

SOCIAL SCIENCES

How education can affect our sociocultural milieu

Schools must train students to critique cultural issues and practices. The education system is weak in this respect

KRISHNA KUMAR

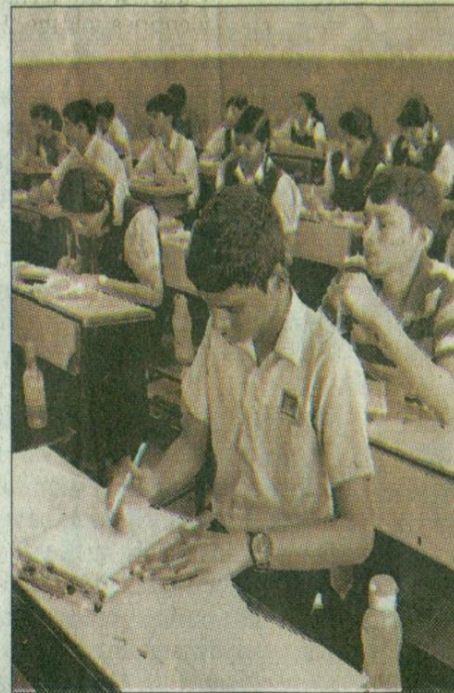


Few people recognise the conflict that education in a society like ours necessarily involves. The Constitution of India carries a transformative vision of society, implying a major change in the values and behaviours embedded in culture. Many of these values and behaviours impinge on religious beliefs. They are not compatible with the fundamental values, such as equality and justice, enshrined in the Constitution. The State is supposed to play a negotiating role, reconciling and mitigating the conflict between Constitutional values and those entrenched in culture. The State's institutional apparatus, including schools and universities, are directly involved in this difficult task.

Any number of examples can be given to explain this conflict between Constitutional values and the values entrenched in culture. Take untouchability. As a behaviour, it has

been outlawed in the Constitution. As a practice, it derives its cultural legitimacy from the caste system. It is also closely tied to religious beliefs and rituals. Temples were a major site where untouchability was practised. That is why Ambedkar made temple entry a major campaign in his politics. For long-term change on this front, education was expected to play a major role. The success achieved in this regard is not total. We still hear about untouchability being practised in schools, around the drinking water tap and at the time the midday meal is served. But these stories are not as common today as they were two generations ago.

Gender is another important area in which education was supposed to make a dent. The enrolment of girls in schools was widely perceived as a remedy for gender disparity and discrimination. No state aroused greater expectations in this matter than Kerala where schooling and literacy spread across different sections of society earlier than anywhere else in India. Recently, after the Supreme Court's Sabarimala verdict, I felt disappointed with Kerala's inability to accept and implement it. Despite the verdict, women's entry into the Sabarimala temple remained contentious. Apparently, universal education has not sufficed to remove all misogynistic beliefs. This



The test of maturity of an education system is how teachers handle sensitive topics with care in the classroom HT

is hardly surprising as a lot of people feel that neither courts nor schools should interfere with cultural practices and the beliefs on which they are based.

If we accept that position, education will be reduced to transmit inert information. Education has a role in creating the capacities that a participatory democracy demands. To fulfil this role, schools must train the young to think critically. Our education system is quite weak in this respect. Cultural topics are usually taught without any interrogation. That is why the impact of education on the sociocultural milieu remains limited.

Of course, it is not easy for teachers to handle cultural issues rooted in custom or religious belief. In India, most teachers prefer to stick to the prescribed textbooks, and text-

books usually avoid controversial aspects of culture. The individuals involved in the preparation of textbooks in the states and the private sector often lack the skills required for sophisticated handling of contentious issues. The Sabarimala controversy can be a good topic for encouraging critical pedagogy in a senior secondary class, but the treatment of such a topic in a school textbook must be nuanced and capable of engaging the young.

The ultimate test of the maturity of an education system is whether teachers are able to handle such a topic with care in the classroom. Critical pedagogy is a fine idea, but it cannot be practised by poorly trained teachers. Professional confidence and a supportive environment are necessary for teachers to deal with sensitive cultural issues. Both are rare in our system. Teachers perceive their job as that of compliance with whatever the authorities want. That is why they prefer to follow the textbook mechanically and avoid training the students to interpret. Only a few make an attempt to encourage reflective study of a topic. They depend on the principal's support for such an attempt, especially if parents are sceptical or uncooperative.

Language and literature constitute a crucial area for the school's success in dealing with cultural matters in a mature manner. It is in the language class that children learn the skills required for critical analysis and coherent discussion. Literature offers the opportunity to relate to social and cultural history and its contemporary manifestation in a contemplative manner. Unfortunately, both language and literature, along with other subjects belonging to the humanities, are getting marginalised in the current social environment. Neither parents nor school authorities seem to recognise the importance of humanities and the social sciences.

*Krishna Kumar is former director, NCERT
The views expressed are personal*