

# A Missing Climate

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## MAKING SPACE FOR CREATIVE WRITING IN THE INDIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

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### Introduction

The various Zoom functions—screen sharing, chatting, mute button—seemed to be a locus for negotiating student-teacher dynamics in the initial days of lockdown. I realised this while teaching Article Writing to Class 8, muting and unmuting them.

After having shown the 3Cs—Content, Creativity, Coherence—as a part of writing, the slide dissolved to ‘assignment slide’. 29 participants held their breath for their first flight, each hand drumming a pen in air. In red font, a question emerged: Write an article on Climate Change. Next alternative read: Write an article on the need to plant more trees to reduce pollution. My online class environment changed to a school of birds scattering on seeing a pointy thing shoot in air.

Every day during lockdown, my hope has been bullet proof; my reality—not so much. In the first few weeks, 11 students attended classes on Zoom, increasing to 21 later, to finally becoming 31 on days of class tests. My class has 40 students. Each day I wish the world becomes easier for rest of the nine students. These students have compared class tests to switching on a music system while a shatteringly loud earthquake is rocking their city.

It was no wonder that I received a desolate response that day.

When students of Class 7 were asked to write a diary entry on the first day of their new school, multiple squares, with crestfallen faces inside, gazed at the screen, as the PowerPoint presentation failed to make a point. All

this while making sure that wi-fi connection was strong enough. Last time, Class 7 went to school was to write their Class 6 Annual Exams. My last memory of being in a physical classroom is that of watching them tie sheets and asking for a thread. How unaware we were of the fabric becoming threadbare this way!

That day, I altered the question to: Write a diary entry on the memory of the last day of your school. Within five minutes, responses were flowing in chat box. Everyone wanted to say something about ‘their’ last day.

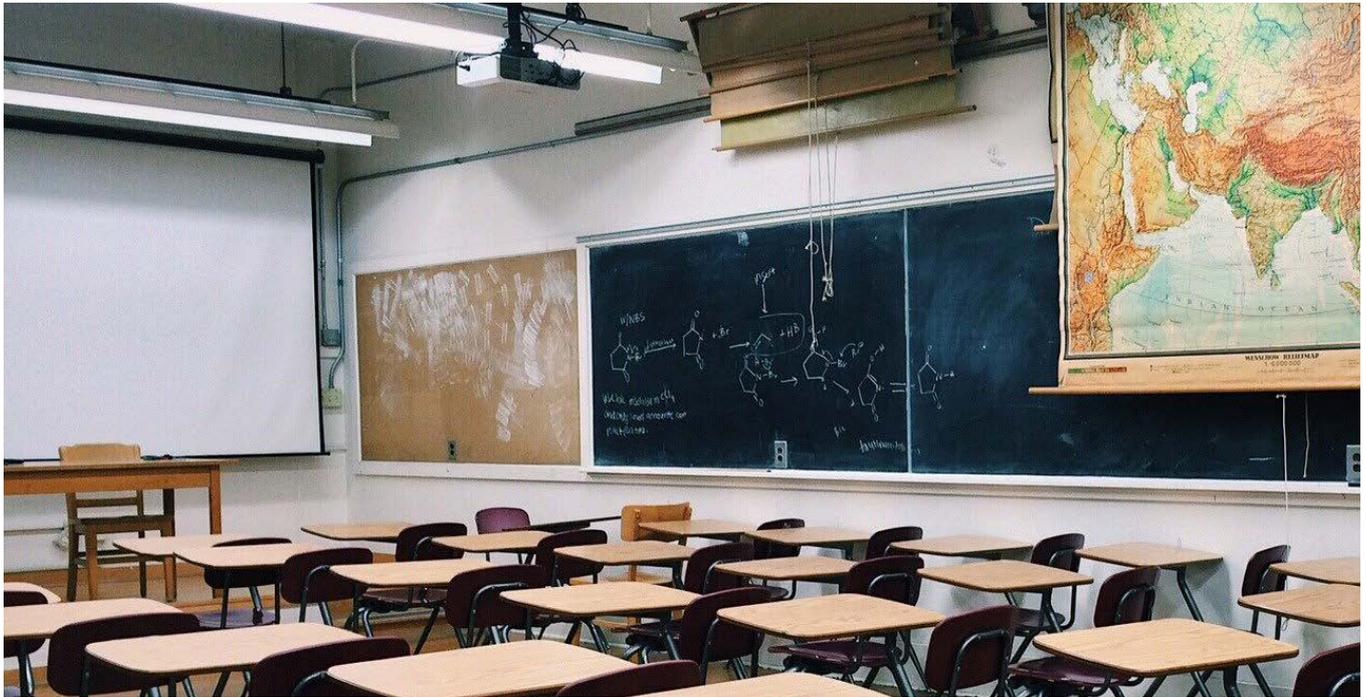
Creative writing in school education isn’t about writing hunky dory. To educate is to learn–adapt–communicate. To write is to watch–observe–create. To teach is to create–collaborate– challenge.

As a facilitator, I want to offer honest, reflective and content rich exercises in writing. Experiences of the last decade have made me recognise a lacuna with regard to creative writing in our schools. In this regard, Climate Writing is one of the areas that needs to be seen with telescope, microscope as well as a naked eye.

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While trying to recollect my earliest association with stories, a brown notebook swam across the ocean of past. In Class 8, my brother got reprimanded for making a notebook for his tales. He resolved the situation by covering the notebook with brown paper so that it could look like a school notebook.

Years later, while designing his blog, my brother tells me



that we all are interested in stories. “One may read good stories, tell better ones, but lives the best one.”

Currently, the Indian education system is writing a dangerous story—a story of neglect. We have premier institutions of sciences and humanities but none for creative writing as a specialised degree course. Sometimes, I wonder do the children in my class know about their teacher specialising in creative writing and yet having to answer in all interviews, “But why did you study Masters in Creative Writing? After all, what good has specialisation in Creative Writing done to you?”.

Every time I try to answer this question differently; Every time I return home wondering.

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While working as a poetry fellow with an organisation called Slam Out Loud, I became perceptive to how deeply we undervalue creative arts. The average Art teacher-student ratio in India is 1:1400 (according to a Right to Information filed by Slam Out Loud), leaving children with less than 20 hours of art education every year. Only one Indian University provides a Degree of Masters in Creative Writing. There is still no provision for PhD in Creative Writing.

Writing allows people to tell stories and spark conversations. We see it manifest in the jingle of advertisement, in the rhythm of a song, in the words of a poem, in a meme, or in the most random places like words written behind buses and trucks. However, over the years, our education system has steadily tilted towards producing students, in-line with productive economic units. In such a landscape, how does one think of creative writing as a space that has the capability to drive interventions in society, like, Climate Action!

Steven Pinker (1994) in *The Language Instinct* says that a language much like blue-green algae and earthworms has

wrought far-reaching changes on the planet. Language is so tightly woven to human experience and that it is scarcely possible to imagine life without it.

This article is about fighting a human induced crisis by Writing about it. A Writing that is fostered by education system and becomes a central aspect to it; instead of a neglected and ignored species or a refrain of ‘once upon a time we could have done better’. This article will reveal how Creative Writing is a relevant strategy to tackle Climate Action.

### **Why Climate Compositions: Creative Writing as Climate Action**

Rajprithvi [1] says that his favourite fictional character is Ronald Weasley. Ryan\* thinks Harry Potter series is a love story instead of a fantasy. Soon the class of 8B\* is charged with “How could you say that? We all know it is a fantasy... but... what about...”

This is the third time they discuss something so passionately. Later, we discuss a humorous poem by Odgen Nash, “This Is Going To Hurt Just A Little Bit”. Using the audio-visual aid, I share a meme in the class. A wave of collective laughter rushes through the room, encircling everyone. Before I say it, they are all explaining the context of the meme to each other. I ask, “What does Humour do?” probing them to search their previous memories of jokes.

“It makes us see what we might be uncomfortable in seeing”, prompts Nasir\*.

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Next week, we read the tale of Lake Eim in “The Lake that Flew Away”, a story about how Lake Eim becomes angry by the greedy and violent ways of humans, and

decides to fly away. Eim takes all the treasures with it, and travels to a different land. Where it settles down, the villagers treat it with respect and care.

In this story, a word 'cumulus' catches the attention of students. One of them immediately expresses Kedarnath Flash Floods as an example. We talk about words like major events in classroom. Before we open dictionary, we turn inwards and search the following: where did I encounter this word for the first time, what does it remind me of, why am I so interested in this word.

Reading stories starts a certain nature of openness. Writing, gives shape to this openness.

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Asking questions is the first step in stopping this climate crisis. I am aware that I do not ask the obvious question: Can creative writing stop the current climate crisis? This is because it is not a question of possibility. I know it can. The question of interest is how.

Climate Action has been termed as efforts to reduce greenhouse emissions and strengthen our adaptive capacity in order to fight climate-induced impacts. From agriculture to health ailments to creating unemployment, climate-induced impacts are making us particularly vulnerable.

Creative Writing is an effort—an effort to increase capacity for understanding life and everything that happens, or is hidden. It is driven by the belief that in order to understand and address the solutions of climate crisis, we must examine creative writing as a microcosm of schools. A world in which Creative Writing is supported, recognises the composition of classroom, recognises the 'everyday' of children, and humanity that comes in contact with them. Somehow, the reason that we can get away with zero accountability for our action, is put to a stop while writing.

This is because writing forces us to 'see'. One may choose to ignore, but then it will be available to someone else for closer observation. Writing brings us closer to 'how' of things/events/phenomenon/people. It makes one dig the self, as well as, others. Writing corroborates the presence of ideas and voices. When an idea is expressed as a thought or a word, it gets a being.

No wonder our school assemblies start with a thought-of-the-day. Imagine, every day we start our learning by reflecting on an existence!

## A Three-Step Approach: Establishing Creative Writing in Central Curriculum of Indian Education

Poem about the injustice of Being Made to Stand Outside in the Rain at Break-time

It's

Not

Fair

By Sue Hardy-Dawson (Morgan 2009)

In April 2020, super cyclone *Amphan* rocked India's eastern coastal line. Inside Zoom Rooms, 23 participants of Class 9 were scrolling pdf of *Wind* by Subramania Bharati. It is a poem that talks about accepting the violent force of Wind and suggests to build strong homes and doors.

2020 has made it evident that Climate Crisis is everyone's problem with some experiencing more than others. As a result, it has become significant to address and solve these challenges. Actions like clearing forests for dams are hazarding environment, robbing nature off its life and dignity. More than one billion animals died in 2019 fires of Amazon and Australia.

Climate Writing shows respect both for human life and environment. There are three ways in which such writing can be established in Indian Education System in preliminary stages: establishing a creative process, giving a voice, and supporting interdisciplinary approach.

The few writings produced during the lockdown illustrated this. Ishaana\* mails me a poem on Rain mentioning that this is the first time she has written a poem. Her poem begins with following lines: *Rain, the VIP personality/ does not come alone/ It comes with a pleasant breeze and/ thunder and lightning/ It comes with its brothers and sisters...*

Her poem was inspired by our discussion on Bharati's *Wind*, which discussed how wind destroys and also seeks to make us strong. That Ishaana\* sees 'Rain as a VIP' struck me. Compare this with, Reshma\*, who wrote about a 'kind of loneliness' reflected in the sky, just before it rains: *The sky today is murky and dull/ It's lonely kind of the day/ I wish I were seated on the bright fire/ Staring an orchestra play...*

A creative process allows one to cater to multiple ideas and bring them together for the reader to see. Writing that concerns our environment is going to be experiential as well interdisciplinary. Actively conversing about emotional experiences as well as making connections with other facets of life, are going to be some of the steps in creating a space of creative writing. The three stages of learning can be vaguely seen in this way: Read; Listen; Create.

One of the tools that Indian education system uses, is the practice of writing diary entries. This starts in middle school and goes on till high school. However, the missing page in this craft is that of—reflections. Students are not machines who we can feed data in. We are designing processes for a human being and what is currently missing is a sensitive human connection to these tools of writing. In such formats of diary and journal, writings about city can foster public understanding of the natural world as seen by children and infrastructural innovations which support life in a place.

The genre of Life Writing establishes an autobiographical creative process aiding in exploration of new as well as mundane, building our skills to focus on every day, nearby, and ways of telling stories. Making topics relevant to learners and improving problem-solving skills is what Pratham and Story Weaver—two platforms publishing stories catering to reading interests of children from multi-lingual as well different socio-economic groups—have been doing.

Once a creative process is established, it will undergo continuous change. One would hope so because that is the point of learning—to evolve. Communication has been listed as one of the basic 21st century skill. Spoken word poetry has given a different dimension to the words on page. It is a way to take oral narratives, lived experiences further, and ‘speak your truth’. Our education system should be a place where each child will be able to find their voice and use it to ‘speak their truth’.

Poetry explores emotions and strengthens our emotional learning. Higher institutes of education will soon have to shift to a mode of learning which is not based on rote learning. Like the pandemic has showed us. Standardized test scores will stop mattering. All that would matter will be our responses to everyday life.

Classrooms are sights of dreaming a vision for social change but many times one may see discomfort. Even then, in those sights, creativity is involved. Doesn't it take imagination to put powder of wafers on blades of a fan? A student may do this to create distraction, get a free period or umpteen other reasons. But they are imaginative and confident enough to execute their idea.

Novelists like Joan Didion report that their acts of creation begin not with any notion of a character or a plot but with vivid mental pictures that dictate their choice of words. (Pinker 1994)

When Amazon made stories.audible.com free, teachers as well as students thronged the website. Schools changed their mode of learning to be more literature centric during English Assessments. Teachers were asked to follow an integrated approach to teach grammar making it very evident that creative writing can be used as a tool to teach subjects. Before the lockdown, Theatre in Education was being used by schools of Delhi to teach Percentage in Maths.

This is also advocated in one of Terry Pratchett's essays on education:

First, you build a library, then build the school round it. You make sure that the kids read adequately, write coherently if simply and at least have a good enough grasp of maths to know when a pocket calculator is lying. Then you show them how to use a library, and you don't let them loose on the net until they can read and write and have grown up enough not to confuse data with information. (Pratchett 2014)

But I also have a fear—that climate crisis will become a comfort. Whatever is every day, sometimes makes us get used to it, instead of engaging with it. We stop noticing it.

By addressing climate crisis, we are not just acknowledging an ecological problem but also a problem in our society—inequal access to education, inequal social structure, exploitation in society. Climate Crisis is an interdisciplinary problem which requires an interdisciplinary solution.

Apart from being interdisciplinary, Creative Writing offers approaches to learning in multiple disciplines. Remember the Periodic Table or the names of planets in our solar system?

*My Very Excellent Memory Just Saved Us, Nancy!*

This is a mnemonic device, an aid to recall information, here, the names of planets.

“For many creative people, inspiration does not come in form of words but in mental images. Michael Faraday, had no training in mathematics but arrived at his insights by visualizing lines of force as narrow tubes through space. Nikola Tesla's idea for the electrical motor and generator, Friedrich Kekule's discovery for the benzene ring that kicked off modern organic chemistry, Ernest Lawrence's conception of the cyclotron—all came to them in images. The most popular self-described visual thinker is Albert Einstein who arrived at some of his insights by imagining himself riding a beam of light and looking back at a clock, or dropping a coin while standing in a plummeting elevator.” (Pinker 1994)

It is not the unique problems that will make us progress: it will be the unique solutions to common everyday problems. Creative writing and Arts based education are means to think how we respond to these challenges.

We are engaging this crisis with a stroke of pen; we can't saddle the ones who teach us to hold that pen. The point is to hire more quality teachers who want to teach creative writing. Presently, English teaching is seen as one size fits all. They take theatre, history, public speaking, library subjects, while carrying out all the other jobs that come with their particular department. We will be shooting the messenger if our education system continues to burden teacher rather than make space for healing and open conversations.

## The Sky will be Blue: Creative Writing can create Carbon Negative School

Creative writing sponsored by public education effort has a lot of reasons to develop as well as surpass our expectations. I discuss some of them here.

While working as a Poetry Fellow with *Slam Out Loud*, transformation due to creative writing peeped into our class one day. In one of our poetry classes, students of middle school wrote a poem on the following prompt: The Sky Is Not Blue Today. Two poems that made sharp connections were from Nasib\* and Dhairya\*.

Nasib\* wrote in Hindi: ...*The red kite is not yellow/ As the sky is not blue today/ I don't feel like flying today/ As there is no colour in cloud today...*

Dhairya\* wrote: *The sky is not blue today/ I want water of trees to say/ Today sky is not blue/ Without water how we grew/ I like the sky when it was blue/...People like the sky of Land/ Everywhere there is sand and sand/ Still, the sky isn't blue today*

Climate writing is being shaped by young writers and readers every day, giving this genre young voices and views, providing an opportunity for collaboration, discovering old as well as new ideas. It will help students and their places of learning deliver major changes to their environmental and sustainability impacts both now and far into the future.

From small community libraries to centres of privilege, creative writing has the potential to be inclusive of everyone. The fellowship made me aware about the immense challenges of infrastructure. The journey saw a lot of invisible things that impacted students: a kind remark, a negative remark, a memory of the past, their families, a day when they missed class because of rain, bad days at home, teachers in schools, all of which finally shapes—how we live our lives.

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Carbon emissions of Delhi have been reaching very poisonous levels every year. As a result, schools had to shut down last year in November. According to *All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2018–2019*, India has 993 Universities and 39,931 Colleges. In Delhi alone, there are 27 Universities, 178 Private and Government colleges. All of this should point to us the vast opportunity for supporting green institutions in Delhi.

Schools and colleges also have a good network of alumni. Their ability to reach out to students and communities, carrying out community outreach programs can be a long-term success.

Find champions in local community; create a vision; execute a plan that involves students undertaking building and reporting activities in support of their vision. For example, making a project on 'Emotional Water', where the research input can come from assessing rain water conservation method employed in schools

or any water body around. This will be significant as according to a report by the policy think-tank *National Institute of Transforming India* (NITI Aayog) 21 Indian cities including Delhi, Bengaluru, Chennai, and Hyderabad are expected to run out of groundwater by 2020, affecting around 100 million people.

The failure to develop interest in ecology and creative writing by schools is also talked about by Kush Sethi—a young urban ecologist designing special walks in patches of Delhi's wilderness—in his interview to *Scroll*: "I was in the final years of school at *Don Bosco* in New Delhi at the time [2005–2008] and all of these [developments] were starting to make me very interested in environmental protection as a subject. The syllabus in school lagged seriousness and depth when it came to ecology, so I started to delve into with environmental documentaries, graphic novels and any other pedagogic formats than seemed relevant." (Sen 2018)

Kush Sethi, leads groups of 15-20 people thrice a month in the hope of raising awareness about ecology, pollution, native species, water tables and heat islands. When children see people like Kush Sethi working in ecology, using imagination and creativity to solve problems, or becoming writers and questioning their relationship with plants and place, when these children grow to create positions of hiring, there is a huge possibility that they imbibe environmental awareness along with empathy, kindness and creativity as best practices in their organisations.

The effort of collaboration with creative arts and ecology is already being realized. On September 1, 2020, UN Environment Programme (UNEP) launched a publication, *The Little Book of Green Nudges*, which aims to inspire 200 million students around the globe to adopt environmentally friendly habits and greener lifestyles.

Imagine, eye-catching designs on recycling bins made by school's visual art students, or creative writing students' haiku on sustainable diets, being used in cafeteria, to create a series of easily achievable but powerful behaviour change ideas, that help these places of learning have an impact, both now and then.

## Conclusion

The creative narratives presented in the article give insight into the current missing fundamentals of climate writing in education system of India. My arguments for introducing creative writing in Indian education system are rooted firmly in the belief that working on climate writing is a solution to current climate crisis.

Creative Writing and Collaboration between various disciplines can lead to outcomes that can change our future on earth. One such model could be making our institutions Carbon Negative. Such models have yet to be developed, and require collaboration as well as research, to assess its legal and economic viability, and effectiveness in countries.

The present article attempted to draw missing links and illustrated the need to make creative writing central to education system. It also elaborates on the scope for a practice in climate writing which can thereby stop the current climate crisis.

Let us not wait for a time when Sher Khan will only exist in *The Jungle Book*. Let us write the tree from our window and stop it from being cemented upon.

Notes:

[1] All the names of children and their sections have been changed

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