of accountability.

The Chinhari Associates shared that they taught the younger children in their respective villages of Mardapoti and Dokal. The kids came on their own accord, and they guided them with their schoolwork. That made us wonder about learning space, embedded within the community, in communication with it and drawing its learning from it.

The first imperative question of why included a deeper question of *how*? How are we perceiving it differently? How are we going to translate our ideas into an actionable plan and explain its need?

The questions were posed to the Chinhari Associates. They were encouraged to reflect on their understanding of “schools, problems and promises”. Since we were ideating on a situation that was prevalent in the two villages, the ideas needed to come from within the community and not super imposed by the others belonging to very different social contexts.

We held onto two core ideas:

- a. It should not become just another school.
- b. Cradles of Care rather than just contexts of cognition

Rethinking the Ideas of Schooling

We were not trying to fill the gap merely by what we had. But curate and create another gap filling philosophy. Schools bring forth an image of a space with children and adults. A place

“where the relatively young go to watch the relatively old work” (Jonas, 2010, p. 1). Structured ideas, paperwork, assessments and evaluations, competition and hierarchy. Hierarchy of ideas, of voices, where what is helpful is predetermined.

Innovative and alternative ideas of schooling though not alien are largely a prerogative for the affluent, demanding, educated, knowledgeable elite. Dominantly confined to the cities or within the premises that are thoughtfully curated and embedded in nature engaged in developing the whole child, usually the urban, affluent child. A divide is thus created by designing different types of education for children, which is based on assumption, judgment and preconceived ideas shaped by the social milieu. Poor education for the poor and education that builds competitiveness and individualism for the rich.

However, we also had to change ourselves by questioning our preexisting ideas, (of who deserves a better education). Question our preexisting contexts and practices (people in the rural spaces did not value education, the young are involved in farming and search of livelihood leaving little time, the indigenous world is steeped in cultural practices which are alien and therefore in contradiction to learning from schools). We had to question our assumptions of ourselves and of others (western educated urban subjects have a deeper understanding and knowledge about the idea of what is good).

Most of the thoughts came from the experiences of the girls themselves and their present observations of the children/ schools in their villages. The observations and reflections were for a period over 10 years of schooling (the average age group of the girls in Chinhari is about 20. The students they interacted with were from the age group of 4 to 12 years of age).

Indigeneity – Philosophy From Within the Cultures

What is indigeneity and why is it important to consider it while framing educational goals? Philosophy of education, especially in former colonies, largely determines the way we perceive teaching and learning. The idea of institutions, “schooling”, discipline and hierarchy in education is largely a philosophy of the west (see Simeon, 2018). Through colonialism, the western idea of education percolates into our universities, high schools, primary schools and the preschools as well. In both the urban and rural spaces, and in adivasi spaces, the colonial idea of what education implies and strives to be, remains the same. The songs sung, the stories narrated are the stories of the west. Lived by the west, they are alienated from the cultural context of the many different communities they strive to reach out to. Wherever an attempt is made to alter the western imagination of education, it is superimposed by a generic Orientalist idea of an Indian village or a city. The west and the Indian are both seen as homogeneous. The west is glorified. The Indian is usually condemned. Or is presented as excessively glorified. Both harm the process of teaching-learning in ECE spaces. At other times, education becomes a question of the benevolence of the rich or the urban elite for the rural child. Tagore mentions the charitable minded city-bred politicians conversing about education of the village folks, where what is left at the bottom of their cup, diluted copiously, is considered sufficient in accordance with the social status of those who receive it (Tagore, 1961, p. 11).

Similar analogies can be found in educational plans and curriculum drawn out for schools across the country. “In most, if not all, of the formerly colonized societies, the educational philosophies are heavily influenced by Western thoughts. However, western traditions on educational philosophy have not been able to find a stable basis upon which to rest its aims of education” (Siegel as cited by Simeon, 2018, p. 2). “Education is based on knowledge and the

key difference between Western and indigenous knowledge is at the level of philosophy” (Stewart as cited by Simeon, 2018, p. 3). Education is used by the indigenous communities to reclaim and regenerate their languages, their stories, their histories and wisdom traditions.

The indigenous world is a lived world with and within the context of nature. The rituals for bountiful harvest and to ward off evil, the rituals for birth, marriage and death are all saturated with stories. The ecological understanding of conserving the forest is very much entwined with the belief of the forest as a living breathing space, as “elder” of the village, eliciting reverence and respect. Inhabited by divinities. The caution of not venturing out alone after dark is overlaid by the chance elephant that wanders near the village. The traditional indigenous festivals reflect their life world, a philosophy of respectful co-existence between the human-plant-animal world.

However, this is not to suggest that indigeneity is the only cultural gap in education or the imposition of the western imagination of education is the only problem in education. One cannot deny that the hierarchy of education has not existed in our country as well. Education was the prerogative of the few, chosen, by the virtue of their birth or by wealth. Though that has not greatly changed, a need has arisen to address the gap in the understanding of who is educated? especially in the context of the education for the indigenous child.

Our problems are hence twofold. One is exclusion. Hence there is a need for inclusion. The second is the curriculum. What is it that we teach to the included? The same old curriculum of the elite. Or do we curate an indigenized curriculum?

From Alienation to Assimilation

The aim of learning is assimilation and not alienation. Learning that aims at being like the other can only reiterate the inherent difference and thereby the impending need to change oneself. The sense of inferiority that comes with the lack of it, impacts the way self-belief and self-esteem develops. The child from an indigenous community, enrolls in a government school where there is little to no reference to her unique cultural context. There is no narrative that talks about their songs and rituals. There is no holiday for their festivals, no understanding of why a “rock” or a “tree” (spiritual practices of the indigenous communities) is more of an object of veneration rather than a temple with an established deity of the dominant community. On the contrary the content that she works with, reiterates the dominant collective consciousness about the marginalized, the indigenous, the outsider. She never feels at home and yet is unable to break apart from this narrative: “unconsciously, then I distrust what is black in me, in other words, the totality of my being” (Fanon, 2008, p. 168). The chances of this child returning to her community to address the source of this conundrum of identity is slim. She would want to break free and associate herself with the ones who had othered her.

Moving Forward: Building a Bridge

Often cultural blindness works on our perception of people who are different from “us”. The “us” that we know. (Hodge, 1991, p. 85)

Multifaceted and complex reality renders a common description, solution or cure difficult for either development or the development of knowledge. Education imparted in the isolated classrooms tends to overlook not just context and the child’s life world but also this complexity. Education here, is closely embedded within the trope called development, in which much of

rural life finds itself immersed, at times imprisoned. Thus emerges a need to raise a few questions regarding: development and the paradigm of development of knowledge, the underdevelopment thesis, the life world of the community where knowledge systems are in practice in everyday functioning. Through such critical reflection on both, our idea of an indigenous Srijanshala takes shape; a somewhat radical thought takes form in the Chinhari Associates: can our communities be that petri dish where *rich* education for the indigenous child can be imagined?

In India, we have offered largely poor education to the poor. Tragically, it is not that we have offered rich education to the rich. We have offered the rich only one kind of education: “how to be rich”? Stand above the rest, be competitive, appropriative and extractive? Including extraction of nature; not just the surplus labour and know-how of fellow humans. *How can we have rich education for both rich and poor* – we asked in our repeated reflections on education in Chinhari. Rich in compassion. Sharing. Empathy. In non-violent reorganisation of desire. Rich in reduction of aggression. Rich in cooperation (Tagore called it *samavaya* in his book *The Cooperative Principle*). In the context of Srijanshala, we asked ourselves further: can we offer *rich* education to the purportedly poor and under-developed? How can we have an education where the head of the purportedly poor and the purportedly under-developed is held high; “where knowledge is free; where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls” (Tagore, 2007).

The western understanding of development, pertaining to infrastructure, buildings and roads (*bijli, sadak, pani*) have altered the way we perceive human relationships, knowledge, and communities. In the race to be developed, we have left a large part of our people behind. Left them with an inferior sense of being and self-identity but a blind desire to become like the other, who ridicules them as *under-developed*. The idea of education has also altered in this understanding of development. Right from the pre-school years it is packaged, labelled, advertised and sold. The pathway to being developed lies through the gateways of a private school.

Education As Shorthand for “Development of Knowledge”

Education is being developed in isolation, in the isolated minds of the individuals. However, learning is in the process of co-participation and not in the heads of individuals. (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 16)

Education needs to be perceived in the broad spectrum of the context of different cultures and life worlds. If participation in social practice is a fundamental form of learning, we perhaps require a more worked out view of the social world. Our concern here is an absence of theorizing about the social world as it is implicated in processes of learning. We think it is important to consider how shared cultural systems of meaning and political-economic structuring are interrelated, as they help to co-constitute learning in communities (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 54).

One such context of the practices of the community can be perceived in the village Dokal, where marriage is a collective responsibility. The community comes forward with their resources, economic and helping hands. It is an *economy of sharing* rather than logic of exchange or exchange through the medium of money (as in the capitalist market form) which drives it.

This culture of sharing and gifting (and not exchange) plants seeds of cooperation among the people, enabling them to face numerous other challenges. It is a learning opportunity where logistics are taken care of in terms of food, guests, arrangement, the actual ceremony, the associated rituals, storytelling and other details. It is a learning experience where the community will put aside their differing viewpoints and ideas and come up with collective, feasible solutions. Responsibilities will be delegated to carry out required tasks. One such ceremony births multiple learning opportunities for the different individuals and groups of the community, outside the walls of a classroom.

Imagining this in the many different contexts of everyday life produces a plethora of experiences. Letting the cows at dawn, the tending of the “baadi” (vegetable patch), working at the field and forest, most often with other members of the village, household work of cooking, cleaning, washing, the gatherings at the village “chopal” (meeting spot, usually located centrally), the day ending with every member of the family having their meals together, every night. Most of the work is collective work, either within the family unit or with the larger unit of the community. The children learn their roles, responsibilities, duties, the ways with the animals they coexist with, and much about the plants and trees that grow around them from an early age. They acquire knowledge about weather and crops, water requirements and the right time to harvest the vegetables. They learn about measurement and the concept of estimation as they help in the cooking or draw water to wash the utensils.

Being in the scope of “legitimate peripheral participation”, they learn in the context of cooperation within the community, through participation (see Lave & Wenger, 1991). Learning about life worlds and the care giving functions for the younger ones in the community across ages. This perhaps also breaks the conception of knowledge being transmitted from the more knowledgeable to the lesser. “We have also pointed out that structuring resources for learning come from a variety of sources, not only from pedagogical activity. We argue that a coherent explanation of these observations depends upon decentring common notions of mastery and pedagogy. This decentring strategy is, in fact, deeply embedded in our situated approach” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 94).

The young children grow up in a community of care, not only for the human world but also for the plant and animal world, the non-human world. They also go to schools where they are introduced to “A for apple” and “Z for zebra” from a chart that hangs from the wall. The golden haired “Q for queen” deepens the sense of alienation rather than instilling curiosity. Most children are visual learners during their early years. Children who have a rich legacy of kings and queens in their history, would perhaps be more intrigued with different imagery. It would perhaps open conversations about communities and kingdoms, about the economy of sharing as against the economy of exchange through money. The story of “Rani Durgawati” can be introduced, a “Gond” queen who challenged the then emperor, Akbar! (see *Rani Durgawati: Forgotten life of a warrior queen* [Sengupta, 1992]).

Trees like “mahua” and fruits like “beal” which are native to these regions, struggle to find their places in the esteemed pages of textbooks and songs. Festivals like “Hareli”, “Madaï” and “Pola” are largely unknown outside the periphery of the villages. Multiplicity of festivals, especially awareness of the lesser known but older festivals and cultural practices, their stories and origin, their intimate ties to the plant and animal world, the narratives of the indigenous tales of myths and legends, is often left out of the discourses that frame content of curriculum. “Adivasi Diwas” is largely unknown and excluded from the curriculum of the schools.

Indigenous identity is only included in the form of a group dance during cultural programs of school. Here, though the “zebra” is included the “mahua” is nonchalantly left out!

It is not to question education but to question the ways of educating that necessitates building a space to balance the two worlds. Between the windscreen and the rearview mirror in the journey called schooling.

The “zebra” is invoked, primarily because we don’t care where the child is coming from. This is not a simple devaluation of the indigenous child’s world. It also stems from a larger devaluation of the family, community, culture and the rural, in development. The discourse of development sees such rural indigenous communities as underdeveloped, backward, superstitious, violent. It sees such communities as *lacking*. Hence, we never customize curriculum to the needs of the children. Srijan Shala was an attempt to revalue and attend to their intricate life world.

Modern schools, a product of a particular idea of development, have replaced the traditional idea of collective knowledge in the rural indigenous spaces. Reiterating the idea of individual performances, the curriculum practiced is more focused on individual learning and performance. A child’s performance is based on the scores in examinations and assessments, seldom on whether there are instances of collective ideas, collaborations and action.

Incorporating indigenous world view and experiences into the daily learning practices is the backbone of the entire effort of Hamar Srijan Shala. Content derived from the context of life and shared through the medium of languages, art, drama, songs, numbers, games and play. Traditional songs and stories are being sourced largely from the elderly of the villages. The “Gond” festivals and rituals are celebrated with the stories behind them. There is an attempt to teach rational, critical thinking of science and today’s global language English, but through the narratives of their daily experiences and practices. Hamar Srijan Shala is an endeavour to build a future, rooted in the age-old knowledge system. It is an opportunity to reimagine content from the perspective of a child who is embedded in nature and community. For whom, “group work” and “nature walk” are not mere classroom activities, but the very way of life.

Hamar SrijanShala is also an attempt to reimagine early childhood learning, in the context of the community, environment and a constant co-existence between the two. An attempt to reiterate that there are many types of knowledge as there are multiple ways of learning them.

Conclusion

Tagore, while reflecting on “Sriniketan” – his ashram school – writes in *Boyhood Reminiscence*, “I know what it was to which this school owes its origin. It was not any new theory of education, but the memory of *my* school days’ (1979; italics mine). The Chinhari Newsletter on School Education (Sept 2024) also stemmed from the reflections of the Chinhari associates on *their* school days and the problems therein and the need to *right wrongs* in school education. The approach was to learn from their experiences in their school days and see how a new framework for early childhood education – an indigenized education that was deeply attentive to *context* (i.e. the life world) and the *concepts* (i.e. the larger worldview) of the indigenous could be imagined.

Hamar Srijan Shala was thus conceived in the context of the *collective memory* of our school days. In the collective memory of the challenges and the realisations that emanated from such

experiences. It was an attempt to create a site of *in-betweenness* which becomes the ground of discussion. Where the indigenous child and the community together confront the inequities and asymmetries of societal trauma not as a “common people,” but as a people with a common cause (Bhabha. 2009).

Hamar SrijanShala is a small endeavour. It is an endeavour flowing from the “long term commitment to righting wrongs”. An attempt to address a much larger question, quietly forgotten and left aside. A question which has been left buried under more pressing matters perhaps.

Hamar SrijanShala lies somewhere in the arc of a journey-from breakdown and collapse to convalescence and recovery. It is resilience. “It insists that we cannot allow terror, self-hatred and sadness to have victories over us and that we can always, so long as we think matters through with sufficient creativity and gentleness, identify reasons to live” (De Botton, 2024, p. 7).

We are serious about our endeavour, committed and convinced that in this process, we are learning too. We are learning what is the best way forward, how we need to shift our own thinking and assumptions, look at the bigger picture, understand the diverse and unique practices and history, be a part of the life worlds different from those we are born into, question the assumed, converse and reflect with those who will be our guide in this journey.

It is these small endeavours perhaps, in my community, in India and in other parts of the world, that will help to shape bigger transformations. Bigger transformations to a better World.

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The author declares that no AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate, refine, or correct the content in the manuscript. The ideas, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systemic conduct of the research.

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