

Reflexive and Relational,  
Empathetic and Engaged:  
A Case For  
'Social Transformative Learning'  
In India

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Rethinking Universities for Development: Intermediaries Innovation & Inclusion

**Rethinking Universities  
for Development  
Intermediaries  
Innovation &  
Inclusion**



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## **Reflexive And Relational, Empathetic And Engaged A Case For 'Social Transformative Learning' In India**

**A.R.Vasavi**

### Beyond Developmentalism

While IDRC's idea of making universities more engaged entities and linking them to sectors (such as the informal economy or that of rural societies) that have largely been ignored is welcome, there are several issues that need to be qualified. For one, should the idea of 'socially inclusive development' itself not be interrogated since this has become a cliché empty of any real endeavour? In its place, what alternative ideas can be mooted? Second, is the 'informal sector' being accepted as a given economic entity that must be looped into the responsibilities (and hence the imprint) of the university or is it a way of serving the large numbers who remain outside the privileges of the world of formal learning (and hence of the formal economy)? Clarity on these issues will enable us to forge forward with this platform for initiating ideas to make South Asian universities more responsive and engaged entities so as to serve larger and broader sections of their societies.

In engaging in such a collective deliberation we may have to locate our search for alternatives and new directions in terms of addressing the imprint or impact (and not necessarily the litany of problems and the perpetual state of crisis of universities) of the universities on the larger body of its graduates. These include the contradictory marking of youth with alienation from their provenance and yet integrating them into the narrow cultures of closed reference groups; fostering the idea that the primary objective of university education is to seek formal employment, thereby missing the objectives of forming a broader mind and intellect; and disengaging youth from processes, institutions, and structures of public and democratic responsibility but integrating them into the circuits of consumer capitalism and mass, popular culture. At the level of the university itself, its failure to be a democratic entity, and thereby be the source of internalizing a culture and ethos of democracy, is the source of multiple forms of reproduction of inequalities. More than focusing on fostering 'development' oriented programs, there is an urgency to initiate and institute a broad-based culture of democracy through which the reproduction of structures of privilege (on the part of the dominant) and the culture of submission (on the part of the subordinated) can be stemmed. While these aspects can be the benchmarks for a re-addressal of universities and their functioning and orientation, there are several specific issues which require specific responses and strategies to address.

Focusing on the need for transformative learning rather than reproductive education, this paper provides two broad perspectives. First, the limitations of higher education in India are identified and the potential of Socially Transformation Learning (STL) is elaborated. Second, based on a broad overview of the some existing ideas on STL, some key issues in the development of STL for India are identified.

### **Interrogating the Indian University: The Need for STL in India**

Amidst the explosion of higher educational institutions and the focus on career options and competitiveness is the need to engage with students for a broader definition of education. One such approach can be 'Social Transformative Learning' (henceforth STL) which can facilitate critical thinking and the social capabilities of learners. In the Indian context where higher education has, typically, meant the reproduction of the dominant structures of society, where issues of caste, class, gender and religious differences remain un-understood, and where commonsensical opinions have greater influence than informed ideas, there is a pressing need to integrate STL into post-school or university education. While there is a substantial body of literature on STL in the Western context, the

possibilities of promoting this in the Indian context can be considered. More especially, given the moribund conditions of higher education institutions in the nation, where colleges are largely sites for youth to 'time-pass'<sup>1</sup>, there is an urgency to initiate programmes in which STL can be the core. More particularly, the challenge remains as to how to make learners become reflexive, critical thinkers who can engage with the range of situations in their society and in the nation.

Rendered primarily into a 'parking lot' in which large numbers of youth<sup>2</sup> spend the best part of their adolescent lives, the average institution of higher education/university in India is mired in problems. The recent push to expand higher education has meant not a focus on addressing issues of exclusion but on making mass education a political alibi. As one internal critic<sup>3</sup> has highlighted, universities in India now produce "employees who are de-motivated, students who are disenchanting and the campus promotes mendacity and obfuscation as necessary and important parts of life." Further, the university is unable to "identify institutional fulcrums around which a new world can be fashioned with progress and reform. Thus universities have become 'duckback' institutions over which new ideas and reforms roll off." Even as there is the push to expansion<sup>4</sup>, primarily to meet international comparative figures in terms of enrollment, the university as an institution is beset with multiple problems: an inability to function as a model democratic institution or to inculcate a sense of respect for the world of ideas; a failure to engage students in the worlds of updated knowledge; the contradiction of alienating students from their provenance and social backgrounds/livelihoods and yet rendering them unemployable; and the reproduction of the dominant societies structures of hierarchy, discrimination, and exclusion.

Directives from 'think-tanks' such as the National Knowledge Commission<sup>5</sup> have led to the establishment of universities that actually defy the idea of the 'university' itself. Growing specialization has meant that far from universities becoming comprehensive centres of knowledge there is increasing specialization. Universities for petroleum, dentistry, law, etc are now being established by both the government and private edu-entrepreneurs as standalone institutions which challenge not only ideas of the 'university' but also erode any possibility of emerging as 'multiversities'. Such trends also imply the rendering of universities into arenas of the 'edu-factory'<sup>6</sup> whereby knowledge is increasingly entrenched into capitalist production and accumulation and is further integrated into capitalist circuits by the introduction of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) based training and certification and integration of students into the new hierarchies of labour. Government level populism which leads to the establishment of institutions which cater to populist demands and

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<sup>1</sup> See Craig Jeffrey's (2010) work.

<sup>2</sup> Although only about 11 to 12 percent of the cohort group of 18-21 years access higher education, the total numbers are large and estimated to be around 23.3 million.

<sup>3</sup> Ali Raza Moosvi, 'The Discontents Must Go', *The HINDU, Monday, October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2012*.

<sup>4</sup> Details of higher Education Institutions in India: 33,000 colleges; 634 degree granting institutions; 43 Central Universities; 237 State Universities; 129 Deemed Universities; 100 Private Universities; 65 Institutions of national importance; 8 lakh teachers and 170 lakh students (source: [www.mhrd.gov.in](http://www.mhrd.gov.in)).

<sup>5</sup> National Knowledge Commission established in 2005 and was led by Sam Pitroda, known for initiating changes in the telecommunications domain. Far from being an open and democratic body that could have functioned through wide-spread consultations, the NKC has focused on promoting its own agenda and perspectives that endorse the opening up of the economy, on being globally competitive and on developing the IT and Science and Technology disciplines over and above that of the others.

<sup>6</sup> For a definition and details of the 'edu-factory' see THE COMMONER, Issue 12. Summer 2007.

are not necessarily attendant with assurances of quality mean that many new institutions are increasingly failing to meet the basic standards of what a comprehensive university or higher education institution could mean. Witness the government's intent to establish new universities for 'religious minorities'<sup>7</sup>...an idea which will only reinforce the insularity of educational experience. Such populist education expansion is matched by the growing privatization of education in which age-old forms of exclusion are being reinforced. While denial to deserving and economically disadvantaged students continues, the alliance between the university and industry is also manifesting varied forms of distortions. These include the relegation of social sciences and humanities, the excessive emphasis on employment-oriented courses and an overall disengagement from provisioning comprehensive education.

Although the policy of positive discrimination or 'reservations' has enabled a sizeable number of students from disadvantaged family and caste backgrounds to gain entry into the university, the impact of the education system on them is yet to be seen as being positive. While large numbers remain unemployed and their political awareness also remains limited, the gains to such disadvantaged communities remains limited. Decades of indifference have meant that there is an absence of critical thinking. This includes the neglect of Ambedkar's emancipatory ideology in the university as a whole or where Ambedkar remains largely confined as a historical icon among circles of Dalit activists. Perhaps what is most striking in the impact of mainstream education on the body of disadvantaged students is the failure to address the long-term 'social scarring' that such students have experienced and the compounding of such marginalization by poor quality education. Such neglect includes the absence of understanding the social contexts of Dalit lives which lack social capital (that most upper caste members enjoy) and the fact that most Dalit students embody and represent forms of 'subjected personhood'<sup>8</sup>. Such 'subjected personhood' refers to "personalities and orientations in which there is an erosion of agency, and the self-worth of individuals and or groups is not individually defined or directed but is marked by the violence of persistent and pervasive humiliation, deprivation and indignities" (Vasavi 2006:376). These markers on most Dalit students are compounded by the socialization and the internalization of caste norms which have led to the typical submission to hegemonic forms of discrimination and exploitation.

The failure of the Indian university is also evident when it is assessed in terms of its contribution to regional or site specific issues and problems. Even so called regional universities, set up to cater to various regions, are merely poor clones of the larger universities and act as 'certification' or exam centres and do not provide region specific knowledge, know-how or skills. For example, none of the regional universities provide courses or training that can pertain to the specific socio-economic, agricultural, ecological, architectural, and medical requirements of different regions. Even as regional universities remain poor-second cousins to the metropolitan and central universities, the new universities meant to cater to specific disadvantaged groups suffer from the same problems. One glaring example of this mindless cloning of universities without attention to the needs of the clientele population is that of the 'tribal' or Adivasi university (at Amarkantak in Madhya Pradesh) which lacks even any imagination or orientation to be 'tribal' or to cater to their needs. Instead, the university offers mostly mainstream courses with a few 'tribal or anthropological studies' thrown in<sup>9</sup>. This even as new

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<sup>7</sup> Statement made by state minister for minority affairs, that the government will establish four 'minority universities' with 50 percent seats for religious minorities. THE HINDU, November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> For more details on 'subjected personhood' see Vasavi (2006).

<sup>9</sup> For details see the website ([www.igntu.nic.in](http://www.igntu.nic.in)) of the University.

states such as Chhatisgarh and Jharkhand, primarily inhabited by Adivasis, require a pool of region-specific knowledge so as to be 'developed' in ecologically and socio-culturally specific ways. That it is the absence of such knowledge-generating initiatives and ideas that accounts for the rampant mimicry of outdated and irrelevant 'development' programmes which only legitimize the further degradation of these areas and the local population is only one glaring example of the failure of regional universities.

Since knowledge creation, teaching, research and publications remain tied to received paradigms of Western scholarship (but largely without the average standards or creativity of these models); there is a deep sense of disengagement from the 'vicinity'<sup>10</sup>. The 'vicinity' (beyond the identification of the local) refers to an area or region with specific socio-historical background and ecological specificities and which is impacted by its linkages to larger socio-economic and political forces. Living in any specific vicinity requires understanding, relating and working in and on it on multiple levels and education needs to factor in how to foster, develop and focus on enabling knowledge of different vicinities.

Perhaps the key limitation of the Indian university is its poor quality which has rendered millions unemployable rather than merely unemployed. Such conditions mean the marking of youth as largely failures, and rendering them as unfit for either their own communities, especially those that are rural, agrarian or crafts-based, or for the new economy. More particularly, in a context where youth form a large pool of the population, this listlessness that results from unemployment, underemployment, and alienation is also the bases for the integration of youth into violent, anti-social activities. Among those who do manage to succeed through the processes and markers of examinations, university education does not typically provide the perspectives, skills, and scope to become engaged and informed citizens. That the reproduction of inherited or received ideas, especially those about privilege and of notions of merit have become key was visible in the hostility that a majority of students displayed during the turbulent 'anti-Mandal' agitation<sup>11</sup> and which continues to constitute the commonsensical thinking of a majority of educated people. In addition, the recent mobilization of large bodies of youth into extremist politics and violent organizations is a troubling trend which requires attention. Overall, the expansion of the higher education system in India, based primarily on enabling access and matching international figures without attention to the content, orientation, impact and specificities of India's needs has meant that there is what W.E.B. Dubois identified as 'systemic miseducation'.

In summary, the limitations of the dominant education system in India are the following:

1. Mainstream education is based on received and dominant ideas and the regurgitation and reproduction of dominant ideas is often the marker of successful 'education'.
2. Within this, the subordinated seek or are forced to fit in and are domesticated into the mainstream economy and culture, but occupy subsidiary positions within it.
3. In a hierarchical and layered society such as India with its range of institutions and programmes (that are also differentially aligned) the impact on the marginalised and the disadvantaged youth mean

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<sup>10</sup> For more details on the definition of the 'vicinity', especially for social science research see Vasavi (2011).

<sup>11</sup> In what has come to known as the 'Mandal agitation' or 'anti-Mandal agitation' was the nation-wide protest by upper caste students in 1990 against the extension of reservations to students based on the recommendations of the Mandal Report, which had been submitted in 1979 but which the then government sought to implement in 1990.

that they continue to occupy either subordinate positions or have become part of reproducing the larger socio-cultural apparatus.

4. In the context of increasing marketisation of education and of fitting learners into the market model (as employees) the effect on the individual, society and nation have been detrimental, eroding the abilities of educated youth to be engaged citizens, and or to be reflexive members of their societies.

5. Given the overall limitations of the mainstream education system there is a need for new paradigms and perspectives in education so that both individual abilities and collective responsibilities can be enhanced.

Given such trends and results, the challenge in India is to go beyond the rhetoric of access and inclusion and focus on ways to facilitate educational justice. Some foundational shifts that are required to challenge the deep and multiple morasses which beset higher education in India are the following: A re-think on the idea of 'higher education' and the institutions, processes, and markers of legitimacy that is associated with being educated. Shifting from the excessively formal system (in which certification and State-approved norms are key) to facilitating a range of learning contexts and engagements which can be legitimized will be important. To even initiate such a process will require the creation of a pool of resource persons (and not just as teachers) who can act as facilitators and as catalysts for social transformation. In terms of educational philosophy, pedagogies and approaches a substantial shift towards first enabling affective and emotive scaffolding of learners will have to be made. Contrary to mainstream education, such alternative learning forms will have to bridge the gap between the worlds of formal learning and that of society and draw on the multiple knowledge forms and skills that remain informal epistemes. In addition, going beyond the idea of simply reviving local knowledge forms, new and integrative knowledges that can address the limitations of both local knowledge forms and that of the formal systems need to be emphasized. More particularly, the challenge of replacing the dominant structures of power, knowledge, and relationships will have to be made the cornerstone of such endeavours.

### **Alternative Education and Attempts at STL**

Over the past few decades, especially since the 1970s, there have been a few endeavours at initiating STL in India. Although none of these have consciously or deliberately adopted or drawn on the term, the focus on facilitating change, on questioning the status quo and the attempt to empower the disadvantaged have been their key objectives. Since the 1970s, there have been several attempts at introducing Paulo Friere's ideas and thoughts but these have been restricted to small alternative groups and endeavours. A key problem that has resulted in Frierian methods remaining either restricted to certain circles or to be domesticated and appropriated (without their attendant significance and impact) is linked to its cooption by large mission mode programmes such as that of the national literacy mission. The lack of availability of a large pool of trained resource persons, the failure to develop localized pedagogies and texts, and its dilution and simplification meant that the Frierian methods have not really made a significant inroad into critical pedagogies. Other institution-based efforts include Eklavya (Madhya Pradesh), Shikshantar (Rajasthan), Vidyodaya (Tamil Nadu), Vidya Ashram (Varanasi), and Tulir (Tamil Nadu) which have been some of the endeavours which have sought to initiate critical thinking and pedagogies at the school and post-school levels. The Jesuits' attempt over the years to provide an 'Option for the Poor' has also been one other effort which has systematically sought to include disadvantaged communities into the educational agenda or has

extended its institutions to areas which serve the disadvantaged<sup>12</sup>. One other effort, at a post-graduate level is that of the Centre for Research and Education in Social Transformation (CREST), in Kozhikode, Kerala. A brief overview of its approach and impact will indicate the possibilities of STL.

CREST<sup>13</sup>, Kozhikode:

'How can disadvantaged students be supported so as to enable them to compete in the fast globalizing world and in the private sector?' These are CREST's key orientations and since 2002, when it was established by the Government of Kerala, in collaboration with the Indian Institute of Management, Kozhikode (Kerala), it has emerged as one of India's primary institution catering to graduate students from scheduled communities of the state. In setting up the institution, the government's objectives were focused on enabling students from such communities to gain entry into private sector employment and or to higher and professional education, including gaining entry into international institutions and universities. Although accepting this, CREST has broadened this objective to provide an enabling learning experience for its students.

CREST's vision is expressed as follows: "To move towards new horizons of creating a just, equitable and caring society through empowerment of the marginalized and underprivileged sections based on the principles of humanism, equality and social justice." CREST's mission is stated to be: "To facilitate the marginalized and the underprivileged to gain confidence, build competence and achieve excellence in all spheres of human endeavor, for their social, cultural and economic development through education, training, and research and consulting. Its specific objectives included helping SC/ST candidates to compete in the open market for admission/jobs in institutions/organizations of repute as well as assisting them to compete as research and development scholars. It also provides training to improve the competence of members of scheduled communities while working in the organized sector" (Nampoothiri 2011:7).

The faculty face several challenges in working with the students many of whom have low aspirational levels, feel defeated by the larger competitive world, and lack confidence and communication skills (with limited abilities in English). In addition, their generally low socio-economic status mean that they face pressures on getting immediate employment which in many cases does not match their aptitude or skills. Taking all these factors into consideration, the CREST faculty has evolved a programme whose pedagogies include the following:

- \* Participative learning
- \* Interactive learning processes
- \* Real life experiential learning
- \* Activity based classrooms
- \* Learning through fun by using relevant games etc
- \* Simulative learning through role plays, skits and theatrical methods

Identifying these pedagogies, one of the faculty members notes that "the above mentioned methodologies are used to help the students to communicate and share their experiences, inadequacies, fears etc and connect them with issues of religion, caste, creed, gender, morale, self

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<sup>12</sup> For a succinct summary of Jesuits' educational work in India see Joseph Satish (2012).

<sup>13</sup> This is not a comprehensive review or assessment of CREST and focuses only on identifying some of the orientation and approaches to STL that CREST has evolved. I would like to thank Prof. D.D. Nampoothiri, the founding Director and current Director for his support and to all the faculty and students who responded to the questionnaire that I sent to them.

esteem and culture. Based on the progress of each session the trainer is able to discuss and address individual and group issues. The process is cathartic and self healing. This leads to a fair degree of emotional maturity in problem solving<sup>14</sup>. In addition to these, CREST faculty has had occasionally to provide extra psychological counseling to students who have experienced traumatic and disturbing events in their personal lives.

Responses and evaluations from alumni indicate that CREST has been a significant life changing experience for them. As one of them once told me, it was for the first time in her life that someone had asked her what she wanted rather than being told what to do. In addition to gaining confidence and skills in relating to the larger world, the focus on understanding and recognizing their own communities has provided an important empathetic factor in their learning. One student, now an alumnus, described her recognition of her own community as follows:

“Though I am a Scheduled Tribe (Mala Arayan), I had never gone deep into the details of the community. But the self actualisation module at CREST gave us an opportunity to know more about our own communities. We had to interview elderly people from our own community which enabled me to know more. There were people who really came out successful from hardships, but there were also people who still are bound to an attitude of not changing for the better”.

Another alumnus pointed out that realization of caste-based differences and of the impact of the caste system on their lives was significant for him; “My attitude to my community and society had a major impact after CREST...I started thinking about unprivileged people in my society and community.”

The programme and teaching-learning initiatives at CREST have been enabling the students and have charted the possibility of endowing them with skills and capabilities of engaging with the larger dominant world. Given the state (Kerala) government’s mandate of supporting scheduled community students to gain entry into the private and professional sectors, the focus has been primarily on providing training and orientation for professional development and facilitating entry into private sector industries or careers. While much of the training seems to have made a significant impact on the students, enabling them to accrue those skills and capabilities that can assist them to compete in employment arenas, much more needs to be made in enabling the students to emerge as engaged and pro-active citizens. The limited time (course period is only four months) is a handicap and CREST is only able to transact some basic skills and capabilities and much more time is required to enable them to be more ‘socially transformed’. This may also be the key reason that until now none of the alumni has been engaged in public work or in politics. Instead, the success stories or successful students are identified as those who have been able to gain entry into corporate sector, have gained entry into higher educational institutions or become independent entrepreneurs. Perhaps, CREST’s key contribution is its ability to challenge the key markers of inferiority, inadequacy and insecurity among disadvantaged students.

If CREST has been able to initiate some work in the arena of transformative education, then more attention needs to be paid to developing a comprehensive education program that can be integrated into all education and which can also address the challenge of initiating change among privileged students.

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<sup>14</sup> Cited from a response to the questionnaire mailed to CREST faculty.

## STL for Privileged Students

It would be inadequate to consider STL as being appropriate only for learners or students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Instead, given that the source of the reproduction of any unequal and unjust society lies among the privileged, it is important that STL also be extended to them. Challenging their assumptions, prejudices, and biases requires new modes of unlearning and relearning. Given that in most cases privileged students and youth tend to be socialized into conditions where they exhibit an 'anesthization of the mind' (Van Gorder 2012: 2) and are enveloped in structures and cultures of privilege there is a need to deploy pedagogies that can question such privilege and their taken-for-granted terms of reference. That there is a need to include the privileged into the ambit of STL is highlighted by Van Gorder who points out that "Education for the privileged is not interested in promoting an awareness of the 'invasive nature' of social injustice. The privileged, in fact, are encouraged to see themselves in a positive light as those who are deeply concerned about the plight of those they are actually responsible (directly or indirectly) for tyrannizing. The privileged protect their status as superior while also paternalistically thinking of themselves as ...the 'great White hope' of benighted, oppressed people who are in need of their assistance..." (Van Gorder 2012: 5). Enabling oppressors or the privileged to also question their complicity in the reproduction of inequity will also require the Freirian methods of conscientisation, problematisation, and reflexivity. In addition to this, patriarchal, institutionalized, or religiously-ordained ideas prevent recognition of the structures and processes by which domination is naturalized and taken-for-grated.

In the context of India, where the focus has primarily been on simplistic reproduction of the dominant system and where the few alternate endeavours have focused on the disadvantaged, it may be opportune to consider including and developing a specialized STL for advantaged students/learners. Key methodologies and orientations especially those suitable for a range of contexts in India are yet to be worked out but the need and potential is immense. Combining the need to address both, the social and emotional scarring that socio-economic disadvantage leaves and the social myopia that cultures of privilege endow the rich, it may be opportune to review the potential of STL to address both these divergent groups of learners.

## **Social Transformative Learning: An Overview of Existing Literature and Debates**

"Social Transformative Learning is a theory of deep learning that goes beyond just content knowledge acquisition, or learning equations, memorizing tax codes or learning historical facts and data. It is a desirable process for adults to learn to think for themselves, through true emancipation from sometimes mindless or unquestioning acceptance of what we have to come to know through our life experience, especially those things that our culture, religions, and personalities may predispose us towards, without our active engagement and questioning of how we know what we know" (Mazirow 2000: 20). Although recognized as a founding father of STL, Mazirow's perspectives on STL, developed since 1975, have drawn on earlier thinkers such as Paulo Friere and others. Focusing on adult learning, Mazirow called for an emphasis on contextual understanding, critical reflection on assumptions, and validated meaning by assessing reasons. These were to enable adults to not only critically review their own roles but also to develop 'self-authorship' not only for their own lives but to being able to contribute to their societies. Dr. Patricia Cranton, another leading writer on transformative learning, defines transformative learning to include the idea of people changing the way they interpret their experiences and their interactions with the world. This includes the ways in which "... an individual becomes aware of holding a limiting or distorted view. If the individual critically examines this view, opens herself to alternatives, and consequently changes the way she sees things,

she has transformed some part of how she makes meaning out of the world. (Cranton, n.d). For Mezirow this transformation of perspective included going through the following ten ordered phases:

- Experiencing a disorienting dilemma
- Undergoing self-examination
- Conducting a critical assessment of internalized assumptions and feeling a sense of alienation from traditional social expectations
- Relating discontent to the similar experiences of others---recognizing that the problem is shared
- Exploring options for new ways of acting
- Building competence and self-confidence in new roles
- Planning a course of action
- Acquiring the knowledge and skills for implementing a new course of action
- Trying out new roles and assessing them
- Reintegrating into society with the other perspective (as listed by Cranton, P. [2006], p. 20)

To summarise Mezirow, this 'perspective transformation' is "a structural change in the way we see ourselves and our relationships" (Mezirow, 1978, p. 100). More importantly, it is the process of effecting change in a 'frame of reference' which is central to initiating transformational learning. In focusing on the need for a change in the reference framework and in allowing for processes that are also context specific, STL offers a viable approach to initiate new learning paradigms and practices in India. While much of what has happened to Freirian methods, that of co-option, is also tenable here, it is also pertinent for educationists to contextually assess each of these methods.

### **STL for the Indian Context**

What are the frames of reference in the Indian context which require change? Can the reference shift from the individual to the collective? What should this collective be? In the context, where a combination of ideas of individualism (as work, market, and ambition oriented) are anchored within a frame of collective identity (family, community, caste and religion) what alternative is required to facilitate STL for an equitable and just society? The challenge is to interrogate the dominant systems so that the myriad existing problems of hierarchy and inequity are addressed and the pressing need to make learning a pathway to a new worldview and to a new world is emphasized. In this search, the emphasis should be on making self-transformation to become the cornerstone of STL so that social or macro changes can be initiated via the individual. Given the cultures of discrimination and exploitation, there must be an emphasis on self-recognition and enabling. For both groups, the disadvantaged and the privileged, the objectives should be to overcome both the 'culture of silence' and the culture of privilege which also includes the fact that many privileged persons also suffer from what Deepti Mehrotra has identified as 'afflictions of affluence'. Here education or learning should enable every individual a voice, agency, and representation. As with the Freirian methods, for 'Social Transformative Learning' (STL) to take place the pedagogies of questioning, dialogue, critical thinking and conscientisation need to be asserted. The linkages between the individual, the family, the community or neighbourhood, and the larger society and nation need to be explicated and contextualized.

If the above are the broad approaches to STL in India, some of the key methods that need to be further developed with clarity on themes, pedagogies, texts, and processes relate to the following four key perspectives. Attempts to frame themes and where ever possible all disciplines within these perspectives may provide a starting point.

## **Issues and Themes in STL**

Reflexive/Reflexivity: How can all themes/topics be made to incorporate reflexivity? Here reflexivity is defined as the ability to re-think or question issues. It includes critically re-thinking inherited cultures and traditions and taken for granted frames of reference. For example: in all contexts can we identify ways in which hierarchy is assumed and what are its implications?

Can the caste system and class relations be explicated as a system of hierarchy? Instead of a formal analytical overview can everyday issues of hierarchy (at home, at school, at work, in public and private lives) be unpackaged? Can learners be made aware of the impact of hierarchical thinking on their lives?

Relational/Relationality: Can the relationships between persons and groups and between disciplines and themes; between objects and persons, between worlds and between ideas be explicated? Can the relationships between past and present, present and future be laid out? Can implications between different domains (physical, social and economic worlds) be made explicit? For example: Can the relationship between low pay and the lack of bargaining power be made explicit? Can the impact of consumerism on the environment be made recognizable?

Empathetic/Empathy: Can a sense of sensitivity towards others (persons, animals, worlds, groups) be made central? How can a person place herself/himself in the shoes of another? What worlds do those who are subordinated or disadvantaged occupy? For example: What if a learner is made to follow all the rules that a working class Dalit is subject to? Can a male learner be made to act and follow all the restrictions that a typical woman of his age would be forced to subscribe to?

Engaged/Engagement: Can the learning sessions provide for all learners skills and abilities to engage in the everyday world that they inhabit? Engagement should include abilities to interact with structures, processes and agencies/agents of power and disempowerment. For example: What are the ways in which learners can improve their own environment (not only physical but also social)? What key social issue can they engage in as part of their everyday civic work or in contexts of pressing issues that need addressal? What changes or differences can they initiate in their everyday lives?

The key objectives of STL should be to evolve perspectives, methodologies, pedagogies and texts which can go beyond the standard and mainstream approaches of knowledge transfer and facilitate the questioning of the dominant society and its cultures. Going beyond the established transactions of classroom-based teaching and examinations, a new portfolio of standards and processes must be implemented. These can include not only site/place-based projects but also the conduct of studies which build on new pedagogies and teaching-learning transactions that emphasize reflexive, relational, empathetic and engaged learning.

In addition to the above, there are several 'details' which need to be worked out, especially for the Indian context. Other approaches to complement the ideas from both Freirian methods and that of STL are to consider ways in alternative learning for rural youth. Drawing on the orientations of 'place-based education', critical thinking, social transformative learning, and integrated knowledges may be ways to overcome many of the limitations of mainstream education especially that of post-school education. In working with youth from disadvantaged backgrounds, it is important to bear the following in mind:

- a. With their histories of being subordinated by a larger system that sees them as less endowed and the layered sense of inadequacy that many youth embody, it is important to consider ways to provide 'emotional scaffolding'. Such scaffolding should include the recognition of the larger systemic injustices which have marked them, an understanding of their collective histories (which can enable them to overcome their individualized biographies) and a sense of recognition of their self-worth. Instead of purely academic learning the preliminary phase should focus on enabling each learner to emerge as a confident individual, recognizing her or his abilities and interests and with skills to negotiate the various demands of a larger world. Abilities to communicate well and be expressive will also be key.
- b. Attention to dynamics between different social/cultural groups and therefore to dynamics of learning context and the reproduction of social tensions within learning domain. Although segregated or homogenous student bodies are considered to be limiting in as much as they do not provide for a socially-inclusive form of learning, this may be reviewed in terms of the dynamics between two widely heterogenous groups. In contexts of clear cut divisions and tensions among learners as 'dominant' vs. 'subordinate', it may be a challenge to enable the subordinate to overcome their diffidence and lack of confidence. In such situations, it may be preferable to have socially homogenous groups in which the pedagogies and transactions take into consideration the shared social backgrounds of the learners.
- c. Learning programmes for disadvantaged youth need to recognize that livelihoods and a source of income are pressing needs for youth. Generalised learning or orientation programmes are not seen as attractive and may be considered redundant to their immediate needs of economic security. In such contexts, STL needs to be embedded within programmes that provide livelihood skills. General/critical thinking or conscientisation and other social and political orientation drawn on STL can be inbuilt into livelihood skills and training.
- d. There is also the additional and related challenge of preparing youth for either independent livelihoods or to those that are linked to that of market and entrepreneurship. In such contexts, what role and position does that of citizenship play out in this context? Are the two incompatible or how should they be seen as interlinked with obligations in one domain also being relevant in the other?

These are only some of the pressing issues that need to be borne in mind. In addition, much more attention needs to be paid to develop programmes in which the STL approach can be embedded into formal and informal types of education. Linkages between the themes (and not necessarily disciplines), texts or materials, pedagogies, assessment etc will also have to be deliberated upon and developed. More particularly special attention will have to be paid to developing parameters or criteria for assessing learning, thereby going beyond standard academic performance (see Appendix I: for alternative criteria). Issues of language, access, and inter-linkages to the world of English will also have to be addressed in a manner that recognizes language abilities not only as a means of communication but also as a form of cultural capital.

## **Conclusion**

“We change society by changing ourselves, and we change ourselves in our struggle to change society” (McLaren 2009:3)

The cornerstone of STL should surely be based on this rallying note for linking education and social transformation. Education as a process and an endeavour and the institutions associated with it are faced by multiple challenges. At a macro level, this includes the pressing urgency of rethinking knowledge forms at a time of ‘Great Disruption’ (of the economic faltering of capitalism and the deepening ecological crisis). Hence there is need to rethink the very premises of several disciplines and to initiate new, interdisciplinary/integrated knowledge forms that can overcome the limitations of some of those that have become foundational sciences. At a more micro and interior level is the challenge of facilitating knowledge forms and educational skills that will enable the recognition and working according to ecological and social requirements rather than catering to market demands.

There are multiple challenges in the mainstream education system that need to be addressed. These include the trend of rendering knowledge into “new forms of educational capitalism that cultivate a new spirit of enterprise and the enterprise curriculum, given a new emphasis to the entrepreneurial subject” (Peters 2009: 42).

Linked to this is the need to develop new curricula and outreach programmes so that the *distantiation* of the earlier knowledge and institutional regimes from myriad communities/societies, especially those that are marginal and disadvantaged is overcome. The space and linkages that universities must interact with are both the ‘vicinity’ (not necessarily limited to the local) and the universal where the specificities of the vicinity can be understood and catered to while also engaging with and drawing on the validity of what has become universal. The vicinity must also act as the litmus test for validating the knowledge of the universal. Curricula and content of learning sources must both induct and deduct from the vicinity to the universal (or generalisable level) so that varied localized innovations can be legitimized and disseminated.

The defining questions of the STL practices should centre around the following:

- a. Has the voice and agency of the learner been scaffolded to enable her/him to be an active citizen?
- b. How will the forms of knowledge transmitted to the learner facilitate her/his life, relations to the immediate community, and to the larger society and nation?
- c. Will the knowledge forms pass the criteria of environmental, social and economic audits, in which sustainability is the key criteria? What implications do these knowledge forms have for the domains of the economy, polity, society, and ecology?

While the above are only generalized criteria, specific ones suitable to the themes, age, context, and social background of learners need to be evolved.

If the established university is now no longer the beacon for constituting a pool of learned and engaged citizens, there is an urgent need to nudge it towards becoming a responsive institution, forging, integrating and disseminating new knowledge forms, catering to new learners, and bridging the chasm of the formal world of learning to that of the fields of myriad societies. Yet, the more significant challenge in developing an STL for India lies in the ability to answer the question Martin Buber posed long back: ‘For whom and for what is education’? And to also recognize the caveat that John Dewey posed: “we will know what type of education to provide, if we know what type of society

we want.” It may only be in our ability to respond to these two challenges that a comprehensive education system may be evolved and in this STL may be one small step.

## **Appendix I: Pedagogies for STL**

Key criteria to be achieved by STL programs can include the following (rather than only achievement levels in academic performance or in grades):

- Confidence: ability to speak up, represent self, discuss issues.
- Body language (eye contact, head and shoulder position, movement, postures etc)
- Comprehension: ability to understand passages, summarise, and respond to questions. Discussion and position on general issues.
- Critical thinking of key issues; ability to assess social and cultural issues, prejudices and biases; popular practices, structures of power etc.
- Decision-making abilities.
- Interpersonal skills; relating to peers, elders, persons in authority, and to subordinates.
- Knowledge of one’s society and structures of power
- Organizational capacity
- Responsibility for self and for collective.
- Awareness of challenges at the local, regional, national, and global levels and their interlinkages.

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## **Discussion**

Chair’s remarks: You have hit at some of the core issues confronting the Indian higher education space itself which often get derided as soft issues. There is always a trivialization and hierarchisation where a lot of the kind of issues that STL addresses are relegated as ancillary activity. We have more or less failed in the higher education space at making these four proxies of STL namely reflexive, empathetic, relational, engaged learning as an intrinsic part of the curriculum itself and not just as a learning method. For example the NSS scheme has been trivialized by relegating it to the ministries of youth affairs, sports etc. At the same time, there is awareness that violence is an intrinsic part of our life, and perhaps the educational system facilitates that. Perhaps STL is the first step for conceiving how we can change the way the curriculum proceeds.

Sujit: It is interesting that you have spoken about dealing with the advantaged as well as the privileged people. Have you thought of using this at the school level to deal with the issues of two extreme kinds of traits in children namely the dominating and the docile children?

Vasavi: While CREST deals with young adults at the post-school level, there have been several other examples (like Vidyodaya in TN) which have shown that a STL framework is possible at the school

level too. But they don't have a theoretical base of STL as such, so they are not elaborating it in a formal way. Yet, they have had some successes and it is possible to replicate this.

Harish: Have there been other examples around the world where the people entrenched in dominance are made more empathetic to the unprivileged? Has this been experimented pedagogically elsewhere?

Vasavi: Van Goder and Mezirow have experimented with STL in predominantly elite universities in the USA. There have been other experiments in Maryland University where white students simulated characteristics of black students in dress, speech, body language, etc. to learn empathy as well as realize prejudices. CREST's own programme at AIIMS included all the students as well as the faculty and the review indicated that the privileged students were able to empathize with the disadvantaged ones and realize what it meant to be unable to form a complete sentence in English or speak without making eye contact.

Rajni: STL is reminiscent of Gandhi's transformative agenda; that the onus is on us the multi-generationally privileged. There is also another initiative called 'The Prince's Seeing is Believing' programme of the Business in the Community network which brings together senior management cadre from companies and exposes them to encounter difficult situations in the field for a few days.

John: In 1984-85, CED had developed a 'social technology workshop' on the lines of STL, thinking that it was developing a new technology for transformation. But this was discontinued as it uses behavioral methods, where the trainees are likely to be subject to badgering towards a particular view of transformation and the course would not be reproduced properly by the available trainers. This makes it very difficult to impart STL on a large scale.

Vasavi: One of the reasons why Freirian methods have failed is that they are being done as an alternative. People come from the mainstream, it is done as an alternative and then again they have to get refitted into the dominant system. So what we are trying to do is work with the dominant itself, so that the dominant itself is transformed. Many of these pedagogies have not been well honed and they were not localized enough, and there is inadequate literature and texts.

STL pedagogies in their existing format will not work in the large scale and may have to go through multiple iterations like the CREST programme which is now being extended to OBC and Muslim students. It is important that it maintains the focus on being an enabling process which helps students become not just engaging citizens but also create livelihood opportunities confidently by and for themselves.

Rajni: As an expert of microfinance said, what kills a good idea is speed, scale and standardization.