Experiments in Critical Pedagogy

The Case of Netritva Vicharshala

Experiments in Critical Pedagogy

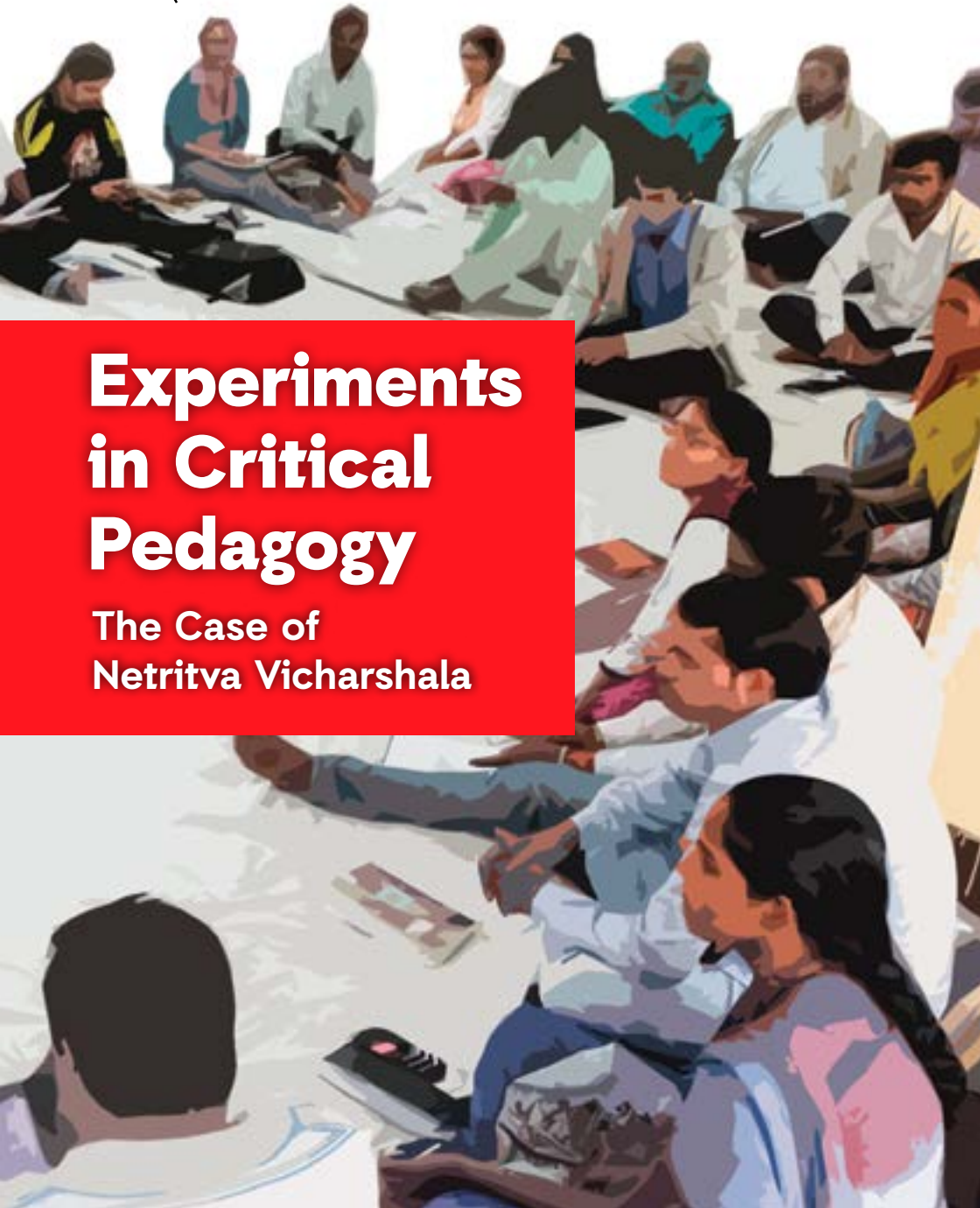## The Case of Netritva Vicharshala

GPN

Global Partnership Network

act:onaid

ActionAid Association (India)

Experiments in Critical Pedagogy
The Case of Netritva Vicharshala

Report written by:
Maduli Thaosen

Research Team:
Maduli Thaosen, Ritesh Khare

Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst
German Academic Exchange Service

ActionAid Association (India)

🌐 www.actionaidindia.org   ⓕ ⓣ @actionaidindia   🅾 actionaid_india

▶️ actionaidcomms   in @company/actionaidindia

Actionaid Association, F-5 (First Floor), Kailash Colony, New Delhi -110048.

📞 911-11-40640500

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

This publication presents a qualitative case study of Netritva Vicharshala, a leadership discourse school in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, against the framework of critical pedagogy. It explores the contours of critical pedagogy and examines how key concepts and themes unfold in this particular educational project. The report unravels the strategies for consciousness-raising employed in this school and also examines this process through the stand point of the learners. It looks at ways in which the educational experience empowers the learners, given their particular contexts. The research also examines ways in which NGOs, social movements, as well as universities can form a powerful nexus to produce conditions that challenge hegemonic cultures of neoliberalism, caste, and patriarchy.

FOREWORD

One of the most inspiring aspects of work with vulnerable communities, sections and groups is the courage and generosity of spirit demonstrated by an uncountable number of individuals who step forward to support, carry forward and initiate agendas of progressive change, not just for themselves, but for others. These people have often experienced situations and contexts that are not just challenging but daunting. People refuse to remain characterised as "victims", move beyond the confines of the term "survivor" and emerge as "activists" or "leaders". They help weave new networks of solidarity in communities and build new narratives of assertion of rights and securing justice. This is also true for ActionAid Association. The expanding areas and arenas of work of the organisation rests squarely on the shoulders of the many thousands of community-based activists and leaders we have the proud privilege of working with.

Teaching and learning processes are a very important component of the nurturing of these, very often young, activists. ActionAid Association has for decades run a variety of education programmes to encourage these community-based activists and leaders to take on wider roles and engagements for the assertion of rights by deprived and vulnerable communities. Of late the need was felt to reflect on these processes as see how these people's educational processes can be done more effectively, and be expanded in both nature and scope.

"Experiments in Critical Pedagogy: The Case of Netritva Vicharshala" is a qualitative case study of the Netritva Vicharshala, a leadership discourse school in Bhopal. It explores the contours of critical pedagogy and examines how key concepts and themes unfold in this particular educational project. The paper unravels the strategies for consciousness-raising employed in this school and also examines this process through the stand point of the learners. It looks at ways in which the educational experience empowers the learners, given their particular contexts. The research also examines ways in which civil society organisations, social movements, as well as universities can form a powerful nexus to produce conditions that challenge hegemonic cultures of neoliberalism, caste and patriarchy.

Given that there are not a lot of schools of critical thinking which run in close collaboration with social movements, political parties and academia, it is good

to explore these new institutions and ideating spaces in order to develop them further.

We hope to incorporate changes and strengthen these initiates as essentially schools of change.

Readers inputs are always welcome!

Sandeep Chachra
Executive Director
ActionAid Association

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

We live in a society where most aspects of human life follow a market rationality; capitalism subsumes and consumes all of previous history and assigns cultural objects a monetary value. Art, media, religion, education are commodified and the individual's identity as a consumer precedes all others (Fisher, 2009). Neoliberalism has exacerbated all forms of social and economic inequality, producing a mass of workers characterised by chronic uncertainty and insecurity (Standing, 2011). With corporate monopoly over economic power and the subsequent weakening of unions, a culture of cynicism, insecurity, and passivity has overtaken the public sphere; capitalist exploitation is seen as an inevitability in society's larger quest for economic growth and commitments to social justice are externalised to the realm of the state, non-profits and democratic associations, with marginal hope. Democratic politics is reduced to the symbolisms of suffrage with little public engagement on conditions of equality and social justice.

What we are witnessing today is a crisis of democracy correlated with a crisis of culture, and education. The public sphere, which is at the heart of any substantive democracy, is reduced to a space for corporate and political marketing. Henry Giroux argues that this condition is a product of a corporate public pedagogy, "a powerful ensemble of ideological and institutional forces whose aim is to produce competitive, self- interested individuals vying for their own material and ideological gain" (Giroux, 2011). In Raymond Williams' terms – neoliberalism has reconfigured the cultural politics of our times, paving way for a new "permanent education" in which dominant sites of pedagogy engage in diverse forms of pedagogical address to put into play a limited range of identities, ideologies, and subject positions that both reinforce neoliberal social relations and undermine the possibility for democratic politics. (Giroux, 2011)

There is a need to expand our understanding of education beyond the realm of schools and universities and locate it in the sphere of culture as well; art, social media, television, video games, and advertisements form a public pedagogy that socialise our thinking, legitimise certain discourses, reinforce social norms and shape our value systems. As a result of corporate ownership of majority of these sites of pedagogy, citizens have been reduced to the status of passive consumers of the interests of the dominant elites, with little opportunity for debate and discussion on public concerns.

In the recent decades, there has been a considerable shift in the dominant attitude towards formal education. Schools and universities are seen as means of gainful employment, and less as spaces to cultivate one's critical capacities. The rapid privatisation of educational institutions across the world has further contributed to the making of depoliticised, homogenous groups of student-consumers as these spaces are dominated by a highly competitive and individualistic student culture, and is accessible only to the rich and the 'meritorious'. Moreover, students are pressured by families and cultural norms into choosing STEM majors (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) over those in the arts, humanities, and interpretive social sciences (which centre discourses on civic education) as the former are seen as job-guaranteeing degrees (Brown, 2011). The hierarchisation of STEM over arts and humanities is evident in the skewed division of resources in favour of the latter[1]; this is symptomatic of the transmogrification of universities as domains for the enhancement of human capital.

---

1. Of the total expenditure on research by the UGC, less than 12% was allocated to research in social and basic sciences in 2009-10. During 2006-2010, the total grant to ICSSR was 2.3% of the total grant to the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) and approximately 11% of the total grant to the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR).
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08abee5274a31e0000754/60911-MappingReport_social_science.pdf

On the other hand, critical pedagogy entails an approach to education that is diametrically opposite to neoliberal forms of educational cultures and imaginations. It is a teaching and learning model that calls on people to develop a process of individual and social awareness that fosters practices and traditions of questioning, dialogue, and social justice. It seeks to unmask the prevailing conditions of alienation and exploitation in society through an examination of systems, institution, rules and regulations, cultural practices, and more. Critical pedagogy inspires a mode of reflection and action that challenges most of the basic articulating principles of capitalism, such as individualism, profit-making, hierarchies and inequities. (Torres, 2019).

With this context, let us understand Netritva Vicharshala as an experiment in critical pedagogy. Netritiva Vicharshala (the leadership discourse), is an educational initiative geared towards providing grassroot activists, community leaders, and the youth a socially just perspective through which they can navigate politics that shapes their everyday lives. It employs a critically-oriented pedagogy that allows for greater understanding of co-constitutive nature of politics, perspectives on economy, development, gender, power, patriarchy, caste, and many others. Netritva Vicharshala comprises a 10-day residential educational programme where learners engage with progressive ideas and perspectives in the classroom and beyond; the residential design of the programme provides unique opportunities to dive deep into ideas discussed in class and share knowledge, learnings, and personal histories with fellow participants. It provides a space for peer-group learning and to cultivate a sense of solidarity among the diverse group of learners. A significant proportion of participants at this school come from marginalised communities such as Dalits, indigenous, DNTs (Denotified and Nomadic Tribes) and religious minorities; they are all part of different struggles and bring their own unique perspectives and experiences to the programme. Moreover, learners engage with ideas through immersive activities such as music, dance, and theatre, fostering creativity in learning and communication.

This report decodes the pedagogy of Netritva Vicharshala using key themes and concepts associated with critical pedagogy. It takes a look at its foundations, spatial and curriculum design, as well as classroom dynamics to create a portrait for what an educational project for democratic thinking looks like in the Indian context. The paper examines how dialogue as a pedagogic tool aids the process of consciousness raising and ways in which the use of art supplements this process. Additionally, the paper looks at the process of learners' critical self- reflection and its impact in their work and everyday lives. Through this, the attempt is also to critique the dominant models of education and present Netritva Vicharshala as an alternative model or a point of departure for critical education that foregrounds local and situated knowledges.

Chapter II

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The following research is a qualitative case study of the alternative pedagogy of Netritva Vicharshala against the theoretical framework of critical pedagogy. It seeks to answer two central questions: a) what is the pedagogy of Netritva Vicharshala? b) If and how does it work to produce critical subjectivities? The research sketched a portrait of the curriculum as well as the practices and strategies employed to inspire critical consciousness among the learners.Then it examined learners' experiences by looking at ways in which they have engaged with the coursework and how that has informed their perceptions about themselves and society, and their actions towards social transformation.

A purposive sample was used in order to ensure representation of people from diverse marginalised backgrounds. This was important to gauge the emancipatory potential of the coursework and provide critical insights into connections between identity, power, knowledge production, authority, and voice.

About the Interviewees

There were three sets of people interviewed for the purpose of this project: 15 grass-root activists and NGO workers (learners), four resources persons, and the organisers.

» Of the 15 participants of Netritva Vicharshala, there were nine women and six men.

» Since Netritva Vicharshala is geared towards the leadership training of grassroots activists, especially from marginalised communities,

14 of 15 individuals were from such communities (Dalit, OBCs, Adivasis, DNTs or religious minorities).

» Geographically, they were situated across Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. Barring one individual, all of them lived and worked in rural settings.

» The age of the participants ranged from 25-55 years.

The four resource persons interviewed were Ram Puniyani (independent scholar), Sanjay Singh (Delhi University), Sarika Sinha (ActionAid Association), and Yogesh Dewan (Jan Pahel) who have been a part of Netritva Vicharshala since its inception and have facilitated sessions on Communalism, Development of Society, Feminism, and Leftist Ideology, respectively. Sarika Sinha and Yogesh Dewan, also members of the organising team, were interviewed along with Sandeep Chachra, ActionAid Association's Executive Director.

Data Collection

Primary Data Source: Semi-structured Interviews

The semi-structured interviews of the participants included explorations of their personal histories, work experience, socio-economic context, community dynamics, experiences at the leadership school and its impact in their public and private lives, etc. On the other hand, the interviews with the resource persons/ facilitators explored, their pedagogical orientation and strategies, the curriculum design, their positionality, beliefs/engagement with critical ideas, work history, etc. Lastly, the organisers were interviewed in order to get a deep understanding of the mission and purpose of this initiative, as well as the future vision. In all these interviews, the context of the research was explained and consent sought.

Secondary Data Source: Netritva Vicharshala Curriculum

Netritva Vicharshala's session plans and curriculum over the years were assessed in the backdrop of the literature explored in this study and interviews with the organisers.

Research Limitations

The COVID-19 pandemic posed several barriers in the research process:

» Firstly, an ethnographic exploration of the educational experience could not be conducted because of the school's non-operational status during the pandemic. Such an exploration would had contributed to the richness of the qualitative study.

» Video and audio interviews were conducted on Zoom that were hampered by connectivity issues for many participants. The flow of the interviews was frequently disrupted because of calls getting disconnected.

» As most participants took the interviews from their homes, some of them were bound by household chores, which resulted in many interruptions during the call.

LITERATURE REVIEW: ON EDUCATION AND CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Education and Society

Education, in principle, is a means to an end (Larsen, 2017). What it seeks to achieve is inevitably determined by cultural and political forces of the time. In an era dominated by nationalist and neoliberal forces, the meta-narrative of the 'goal' of (formal) education is to enhance human capital, to produce 'efficient' workers, and to generate experts who will contribute to the nation's economic growth. At the level of the individual, education is sought to achieve employability that will enable the individual to amass highest possible earnings and a desirable status in society. Such is the general condition of education in our times.

The western classical tradition viewed liberal education as simply the cultivation of intellect, where the object was to achieve intellectual excellence (Heredia, 1995). In this regard, education becomes a means to gain a mastery over a body of knowledge. The study of a particular subject matter, be it science, technology or economics, becomes de-linked from notions of politics of knowledge production, social justice and everyday political realities.

Rabindranath Tagore was a vehement critic of the classical university imagination that was limited to the cultivation of the intellectual and the cognitive self, foreclosed from the praxis of being-in-the-world, distinguished from the culture of the masses. He believed that the university had to go beyond its narrow role of being merely an institution of learning and knowledge production, and ground its work in the larger project of social transformation (Dhar, 2018).[2] The inauguration of Shantiniketan

---

2. https://cafedissensus.com/2016/09/15/what-if-the-university-is-a-parrots-training/

and Sriniketan was representative of his turning away from the 'parrot's training' of the classical university and his foray into a kind of a pedagogy resembling what we understand as critical pedagogy today. His ideas can also be understood in opposition to the brahmanic pedagogical model of 'guru-shishya' wherein the Guru would impart traditional knowledge to the Shishya through a relationship of authority-obedience (Heredia, 1995).

In Tagore, Dewey, and the Imminent Demise of Liberal Education (2009), Martha Nussbaum cautions us of the crisis in education ushered in by the dominance of the 'profit-motive' in the field of education and the larger cultural sphere. She draws upon the works of John Dewey and Rabindranath Tagore to argue for an education for democratic citizenship, and asserts the importance of the humanities and the arts for the cultivation of a sympathetic and critical public culture. She delineates three abilities that education must cultivate for a healthy democracy – capacity for Socratic self-criticism, the ability to see oneself as a member of a heterogeneous community, and understanding the history and character of the diverse groups, and finally, the Narrative Imagination, which is the ability to sympathise and empathise with other members of society.

For Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, education had immense emancipatory potential and was central to emancipation and survival of marginalised people. He wrote:

"The backward classes have come to realise that after all education is the greatest material benefit for which they can fight. We may forego material benefits, we may forego material benefits of civilisation, but we cannot forego our right and opportunities to reap the benefit of the highest education to the fullest extent. That is the importance of this question from the point of view of the backward classes who have just realised that without education their existence is not safe."- (Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, 1982)

He also believed that the education system should be geared towards social transformation, rather than the perpetuation of knowledge that

uphold the status quo (unlike the Brahmanic pedagogic traditions that glorified the traditional order). This belief is epitomised in Article 46[3] of the Indian Constitution[4] hat states, "The State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, and, in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation." Zene (2018) notes that Article 46 urges the State to not only care for the education of the "weaker section" but also demands the State to be truthful to democracy and social justice by reiterating that it is not enough to "enunciate the principle of justice," for commitment to praxis is needed "to make it effective" (p. 496).

Most theories on emancipatory education, like critical pedagogy, are greatly influenced by Marxist interpretations of reality. Marxist conceptions of culture, ideology, class struggle, capitalism, labour, and many others have been important analytical tools in understanding relationships of subordination and to articulate modes of resistance. One of the most influential Marxist theorists in this regard is Antonio Gramsci. His concept of 'hegemony', which harkens back to ideas in Marx's *The German Ideology*, is an important concept to understand the political realities of marginalised people.

Gramsci's theory of hegemony helps us understand domination as occurring not merely through force, but also by ideas; dominant classes win consent from subordinate classes by dominating cultural forms, resulting in the latter internalising their subordination and perceiving dominant interests as the ideal (Gramsci, 1971). Education plays an important role in ensuring the cultural and ideological hegemony of dominant groups; through control of educational sites, dominant groups control the process of knowledge production and mould the aspirations and value systems of society by foregrounding their interests and obscuring those of subordinate

---

3. Article 46: Promotion of educational and economic interests of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other weaker sections (https://indiankanoon.org/doc/352126/)

4. Dr. Ambedkar was the Chairman of the Drafting Committee

groups. This idea is further extrapolated by Athusser (1994), who theorises educational institutions as the ideological apparatus of the state, which work to construct the desired 'good citizen' through instruction. For Althusser, it is also other institutions like media, the family, religious institutions, etc., that mask, conceal, and legitimise the interests of the dominant classes.

In *The Prison Notebooks* (1971), Gramsci distinguished between two kinds of intellectuals – 'traditional' and 'organic.' Traditional intellectuals work upon existing knowledge and articulate the interests of those holding power and simultaneously 'put themselves forward as autonomous and independent of the dominant social group.' On the other hand, subordinate classes produces their own 'organic intellectuals,' which form a subversive intellectual force that is grounded in the everyday life of people's struggles, and organises in support of their interests.

Gramscian ideas of cultural politics were crucial in shaping critical pedagogy as an oppositional force aimed towards countering the cultural hegemony of dominant groups. Another theorist whose ideas on cultural domination are relevant to our analysis is Pierre Bourdieu. For Bourdieu, dominant groups have their power legitimised through symbolic systems. His concept of 'misrecognition', which refers to the everyday social processes that naturalise domination, allows us to look at how education perpetuates the symbolic violence of dominant groups. In Reproduction *in Education, Society and Culture* (1978), Bourdieu asserts how the cultural reproductionist character of education of schools results in the reproduction of the whole social system (or social formation). For example, schooling encourages pursuit of credentials that entails the learning of 'legitimate' culture, simultaneously masking the reproduction of class domination that is the result of such participation. (ibid. p.164-7). However, exposing such misrecognition and questioning the legitimacy of dominant cultural forms can open up paths to alternate social formations (Navarro, 2006).

Perspectives in Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy is majorly influenced by the works of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator who worked towards critical literacy of the peasant and working class individuals in Latin America and Africa in his lifetime. In 1964, he was imprisoned and then exiled following a coup d'etat in Brazil, as the new regime considered his teachings to be subversive.[5] Freire forged a pedagogy that is rooted in the unity of theory and praxis. While in exile, he published *The Pedagogy of The Oppressed* (1970) – a book based on his experiences as an educator in Latin America, which led to his popularity in North America. Freire's pedagogy provides a breadth of concepts and theoretical insights that have served as the building blocks of radical pedagogy across geographies. However, Freire cautions that his educational experiments should not be transplanted, rather recreated if used in other countries (Freire, 1985).

Freire's pedagogy is an oppositional force to what he calls 'banking education' that plagues the education systems under capitalism and authoritarian regimes. Banking education mirrors the attitudes and practices of an oppressive society with teachers disciplining learners and treating them as passive objects that need to be endowed with skills and knowledge to reproduce the present social order. He advocates a "problem-posing" education that strives for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention on the part of both learners and educators. To Freire, central to problem-posing education is the notion of 'dialogue'. He argues that in order inspire critical thinking among learners, it is imperative for the educator and educatee to have a dialogic relationship. Critical pedagogy invites both educators and educatees to collectively analyse the relations among their own experiences, the knowledge they produce, and the social, cultural, and economic arrangements of the larger social order through dialogue (McLaren, 1994). For Freire, dialogue is not merely a mode of classroom engagement, rather, it is a way of engaging with the world,

5.   https://ptoweb.org/aboutpto/a-brief-biography-of-paulo-freire/

a tool of social agency to realise an inclusive social transformation of ociety (Torres).

Through his pedagogy, Freire seeks to galvanise what he refers to as 'Conscientisation', which is "the process in which men [sic], not as recipients, but as knowing subjects, achieve a deepening awareness both of socio- cultural reality which shape their lives and their capacity to transform reality" (Freire, 1970: 27). This is not merely an intellectual process, rather, it is rooted in "praxis" - an intellectual awakening followed by action towards social transformation:

"Conscientisation implies, then, that when I realise I am oppressed, I also know I can liberate myself if I transform the concrete situation where I find myself oppressed. Obviously I can't transform it in my head: that would be to fall into the philosophical error of thinking that awareness 'creates' reality, I would be decreeing that I am free, by my mind. And yet, the structures would continue to be the same as ever–so that I wouldn't be free. No, conscientisation implies a critical insertion into a process, it implies a historical commitment to make changes."
– Paulo Freire (1972)

Freire's theories were the driving force behind the development of critical pedagogy as we know it today. North American intellectuals such as bell hooks, Peter McLaren, Henry Giroux, Michael Apple, Joe Kincheloe, Ira Shor, and others, have made important contributions to the field by building on Freire's works. In *Teaching to Transgress* (1994) , bell hooks builds on Freire's work as well as the 'lived pedagogy of the many black teachers of my (her) girlhood' to theorise a transformative pedagogy that understands classrooms as a space of possibility where individuals can collectively imagine ways to 'transgress' boundaries of race, gender, class, sexuality, etc and labour for 'freedom'. Here, the point of departure for a transformative pedagogy is 'when one begins to think critically about the self and identity in relation to one's political circumstances' (ibid. p. 47).

Although bell hooks (1994) draws from Freire, she also critiques the phallocentric language in his works. Similarly, many feminist writers make a distinction between critical pedagogy and feminist pedagogy arguing that critical pedagogy foregrounds class as a unit of analysis as opposed to gender, race, etc. However, as shown by Tisdell (1998), there are several overlaps between various forms of feminist pedagogies and critical pedagogy.

Critical pedagogy, as theorised by Henry A Giroux, has great importance for democratic citizenship; in *On Critical Pedagogy* (2011), Giroux argues that critical pedagogy is central to 'creating the conditions for producing citizens who are critical, self-reflective, knowledgeable, and willing to make moral judgments and act in a socially responsible way.' On the other hand, Peter Mclaren (1994) understands critical pedagogy as 'bringing into the arena of schooling practices insurgent, resistant, and insurrectional modes of interpretation which set out to imperil the familiar, to contest the legitimating norms of mainstream social life, and to render problematic the common discursive frames and regimes within which "proper" behaviuor, comportment, and social interactions are situated'.

If we understand critical pedagogy as educational practices contesting forms of "banking education" and hegemonic interests through dialogical and social justice oriented teaching and learning, then Phule– Ambedkarite– Feminist pedagogies can also be interpreted as a strand of critical pedagogy (Rege, 2010). Anti-caste thinkers such as Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule as well as Dr. B. R. Ambedkar saw education as central to the emancipation of Dalits and other marginalised communities. Although they did not call themselves critical pedagogues, their pedagogical and philosophical vision deeply echoes the fundamentals of critical pedagogy as we understand it today. For example, in 1942, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, at The All India Depressed Class Conference, Nagpur, said:

"My final words of advice to you are educated, agitate and organise; have faith in yourself. With justice on our side, I do not see how we can lose our battle. The battle to me is a matter of joy. The battle is in the fullest sense

spiritual. There is nothing material or social in it. For ours is a battle for the reclamation of human personality."

Jyotirao Phule's Marathi play *Trutiya Ratna*, meaning Third Eye, explores the relationship between power and knowledge, and reimagines education as the third eye that opens up possibilities for the oppressed to transform the realities of oppression (Rege, 2010). Phule as well as Ambedkar were modernist thinkers who advocated for a cultural revolution as well as a technological one, as against upper-caste thinkers who pushed for the preservation of 'traditional' values through education (Omvedt, 1994). On the other hand, Savitribai Phule wrote extensively about education as a tool for liberation from Hindu caste-patriarchy in works such as *Kavya Phule* (1854):

Go, Get Education

Be self-reliant, be industrious Work, gather wisdom and riches,
All gets lost without knowledge

We become animal without wisdom, Sit idle no more, go, get education

End misery of the oppressed and forsaken, You've got a golden chance to learn

So learn and break the chains of caste. Throw away the Brahman's scriptures fast.

(In *Kavya Phule,* Savitribai Phule, 1854)[6]

---

6.   https://drambedkarbooks.com/2015/01/03/few-poems-by-savitribai-phule/

NETRITVA VICHARSHALA: THE INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

The Foundations of Netritva Vicharshala

Netritva Vicharshala was born out of the collective efforts of individuals working in NGOs and those involved in social movements to create a space for critical thinking for people involved in humanitarian and social work, people from marginalised communities, and the youth. A group of people from ActionAid Association, Bhopal and Janpahel had been in dialogue since 2005 reflecting on the lack of deep ideological understanding and commitment on the part of NGO workers across fields and the lack of such training in educational institutions.

Yogesh Dewan, a leading member of Janpahel said, "Over my many years of activism, I have interacted with a lot of NGO workers and most of their work is target-based, without any engagement with the larger socio-political context of the communities they are working with. No critique of larger structures that govern our lives. A lot of the NGO people that I met did not tie the issues they were working with to the larger struggles being taken up by people's movements. They lacked the ideological coherence in the work they were doing. So we recognised this limitation that existed, which was a product of the larger system, and came up with the idea of the leadership school."

Sarika Sinha added, "I think this [Netritva Vicharshala] also evolved as a critique of the NGO and charity sector per se. They don't help you develop critical thinking because then you will question them. They only give you the bare minimum. These [communities that NGOs work with] are really poor and historically excluded people, getting into the habit that if you give someone something, then you get something in return. Every time we

used to go there, they would ask us – what have you brought for us? And that is not how it should be." Ismail and Kamat (2018) note that NGOs are a contradictory set of institutions, there is a vast 'disjuncture between their funding streams and social spheres from which they draw their support and in which they operate. This makes them particularly vulnerable to abuse by powerful interests that want to instrumentalise them to influence the social developments or opinion on the ground' (ibid., p. 3). There are several operational and ideological constraints that are imposed by funders, and many critics on the left see NGOs as 'pillars of the neoliberal state' or 'agents of imperialism'. Although such structural critiques of NGOs are important and warranted, they run the risk of obscuring realities where social movements have allied with NGOs, especially international human rights and advocacy NGOs, to challenge authoritarian forces in the domestic sphere. Netritva Vicharshala itself is emblematic of the complex reality of the NGO sector and the dynamic relationships that exist between international organisations, domestic NGOs, and people's movements. Born out of a self-reflexive critique, Netriva Vicharshala holds hope for new and radical possibilities in the larger project for social change, taking account of the structural constraints that limit us.

What is unique about Netritva Vicharshala is that it serves as a platform to bring together NGO workers, grassroots activists and community members, as well as academics as co-investigators into the realities of an unequal society. Although the course was designed to raise critical-consciousness among NGO workers and grassroots activists, there is a reciprocal exchange of knowledge between the resource persons and the participants at the school. Elaborating on the reciprocal relationship between him and the participants, Sanjay Singh, a resource person who has been involved with Netritva Vicharshala since its inception, said: "I believe this [Netritva Vicharshala] is quite an interesting and novel idea because it adds a new dimension to the idea of NGO. Because NGO is understood as either a professional or voluntary work. What this leadership school does is get people who have expertise in some areas of the social

processes with people who are working in the ground and this is actually enriching for both the parties involved in the workshop. People who are supposedly the experts are enriched by the experiences of those people who are working on the ground. Because reality keeps transforming and every area has its own challenges. So, by working with people who work on the ground, people become aware of the evolution of the social and historic processes."

The goal of Netritva Vicharshala is not 'skill development' that will make learners more employable or 'efficient' workers in the economy. Rather, it is to provide learners with a critical lens to look at the world and their lived realities, to cultivate a culture of questioning, to nurture a historical sensibility to understand the present, and to inspire a commitment to democratic traditions. Most certainly, there is a pedagogic emphasis on open dialogue and communication as enabling tools in such a project. Therefore, there is a strategic effort towards honing communication skills. This is to help boost learners' confidence, which will further allow them to better engage with stakeholders in democratic struggles such as community members, politicians, the media, and the state bureaucracy.

Course Design and Classroom Engagement

The ideological inspirations for Netritva Vicharshala are based in various feminist, anti-caste, anti-racist, indigenous, peasant and working-class struggles, both domestic as well as global. The course also draws from several other progressive educational initiatives in India such as feminist schools run by Sangat[7], initiatives by Romila Thapar and Uma Chakravarthy, indigenous schools in Jharkhand and Assam, and many others. Major global inspirations include movements like La Via Campesina,[8] an 'international movement that brings together millions of peasants, small and medium-size farmers, landless people, women farmers, indigenous people, migrants

---

7. https://drambedkarbooks.com/2015/01/03/few-poems-by-savitribai-phule/

8. https://viacampesina.org/

and agricultural workers fighting for their rights, and resisting forces of capitalism, free trade, and patriarchy'.

One of the central organising principles of the course content is that of intersectionality;[9] the course explores the current realities of oppression through a wide variety of theories and ideological struggles ranging from Marxism, feminism, Amberkarism, Gandhiism, secularism, socialism, indigenous people's movements, civil rights movemenmts, etc., and studies the intersections between different forms of oppression or discrimination prevailing in the society. Let us briefly look at the course content of Netritva Vicharshala–

Understanding Society, Polity, Exclusion

This session explores the development of society through a materialist lens (historical materialism) that sees the evolution of society as moving through various economic systems; how society evolved from primitive communism to slavery to feudalism to capitalism (what we see today) through a dialectical process and the possibilities of socialism in the future. It also explores the notion of injustice and inequality through the history of caste, class, ethnicity, gender, and geographical locations.

Identity and Culture of Indigenous People

This session explores the question of Adivasi identity, the cultural politics and its relationship with the politics of livelihood and control over resources. It looks at the historical struggles of the indigenous people of India and how it has been invisibilised in the reading of Indian history in mainstream discourses.

Moreover, it contextualises the contemporary Adivasi rights movements for 'Jal, Jungle, Zameen' such as the Pathalgadi movement, Narmada Bachao

---

9. https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/6/explainer-intersectional-feminism-what-it-means-and-why-it-matters

Andolan, etc. against the corporate-state project of resource extraction.

Understanding Ideologies of Gandhi and Lohia

Here, the learners explore the progressive theories of Gandhi along with the critiques of his ideology. These critiques are centred around his debates with Ambedkar and feminists. Moreover, this session also explores Lohia's ideas on socialism, religion, and politics of language and caste. Placing Gandhi and Lohia in today's modern context allows learners to explore their contemporary relevance.

Origin and Evolution of Caste

This session discusses the ideas of Ambedkar, Periyar, Phule and Rama bai; it looks at the origin of the caste system and its historical roots in religious texts and practices. This also includes an analysis of the various ways in which the caste system has manifested in both rural and urban settings and the modes of resistance against it.

Understanding Communalism and Fascism

In this section, learners understand the communal prejudices and misrepresentations that have been circulating in mainstream discourses throughout history. They also analyse the rise of right wing nationalist ideologies and the modes through which they came to dominate popular imagination. In addition to this, they look at the contours of fascism, nationalism, and discuss the various constructions of the 'idea of the nation'.

Left Thinkers

Left ideologies of Marx, Lenin, and Mao are explored to understand the class based nature of stratification of society and modes of capitalist exploitation. The unity and differences in their theories and their political works are investigated to understand the global leftist struggles in history and the forms they have taken in the Indian context. Theories of Gramsci and Paulo Freire are also introduced to examine the various forms of

oppression in society and the possibilities of resistance. The theories of the left thinkers also provide a critical vocabulary to understand ideology and its functioning through history.

Feminism

This session explores themes in gender and sexuality; here the learners are encouraged to look at the socially constructed nature of gender and its relationship with sexuality, queer politics, the evolution of patriarchy, women's work, the politics of marriage and property ownership, among many others. It also traces the history of feminist movements across the world and in India, from women's suffrage movement, to Civil Rights Movement, to Bhakti Movement and The Dalit Feminist movement in India. This session also discusses the concept of intersectionality and urges a self-reflection upon one's positionality in navigating politics at the individual as well as at the societal level.

Capitalism, Globalisation, and Climate Change

Here, participants decode the rationality behind capitalist globalisation and look at its impact on the disadvantaged communities across areas. The analysis also includes feminist interpretations of the current economic disparities and scrutinises capitalist exploitation against the context of imperialism. Moreover, it looks at the evolution of the global economy and its relationship with climate change and the politics of natural resource extraction.

Classroom Engagement

In the classroom, all individuals, the resource persons, as well as the learners, sit together on the floor in a circle for discussions. This non-hierarchical egalitarian arrangement is intended to create an environment of trust and camaraderie among the participants to facilitate open and candid discussions. Most sessions do not consist of lectures, rather, they are conversational in nature; the resource persons and the learners share

a dialogic relationship with each other. In any explanation of a concept or theme, learner's lived experiences are foregrounded, which function as a point of departure for the discussion. This form of situated learning is what Freire (2009) understands as problem posing education. Prof. Sanjay Singh elaborated,

"At the leadership school, communication is always anchored around actual events that are happening around the area from where the activists are coming. Here, the concepts are not what have been fore fronted to communicate, it is actually the events that are fore fronted. This is how you go about your conversations with the activists because they know about the event and then they will say – 'okay you are saying this but this is also happening so how do we understand the event'? In university classrooms, concepts are the vehicle for the construction of communication. In leadership schools, it is the lived experiences and actually occurring events that become the linchpin of the conversations that happen... You try to make an association between local level events, state level events, national level events and international events. Then what are the selection of the concepts that can help us understand the unravelling of these events and if possible, to find out a way to transform the life of the people who are suffering because of the unfolding of these events."

To challenge learner's biases, the resource persons also resort to techniques of Socratic questioning, which allow learners' to see their biases themselves without feeling a vertical imposition of views from the educator to educatee. Ram Punyani, who takes the session on Communalism, delineated his process of engaging with the learners on biases against Muslims in India:

"My aim here was not to give a flat lecture but to involve the audience. My goal was that I have to communicate the things in a way that is received by them. They [learners] come with an understanding and their understanding should rather be enhanced or modified or changed. With 30-40 people

in a small room, I focus on the interactive model. Here I gave more chances for the audience to speak. For example: I tell them that there are misconceptions against Hindus in Pakistan and here in India there are misconceptions against Muslims, so what kind of misconceptions are you aware of? They will say they marry multiple times; somebody will say they destroyed Hindu temples; somebody will say they forced Islam on India. I ask them to keep listing these things and then I classify them. Some of them are historical, some things are temporary and some things are international. The goal was to build simple building blocks, people already understand so you build them and you go to the next step and then deconstruct it. For example, Muslims destroyed Hindu temples. Yes, they did but not because of their hatred towards Hindus or for the purpose of religion. I demonstrate that a king goes from here to here and on the way, there are so many temples that he does not touch but why does he touch this temple only? People say that because there was wealth in that so I say that then was it destroyed for wealth or for religion? People will then give the correct answer. Then I will give the example that two kings are fighting. Are they fighting for religion or are they fighting for power? I don't have to say anything, they will give the answer."

All the participants that were interviewed expressed that the environment of the classroom was such that they felt comfortable in sharing their experiences and felt heard. However, there were a few who shied away from sharing their disagreements on matters such as nationalism, religion, and gender, born out of a fear of being judged in a progressive space. Although these disagreements were not shared in the classroom, they were carried outside the classrooms and were articulated in dining spaces in groups, or discussed with room mates in the dorms.

"When the cadre goes to the room, we can debate to the fullest without any hesitation. What we cannot discuss with our teachers we manage to discuss with our colleagues at breakfast, tea and at night. Only then do they understand where they are wrong and they can also better point out

where we are wrong. This is the way we have discussions, and the second time I came I had studied so much that I didn't have any questions left."[10]

– Samadhan Patil

Conscientisation Through Art

Conscientisation, i.e., the process of achieving a deepened awareness of one's socio-cultural reality and one's capacity to transform it (Freire), can be facilitated through the use of art. Art forms, such as theatre, dance, music, poetry, provide a creative and playful space to engage with critical ideas, enabling new ways of thinking about the world and ourselves. Art is also a great source of joy that enriches the rest of the learner's educational experience.

Art can also be employed as a mode of problem posing education; works of art can be chosen to promote criticism of an obtuse understanding of reality, and provide a more adequate vision of the unseen (Nussbaum, 2009). Based on Freire's concept of conscientisation, Augusto Boal, a Brazillian theatre practitioner developed theatrical techniques known as Theatre of the Oppressed to enable critical consciousness, collective action and social change with marginalised communities (Boal, 1993). His methods invite all participants of the theatrical event, actors as well as the audience members (spectactors), to pose problems and offer solutions through their acting (Barak, 2016).

Netritva Vicharshala also employs various art forms to enhance participants' learnings and engagement. The participants start their day

---

10. *"Cadre jab apne room main jata hain tab 100% debate hota hain aur wo aisa waisa debate nahi hota hain, bohot jorse debate hota hain. Jo hum discuss apne teacher ke saath nahi kar sakte wo hum apne colleagues ke saath karte hain breakfast ke time, tea break ke time, raat ko tehelne ke time. Tab shayad unko bhi samajhne main aata hain thoda ki wo log galat hain aur wo bhi humain bolte hain ki aaplog galat ho. Wo ek tarika hota hain discussion ka aur second time aate aate maine itna parh liya tha ki prashna puchne ka kuch tha bhi nahi baki."*

with daily sessions of dance and yoga; this is to get them to feel free, comfortable, and refreshed before diving into the academic sessions. During the day, there are also sessions for poetry and music. Here, the entire cohort comes together to sing revolutionary songs, such as *Hum Dekhengey,* originally a poem by Faiz Ahmed Faiz, are greatly celebrated each year by different batches of learners. These activities are central to forging bonds of solidarity and creating an environment of camaraderie.

On the last day of the workshop, the participants stage a play addressing an issue of social justice, where participants employ Boalian methods to unravel situations of injustice. Staging a play collectively aids community building, facilitates peer group learning, enables a better understanding of the issue explored, and inspires empathy towards the struggles of other individuals and communities. Moreover, it also teaches the participants how to effectively communicate and create awareness through non-verbal mediums as well.

Netritva Vicharshala also holds sessions on public speaking – a necessary skill for any community leader/ mobiliser. For this session, participants are asked to give a speech on a topic relevant to the coursework and are guided by the facilitators with respect to the structuring of arguments, use of effective storytelling, speaking with confidence, etc. This session greatly helps in boosting the participants' self-confidence, enabling them to imagine themselves as leaders and community mobilisers.

"In school I used to study and sing but never alone as I didn't have the confidence to sing in public. After going there [Netritva Vicharshala], however, I have begun singing without hesitation. Over there everyone gets an opportunity to speak. The training there has a real effect on people. It had such an effect on me that any hesitations and nervousness I had completely went away. I can now speak irrespective of the people around

me, be it 10 people or however many, what matters to me is that I voice my opinion."[11] – Anita Singh, Batch of 2016

Films were also employed as a medium to enable learners to gain a contextual understanding of the issues addressed in the class. Most of the participants that were interviewed for this study stated that there were many engaging and important discussions around the films they watched at Netritva Vicharshala that greatly informed their understanding of politics.

"During the leadership school we saw a film - Bawandar. We saw it on the projector. I thought that the whole conspiracy involved politics. For example the judge was bought. We also saw a movie relating to Ramjanambhoomi, with these activities, the mind feels fresh. I am also a trainer from the panchayati raj, we also train with ActionAid Association and the thing with activities is that it allows people to absorb issues better. "

– Surendra Dahiya

---

11. *School main bhi padhti thi aur gaana gaati thi toh akele toh nahi karti thi. Sabke saath gaati thi kyunki akele gaane ke liye himmat nahi hoti thi ki itne public ke samne main kaise gaau. Lekin waha jaane ke baad toh jhijhag khul gaya hain pura. Waha pe aisa rehta hain ki sabko bolne ka mauka milta hain, jhijhak khulta hain. Wahan ki training se bohot prabhav parta hain logoka. Mujh main toh boho tachi prabhav padhii aur jhijhak khuli meri udhar se. Abhi toh main bol pa rahi hu chahein das jan baithe ho ya kitne jan bhi, mera toh bolne se hi matlab rehta hain."*

12. *"Leadership ke dauran ek film dekha tha. Bawandar. Projector main dekha tha. Mujhe laga ki puri saajish hain rajneeti bhi juri hoti hain. Jaise judge kharid lete hain. Ramjanambhoomi ke baare main bhi movie dekhi thi maine. Activity se kya hain ki mind fresh ho jata hain. Kyunki main bhi ek trainer hu panchayati raj ka. Actionaid se bhi hum training karte hain to hum activity karate hain jab koi bara topic hota hain toh aur aise logoke andar aa jati hain wo baat."*

LEARNER'S EXPERIENCES

This chapter examines the learners' experiences at Netritva Vicharshala through the framework of critical pedagogy. It answers the central question – "In what ways have the learners benefitted from their experiences at Netritva Vicharshala?" In other words, has Netritva Vicharshala provided the learners a new critical lens to examine their work and their everyday lives, and in what ways has the change in their perspective come about? Here, let us look at the diverse ways the learners have engaged with different parts of the coursework – which sessions challenged their assumptions, ways in which the use of art and extra-textual methods enhanced their understanding of the subject matter, and what changes did their experiences inspire in their personal lives, etc.

The reserch employs the key themes in critical pedagogy such as critical consciousness, conscientisation, dialogue, critical self-reflection, and praxis in our analysis of learners' experiences and trace how these manifested in the learners' respective contexts. The skills and strategies for community mobilisation that the learners' adopted from Netritva Vicharshala and employed them in their work and community contexts are also studied. Lastly, ways are explored in which Netritva Vicharshala has contributed to their empowerment and evolution as social workers and community leaders.

Critical Sensibility as Historical Sensibility

Historicity is a central theme in critical pedagogy, as was in the critical theories of Marx and Gramsci. In order to 'unmask domination' and understand the workings of power in society, one needs to look at the present through a historical lens. The material conditions of the present are shaped by historical forces – discriminatory laws from the past legitimise marginalisation in the present; languages disappear or survive

through historical processes, as do norms and social customs; nation states themselves are historical formations. To understand the world as we know it is to know the history of the world.

Unmasking one's current conditions of oppression and to take action towards liberation, it is imperative to understand that individual as well as collective meaning-making are historically determined processes. To develop a vocabulary of critique necessarily requires one to have a historical sensibility. Rohini C, a participant at Netritva Vicharshala, from the Bedia[13] community, emphatically articulates this point in her analysis of the National Register of Citizens (NRC)[14] by locating its effects in the context of the history of her community:

"Those people who are from Nomadic tribes, they don't have official papers from 1950. They were earning by begging, but it was soon banned, followed by the imposition of the Act in the jungle. Such practices are meant to take away the rights from tribal communities. What other role do they play? Now those women are forced to engage in wage labour and prostitution. If you look at Bihar, there is a Muslim community who are Khans and Pathans, but they engage in prostitution. If you look back at your community's history, you will realise the reasons behind what is happening with you today. If the police pick up someone from our tribal community today, I already know that they are doing so under [prejudices created by] the Criminal Tribes Act. Despite knowing all this, the government has not provided these women with any employment. This has been going on

---

13. Bedia is one of the Nomadic and Denotified Tribes (NT-DNTs). NT-DNTs have been subjected to historical injustices both in the colonial and free India. During the British rule, the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871 was passed, which notified most nomadic communities as criminals. The Act implied that these communities were criminal by birth and practiced crime as a profession. The Act gave the colonial administration the power to brand, penalise, segregate, and forcibly sedentarise nomadic communities. The Act was repealed on August 31, 1952. (https://thewire.in/politics/nomadic-denotified-tribes-demands)

14. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-citizenship-explainer-idUSKBN1YR0WL

ever since India became independent. It is 2020 now. That is why I want to understand the law and become aware of how to demand our rights."[15]

For Freire, history and subjectivity were deeply interconnected. He believed that marginalised people were not just objects of history (as viewed by anthropologists and policy makers from their ivory towers), but also active subjects in the making of history. Although history informs the extant cultural forms and social relations, the knowledge of their historical contexts creates possibilities for counter-hegemonic imaginations and action. Knowledge production is a political process; what we understand as common sense or as legitimate knowledge often excludes the lived experiences of communities who have been historically alienated from the process of knowledge production. In this regard, historical memory, as opposed to positivist epistemologies, has the potential to reconfigure the cultural politics of our times. Freire (2009) recognises the value of local narratives and critical recollection of marginalised histories in the struggle for emancipation. Giroux, on the other hand, refers to this as "liberating remembrance" – a force against the historical amnesia of the dominant order.

Anita Singh, a 27 year-old social worker from the Gond community in Parsmaniya Pathar, MP, has undertaken multiple efforts to create awareness among the members of her tribe about their tribal history and the importance of preserving their tribal culture. The Gond community is one of the Scheduled Tribes of India whose livelihood and survival is being

---

15. *"Jo ghumantu jaati hain unke paas bhi 1950 ka kagaz nahi hain. Unka maangne aur khaane ka kam tha lekin beggary main ban laga diya gaya aur jangal main act laga diya gaya. Ye cheeze jaati yo se unka hak cheenne ka kam karti hain. Unka aur kya kam hain. Wo mazdoori karte hain, prostitution ka kam karte hain. Bihar main dekhiye ek Muslim samuday hain jo nam main Khan aur Pathan lagate hai lekin kam unka prostitution ka hain. Toh apne itihaas ko aap janogey toh aapko pata chalega ki aaj aapke saath jo ho raha hain wo kyun ho raha hain. Jaise koi police yaha se kisiko utha ke lekar jaate hain toh mujhe pata hain ki Criminal Tribes ke Act ke tahet hi utha ke le gaye hain. Sab kuch jaaneke baad bhi government ne ab tak unko koi kam nahi dia. Tab se chal raha hain jab se bharat azaad hua hain. Ab toh 2020 ho gaya. Isiliye main kanoon ko samjhana chahti hu ki kaise hum apna hak mangey."*

threatened by capitalist exploitation and state control of forests and land. Since 1940s, Gonds have struggled for their territorial autonomy and rights to the forest (Singh, 1982). Today, they are one of the most marginalised communities in the country facing all forms of exploitation from sexual exploitation, bonded labour to systemic dispossession.[16] Anita, along with the other young people in her village, formed a youth organisation called Yuva Chatra Sangathan to facilitate discussions on their tribal culture and their historical struggles among the members of the community.

"Our native language is Gondi. But it has completely changed now. Now we don't even know what it is. Even the traditional attires have undergone a change now. That is why we celebrated Birsa Munda's Jayanti in Parsmaniya for the first time yesterday. When people asked me about who Birsa Munda was, I told them that he was a revolutionary. I learnt this at the leadership school. I used to share such information earlier as well, but I never got this much support. But we got a lot of support from Yuva Chhatra Sangathan. We formed this organisation last year. We got Rani Durgavati's statue erected using donations so that people become aware about their identity and ancestors. The celebration of Birsa Munda Ji's Jayanti made people realise the importance of their identity and culture. Yuva Chhatra Sangathan was able to achieve what was unachieved for years."[17]

---

16. https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/indiascope/story/19840430-andhra-pradesh-gond-tribals-get-frustrated-over-land-ownership- issue-803010-1984-04-30, https://thewire.in/rights/supreme-court-eviction-tribals-displacement

17. *"Abhi jaise humari Gondi bhasha hain. Ab humari puri hi change ho gayi. Ab humein pata hi nahi wo kya hain. Bhesh bhusha bilkul change ho gayi. Isiliye Birsa Munda ki humne kal Jayanti manayi Parsmaniya Pathar main pehli bar ke liye ye Jayanti manayi gayi. Phir logone mujhe pucha ki ye kya hain toh maine unko bataya ki ye humare ek krantikari the. Ye maine cadre school se hi sikha. Pehle bhi main batata thi lekin wo itna support nahi milta tha mujhe. Lekin Yuva Chhatra Sangathan ne humein bohot support kia hain. Ek saal pehle humne ye sangathan banaya. Rani Durgavati ka statue hum chanda lekar ke banaye taki log jaane toh ki humari pehchan kya hain, humari purvach kaun hain. Humne Birsa Munda ji ki Jayanti manayi aur phir logoko ehsaas hua ki jo itne saalo main nahi hua wo yuva chhatri sangathan ne karke dikhaya."*

Yuva Chatra Sangathan's efforts to revive the Gondi cultural practices also include a re-imagining of the existing marriage and religious rituals, which are presently governed by Brahmanical norms and customs. Anita, commenting on this effort of tribal ritual revival, said –

"Like we used to call a [Hindu] Pandit for marriage but not now. We have a different culture. Things are slowly changing. Now they are getting married as per Gondi religion and Gondi worship has also started. Some people did not accept when we used to say "sewa sewa". Then we said that we are Gondi so we will say "sewa sewa". They did not agree. This has been going on since their youth. But change will happen slowly. When the whole village changes, that individuals will also change. They will think that how will I do it alone now, then they will also change. Now slowly marriage and worship has also started according to Gondi beliefs and practices."[18]

All history has a social purpose; historical knowledge helps us understand the world and it shapes our actions, identity, and beliefs. However, one must be aware of their own subjectivity in consuming historical facts. What we remember, what is taught in schools and universities, what remains in popular memory is often deeply tied to relationships of power. Whose history is remembered? Who gets to write their own history? Who gets to define 'common sense'? These are some questions that Netritva Vicharshala compels learners to ask themselves when they set out to understand the past and the present.

Official records, written by those in power, have often obscured/ misrepresented the realities of marginalised groups; they have been used

---

18. Jaise shaadi bhi pehle hum pandit ko bula ke karte the lekin abhi nahi. Humara toh alag hi culture hain. Abhi dheere dheere badal raha hain. Ab gondi dharam se hi shaadi hone lagi hain aur pujaye bhi hone lagi hain. Kuch log accept nahi karte thein jab hum sewa sewa bolte thein. Tab humne bola ki arey gondi hain toh sewa sew toh boleygey. Maante nahi hain. Unke jawani se hi aisa chala aa raha hain toh. Lekin ye dheere dheere hi hoga. Jab pura gaon agar change ho jayega toh khud hi aa jayega. Wo sochega ki main ab akele hi kaise karuga toh wo bhi ayega. Ab dheere dheere shaadiya aur puja path bhi gondi dharam se hone laga."

to legitimise forms of violence and oppression, and also been used to mobilise political support by conservative politicians. The knowledge that is produced through books, media, and art is also determined by relationships of power. However, these dominant relationships in knowledge production are often subverted through oral traditions that foreground local histories and counter-hegemonic commemorations, in order to reclaim space for the historically marginalised to tell their own stories and assert that own cultures and histories.

Seeing the Personal as Political

One of the central aims of critical pedagogy is to make power visible, not merely in the context of institutional and symbolic power, but also how power permeates all social relationships and manifests in our everyday experiences. It also seeks to cultivate democracy and justice-oriented sensibilities among learners, so that they are able to recognise anti-democratic forms of power, and are equipped to fight injustices in a deeply unequal society. However, the exercise of recognising power and inequality must begin with a critical reflection of the self vis-a-vis their position in the world, the community, and the personal relationships. Freire (1970) asserts that merely an awareness of injustice and power is unproductive; reflection must be followed by action with the aim to transform the situation of injustice.

When the participants were asked the question – "did the leadership school challenge any of your deep-rooted assumptions?", most of them pointed to how the session on feminism brought immense changes to their thinking about themselves and the relationships in their lives. For women, it enhanced their sense of agency and boosted their confidence as individuals, as workers, and decision-makers in their families and their community. Their experience at Netritva Vicharshala also inspired them to challenge societal norms through their choice of clothing, decisions regarding education and work, and gender roles and responsibilities in

the domestic sphere. However, for men the changes manifested in an enhanced consciousness about oppressive gender roles and an effort to contribute to domestic chores, in addition to personal efforts taken towards gender sensitisation among community members.

Anita's understanding of feminism with reference to her work perfectly captures the essence of the notion of 'the personal is political'. She said:

"My views on feminism have changed drastically. I have learnt how patriarchy makes women weak and subordinates them. I saw this in my own household which is why the change started at home. I changed affairs in my house first and then went on to change society. I did this because usually when you go to change others, they say that first you should improve the condition of your own household. If change doesn't start at home, everything else will remain the same."[19]

Shabnam, another participant at Netritiva Vicharshala, belongs to a Muslim community in Rahatgarh, Madhya Pradesh. The status of women in her village is such that majority of the women are uneducated and the conservative social norms in her community disallow women from venturing outside their domestic spheres. Most women are involved in beedi-making, a home-based activity, which earns them Rs. 67 for 1000 beedis.[20] Shabnam works at ActionAid Association's partner organisation and has contributed on several issues from education of young girls to gender sensitisation among women in the community. On a personal level, one of the ways she resists the patriarchy in her community is by

---

19. *"Narivaad ko lekar achi tarah se soch meri badli hain. Ye pittrsatta mahilaon ko kamjor bana deti hain. Yehi meri ghar se hi shuruat ki thi. Matlab meri ghar se hi shuruat hain. Pehle apne ghar ko badli phir apne samaj ko badli. Kyunki doosron ke ghar ko badalne jaatein hain toh log bolte hain ki pehle apne ghar ko sudhar. Kyunki pehle ghar nahi badlega toh kuch nahi hoga."*

20. The wages for beedi work are set at the state level, and that for Madhya Pradesh is Rs. 67 per 1000 beedis (this amounts to approximately one day's work). (Ground Realities of Beedi Workers in Madhya Pradesh, Centre for Health and Social Justice, 2017)

standing up against the moral policing of her daughter's clothing choices. She told me:

"Our daughter had gone to the market wearing jeans. That is when they started taunting us and saying things like, 'Don't you have any decency, aren't you a Muslim?' I said that her skin was not exposed. Wearing jeans is like wearing a salwar; and the stomach is not even visible unlike in a sari. Why doesn't anyone raise questions then? She just wore jeans and a t-shirt. Yet, they blamed me for her choice of clothes and insisted I am not a true Muslim. I said, how are we expected to prove that we are Muslim from within? If any woman wears jeans, men create a ruckus and crowd around her, stare at her. At home as well, they justify the behaviour and say that such an incident occurred because of what the girl was wearing. If she had dressed appropriately, maybe such a situation wouldn't have arisen. But my response to that is how come girls who are 6-7 years old face the same harassment? Is that also because they wore jeans? This usually shuts them up and they don't have any response."[21]

On the other hand, Rohini recognises that, for the women in her community, the struggle against injustice is manifold; not only do they have to fight the prejudices and systemic marginalisation of their community by society and the state, they also have to resist the patriarchal norms of their own community that restrict women's freedom. Navigating around the double oppression is a complex process, which often compels one to prioritise certain struggles over others. For Rohini, the freedom to work did not

---

21. *"Humari ladki jeans pehenkar mandi gayi thi. Tab kehne lage ki izzat nahi hain, Muslim nahi ho kya, ye wo. Tab maine kaha ki kuch toh dikh nahi raha. Jaisa salwar hota hain waisa hi jeans hain aur paet toh nahi dikh raha, sari main toh wo dikhta hain phir kuch kyun nahi kehte? Jeans aur t-shirt hi toh hain. Toh wo kehne lage ki pehnawaya kaisa hain tumhara, Muslim nahi ho. Phir maine kaha ki andar se kaise dikhaye ki Muslim hain ki nahi. Koi mahila jeans pehenkar jay toh purush bilkul bhir laga dete hain. Dekhne lagte hain. Ghar par bhi bolte hain ki dekho iss larki ke saath aisa ho gaya, pehnawa thik kar de toh aisa nahi hoga. Phir hum bolte hain ki 6-7 saal ki larkiyo ke saath bhi hota hain ye sab toh kya jeans pehenne ke karan hota hain? Phir koi jawab nahi hota unke paas."*

come easy; it came after several negotiations with family and community members. She said:

"There are several issues in the community, which I have had to fight even on a personal level and those exist even today ... as soon as you get married you cannot go out of the house. I still have to wear ghoonghat even today. I have been in this sector for the last 12-15 years and I have a larger fight where I have to sometimes give up on the smaller things. For me my work is more important than me removing my pardah, I accept that. I don't have any problem with that because we fight on a new issue everyday and due to this it will take a lot of time."[22]

Samadhan Patil, one of the few individuals who has had the opportunity to attend Netritva Vicharshala multiple times, asserted the importance of internalising classroom learnings in one's personal life:

"After learning about feminism, I can do everything from cooking to making roti. I believe that it is more important to apply the principles of feminism in our daily life than merely learning about them. This is why I try to adhere to them in all matters whether it is concerning the household or the kitchen. I have learnt how society discriminates against women. For example, when they want to seize her property or the man wants to marry someone else, they brand her a witch or try to loot money from her parental home. Under the pretext of exorcism, they humiliate women."[23]

22. *"Community ke bohot saare mudde hai jo mujhe apne star pe bhi ladai karne ki zaroorat padi hai. Aur woh aaj tak hai.. jaise aap bahu hokar ghar se bahar nahi ja sakte. Aaj bhi mein ghoonghat leti hoon. Ghoonghat pratha aaj bhi hai. Bhale hi mujhe 12-15 saal ho chuke hein iss sector mein lekin woh ek meri alag ladai hai jo mein badi jang jeetne ke liye choti haar gayi. Mera kaam karna zyada zaroori haim, na ki pardah hatna. Woh mein accept bhi karti hoon. Mujhe zyada dikkat nahi hai... . Ladai roz ek nai issue hai. Roz ek nayi ladai hai aur bohot abhi time lagega."*

23. *"Ab feminism ke baare main sikhne ke baad main sab kar sakta hun, khaana banana, roti banana. Kyunki samjhne se jyada ye mehetwapurna hain ki hum use apne jeevan main kaise utare. Toh maine apne ghar se lekar kitchen tak isko utarne ki koshish*

(contd....)

Although he had a deep understanding of women's issues and had a strong commitment to the cause, he acknowledged the challenges that came with engaging with men in his personal life. He said,

"If I am meeting with my college friends and on the road we see a girl cross by then it is quite common for them to make inappropriate comments like "kya cheez hai?". They use derogatory and explicit words and when I attempt to stop them, the full gang turns on me because that is just their way of thinking. And this has happened to me not just once but quite a few times with my college and school friends and I don't like hearing their comments. Whenever I oppose them I feel outnumbered as I am just one in a gang of ten telling them not to make comments like these."[24]

What this interaction highlights is the reluctance society displays in being educated in unorganised spaces that move beyond the classroom. Bourdieu (1984) understands these rigid societal beliefs as doxa– those aspects of culture that are taken for granted, or, naturalised as common sense in public imagination. These are shaped by relations of power in

---

(contd....)

ki. Feminism ki samaj maine dusre subjects se bhi milaya jaise mahilao ka property harapne ke liye ya dusri shaadi karne ke liye mahilao ko dakni bol dia jaata hain ya uske parivar se paisa loota jata hain. Jhar phook ke nam pe kaise usko bedardi se treat kia jaata hain."23. "Ab feminism ke baare main sikhne ke baad main sab kar sakta hun, khaana banana, roti banana. Kyunki samjhne se jyada ye mehetwapurna hain ki hum use apne jeevan main kaise utare. Toh maine apne ghar se lekar kitchen tak isko utarne ki koshish ki. Feminism ki samaj maine dusre subjects se bhi milaya jaise mahilao ka property harapne ke liye ya dusri shaadi karne ke liye mahilao ko dakni bol dia jaata hain ya uske parivar se paisa loota jata hain. Jhar phook ke nam pe kaise usko bedardi se treat kia jaata hain."

24. "Agar main apne college ke doston se mila, aur raaste se koi ladki ja rahi hain, common hain ki wo alag tarah ka comment maregey. Ki kya cheez hain? Aise words use karte hain aur mujhe tokna parta hain ki aise nahi bolna chahiye. Toh aisa ho sakta hain ki pura gang mere upar bhari par jaye. Kyunki samaj ka soch hi aisa hain. Aur mere saath aisa ek bar nahi kayi bar hua hain ki school ya college friends aisa comments marte hain ki usko sunna bhi acha nahi lagta. Jab main virodh karta hu tab shayad 10 larko main main akela virodh karta hu ki aise comments humain nahi karna chahiye"

society and are perpetuated by systems of education, language, religion, media, and other cultural products.

Mukesh Kumar Patel, a 27 year-old social activist associated with Disabled Persons' Organisation, Madhya Pradesh said that challenging people's deep-rooted beliefs is a slow process and one needs to approach such efforts with a great deal of patience. He elaborated,

"Whenever we see change in ourselves it takes some time for us to accept those changes. For example, I took training in 2010 and I cannot say that I have changed any mindsets within my family and relatives, that would not be possible. Now that I have changed people are beginning to understand, in the beginning it was not possible. Those who are 50-60 years old are used to their customs for a long time, so we cannot change their mindset in just 4 days, we just have to get our points to four people so that when the next time they understand us, they will be able to communicate it to others."[25]

All the participants that were interviewed for this project expressed positive attitudes towards the feminist discourses within the classroom. However, many did share that some of their peers at the school were resistant to certain feminist ideas such as the social construction of gender, the gendered division of labour, etc. When Sarika Sinha was asked about how she feels about some participants being resistant to the things being discussed in class, she said:

---

25. *"Jab hum apne aap me badlav late hai, toh samaj isko deri se badlav accept karta hai. Jaise mene 2010 me training li hai, aur agar me kahu ki mene pariwaar me aur ristedaro me badlav kar diya hai to ye sambhav nahi hai. Ab jab me khud change ho gaya hu, log samajhne lagenge... aachanak, ek dam se sambhav nahi hai, yoki jo pratha hai, 50-60 jinki umar hai, woh itne saal se hi sunte sunte aa rahe hai.. toh hum 4 din me kaise change karenge... lenkin hame apni baat sabko nahi, bas 4 logo tak baat pahuchana hai. Isse hoga kya, jab baat unko samajh aayegi to agli baar wo log bhi hammari baat doosro ak pahuchayenge."*

"I quite like people who are resistant, who vociferously disagree with you. That means there is something happening inside. I'm wary of people who don't speak or they are writing things so that they can convince another donor that comes in. But by the 7th day they do start questioning these practices. It creates an upheaval because they were taught that this is what God made and they internalised and normalised it. So uprooting that normalisation is a tedious process that often gives rise to abnormality."

Conscientisation is not a straightforward process, and total unity between action and reflection is often challenging to achieve. Although Netritva Vicharshala enabled the learners to reflect on their own power and possibilities, and inspired them to make several changes in their personal lives, some desired changes and choices were difficult to enact; there were several barriers and resistance posed by family, neighbours, and community members. The women that were interviewed were deeply aware of the oppressive and gender-discriminatory practices in their households, but challenging them involved a long, strategic engagement with the family and community members that did not always lead to change in the status quo.

Challenging doxa, as Waquant (2004) argues, requires critical thought that allows us to 'to perpetually question the obviousness and the very frames of civic debate so as to give ourselves a chance to think the world, rather than being thought by it, to take apart and understand its mechanisms, and thus to reappropriate it intellectually and materially' (ibid., p. 101). Critical thought cannot be imposed, rather, it can be cultivated through pedagogical practices, discourses, and relations. The sphere of the political extends to diverse spaces in which cultural forms are produced, lived, and circulated. Therefore, critical pedagogy seeks to politicise, for the learners, not only the public sphere, but the private sphere as well, and reappropriate cultural practices towards counter-hegemonic forms of knowledge and authority (Giroux, 2011).

Strategies for Community Mobilisation and Consciousness-raising

One of the many hopes of Netritva Vicharshala, or any other project in critical pedagogy, is the amplification of democratic practices, ideals, and modes of thinking beyond the walls of the classroom, and for learners to operate as agents of social change. The idea is to not only to make pedagogy more political, but also to make the political more pedagogical; this entails "producing modes of knowledge and social practices that not only affirm oppositional cultural work but offer opportunities to mobilise instances of collective outrage, if not collective action" (Giroux, 2011).

The pedagogic emphasis on dialogue opens up multiples sites of collective reflection and action, where dialoguers can see themselves as active subjects in knowledge production. Here, knowledge production is not a vertical endowment of skills and information to passive consumers (like in the banking education), rather, it is collective investigation into our common reality, with a foregrounding of people's lived experiences and democratic values. This can occur in what Freire (2000) calls "culture circles" consisting of a group of learners and facilitators who come together for a collective thematic investigation on a wide variety of issues.

In the South Asian context, a culture circle can be understood as a 'baithak' – a traditional space for dialogue, often occurring in public spaces (Munir, 2018). Most of the participants of Netritva Vicharshala organised several culture circles in their respective villages, in order to share their learnings from Netritva Vicharshala with the members of their community and discuss issues of public interest.

Priti Batham, an independent social worker from Indore, has undertaken several initiatives for women's health and economic assistance; she has facilitated the setting up of several medical camps and self-help groups, as well as helped women obtain employment in garment and bangle-

making industry. In addition to this, she has formed several youth groups across a number of slums, where she facilitates conversations on gender sensitisation. She said: "I work in 34 slum areas in Indore, where I go eat, sit, drink tea, talk, and build relationships."[26]

In each slum area, she has formed groups of youngsters aged 8-16 years and 16-21 years, where they discuss matters related to menstruation, sexual and reproductive rights, as well as women and children's rights. Through these youth collectives, she has reached out to 900 individuals across Indore. This has been a result of almost a decade of work and relationship-building. She told me that a lot of the content of what she discusses in these groups has been informed by her learnings at Netritva Vicharshala. She has also passed on several revolutionary songs to the youth groups that she had picked up at the leadership school.

Similarly, as discussed earlier, Anita's initiative to form Yuva Chatra Sangathan has inspired several counter-hegemonic cultural practices such as Baithaks to discuss adivasi culture and history, and revival of adivasi ways of marriage and other religious rituals. Outside of the operations of YCS, she works on issues of malnutrition and women's rights. "My work has inspired a lot of changes in my community. Take women's issues, for example. At the leadership school, I have learnt a great deal about feminism from Sarika didi, about domestic violence. I sit with people in the community and tell them about these issues. I sit with men, women, and adolescent girls. I tell women about their rights."[27]

---

26. Mein Indore ke 34 slum areas mein kaam karti hun, jahan khati hun, baithti hun, sirf chai peeti hun, rishte banane ka kaam karti hun.

27. "Mere kam karne ke baad se bohot badlav aaye. Jaise mahilayo ko lekar. Leadership school main bhi mujhe Sarika didi se narivad ke baare main sikhne ko mila, gharelu hinsa ke baare main sikhne ko mila. Main logo ke saath baith ke inn sab ke baare main baat karti rehti hu. Jaise mahilayo, purusho ke saath aur kishoriyo ke saath baith ke. Mahilao ko bhi unke adhikar ke baare main bataye".

Anita also engages with her community members on these issues through the medium of music and theatre. Since these mediums employed at Netritva Vicharshala greatly helped to strengthen her understanding of the issues discussed, she adopted these practices in her work as well. She added: "Over here at Childline, I work with both children and women. I come up with songs and make them about issues like malnutrition and feminism. I join these issues with songs and explain it to them. I also do this through street plays and this makes them understand better."[28]

Geegraj, a 24 year old social activist from Rajasthan, has taken great efforts to cultivate a constitution- oriented thinking in his community and neighbouring villages. He kickstarted an initiative called Samvidhanik Vichaar Manch in 2018 that has brought together 180 individuals to form several Samvidhan Shakhas (Constitution Schools). Here, people get together, discuss the Constitution, learn about their rights, and reflect on their everyday realities from a constitutional lens. Geegraj elaborated:

"I have taken a lot of training from different schools including the leadership school in Bhopal. After coming from the leadership school, I decided that I was going to work on the Constitution because the Constitution is often ignored a great deal. There are such good and profound ideas in it but the implementation and the ground reality of the situation in the country is very different. So that's why I thought there should constitution schools in different schools."[29]

---

28. 27 Main toh yaha childline main baacho ke liye hi kam karti hu aur mahilao ke saath bhi kam karti hu. Toh main cheezo ko jodhke gaana banna deti hu. Matlab muddo se jor deti hu jaise kuposhan ho gaya, narivad ho gaya. Gaana se jor deti hu aur beech main samjha bhi deti hu ki samajh main aaya ki kiss ke liye gaana hain. Baacho ko nukkad natak karke dikha deti hu, tab practical main unko jyada samajh aa jata hain.

29. "Meine apne youth mein bohot saare training liye hain, jaise Bhopal wala school tha. Leadership school tarah tarah ke cheezon mein baat hoti hain. Wahan se aane ka baad, meine soch liya tha ki mein samvidhaan ke oopar kaam karunga, kyunki samvidhaan ko bohot ignore kiya jata hai. Itni achi baatein hain usme, itne ache pravdhaan hain, par ground pe dekhein toh kuch implement nahi hota hai. Toh fir mein socha ki samvidhaan shakhayein banani chahiye gaon mein."

Divya Bagwe, a 25 year-old social worker from Betul, Madhya Pradesh, has worked towards organising the women of her community into a women's collective called Mawa Shakti Sangathan, where they get together and discuss issues ranging from domestic violence, women and children's health, unemployment, etc. However, one major challenge that she and her colleagues faced was that women were hesitant in speaking about their problems in the domestic sphere. She told me that one of the most important skills that she learnt at Netritva Vicharshala was the ability to get people to open up about their problems in the domestic sphere. She added:

"The thing is, we used to work but we just couldn't understand where to begin. First we went to villages, but after sitting with them they wouldn't be willing to share their problems. One of the first things I learnt at the leadership school was how to bring issues to the community so that they can understand them. Second was that if women did have a problem, they couldn't say it in front of 30-40 people, so we pondered over how exactly we could talk to them so that they could share their problems freely. If there are problems that women are facing then the best approach was to go to their home and to sit with them separately so that we could talk to them."[30]

_____

30. "Mujhe aisa laga ki hum log kam kartein toh thei lekin samajh nahi aata tha ki shuruat kahan se karein. Toh jo leadership school main ja kar samajh aaya ki shuruat kaha se karna chahiye. Sabse pehle ye hota tha ki hum gaon main gaye, baithe, tab ekdum se humein koi apna samasya nahi batata hain. Leadership school main toh sabse pehle maine ye sikha ki jo samudaay hain toh unke samne humein apni baat kaise rakhnei chahiyein, taki wo uss cheez ko samajh sakhein. Dusra ye ki agar samudaay main mahila ke saath kuch ho raha hain, kuch problem hai toh chaupal main toh 30-40 log ke samne wo bata nahi sakti, toh phir hum samjhey ki unke saath kaise baatcheet karein, kiss tarah se baat karein ki wo apni samasyayein khulke humare samne rakh sakein. Mahila ke saath kuch problem hain, toh bilkul uske ghar jaakein, humein baithke humein usse alag se baat karna chahiye... Toh pehle unke saath baithegey, unke ghar ke baarein main, anya kuch baatein kareygey. Phir gaon ke baarein main ki kaisa chal raha hain, pani wani ki samasya toh nahi ya koi aur samasya toh nahi hain. Phir hum puchegey ki aaplog apne apne pati se khush hain? Kiska pati theek se rakhta hain kiska nahi rakhta. Inn cheezo se mahilaon ke taraf se nikal ke aata hain kin ahi bhai mera pati toh mujhe thikse rakhta hain, nahi mera pati toh daaru peeta hain, mujhe pita hain ya phir kisi bhi prakar se prataadit karta hain."

Cultural apparatuses such as the culture circles and schools functioning outside of state and market imperatives are central to the creation of a critical public pedagogy that exposes the hidden power mechanisms of social domination, demystifies hierarchies, and explores the reason for their existence. Bourdieu's cultural theory of power asserts that such knowledge, when in possession of marginalised groups, has the potential to catalyse social change towards egalitarian social arrangements (Navarro, 2006). Bourdieu's concept of 'misrecognition', which refers to the everyday social processes that naturalise domination, is important to understand how pedagogic practices hold possibilities to oppress and liberate (Navarro, 2006). Education can work to legitimise, preserve, and reproduce dominant cultural forms. However, an education, dedicated to critical thought can challenge the legitimacy of 'doxa' and carve out routes for alternate social circumstances.

Reflections on Learners' Empowerment

It is important to note that majority of the people interviewed for this project were not experienced social workers. For most of them, Netritva Vicharshala was kind of an initiation into social work. Prior to this, many were students or engaged in different fields of work. They also faced several oppressive circumstances informed by their gender, caste, class, religion, or disability, which persist even today. The community leaders that they are today has been a result of a complex process of learning, unlearning, and connecting with people. Therefore, it is important to explore ways in which Netritva Vicharshala has contributed to their empowerment and evolution as social workers and community leaders.

For this purpose, let us first look at empowerment in its relation to the dynamic concept of power, as articulated by Rowlands (1998). Her conception of empowerment is in opposition to the instrumentalist approaches to empowerment that dominate the developmentalist discourses, which emphasise empowerment as "people's power over resources and means of economic and social reproduction. This results in

the "strengthening of focus on individualism, consumerism and personal achievement as cultural and economic goals" (ibid., p. 11). She calls for an expansion of the understanding of the concept of power informed by Foucault's (1982) conception of power as a productive force, intimately tied to knowledge. For Foucault, power is a 'mode of action upon action' (ibid., p. 222); it not only disciplines and controls, but also unravels new ways of being and thinking about ourselves. Since power exists in all social relationships, these relationships also serve as sites of resistance. Foucault understands resistance not as a negation of power, rather, as 'productive, affirmative and strategic use of techniques of power' (Pickett, 1996: 459).

Therefore, following this framework, Rowlands proposed a dynamic conception of power vis-a-vis empowerment, consisting of four different types of exercise of power. First, she looks at 'power over' as controlling power – over resources or, to influence actions and opinions of another. On the other hand, she understands 'power to' as 'generative or productive power (sometimes incorporating or manifesting as forms of resistance and/or manipulation), which creates new possibilities and actions without domination.' Third, she identifies 'power with', which 'involves a sense of the whole being greater than the sum of the individuals, especially when a group tackles problems together' (quoted in Williams et al. 1995: 234). And the last is – 'power from within', 'the spiritual strength and uniqueness that resides in each one of us and makes us truly human. Its basis is self acceptance and self-respect which extend, in turn, to respect for and acceptance of others as equals' (ibid.). This power can be what enables the individual to hold to a position or activity in the face of overwhelming opposition, or to take a serious risk (Rowlands, 1998: 13). In conclusion, "empowerment is not restricted to the achievement of the 'power over' form of power, but can also involve the development of power to, with and from within." (ibid., p. 15)

An examination of the participant's life trajectories suggests that Netritva Vicharshala has played an important role in enabling its participants to exercise these dynamic modes of power:

1. Power Over: Control over resources or the ability to influence people for marginalised individuals necessarily requires an enhanced ability to resist, to debate and communicate effectively, to have knowledge of one's rights and support mechanisms. It is important to understand modes of individual empowerment that do not rely on the dominant developmentalist conceptions of empowerment rooted in monetary and symbolic privilege. While ownership of property, higher educational qualifications, and having a "good job" are all things that allow one to have "controlling power", it is important to look at other means, as well as other meanings of such power. How can someone with limited educational qualifications and income, no property, come to gain control of resources and influence people?

   Divya Bagwe, the only daughter among three children, narrated her struggle to claim control of her property: "During the 15 day training at the leadership school, I learnt a lot about discrimination against women, I like this (session) a lot. And I felt that if I am telling others about it, I'm facing the same treatment. It's happening in my household as well. If I ever get married, and my husband isn't treating me well, if he shoos me away, you (her family) will not keep me, you will tell me to go back, and get beaten up. But I thought that I also need a place to go and stay. Everyone was very upset with me for a few days after I brought this up, but later they all understood. They said it is in my sister's name only. So they named the flat in my name. A lot of changes have happened in my house."[31]

---

31. "Leadership school ke baad jo 15 din ki humein training mili thi unn dinno main mahila ke bhedbhaav ke baare mein kaafi ache se samjhayi gayi, jo mujhe bohot achi bhi lagi. Aur mujhe ye laga ki main dusro ko bata rahi hu, lekin mere saath bhi ye ho raha hain. Mere ghar par bhi ho raha hain. Agar meri kissi din shaadi ho gayi toh aur mere pati ne agar mujhse thikse nahi rakha, bhagga dia toh tum log toh tab bhi mujhe nahi rakhogey, bologey ki wapas chalein ja. Tu maar kha, kuch bhi lekin chali ja. Lekin maine socha ki mujhe bhi chahiyein ek jagah jaha pe wapas aakar main reh toh sakhu. Kuch dinno tak sab logo gussa rahein lekin baad main sab theek ho gaye, bolein ki chalo hain toh behen ke nam pe hi. To unhone flat mere naam kia. Toh mere ghar par bhi kaafi change hua waise."

For Divya, knowledge of women's rights to property and her ability to recognise modes of oppression, was central to her gaining ownership of property. It was also a result of months of engaging with her family members on issues of gender equality. She told me that she had made great efforts to share her learnings on feminism with her family and to get them to reflect on the discriminatory division of labour at home. Her confidence to address these issues with her family came from her sustained engagements with other progressive voices in the community as well as the associations she created at the leadership school.

2. The power to imagine new possibilities for oneself as well as the community and to take action towards it is intimately tied to the cultivation of hope and courage, knowledge of history, and a deep sense of solidarity with others. Lessons in history give us the courage to struggle for social justice, whereas community support and solidarity give us the hope and strength to persevere in these struggles.

   Netritva Vicharshala equips its learners to "educate, agitate, organise", to forge bonds of solidarity, and inspires a commitment to social justice. For most participants who were interviewed, the leadership school was one of the most formative experiences of their lives. Their experiences at the school gave them a unique lens to look at themselves and their lives and politicised them in a way that they all undertook efforts towards consciousness raising, of varied degrees.

3. Power with, which 'involves a sense of the whole being greater than the sum of the individuals, especially when a group tackles problems together' is enabled by an ability to see the interconnected nature of social problems, by having an empathetic understanding of other people's struggles and histories, and is cultivated by strong bonds of solidarity. Through an emphasis on discussions that foreground people's lived-experiences, the participants learn a great deal from each others' struggles and also find inspiration in them. Using theatrical techniques that allow one to "step into another's shoes" also invoke a sense of solidarity and empathy.

"The people who came to the leadership school came from different places and were working on diverse issues. But the one common issue every one had was women's issues. All women face violence. And if we look at caste-based discrimination, it's happening to my community as well as other adivasi communities. Sahariya community is also facing the same discrimination. Labourers as well. So there are many commonalities and all areas are in need of leadership. If there's no unity among us, no one to to lead and tell people what is right or wrong... and even if this leader isn't a politician, we need an aide who can show people the way."[32] – Rohini C.

4. Power from within, which is the basis for self-acceptance and self-respect, is central to any action against hegemonic forces. Critical consciousness enables individuals to look at themselves not merely as products of history, rather, as active subjects in the making of history. A historical sensibility allows one to look at the present and oneself as containing a multitude of emancipatory possibilities, and not as static, or unchangeable. In this light, it is 'power from within' that gives one the 'power to' undertake revolutionary action. It is this power that allows one to see themselves as leaders and change makers.

    Netritva Vicharshala's primary aim is to empower learners by enabling this kind of power – a belief in oneself and one's ability to influence change. Enhanced communication skills, greater knowledge of historical processes, ability to identify situations of injustice and power inequalities, and a familiarity with support networks greatly help in building self-confidence as an activist/social worker.

---

32. "Jo saathi leadership school mein aaye the, woh alag alag jaghon see aaye the, aur unke alag mudde the. Lekin, mahilaon ke mudde sabke ek jaise the. Hinsa sabke saath ek jaisi thi. Log alag alag the.. Agar jaatigat bhed-bhav ki baat karun, toh jo mere community ke saath hai, woh adivasi community ke saath bhi hai. Sahariya samaj ke saath bhi hai. Labourers ke saath bhi hai. Toh alag alag area mein kuch cheezein bilkul common hai. Aur sab area mein leader ki zaroorat hai. Agar hum mein ek jut ta nahi hai, humko koi netritva karne wala nahi hai.. Sahi kya galat kya.. Bhale hi humain usse neta na kahe, par sahayak aisa hai jo hamein rasta dikha sake.."

"The important thing about the leadership school is the leadership training that focuses us on thinking about the various issues within society and how we should address these issues. What I'm trying to say is that we get to understand our own capacity to answer different kinds of questions and therefore get to develop ourselves with a lot of support. And there are issues that are social, political, economic, and ecological in nature and we are given this knowledge all the way from the village level to the international level and it was my good luck that I got this training. The thing is that now when we talk about economic issues the masters trainers have enhanced our ability to observe and analyse issues to its fullest be it economic, social, political, or cultural…"[33] – Mukesh Kumar Patel, Member, Disabled Persons' Organisation.

Here, we understand empowerment, i.e., to achieve power over and to develop power to, with, and within, involving a long-term process that is deeply tied to an individual's enhanced consciousness enabled by learning experiences at Netritva Vicharshala. Theorists such as Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum view empowerment as related to human agency, wherein agency is an intrinsic process mainly comprising freedom, capabilities, choices, and the ability to transform a choice into action (Nussbaum & Glover, 1995; A. Sen, 1989). Here, human agency relies on an understanding of freedom and capabilities in terms of material (corporeal and environmental) conditions and

---

33. "Leadership school me important ye hai ki vastav me jo leadership training me shikhaya gaya hai ki samajik bindu kya hai aur kis par hamko work karna chahiye main baat ye hai ki hamari capacity kaisi hai ki hum kisi bhi question ka answer kaise hum de payege to khud ko develop karne me bahut support hua hai mujhse aur samajik, aarthik, raajnitig evam paristhik mudde hote hai, desh ho ya videsh, uski bhi samajh banihai. kyoki village level se me juda aur waha village se lekar antarrastiya level ki jaan kari di gayi waha aur mera ye saubhagya tha ma'am yahi hai ki . aarthik me jab hum baat karte hai aur jo master trainers ne jo avlokan karne ki shamta badai hai ki aap kisi bhi mudde ke tah tak na jaye jab tak wo mudda poora nahi hota to ye charo mudde samajik, aarthik, raajnitik dharmik evam paristhik aur dharmik mudde aur dekha jaye to dhamik mudde bharat me bahut hote hai village level par."

obscures the cognitive meaning-making and reflective processes that are involved in the development of such agency.

Emirbayer and Mische (2018) understand human agency as 'a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented towards the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and towards the present (as a capacity to contextualise past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment)'. In other words, agency is embedded in the way we act as well as think that is informed by spacio-temporal conditions as well as the history and the politics of social relations (Mclaren, 1994).

McLaren (1994) also asserts that 'for criticalist educator, agency is structurally located and socially inscribed'. Critical pedagogy by focusing on local, concrete, and situated knowledges, validates a construction of a historical agency, enabling individuals to imagine alternative possibilities for themselves and their communities. Therefore, through our inquiry we can trace ways in which certain set of ideas and pedagogical practices have the potential to enhance human agency in ways that leads individuals to act as agents of social change.

Beyond Netritva Vicharshala: Creating Autonomous Culture Circles

Many of the participants that were interviewed expressed their desire to a) attend the leadership school again b) have similar educational initiatives kickstarted at the local level. There were only a few people who had attended it more than once or twice. What most participants felt was that the first experience was central in giving them a fresh direction in their work, newer strategies for engagement, and inspiring a great deal of critical self-reflection. However, they asserted their desire to participate in more such discussions and explore the ideas introduced at Netritva Vicharshala in a more rigorous manner.

For Samadhan, it took multiple experiences at Netritva Vicharshala for him to unlearn the nuances of nationalism and communalism. He commented, "At first I didn't understand nationalism or communalism. Regarding those issues I used to disagree a lot, but over there I did not voice this. I felt that they were insluting mother India as well as the tricolour, but the second time I came, I attempted to understand and I studied these things as well. Only then did I truly understand, so that's why the learner cannot be perfect in one go."[34]

As of now, Netritva Vicharshala invites a new set of participants each year from across the country. The themes explored are more or less the same, with a few additions and omissions each year. Each topic discussed at the leadership school is extremely vast and bulky in terms of the concepts and literature that it refers to. However, all of it is condensed, simplified, and contextualised by the resource persons in order to make the subject matter intelligible and accessible to the participants from diverse backgrounds. The first few days of the course work are less interactive than those that come later as the participants take time to familiarise themselves with the environment, their peers, and the dialogic mode of learning. As the days are packed with discussions and activities, a lot of the times, participants' confusions, doubts, or disagreements go unaddressed. Many participants shared their desire to expand their knowledge on the topics discussed and to develop an expertise on the issues. This was not driven by mere curiosity, but by a desire to empower oneself and their community members with greater knowledge.

Rohini explained, "What this was, was our base. We can understand how to make this stronger. For example, if you study the constitution and the

---

34. "Pehle mujhe rastravad samajhne main nahi aaya, sampravadiyakta nahi samaj main aaya. Usko lekar maine disagree kia tha, lekin maine waha bola nahi tha. Tab laga ki arey bharat mata ko aisa keh rahe hain, tiranga ko aisa keh rahe hain. Jab dusri baar main aaya tab samajhne ki koshish ki ki aisa kyun kehte hain bar bar, aur padhne ki kosish ki. Tab baat pakad main aayi. Toh aadmi ko ek bar main perfect nahi kar sakte hain."

law within the current atmosphere of the state, you can learn a lot. If you're talking to someone you should have the vocabulary to prove to them that they should keep their mouth shut. If there is a leader in a particular area then he should know everything for example I am working with a sex worker and her children and that after 6' o clock the woman cannot be arrested."[35]

Participants also stressed on the importance of having local leadership schools in their respective villages, in addition to the extant centralised model. Having a centralised model has many benefits of its own, some of which include:1) It allows for the coming together of individuals from diverse areas (across states), which enables one to gain a deep sense of solidarity and unity in struggles, and results in a rich cross-cultural learning experience. 2) The symbolic value of moving out of their village for a training/education to the "city" has immense empowering effects for women. However, the participants asserted that such initiatives are needed at the local level as this will allow more people from their respective areas to participate, learn, organise, and potentially become agents of change. Moreover, more localised discussions on themes explored at Netritva Vicharshala allow for the creation of a tangible action plan towards the concerned issue as well as greater community involvement and organisation.

However, NGOs such as ActionAid Association have their own limitations in terms of human resources, funding constraints, and forms of bureaucratic checks that make it challenging to run leadership schools across villages on a regular basis. One way to navigate this problem is to strategise ways to facilitate autonomous educational projects such as Netritva Vicharshala,

---

35. "Ye jo tha wo tha humara base. Usse bhi mazbooti se hum sikh sakte hain. Jaise ek tha constitution pe, dharao pe tha aur aaj kal ke rajneetik mahaul ko dekh kar mujhe lagta hain ki humain bohot kuch sikhna chahiye. Agar aap kissi se baat kar rahe hain tab aapke paas wo proof hona chahiye ki aap unko chup kara paaye. Agar koi leader ek area ko lead kar raha hain toh usko sab pata hona chahiye jaise ki main sex worker aur unke baacho ke saath kam karti hu aur mujhe patta rehna chahiye ki 6 baje ke baad ek mahila arrest nahi ho sakti."

spearheaded by the grassroots activists and NGO workers who have previously studied at the leadership school. In other words, what we need is autonomous culture circles for the grassroots community that are organised and facilitated by members of the community itself.

In many ways, the process is already in place as evident in the efforts discussed in the previous sections. The learning and unlearning happening in women's collectives, baithaks and other informal gatherings are as valuable as the discussions in Netritva Vicharshala's classrooms, but such discussions are issue-specific, narrow in scope, and remain at an introductory level. For example, conversations in women's collective are often centred around women's issues in the village, with little room for discussion on processes that are not explicitly gendered, such as communalism and nationalism. To inspire engagement with a subject through an intersectional lens, one requires a certain level of confidence and expertise in other fields, which the participants felt they were lacking, owing to the brevity of their experience at Netritva Vicharshala.

While Netritva Vicharshala has empowered learners in enormous ways, there is still more that can be done in order to realise the aims of the project– to build community leaders with a strong ideological backbone. The participants themselves feel that they are capable of being more than who they are now, and there are many others like them who will grow to lead, if they gain access to such critical learning experiences. In its current form, Netritva Vicharshala functions as a stepping stone in an individual's leadership journey. However, their potential and capabilities can be maximised through regular engagement. Instead of Netritva Vicharshala being a one-time experience in a participant's life, participants will greatly benefit by coming back to the school on a yearly/half-yearly basis. Once the individual has gained sufficient expertise over the contents of the curriculum, they will be more able and keen on initiating similar education projects in their respective areas. Moreover, there needs to be an effort towards strengthening the relationships between participants and their

peers as well as the resource persons. Creating a support system that does not rely on NGOs to facilitate exchange of knowledge and experiences is central to sustaining autonomous educational projects.

Prof. Sanjay Singh emphasised on the importance of the network between the university and the grassroot activism created by a space like Netritva Vicharshala, and how that enables a filling up of gaps in both these spheres. He said, "It is very important for initiatives like leadership schools to have live contact with students and teachers of universities, who have an inclination towards social issues. If campuses and grassroot activities get delinked, then it will make both the processes poorer. What is happening at Netritva Vicharshala is important because of the simple fact that it acts as a bridge between the university people and the activists, and they are getting an opportunity to meet. But we can build upon it, regularise it, follow-up with participants, and I was also thinking that once a year or once in two-three years, a slightly advanced element of the leadership school should be called back and one can sit with them and have a conversation with them about what they are doing and how they are organising things and do some kind of an embedded public kind of a research. The issues they throw up can be used to develop lectures and projects and then hand it back to them. Something like that could be done... It will be wonderful and it will trigger processes and activities that we can't speculate on right now."

CONCLUSION

This report contains important insights for exploring critical pedagogy in India, for Netritva Vicharshala is rigorous, dynamic, and unique in its quest to foster democratic practices and ideals through education. Netritva Vicharshala serves as a model for alternative educational projects that function outside of state and market imperatives, geared towards cultivating critical thought and enhancing individual as well as collective political agency of marginalised communities.

It illuminates ways in which NGOs, social movements, and as well as universities can form a powerful nexus to produce conditions that challenge hegemonic cultures of neoliberalism, caste, and patriarchy. Such a nexus allows for possibilities of critical education reaching the grassroots, and expands the notion of intellectual politics beyond the realm of academic spaces. Netritva Vicharshala facilitates the emergence of the Gramscian 'organic intellectuals', who take on critical intellectual work, grounded in everyday struggles, in the interest of marginalised groups.

NGO's with access to domestic donors, or humanitarian aid, can channelise their resources towards educational efforts that aim towards local and situated knowledge production; this means centering voices of the local communities in the pedagogic design as well as practice. Netritva Vicharshala does this by bringing those 'organic intellectuals', who have long been parts of people's movements and struggles, to facilitate discussions on relevant issues. ActionAid Association's Executive Director Sandeep Chachra explained, "If I have to run such a school in Chotanagpur in the state of Jharkhand, I will obviously need some physical resources like some space, money to take care of the minor expenses. I will also need a range of knowledge associated with the idea, for which I will have

to bring in educators, let us say, Munda tribe leaders or other sociologists and anthropologists or those from Jharkhand Mukti Morcha who fought the struggles."

Netritva Vicharshala's curriculum is dynamic in the way that it centres the local and situated knowledge/ experiences of the learners and simultaneously brings forth the universality in their experiences by situating them in the context of larger structures of capitalism, patriarchy, the caste system, etc. By doing this, Netritva Vicharshala validates the construction of learner's historical agency as well as inspires solidarity with other groups and movements. It enables a mode of interpretation amidst learners that problematises the socio-cultural norms that govern everyday life and provides them with a language of critique and possibility. Especially for learners from marginalised communities, it inspires a renewed sense of agency that comes from learning the history and modes of the extant power configurations as well as the history of struggles against them.

This publication also emphasises the successes of dialogue, as opposed to instruction, as a pedagogic tool for critical thought. One cannot instruct an inquiry into the power relations and hierarchies of the larger social, cultural, and economic order; it requires a co-investigation, through dialogue, into one's own experiences in relation to the larger social structures. Therefore, any effort towards consciousness-raising requires dialogue that foregrounds learners' lived experiences as the primary mode of inquiry. This can also be supplemented by use of art; Netritva Vicharshala employs art forms, such as theatre, dance, music, poetry, and films to provide a creative space to engage with critical ideas, enabling new ways of thinking about the world and ourselves. Collective engagement with art also aids in strengthening bonds of solidarity in a group.

The study also shows how empowerment is deeply tied to an enhanced consciousness of learners that is enabled by cultivating a critical sensibility that views local, concrete, and situated knowledge as legitimate. The

cognisance of their legitimacy is through the awareness of power relations in society and the historical understanding of the origins of social inequalities in society. A historical sensibility also allows us to move beyond what Bourdieu refers to as misrecognition, and enables us to view culture as the sphere where power relations can be contested.

The banking model of education dominates the educational system of our times as formal education spaces are deeply embedded in the unequal power structures. Therefore, it is important to carve out alternative educational spaces that are counter-hegemonic, accessible, and localised. Netritva Vicharshala is a step in this direction. Although Netritva Vicharshala itself is embedded in relations of power, it acts as a point of departure for future educational efforts towards challenging hegemonic forces.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Althusser, L. (2014) Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses. Verso.

Barak, A. (2016). Critical consciousness in critical social work: Learning from the theatre of the oppressed. The British Journal of Social Work, 46(6), 1776-1792.

Boal, A. (1993). Theater of the oppressed. New York: Theatre Communications Group.

Bourdieu, P. (1984). Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste. Harvard university press.

Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J. C. (1990). Reproduction in Education, society and culture (Vol. 4). Sage.

Brown, W. (2018). The Vocation of the Public University. What Is Education?: An Anthology on Education. DUF (The Danish National Youth Council).

Dhar, A. (2018). What if the University is a Parrot's Training. Bhattacharya, D. (2018). The University Unthought: Notes for a Future. New York and London: Routledge, 154-158.

Emirbayer, M., & Mische, A. (1998). What is agency?. American Journal of Sociology, 103(4), 962-1023.

Freire, P. (2005). Pedagogy of the Oppressed. New York, NY: Continuum. (30th Anniversary Edition)

Freire, P. (1972) Conscientizing as a Way of Liberating. LADOC, A documentation Service of the Division of Latin America– USCC, II, 29a, 4 pages (mimeographed).

Freire, P. (1985). The Politics of Education: Culture, Power, and Liberation. South Hadley: Bergin & Garvey.

Fisher, M. (2009). Capitalist Realism: Is there no Alternative?. John Hunt Publishing.

Gramsci, A. (1971). Selections from the Prison Notebooks (Q. Hoare & G. Nowell Smith, Trans.). New York, NY: International Publishers.

Giroux, H. (2011). On Critical Pedagogy. Bloomsbury Academic.

Government of Maharashtra (1982), Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 2, p. 62

Heredia, R. C. (1995). Tribal education for development: Need for a liberative pedagogy for social transformation. Economic and Political Weekly, 891-897.

Hooks, B. (1994). Teaching to Transgress. Routledge.

Ismail, F., & Kamat, S. (2018). NGOs, social movements and the neoliberal state: Incorporation, reinvention, critique.

Larsen, SN. (2018). What is Education? — A Critical Essay. What Is Education?: An Anthology on Education. DUF (The Danish National Youth Council).

McLaren, P. (1994). Critical pedagogy, political agency, and the pragmatics of justice: The case of Lyotard. Educational Theory, 44(3), 319-340.

Nussbaum, M. (2009). Tagore, Dewey, and the imminent demise of liberal education. In The Oxford handbook of philosophy of education.

Omvedt, G. (1994). Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India. SAGE Publications India.

Pickett, B. L. (1996). Foucault and the Politics of Resistance. Polity, 28(4), 445-466.

Rege, S. (2010). Education as "Trutiya Ratna": Towards Phule-Ambedkarite Feminist Pedagogical Practice. Economic and Political Weekly, 88-98.

Rowlands, J. (1998). A word of the times, but what does it mean? Empowerment in the discourse and practice of development. In Women and empowerment (pp. 11-34). Palgrave Macmillan, London.

Standing, G. (2011). The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class. Bloomsbury.

Torres, C. A. (2019). Tansformative social justice learning: The legacy of paulo freire. In Utopian Pedagogy (pp. 242-247). University of Toronto Press.

Tisdell, E. J. (1998). Poststructural feminist pedagogies: The possibilities and limitations of feminist emancipatory adult learning theory and practice. Adult education quarterly, 48(3), 139-156.

Wacquant, L. (2004). Critical Thought as Solvent of Doxa. Constellations, 11(1), 97-101.

Zene, C. (2018) Justice for the Excluded and Education for Democracy in B. R. Ambedkar and A. Gramsci, Rethinking Marxism, 30:4, 494-524.