

## **Redesigning desire: Challenges in designing a culturally responsive curriculum**

-Gautam Bisht

If PRADAN were to run a rural school, what would it look like? Perhaps it would be a school that would have the 'rural' at the center of its curriculum. It would be a school where children are apprentices who move towards expertise in community practices through a sustained engagement; practices directly related to the needs, aspirations and culture of the community. To say the least it would be dream come true for a section of educators who always insisted that schools are alienated from social life. Under [GRTA-CHIRAG](#) project, we are engaging with a part of the above dream, by designing a culturally responsive curriculum on sustainable food systems. This blog outlines details of this endeavor and the challenges that we face.

Any curriculum is placed within a broad set of questions and assumptions- around students/learners, their contexts, pedagogy, assessments and a philosophy of education reflected through desirable outcomes. A curriculum broadly entails designing a totality of learner's experience within an educational process. The starting point of curriculum designed by us in CHIRAG project is the gap between school learning and community life, specific to the subject domain of health, food and environmental science in the rural Santhal context of south Bihar. Not just school textbooks, but also development agencies often fail to integrate their programs on health and food sustainability with what is referred to by concepts like 'indigenous', 'local', 'traditional', 'cultural' or 'community knowledge'. In this blog, I use these terms interchangeably.

CHIRAG (project) works with the belief that community knowledge on food and health can play a crucial role in responding to the health crisis in the region. Building on that belief, the needs of this curriculum within our project are twofold- one, to ensure an

intergenerational transfer of knowledge around food and health undergoing rapid devaluation; and second, to demonstrate that national learning outcomes can be effectively met by leveraging a culturally responsive curriculum.

As outsider to the community, the first challenge for us is in recognizing and accessing what we call community knowledge. What are those practices, values and dispositions that will potentially build into a curriculum at the intersection of health, environment and cultural identity? The task demands a close interaction and relationship with local life, and thus community participation is the basic principle of such a curriculum. Lahanti Club, a local youth collective that works with a socio-cultural perspective to education in out of school community learning centers, has taken the lead on this. They have worked as community anthropologists, occupying a liminal space, to bring out elements of knowledge and cultural dispositions on food systems through creative mediums like short films, IVRS audios, theatre and group discussions. We in CHIRAG have tried to meticulously document the processes of this knowledge production that Lahanti and Self-Help groups have participated in. This process documentation is a key input to the curriculum development. It is also important to mention that this whole transaction potentially works like Chinese whispers, and a lot of vitality of this knowledge system runs the risk of being lost in translation. Moreover, as we do this, we must acknowledge the problematic history of knowledge extraction from rural indigenous communities.

The second challenge that we face is organizing the 'raw' version of data from process documentation into a structured curriculum. For school, our curriculum must speak directly to the existing school textbooks. Hence, to ensure collaboration between schools, communities, NGOs and research institutes, in this project, we are mapping our curriculum onto established standards as laid down in learning outcomes NCERT (2017-2018). For the Lahanti Club learning centers, the curriculum can be more expansive and organic. It may

also touch upon issues of identity and belonging in manners that lie outside the learning outcomes discourse.

Another significant challenge is to build this curriculum such that it appeals to the interest and capacities of children. This means further subdividing the curriculum activities as per age-groups of children. With the youngest ones we may have to rely mostly on stories, games and activities like forest excursions. With slightly more senior students we can have components of reflective discussions. We are also confronted with a difference in epistemologies: While the community knowledge is majorly embodied, culturally rooted and immersive in nature, the epistemology usually associated with formal schools are positivist where the knower and the known is distinct. This leads us to a third challenge of boundaries of the nature of delivery: *who* will facilitate this curriculum, *where* and *how*?

The dimension of delivery is where most grand ideas may fall flat or even the most basic ones become profound. The potential candidates for the delivery of this curriculum are Lahanti Club members and government school teachers. Most government school teachers in the region currently come from non-Santhal backgrounds. For school teachers to undertake an activity like 'foraging' would entail a lot of (un)learning, learning and appreciating local diverse knowledge and perspectives. Such pedagogy can also reverse the power dynamics between the student and the teacher. The challenge facing the Lahanti Club members is that they may understand the local context and content of the culturally responsive curriculum but are not professionally trained as teachers. For them to teach would entail learning to navigate between the text and this contextual curriculum. Both these groups will require slightly different orientation and inherent motivation to make this curriculum meaningful. This will throw the ball right back at us in figuring out this orientation itself.

I want to conclude with a larger challenge that confronts us in the form of the decline of indigenous and contextually relevant knowledge systems. There is a social and a material

aspect to this decline and both reinforce each other. At a social level this knowledge is rendered undesirable. Symbolic inclusion of ‘cultural knowledge’ as blogs or films can at best initiate a counter discourse and at worst be another activity at ex-situ conversation or museumization. Cultural knowledge is deeply tied with material conditions in which it is kept alive and remains relevant. For many villages in Chakai, ‘forests’ have disappeared, agriculture production, housing systems, market access all have changed the material infrastructure of village life. Approximately 2.3 million km<sup>2</sup> of forest cover was lost due to human and natural causes between 2000-2012 globally. Culturally responsive curriculum can redesign desire and imagine different futures, only if the material condition of this knowledge thrives. One example of such an approach is community-led forest restoration projects, which would bring us to the radical question of *‘Jal, Jungle and Jameen’*! Perhaps an educational dream in one paradigm translates as a nightmare in another.



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