

AN INTRODUCTORY NOTE ON ACTIVIST SCHOOL

Towards a Pedagogy of the Oppressed & Marginalised

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The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus character – that is the goal of true education

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

I. Onset of the Discussion

The primary idea of this initiative is to build a different learning process aiming towards a pedagogy from below. The Activist School would function as a learning centre for both activists as well as non-activists. It would engage people from different walks of life such as activists, professional, community leaders, community members, people's advocates, students, youths (both rural and urban) and others interested in such learning process. It is an intentional strategy for creating knowledge characterised by taking action to realise just relationships that transform unequal power structures in our personal, social, cultural, political, environmental, spiritual, and economic lives. This could be accomplished by linking critical reflection to activism by creating opportunities to connect the action to self-reflection, self-discovery, and the creation and comprehension of values, skills, and knowledge.

Broadly such a school could be defined as a creative learning and educational practice in which participants engage in a set of learning activities that help them understand themselves as capable of effecting change for social justice, distributive justice, sharing of values and a balance of ecology. Learning in such a process would derive by developing a multi-prolonged approach, method and practices consisting of reading, learning, listening, researching, reflecting, participating, observing, writing, experimenting, and engaging in activities that are hands-on, minds-on within a specific timeframe and other tangible limits. Such an approach needs more serious brainstorming through which an appropriate methodology with sound epistemological and ontological backing would emerge.

It is also an opportunity to develop a critical pedagogy of actual learning trajectories, beyond the ambit of current schooling or academic mechanics. Socio-cultural studies on learning view learning as a socially mediated process (i.e., through the use of semiotic-cultural artifacts) in which peers (i.e., novice and sometimes more expert ones) participate in co-constructing authentic activity. From the perspective of socio-cultural theory, learning is a social process, a process of transformation of participants themselves. Thus theoretically it could be argued that people develop a function of their transforming roles and understandings in the activities in which they participate.

Critical pedagogy argues that all mainstream education originates and proceeds from a particular socio-political viewpoint – the ideology of the dominant culture and the elite remains in the centre. This means that as critical learning process, one would have to develop and implement a critical curriculum that would encourage the participant learners to reflect beyond the ordinary rhetoric of academics. Critical educators view the mainstream education of candidates from subordinate cultures and sectors (like Dalits, Adivasis, poor, religious

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minorities, sexual minorities, linguistic minorities and ethnic minorities) as a process of deculturalisation, decivilisation, subjugation, and silencing. Such a process always secedes from plurality of existence to a monolithic homogenous polarised pattern of learning – which in turn would not only impact the individual learning process or delimit his or her skills, but at large it would influence their engagement in the society.

Activities are presented in ways that open a practice field where students and educators can enact lived-democracy in the form of facilitated participation in, and sometimes resistance to, the structures that constitute human society on both local and global levels.

II. Objectives

- a) To assist activists to become agents of change through upgrading their knowledge base, skills, tools and techniques and an application of traditional knowledge and customary practices.
- b) To engage in the development of critical learning process of sensibly evolving the pedagogy of oppressed and marginalised; a bottom-up mechanism of learning.
- c) To build a network of learning-cum-teacher activists.
- d) To create a space for interaction between activists, learners, professionals, researchers, community leaders, community members, people's advocates, students, youths (both rural and urban) and others interested in such process.

III. The Construct of an Approach

The primary goal of pedagogy from the margins is to assist the learners to emerge as responsible citizens. In such a circumstance, the learner should be provided with the opportunity, skills, tools, and strategies to be active agents of change. Such effective process could have three different approaches.

- a) **Academic Approach:** In an academic approach the focus would be more on theoretical learning. This has its strengths and limitations. As in any academic institutions, while it could help in learning and testing theories, for the new learners it would be a difficult proposition. Such an approach would turn more challenging and difficult and in a way it would be an enforced process. In order to couple up with such an approach, the activist learners would require more time or else in the long run, one would witness a serious problem of 'dropouts'. Eventually this would challenge the very notion of Activist School in its very notion of the development of a different (read alternative) pedagogy of learning from below.
- b) **Activist Approach:** The activist approach as such could be one of the best methods of learning. Many academic institutions have been fast moving towards this method of learning. This is in fact a more practical method and would engage with the masses at the ground level in order to study and learn from the masses. Such an approach has the potential to challenge the ideas and knowledge creation poured in by mainstream education institutions and educators. This has the potential to evolve soft theories and instill the fresh (read non-academic) minds as the collective creators of knowledge. The biggest lacuna of such an approach is a complete dismissal of existing academic processes, knowledge, theories and patterns, which in effect would be disastrous as it could lead to denial of the existing body of information and knowledge. Therefore it is problematic within the practice of learning itself.
- c) **Mixed Approach:** Mixed approach is a combination of academic as well as activist method where there is a balance between the theory and practice. This method in the quest for socio-economic, political, economic and ecological justice, this would be more

appropriate as a practicum through updation of information, knowledge and field based practicum. Activists turning into learners (students) in this process should facilitate the new method of innovation of learning, consisting of mainstream episteme (knowledge and information that is in existence) and ontology (rationality of the knowledge) but also a critical connect with the traditional knowledge and customary practice of not only which eventually would emerge. This would be process of the emergence of a new pedagogy of the oppressed and marginalised.

IV. Envision the Emergence

- a) *Activists as learners:*** This is one of the key visions of this process that would emerge over the course of time. Generally rural (and also urban) activists with low educational level have been engaged in action and experimentation of building organisations and movements. In this process they would emerge as would critical learners by which they would get equipped in this pedagogy as critical thinkers and knowledge bearers.
- b) *Activists as teachers:*** Activists have a typical open mind where they would dismiss the space of being biased. Once they turn as learners, their engagement with the community would emerge them as guides (teachers). Thus, it would provide them an opportunity to translate their learning into action, experimentation and building up organisation, movements and campaigns. Such a process would strengthen the community as well as uphold the sustainability of the organisation.
- c) *Learners (students) as activists:*** This would constitute the second part of what is envisioned when one would create the space for higher degree of interaction between the activist-learners and academic-learners. Such a space would apparently draw more students from the universities to take part in the activities of social organisations and people's movements, build support for various campaigns and help in a greater interaction and knowledge sharing with activists.
- d) *Teachers as activists (or supporters of activists):*** While students would play a higher role the university level teachers have a serious role to play in promoting the students for such engagements, providing orientation to students and initiating interaction. In the long run these teachers could support with appropriate learning tools for the activist school that would be more interesting for the participants.

V. Some Methodological Remarks

- a) *Mixed Methodology:*** Generally learning methods are assessed either based on quantitative or qualitative patterns. It is proposed to go beyond these methodological propositions by adopting a critical combination of quantitative, qualitative, pragmatism, experimental and non-conventional methods. The entire learning process would be based on building these teaching and learning practices in the long run.
- b) *Assessment of participants:*** The participants at all level would be accessed and their learning and growth process would also be monitored consistently. The course would start with the assessment of the participants. This would help the course instructors/ teachers to frame or reframe the modules and tools accordingly. However the idea of assessment can go beyond a one-time affair. It would depend upon the type of learning one would engage at a point of time. The assessment could be done based on a simple questionnaire or by raising instant questions in a different format. There are other assessment tools like game, posters, sketching, drawing, painting, speaking, etc.

Assessment is important in order to figure the interest of the participants and one could suggest course in accordance with their interest either.

- c) *Tools and methods of learning:*** Multiple tools and methods could be applied in the learning-teaching process. Some of the tools and methods could be adopted from the existing patterns of learning, while others could be innovated in order make the learning process easy and feasible for the participants. These could range from classroom lectures, participatory sessions, interaction, outdoor exercise, theatre techniques, theatre games, social games, group games, reading work, writing exercise, reflection sessions, music and dance, listening techniques, group exercise, chart work, exposure, outdoor work, survey, questioning patterns, research techniques, experimental methods, interpretative techniques, body language methods, improvisation techniques, presentation, movies, documentaries, community traditions, customary practices, resource mapping, GRS mapping, etc. These learning tools and methods could expand according to the need of each of the themes and techniques. What one has to be careful with that it should generate an interest among the learners. People desire to learn things in an interesting, relevant and meaningful manner. Therefore efforts should be maximised to find how the information and knowledge is transformed into a non-bored style of learning-teaching combination.

VI. The Courses

One could have a wide range of course as per the need based assessment of the candidates. Some of the courses are clubbed together based on thematic and sectorwise relevance and priorities. There could be some overlapping in this at certain point; however such aspects could be dealt with care so that such overlappings are carefully avoided. These aspects could be further discussed and elaborated accordingly as and when required. However some of the possible courses that could be included in it are noted below

1. Indian Constitution and Constitutional Rights as Citizens
2. Adivasi Identity, rights, PESA and Fifth Schedule
3. Dalits, Caste system and contradictions of social systems
4. Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policy
5. Religious Minorities
6. Sexual Minorities
7. Women's and Feminist Studies
8. Poverty Studies-
9. Human Rights
10. National and International Mechanisms on Human Rights
11. Development Studies
12. Resource Politics
13. Rural Development
14. Local Self Governance (PRI)
15. Environment and Ecology Studies
16. Labour Studies (with a focus on rural labour)
17. Conflict (militarisation) Studies
18. Science and Society
19. People's Health Science
20. Media (Mass, Social and Alternative) Studies
21. Water and Sanitation
22. Development Communication
23. Writing Skills
24. Basic Research Skills and Methods

25. Leadership Skills

VII. Course Structure

The courses are structured in a manner that one could take the entire courses from 1-20 mentioned in part-VI. Each of the courses would be of five days. This means the entire course would be for a period of 100 days a year. Participants would be also free to take specific courses as per their needs.

- a) **Inhouse School:** This is specifically meant for the staff members of Atmashakti (and OSM), which consists of Jansathis, Junior Coordinators, Coordinators, Assistant Programme Executives, Programme Executives, Team Leaders, managers and others leaders at the State level.
- b) **School for Community leaders:** This is again specifically meant for the members and community leaders at the village level, particularly in Odisha working through the Atmashakti and OSM network. This could include members and leaders at the village, panchayat, block, district and state level.
- c) **Schools for Others:** The School would not be closed for others including members and staff of other NGOs, Social Organisations, People's Movements, Civil Society Networks, Activist groups, Academic Institutions, Students, Youths, Community leaders and members, etc.
- d) **Scope for Integration:** There is immense scope to integrate these courses where inhouse members, community leaders and others could come together for any particular course or all the courses. For this, we would have to open it up by making open/ public announcements. Application should be invited and these applications has to be appropriately screened before accepting them.
- e) **Course Module:** Every course would have a specific module based on a pre-assessment of the participants. The module would be designed in a manner of two days of indoor exercises, one day of library (reading, writing, reflection, analysis, assessment, etc.), one day of fieldwork and one day of reporting, planning, etc. These courses would be developed by a team of experts based on a common module and wherever needed make essential shifts and changes accordingly.
- f) **Creating an Environment of Learning:** Any different pattern of learning essentially needs a different environment of learning and this is one of the key features of the course design and structure. Such inclusive, enjoyable, expressive and friendly environment can have huge impact on the learning and the overall process of growth of the individual.
- g) **Focussed Eligibility:** As a principle, we could think of giving more emphasis on the participations of candidates from Adivasi, Dalit, Working Class and Minority sections, with a focus on women candidates.
- h) **Token fees:** One could take a token fee for the long term sustainability of the School. This could be in terms of money, kind, voluntary labour or any other forms.

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