

# The mainstreaming education

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Ladakh is situated in the northern most part of India. It lies beyond the mighty Himalayas. Administratively, the region is divided into two districts: Leh and Kargil. From 31 October, the status of union territory awaits the trans-Himalayan region. The Himalayas had not allowed monsoon clouds to pass over to Ladakh. As a result, Ladakh boasts of a unique high altitude desert ecology. Even though clouds could not get an entry, cultural ideas have crossed over to Ladakh with aplomb. Buddhism first spread to Ladakh from 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD from Kashmir and Islam from 14<sup>th</sup> century. In spite of the spread of mainstream religions, pre-Buddhist animistic beliefs have survived, mainly in the Buddhist part of Ladakh. This belief system presents a different worldview of the Ladakhis. It showcases a different way of perceiving of space, happiness and well-being. In the present age of spread of global mono-culturalism, these types of real difference are being wiped out. Mainstream education system has been one of the central vehicles in that difference eradication mission. In this context, this article is a critique the mainstream or the mainstreaming education system.

Let us begin with a quote of Tagore. "What we now call a school in this country is really a factory, and the teachers are part of it. At half-past ten in the morning the factory opens with the ringing bell, then, as teachers start talking, the machines start working. The teachers stop talking at four in the afternoon when the factory closes, and the pupils then go home carrying with them a few pages of machine-made learning.....one advantage of factory is that it can make goods exactly to order. Moreover, the goods are easy to label, because there is not much difference between what the different machines turn out."

I will urge you all to focus on the last words: "there is not much difference between what the different machines turn out."

I was born in a village called Hemis-shukpa-chan, 80 kms west of Leh. In the village, I was taught that rocks, water and mountains could be homes of spirits. Spirits are known locally as **Lha** and **Lu**. A big rock, believed to be residence of a spirit, still live in my village house. Comfortably and proudly, it commands over one of the rooms of our house. The house was repaired by my father in 1980s. Before him, my great grandparents constructed it for the first time. No one dared to move the rock, let alone break it to convert it into building material. This sacred rock is not a one-off case. In fact, the whole village is a sacred manifestation. The village is sometime called as **Lu-sa** which means land owned by the spirits.

What does this belief system tells us? It tells us that in the perception of reality of the Ladakhis there are more-than-human elements in the world. The world is beyond the materiality that can be seen by naked eyes. In the natural world, humans share space with the interesting, yet very scary, world of capricious spirits. The humans in this world are not the omnipotent individual that liberal philosophers like Locke and Mill taught us. Humans are not the centre of the happening in this world. They are at best supporting actors in the drama of the natural world. Seeing spirits in springs, rocks and mountains, in a way, renders them living. Giving live and name to springs allow humans to see from the perspective of the springs. It also gives rise to an interaction with nature that mimics environmental protection. It also intimately bound up Ladakhis with the natal earth or soil.

Then at some point in life school happened to me at Leh. I was not a good student. Even an academically poor student like me, vividly remember the stage in school where the differentiation between living and non-living thing was taught. Rocks, mountains, lakes, springs, earth and so on were taught to be non-living things. The root of this differentiation is the separation between humans and nature paradigmatic of western modernity.

The dualism between living and non-living thing was so convincing that it got struck in my mind. Few years ago I heard that the Jains believe everything to be living, I scoffed at their belief. This also made the Buddhist part in me feel superior thinking that Buddhism is more scientific. This I did without realizing that scientific method or positivism is the reason behind why Ladakhi and other indigenous worldviews got foreclosed. Few days ago I presented a paper at Central Institute of Buddhist Studies, Leh on environmental ethics that emerges from the old Ladakhi worldview. The discussion that ensued after the presentation was very saddening for me. People walked up to me asking whether there are *Lha* and *Lu* in reality. Such was the hold of positivism on Ladakhis that they completely missed the point of seeing reality differently. Or seeing reality as our ancestors saw. And yes, there are spirits, for those who believe in it. My father attributes his success in life to the rock that live in our village house. Also, *Lha* and *Lus* could also be looked at as concepts in Ladakh and Tibet, like equality, justice and liberty are in the English world. I cannot go to the market and order three-kgs of equality. Can I? I cannot show *Lhas* and *Lus* like modernity cannot show me equality and justice. To bring in practice the idea of *Lha* and *Lu* people created *Lakhang*, *Lhato* (both are structure erected to house the spirits), rites and rituals around it. These are where the concept could be located. Similarly, the supposedly advanced people located equality and justice under various articles of constitutions. To be sure, I am not anti-science. I am not saying that I will not visit an orthopaedist if I break my legs. I am only questioning the ways of knowing and being taught to us through education system based predominantly on methods of science.

To understand that there are differently ways of knowing and being, this Ladakhi had to wait till 2017. In 2017 I went to the tribal belt of southern Odisha. I lived in *Kondha* adivasi village for almost a year to do an action research project on education. Like the Tom Cruise of *The Last Samurai* I learned the *Kondha* way of seeing, being and knowing, and unlearned the modern ways. *Kondhas* believe that Earth is their mother in the literal sense of the word. All their *pujas* are to propitiate the spirit of their Mother. Similarly, there are the spirits of the water, forests, hills and so on. These elements of nature are all living in their worldview. Whatever the *Kondha* taught me, also opened up my village and my community in a very different way altogether.

I was struck, *then*, by these questions: what was and is being taught to tribal communities? Are schools acting as training centres for the tribal people to prepare them for the 9 to 5 jobs of the industrial society? Are we groomed to be consumers? Are we taught our way out from the place based economy? It is to prepare the tribal children to normalize selling of labour power as commodity in the market? Or, are we made into job seekers? The supposedly privileged tribal children are made into corporate and government job seekers and the supposedly underprivileged become *stapa* (horsemen who transport trekker's luggage), drivers, sepoy, watchmen, clerks at big travel agencies. Education mass produces cognitive students, and then, is education facilitating *turning away* of the educated from the masses, from practice, from agriculture, from culture and from nature?

Let us again reread the previous line of Tagore: "there is not much difference between what the different machines turn out." A school going child in Leh is not very different from a school going Khasi child in Shillong or an Irula tribe child in Coimbatore. This is because schools in a way remove the children from the influence of their communities, from the communities' way of being, knowing, seeing and from the agricultural seasonal work in the fields. Today I can speak and write English but cannot grow barley. So I have to buy chaki atta probably grown in Punjab from shops in Leh. I cannot but participate in the long distance trades.

Similarly, the ambience of my home and village was completely missing in the school. Then there was the disciplining about timings, sitting and standing in silence, about hygiene. Everything was monitored, routinised and enforced with massive force. Moreover, western style clothes were promoted and Ladakhi

ornaments were prohibited. A distinct identity of the region that I come from was the plaited ponytails that men spotted. These markers of outwardly differences were killed, the moment I was enrolled. I have a bigger lost to add to this. I lost fathers when I was enrolled in school. I am product of polyandrous marriage. However, monogamy was the norm of the educated. Father's name had to be written in the official records of the school. But there was only space for one.

To end this, education system is way of indoctrinating children into mainstream values and aspirations, and mainstream way of seeing reality which are far removed from those of their own communities. But at the same time I don't want my views on education to be uni-dimensional. For educational spaces like universities are also spaces where women find freedom from patriarchal set-ups like families and societies.

Based on a talk given by the author

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