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Silence is the Storehouse of Strength: Meeting Children of Remote Sundarbans in India

Pratishtha Sengupta

*Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) Senior Research Fellow at Institute of
Development Studies (IDSK), Kolkata*

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Abstract

Despite having the exposures of mobile, internet, technological knowhow and trendy cloths speaking own minds in front of society which is socio-economically different from them remains an issue for children of remote Sundarbans. Their academic knowledge as it emerges from the copies, lessons is not extremely poor rather pretty decent not only in terms of marks obtained in assessment papers, exam sheets but in their day to day class room performances as well. Despite repeated requests from survey team to the students of secondary sections in select schools of both Patharpratima block in Indian Sundarbans to open up on their dreams, aims, likes, other than one or two students as a whole do not express themselves much. However, considering the background, their ability in solving curricula related queries one can't help but be hopeful that if explored the relevant ways and oriented with empathy the teachers can actually prepare children to be assets for the society.

Key Words: Remote areas, Sundarbans, Responses, Participation

Introduction:

Expression of students across remote localities of Sundarbans remains an issue one can't help but take a clear note of. Sundarbans means the real and remote parts of the riverine islands of Bay of Bengal across blocks of South 24 parganas district. Patharpratima which is selected for this study on quality education of children is a community development block under Kakdwip subdivision of South 24 Parganas district in West Bengal, India. I as part of my academic exercise under ICSSR Fellowship went to explore the scopes of strengthening institutional linkages in education system so that school children in this part of society enjoy a better benefit of learnings in their school. Students of the select schools have otherwise been very cheerful, interactive amongst themselves in the class and during periodic breaks. This kind of relational dialogue becomes frequent once they are within their own circles, groups and people who are known to them. They would speak in their own dialects, colloquial verses only to reach out to their peers. As it may otherwise be presumed that

they would often indulge in slangs or abuses while conveying any exclamatory feelings, negative or positive. This is not always true. They are like any other normal kids, adolescents in their growing phase. Some of them have some sort of a career aim while others are still clueless about future plans. These kinds of approaches towards life are nothing but a cumulative effect of their level of education, lack of familial support and scope for no or negligible life enrichment exercises (LEEs). To be detailed, exposures to spoken English, various competency exams, skills identifications, extracurricular capacity nurturing are few areas these students from far off regions tend to lag behind their counterparts in schools from core urban locations.

Literature Survey:

Bangalore based institution called evidyaloka in 2021 has had this narrative that any formal or informal education system is a service at the end of a day. It is thus utmost important that education needs to cater to various needs in any class room. Each student is unique, they may not always talk, open up like many others. But they have a sound mind of their own.

Harvard Graduate School on Education in its report of March 2021 has stated that relationship does matter in an institution where exchange of ideas, knowledge, information remains an inbuilt element.

Kathy Charmaz during her long research career focuses on need for grounded theory (2006) that are realistic and time tested and thus again research findings need to be reviewed time and again from various perspectives. Consequently, the interactive approach in the class room sessions becomes really relevant to pick out loopholes in the procedures and responsibilities therein.

NGOs like Prays, CINI, Magic Bus, Smiles Foundation, and Miracle Foundation working tirelessly across states of India on education projects have gone through trial and error methods to optimize on their outreach to students. Right from holding special sessions for weaker sections to arranging volunteers these community institutions have made every possible move to stick to their commitment – education is a service and that needs to be provided as per requirement. Smile Foundation, Miracle Foundation, Magic Bus Foundation, evidyaloka are some such NGOs whose works stand out as references before policy management.

In addition to sets of written documents as researcher we came across some interesting references about children of this region. Local people have many a stories to tell. How the cricket match between local clubs become an event of great excitement where children get involved quite emotionally. They take part in yearly Holi, Saraswati puja, local fairs and they prefer to participate in large numbers. Thus it is simply not normal for them to not open up with people otherwise. Here the point is that they seem to be a bit hesitant and uninterested as they do not find any commonality between them and the guests. like us who paid them rare and occasional visits.

Further to this there are some stories that have gone down the generations and people get convinced of its worth and truth.

For instance, When Aila cyclone hit this region, it is the local adolescent who took real initiatives in making shelter homes, putting up mud embankments, organizing community kitchen, on the spot treatment for wounded and sick along with many other emergency services.

There have been instances when these local children stood up against offences like small thefts, dacoity or extortion. Though the students have been minors they do take side with their seniors in such community based endeavors to do the best for the benefit of their neighbors and people around them.

Objectives:

To address factors causing differences in expression of children in remote areas.

Study Methods:

Focused Group Discussion (FGDs) on two sets of schools each from Patharpratima block of Sundarbans and from hinterland of Kolkata were conducted. Students from adjacent areas of Kolkata have been included along with Patharpratima as case control for the same. They would as protocol of a reference based study act as standards in comparison to which the performances of students from remote locations to be examined. Students from ninth and tenth standards have been interacted with on their background, vision, aim and aspirations in life etc. Students from secondary sections were selected in mixed groups and four FGDs conducted amongst them on issues relevant for them. Issues like subject preference, favorite food item, sports, TV channel, aim in life were given to them to carry on a conversation. Each group consists of 12 students in combination from both ninth and tenth standards. Teacher of the Class or Class Teacher while conducting the FGDs responded on behalf of the participants. Group discussion participants or the students mostly passed smiles, gazes at one another, murmured a bit but didn't come out quite candidly on their opinion. This lack of clear expression has as a matter of fact been result of a sense of discomfort, uneasiness in front of unknown people. Teachers too echoed the same feelings as part of field studies under ICSSR fellowships I visited these schools in one of the most remote islands of South 24 Parganas, the Patharpratima. Select schools there are govt sponsored schools with all infrastructural and institutional facilities that this system could offer. School furniture, upholstery laid out in the class, uniform – all these put together would throw an image of a complete school till one delves into interactive mode with its pupils. Water facility in the latrine, access to safe drinking water, canteen all in place to complete the list of conditions for a good school. The human resource management remains an issue that need to be addressed more sincerely. Based on news clippings (*Ei Somoy* dated 15.2.2025) in a leading Bengali Newspaper published from Kolkata it can also be a reference that teachers from a particular school in Bardhaman districts in order to improve the performances of students have started visiting homes of students. They in a friendly manner do help students with subjects otherwise tough for them. All these special interactions are arranged in such an amiable manner that students can really reap academic benefit out of it.

Majority of the students engaged in group discussions mostly gazed at me despite my reactions, requests to them to come up with what is on their mind. Our hypotheses for this study has been that a stronger linkage across institutions would spell better in accessing quality learnings, improving participations and receiving life enriching exercises. The responses of corresponding students from schools located within urban agglomerations of Kolkata have been significantly prompt and participatory. The students of this urban locale in a nutshell exhibited more readiness in the attitudes than in answers.

It is not only group interaction method that has helped us gather this set of data details but local people's observations too reflect strongly on the nature of ambience that matters to add quality to their level of candid communication.

Data & Details:

Primary qualitative survey happened to be key source for data collections and capturing details. Visiting schools in these locations has been an exposure one can't forget quite easily. Buildings are solid, structurally gigantic and endowed with every modern facility that any modern school of our country can afford to have e.g, library, canteen, playground, staff room, toilet, mid day meal and so

on. Looks wise, it appears to be perfect. Students get free sets of books, copies, dresses, shoes. Thus everything seems to be okay as far as the external image of an education institution is concerned.

Two schools in Patharpratima blocks of Indian Sundarbans that are taken up for field studies have exhibited that students who despite having common state syllabi, curricula hardly spoke in front of survey team. Students on the other hand from urban agglomerations of Kolkata spoke enthusiastically on sets of similar question points posed before them.

While coming back interestingly some of the students of Patharpratima outside the school premises asked me candidly whether I would be back soon to meet them again. Thus few aspects tend to pop out of this field investigation that requires special mention.

Emerging Issues:

Lack of Special Teachers

It is often mentioned that schools require special teachers, counselors to deal with typical needs of students. However, special teachers or special educators are few in number and they often do not get paid in equal terms. Further to this even if one gets special teachers they need to be sensitized with local moods, mental make ups and background details of children. A randomized counseling session fit for all may not suit all in dire need of real psychological intervention planned for these children. Planning for this is to be updated with any change in the status quo of the beneficiary only to address it from every possible crisis in a feasible way.

Training of Educators

This becomes an important issue that teachers need periodic training, orientation to have a sincere understanding about students coming from varied familial situations. Training usually denotes a set of standard modules coupled with heaps of papers which the trainee educators are expected to make use of while engaged in pedagogy. However, training actually demands a set of prerequisites that educators, guides the school management as a whole would facilitate for their students and this process continues like a flow. This process or the flow of renewed vision – treating each student as per situation appears to be the key behind a significant impact expected out of study-based intervention.

Solid Data base on Students, Family before Class Teachers

Teachers too are in need of data, information, updates on students, their background, special challenges, if any faced by students. Betterment in interactions, additional values in communications are indeed important but these can only be ensured on basis of references. Evidences or field information accordingly play crucial part in case of teachers' performances, roles and responsibilities. Whether the child is a slow learner, afflicted with some congenital ailment, serious disease, disability that any family member of his/her is suffering from to be conveyed to teachers to ensure her/his awareness about the situation of a child.

Reviewing School Development Plans

Tremendous scope for revisiting the school development plans in light of future career of students in particular and quality of their life in general. Government both at centre and state have been charting out various LEE strategies for the welfare of students. Attitude and aspirations of students need special mention under such proposed plans and programs. In fact parents or care givers at home, private guides or home tutors often lack their presence in these proposed development initiatives of schools. They along with guardians, peers, coaches, guides make a team of immediate stakeholders for children which school management should take cognizance of. Parent teachers meet being an

integral participatory tool between school and family need to be reviewed with reference to its timing, nature of discussion points to be planned, updating plans, scope for defaulter and additional provisions for transport, accessibility for those from cutoff areas,

Tasks Ahead for Researcher:

Any research dealing with fundamental development themes like education, nutrition or health necessitates a kind of dissemination on key findings before stakeholders at local levels and policy planning at macro levels. On a priority scale this has also been an agenda of this particular study under ICSSR fellowship that field observations on emerging issues are significant to be taken up for an in depth retrospection. Is it only spending time at schools both by teachers and students or handholding the future citizens towards building a meaningful career – a crucial point that might act as a trigger for any student friendly planning under education policy. Thus a dissemination session is also planned where key revelations of field observations would be taken up for an urgent review.

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