

From the Kothari Commission to the New Education Policy (NEP), there have been many policies that recommend connecting basic education with the environment and the needs and aspirations of people's lives. Teachers play an important role in educating students to ponder over the environment and become responsible citizens. Environmental literacy, combined with the efforts of teachers to promote it, creates opportunities for dialogue that increase awareness of the environment.

The Azim Premji Foundation works closely with teachers to ensure better education in government schools. The members of the Foundation co-teach with teachers in the classrooms so that the children can achieve better learning outcomes. In this context, an effort was made regarding environmental literacy, the experience which I am presenting here.

### **Promoting environmental literacy**

My intention behind this effort was to give children an opportunity to interact with the world around them. To do this, it is necessary that the children observe, record and reflect on what is happening around them. This must be followed by a reflection on the possible reasons behind their observations; learning of the ways in which to examine the causes; discussing if there is a connection between the causes and the occurrences, and then, creatively and sensitively arriving at solutions to improve the conditions. In short, children also need to be given opportunities to participate in making our natural environment better and safe.

### **Contexts, dialogues and functions**

While I was planning environmental literacy with a teacher, I read about the sources of water in Chhattisgarh in the newspaper. The data showed that in the year 2000, there were 2.79 lakh ponds in different districts of the state, but by 2020, the number had come down to 1.34 lakh. Along with the ponds, the number of lakes had also reduced.

Everyone knows that ponds, canals and lakes play a major role in conserving water. Due to the reduction or disappearance of these water bodies,

the groundwater level has declined drastically in most places. As a result, many wells and hand pumps in the state and various water sources of the *patwan* (a municipal water source) have dried up. Therefore, there is a constant problem of water scarcity.

On observing the surroundings of the schools that I visit, I found that water is not easily available. Taps installed by the government supply water only at fixed times. Those who miss filling water at those times have to go without water, especially drinking water. In summer, this problem gets worse, and people depend on water tankers to supply water. So, I thought of integrating the above context and environmental literacy with basic education. I started my work with 27 children from class V. The main thrust of my work was the scarcity of water sources, especially ponds.

Something interesting happened during this visit. As they do every year, the children were planning to visit their relatives after their final examinations. Most of them were going to their maternal uncle's place. So, I asked them the following three questions:

1. Where are you going for your summer holidays?
2. Which activity do you enjoy the most there?
3. How many times have you been to that place so far? What kind of changes have you noticed?

Here are some excerpts from this discussion, which went on for almost four periods.

My question: It is vacation time now. Where are you all going?

A few children said that they were going to their native village or to their relatives' places. Some children said they would go to their maternal uncle's village. A few others added that they would go to attend a wedding at some relative's place and the remaining said they were not going anywhere.

I said: Great! Which are the places you will go to?

The children named many places, including Jangaon, Sankara, Dhamtari, Pahanda and Bhothali.

I asked: Do you go there every year? What do you do when you go there?

The children enumerated their activities excitedly – playing, drinking fresh cow's milk, relishing the treats cooked in their grandparents' homes, and bathing and swimming in the ponds.

They added that they had nowhere to swim near their homes but in the village not only did they get a chance to do that but can go for a bath in the morning and evening.

I replied: That sounds great! You seem to have a lot of fun there. Just like you, even I used to go to my grandmother's village in Bilaspur during my holidays. She had many cows and we used to get a lot of milk, curds and ghee. But tell me, all of you have been going to your native village for so many years, do you see any difference there then and now?

It was clear from the silence of the children that they did not comprehend my question clearly. Their teacher prompted them in Chhattisgarhi, 'How was the village when you visited it earlier and how do you feel when you go there now?'

Now there was a flurry of answers from the children:

- The water in the pond does not look as clear as before.
- The lakes were bigger earlier but now they are shrinking.
- The pond has been converted into a *gothan* (cow shelter).
- A house has been built where a *gothan* used to be.

The teacher was quite surprised to see the children's eager participation in the discussion and said to me, 'See ma'am, how well they are answering now! Otherwise, even after studying environmental science, they are unable to write the answers.' I understood then that it is very important to speak a familiar language for mutual communication.

The children continued: The houses have been made bigger by breaking the platform outside the house and the trees have been cut to make bigger houses. So now the place where we used to take rest when we got tired of running, is gone too. Some children also mentioned that during the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the shortage of money, some families had to sell their farms and cattle because of which they could no longer pick mangoes and berries to eat from the land that they formerly owned.

Now it was the turn of the children who were going to stay back during the holidays to speak. They were to stay back to take care of their younger siblings and help their parents with household chores. They said that they too face water shortages and have to help with filling, carrying and storing water in their homes during summer.

The teacher listened to them sympathetically and agreed with them since she had lived and worked in different places in Chhattisgarh which had also experienced water scarcity. She asked the children: You say that the pond has become dirty, and its size has reduced, but can you tell us how the pond can be saved?

She divided the children into two groups. One group, let us call them the *Activity Group*, was asked to dig a pit in the ground, and then fill it with water. When it dried up, more water was poured into it till the time the water stopped drying up. The other group, let us call them the *Survey Group*, was instructed to go to the village and ask the people about how to keep the pond water clean and save the pond.

### Results of the experiment

Both the groups were asked to bring their observations and reports in writing. On the second day, the children were ready with the results. These can be consolidated as follows:

1. The Activity Group's observation was that keeping the soil constantly wet led to the water in the pit being retained. The teacher and I connected the idea of the pit with that of the pond, saying that if the groundwater is to be increased, then we have to revive the ponds to save them.
2. The Survey Group's findings were that increasing population, continuous construction of *pucca* houses and exploitation of land are the main reasons for the disappearance of ponds. It is important to plant trees and to not fell them. The ponds need to be deepened, and not filled up with soil to make a pasture or build a house there.

### The end is the beginning

This dialogue brings out the fact that most of the children are aware that the water in the ponds is not like before, and it looked dirty. The children also figured out a way to solve the problem on their own.

This exercise also breaks the misconception that

children do not like to study or do not speak in class. It is important that their curiosity is given space, their words are patiently heard, and their questions and experiences are respected.

This was just one example. There are many issues like this that can be discussed in class to create awareness and sensitivity towards the environment and environmental challenges. Such exercises enable them to express their concern for the environment and be motivated to improve or maintain the quality of the environment. Environmental literacy, like any other form of literacy, is a must if we want children to grow up in a richer ecological world.

My personal experience is that environmental literacy tends to be confined to primary school. There is a lack of environmental awareness content in the subsequent classes. When children see in their own lives the events that they have studied about as a part of their curriculum, they learn better and are able to retain their learning. There is a need to seriously consider how to make environmental issues a part of the classroom dialogue. Had this not been felt as strongly as it was, the Supreme Court would not have intervened to include environmental literacy in the school curriculum in 1991.

#### **References**

Kothari Commission, 1964-1966

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