

# Recreating the joy of learning

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Setting the Context:

*Lakshmi Murmu Smriti Shishu Vidyalaya* is a school founded by the women of Chhachanpur Mahila Kalyan Samiti with the help of Kishore Bharati Trust (a trust comprising of senior school teachers of Kolkata who believe in the Tagorite model of education). The school is situated in a small adivasi hamlet called Chhachanpur, which is a part of a larger village called Shuarabakra. The founders of the school were Reba Murmu and Late Lakshmi Murmu, who initially ran an informal school within their own household where they taught and sheltered kids who were abandoned by their parents. As these two women were actively involved in various social awareness programs and financial program for women, they were able to create an SHG called Chhachanpur Mahila Kalyan Samity. The women of this samiti invested their savings to help establish a formal school along with the help of Kishore Bharati Trust and an Action Aid project coordinator Arunopol Seal. The idea was later built by Sindhunil Chatterjee, an action research fellow from Ambedkar University, Delhi.

[The school](#) was conceived as a place of congregation and discussion for villagers and a place for learning for their children, where the teaching would be an organic engagement; engagement not only in terms of the teacher student relationship but - towards the lifeworld of the children that came to the school. The idea was to keep the "Santhali lifeworld" alive amongst the Santhals, and to promote an essence of education following the pedagogical method of Tagore and Gandhi. The idea of 'labouring' was also an important aspect of the scheme which looked at learning from the lens of self-sufficiency, and believed in merging the conventional idea of studies with the daily life of the child. The other important influence was that of the [Bratachari](#)<sup>[1]</sup> movement which was adopted to promote a sense of somatic involvement into the process of learning values, language lessons and even numeric logic.

Understanding education in the current scenario

However, despite the influences on foundational values, these conceptions could not be materialised with the changing times and expectations of the community. As time progressed the community started viewing the school from the rigid lens of an "institution" that was expected to educate their children to suit the needs of the market; its essence of a collective effort to keep their own community values alive was gradually fading away. The teachers of Lakshmi Murmu Shishu Smriti Vidyalaya would hardly employ Gandhian, Tagorite or the values of Bratachari to teach. There is also a community pressure to guide learning and education in a certain manner, which often forced the teachers to use the techniques of rote learning to showcase their success of teaching. However, this method just generated a literate individual, devoid of learning. The methods used to educate in itself became so rigid and removed that it didn't incorporate the child's daily life and activity as a part of learning, rather it alienated the child further from his/her everydayness. A child who is also involved in collecting material for the survival of the household, who daily collects mushrooms for consumption and carefully chooses mushrooms that the family can consume, which would not be poisonous, s(he) also carefully chooses the firewood that would burn better, checks if the moisture content of the wood is not too high, these are the forms of knowledge that the child has learned from the everydayness of his/her life, these tasks are form of the tacit knowledge the child has imbibed through examining his surrounding, yet s(he)is made to realise that these chores are not real forms of learning, the only learning s(he) can be provided is by attending school and reading textbooks. The school education has created more distance, such that the 6 hours of schooling had no correlation with the 18 hours of the child's life. Children's contribution to the household work post school and tuition hours, which isn't recognised as work or even considered work through which a child can learn. Rather it is looked down upon by the families as something that the child should not continue in the long run as under the capitalist economic framework this work does not hold any monetary labour value. Not only the work done by the children is looked down upon, but the

aspiration of the child is shaped for a lifestyle that is completely separate or isolated from his lifeworld. When an activity that was a part of their everyday is suddenly rendered valueless then it can go on to facilitate a brain and hand divide such that the brain processes the monotony of the daily work rather than spotting an element of learning or the joy of doing some work. It becomes about finishing the work as fast as they can, without applying much thought, it becomes about finishing the chore without applying any thought to one's own work. "Education" shapes the aspiration of the community in a manner that facilitates rote learning, which can only be accomplished through mugging up text books of a certain kind, generating a process of alienation of the child from his/her everydayness.



[A trip to the river](#)

Emergence of 'Leaf Art' as a way of Learning:

My work in Chhachanpur became about rethinking 'education' and its practices (largely through rethinking pedagogy) which would allow the children to critically engage with the process of education and learning. I am currently working with the students from the age group of 4-12, using material available naturally to the, facilitating experiential learning through the medium of various activities that would help develop the essence of learning. One of the activities that were planned and conducted by the children was the

leaf art

. I was a part of facilitating and observing the entire procedure. The children along with their peers initiated the activity through which, they could grasp the sense of the environment around them. One of the girls in that group, Rekha who is about 11 years old lead the activities. She collected some fallen Peepal leaves which were still green. She soaked them for 5 days, to drain out the chlorophyll and then dried the leaves in sunlight. After the leaves had dried completely, she used crayons to colour the leaves. The colourful dried leaves intrigued the other kids. They persuaded me with their own reasons and logic, where they spoke about how exciting the task seemed, they could do it in groups and learn a new activity thereby convincing me to do the same with them. The children then formed their own mini collective and gathered leaves together, following the procedure under Rekha's guidance. And by the end of the week the children had managed to develop colourful leaves. It was a part of their collective creation. It was through this experiment, the children developed an understanding of chlorophyll, the necessity of it, the means to drain out the "green" element and how they would use different resources {wind, sunlight, fire etc.) to dry the wet leaves without damaging it. There was an understanding around the delicate nature of the dried leaves, which made them extremely careful and responsible when it came to handling the entire process. This activity also helped in strengthening the peer relationship among students.



*Leaf Art*

The students, teachers and I now organize many such activities, to rethink pedagogy together. Often such activities lead us to diagnose the fundamental gaps of learning that remain unaddressed through our existing instructional design; One of the problems that got highlighted, which also lead me to the larger question of education was that of correlation of objects (i.e. its nature, colour, quantity, size etc.) with the associated words we know. Once the children of the community and myself were busy painting stones together to decorate our classroom, but it is only when I asked them to pick up three stones and keep them in one corner, they were unable to count, some were also unable to identify the colours with their corresponding words. This situation deepened the understanding of what learning could be. Several activities post that event were planned to facilitate learning, which does not isolate the children from their lifeworld. The children now colour the stones together and draw their understanding of colours and numbers from it collectively. The activity fairs even better when the children are divided in pairs and help each other to learn. It's an exercise to build up peer relationship through care rather than competition. We in our school are trying to use innovative ideas, to build up a curriculum beyond textbooks. The pedagogy of such a mechanism involves participation of the teachers, students and parents, to be able to guide

the children in the process of learning. The idea is to bring parents, students and the teachers on the same platform. In such a scenario the child gets back the lost agency, s(he) gets to participate in the decision making processes and reclaim learning. The platform works as a reflective co-learning mechanism, which enables the parents to look at learning as a day to day aspect, beyond a textual medium.



*Our stones, our abacus*

One of the parents who approached me was Krishna didi. She wanted to dwell deeper into the idea of children being self-taught at home without tuitions and how can one work around learning. In our conversations came up the plight of the mothers where, they think of themselves as people who can't impart knowledge or "teach." The meaning of the word teaching has completely changed since the idea of teaching space, and teaching style has started to be viewed under a rigid structure. The mothers who have access to their children, most of the time, have started believing that they are incapable of parting any "useful" knowledge to the child. This can also be understood under the light that women's voices have been historically marginalized, and kept on getting reinforced during the era of colonization and modernization similar to the situation in Europe until the 16th century, when formal education was the sole privilege of aristocratic men, colonialism might have played in further subjugation of subaltern Indian women without much agency caught between "patriarchal subject formation and imperialist object construction." To deal with such a notion, it becomes important to reflect on one's daily life, in a sense that, the mothers had to consider their own labour as worthy and had to believe that they are capable to impart knowledge. So we started with mothers asking the children to count the number of glasses and then fill them with water. Arranging plates according to their sizes. Such activity made the parents, reflect on their own lives as a mechanism of teaching and learning.

#### [Understanding Pedagogy through lifeworld of the child](#)

As Jonathan Dawson said "Pedagogy is the Cinderella of the world of education, it is the most important member playing the most critical role, yet the most neglected". My work is to address this disconnect and create a method that talks about, how the basic curriculum of school can be learned through pedagogical techniques from the student's lifeworld. Is it possible to create a pedagogy that shapes out of both practice and theory? Is it possible to have a curriculum that is sensitive to the everyday practices and the worldview of the Adivasi and a theory that emerges out of their everyday, rather a theory that rests on a practice too foreign? The idea is to move away from the assumption that functions under the notion of "knowledge as a fixed body that can be only transmitted in subject specific compartments by the expert teacher and look beyond the idea that intellect can be only a legitimate faculty of learning which is age specific. (Johnathan Dawson)"

The idea is to move away from the mechanical idea of reading and writing, to realize the joy of learning. Instead of focussing on rote memorization and creation of a repetitive understanding of education, there is an attempt to move beyond the hierarchical working of the school system. The children learn how to arrange leaves and stones through the method of understanding shape and sizes that fit beyond the modernist discourse of square, rectangle etc. Not every shape they encounter would fit under a bracket, the aim is to take recognition of that.



*Learning shapes and size*

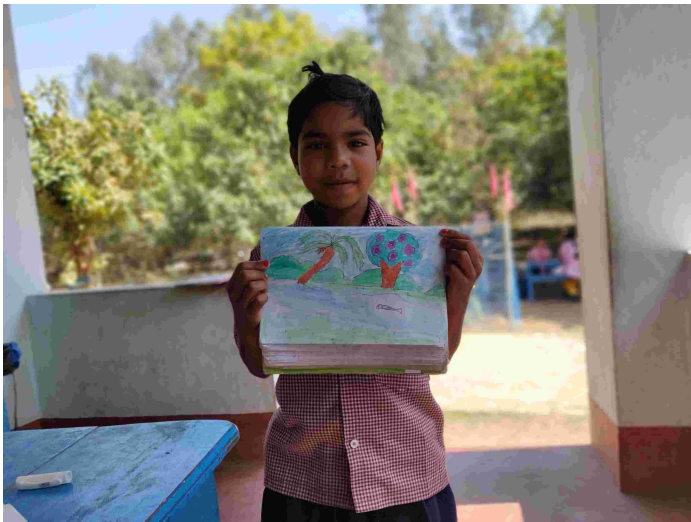
We conducted a nature study class, in which the students of 2<sup>nd</sup> grade had gone to the riverside along with me. It took them sometime to ease up. One of the girls had caught a tiny Tadpole. Post the nature study class, when the students were asked to draw their understanding of the river, one girl from the class, Anjali Soren, actually drew the river and the Tadpole her friend had caught. This was another eye opener for all of us regarding the child's observational power and how can it the pedagogy enhance the growth of the child. The idea is to help the child understand its own potential, formulate a curriculum from his own lifeworld and build capacities of children to articulate and express their understanding.





*We caught a tadpole!*

The language of the child here is facilitated with or without words, the idea of our pedagogy is to create activities through the existing conditions that allows the child to decipher the world around him/her, in their way. The child shall learn to both read, write and articulate the unarticulated but not by brute force or through the medium of rote learning. The learning shall be derived out of the child's usual routine which shall be used to make a systematic pedagogy to revive the joy of learning and the essence of education.



*Nature study class*

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<sup>[1]</sup> *Bratachari Movement: Started by Sri Gurusaday Dutta as a movement to promote 'folk traditions', dance practices to educate, sensitize and organize youths for the betterment of society. The essence is indoctrinated through vows or Bratas taken by volunteers of the movement. Refer to <http://www.gurusadaymuseum.org/bratachari.html>*

Contact *the author*