



# Cultivating Sensitivities through Environmental Studies (Part I)

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## 11.0 Objectives

After going through this module, you would be able to:

- arrive at various desirable sensitivities that need to be developed in young children;
- build appropriate contexts in EVS for inculcation of these sensitivities; and
- plan your teaching-learning in the light of sensitivities to be cultivated.

## 11.1 Introduction

Traditionally, Environmental Studies (EVS) was considered synonymous with Environmental Education, an endeavour understood to be associated with study and improvement of physical and natural environment. Concerns like pollution, resource conservation and plantation lay at its core. The contemporary academic view of EVS is, however, much broader. The term ‘environment’ is taken to encompass all the objects, events, people, structures and institutions that surround us. Moreover, EVS is not only a study area but also the strategy and approach through which environment is to be studied. Interpreted in this manner, the term ‘EVS’ becomes extensive and expansive. This interpretation of EVS has corresponding implications for transaction.

An EVS curriculum is sterile if it is not responsive to the socio-cultural milieu and intellectual needs of the learners and/or if it does not sensitise learners towards the various aspects of their natural, physical and social environment. While sensitising future world citizens towards emerging environmental issues must remain an abiding ideal, there has to be a concurrent curricular effort to foreground various social, cultural and ethical concerns. This becomes particularly relevant for a society like India, which is home to many cultures. Many of the values that EVS, or for that matter, any curriculum ought to seek to develop among the learners emanate from the Constitution of India itself. The guiding principles enshrined therein have crucial implications for the content and methodology of a curriculum, including that of EVS. It is also pertinent to highlight that development of sensitivities in learners cannot be expected to be encouraged in a pedagogically insensitive environment. A pedagogically sensitive curriculum is one that recognises and represents each child’s life situation and respects children’s ideas.

The following excerpt from the draft of Convention on Child Rights held in 1989, to which India is also a signatory, can well sum up the sensitivities that Environmental Studies curriculum should be directed towards.

The education of the child shall be directed to:

- The development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to her/his fullest potential;
- The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations;
- The development of respect for the child’s parents, her or his own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which she or he may

originate, and for civilisations different from her or his own;

- The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin; and
- The development of respect for the natural environment.

Read Convention on the Rights of the Child at <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx>

## 11.2 Sensitivities in Context

Learner sensitisation is an inherent part of EVS. However, as in the case of concepts, sensitivities cannot be developed devoid of a fertile context for them. Preaching to students is seldom helpful. Building sensitivities into meaningful class activities make them relevant. A Class V, EVS teacher gave the following picture to her students:



The above concepts, issues and sensitivities highlighted above could well have been taught directly. Various sources of water can be listed followed by an explanation of the means by which people residing in different kinds of areas obtain water but this approach can neither create a context for learning nor be able to draw upon the speculative capacities of the learner effectively. Embedding target understandings in specific situations lends meaning to those classroom activities, which would otherwise appear dry and divorced from real lives.

Read the following narrative:

*Gomti is thirty years old. Gomti works in the fields of a rich farmer. For all her hard work, she gets paid very little, so little that she cannot even buy enough rice to feed her family. Some months she does not get any work at all. Then she has to eat leaves and roots from the jungle. Gomti's children are weak with hunger and always sick. Few years ago, her husband died of hunger.*

*Most rice grows in Kalahandi district. Rice is even sent to other states from here. Many times the rice that keeps lying in the godowns gets spoiled. In the same Kalahandi there are many, many poor people like Gomti. Why do people die of hunger in such a place?*

You may appreciate that, through the story of Gomti, many critical EVS concerns have been fore-grounded. Children have been familiarised with the fact that Kalahandi district of Odisha is a leading producer of rice. The livelihood concerns of landless labourers have been raised. Unjust and inadequate wage structures, and the related gender issues, have been questioned. The impoverishment caused by oppressive economic structures has been made visible. Physiological effects of inadequate nutrition have been portrayed. Glaring deficiencies in the country's public distribution system have been highlighted. You may appreciate that these issues directly link to the raging national level deliberations that are taking place around the issue of ensuring food security. Children have thus been made familiarised with and encouraged to ponder over a compulsive national matter, in a developmentally-appropriate manner. This has been made pedagogically possible because the concerns were raised through a real life example, which makes them more intellectually accessible for children.

### 11.3 Celebrating Diversity

In a multiple-hued society, like ours, children are naturally exposed to all kinds of diversity, geographical as well as socio-cultural which include religious and linguistic. Indian classrooms, which have always been plural and multicultural, promise to become more so with the implementation of the Right to Education (RTE) Act. Children bring to classrooms heterogeneity in various forms such as gender, religious beliefs, culture, economic situations, personal abilities and so on. Schools of a democratic society need to be responsive to this heterogeneity so as to be in consonance with the principles of equal representation and participation on which any functional democracy is premised. The heterogeneity needs to be respected and used as a learning resource.

All children bring a sense of self when they enter school. This sense of self pertains to a perception of which one is, one's abilities, one's familial background, one's living situations and one's cultural beliefs. However, this sense of self is in a state of flux and keeps getting shaped, reshaped and moulded under the influence of school experiences that flow from the school ethos. If the school recognises diverse learners and communicates a sense of unconditional acceptance, they learn to feel valued and begin to actively participate thereby enriching their schooling process. A person's identity is a complex of group and individual identity. While different children hold different identities, every single child also subscribes to multiple identities at a given point of time – these could pertain to their gender, religion, region, language, country, caste, class, abilities, etc. All these identities need to be duly recognised by the school curriculum. Asking children to choose between or prioritise one identity over the other, could lead to unproductive conflict within them. The school curriculum has to have a sanctioned space for each child's lived experiences, and the textbooks would be the starting point as the textbooks are the pivot of the school curriculum. Many times a textbook may prioritise the experiences and aspirations of certain people, class, community or group, thus, rendering other kinds of living realities invisible.

EVS, by virtue of its nature, carries ample opportunity for inculcation of various sensitivities in children. Following is an excerpt from a conversation that appears in an EVS textbook.

The teacher read the excerpt and then proceeded to discuss with children. She asked students the following

questions:

- What is your favourite food?
- Where is it obtained?
- What is it called in your language?
- On which occasions do you cook something special?
- On which occasions do you cook in large quantity?
- Is something special cooked for some family members such as infants, toddlers or old people?

#### **Let us reflect**

- \* What kinds of diversities do you see reflected in the situation described above?
- \* Do you see an opportunity for inculcation of gender sensitivity here?
- \* Do you think it is desirable to compromise the formal tone of a textbook by incorporating words from vernacular languages?

#### **11.4 Concern for Equity and Social Justice**

Diversity is however not to be confused with disparity which is a politico-economic difference arising out of unequal power and resource distribution among people. While diversity needs to be respected, there have to be simultaneous efforts to question disparity. The theme of 'Work' can be used to provide a context for such questioning. Existing social inequalities need to be made visible and brought to question. The concerns have to be raised in real life contexts. Children should be familiarised with and appropriately drawn into national debates and deliberations.

A teacher uses the narratives of three elderly ladies Krishna, Kusum and Manju as part of the theme 'Work'. All of them have worked as manual scavengers for many years of their lives.

Kusum: I was not used to doing this work before but had to do this for family, as I had to feed my children. I was told that our ancestors did this and this was the only work we could do as Dalits.

Krishna : Every day after dumping the waste, I used to go back to the same houses to collect food and beg for money. I worked every single day for over 40 years, even during rains, which caused the basket's contents to seep out and cover me in filth. When I left the basket, I felt I was reborn. (Krishna works as sweeper now.)

Manju : We don't choose to do this. We're born into it because we are at the absolute bottom of society. The job came as a legacy. But, I made sure my children never touched those baskets. (Manju's eldest child is in college.)

(Taken from article provided at weblink 2)

The teacher then discusses with her students:

- Why do you think the practice of manual scavenging is still prevalent?
- Why do the manual scavengers find it difficult to give up this work?
- Why do manual scavengers find it difficult to get some other work?
- Who carries the garbage and cleans the toilets in your house?
- Why is the cleanliness work considered 'dirty'?
- Do we become dirty if we clean our home toilets?
- Is cleaning community toilets a dirty task?

### Let us reflect

We see that instead of preaching to the children about such lofty ideals as 'equality' or 'dignity of labour', the teacher creates opportunities for children to explore their own biases. It is important that young children become conscious of the inequalities within family and in society, and the reflection leads to action. Children must learn to be sensitive towards others who may be disadvantaged or differently-abled. They also need to be aware of others' rights and their own responsibilities. Teachers specially need to be aware of children's rights, respect them and also make them aware of the same.

Through awareness and sensitisation, children can be transformed to be effective agents of change in society at large.

### 11.5 Valuing Traditional Knowledge

Several years of colonial rule, unplanned industrialisation, persistent raw material depletion and steady resource drain have left India impoverished and disempowered of its ownership over traditional knowledge and heritage crafts. The refined skills and indigenous knowledge, which once occupied a place of prominence in society, have been relegated to the margins and so have been the people associated with them. The critical need of the present times is to revive and rejuvenate them and inculcate in students a sense of appreciation for our native knowledge systems and crafts. Following piece of information is given in an EVS textbook of NCERT for Class IV.

Great skill is needed to weave pochampalli sarees. It also takes many days of hard labour. After all this, it is difficult to get a good price for these sarees. Silk is becoming expensive day-by-day. Big shopkeepers give very little money for the sarees, though they themselves sell them at very high price. That is why, many weavers are giving up their family craft.

*Source: Class IV, EVS Textbook, NCERT, p. 188*

### Let us reflect

- \* Which traditional craft is being talked about here?
- \* What is the need to protect and preserve heritage crafts?
- \* What economic and equity issues can be raised here?

Ancient India had always had a very robust and sustainable agricultural system. In present times, we continue to extol the virtues of ‘sustainable development’ but actualising it presents challenges because of years of lopsided development patterns and skewed policies. We seem to have somewhere lost touch with our traditional wisdom. For example, harvesting water from natural sources was a prevalent practice in ancient India that we seem to have discontinued during the British rule. In fact, many of our indigenous environment-friendly practices have been given up and never was there a more urgent need to revisit and revive them than today when the world environment is severely stressed and resource reserves are pushed to their optimum limit.

Read the article linked below and answer the questions that follow:

*The ‘Beej Bachao Andolan’ (BBA), begun here in the late 1980s, is fifteen years old. Led by farmer and social activist Vijay Jardhari, the ‘Andolan’ has made village Jardhargaon of district Tehri in Uttaranchal state (India) famous for its unique movement to save the traditional seeds of the hills.*

*The ‘Beej Bachao Andolan’ (Save the Seeds Movement) is not only a crusade to conserve traditional seeds but also to promote agricultural biodiversity, sustainable agriculture and local traditions.*

*The hallmark of the BBA is, that it is a people’s campaign and flourishing without any government financial assistance or help.*

*On starting the Beej Bachao Andolan, 52-year-old Vijay Jardhari says, “After the Green Revolution of the 1960s, farmers in the hills also adopted high-yielding varieties of seeds. After initial success, the Green Revolution fizzled out as the yields began to decline. This made the villagers realize that so called modern agriculture was unsustainable. Low production despite increased investments on pesticides and fertilizers, as well as decline in soil fertility, forced us to think of corrective measures.”*

*“Village elders advised us to focus on traditional farming. We started the ‘Beej Bachao Andolan’ as an awareness campaign in 1989 for farmers to discontinue growing cash crops like peas, potatoes and soybean, and promote indigenous practices like the ‘Baranaja’,” Jardhari adds. The Baranaja (meaning twelve grains) is a traditional system of mixed farming, intercropping of twelve species.*

*With this, the movement to save traditional seeds got off the ground. Vijay Jardhari and his friends travelled from village to village to collect traditional seeds. To date, they have collected some 200 varieties of kidney beans, 100 of paddy, seven of wheat - to mention just a few. The huge collection of local seeds clearly indicates the toil put in by the BBA activists. The green revolution had an adverse effect on indigenous agriculture practices of the hills and many seeds were lost. Kunwar Prasoon, connected with the Andolan, says, “There were over 3000 varieties of wheat in Garhwal before the Green Revolution. Now these are down to 320. Incidentally, many of our indigenous seeds yield more in fewer days than the high yield variety of seeds. Like the Gorakhpuri Paddy of Tehri takes 95 days to harvest and yields 35-40 quintals per hectare.”*

*The Beej Bachao Andolan has prepared a comparison chart of high-yielding varieties of seeds and traditional seeds to clear the confusion among farmers.*

*Though Vijay had to face resistance in the beginning, now more and more villagers are joining the Beej Bachao Andolan. On his future plans, Jardhari says, “We want to do village wise documentation of seeds. The seed should remain with the farmers; so we have made a small start to setting up seed banks in villag-*

*es. So far, we have established such banks in six villages.” He avers that the growing popularity of organic food grain will provide more strength to the BBA. The BBA has brought fame to Uttarakhand for this unique concept but the State Government is yet to acknowledge these committed activists for their noble deeds.*

Source: <https://www.indiamike.com/india/india-travel-news-and-commentary-f80/unique-movement-to-protect-traditional-seeds-t10704/>

- What has led to the loss of traditional seeds?
- Find out about the agricultural practice of ‘Baranaja’ and describe it.
- Would you call it a sustainable practice? Justify.
- Can you cite more examples of people’s initiatives that have managed to bring about long-term change?

### **Let us reflect**

- \* What do we mean by ‘progress’ and development?

Are all practices that are ‘recent’ and technologically-advanced necessarily progressive? Justify.

To sum up this part of the module, we looked at the interpretation of EVS and its corresponding implications for transaction in a classroom. The need for an EVS curriculum which is not sterile but responsive to the socio cultural milieu and intellectual needs of the learners. We looked at real life examples that can be taken up suitably so that the issues are intellectually accessible for children. The rationale of celebrating diversity or concern for equity and social justice are taken up in this part of the module along with valuing traditional knowledge. The next part of the module will further talk about the need for appreciating individual initiative and challenging stereotypes.

### **11.11 References**

1. Looking Around (2014). NCERT Class IV textbook, NCERT Publication, New Delhi
2. Looking Around (2014). NCERT Class V textbook, NCERT Publication, New Delhi

### **11.12 Weblinks**

1. <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx>
2. <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/An-endless-fight-against-manual-scavenging/article16039417.ece>