

Deconstructing the 'Rural Space' of Rural Teachers: Implications for Teacher Education

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ABSTRACT

There is a complex interconnection among the issues and concerns that affect the professional learning of rural teachers in India. The complexity can be conceptualized under 'rural space' bringing together social, cultural, economic, political and demographic dimensions of rural setting. The dimensions are in a continuous interaction with the process of teaching-learning in rural schools and tacitly shaping the professional identity of rural teachers by creating challenges as well as scopes in their profession. Therefore, the questions such as how rural teachers construct their professional role in a 'rural space' and how the complexity of 'rural space' contributes in their professional preparedness for rural transformation are needed to be explored. The main argument of this paper is that there is a need to establish the identity of rural teachers with reference to their diverse rural space. The paper basically attempts to discuss the complex notion of 'rural space' from the view of rural teachers by collecting extensive data from the field. The paper is informed by the primary source data, gathered through questionnaire tool and narrative inquiry method. The data is collected from the rural teachers of Bihar. Qualitative analysis of data is done as per the purpose of the paper.

Keywords: Rural teacher, teacher identity, rural space, teacher education

In India, teaching in rural schools has its own complexities. Here, the rural teachers are not just the deliverers of curriculum, but the careers of the hopes and dreams of rural community for rural transformation. There, they perform their tasks in a very complex scenario which can be conceptualized as 'rural space' bringing together social, cultural, economic, political and demographic dimensions of the rural setting. The dimensions have a tacit but continuous interface with the rural schools which shapes the identity of rural teachers and creates an enriched platform for their professional learning. However, the socially established idea of 'rural' as 'backward' and 'insulated' space has always justified the low quality of rural education in India and systematically neglected the context based professional development of rural teachers. According to Govinda and Varghese (1993), in places where only minimal physical infrastructural facilities are available, the teacher remains the

primary resource for educational transactions. Therefore, the rural teachers must be given highest attention for their context based professional preparedness. In spite of this, the potential of 'rural space' with respect to the professional learning of rural teachers has been never given emphasis in the discourse of teacher education in India. The problem gets more complex with the false notion of homogenous character of 'Indian teachers' and impractical idea of 'Ideal Schools' (as the government educational policies assume them). From remote village schools to elite urban schools, the word 'teacher' undergoes distinguishable change in nature. So, as rightly stated above, there is a need to look into the contextual reality of a teacher's world in Indian schools, especially with reference to rural teachers.

Empirical research on teachers' work in the last decade has highlighted the complexity of their work and cautioned against perceiving teaching as an

'oversimplified' task. The socio-cultural, material and ideological context in which they work for instance, have to be understood as most major influences, which account for how they actually carry out their work (Gay & Haward, 2000). In a 'hardest to reach' and 'hardest to teach' condition, the challenges of a rural teacher is quite wider than the assumed one. There are particular social contexts for teaching and learning in rural schools that make it significantly different from non-rural teaching (Anitha, 2005). The rural life is generally perceived as isolated space by the prospective teachers. Without any practical experience, they presume their role for rural schools. In addition, all rural schools in India are not similar to each other. They vary village to village, district to district and state to state. Therefore, the nature of variation also contributes in the complexity of 'rural space' of rural teachers. However, it is evident that the schools in rural India have very distinct needs due to their specific properties, but one of the main problems encountered in the field of rural education in India, has been the notion that the rural schools should be modeled after good urban or suburban schools (Beckner, 1996).

This problematic notion has deeply affected the vision of teacher education in India where the teachers are being prepared mainly with urban centric approach. Due to this, the rural teachers are facing pedagogic dilemma of urban-rural dualism which is restraining their connectivity with the rural context and delimiting their role in rural transformation. The academic performance of rural schools is raising questions on the professionalism of rural teachers (NAS report, NCERT). But, is it only the question of their professional lacking or the issue of their professional preparedness; is needed to theorize seriously.

Therefore, the questions such as how rural teachers construct their professional role in a 'rural space' and how the complexity of 'rural space' contributes in their professional preparedness for rural transformation are needed to be explored. The potential of 'rural space' is also needed to be explored to transform the urban centric teaching of rural teachers in to context based teaching. The purpose of this paper is to evidently address the above concerns by situating them in field reality.

Methodology

'Rural space' is a multifaceted concept, which can be conceptualized in multiple ways. For instance, it can be defined as geographical space, social space or economical space. In this paper, the term 'rural space' is used as a constructive concept which will be derived from the views and opinions of rural teachers. The paper is an attempt to deconstruct the concept of 'rural space' from the views of rural teachers. So, grounded approach is taken to associate various notions of rural teachers to develop the concept of 'rural space'. But, this is to be understood that here the rural space is a relative concept with respect to the professional understanding of rural teachers.

The paper is informed by the primary source data which is qualitatively analyzed. The data collection includes questionnaire, classroom observation and interview. In total, forty two rural teacher participants were taken from Bihar to fill a questionnaire. Ten classroom observations were done and five interviews were taken.

The questionnaire has questions to take the responses of rural teachers about their understanding of school and rural setting. Their responses were analyzed to understand their notion about rural space. The observation of classroom has been done to explore that how they utilize their understanding of rural space as pedagogical tool. Interviews were taken to substantiate the findings through in-depth inquiries.

The 'Rural Space' of Rural Teachers: Informing through Data

How rural teachers perceive their 'rural space' and what are major components of their perceived 'rural space'? Initially, a questionnaire was administered on forty two rural teachers to explore these questions. The Questionnaire has six questions, out of which first four questions were focused on to get responses about the concept of rural space.

In the first question of the questionnaire, the rural teachers were asked to tell something about their schools. In the next question, they were asked to say something about the village in which their schools are situated. These two questions were asked with the motive to enlist the components and ideas which they relate with rural space and to theoretically analyze them. In response,

various themes emerged. For first question, many participants have highlighted the history of their schools or the inside structures of their schools such as school building, classrooms, teachers, students, total area etc. They have also tried to explain their school in a geographical setting. This shows the 'school centric' view of those teachers who wouldn't be able to see beyond the formal framework of their schools. But it can also be inferred that the inner space is so challenging for those teachers that they hardly have opportunity to think about the outer space. This may be a reason that they couldn't be able to see their school in the broader context of rural space. The school has been seen as an isolated entity within rural community.

However, a few responses were very different from the usual one, where rural sociological structure has been taken as a part of school. The responses were started with situating the rural schools in their rural society. The social structure, caste-class division, religion, economy and educational status were seen as integral part of school environment in those responses. It is also inferred from the responses that any school must take the cognizance of its community and accordingly shapes its pedagogy. Some responses are:

"... People from Suyi Caste dwell around my school. Their children enthusiastically come here for study. We teach them with love. The community also supports the school"

"... My school is situated in a village of backward community. Due to which they don't support the school very much."

The above two excerpts highlight a relation between school and its outside rural world. However, they also infer that the relation is not always a positive. It can be confronting, disinterested too, which shapes the role of rural space in rural schools.

Through, observation of ten classes, many perceptions of rural teachers about their rural setting also emerged. Though they drew their initial examples from rural settings but finally they ends with some urban instances. This can be analyzed through the theoretical lens of identity dualism and pedagogical dilemma. Their idea of identity development as linear and from rural to urban shapes their pedagogy. Here are some examples from class talks during observation:

"Here (in village), you only see some small transport vehicles but if you study well and go to town then you will find big transport vehicles"

In interview, it was found that the rural teachers want to see their school as developed. One of the reasons they quote for the undeveloped condition of their school is the distance from town. This distance is not a geographical one but also psychological in nature. According to their indigenous theory, a rural school nearer to town has more possibility to be in a developed condition in comparison to a hard to reach school. But, this doesn't mean that the schools far from urban settings remain always in a detrimental condition. There, factors such as teachers' professional commitment and community participations are stronger to sustain the bond between school and community. Through, the interview, it can be concluded that the teachers of the rural schools situated near to urban or semi urban settings, don't see their schools in contrast to urban schools. However, the teachers, teaching in remote rural schools introduce their schools with a contrast comparison with urban school such as:

"...Even after being so far from town, where nobody cares to come and see, my school is in a very good condition. You can ask anything from my student of their level. They will quickly give you answer."

It seems from the responses, that somewhere the rural teachers have associated the urbanized culture with development. In the perception of their rural space, the urban hegemony is increasing. They also tend to break the identity of themselves as a rural teacher. One of my participants strongly objected on being called as 'rural teacher'. He argued that he had many educational degrees from big cities so he is not a rural at all. This crisis of rural teachers to distance themselves from rural space is advancing in Indian scenario.

In our modern society, the rural schools and communities are highly insulated from the so called mainstream urban society. They usually see rural setting as backward and hard to sustain. With the same mindset, novice teachers are reluctant to work in rural settings but they also know that getting job at these places is 'easy'. In Bihar state of India, many young people have left their high paid private teaching jobs of cities and joined the profession of teaching in rural settings with comparatively less

paid amount. It is because they see it as a good option to get a secured less income rather than unsecured high income. But, in their profession that urban identity always dominates which restricts their interaction with rural space because they still see rural school as an undesirable place. In Bourdieu sense, it is a kind of symbolic violence that 'insults' professionals in rural settings, and effectively reproduces the idea that those who work in town schools are somehow 'better' than those who 'can't'.

The response of second questions adds some more components to the concept of rural space. The rural teachers see a rural setting as a strong 'political entity' in which they must not interfere but they also know that they can't remain untouched from that political system. In their understanding, the quality of teaching in rural schools is highly affected by the political system of the particular village. It is because the political system i.e. 'Panchayat' has a major role in deciding the functioning rural schools. Therefore, political structure of a particular rural setting is a key component of the rural space of rural teachers. As quoted from the interview of a rural teacher:

"My school is situated in the village of 'Pradhan' (Head of the village Panchayat), so he has a close watch on the activities of the school. He questions teachers if they don't come on time but also interferes in the accounts of the school"

Along with the political nature of rural space, the rural teachers also see it as a closed cultural entity. But, it is found that the cultural position of village was not very dominant in the responses of rural teachers. They mention it as a basic component of a rural setting but avoid to discuss about it. For them, the cultural setting of a village which also subsumes religion is a fixed thing. School has very limited role to live the culture of the village. In fact, the teachers were more able to associate poverty with their rural space, rather than culture. In interview, they explained various forms of poverty in rural settings and also associate their schools with it. During observation, it is found that there is difference in the number counts of students pre Midday meal and after it.

"...schools situated in the area of poor community, acts poorly. Most of the time, they get closed after haft time. Children are compelled to leave school since they have

to do labour or household work daily. Teachers have accepted this situation as an avoidable reality of their profession. They try to stop children but also knew that they can't succeed."

The third question of the questionnaire was about "how they interact with their rural space". In response, it is found that they experience more interaction with the political entity of the village. The organizational works which cannot be performed without the involvement of 'Village Panchayat' are the major reason of those interactions. Interaction with community is also observed but the interactions are more of formal and mechanical nature. There is interaction but hardly some meaningful dialogue between the school and community happens. In response, it comes that the dialogue between rural community and teachers is itself discouraged by school authority. It largely shows a one way interaction between teachers and rural space. A participant has responded as:

"The principal of my school assumes that talking to community is wastage of time since they are uneducated and ignorant. We can suggest them but they have nothing to advice us."

The fourth and fifth question was about "how they differentiate their rural space from urban notion and how they establish the identity of their rural space". In response, it was analyzed that the rural teachers found their rural space more organized and enriched than urban space. According to them rural schools are comparatively situated in good environment with almost no pollution. However, the rural community is not much aware in comparison to urban counterpart.

It is interesting that maximum rural teachers have accepted their rural space as more resourceful than urban one. Only a few teachers have regarded themselves as less resourceful due to rural setting. In fact, in their understanding, rural teachers have more teaching learning opportunities due to their enriched rural space. But, they insisted that they are not prepared enough to utilize their rural space in teaching learning process of their schools. In their understanding, the technological tools in rural setting can't be same as in urban setting. Assuming rural space as technologically undeveloped and intellectually poor is a narrow mindset to justify its lower status and devalue its identity. In interview,

except one teacher, the others have emphasized their identity of being associated with rural space. But they were clueless to associate the resources of rural space with their school.

In the sixth question of the questionnaire, rural teachers were asked to explain those points which must be kept under concern if they have to improve their teaching in a rural setting. Almost all teachers have emphasized the effective professional preparedness for this purpose and express their inability to effectively improve their teaching by themselves. They blame it to their teacher training programmes that are theoretically focused but practically not rooted in the field realities.

In this way, rural space for rural teachers is not just limited to visible school periphery, but it is the set of relationships, actions and meanings that are produced in and through the daily practice of rural teachers in their rural settings. It is a Psycho-social space for rural teachers, where they interact with the realities and practices of rural settings. If we analyze in Bourdieu's sense, then rural space inculcates some forms of capital in rural teachers. It can be referred as 'practiced space' where people meet and interacts to develop them. With reference to rural teachers, the form of capital they gain from their rural setting can be termed as profession capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

CONCLUDING REMARK

This paper submits that there is a need to establish the identity of rural teachers with reference to their diverse rural space. They must be seen in their own context and needs, and should be accordingly developed for broader professional roles by Teacher Education Programmes. Their rural space must be seen as a key resource to develop themselves as true professionals. It is also argued that their role for rural transformation is very crucial, so it requires serious attention and enrichment. This demands reengineering of teacher education system for the continuing professional development of

rural teachers. National Curriculum Framework 2005 and National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education 2009 have emphasized that, Teacher education programmes need to provide the space for engagement with issues and concerns of contemporary Indian society, its pluralistic nature, and issues of identity, gender, equity, livelihood and poverty. This can help teachers in contextualizing education and evolving a deeper understanding of the purpose of education and its relationship with society. Therefore, rural teachers must be strengthened in a way so that they can transform themselves and their rural space. The transformation should be a two way process where, the rural teachers transform their rural setting and the rural setting transform them too. The paper also concludes that there is a need to develop a theoretical argument for understanding the rural space. The rural space is not just a location or only visible space. It is highly complex and potentially enriched space. The concept of rural space must be included in the teacher education programmes.

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