

Right To 'Education' Or 'Quality Education'? An Anthropological Critique

By Shweta Srivastava

"When any culture or society denies human rights, anthropologists have an ethical responsibility to protest and oppose such deprivation. This implies starting from the baseline of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and associated implementing international legislation, but also expanding the definition of human rights to include areas not necessarily addressed by international law." This Declaration on Anthropology and Human Rights clearly defines the role of anthropologists in protecting and safeguarding human rights, including the right to education. The unique ethnographic sensibility that anthropology brings to all areas of life enables a more holistic evaluation of the root of all social issues. This discipline is more solution oriented than we give it credit for. Moreover, as anthropologists, we have too much colonial baggage on our head to not be actively involved in the betterment of society.

'Quality Education' is one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals proposed by the United Nations in 2015, which are to be collectively fulfilled by all nations by the year 2030. Since

then, the government of India has left no stone unturned in formulating various programs and schemes to achieve the same including Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Udaan, Swachh Vidyalaya, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, etc. However, India's literacy rate is still stagnant at 77%. Why is that? Let's examine the reasons.



As an anthropologist working in a non-profit organization that is dedicated to providing financial aid to underprivileged girls so that they can pursue higher education and avail skilling facilities, I have seen the microscopic implementation of these efforts, which remains little to none. The initiatives are wonderful on the surface level, but the implementation is not modeled keeping in mind the cultural nuances in which these girls are embedded. Firstly, information about most of the career opportunities and scholarship programs

targeted specifically to these girls do not reach their ears at all. How do you exercise a right you have never heard of? Most girls remain clueless about what to do after passing class 10th or 12th. Even after securing high marks, due to lack of exposure, they do not know of all the possibilities and opportunities. Living in the outskirts, where you are one of the very few people receiving education definitely comes with its own setbacks. No one in your vicinity can guide you, you have no peers to discuss your studies with, nor is there any skilling institution nearby where you can pursue courses to embellish your resume.

Secondly, in today's highly digitized world, almost all information is imparted online. To access that information, you need a mobile phone or a laptop, the permission to use that gadget (if you are a girl in a backward family), the knowledge of operating these gadgets, ability to understand the English language to a certain degree and a stable internet connection, all of which is a luxury to the majority of population living in rural India. Even if these girls are given a mobile phone by an NGO or under any government scheme, who guarantees that they will be the one using it and not their parents or siblings?

One of the beneficiaries of the fellowship program that I am involved with, who lives in the village of Mamura in Uttar Pradesh, was given a mobile phone, as she wanted to do an online course. She and her father were ecstatic to receive one. They put up various celebratory stories on their whatsapp account. Naturally, I believed that it will be easier to reach her from now on. But whenever we tried to contact her, her brother or her father would receive the call, or sometimes disconnect it. The phone was never with her. The display picture on her whatsapp account was now her brother's. On inquiring, she said that her younger brother likes to play video games on it. She very hesitantly explained that the

display picture on her WhatsApp account is her brother's only because her father does not think it is safe to put up her picture on display, a sentiment not popular among other girls her age living in the same village. There have been other instances where the fellowship money has been used by the girl's family for personal matters. The financial aid that we provide only trickled down to the girls, passing through the filters of her family members.

Thirdly, different people communicate differently, as a result of which language becomes a medium of identity formation. But this heterogeneity can lead to misunderstandings. Indians have accents, a thick one at that. The girls I am working for have been born and brought up in various nooks and corners of the villages of Uttar Pradesh. They speak 'khari boli', a style of speaking which is considered rude and unsophisticated. This kind of tonality might not be appreciated in the workplace.

Thus, it's easy to see that there are layers to providing education to 'all'. It's no easy feat, but one that can be easily accomplished by first understanding the people and then forming a curriculum to fit their educational needs. Mere financial aid will not cut it. In this sense, it seems that a long-term fellowship program is much more efficient than providing one-time scholarships. I also suggest the comeback of traditional youth dormitories in the Indian education system. The Konyak Nagas, for example, would gain education in Morungs, which was an institution where young unmarried men were taught about social systems, their history, etc. Gurukuls of ancient India, where the students stayed with their teachers, who took care of their daily food and clothing, is also an ideal model. A residential intervention is the need of the hour to overcome the regional, gendered and structural barriers to quality education.

<http://www.aaanet.org/about/Policies/statements/Declaration-on-Anthropology-and-Human-Rights.cfm>

Note:

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