Thesis Reflection

Journeys and Arrivals of my PhD Thesis 'Place-Pedagogies, Eco-Spiritual Cosmologies and Cultural Stories: A Reflection

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In this reflective paper, I make a concluding observation of the journeys and arrivals of my PhD thesis- Place-Pedagogies, Eco-Spiritual Cosmologies and Cultural Stories. Employing the metaphor of 'writing as living yoga' of ecological relationality and 'research as living dharma' of authentic sincerity, the Eco composition of this paper unpacks the research journey. While unpacking the research journey, I make a synopsis of the process of how 'being here yogic reflection' (Chinmayananda, 2011; Morgan, 2012) at 'being there PAR performance' to ecological ripples (Trickett & Beehler, 2017) recognized that the dominant Western-Modern schooling architecture of Dapcha located Janahit School, where we conducted this Participatory Action Research (PAR) was less compatible to the place essential (the place *Dharma*) of Dapcha, Dharmashala. It appeared that the seemingly displaced (anti-ecological) schooling design which was continuously inclined to displaced standards was partly responsible for weakened belonging, being, and becoming of teachers, and students in the school and in the community. Also, the study recognized that so long as the human conduct is not in conformity with the authentic nature of beings and non-beings (Lange, 2018; O'Neil, 2018), there might remain the ecological disharmony, which might weaken the place connectedness of its people. Emplaced teaching and learning could possibly bridge this gap, and as studies (e.g., Miller, 2010; Smith, 2002; Sobel, 1996) suggest, the pedagogies, to some extent, would bring life to school and school to life. But, as this study discovered, thinking and working for an open lifeworld in closed schooling design was seemingly anti-ecological. Under such circumstances, stepping on the lessons learned from the PAR project, I began to meditate manifold ways of authentic lifefulness in teaching and learning. Also, stepping on the experiences and the lessons in this research project, I made a futuristic (philosophical) vision for such pedagogies and research. Thus, considering the very essence of the study, this reflective paper is a synopsis on a long reflexive performance on discovering-

1. What place, and emplaced pedagogies meant to us, particularly to the Nepali people of Hindu-Buddhist, and ethnic origin?
2. How was the place *dharma* of Dapcha, Dharmashala?

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3. How did the displaced (and therefore lifeless) school pedagogies in Dapcha, Dharmashala located Janahit School suggest a need for pedagogical innovation, a need to bring life to school and school to life? And how the PAR team emerged with a plan to initiate participatory and generative approaches to emplaced pedagogies in the school?
4. How the PAR team initiated participatory and generative approaches of emplaced pedagogies from and within the dominant pedagogical practices? And, despite some hopeful perspectival transformations, how the team experienced manifold messiness while in the process to implement it?

Also, we make reflective synopsis on-

5. What meaning did we make about the reasons that Janahit School (like many other schools in Nepal) could just partly 'act', and sustain the 'talk about' innovations for emplaced (and therefore, lifeful) pedagogies?

The reflection eventually ends with a synopsis of concluding answers to the questions- So what and what next? Maybe, considering the postformal dissertation structure (which is often rhizomatic and fuzzy), the conclusion drawn from these multilayered texts needs multi-layered reflexivity. It is to this end, from this micro-macro circular hermeneutics (Gadamer, 1982; Heidegger, 2002) between the whole and the parts of the overall Eco composition, here I conclude this study. Let's move-

What Happened: Encountering Anti-Ecological Design

I begin by making reflective synopsis on how I (and my co-researchers) emerged with the research agenda, the research purpose, and the research questions. As it was a PAR project, I couldn't 'conceptualize' the research agenda before the engagement with the participants (co-researchers) and the school communities. Therefore, analogous to ecological flourishing, the emerging of the research agenda to explore the possibilities of place informed lifeful pedagogies for strengthened belonging, being, and becoming was seemingly a continuous (to and fro) process.

In chapter one of my thesis, I allocated more time and space to shape my experiential and philosophical position on an emerging issue of displacement in (rural located) Nepali communities. My postformal positioning through (multilayered) autoethnographic excavation in the chapter suggests how I was emotionally and professionally growing within the sphere of the research agenda of displacement (and lifelessness) in Nepali schools. Later, as the PAR team (including PAR community of practice) began to explore the present educational status of the Dapcha community and the Janahit School located in Dapcha Dharmashala, the team began to realize the displacement in many spheres of community life. In school, the ongoing pedagogies were seemingly displaced, and therefore, lifeless. This is how (1) pedagogical displacement and lifelessness, and (2) pedagogical innovation for emplaced pedagogies (as a way to bring life to school and school to life) became the overarching theme of the study.

The PAR team's action-reflection for emplaced pedagogies and my 'embodied-philosophical knowing of the 'place' and the 'place spirit' of Dapcha Dharmashala continued simultaneously (informing one another). The ecological ripples of manifold chaotic ideas on place and place historicity in school education of Nepal '(dis)orderly shaped' the writing process, which was but 'being here' and 'being there' reflective performance of a kind.

The ecologically circular hermeneutic (re)view of literature and embodied experiences enabled me to discover what 'place' means for this study. From there, I built an argument that place is a complex of socio-material, economic and political practice. Widened to manifold spheres of the lifeworld, place is also the complex-built widening circle of mind-body integrated self-wherein locates the belonging, being, and becoming of the beings and the non-beings in their relational totalities. Hindu-Buddhist knowledge tradition views 'place self' as identical to 'human self', which is the divided of the undivided 'One'. In other words, the place is 'one ecological whole', the cosmic *mandala*, a metaphorical tree, and the spider web. It suggests the need for ecological wholeness, inclined to sincerity, authenticity, and ethical responsibilities in education. Slowly, the growing awareness of the place as 'one ecological whole' characterized through relational complexities enabled me to make place-awareness in terms of ecological wisdom. This wisdom of relational ontology(ies) enabled me to see the lifeworld beyond the global (modern) and the local (postmodern) binaries. Also, heterogeneity, porosity, and non-exclusive place-awareness enabled me to see the lifeworld beyond decolonial and indigenous renderings of romanticizing one and scorning the other. Additionally, the (re)view enabled me to discover the history of the place in education and research, particularly in Nepal. The exploring made me aware of the beginning and the continuity of placelessness (and therefore, lifelessness) in school education in Nepal. The policy literature suggested how Nepal had documented many initiatives for pedagogical innovations in the past. But, despite those initiatives for pedagogical innovations, often the innovations which couldn't fit the dominant pedagogical design (of linear closeness) wouldn't sustain. It appeared that the repeated 'failure' to bring 'open life and lifefulness' in 'closed schooling design' would just add extra messes. From there, I began to make sense of the reform agendas as 'trojan horse' and discovered the need for 'homegoing' and 'soul searching' in education and research.

Thereafter, addressing the need to integrate educational processes and ecological principles, the overall PAR journey (of constructive consciousness) put the 'idea' of place relationality and the actual place spirit, the place *dharma* of Dapcha Dharmashala, at the heart of the study. It is from those human landscapes, cultural stories, myths, symbols, metaphors, memories, dreams, and aspirations of the place (which I called it a Dapcha curriculum), I developed the 'awareness context' of this study. The awareness context (the living Dapchali curriculum) was poetic, mythical, and performative, often scratched, rhizomatic and multilayered. It was transdisciplinary and holistic. It was to this end, not predominately relying on the 'borrowed', and therefore, displaced theories, the eco-spiritual relationality and ethical authenticity of Dapcha Dharmasala (the living Dapchali curriculum) made referential (theoretical) positioning of the study. From there, the study made an organic breakthrough.

As the study progressed, I observed that the social life of the Dapcha civilization was largely informed through Hindu-Buddhist and ethnic worldviews and cosmologies. It was not as sacred and isolated as commonly romanticized in popular literature on decolonial and indigenous renderings. Rather, it was continuously informing and was being informed by the spheres of the global circles. Also, it appeared that the civilization had its own 'darker hearts' of disempowering/ superstitious hierarchies and 'isolating norms'. I acknowledged both the 'ecologically empowering and disempowering' cultural narratives of Dapcha Dharmashala, and began to relate this place spirit with Hindu-Buddhist, and ethnic, particularly the

Brahmin, the Newar, and the Tamang[1] wisdom traditions. Also, being mindful of the cultural complexity of Dapachali civilization, which is but a complex of the traditional, the modern, and the postmodern historicity, I began to see the phenomenon through present time and space, here-now. It enabled me to make sense of the PAR action-reflections through Metamodern maturity[2], ecological relationality, and ethical responsibility. The Hindu-Buddhist metaphor of *Dharma* added to it the primacy of authenticity. *Dharma* wisdom tradition believes that though the place is apparently a shifting articulation of social life, every place and the beings and non-beings in the place hold their own place-authenticity. Problems like the loss of authentic identity and purposelessness arise when this place's authenticity is contaminated with displaced cultural practices (Klein, 2018; Lange, 2018; Sterling, 2001). This inescapable embodiedness and relationality of the cultural milieu (here-now) informed the performative basis and the moral responsibility of this study.

Also, my conceiving of research design was continuous dialogues between Western-Modern PAR 'standards' and the place essential of Dapcha, Dharmashala. Adopting Metamodern ethos, I embraced performative reflexivity (Denzin, 2001; Lewis & Owen, 2020). For this purpose, unlike dominant Western-Modern ideological modernity, which celebrates linear disciplinary ethos, I embraced time and space informed modernity (which this study forwards as Metamodern) arising from place authenticity, openness, and complex relationality. The hermeneutic circle of performative reflexivity (Denzin, 2001; Heidegger, 2002; Lewis & Owen, 2020) enabled me to embody the collaborative nature of PAR performances through a kind of *Leela* writing (see Upreti, 2069 B.S.), the writing which is supposed to flow naturally through chaos and order; through evocative arts, multi-logics and genres. The *Leela* rhetoric appreciates the cosmic mystery of place as simply unique. Optimistic of some genuine future, the rhetoric doesn't leave the grounded authenticity. This *Leela*-like performance reflexivity (see Denzin, 2001) is eloquently reflected in this (postformal and multilayered) ecocomposition, where I responded to the research questions through 'being here' yogic observation at 'being there' PAR performances. It was like an emotionally thoughtful artist observing a performative art in the study canvas (the cosmic mandala), where the artist and the co-artists are the arts in themselves.

What Happened in Janahit School?

Passing through participatory needs assessment, our PAR team identified that (1) the weaker place sense and (2) the displaced schooling culture, to some extent, were resisting pedagogical practices for strong belonging, being, and becoming of the people in the Dapcha community. Therefore, emplaced pedagogies for lifeful teaching and learning at Janahit School were seemingly an overarching need for pedagogical innovation. Literature (e.g., Ahmad, Gjøtterud & Krogh, 2016; Constantinou & Ainscow, 2020; Roberts, Brown & Edwards, 2015) would suggest participatory and generative models of pedagogical innovation as effective to initiate and sustain emplaced pedagogies. From there, through hands-on experiences, we began PAR cycles (plan, act, reflect) and explored the prospects of participatory and generative approaches to place-informed lifeful pedagogies at Janahit School.

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[1] Dapcha civilization is a complex of Hill Brahmins, the Newar, and the Tamang ethnic communities
[2] which is 'modernity informed by post-modernity' (Stein, 2018)

The period of initiation that involved three different action-reflection cycles and experimentation with a kind of participatory and generative approaches to emplaced pedagogies influenced teachers' willingness to 'do something new'. It appeared that though the action-reflection cycles motivated teachers to work on a participatory and generative model of emplaced pedagogies, some root constraints like the habituated classroom structures, bureaucratic linearity, and 'teach and learn for exam result' just partly allowed the initiation to become an integral part of the regular routined-behavior of the school. We observed that the constraints were further strengthened by later developed (anti-ecological, utilitarian, and ego-centric) cultural expectations of Dapcha communities (like, 'make my son and daughter study books; get good marks in the exam and get prepared for office-job in the future).

Therefore, trapped in this mess of ecological ripples, our PAR team just partially met our commitments for emplaced, and therefore, lifeful pedagogies as imagined and decided in the action plan. In chapters five, six, and seven, I made detailed reflections on those school factors, which possibly constrained us to meet the commitments. Pre-designed and pre-constructed classroom designs were the ones. Most often, the classroom designs (in the form of policy documents) were prescribed from others outside the school, and therefore, they were seemingly less compatible with the place authenticities. Also, growing and being habituated in that Western-Modern (displaced and anti-ecological) classroom design, it appeared that the students and teachers had developed seemingly anti-ecological cultural expectations for how they should act. Despite the headteacher's, teachers' and students' willingness to initiate innovative pedagogies, they were, to some extent, a 'cog' in the practice architecture of linearly closed modern schooling. Under such circumstances, we learned a lesson that any innovative models (emplaced pedagogies in our case) that couldn't fit the linearly closed dominant architecture would remain sandwiched between the dominant practice and cultural expectations, and therefore, couldn't make continuity. The innovative models, when failed to continue, would add extra chaotic ripples in the ongoing practices.

So, What (?): Education as Cultural Reconstruction

The initiations brought some forms of cognitive shifts among teachers, students, and parents on the need for lifeful teaching and learning through the place. Also, it appeared that the students were becoming more familiar with the practices, and they were possibly enjoying the fundamental of emplaced pedagogies. Despite these, the innovative pedagogies just partly continued as the everyday culture of the school. As Fullan (2007) argues, it takes 2-3 years for any pedagogical innovation to continue as regular (habitual) practice. Seen from this, maybe one possible reason for weaker recognition and adaptation of the innovations was our limited time for the initiation. The Rupantaran Project is still continuing and other researchers are adding extended efforts to the initiations. Maybe the ongoing continuous efforts (through balance in indoor-outdoor learning spaces) may bring some visible transformation to bring life to the school and school to the life. But the indoor (and closed) nature of dominant pedagogical practices 'to teach and enable students for high exam score' was apparently so ingrained in the institutional practices that there were hardly the spaces for outdoor (open and interdisciplinary) pedagogies. The PAR team's reflection as such enabled me to 'view' why many of the pedagogical innovations and reform programs (especially the outdoor

pedagogies) remained as 'talk about pedagogies' (Casey 2013), and why many innovations were not adequately 'actioned' in the past.

Among many reasons for weaker recognition and adaptation of pedagogical innovation in Nepali schools, the literature suggests that non-participatory reform packages were the ones (see Acharya et al., 2020). But, is democratic participation of the concerned stakeholders for pedagogical innovation the only solution? Maybe, one of the major contributions of this study is the discovery that even the suggestions for participatory approaches are partially true. In the linearly designed complex bureaucratic structure like ours, the participatory approaches for pedagogical innovation are less likely to sustain in case the innovation 'fails' to move parallel with the shift in dominant pedagogical architecture and cultural design. Also, the study makes an informed claim that as the already endorsed Western-Modern schooling architecture of Nepali schools is seemingly less compatible with the place essential, many pedagogical innovations that seek non-linear openness, ethical relationality, and authenticity are unlikely to fit into the dominant Western-Modern design. Within this limited frame, many of the talk-about innovations for emplaced pedagogies are less likely to make a sustained continuation. They may 'fail' and continue to add pedagogical chaos, scorn, blames, and humiliation. The study observed very limiting and narrow space for the place-spirit and lifefulness to unfold in the ongoing schooling design of Nepal. Therefore, it was apparently logical that an authentic space must be made for such authentic learning to unfold.

The PAR experiences informed the way educators and policymakers view the sustainability of pedagogical innovations for emplaced teaching and learning. To ensure the sustainability of pedagogical innovation, the study appreciates the idea of Burns (2015) that instead of trying 'hard' to fit emplaced teaching and learning within the linearly designed dominant approach, maybe our participatory approaches need to learn from the wisdom of the ecological system. It is to say that the approaches need to explore ways for ecological design, the design that considers relational whole. Together with the way we understand 'participatory' and 'sustainability', also the study informs the way we understand transformative learning during pedagogical innovation. The cognitive shifts and the shifts in habituated ways of acting and valuing may be a means for transformative learning to occur (Mezirow, 2005) but not the ends. It appeared that shifts in human perspectives have to move together with 'more than human' shifts in body, culture, and eco-social systems. Doing so, the study seems near to Luitel and Taylor's (2019) claim that for ensuring the sustainability of pedagogical innovation "we need to radically restructure education systems in accordance with the metaphor of education as cultural reconstruction" (p.5). In line with Lee (2007), maybe such an ecological restructuring of participatory approaches to pedagogical innovation (for contextualized teaching and learning) involves openness, creativity, uniqueness, and networking abilities.

(Re) Defining Pedagogical Modernity

Being thoughtful on the limitations of linearly closed Nepali schools to incorporate 'out-door space' 'place' and 'lifefulness' as integral to teaching and learning, the study forwarded Metamodern ecological reflections that the problem likely was somewhere in Nepal's inability to define pedagogical modernity from its own place authenticity. It appeared that, for a long, Nepal understood pedagogical modernity as a mere Western-Modern ideological (and linear) worldview in education and research. Thus, instead of emerging from within the

eco-spiritual cosmologies and cultural stories, the rapid expansion of mass education imported Western-Modern educational visions of 'schooling' the mass for future purposes. It began to design indoor and disciplinary schooling architecture in a way to 'modernize' the school learner. The seemingly non-ecological schooling design with disciplinary routine and content teaching continuously romanticized somewhat deterministic and predictable cause-and-effect relationships in learning. To teach and to learn books inside the classroom just to pass the exam appeared to be the pedagogical culture. It was to this end, Nepal's road to (anti-ecological) pedagogical modernity was seemingly self-suicidal. Unlike traditionally attuned awareness of place as 'one ecological whole' of relational complexities, many other postmodern reactions in the name of local, indigenous, decolonial, and decentral continuously mesmerized pedagogical displacement in school education. It eventually emerged with scorn, blame, and self-humiliation. Under such circumstances, (re)defining modernity arising from Nepal's own place awareness could be one possible way for 'home going' and 'soul searching' in the school education of Nepal.

The Need to (Re) Define 'Local' in Local Curriculum

The study makes a reflective observation that the local curriculum, to some extent, envisions emplaced teaching and learning. This policy provision, in case it adopts ecologically harmonious relational ontology(ies) and moves beyond the global-local binaries, may work as a gateway for place-informed transdisciplinary pedagogies. But it appears that many of our schools in Nepal are designed entirely for indoor preparation of the learner, and therefore, implementing outdoor (and lifeful) local curriculum policy provision within the existing indoor (and closed) school structure was seemingly a deceitful dream of a kind. Maybe, this was the reason many schools in Nepal failed to develop and implement the local curriculum. It appeared that those schools which have made some initiations, they have prepared the curriculum in the form of a coursebook to teach in the class and prepare students to pass the exam. Seemingly, the practice is against the basic principle of participatory and generative models of the local curriculum. Thus, it appeared that the provision of local curriculum and re-designing of transdisciplinary schooling architecture needs to move together, complementing one another.

But, recognizing the need to reform school pedagogies within the relational ontology(ies), the study doesn't glorify 'local' in the local curriculum. Unlike ecological connectedness and holism, it seems that the local curriculum has a growing tendency to look backward, to overly celebrate 'self-isolation', and to blame 'others' for the problems. Glorifying binary oppositions, such postmodern ironies like 'liberating education and research from Western-Modern (universal) hegemony through local curriculum', appears in many ways, the catalyst for self-isolating, enemy seeking, and the blaming tendencies. It is to this end, the study partly reflects that leaving the self-isolating and 'enemy seeking' political interests behind, maybe the curriculum has to stem from the basic principles of place authenticity, ecological relationality, and ethical responsibility. One possible way is that, unlike essentialist, foundationalist, and exclusivist definitions of locality and the locals, the process begins (re)defining 'local' in the local curriculum from heterogeneous standpoints. Through living schools, the pedagogical practitioners may begin an authentic journey for 'home going' and

'soul searching', which may continuously extend to the widening circles of the universe as one ecological whole.

What Next: Discovering my Futuristic Philosophical Voice

Observed in Dapcha Dharmashala, people belonging to a particular community have a unique but heterogeneous place authenticity, the unique *Leela* of ecological cosmologies and cultural stories that have long been sustaining (and informing) the lifeworld. It appeared that these place-authenticities can neither be generalized nor be judged as 'right' and 'wrong'. Therefore, it seems that the metaphor of *Dharmashala* (place of wisdom/ place of authentic rightness) seeks 'evolve' than change. Evolve seems to be ecological. Evolve is likely to come from within societies, integrating with it the self-sustaining dimensions of life. The continuous failure for 'centrally (and externally) prescribed' pedagogical innovations in the schools of Nepal suggests that 'the change' which seeks external instructions and frameworks might not work effectively. Evolve, on the other, might be a continuous process of soul searching, and re-discovering the essential in the process of belonging, being, and becoming.

Unlike the ecological principles to evolve from within, many of the 'one-size-fits-all' educational ethoses of Western-Modern pedagogical architecture romanticize change. In this linear pedagogical design, it appears that changing human beings means changing their way of seeing the world. These basic ideals of Western-Modern schools rest in the philosophy of 'changing' human beings from one form to the next. Histories have shown that these philosophies repeatedly legitimized the way Western-Modern 'knowers' impose their own ways of knowing and seeing. They forwarded the ways for change through intervention. Unlike fostering self-forming creativity, pedagogical innovations through intervention were seemingly anti-ecological.

Seen from these lenses, the study suggests that in the name of modernizing school education, schools in Nepal have institutionally run seemingly anti-ecological and reactive programs in the past. It appears that, in long run, the practice has left unconscious impressions, the *samskaras* that meeting 'other's *Dharma,* the Western-Modern standards of education is the only goal of school teaching and learning. It is from there, schools in Nepal hardly showed interest in self-reflection. It seems that the tendency to follow other's standards created 'school boundaries'. The boundaries displaced the pedagogies from its eco-spiritual cosmologies and cultural stories. In the long run, the linearly closed practices isolated the self-fostering life process of the school and the community. There began some forms of cultural rootlessness. As this study suggests, Nepal is unlikely to imagine lifefulness in already displaced pedagogies arising from the imported (and therefore non-authentic) *samskaras* of linear closeness. If so, it appears that the innovative place pedagogies have to evolve free from within. Looking back to the efforts for pedagogical innovations in Janahit school, it is apparent that for emplaced pedagogies to foster, the schooling system has to move in harmony with the ecological (living) system. Thinking like *Peepal* (extending all around but continuously returning to the root), 'pedagogy of authentic lifefulness', which is constructive consciousness of present time and space, may let education matured from one's own true nature, *swarupa*. Unlike disciplinary linearity and duality, such teaching and learning within *swarupa* is supposed to reside in 'One' cosmic relationality of the place.

Thus, reflecting on this overall PAR project to bring life in school and school in life, Dapcha Dharmashala shares the wisdom of the living system. It suggests-

- Continuous improvement is the law of nature; and therefore, 'don't try to 'change' and 'get changed'. Instead, evolve from within. And following the ecological principles of authenticity, relationality, and ethical responsibility, let others evolve so naturally and spontaneously.
- The (pedagogical) transformation is but the transformation in individual consciousness that co-evolves with shifts in the collective consciousness.
- These shifts in collective consciousness come from authentic shifts in cultural stories, socio-economic and political dimensions, and ecological systems (also see, Esbjörn-Hargens & Zimmerman, 2009).
- For this shift to occur, maybe, we need to shift our worldview and the shared meanings, where we can possibly connect authenticity more to it.
- One best possible way is attuning and harmonizing schooling structure and pedagogical design with place authenticity characterized by non-exclusive circular heterogeneity.

This meaning-making foresights future of education and research in the name of the living school and living inquiry, where learning (and researching) may get attuned to the wisdom of place and emerge with life and lifefulness. This educational journey for authentic lifefulness, in the context of Nepal, could be the journey of 'homegoing' from school to *Vidyalaya*.

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