



EDUCATING FOR COEXISTENCE: CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES IN INDIA

Meenakshi Gopinath

Abstract

This article attempts to delineate the historical contexts within which the idea of 'unity in diversity' informed education policies in the initial years after India's independence from colonial rule. It then examines if education can engender social transformatory practices and thereby provide effective responses to conflicts arising from religious, ethnic, regional and other differences. Can education lead to respect for pluralism, equality of rights and gender justice in India? This is the central question the paper seeks to answer.

Author Profile

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This paper is extracted from a paper prepared for United States Institute of Peace (USIP), Washington D.C. The author acknowledges with thanks the inputs provided by USIP.

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Introduction

Almost six decades after independence from colonial rule, the prevalent mood in India today is one marked by buoyancy and a new found confidence. Official discourse today focuses on India's role as an emerging global player, a 'responsible' nuclear state, a huge potential market and a growing knowledge hub in a globalizing environment. Above all, India prides itself in being an old civilization and a 'youthful' nation.

That today fifty per cent of the country's population is below twenty-five years of age, opens up enormous possibilities for dynamic change, inclusive development and progressive governance. Yet the utilization of the possibilities offered by this dividend of youth is dependent on how the country maximizes its enormous human potential, and the sagacity and vision with which it invests in its population of over a billion. Access to opportunities for gaining skills and knowledge, and the learnings from formal and informal education streams will, to a great extent, determine whether this population can be effectively harnessed to provide the locomotive for equitable and inclusive change.

"Sa Vidya ya Vimuktaye" a motto in Sanskrit, is proudly displayed in several institutions of learning in India - a country with traditions of knowledge creation and sharing, and cultures of integral learning. Briefly translated, the motto means "that alone is knowledge which leads to liberation." Yet, whether Indian education today lives by this transformatory exhortation is seriously open to question.

Education in India, today, is beset by issues of access, equity and quality, as also concerns about biases in curricula and flawed teaching methodology. Today, the domain of education as a possible liberatory space faces severe challenges from three distinct but inter-related trends in its society and polity. First, the threat to secular spaces from different fundamentalisms; second, the growing legitimacy of a culture of militarism and the warrior discourse; and third, the dislocating and bewildering change imposed upon it by the processes broadly described as globalization and its consequent inequities.

As these trends and concerns collide and cohere, they raise serious questions about the capacity of Indian education to renew its role in engendering social transformatory practices and to provide effective responses to conflicts and their resolution. It is the challenge to secular education and democratic engagement that is the primary concern of this paper. How can Indian education resist the illiberal impulses of sectarian forces? Can it be made capable of countering these influences or is it doomed to implicate itself in a 'closing of the Indian mind'? Do contemporary developments in the revision of curricula represent an attempt to reclaim 'the secular'? Can education provide avenues for the politics of the possible, without capitulating to partisan and cynical political interests and stakeholders? Can it provide a vocabulary for emancipatory praxis?

The Nationalist Vision and Composite Culture

The visionaries of the Indian national movement saw education as an effective instrument for the transformation of the consciousness of an enslaved people, to equip them to unleash their inner resources and untapped potential and to energize the anti-colonial struggle.

I invoke here three men, Gandhi, Tagore and Nehru, whose views – while substantially different – helped shape the nationalist discourse on education. Their positions on ethics, morality, culture and modernity were to provide the conceptual alphabet within which the vocabulary of education for a new India was to be constructed. And inevitably, the disagreements and tensions between them continued to reflect in the sometimes contradictory pulls and pressures within the Indian education system. However, despite differences of emphases, at root, these men shared a remarkable commonality in their commitment to preserving what came to be described as the “composite culture” of India, from its ability to draw upon and creatively negotiate diverse influences from the cultures and religions of the world without – to use Gandhi’s phrase – being “swept off one’s feet by any one of them.”

‘Composite culture’ served as a prism to look at how people have traditionally lived together in a multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-religious society like India. Composite culture as a formulation was definitely a nationalist creation; and as nationalist creations go, it is neither entirely fact nor wholly fiction. The notion of a composite culture that emerged was a vision of proposed nationhood and of the way people would live together after independence was won. To this Gandhi added the pluralist principle of *sarva dharma sambhava* – equality of all religions.¹

¹ The early Gandhian positions enunciated in *Hind Swaraj* (1909) set up a substantial critique of ‘satanic’ Western civilization and its values of technological progress, that both enslaved and dehumanized. The task of education was to liberate itself from the shackles of its rationality. Gandhi extolled the qualities of the

Tagore, Gandhi and Nehru represent, as Khilnani has eloquently argued, “an important moment in the making of a tradition of public reason – the creation of an intellectual space which allowed morals and ethics, and the political choices these entailed, to be debated, revised, decided upon. At its best moments, the arguments and ideas generated quite exceeded the bounds of nationalism or nationalist thought.”² They engaged with the problem of how to construe the relation between political power and the presence of multiple faiths. How can a moral and integrated life be lived under modern conditions – where political power is concentrated in the state, but where beliefs are multiple and diverse across society? What set Tagore and Gandhi apart from other Indians who wished to root public morals in religion was their recognition that no religion taken in its traditional sense could serve as a basis of public morality. So Gandhi’s intellectual itinerary involved “a strenuous dismantling and reassembly of religious traditions.” By drawing on Islam, Christianity and the folk traditions of Hindu devotion, Khilnani argues, Gandhi engaged in a spiritual recovery that was respectful of existing religious faiths but also used them as a reservoir for re-articulation.³ Tagore’s “poet’s religion” reflected a humanist faith in the capacities of man and a belief in the transcendent powers of art and aesthetics.⁴

Nehru’s vision was closer to Tagore’s and, although fully cognizant of the limits of reason, was imbued with a respect for the traditions of scientific enquiry, trying simultaneously to develop a morality without the fall-back to religion. For him, the lesson of the Partition of India was to drive home the pervasive, deep-rooted force of religion in Indian society. Unlike Gandhi’s, his views were imbued with a fear of the dangers that religion posed if it should ever be linked to that most powerful form of instrumental reason, the State.

Tagore’s initiatives at Shanti Niketan, the university he founded, to create an Indian who would become the social conscience and cultural leader in that age, Gandhi’s *Nai Talim* as the basis of empowerment and mobilization of the masses,⁵ and Nehru’s vision of education as a humanizing, progressive and

Indian civilization as unparalleled. This position was to change by 1921, in the course of his debates with Tagore.

² Sunil Khilnani, *Nehru’s Faith*, 34th Jawaharlal Memorial Lecture (New Delhi, Nov 2002).

³ *Ibid*, p.9.

⁴ While Gandhi searched among folk traditions, Tagore drew from classical traditions also acknowledging the influence of the European Renaissance on the modern Indian mind. In his schools, there was to be no politics, only nation building through the development of the Indian personality. His solution was to bring the urban elite and the village folk closer. The town would bring modern science and technology, and the village, traditional knowledge and skills. The curriculum of Shanti Niketan reflects this engagement.

⁵ Gandhi’s philosophy of Basic Education, which came to be known as the *Wardha* scheme was formulated as a practical critique of the bookish, examination-oriented colonial education. Its focus was to integrate children’s learning of different subjects with training in a manual craft. Education was to be an effective

essentially liberal undertaking provided the strands with which the educational project in post-independent India sought to weave its trajectory. Not surprisingly, these strands did not always sit well together.⁶

History and its Discontents

In the agenda followed by the state after independence, particularly from the 60s, education was harnessed to the nation-building project. Among other developments, the *mantra* of 'Unity in Diversity' informed its 'national mainstream' and was a widely shared imperative. The teaching of history in schools was expected to serve as a vital ingredient of this mission, and it became, from early on, and more especially from the late 1970s, a contested political terrain.

The influential Kothari Commission Report on Education of the mid-1960s articulated a position in which a national perspective was assumed to be synonymous with a modern perspective. The responsibility to produce model textbooks to buttress this modernist orientation fell on the National Centre for Educational Research & Training (NCERT), set up in the mid-1960s. It drew to its fold eminent scholars and historians, mostly of the Left, and this was to leave a profound impact on Indian historiography. A young nation-state beset by political uncertainty was not particularly inclined to curricula that prioritized the students' freedom to reconstruct knowledge in the context of a local ethos.⁷ The influence of Gandhian educational philosophy was clearly on the wane.

During the closing decades of the Twentieth century, even as the traditional right was preparing the popular imagination against official secularism, educational policy came under strong pressure to accommodate the ideology of religious revivalism. The evolution of curriculum and textbook policy, particularly in history, has as much to do with the politics of education as with the State's cultural policy. The ascendancy of the Bharatiya Janta Party (the political party of the Hindu Right) to power at the center in March 1998, witnessed a more "legitimized" assertion of the militarist discourse of cultural nationalism. The NCERT textbooks were in the eye of the storm during the period, being criticized for their attempts to rewrite history to subserve the saffronizing agenda of the Hindu Right. The saffronization of education was of particular salience since it represented one condensed moment in a process that challenges both the discourse and practices of secularism in India. With the ouster of the BJP-led

instrument to realize independence, battle social injustice, eradicate illiteracy and poverty, and also restore vernacular languages, as opposed to English, as the medium of education.

⁶ See Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, (Ed.), *The Contested Terrain: Perspectives on Education in India*, (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1998).

⁷ See Krishna Kumar, *Prejudice & Pride* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp.50–52.

government at the polls in 2004, the reins of power shifted to the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance. The National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCFSE) was consequently revised in an attempt to bring it in consonance with the ideals of equality and justice enshrined in the Indian Constitution. The document was approved by the Central Advisory Board on Education in September 2005. Though widely debated and critiqued itself, the Framework is a considerable advance, and represents an attempt to undo the biases of the NCFSE 2000 by injecting a strong dose of the 'secular'.⁸

The Indian Constitution bears the traces of a historical context of religious discussion and conflict, and comes out resolutely in favor of a broad, tolerant humanism.⁹ The modernist conception of India, which shaped the Constitution, the choice of its national symbols and the policies of successive governments, cast the idea of the Indian nation primarily as a political and not cultural or civilizational community.¹⁰ In this view, India's political identity consists of its commitment to certain fundamental principles such as justice, liberty, equality, fraternity and the dignity of the individual – all of which were new to the country and somewhat at odds with its cultural and social practices. While it served as an inspiring idea for the imperatives of forging an independent nation-state out of a multiplicity of identities, it paid little attention to their internal diversities or their creative historical interventions, and lacked a coherent notion of the place of religion in political life.¹¹ Its homogenizing impulses were deeply problematic for a multi-cultural and multi-religious society, whose citizens have always taken a fluid and porous view of their identities and crossed their boundaries without inhibition. Not surprisingly, its contradictions were to unfold and manifest in violent ways. It is this context that the forces of **Hindutva** (the political ideology of Right-wing Hindu nationalism) sought to exploit, with startling degrees of success. The control over the media and education is crucial to its agenda, and although it is presented as a struggle to revive the purity of Indian culture, it has the consolidation of power within the **political** arena as its

⁸ The National Curriculum Framework 2005 identified “nurturing an over-riding identity informed by caring concerns within the democratic polity of the country” as one of its guiding principles. It furthers the values of equality, justice and fraternity, emphasizing education's role in building a culture of peace. It encourages students to explore diverse sources of information to understand how the same content may be presented in different ways.

⁹ Hiren Gohain. “On Saffronisation of Education”, *Economic and Political Weekly* (New Delhi, Nov 16, 2002), p.4599.

¹⁰ Bikhu Parekh, *Re-Imaging India*, Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi, Annual Lecture 2003, p.12.

¹¹ The lack of clarity on what constitutes Indian secularism has spawned a range of interpretations – especially within the community of students. These range from - a) secularism as a concept is defunct; it is an import from the West; there is confusion about whether it means the states equidistance from, indifference to, or equal love for all religions; it represented official ideology rather than popular conviction; that the Congress Party had taken secularism with it to the grave; that secularism is pseudo secularism and religious nationalism is real secularism. See Ananya Vajpeyi, “Teaching Against Communalism”, *Economic and Political Weekly* (December 21, 2002) pp.5093–5097.

primary goal. Hindu nationalism can be seen at one level as a conservative backlash, among the relatively privileged, to resist the broader democratic transformation that has intensified political mobilization among the lower castes and minorities. Consequently, the process of questioning social hierarchies through transformatory educational agendas will not always be a peaceful one.

It is significant that the scale of violence targeting ethnic, religious and sectarian minorities has been on the increase in India. Between 1954 and 1994, there were around 15,000 communal riots in India, resulting in 13,300 casualties. In 1996 alone, 36,000 crimes were reported against scheduled castes and scheduled tribes.¹² Religion still continues to be the most combustible manifestation of conflict. Nearly 2,000 people died in the communal rioting that followed the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992, which touched major urban centers.¹³ The Gujarat carnage claimed hundreds of lives and left over 50,000 displaced.

The decade of the 1990s had seen a multiplicity of political conflicts around religion, caste and regional identity in India. Yet no single event in recent political history after the anti-Sikh riots of 1984 has shocked liberal sensibilities as the Gujarat carnage of 2002 has done. The demolition of the Babri Masjid in December 1992 and the violence in its aftermath had represented a defining moment in the assertion of processes that undermined both governance and the security of minority groups. It was a grim reminder of the fragility of official secularism. The horrors of Gujarat had completely exposed the violent underbelly of the politics of nation-building. There had been warning signals – the writing on the wall.¹⁴ Yet the tragedy remained that neither the Liberals nor the Left, were able to convert these crises into effective counter-platforms of transformative mobilization across society. The largely ‘reactive’ politics of secularists proved too weak to quell the momentum of the reactionary mobilization of both majority and minorities. The Gandhians, from whom a non-alienating mobilization could have emerged, ceded their space without much

¹² See Khadija Haq, *Human Development in South Asia* (Karachi: OUP, 1999), p. 113.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 45.

¹⁴ Examples of the communalization of the polity in the closing decades of the twentieth century are too numerous to be listed. The controversies surrounding the Shah Bano case, the debates around the Uniform Civil Code that couched an issue of women’s rights in a minority-majority framework; the Mumbai riots of 1992-3, the acquittal of Shiv Sena Chief Bal Thackeray who was implicated in inciting communal violence; the repeal of the U.P. Hindu Public Religious Institutions (misuse of funds) Act 1962 to appease the Vishwa Hindu Parishad; the selective invoking by the state of “hate speech” offences in violation of sections of the Indian Penal Code; the state-supported tirade against painter M.F. Hussain on grounds of hurting the religious sentiments of the Hindu community; the vandalization of mosques and churches in the aftermath of the Babri Masjid demolition; the targeting of the Christian minority community and the violence unleashed against priests and nuns on the issue of ‘forcible’ conversions; the riots in Gujarat in 1982, and the 106 communal incidents between 1987 and ’91 in Gujarat were, in many ways, precursors to the carnage that occurred in 2002 and the logic of its denouement.

resistance, opting for retreat, oblivion or self-imposed exile in the face of their lexicon being cynically appropriated by the proponents of the **Hindu Nationalism**.

'Reform' and Appropriation

The growing need to assert 'Indian culture and values' cannot be isolated from a larger global pattern. Cultural imperialism, accelerated by the communication revolution, has not triggered Talibanization processes in the Islamic world alone. The reductionist view of culture reflected in these processes also found resonance within fundamentalist groups in India.

The growth of Islamic madrasas with generous funds received from the Middle East and the reported funding of Christian missionary institutions by Western sources are provided as the justification for extreme moves by the Hindu Right to effect changes in curriculum and laws on conversion.¹⁵ The perception among sections of the majority elite, that successive governments have built vote-banks by appeasing minorities at the cost of the majority and "national security", made it difficult to contain their fundamentalist fringes. The targeting of the Christian minority community since the 1990s also reflects these misgivings. Christian Missionaries were seen as an added threat in that they were able to provide quality education throughout the country. The inability of many government schools to match their standards proved an irritant. In addition, these schools provided economic and educational opportunities to hitherto disenfranchised dalits and other groups, many of whom embraced Christianity in the process.¹⁶

The controversy over the Talibanization of textbook history stemmed from the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) edict of October 25, 2001, to delete certain sections from well-known prescribed textbooks. Coming in the wake of a growing culture of censorship, be it of Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* or Hussain's paintings or films and posters, it reflected a disconcerting trend of growing intolerance that is sought to be transmitted to the learning population and future citizens.

¹⁵ It is significant to mention here that the Gujarat Assembly passed the Gujarat Freedom of Religion Bill in March 2003, which punishes anyone engaged in conversions by "use of force or any fraudulent means", with up to three years imprisonment and a hefty fine. The courts too have not been immune to these influences. On October 2, 2002, an eleven member Bench of the Supreme Court pronounced a landmark judgment, overturning earlier practice where it interpreted Article 26 (a) of the Constitution that conferred the "right to establish and maintain institutions for religious and charitable purposes" in such a way as to include all kinds of educational institutions. With this, the right of non-minorities to establish and administer educational institutions is treated at par with that of minorities by the Supreme Court. See Annual Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, Katarina Tomasevski, submitted pursuant to Commission on Human Rights Resolution 2001/29 (January 7), 2002.

¹⁶ See Meenakshi Gopinath, "Trenches, Boundaries, Spaces", in P. R. Chari, (ed.), *Security and Governance in South Asia* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001), pp.56-58.

Neeladri Bhattacharya, lamenting the tainting of the rewriting of history in contemporary India, argues that for historians, the process of rewriting history is a creative act; it is the way history develops as a mode of knowledge.¹⁷ The changes in history writing have occurred through intense debates and disputations, conceptual ruptures and shifts in frames.¹⁸ Yet this process increasingly came under strain. The writing of history itself began to be mobilized for specific sectarian political projects. When political and community sentiments began to define how the past was to be represented and what could and could not be told, subserving interests inimical to coexistence, the nightmares of Gujarat were, as Bhattacharya points out, doomed to be re-enacted.¹⁹

In the school settings of post-colonial societies like India, teaching uses highly visible texts which carry the status of 'prescribed' texts. Though terms like "curriculum" and "syllabus" are in use, in practice, it is the prescribed textbook which acts as the de facto curriculum, and being the only reliable indicator of what is "expected" in the examination, its centrality to the classroom transaction has remained intact. Furthermore, content and impact analysis studies of textbooks have revealed that since they are 'non-optional' media, their influence strikes deeper and is more pervasive than other print media or even the electronic media. The textbook's status as canon, consequently, has more far-reaching effects on the shaping of consciousness than is acknowledged. It has been used very 'effectively' as a tool for religious instruction and to impact 'moral' and 'value' education in both the Muslim majority schools and the Vidya Bharati-run schools.²⁰

¹⁷ See Neeladri Bhattacharya's excellent analysis of the narratives and dominant trends in Indian Historiography in *Seminar*, New Delhi, No. 522 (February 2003), pp.12-18.

¹⁸ History in India began its modern career implicated in projects of colonial knowledge. Nationalist histories developed in opposition to imperial and communal frames. Nationalist historians largely operated with Western Modernist ideas of what constituted progress. In the years after independence, as professional history matured in India, the secular nationalist vision was articulated within a Left-liberal paradigm in opposition to imperial and communal conceptions of history. The question of nationhood remained central to post-colonial reflections although the terms of conceptualization changed in many ways. Historians of the 60s and 70s explored the ideas of colonialism within a framework of Marxist debates on modes of production. In opposition to nationalist valorization of the idea of Indian unity, historians of the 'Cambridge School' focused on local histories of communities and castes and saw the history of tensions between them. In the 80s, the 'Subaltern School' challenged the elitism of earlier histories and emphasized "history from below". By the 90s, there was growing disenchantment with Nationalist frames and the liberal consensus around the vision of Nehruvian India.

¹⁹ See Neeladri Bhattacharya, *op.cit.*, p.18.

²⁰ Vidya Bharati is the apex body in the educational network of the organizations propounding Hindu nationalism, broadly characterized as the Sangh Parivar. Today the Vidya Bharati runs 17,000 schools at the nursery, primary and secondary levels, and has over 19 lakh students under its tutelage. These schools are run in most states and employ 90,000 teachers. Of these, 6,000 are recognized and affiliated to the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) or respective State Boards. The Muslim majority school or the Urdu medium school is the Muslim equivalent of the Vidya Bharati schools in India. But these are not

So effectively, even outside of the NCERT system, within schools run by community organizations and political parties, children are being socialized into a sensibility that legitimizes sectarianism, obscurantism and a culture of militarism. This is done through textbooks prepared either by the Vidya Bharati Network or the Markazi Maktaba Islam. This activity of 'theologization' through textbooks or the 'core curriculum' reinforces stereotypes and jeopardizes future spaces of meaningful dialogue between religious communities. In the teaching of history, in particular, ancient myths are reconfigured to convey communal meanings and present political projects legitimated through mythic returns to an imagined glorious past. These other histories emerging from the shadows of their erstwhile submerged location are beginning to assert themselves with greater vehemence, claiming a right to be patronized by the state.

But have mainstream schools been effective in resisting this non-inclusive 'insider-outsider' bias? The evidence suggests that they have either been unwilling or unable to offer an alternative orientation to contain prejudice, and have not been effective in positioning themselves to teach **against** communalism. This counter-positioning is crucial to any process in which education can be linked to a rights-based perspective. It is now acknowledged (and mandated by the UN and other bodies) that the integration of the economic, social, cultural and political facets of education is facilitated by the indivisibility and interrelatedness of human rights. Such an integrated approach facilitates adapting education to key contemporary challenges, including the prevention of ethnic and religious violence.²¹

A study undertaken by **KHOJ**, a **secular education project** in Gujarat in 1999, detailed how, outside of the RSS-run Shishu Mandirs and Muslim Madrasas, textbooks prescribed by even 'secular' central and state education boards in the country communicate religious, caste and gender prejudice.²² Crucial **exclusions** are explored and analyzed through abstracts from state board texts, ICSE textbooks and college texts to highlight this alarming phenomenon. The silences and exclusions are particularly disturbing, since they allow Right-wing ideology to slip in through the interstices of the discourse, with insidious force.²³

part of any organizational network or system. They tend to mushroom sporadically in Muslim dominated areas. Their self-confessed ideology is one that carries forward the tradition of madrasas. Of a total of around 1,25,000 recognized secondary and higher secondary schools in India, no more than 6,200 are within the CBSE system.

²¹ See Annual Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, op.cit.

²² See Teesta Setalvad, "How Textbooks Teach Prejudice", *Communalism Combat* (October 1999), pp.1-10.

²³ Some examples cited in Setalvad's detailed analysis of the Gujarat State Board Social Studies Textbooks include: the depiction of ancient Indian culture as Hindu culture (Std V); Muslims, Christians and Parsis categorized as 'foreigners' (Std IX); silence on the role of the RSS in the murder of Gandhi (Std VIII) . A frighteningly uncritical account of Fascism & Nazism (Std VIII), the depiction of Hitler as lending dignity

The fact that children, and especially their access to education, were under assault during the Gujarat carnage is not pure coincidence. There were more than 50,000 affected children in camps alone in Gujarat since February 2002. There has been a systematic crackdown on the education of minority children and youth at all levels of the school system in Gujarat. This process, which had begun earlier, peaked in the period starting from February 28. Even as violence raged in the state, the language of the examination papers proved exceedingly problematic. In addition, a number of minority-area examination centers were shifted to majority areas, thereby causing many parents to fear for the basic safety of their children. The Supreme Court came down heavily on the state government and issued directives to remedy the situation. Apart from the most obvious economic, psychological and physical devastation, the educational setback to the children of Gujarat has impaired chances of intra- and inter-community healing and reconciliation for the future.

Identity and Pedagogy

The question of whether education in South Asia can become an effective vehicle for building peace between the communities and countries of our region has no easy answers. But some beginnings can be made. Since the **teaching of history** has been seriously implicated in the reinforcing of negative stereotypes that engender social conflicts, conscious interventions in this sphere are urgently required.

Scholar and educationist Krishna Kumar has shown, based on an extensive study of curricula in India and Pakistan, that the manner in which the freedom struggle is presented to children helps sustain the hostility between India and Pakistan. The teaching of history forces a perpetual quarrel with the past in both countries. In India, the narrative of freedom is structured around the tension between 'secular' and 'communal' forces. Since this tension is relevant in terms of defining India's national identity and its distinctiveness from Pakistan, it encourages a disapproving and suspicious view of Pakistan. On the other hand, school textbooks used in Pakistan present the political narrative to buttress the claim that the urge to create Pakistan arose out of certain irreconcilable differences between Hindus and Muslims. The conceptual ground on which this common perception of history is based is that the past is past – and it is fully known to us.²⁴ This 'memory-based' view of history allows ideological

and prestige to the German government (Std X), silence on Ambedkar's critique of caste hierarchy and his protest conversion to Buddhism, the unquestioning presentation of Hindu texts including *Manusmriti*, and the implicit justification of gender inequities.

²⁴ Kumar, op.cit.

indoctrination to become the purpose of discussing the past. These biases are also carried into inter-community perceptions within the country.

It is essential to engage with a pedagogy that is collaborative, not confrontationist or collusive. Exchanges between students and teachers to examine the roots of prejudice, primarily by acknowledging differences and accommodating rival perspectives through the additional use of biography, literature and journalism, could expand the scope of interpretation of existing historical narratives.

The application of analytical techniques and judgment is part of the curriculum in countries where a serious effort has been made over recent years to reform the teaching of history. For instance, the path-breaking work in Northern Ireland, where impressive initiatives have been made to integrate and enlist education in an overall strategy aimed at transforming the conflict, presents us with encouraging possibilities.²⁵

There have been similar innovative attempts in other parts of the world to meet the challenges of ethnic disaffection and conflict through education. Education for peace programs are being promoted by UNICEF and are reaching many thousands of children in war-scarred countries in Burundi, the Republic of Congo, El Salvador, Guatemala, the Honduras, Lebanon, Liberia, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Sudan, the former Yugoslavia and Sri Lanka. However, while the reach of these programs is substantial, the nature of the depth of their impact is less clear.²⁶

The case of apartheid South Africa suggests an example of how non-state actors can step in to galvanize forces for constructive change, and provide effective resistance to systems of oppression. Here, Roman Catholic schools admitted black pupils, thereby defying the government's prohibition on integrated education. Also, a sensitive handling of linguistic issues in the curriculum can

²⁵ In 1981, the first integrated school, for both Catholic and Protestant children, was opened in Northern Ireland and since then, forty-five integrated schools have come into existence through community initiative. Significant work has also been undertaken to ensure that even within segregated schools, pupils have the opportunity to address existing cultural and political divisions. By the early 1990s, programs within schools were designed to increase understanding among young people, eg. The "Cultural Heritage" and "Education for Mutual Understanding" programs were an obligatory part of the curriculum for every child. Thanks to the efforts of educationists and parents drawn from all sides, an agreed history curriculum was devised in Northern Ireland.

²⁶ Kenneth D Bush and Diana Saltarelli, (Eds.), *The Two Faces of Education in Ethnic Conflict*, (Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Insight, August 2000).

often be crucial to build and maintain peaceful relations within and between different ethnic groups.²⁷

The early 'secular', modernist preoccupations with nation-building in India had very consciously kept discussions on religion outside the parameters of school and university curricula. The refusal of the Left and 'progressive' groups to acknowledge how pervasive issues of faith can be in the South Asian context further reinforced a somewhat myopic approach to 'coexistence'. Even Gandhi was designated (till quite recently) by the Left broadly as a 'bourgeois thinker', whose contributions to the national movement were explored through the lens of class-based analysis. The genius of Gandhi, whose transformatory appeal lay in the extraordinary manner in which he could communicate iconoclastic ideas through the use of a religious idiom that resonated with ordinary people in novel ways, was largely ignored. The liberal intelligentsia remained impervious to the fact that in India, it is not possible to simply wish away religion in any mobilization for social and political transformation. This ambivalence inhibited the exploration of creative mechanisms to harness its potential and to contain its propensity to unleash conflict and discord.

In multi-cultural societies, the question of faith is infinitely more complex than that which is reflected in the dichotomy of the 'secularism' versus 'fundamentalism' debate in India. There is an inherent danger in treating faith as a totalizing category. Faith is always in the process of being defined within the specificities of particular contexts. What makes this a difficult arena is that in South Asia, faith is a reality that touches millions of people in incomprehensible, sometimes violent, ways. The educational enterprise cannot remain immune to its resonances.

More effort is needed to create a frame of reference in which the ambivalences of faith can be accommodated. This can materialize only through the process of confronting specific religious beliefs, customs and taboos that continue to have significance for particular communities. In searching for new languages of faith, it is important to stress their interventionist possibilities. If by 'secular' we mean a total avoidance of religious matters, secular weapons may not be enough. Ways have to be found to enrich the secular and ground it within the specificities of our cultural contexts.²⁸ There is a need to distinguish between faith and its

²⁷ In Senegal, for example, where there are fifteen different linguistic groups and where Islamic and Christian populations have coexisted peacefully, 'ethnic peace' has been attributed, in large part, to an imaginative language policy for schools, where both French and other local languages were enlisted to develop an inclusive ethos (Kenneth D Bush and Diana Saltarelli 2000). The School of Peace, established in 1979 in Jaffa by the Neve Shalom / Wahat al Salam Cooperative village of Jews and Palestinian Arabs of Israeli citizenship, is a bilingual, bicultural, binational elementary school coordinated jointly by a professional team of Jewish and Arab educators.

²⁸ Rustom Barucha, *The Question of Faith*, (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1993), p.94.

perversion, and discuss those critical junctures when religion becomes something politically volatile. Education about the boundaries of religion is crucial to enhance our vigilance of its political misuse.

Consequently, for a secular theology to strike roots in India, there would have to be an understanding that could be adapted within the multi-religious contexts of faith.²⁹ As Ashish Nandy has pointed out, one can only hope that the state systems in South Asia may learn something about religious tolerance from everyday Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and Sikhism, rather than wish that ordinary Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and Sikhs will learn tolerance from various theories of statecraft.³⁰

The challenge for education is to engage in a sensitive and creative balance, especially since such an initiative could, through unimaginative approaches, easily degenerate into either reinforcing religiosity and orthodoxy or domesticating the pedagogy into the predicable strait jackets of unidimensional 'secular' rhetoric. Yet this is an engagement – difficult though it is – that Indian education can ignore today only at its peril. **Teaching against communalism**³¹ can be integral to envisioning how educational processes and institutions could be used to analyze communalism, and through such a process, persuade young citizens to turn away from it.

Ethnicity, Conflict and Education

The theory that nation-building would develop modern homogenous cultures centered on primary affinity to the nation-state rather than on ethnically based loyalties has proved illusory. Ethnicity has, in many instances, proved to be a positive integrative force in contemporary societies. Yet violent internal conflict between ethnic communities has surfaced where state attempts at building an overriding 'national identity' have collided with practices enabling the **democratic** celebration of pluralism or **diversity**. Research conducted by the Stockholm Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) suggests that throughout the 1990s, there were about thirty active major armed conflicts, only one of which was inter-state. The rest took place **within** states, between factions split along ethnic, religious or cultural lines. Education has not been immune to these influences. Because of its propensity to alienate groups and create antagonism between

²⁹ It is pertinent to note that no university of national repute in India offers the comparative study of religions as a subject.

³⁰ Ashish Nandy, "The Politics of Secularism and Recovery of Religious Tolerance", *Alternatives* XIII, 1988.

³¹ For an excellent exposition of the challenges and requirements to make this effective see Ananya Vajpeyi, op.cit.

them, in many conflicts around the world, education is part of the problem, not the solution.

A UNICEF study has examined, through specific examples, the role of education in situations of identity-based conflict, highlighting the following 'peace-destroying' or 'conflict-maintaining' factors:

- Inequity in education as a means of creating or preserving positions of privilege
- Education as a weapon in cultural repression
- Denial of education as a weapon of war
- Education as a means of manipulating history for political purposes
- Education serving to diminish self-worth and encourage hate
- Segregated education as a means of ensuring inequality, inferiority and stereotypes
- The role of textbooks in impoverishing the imagination of learners and inhibiting them from dealing constructively with conflict³²

Examples of these processes abound, and a correlation can be found between educational practices and conflicts in societies. The fourteen-year long conflict in Kashmir has adversely affected educational opportunities for young Muslims in the valley, and today, the question of access to quality education for the children of Hindu refugees in the camps in Jammu raises serious questions about the efficacy of 'rehabilitation' policies and programs. There are many additional examples of such direct correlation between education – its use, misuse or abuse – and conflict throughout the world.³³

Equity and Access: Continuing Concerns

Education in India continues to be riddled with several unresolved issues of equity and access, making it prone to cleavages that become vulnerable to manipulation by communal ideologies. People who take to **direct violence** appear to address the perceived injustice of what Galtung calls **structural**

³² See Kenneth D. Bush and Diana Sattarelli, (Eds.), op. cit., p. 33.

³³ In the conflicts between Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo, the Serbian government adopted a policy of assimilation, eliminating teaching programs in the Albanian language and introducing a unified curriculum and standardized textbooks. The ethnic cleansing undertaken by the Serbian military forces in 1999, consequently, cannot be seen as a spontaneous event. Again, the Arabization of schools in Sudan from 1964 onwards, resulted in the total isolation of the southern intelligentsia, along with the expulsion of foreign missionaries. Similar examples can be cited in the case of Rwanda, where Christian missionary schools, from the late 1800s onwards, openly favored the Tutsi minority and actively discriminated against the Hutus. 'Special Schools' were set up to educate Tutsis as future leaders of the country, as part of state policy. Textbooks of the German and Belgian colonial periods also linked the physical differences between the two to intellectual capabilities, according to prevailing racial prejudices.

violence, hoping to achieve systemic changes in the underlying economic, cultural, social and political structures that are perceived to detrimentally affect their lives. It is in this sense that education, too, becomes a **contested terrain**.

Amartya Sen sees education as holding many keys to the enhancement of human freedom. It increases the substantive freedom enjoyed by people through individual enhancement and distributional change, which can have many far-reaching social effects. If its immediate and direct purpose, as he sees it, is to make people “better informed, more able, more skilled more enlightened and broaden their thinking horizons,”³⁴ then Indian education has, by and large, with the exception of few shining examples, fallen short of this goal.

While primary school enrolment may have increased, it is still far from adequate, and below the rates in South Asian countries like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. More than half a century ago, the Indian Constitution promised to ensure universal primary education up to the age of fourteen years. Today, even with elementary education having been declared a fundamental right, more than seventy million children in the age group of six to fourteen years are either school drop-outs or have never been enrolled in a school at all. Many more children are formally enrolled, but barely attend classes. The bulk of primary schools in the country suffer from huge shortages in the most basic resources: teachers, textbooks, black-boards, buildings and so on.

Class and caste factors keep large numbers outside the ambit of opportunity. Poverty and the attendant pervasiveness of child labor, especially in the states of the North, add to illiteracy and disempowerment. Higher education faces even greater threats on account of decline in state funding, pressures from processes of globalization, recurrent strikes and political interference. Experiments at linking education with the world of work has led to a ghettoization of the ‘vocational stream’, which is being increasingly perceived as the repository of the ‘less meritorious’ or ‘less advantaged’ sections of the student population. Gender inequities abound, both in terms of access and retention of girl students in the school system. In addition, educational material and textbooks reinforce gender stereotypes and the sexual division of labor.³⁵ Government policies to mainstream protective discrimination to provide access to disadvantaged castes

³⁴ Amartya Sen, “*Education in Kerala’s Development: Towards a New Agenda*”, Institute of Social Sciences, (New Delhi, 2001), pp.3-6.

³⁵ Recent findings suggest that the social benefits from investing in female education are far greater than those from investing in male education, and that female literacy has a strong inverse correlation to average total fertility rate, public health etc. The benefits are greater than from other public interventions such as family planning services, increasing the number of physicians etc. Also, increases in women’s education generally lead to increases in their labor force participation as well as their earnings (see Jean Dreze & Amartya Sen ed, *Indian Development: Selected Regional Perspectives* (OUP, 1997).

and tribes continue to be met with suspicion and hostility. The recent debate surrounding reservations have brought these cleavages into sharp focus.

India is already among the worst performing nations in terms of the share of GDP devolved to public spending on education (In 2002-03 it was 3.1% as compared to international norms of 6% and as much as 12% to 15% in some countries of East Asia). It is significant that where there had been a steady increase in the percentage of allocation between 1950 and 1994, there has been a decline since then.

Fifty-eight years after independence, the average adult literacy in India is 75.3% for males and 53.7% for females (according to the 2001 Census). The primary school enrolment ratio is 110 boys: 90 girls, and the percentage of drop-outs before the fifth grade is 38%. India has 35.2% of its population aged fifteen years and above as illiterates.

The influential PROBE (Public Report on Basic Education in India) report of 1999 on elementary education brought the inequities of the basic education system into the public space for the first time, to mobilize opinion to make the Right to Education a fundamental right in India.³⁶ The PROBE findings systematically exposed several myths that had gained currency either through state complicity or silence. It highlighted that the poor in India, contrary to public perception, attached a great deal of importance to children's education and were concerned about the quality of education. There was state inertia and blatant neglect of disadvantaged communities and regions. The number of illiterates actually rose from 350 million in 1981 to 371 million in 1991 – the proportion of illiterates in the 15-19 age group (34%) is six times higher than that of China.

While elementary education is free in terms of admission fees in the government school system, the cash costs of education discourage families from sending children to school (the cost could be as high as 318 rupees, on an average, per child in a government primary school, which, for an agricultural laborer, is a prohibitive cost). Though there has been progress in the provision of schooling facilities, there exist not just physical distances, but 'social' and class distances that have to be overcome. Children often internalize class and caste distinctions in the classroom, and a middle class bias is generally visible in the transacting of the curriculum. Education is transmitted as an unimaginative assemblage of facts in an alienating and intimidating pedagogical style.

The adoption of the 86th Constitution Amendment Act, 2002 by the Parliament makes the **fundamental right to education** a guaranteed right. The amendment

³⁶ See *Public Report on Basic Education in India*, (New Delhi: OUP, 1999).

was inserted as Article 21A, under the Right to Life and Personal Liberty. Its origins lie in a Supreme Court judgment delivered in 1993, when, in *J.P. Unnikrishnan Vs the State of Andhra Pradesh*, a five-member Bench laid down that the right to education was a fundamental right that flowed from the Right to Life. The 86th Amendment enables any citizen to seek the enforcement of the right to education by way of resort to writ jurisdiction under Articles 32 and 226 of the Constitution. While it partially fulfils the mandate of the convention on the Rights of the Child (adopted by the UN in 1989), it has invited some criticism for having restricted the right to children between six and fourteen years of age. Moreover, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Bill, 2009, the legislation envisaged to put into effect free and compulsory education for children in the delineated age-group, awaits President's assent.

One of the greatest challenges to the future of education in India comes from the growing chasm between the two worlds that the school-going population inhabits: that of privilege and that of deprivation. The reinforcing of attitudes of arrogance at one end and attitudes of subservience at the other, along with the division of the school-goers along perceptible class lines, continues to have a demoralizing impact on educators and learners alike. The general divide between children of state-run schools and the children of English-medium schools applies to all regions of India, and serves as the continuum for colonial mindsets. The two groups live in two different cultural worlds with their own specific zones of knowledge and ignorance. The academic and other components of the culture of English-medium schools engenders both ignorance and disdain for local cultures, and affiliates its inhabitants culturally and emotionally to the metropolitan centers of Western affluence and capitalism.

In its attempt to coalesce the concerns of human development and human rights, the Amendment sees "capability rights" – to use Amartya Sen's conceptualization – as a substantive content of goal rights. The Right to Education is to be viewed as a proxy for the more fundamental rights to the capabilities that derive from access to education, namely of being free from ignorance and to live with dignity. It is here that its scope must be extended to include the right to an environment free of prejudice, respectful of difference and ensuring of equity, access and quality. This will be its ultimate litmus test – and not just the goal of achieving literacy, which, in India, has officially been benchmarked as the ability to write one's name. However, set against the backdrop of raging debates over prejudices in curricula and teaching methodologies, whether the operationalization of this fundamental right would ensure equity and respect for difference remains an open question.

The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) of 1988 had "equality of education and opportunity" as its first concern. The document of 2000, which came in for

widespread criticism, had “education for a cohesive society” as its primary focus. Though the draft made loud and repeated noises about “national identity” and the “duties of citizens”, it did not demand the provision of essential facilities for quality learning as a way to ensure equality. What was most problematic about the document was its call for a “redefinition” of the concept of secularism – a fundamental precept of the Indian Constitution. The critical concerns related to how the “equal understanding and equal respect for all religions” would actually translate within the classroom situation, given the social realities of India today. Equal respect for all human beings irrespective of their religions cannot be conflated into “equal respect for all religions” – especially when dogma and indoctrination can quite easily and insidiously creep into curriculum transaction. Although there were several references to Gandhi’s educational ideals, there was a marked lack of appreciation for the congruence between the rhythms of learning and living and the “granite reality” of the context of the learner, for as it has been shown, “where living is in crisis, learning becomes inaccessible”.³⁷

Clearly then, the National Curriculum Framework 2005 attempts to redress the distortions and the partisanship evident in the 2000 framework. The larger and possible goal of defining community-based education, while emphasizing the Gandhian ideal of developing and retaining local knowledge, has been highlighted in the discourse. Advocating a partnership between school and community, the document perceives the process of social transformation to be complex, multi-layered and democratic.³⁸ It acknowledges that local knowledge traditions may be “different from the way school knowledge approaches particular subjects”, and encourages comparative and contextual study. It is clear that to walk the tightrope of providing education which is relevant to the immediate context of children, and at the same time, provide them with ‘standard’ knowledge, is no mean task, and calls for a pedagogy that is imaginative and discerning.

The curricular and pedagogic concerns in NCF 2005 are informed by respect for pluralism, equality of rights and gender justice. The need to promote a culture of peace through the curriculum finds its first official articulation in this document. Today, there is a considerable body of research that shows that the exclusion of minority cultures from schools adversely affects the sense of self, identity and motivation for learning, and that historical deprivation, isolation and exploitation may continue to be relevant to the educational experiences of the socially and economically marginalized communities, who are still portrayed largely in subservient roles, even in some textbooks.

³⁷ Mohammad Talib, “The Granite Reading of a Rainbow” in *Seminar* Vol 493 (September 2000), pp.25-29.

³⁸ See Nivedita Menon, “To Accommodate the Curious Mind”, *The Telegraph* (August 25, 2005).

As guidelines for building a curriculum, these are sound recommendations, but what is pertinent is how these are operationalized in the light of logistical, infrastructural and political complexities. The real challenge lies in bringing into effect the crucial balance between equity, access and quality, the imperatives of 'education for all' and the 'maintenance of standards'.

This is possible only when the political underpinnings of the prevalent policy framework are subjected to rigorous debate and constructive change. An appreciation of diversity that marks 'being, knowing and learning' in India is a first important step to furthering coexistence.

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