



# Our Land Our Life

**A curriculum for children of rural communities in India**

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for children of rural communities  
in India

Taleemnet  
Organic Farming Association of India  
Natural Farming Institute  
Cerana Foundation  
New Education Group-Foundation for Innovation and  
Research in Education

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## ***Our Land Our Life***

(A curriculum for children of rural communities in India)

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## ***A Note from the Principal Researcher***

An idea is like a date seed. It can lounge in dormancy till the time it finds suitable conditions to come alive. The germ of an idea for a rural curriculum lay dormant for many years, making every effort to surface now and then; asserting its life potential. In early 2011, the New Education Group - Foundation for Innovation and Research in Education (NEG-FIRE), New Delhi, saw the possibilities that such a school curriculum would open up for children of rural communities in India. They readily agreed to support the work financially.

It takes a community to nurture a child and a family to bring it up. Likewise the rural curriculum design has been nurtured by a country wide community of educators, organic farmers, thinkers, academics, children, rural community groups and practitioners in innumerable ways. Cerana Foundation, The Organic Farming Association of India, Natural Farming Institute and Taleemnet have shouldered parental responsibilities. And like all parents have done so, at most times, happily. Each gesture is hereby acknowledged with deep gratitude.

What came across very clearly in the process of this work was that, it was a 'dream child' of numerous eager and expectant "parents". So naturally, it carries within it several strands of complex 'DNA'. Many however, will question its birth, worth, relevance and place. Many others will see its potential, may want to pick and choose using an astute eye; while some others may wish to embrace it completely. Each of these sentiments is perfectly valid and in fact encouraged. Such is in the nature of all things new.

Throughout the entire research period there was always a sense of excitement. Fears and apprehensions were aplenty as the team was navigating in uncharted waters. But we woke up each morning with renewed enthusiasm to sail on. Captain and crew switched roles with ease. Early in the day, there was a casualty. Sameer Badodekar, our young secretarial assistant, left us to journey on to his final rest. We have egged on. Reconciling with the loss, however, is taking time.

Finally, in all sincerity and modesty, I would like to place on record that it has been an honest attempt to put together a framework as best as we could within our understanding of the issue. No doubt, there is much scope for improvement, and this can happen only with your feedback. Anyone who may wish to improve on it, independently, is most welcome to do so. We would be happy to hear from them.

The credit for the merits within this document goes to many. The demerits are entirely my responsibility. We look forward to hearing from you about both. Inconsistencies if any, if brought to our notice, will be corrected in subsequent publications.

*Nyla Coelho*  
February, 2012

## *Acknowledgements*

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Obtaining useful resources for such a framework may well be a project in itself. Apart from hunting the internet, physical copies of books and materials were sourced, sometimes even photocopied and sent to us. Dr Yogesh Kulkarni, Arvind Gupta, Meenakshi Varma, M.C.Malathi, Anshuman Das, Rohit Shetty, Carmalita Machado, Ravi Gulati and his student volunteers, Jenessey Dias and Suresh Kosaraju receive a standing salute for their help.

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Several women's groups from rural Karnataka, children of schools run on Gandhian thought and children home schooled on farms have also shared their aspirations and expectations out of such a curriculum. These have helped greatly in giving direction to our work. Each has been a voice of wisdom. Our namaskar to all.

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Cerana Foundation took on the entire responsibility for all the paper work involved, thus leaving the researchers mentally free to get on with the task at hand. T.Vijayendra and Sagar Dhara's efforts in this regard deserve appreciation.

If it was not for the patience, support, encouragement and the gentle but firm hand of Dr M.G. Jackson directing us during the last phase of the work and Dr G.P. Pande sharing his expertise, this document would not have seen the light of day as yet. Their assistance with drafting some parts of the document is gratefully acknowledged.

Gerard J. D'Silva, my colleague and research assistant for this project showed up at the door unfailingly each morning. Words seem inadequate to acknowledge the steady support, enforced rigour, discipline and the quality he brought into this work.

Each has contributed in ways that only they could have done.

*Nyla Coelho*

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## SUMMARY

This document describes in outline an innovative educational programme for children of rural communities in India, why it has been developed and how.

The past thirty years have seen great improvements in school education in terms of enrolment, curriculum and pedagogy, albeit adopting a top down approach. Serious short-comings, however, remain. The three most important of these are:

1. national and state-level curricula have an urban bias;
2. these curricula fail to address effectively the critical problems of today and specifically those of the rural communities;
3. in practice, the teacher-student interaction remains largely chalk and talk.

The present curriculum addresses all three problems in fundamental ways, utilising entirely new concepts and practices.

This curriculum has come about as the result of the merging of three contemporary streams of thinking and practice.

1. Alternative education
2. Alternative agriculture
3. Recovery and interpretation of traditional thinking and practice of agriculture

Specifically, the members of the Organic Farming Association of India articulated the need for creating a land based curriculum for school aged children. The first phase of this process has been the creation of a curriculum framework. This has now been completed and is presented in this document.

Two basic concepts have been utilised in building this curriculum.

1. The living systems concept in terms of which everything is seen as living and organised into self-limiting, self-organising and self-perpetuating systems.
2. The concept of learning by reflecting on experience to create understanding of why things are the way they are and behave as they do.

This curriculum is a planned educational programme for children six to sixteen years old. However the age factor may be viewed in flexible terms. It is designed to give children a sound general education that will enable them to participate as responsible citizens at all levels and at the same time acquire the knowledge, concepts and skills required to pursue livelihoods on the land or in farm-related services.

The content of the curriculum falls under two broad categories:

1. Core academic subjects
2. Farm related modules

The system as a whole (that is, curriculum) is holistic, activity centred, going from the known to the unknown, concrete to abstract, simple to complex. The topics offer more than ample opportunity for extra-curricular activities. Students have a choice of elective modules under the category of farm related modules.

The curriculum is so designed that learning with pen and paper is minimal and most of the learning would be through active engagement with living systems on the farm or in the neighbourhood.

The local community would play a central role in many ways in this learning programme. One may safely do away with the prevalent examination type of evaluation as progressing through the curriculum makes demands in terms of prerequisites of competence.

Having completed the work of constructing the curriculum framework, it remains to fill in all the details such as activity guides, preparing the teaching resources manuals, enlisting the collaborations in testing the programme and conducting orientation workshops for those interested. A booklet for children describing the learning programme could also be produced.

This document is only a beginning towards a holistic programme of education for children of rural communities in India. While the syllabus is presented as a collection of discrete topics and subjects, it may be used for building a holistic educational programme. This is highlighted through some of the case studies from the field that one will find spread throughout the document.

The curriculum document has drawn from the many prevalent educational programmes in the country that have tried to address this issue in various ways.

## A letter to our young friends

*Dear friend,*

This rather long letter is penned specially for you. There is no need to read it all at once if you do not wish to. Also, you may need the help of an adult to help you with all that it says and talks about here and in the rest of the book. It is about the many things that one sees, experiences, hears or may wish to know about. The book talks about how one can go about learning many of these things. I am hoping you will find the contents interesting, especially if you happen to live in a village or a very small town, close to a farm or within a farm in India. If you happen to live in a city but enjoy the outdoor activities of the countryside, then too you may find this book of some interest. In the adult world, where people decide or would like to have a say in what children learn or ought to learn, this may be called the Rural Curriculum Design.

*What is a Rural Curriculum Design?*

Let me explain what each of these words mean on their own and when put together.

*Rural* refers to a village or a small town with fewer people, fewer houses, many trees, clean air, farms, lakes, rivers, less noise and a steady pace of life. Most people living in such places work on the land or the work they do is related to the land. What I mean is most people do farming or activities that help farming directly or indirectly like carpentry, smithy, pottery, weaving of cloth or baskets, rearing and grazing animals, repair of farm implements, trading in farm produce etc.

*Curriculum* is a word commonly used to describe a programme of study. The way we live today, it is necessary to know how to read, write and do math. We also like to know the reason why things are as they are or how something works or how something is done. Generally, these things are learnt when one is young because young children are growing up, are curious and quick learners. It is natural for adults to teach or train children in what they think are important matters that children ought to know. It is like a preparation for making them independent and free to explore the world around; to depend on themselves for their needs. You will see this among cats, dogs, chickens, tigers, elephants, fish etc. Bees and bugs too teach their young. Also, there are many things we do naturally, learn naturally. Some things we learn with some effort.

*Design* is a map, a plan, a guideline or a blueprint on how to go about doing something. It is generally drawn up by people who know about these things or who have done it themselves and would like to share it with others. Many a time it helps to know how something is done, so you have some clue as to where and how to begin and then you can make it such that it suits your needs or interests best.

So if we put the meaning of these three words together, it adds up to a guideline for a programme of study for children growing up in a village or a small town, especially on a farm.

*Why a Rural Curriculum Design?*

You may now ask me, why a Rural Curriculum Design, when we already are being taught how to read, write and do math and many other things in a school? Well, the story for the reason goes back a long time.

The place we live in is part of a much bigger place that is called the earth. Its land parts have been divided up into many smaller places by people and are called nations. India, where we belong, is one such nation. It is like a big village that has many houses and within each house there may be rooms and within a room spaces for keeping and doing things. Like in a home where we do things in a certain way, sharing chores so that everybody within the family is happy and healthy, so also in a nation, we do things in a certain way. However because a nation is huge, and has many many people and many many chores, these have to be shared. The education of its young people is one such task.

For a very long time now, maybe since the time of our great great grandfathers, not many have paid careful attention to this task. Like hand me downs, that sometimes do not fit us well even after much tucking in and opening out and sewing up, so too with learning or education, what we offer our children in schools does not seem to fit most, more so if you belong to a rural area. It falls short of preparing young people to become independent, responsible and free to explore the world around; to depend on themselves for their needs and most of all enjoy the process of learning.

Mind you, many people have known this and from time to time shared with others their thoughts and plans and some even today do so all the time. Two persons who thought about this and even set up places to show how it is to be done in India very many years ago are Rabindranath Tagore and M .K. Gandhi. However nobody followed it up seriously and so, it has not been taken care of and has hence become a little rusty, rather like an unused old bicycle, whose parts are difficult to fix.

If you look around and ask around, you will discover that India is a country whose people are mostly farmers or people doing things that are related to farming. Children too help with chores and learn how to do many of the things that adults in the family do. They learn many things this way. When these children go to a school, it takes away from them much time that they would have otherwise spent in learning how to do things that are part of the family's work. Also what is taught in school is not really connected with their everyday life. It ends up making them feel confused, unhappy with study, or worse still, they begin to find learning very burdensome. Such children lose interest or if they do study, they have little use for it in their everyday life as grownups.

Many farmers and people from rural areas feel that, what their children study at school is of little use. They would rather have their children learn things that will come in handy in their life. The Rural Curriculum Design is an attempt at a programme of study that would be useful in such cases. It will help children learn most of the essentials while allowing them to pick and choose various topics of their interest. Although, it does not cover everything, one can use the tools it offers to learn almost anything on one's own whenever one may wish to do so at a later date.

### *What is in the Rural Curriculum Design?*

The Rural Curriculum Design is a programme and plan of study for children growing up in rural areas as against what is offered in schools, in these areas, mostly through a textbook. In schools, a textbook forms the main content of study. Some parts of it are interesting, others not so interesting and some, downright boring and useless! It is like being told that you can take only a particular dish (that you may or may not really care much for) at a buffet and have it in a particular way. Is that not a sad thought, when there are many many dishes that one may like to serve oneself from and have it in a way one likes? Well, what I am trying to say is, in schools, we are expected to learn particular things in a particular way. They are the same for all, and there are not many choices given. Also, some of these things may not be useful to us in any way. It is like asking a fish to learn how to climb a mountain, totally pointless!

The Rural Curriculum Design (let us call it RCD for short) has tried to carefully pick the things that one may benefit from learning if living in a rural area. Like a buffet, it offers many interesting dishes, but like at a buffet, where we like to be allowed to pick what we would like for a meal, and we do not serve ourselves everything, just because it is there, here too, the programme includes many topics that one may like to learn, to know about or do or find out for oneself. It allows for picking and choosing favourites. But it also tells you about certain things, that it would be best to know first, so you can try other more advanced things. Like if you wanted to learn to SCUBA dive, it would be first essential to know swimming! Also it is helpful to do things in small steps. It is the natural way of doing things. There are bound to be many goof ups before one gets it just right! That is where repeating things over and over again and practice becomes important. Just watch a child learning to walk, or a kitten learning to catch mice, you will see what I mean.

Well, so also with the RCD, it tells about all that children from rural areas will enjoy learning or will find useful to know.

### *How is the RCD set up?*

The RCD is presented in three levels in a way that is suited for children from 6 to 16 years of age. There is nothing very strict about this age; it is only a matter of convenience. One can begin earlier or later, or begin from where one knows. Like if you already know to count and add up small numbers, you can take up from there onwards in math work. Also for older children say, 12 or 13 onwards, one can pick a particular topic, and come back to others later. Like if you wish to know how much will spill out of a drum full of water if you sit in it, but do not know what the volume of a liquid means, or how to calculate volumes of cylindrical bodies, one may have to go back to those topics before being able to calculate using math how much water spilled out on stepping into a drum full of water.

To make it simple and straight forward, the topics are arranged subject wise from simple to not so simple. It may be interesting and easy to learn it in that order, but not necessary. People who work in education call such arrangements as going from the known to the unknown or from concrete to abstract or progressive degree of complexity.

To say all this in the language used by people in education, the curriculum is divided into three parts – Lower Level 1,2,3,4 and 5; Middle Level 1 and 2; Upper Level 1,2 and 3.

The subjects are offered in two parts:

#### 1. Academic Subjects

- Language
- Mathematics
- Science
- Geography
- Understanding History
- Understanding Governance

#### 2. Farm Related Modules\*

- Farming Fundamentals
- Farm Related Technology
- Supplementary Farming Activities
- Accounts Trade Records and Permits

(\* modules, meaning topics that are by themselves complete units of study)

There is a full list of modules to look up and check what one would like to learn. At the end of each subject and module is a list of resources – books, websites, films, CDs, institutions... to help you with the task at hand.

In writing the RCD, many people who have done these things themselves and children who have grown up on farms in many different places in India have said how they have done it, or what things work. All their first hand experience has been put down here in a way that is easy to follow.

Since adults will no doubt have to help you with many of the things mentioned here, the details have been written in a form that they are used to. Don't let that bother you too much.

### *Why the RCD is titled 'Our Land Our Life'*

Several hundred years ago in India, there lived a man who loved to express himself in verse so much that he wrote plenty of it. He was a weaver and his name was Kabir. He had a way of putting things such that one caught the deeper meaning instantly.

While working on the RCD, we put our heads together to think of a name for the course of study which would tell at once its central idea. "Our Land Our Life" seemed to say it best. As a matter of fact it is not a new name. It is a subject that all school children of class six, seven and eight study in the hill state of Uttarakhand. This is because the mountains, the water and the lands are very important in the everyday life of people living there.

The same is true for all of us who live in rural areas in other parts of the country. Our life has a direct connection with the land, trees, farms, rivers, forests, mountains and people. Hence we really need to understand it well. What better way to do this than to begin by calling our course of study '**Our Land Our Life**'?

*How, when and where does one go about using the RCD?*

There are many ways in which this can be done. The basic academic topics are quite simple, graded, with many things for one to learn by doing and by making careful observations along the way. It is best that children work with an adult to help decide on many of the things it offers, helps to explain, do together with adults and with friends. Many things can be learnt from people who are already familiar with these things.

If one stays on a farm, there are many things one can do while still quite young. These could be things like growing plants, keeping pets, raising a brood of chickens, watching what birds, butterflies, bugs and worms do and how they live. Taking a walk by the river, learning to catch fish, watching tadpoles grow into frogs—by growing a pair of legs and losing the gills and tail and so on.

When slightly older, one can help grow a vegetable patch, make compost, fix tools and machines, build a live fence, fix a fuse or water pump, keep a record of the weather, the crop cycles, the yields, check which soil is most suited to grow a particular crop, milk the cows, grow mushrooms, keep bees, maintain farm data on the computer, keep farm accounts, do bank related work, apply for a license etc.

All this and more can be done with the help of adults who will help you to learn how. There will be many opportunities to work with things rather than work with only books.

The RCD has been set so that people who are running schools can use it in their schools. This way it becomes useful to many more children. The way it is written is in a form that adults or a teacher who is helping children learn will know right away how to go about things. Hence, it uses words like pupil, student, teacher, classroom etc. However, it is really meant for children, and I would like to urge you to remember this all the time. It is you who are the learner, and you are free to decide, what within the RCD you would like to learn and when. Adults, schools and teachers can only help, show you how, explain, assist, draw your attention to, but unless you see the value in learning, there is not much anyone else can do. It is like a game. You enjoy it best, when you are playing it yourself. Watching is fun only partly, playing it yourself is the real thing.

I am hoping you will find this way of learning interesting, you may like to do bits of it or all of it. The choice is entirely yours. So also, schools and teachers may take bits and parts of it, depending on what the children wish to learn or what they think children will benefit from. Anyway, it's a buffet of yummy treats through and through; you may prefer some over the others.

It's a pleasure to invite you to it. Dig in, enjoy!