

Integrating Culture and Environmental Education for Sustainability to Develop Values

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Abstract

India is a traditional country with values ingrained in its culture. The values absorbed in the early years of life are long lasting in life and therefore values are gradually taking their rightful place in the education system. Value-based environmental education can bring in a total transformation of our mindset, attitudes and lifestyles. The objective of this paper is to identify few cultural practices ingrained in the Indian cultural heritage, and bring out a few strategies to expose children to the strong value system, to achieve sustainability by caring for the nature.

INTRODUCTION

Values are gradually taking their rightful place in the education system. Like science that had experimented with 'value-free' science, our experience with education has also convinced us that education without values would be meaningless at best

and a disaster at worst. Hence, the effort all around for value education. Our experiences with life have further made us aware of instilling the value of sustainability in our children and youth. Sustainability can be seen as an umbrella value that incorporates several other values like those of

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tolerance, equity, sensitivity, respect, etc. When we talk about sustainability, it encompasses things that are local, small scale, contextual. Thus, sustainability as a value has much to do with culture and traditions. There is a need to revisit cultural practices for their sustainability aspect. This is the attempt of this paper. The purpose is two fold — identify cultural practices that can contribute to value development for sustainability, and suggest strategies for including these practices in the school routines.

India has a rich heritage of practices for stimulating development and inculcating *sanskaras* or basic values and social skills in children. In the past, this was transferred from one generation to the other primarily within families through traditional methods and practices (National Early Childhood and Care Education Curriculum Framework, 2013). Young children acquire moral values at home by observing and emulating the ways in which their parents or the adult world around them behaves. The values, thus absorbed in childhood remain with them for the whole life. They become the integral part of the culture all around them. The same way, the adult world sees social values the way they have been shown in their childhood. Maria Montessori (1870–1952) observed that children pass through periods of heightened sensitivity when their minds are absorbent. They literally acquire everything through the skin from their physical surroundings,

and therefore are never really content unless they live in a region similar to the climate and landscape of the one where they spent their early years.

In recent years, there is a globally emerging realisation of the importance (Position Paper on Early Childhood Education, 2005 and NEP, 2020) of the early years and instilling values for a healthy and dignified life, and such a kind of life can only be realised by caring for the environment or every element of 'Mother Earth'. Therefore, value-based environmental education must be imparted right from childhood, so that the child internalises these values and the heart resonates with this education.

Education is a life-long process and an effective tool for all round development of the individual. Gandhiji rightly said that, "Education is the preparation for complete living, adjustment to environment, perfection of one's nature, character-building and harmonious development of personality." It has an implication that education has the responsibility not only to provide training in three R's (Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic), but also to draw out the best in the child by stimulating the spiritual, intellectual and physical faculties of the child (Singh, 2010).

Environmentally sustainable behaviour is not easy to achieve because ensuring a sustainable planet that is hospitable for future generations will mean curtailing some of our wants and desires now

(Nickerson, 2003). Environmental Sustainability Education (ESE) can help change attitudes and behaviours towards environment friendly practices. UNESCO (2005), the lead agency for Education for Sustainable Development, describes ESE as that which enables learners to build sustainable and resilient societies by overcoming challenges and making informed decisions to ensure environmental integrity, economic viability and a just society.

ESE should include some equally important goals like providing knowledge about sustainability, creating feelings of empathy for the environment and others, and also encourage learners to perform environment friendly practices.

BRINGING ATTITUDINAL CHANGE THROUGH ESE

From the cognitive knowledge point of view, it is seen that learners seem to have an understanding of the environment and its factors. However, what is less developed are the expected behavioural acts. Environmental Sustainability Education (UNESCO, 2005) can generate an attitude of environmental friendliness and produce lasting changes in learner's attitude with regard to their behaviours and acts. How do we evaluate the expected changes in learners' attitude towards environment? Gagne et al., (1992) defined attitude as psychological evaluation of a person's understanding and response towards an object, person or an event. An

effective analysis of such nature can be achieved considering the cognitive, affective and behavioural components of a learner, (Kamradt, 1999). Analysis of cognitive component of a person is based on exposure of the person to information, gathered knowledge and, conversion of the same into thought process. Such accumulations will have an impact on emotions and feelings which should or will transcend into actions of the person(s) towards an object, person or an event, (Kamradt and Kamradt, 1999).

BRINGING BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE THROUGH ESE

It is high time that acts like for example, throwing the wrapper of a chocolate or a packet of chips on the street, or a dustbin or converting these into garlands or other recycled products are differentiated into different strata of learning outcomes. These acts are commonly committed by learners who have a minimum sense of understanding about environment and its factors. The objective of Environment Sustainability Education is to generate a sense of belongingness, positive attitude and acts that have immediate and long lasting impacts on sustainability of the planet itself. Cultural practices and certain rituals can enable us to instill such belongingness in the young minds. Many a times for example, it is seen that learners have the knowledge of recycling but it is the lack of sensitivity, decision-making ability and tenacity to go for recycling.

ESE as such should put stress to bring in long lasting behavioural changes in the learners which will ensure that the good practices are not eroded with time due to various inconveniences, (Hungerford and Volk, 1990). Sustainably education must generate a sense of personal responsibility amongst learners towards rehabilitation of the environment with innovative ideas to solve a particular environmental problem (Griset, 2010). Awareness and intentions may not bring in behavioural changes, (Arbuthnott, 2009). Behavioural changes depend on constraints, barriers and negative perceptions against those behaviours (Tucker, 1999), and ESE is not successful until the learners' exhibit environment-friendly behaviours in real life.

Value-based environmental education can bring in a total transformation of our mind-set, our attitudes and our lifestyles. The values that need to be instilled in the children are social values, cultural values, global values, spiritual values, ethical values; and all these values are to be nurtured so that all forms of life and the biodiversity on this earth are protected.

Environmental Education needs to weave the basic teachings of our religion, i.e., love, compassion, tolerance and justice so as to bring about a sensitive child into this world. Tolerance for pluralism, compassion for all and love for the motherland are core civilisational values of India

where hundreds of languages, ethnic tribes and all major religions coexist under the same umbrella. Exposing children to such values will help them to learn to live with positive human values and thus bring social cohesion and strong-value culture. Ethical values like earth-centric livelihood and actions, instead of human-centric actions of exploiting nature for the comfort of man leading to devastation of the environment is of utmost necessity.

Truth, self-restraint, self-discipline, contentment, kindness, free from greed and austerity, are intricately woven in Indian tradition. All these values promote conservation rather than being consumers of nature.

Living in harmony with nature has been an integral part of Indian culture. This has been abundantly reflected in a variety of traditional practices, religious beliefs, rituals, folklore, arts and crafts, and in the daily lives of the Indian people from time immemorial (Nair, 2016). People of this land revere nature and mountains, rivers, animals, plants, rocks, planets and even stars are considered divine. Trees being nature's major processors of solar energy which is vital for our existence, and yielding flowers, fruit, wood or medicine, have been worshiped by the people as a matter of gratitude. According to the Indian value system Sun (Surya), Air (Vayu), Water (Ganga), Fire (Agni), Soil (Bhumi), Forest (Van), etc., is revered Gods and Goddess. Sun or Surya is

worshipped as it is considered the creator of the universe and the source of all life. The Sun God is the supreme soul who brings light and warmth to the world and is the ultimate source of all energy. Water is a lifeline of human civilisations and traditionally people of India worship rivers.

A river provides water for irrigation. The banks are very fertile lands for agriculture and this leads to a lot of people having a means of livelihood. Farmers and fishermen highly benefitted from the presence of rivers around their areas of cultivation. Therefore, people worship river out of gratitude as it supports many lives. River Ganges is also believed to wash away all the sins that the mortals commit on this Earth, as the river has inherent cleansing properties (Deshpande, 1951). The Kumbh Mela organised every year is an example of the belief system and the value associated with it. There are other rivers in the country which are considered auspicious likewise. The air/wind (Vayu), is that which flows, is an energetic force that moves in a specific direction to control bodily functions and activities. It is the breath of life and sustains life, and hence revered. The fire (Agni), since the beginning of the human civilisation has been a witness to all its activities. It not only gave light, heat or built a sense of security, but also helped the human civilisation flourish. The sacred groves are natural habitats in India having religious connotation but they stand tall as evidence of

man's respect for trees and forests. They serve as well-planned carbon sink, treasure house of medicinal plants, biodiversity hotspots and also pristine tourist destinations. For example, Mawphlang Sacred Grove, Meghalaya (Shangpliang, 2010) and elsewhere in Kerala (Chandrashekara and Sankar, 1998), and other places. In many states, forests are associated with deities and people worship them as 'Van Devi' (Amirthalingam, 2014). Besides this, individual plants and trees also have a lot of importance in India and have been worshipped in the country since time immemorial. Example— *Peepal* tree, *Banyan* tree, *Bael* tree (Wood apple), *Mango* tree, *Neem* tree, *Coconut* tree, *Sandalwood* tree, *Banana* tree, *Tulsi* plant (Holy basil), etc. Celebration of '*Vanamahostav*' or 'tree festival' in the country is of great significance. These all examples are in favour of the philosophy 'man in nature' as against 'nature for man.'

These beliefs personify the elements of nature which makes it easier for people to relate with them. A river is not just a river, but mother, as in "Ganga Ma". The belief attached to addressing rivers as 'Ma' is that, the river has been the life source of civilisations. A whole set of cultures have emerged along river sites.

The need to harness the environment has emerged from so called 'development' that has taken place and that has replaced the traditional sustainable ways of living with intense consumption

predominated lifestyles. It is this need to control, consume and own all that is there that we need to address when developing sustainable values.

Sustainability

Sustainability is a value in the sense that it should permeate everything the person does. It is not only about conserving the environment. The child needs to learn that the environment conservation is the end product of a major reorientation in the lifestyle — consuming with the knowledge that generations to come would also require the same resources. Also, a sensitivity to the fact that the ecosystem belongs to several other species and not only humans who may be more ‘developed’, but then this fact invests in them more responsibility to take care of the other organisms around us. Sustainability, thus becomes an overriding value that subsumes several other values. It also means that the way of life is such where you live without hoarding for the future. A very important lesson to be learnt from the environment around us — birds and animals do not store. They go out and search for food every single day and bring back only that they can consume immediately.

TEACHING-LEARNING STRATEGIES

When we intend to instill certain values, the first step would probably be to make children aware of the desirability of doing so. Thus, we can begin by letting children themselves

identify what is required for them to live together in harmony and what are the obstacles to that. They can then be motivated to find out and practice the strategies that they themselves have developed. The whole process is somewhat akin to Socratic Thinking, which has to be guided by the teacher one step at a time. However, the results would be long lasting because the way of living would be a choice made by the child rather than an imposition or a ‘rule’ which all of us resist spontaneously. The process itself would also probably give a chance to develop several values like reasoning, quest for truth, sensitivity to multiple perspectives. Going out into the world to explore ideas and practices is one major way to instill strong values that lasts.

An oft-mentioned constraint in Environmental Education is the discontinuity between attitudes and behaviours. This is often seen when we assess attitudes towards the environment which are almost always very positive but they fail to get translated into matching behaviours.

Reverting to certain cultural practices could be a teaching-learning strategy. Cultural practices are so intertwined with cultural values that engaging in them will spontaneously bring in the attached value. If you light a lamp (*diya*) under the *Peepal* tree, you will think several times before deciding to chop it off. Those who worship the river as “mother” and source of all life will not pollute it.

Experiential learning is effective and long lasting. Children can be given a group task or assignment to identify cultural practices that have sustainable value components. Each child can do so at his family level and then get information from elders in the community. This would enable the school system to come up with a collection of culturally and ecologically relevant value rich practices. This would be a good way of sensitising the children to engage in some of those practices. A lot of cultural and traditional practices are being continued presently without the knowledge of why they were initially started. This gives several of them a superstitious garb. This has happened because mindlessly people have been following rituals they have seen being observed by their elders without knowing the logic or reason behind them. Thus, what started as an informed and relevant way of doing things turns into a meaningless ritual when the context of its origin is changed, because the practice has been passed on through observation without the knowledge system behind it. Such assignments can require children to rationalise or reject the so called 'rituals' based on their assessment as to the relevance and utility of these practices in their immediate context. However, before such assignments are given, some core values that the culture stands by need to be made explicitly clear to the learners.

Peer learning can be an effective method of ensuring that children adopt values and behaviours that are desirable. Children learn from their peers — though several times, we wish that they did not. This natural tendency can be used with necessary modifications or direction to spread values. The work that a small group of children comes up with — this is quite akin to a small research project if taken up earnestly — can be shared with the entire school in the morning assembly or in another school programme organised especially for sharing their findings. Apart from spreading the message/information/understanding that has been derived by a group of students, it will also ensure that children take up the inquiry into cultural practices with due seriousness because they know they will have to defend it before others. Discussions and debates that follow will clarify the issues and make the understanding deeper, and hence should be encouraged. All students who have taken up the inquiry should be encouraged to present before the school. In fact, all children should be engaged in this activity which should be taken up as a mega school project. It does not matter if there are overlaps in inquiries and the practices covered. The idea is to sensitise each child through his own experience and reflection.

The school as a system can then incorporate these cultural practices in different school routines. For example— planting a tree if we

worship a tree as a God — and our culture has not only trees where Gods abide but the entire forest is believed to be resided by Gods and other beings — we will think several times before chopping it off. These activities can be taken up by all children in the school and not be confined only to the monitors, etc. We need to remember that each child needs to have his own unique experience with the value enhancing attempts. Children will own these since they have together identified them. A unity of attitudes and behaviour can then be achieved.

Revisiting folklores and folktales with values inherent in them can also be a good way of bringing the children closer to the environment and develop sensitivity for it.

The students can also be asked to share practices that their friends and cousins in other schools are engaging in. However, any of these should be incorporated only after the students are convinced of their efficacy and relevance. This conviction can come after thoroughly debating the pros and cons of a practice or regimen that is sought to be adopted by the school and the learners.

For any value that is to be developed, a good idea would be to let children suggest ways of doing it. With modifications for feasibility, their ideas should be taken up. This would motivate them to continue with those routines.

Values, it is widely believed, are 'caught' and not 'taught'. Thus, it is imperative that everyone around

the child displays the same ways of dealing with people and situations that the child is being expected to display. Teaching a lesson on limiting our needs will not be effective when the children see all those around them consuming and acquiring more and more.

Rewards or consequences of actions will determine whether they would be repeated or not. A major reward that has been found to be intrinsically motivating is a sense of satisfaction for having done a good deed. It gives happiness which is the goal for all behaviour. Thus, creating opportunities where the child experiences these positive emotions is very important for strengthening environmentally friendly behaviours. Field trips and nature walk are two such activities. The exposure to the beauty, diversity and the importance of the natural environment in our life can be a powerful experience for the child to become sensitive to the environment. Engaging in community work where the child gets a sense of having been able to help others — either by participating in a sensitising programme or a cleanliness drive, etc. Participating in sensitising programmes may motivate children to change their behaviours to be consistent with what they have professed to others.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, we can reiterate again that values are a way of life. They will not be practiced under duress.

They will come spontaneously to children when they are ingrained in them. For the values to be ingrained in children, they need to imbibe them which in turn will happen only when the environment around the child is suffused with values. If children have to learn the value of kindness they need to experience it all around them — definitely as a lecture in the moral science class but also the way the parents treat their mistakes, how the teacher helps a child who could not complete his assignment due to his mother's sickness, how some children in the school give shelter to a stray pup and how the Principal of the school speaks to the

school gardener. Further, children need to be appreciated and given recognition for displaying these values. Values are not sporadic. They are what the person is and will be consistent across situations. A conscious effort and the knowledge of how our actions and behaviours are perceived and imbibed by our children is very important in value inculcation. Traditional systems are replete with values that have stood the test of time. Taking recourse to this traditional wisdom with a better and rational understanding may go a long way in making this most difficult task manageable.

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