

Education and Modernity

Some Sociological Perspectives

Amman Madan

Sociology of Education -1



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Education and Modernity: Some Sociological Perspectives

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PREFACE

Education is expected to respond to its times. In a society with increasing hatred between communities, we turn to education as one process which can soothe bruised egos and foster love for humanity. In a time when old occupations are fast disappearing or no longer appear attractive, we expect education to show a path to new ones. When the children of farmers move to cities, they may find that the culture and values they were familiar with no longer seem to be of any help to them, and we turn again to education to help them learn the newer ways. There are many deep dilemmas that people face today. Increasingly, we find advertisements and consumerism telling us that the meaning of life comes from a new mobile phone or the latest trend in clothes. The desire to buy them motivates people to seek new jobs, and even friendships are formed around a shared taste in consumer goods. Education is called upon to take a stand on these new trends as well.

This little book explores some of the basic changes happening in our times and the questions they pose for education. Many of the changes lead to an intense questioning of the older ways. Many changes may also lead to new problems. This book may

help in understanding these changes better. It aims mainly to help the reader grasp some of the key changes shaping this country and the world. These are discussed with reference to education and how they have influenced it, and also the new challenges that they pose for education in India and other countries. The three broad areas the book deals with are: (i) the emergence of complex societies in today's world, (ii) the impact of capitalism and commodified exchange on society and education, and (iii) the growing rationalisation and bureaucratisation of society and education. Many social scientists consider these the three pillars of a very important global trend, which is called the growth and expansion of modernity. A number of today's debates actually rage around whether these are good or bad. Or whether they are essentially beneficial but need to be done in a very different way. The stands we take regarding these three themes deeply affect how we see education and what to do in it. Getting a better understanding of them therefore affects our actions and strategies in almost every aspect of school and university education, and actually in the rest of contemporary social life too.

While trying to introduce these basic questions of our times, this book tries not to force answers or push a single ideologically driven stance. Instead, it tries to indicate some of the different kinds of solutions which people have sought. Undoubtedly, I have my own stands and they continue to evolve and change. I have tried not to let them dominate these pages. Perhaps an emphasis on the issues and their dynamics rather than on proposed solutions will be of more use to the reader. A grasp of the changes and their dilemmas may better help readers think and find their own directions and their own answers to some of the pressing issues of our times. Accordingly, I have tried not to stress too much on finding just the single best solution to every problem. To the reader who is used to hearing people say that they have just the answer to everything, this may appear a

disconcerting style of writing. But I feel that presenting multiple ways of seeing the world may be of more help in the long run.

This book is the first of a series that will introduce how sociology and social anthropology look at education and its dilemmas in today's times to readers who have never studied these disciplines before. Or perhaps who studied them only as subjects to pass exams and not as sources of insight and guidance for everyday life. This particular book initiates this series by talking about the pillars of modernity and the opposition to them. But this is just the beginning, sociology and social anthropology have much more to offer to educationists. If the book sparks in the reader a desire to read more of what various social scientists have had to say about education in our times, then perhaps this will have been worth the effort. It is not claimed here that social science provides all answers to everything under the sun. However, the reader may well find that using the theories and methods of social science to investigate educational concerns throws light on some of their very important dimensions.

The pages that follow are intended to be easy to read. The ideas they contain, of course, are not all that easy. Indeed, some of them will challenge many commonly held beliefs and perspectives and may call for thought and a fresh look at the world around us. To keep things simple very few references have been given within the text. At the end of every chapter a small number of further readings have been suggested. There is voluminous research and writing on the themes of every chapter and the reader is encouraged to look for more detailed expositions of the themes, eventually. Here, many complex issues have been presented in a simple and hopefully clear manner. This unavoidably means that many aspects have been skipped or touched only in passing. If this book were to fall into the hands of experts in this area they would no doubt feel that many important things are missing in it.

However, the purpose has been to only provide an introduction, not a complete and full study. It is hoped that this will serve to invite the reader to explore sociology and anthropology of education at greater length.

This book is about things which I have been talking about for many years with participants of workshops at Digantar and with my students at IIT Kanpur, TISS Mumbai and Azim Premji University. I am grateful to all of them for continually challenging me and for helping me see the world from their eyes as well. It was N Venu who first persuaded me to seriously consider writing a book like this, which non-sociologists could read. A lot of the material here appeared initially in Hindi as a series of articles in *Shiksha Vimarsh*, the periodical published by Digantar from Jaipur. The invitation to write for it by the then editor Vishwambhar Vyas forced me to get down to work. Eklavya's publications now offer a way of conveying these writings to a wider audience. Advice from the Eklavya editorial team and its reviewers has helped me to rewrite the original articles and try to make them more accessible and well -rounded. I am particularly grateful to CN Subramaniam and Lokesh Malti Prakash for this. Ishita Debnath Biswas has given the book an elegant design and Abira Bandyopadhyay's passionate illustrations have made many of the its ideas come to vivid pictorial life. I am grateful to Alex M George for his ideas and suggestions on the illustrations.

Amman

Bengaluru, 18th November 2018

Introduction to the Sociology of Education

1

It was an early winter morning, misty and cold. I was sitting with a group of farmers wrapped in shawls, sipping hot tea. I was trying to speak about my interest in understanding what school meant to them, why they sent their children to study in schools. One farmer contemptuously said “Education! It is worthless, what can it do for us. Here, look at my son,” he gestured towards an embarrassed lanky young man. “Passing class tenth has made him useless. He thinks he is too good for the village now. Neither can he work in the fields any more and nor can he get a job in the town. What does such an education mean to us!”

Developing countries like India are changing very rapidly. New ways of life are emerging which need to be understood, even if we do not always embrace them. We seem to be faced with fresh and difficult questions at every turn. We ask ourselves whether we should retain older traditions and, if so, which ones to retain and which ones to discard. School and college education do not teach us the old culture of our families and actually may lead us into careers and values quite different from those of our

forefathers. On the other hand, there is a sense of unease about the kind of values which education imparts and the tensions it creates with the older ways. There is taking place a commercialisation of society at large which appears to be weakening the bonds of family and community. The better paying jobs often entail moving to live far away from the family. There is a common complaint that young people are becoming rash and disrespectful. They are said to spend so much time on their mobile phones that they have no time for the family. Most students are told to aim towards a technical and professional education. It is said that that is where the jobs are. At the same time, the promise of professional jobs is fulfilled for only a small number of them. Agriculture stagnates in most of India and education is seen as a way of escaping it. Meanwhile, subjects like philosophy and the arts, which are supposed to make people more sensitive and thoughtful, languish for want of takers. Education is thus connected with many of the basic dilemmas of developing countries. Women are saying that they want to study and take up jobs and not just become dutiful wives and mothers. Many communities are demanding more education than they ever had in the past, but there are just not enough jobs to go around.

The Importance of a Sociological Perspective

The way most people talk about education, it appears that education is concerned mainly with psychological matters. Discussions tend to be about what is happening within the classroom or in the family. Efforts to improve education tend to focus on how to do better teaching, how to write a more interesting textbook and have more engaging classroom activities and so on. I will try to suggest here that all of these and many more educational issues are deeply affected by the character of society and the changes taking place in it. A small scale unchanging society, for instance, will have several educational goals that



Social context of schooling

are different from those of a society that is very large and complicated, and that is changing rapidly. As the anthropologist Margaret Mead pointed out¹, in an unchanging society the young need to learn only what the old already know. Whereas in a fast-changing society that is no longer enough and often the old may benefit by learning from the young. The purpose and aims of education are closely connected to the character of a society and change with that character.

The sociological perspective is different from an individual or a biological one. Perhaps that is what gives it its significance. To take an example, a student who tops the board exam may believe that it is because of her hard work and dedication, which are personal, individual characteristics. She may also say she did well because she loves her studies and finds them fascinating. However, sociologists may add some explanations here that may not have occurred to her. They may point out that she comes

from a family and a social background where school education is highly valued. Such families support the education of girls and not just of boys alone. It would have been her family which made it possible for her to go to a school that taught well. They may have kept her away from housework and the traditional activities of a girl, urging her to focus all her energies on studies instead. Why was her family like this and not like many other families in India? Sociologists trace that to where her family may have been located and to a variety of sociological processes like the class which her family belongs to, the culture of her caste and her religion, the examples around her of women who have followed careers other than that of home-makers, the discussions and debates which have taken place over what it means to be a woman in her school and community and so on.



Social background and educational achievement

Our board topper's achievement does rest on a biological foundation in the sense that she is cognitively competent and not malnourished or mentally disabled. But whether her biological capacities get developed or not depend to a great degree on the social environment in which she grows up and on the hard work and initiative she herself puts in. The sociological aspects of her life and her achievements need to be paid special attention to, separately from her individual and biological characteristics.

Sociologists point out that the widespread belief that educational achievements and learning are personal, individual affairs is incomplete. There is a very considerable role that society also plays in it. In 2009-10, only about 17 percent of young Indians of college-going age were actually enrolled in



Relation between society, individual and biology

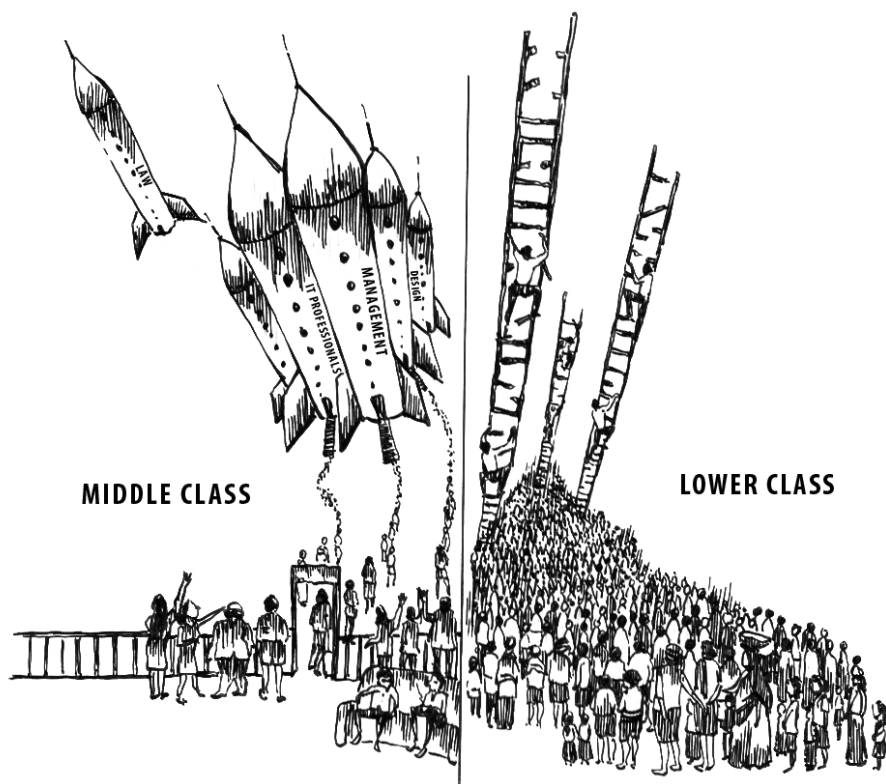
any kind of education after higher secondary. This means that less than one out of five Indians got a higher education. Most of the rest did not miss out on it because they made a purely personal choice not to go to college or because they did not have the biological brainpower to deal with it. The cause was not primarily individual or biological. Instead, they did not go to college largely because their families could not support them to complete their schooling or their higher education, or did not see any viable careers in their local environment from the kind of schooling and college education that was available to them. Or in case of girls, because it was thought that they don't need too much education and so on. These are not purely personal choices, but are shaped by the way different parts of the country has developed and by the history of different communities and classes. The chance that a child is born in an English-speaking family in a city with large commercial and government institutions almost guarantees college education for that child. Whereas, the child of an agricultural labourer may have to work extra hard and show exceptional commitment to be able to enter even an ordinary college.

The sociological perspective has helped us in getting better answers to many kinds of questions. However, it does not give complete answers to the more important questions like, 'what should be the ultimate goal of education in my society', because these usually need answers from various sources, including philosophy and psychology, and not just sociology alone. However, sociology has often contributed important missing parts to the jigsaw puzzle of many such questions. Some important questions that it has helped us answer include:

- *Who does better in school?* Every school classroom has some children who learn faster and some who learn slower. It is commonly said that fast learners are brighter than the

rest. Sociology disputes this. It is pointed out that when a 'slow learner' moves into another kind of school where she gets special attention and support, she usually begins to learn at a much faster rate. Doing better or worse at school seems to be connected with one's social environment, the kind of social group one comes from and also the kind of school environment one gets.

- *Who gets resources and support for education and who does not?* In today's India most children go to schools where either little teaching takes place or it is done in a mechanical and inept fashion. This is often said to be part and parcel of school life. But we also see that many developed countries have gone far ahead in providing a good education to most if not all their



Social class and access to higher education

children. Getting a competent education is not just the result of a chance of getting a good teacher, but is also shaped by a variety of social processes, including political movements in a country, economic developments and social demands.

- *What kind of education does a society want?* In today's India many students are told that only engineering and medicine are worthwhile careers. However, a society which does not have poets or statesmen or philosophers will start running into very serious problems. Each of these latter careers also calls for specialised training. Further, a complex society with many communities living together also requires all of its citizens to have a cultural education which will permit them to be cooperative and live with each other. Across most of human history, education has meant cultural rather than technical learning. It is in certain social and historical conditions that this emphasis has been reversed and the significance of this reversal is still being debated. The aims of education seem connected to history and to the structure of a society rather than being eternal and fixed. Understanding that particular society and the different pulls and tugs in it is essential for formulating viable goals for its education.

I hope that the following chapters will add to such examples of insights that the sociological perspective can give into education.

Defining Sociology

Definitions are often of little use. They are so short and terse that they don't really help us much. It's like saying the film *Sholey* is about catching a dacoit. Those who have seen it won't be satisfied with this description and those who haven't seen it won't learn much about the movie from it either. Yet, it is good to try to describe at the outset what the sociological perspective is. Even though, like watching *Sholey*, many more and interesting things will get added to the basic definition as we go along.

Basic to the sociological perspective. It is understanding people not with reference to their individual self or biological body alone, but with reference to their human environment. So, we try to understand what happens in education, for instance, by asking how it is influenced by different kinds of families, by changing economic conditions, by communal hatred, by changing political identities, by people's ideas about how to motivate other people and so on. At the core of the sociological perspective is the idea that individuals live not in isolation but within a certain kind of social structure, which deeply influences their life in every possible way. However, it is not that we are puppets, whose strings are being pulled by society. We have the capacity to think, reflect and choose. We may decide to be patient and caring in our responses or we may choose to let go and become angry. These choices affect how we act in a particular social context. We may even get together to form associations or parties that change that social structure and context. However, what we choose is deeply influenced by the previous exposure we have had, which is influenced by the place we are at within the social structure. As Karl Marx once said², we make our own history, but not in the circumstances of our choice. Studying in an over-crowded classroom, with a teacher who has never been exposed to a good teacher-education institute, makes it more difficult for me to get excited about learning maths. Sociology is thus the study of the complicated interaction between individuals and social structures.

In a way, people have always been aware of society and its importance for what we do. When the *Arthashastra* emphasised that the happiness of the people was important for making a kingdom stable, it was an awareness of social structure. It was an awareness of the relationship between leaders and their people and the power of the symbols and rituals that they were the centre of. The sociological perspective though, is a greater development and refinement of that early and basic awareness. It

will study the people to ask what exactly does happiness mean to them. And how much unhappiness will they tolerate before they try to topple the government? Further, it will also ask whether a kingship is the only viable form of government and what are the characteristics of other kinds of societies and their government and so on. Sociology involves a systematic study of different kinds of societies and not just an intuitive discussion of them.

Sociology and Common Sense

One reason why sociology is in demand and why people look to it for insights is that life is becoming more and more complicated. My own experience is usually from my neighbourhood, and my family and friends. That does not go beyond a few hundred people at the most. Many things that influence my life come from sources that are far removed from my experience. For instance, it happened in 2008 that some American home loan companies and banks got too greedy and triggered a collapse in the American financial system. The shocks of that collapse quickly spread around the world and many people lost their businesses and jobs, including my friend Salim in Bengaluru who found himself sitting at home without any income. It was a tough time for him and it is to his credit that he somehow managed to stay out of a depression. But his being unemployed was largely not his own fault. These were larger processes that were influencing his life.

If we take a view from our own little bubble of experience, we would blame Salim for having lost his job. Only when we begin to pay attention to the larger scenario are we able to see a more real picture of what had happened. After all, the drama of Salim's life was only one small scene in the that larger theatre.

Similarly, the difficulty which students from rural areas face in making an entry into urban schools can be understood differently if one takes a sociological perspective. From the point of view

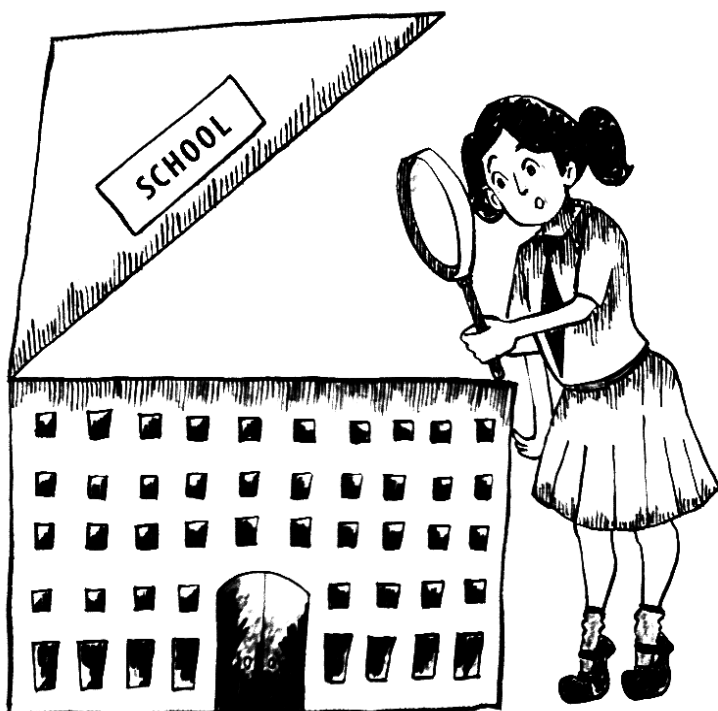
of teachers in the schools they come to, it may appear that these students do not understand what is being taught or they just seem disinterested. Sociologists however point to the fact that in Indian schools the syllabus, textbooks, examinations and teachers are all focused on getting white-collar jobs in cities. This makes the schools most comfortable for those students who come from families that are already in such jobs, and makes them alienating and strange for students from other social backgrounds. This realization changes the way we look at the problems being faced by students from rural backgrounds. It is not possible to blame them alone for what is a larger problem of a social system.

Our common sense understanding of many things is changed by studying sociology. This is because our common sense draws from the familiar and what we get to know through sources like the media. However, sociology seeks to draw upon the basic approach of science and tries to deliberately do a systematic study of what it seeks to understand. It is self-conscious about the methods it uses and evidence plays a very important role in the understanding it develops.

For instance, it is often said that Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) students are treated with hostility in the IITs. S Srinivasa Rao wanted to check whether this was true and if so, how this took place. He studied an IIT in 2005-6, interviewing students, faculty members and staff.³ Through these interviews and through personal observations, Rao outlined certain processes that led to labels being applied to SC and ST students. These led to discriminatory behaviour from at least some individuals. For instance, some SC and ST students who did not clear the IIT-JEE were given the option of joining a Preparatory Course (PC) for one year. That title 'PC' became a term of mockery in the IIT and seriously affected the way students thought about themselves and their relationships with others. As one student said to Rao:

It was our Physics class and we were meeting the teacher for the first time. After the lecture, the teacher called for clarification of doubts, if any, and I asked a question. Then the teacher instead of answering it straight, he asked me another question in return, “You don't know even this? Are you a PC student?” I felt humiliated and insulted. Imagine, that was my first class and what kind of image would I have before my fellow classmates. That time onwards, I started hating his class and even physics. Now I don't want to be an engineer. I will go into some other programme. (Rao, 2013: 210)

Rao has several more things to say about the IIT but for the present it is sufficient to note his approach. He studied theoretical works that helped him understand the impact of labelling on students. He did not draw conclusions just from the books or from his own previous understanding, but went out to systematically study students and teachers in an actual educational institution.



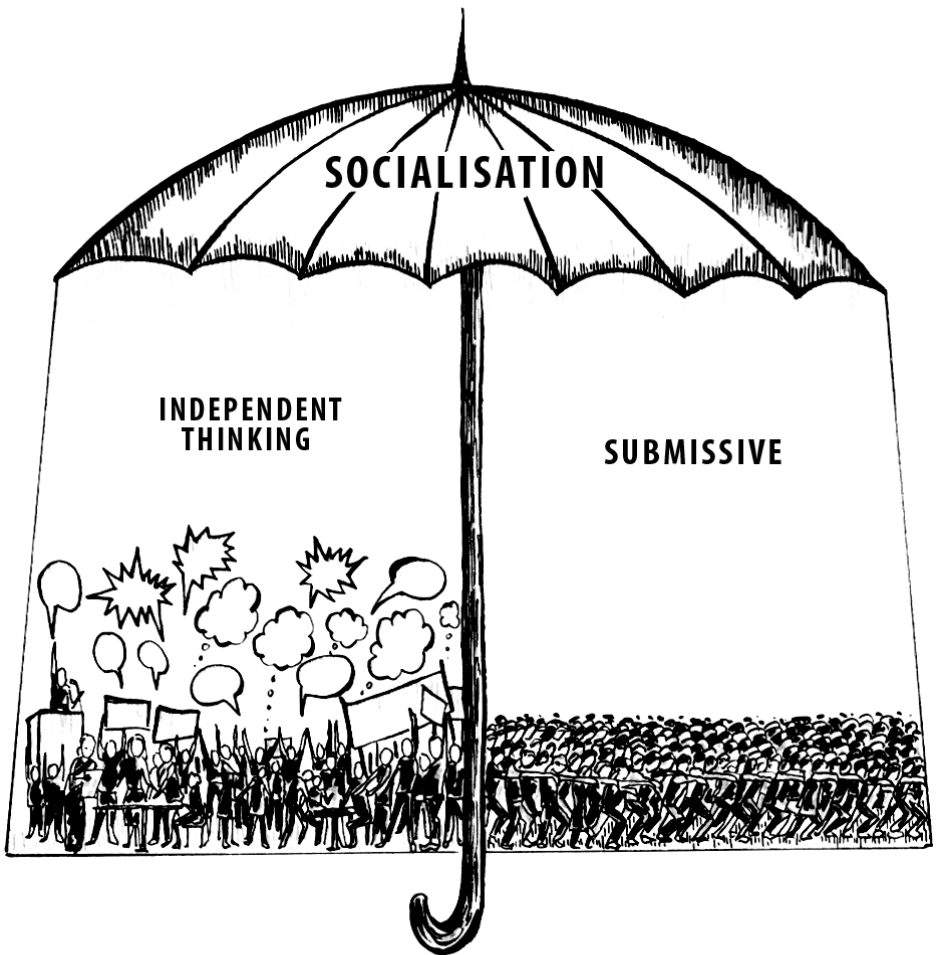
Sociology looks for evidence

This emphasis on studying reality as well as on developing concepts and theories regarding it is typical of sociology. In this it is deeply influenced by the scientific tradition which relies on studying reality and having ways to check that what we think (ie, our theory) actually corresponds to what is happening in the world. At the same time, it is not a science in the way, say, physics is. So, it does not have laws like those spelt out by Newton from which the trajectory of a thrown stone can be predicted. Understanding how humans feel and the role society plays in that seems to be too complicated a matter for easy predictions. Most of all because we can reflect upon and change our directions.

Socialization: Becoming What We Are

A basic principle in sociology is that people are born more or less like a blank slate and their personality, beliefs and achievements are actually built through interaction with other people around them. The human child is born so helpless that she would not survive beyond a few days if there were no other humans – ie, society – to take care of her. The story of Mowgli who was raised by wolves is a delightful piece of fiction. The rare individual who was found having survived through the support of animals was found to lack almost all that we consider human – the ability to communicate in a sophisticated and rich manner, to make tools, to have a culture. We become human through society. Many of the differences we find between people, though not all, are also because of society. This makes very exciting the study of why societies make it easier for people to be honest or dishonest, how societies change, what are the different components of a society that must change and so on. It also tells us the great importance of education in human existence. It is through education that human beings take up their character, knowledge and their activities. Of course, education takes place not only in schools but at many places in society.

Socialisation is the process by which human beings learn to be members of a society. Clearly, this is not a simple and non-controversial process. Some people may want socialisation to create good slaves, submissive and unquestioning, while others may want socialisation to create independent thinkers, who actively question everything. What effect society has on the kind of people we become and what effect the kind of people



Socialisation and the different forms it can take

we are has on society are amongst the important questions that sociology raises. Sociologists tend to believe people have enormous possibilities. Whether those possibilities get realised or not is affected to a considerable extent by society along with the hard and smart work which they themselves put in.

The Social Context of Education in India

As we go on, we shall look at the basic processes that shape the sociological context of education in India. Understanding these processes will help us understand what is affecting Indian education and the challenges faced by it. Many of our daily problems and dilemmas are actually connected to these processes. Hence, trying to summarise these processes will give us a grip on a large range of issues. Without claiming that this list is complete, I shall talk about the following three processes:

1. *Greater social complexity*: Many more social groups are having to live with each other and the suppression of one by another is no longer an acceptable option. This is driven by industrialisation as well as modern political systems. Education is faced with the problem of nurturing cultures that connect groups with each other, while at the same time maintaining their autonomy and vitality.
2. *Our changing system of production, exchange and consumption*: This influences the basic relationships which we are a part of and is believed to be increasing commercialisation and exploitation as well as dissolving many older systems of domination. Capitalism is one force which is changing this system, particularly in the form of globalisation. There are also other voices in the fray, including the demand for the primacy of morality and culture over profit and the impact of a democratic political system. Education feeds people into this process and is itself deeply influenced by it.

3. *Growth of bureaucratic organisations*: As societies and the organisations within them become larger, they need to change the way they work. An important form this takes is in the growth of rules and impersonality of functioning. Educational institutions express this change of form and so do governments. Many of the central debates on education are actually emerging from this shift.

These will be discussed in the chapters to follow.

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Education in Complex Societies

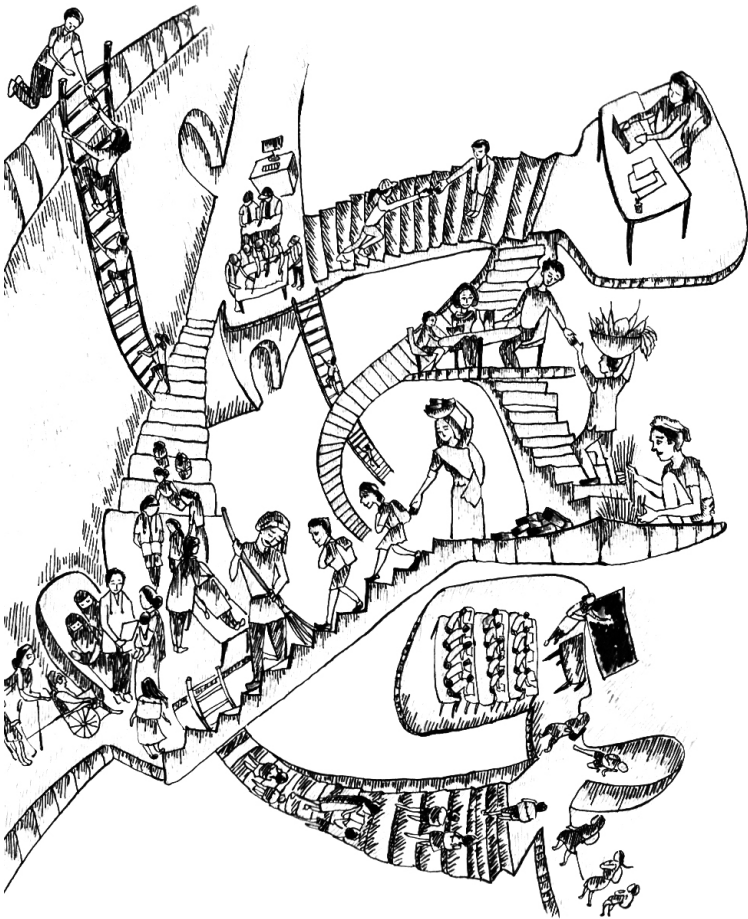
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Education in India is standing today at the crossroads of several kinds of social changes. These are influencing educational questions in quite fundamental ways. The first process of change that this series will examine is the shift from a simpler to a more complex society, which is turning upside down many of our cultural beliefs, values and practices. To see what this means and why this is happening, let us start with some basic concepts in sociology, like the notion that we live our lives through playing certain roles within social structures. This fact of playing roles in one kind of social structure and not in another is responsible for shaping many of our most important thoughts and feelings.

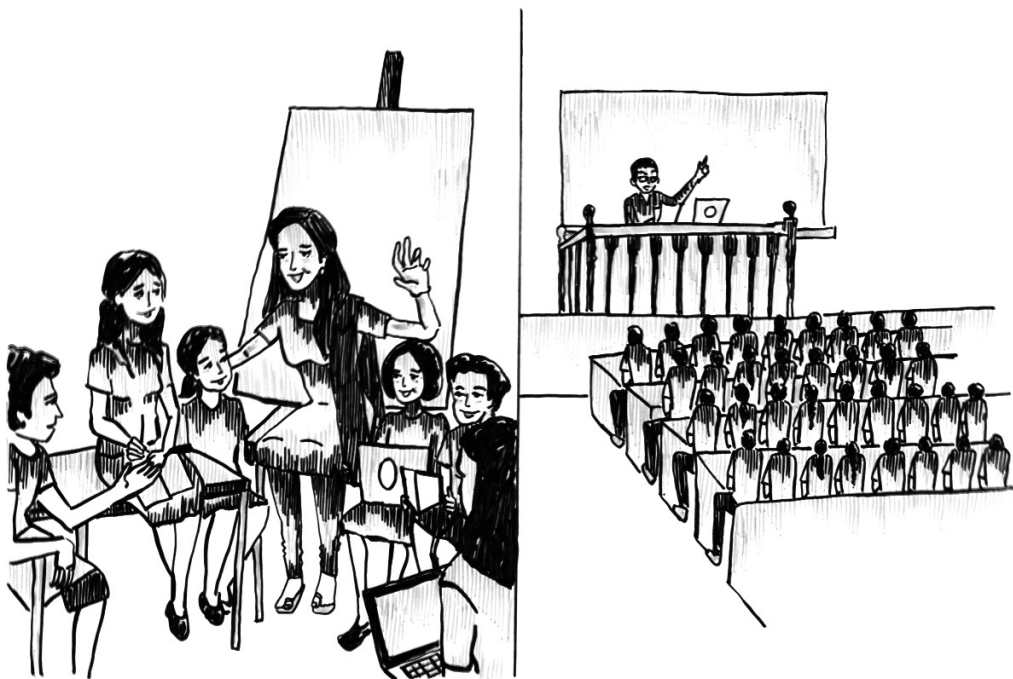
Roles and Structures

At the heart of sociology is the observation that in our social lives we have certain kinds of relations with other people. These can be relations of love like those between myself and my beloved, of hatred between me and those who try to dominate me, of respect towards those whose work and ideas I admire and so on. The character of learning in a school is shaped by the relations between a teacher and his student. Some of these relationships in

a society change very quickly but others can be seen to have a regular and established form. For instance, in a society there may be those who produce food, those who distribute it and those who consume it. Each of these are in a particular relationship with each other. What we call roles are these relatively stable relationships, in this case the role of the farmer, the vegetable seller and the buyer, respectively. Sometimes, all the roles can be combined into one person and sometimes they are different roles. When they are combined there is no chance of exploitation



Complex societies



The character of learning in schools is shaped by teacher-student relations

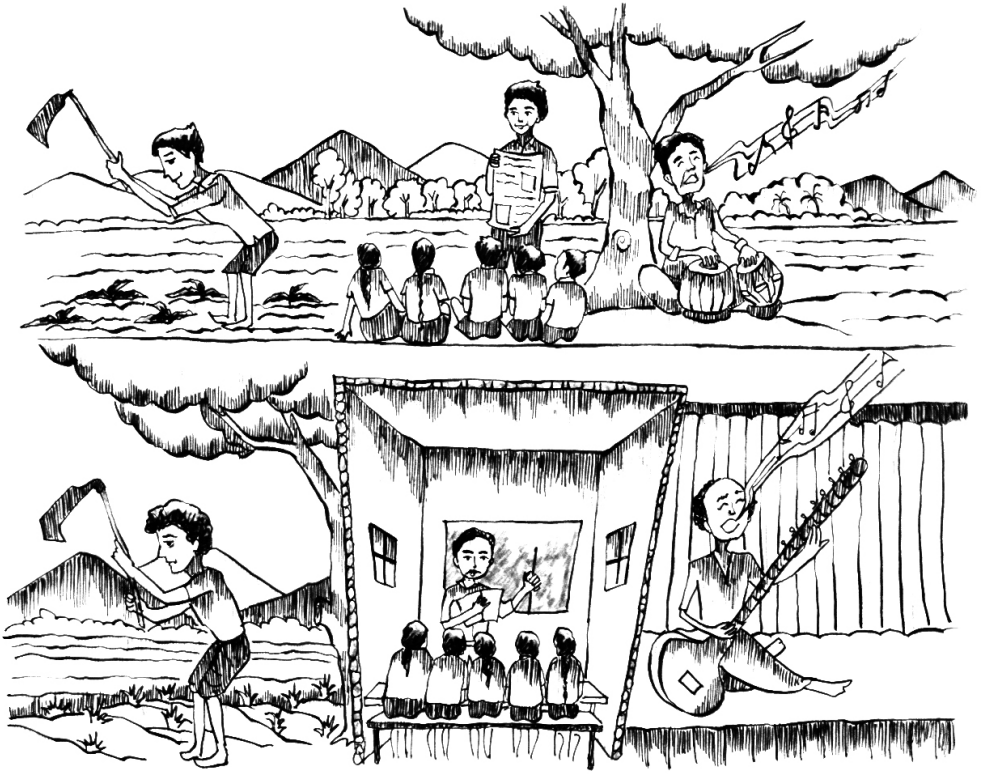
or oppression. But when they are separate, that is where the possibility of oppression can, in principle, but not always, exist. For instance, a farmer may feel exploited because she gets only a small amount of money whereas the vegetable seller is making a huge profit. There can be many other kinds of roles too in a society. The kinds of roles and the kinds of relationships in a society can be seen as the structure of that society and there can be several such kinds of structures in it.

Structures of roles have a great effect on our lives. The experience of a student and a teacher in one kind of social structure may be very different from what they would have experienced in another kind of social structure. For instance, in a certain kind of social structure the teacher may appear to be like an older family member, guiding the learner through love and emotion. But in another kind of social structure the teacher is like a bureaucrat, channelising the student's learning through

rules and regulations written in a rulebook. Different societies may have contrasting structures or even different schools within the same kind of society. The student who moves from one to the other immediately realises that ‘something’ has changed. In one kind of school there may be a flat structure with a lot of blurring of roles between the administration, teachers and students, leading to personal warmth and lots of space for personal variations. Where there is a hierarchical structure with strict separation of roles, it is possible that relationships may be more impersonal and focused on a distant ideal of excellence. Sociological concepts help students, teachers and administrators to see what the difference is and also help to weigh the pros and cons of each structure.

Industrialism and Complex Societies: Challenges for Education

Education has a very close connection with the social structure of the society it exists in. One of the early sociologists, Emile Durkheim (1857-1917) spelt out some basic contours of changes happening in contemporary times and the educational issues they threw up, focusing on the theme of industrialism and the transformations it was leading to in society. He distinguished between a simple social structure at one extreme and a complex social structure at another extreme, with many shades in between. He said that relatively more complex societies had their own special kinds of conditions and problems which needed us to think afresh about what how to do things in them. In a simple social structure, there were relatively few roles and even the size of a self-contained social unit was small. In societies like hunting-gathering bands or many tribal communities practising light agriculture, the entirety of social experience was made up of a small number of roles played out within a not very large group of people. A hunting-gathering band usually had no more



The shift towards role specialisation

than a hundred odd people and they performed the entire span of social roles – from producer to consumer to teacher to student. It was common that the same person performed more than one major role. At the other extreme we have industrial societies where the number of roles has exploded. Roles have become so sophisticated that it takes many years to learn how to play just one well. This has led to a narrowing down and specialisation of roles. The scale at which social life is lived has moved from small to gigantic with many layers and groups now inter-connected with each other. The very nature of social existence has changed into something quite different with the increase in numbers and complexity, and the tasks of education have also changed.

Consider a simple thing like crossing a road. In front of the place where I work these days there is a huge road that seems to flow like a vast, noisy rushing torrent. It is very crowded since it leads to an important economic centre where lakhs of people work. Tens of thousands of vehicles cross back and forth every day. Industrialisation, new technologies, specialisation of activities in particular places has created this situation. If the road had just been leading down a residential part of a village, the traffic would have been much, much less. There would have been no need for traffic rules and it would have hardly mattered if one walked on the right side or even in the centre of the road. But those habits would have led to immediate injury or even something worse on this highway. To prevent accidents and traffic jams, there are strict rules for where to drive and where to walk, and even where to stop. Special people called traffic policemen stand at strategic points to scold and sometimes fine those who do not follow those rules.

When I stand and watch people at the crossroads, I can make out who is a recent arrival to this complicated new world and who is an old hand, now skilled at dealing with it. The new entrant is bewildered and not sure where to head, when to move and where to stop. He looks harassed and tense and speaks of how awful this enormous city is. But the person who has been living here for a while knows where to slow down and where to speed up. Drawing from the habits which come from a small-scale village environment, he tries to go through wherever he gets the opportunity, at times even causing traffic snarls and jams in his wake. He is tense and finds the experience trying and something to be made as short as possible. The most experienced hand, though, looks relaxed as she smoothly traverses through the rush. She has found that following the traffic at an easy pace is the most convenient thing to do and when stopped by a red light, instead of trying to find some way to sneak through and fuming and fretting, she turns off her engine and thinks of the interesting

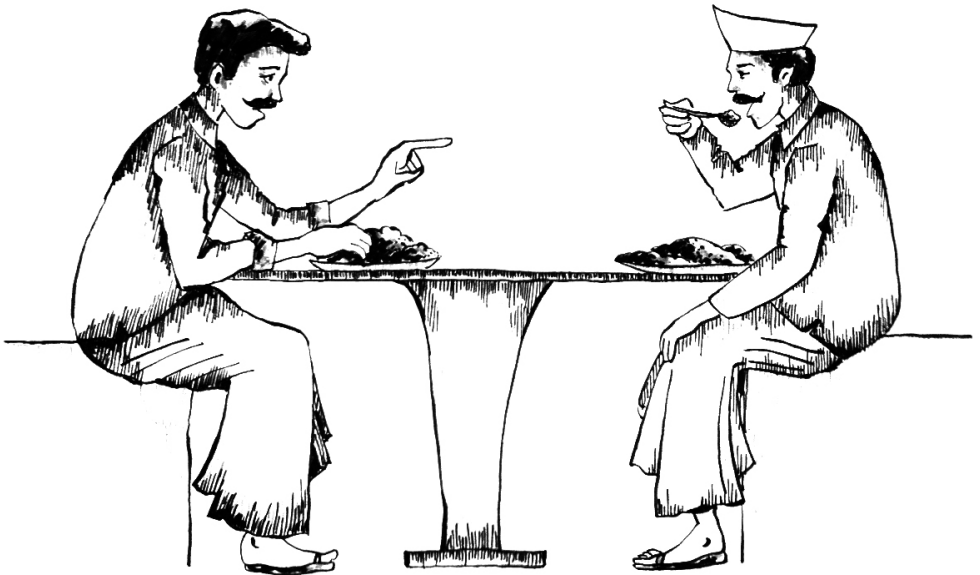
things she is planning for the rest of the day. The ways of dealing with a complex society are quite different from those needed in a simple society. Simply carrying on with the older ways in the new context may often not work. It becomes necessary to think afresh about how to do even elementary things like crossing a road. One of the things we would expect of education today is that it teaches the ways of a complex society to the younger generation. We want to teach them a culture that is appropriate for such a social structure.

Shifting from Particularistic to Universalistic Cultures

Our culture is an important and indeed an essential part of our social life. We inherit it through learning and ourselves create and modify it as well. By culture we usually mean the ideas, beliefs, values, attitudes and practices that we think, feel and do every day. Culture makes up the fabric through which we communicate and make meaning for each other, including how to cope with traffic on the road and the many little things which make up the business of our daily life. It also suggests to us how to make sense of and respond to the biggest questions of our age like how to deal with social oppression or how to interact with strange, markedly different cultures. Our culture is usually not as unique as we like to believe it is. Cultures across the world share many common elements and may also have significant differences. It is often difficult to draw the boundary between where one culture ends and the other starts. For instance, while it may be possible to draw a political boundary, it is impossible to really draw a cultural boundary to show where Maharashtra ends and Karnataka begins or for that matter even where Pakistan or Sri Lanka ends and India begins. There are many shared cultural beliefs, ideas, practices, languages, phrases and so on that spill over from one to the other.

At a deeper level, we can observe a gradual shift in cultures which seems to parallel the shifts in social structures from simpler to more complex societies. Where simple societies may

highlight personal, family-based relationships and prize them the most, as societies become more complex, relationships in non-family situations become more important. Here, many changes in culture can emerge. The sense of who I am, for instance, can come more out of what school I studied in and what work I do at a factory or office or farm, rather than from my family and its own unique history. This is often called a shift from particularistic to the direction of universalistic cultures. In cultures that are oriented more towards the particular, most important roles deal with small social networks, with 'particular', known people. In such a society, for instance, I may be an uncle of my brother's and sister's children and also of my cousins' children and it may be my duty as an uncle to educate all my nephews and nieces. Whenever there is someone else who may want to learn from me, I may teach them too, but the most important people around me expect me mainly to focus on those who are related to me. In a more



Similarity and difference in culture

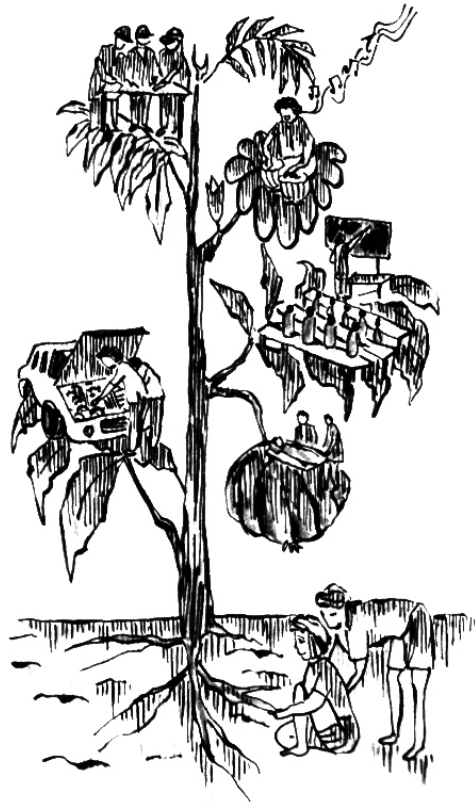
universalistic society, I take up a job as a teacher and am now in a school that expects me to teach anyone who wishes to learn. There is a great deal of emphasis that I am not supposed to focus only on my relatives. Instead, it is considered very important that I do not discriminate between my own niece and those whom I do not know at all. Nepotism (favouring relatives) begins to be a bad word.

The gradual movement towards more universalistic societies is typical of complex structures since they now need to connect many more people together. How exactly this happens may take different models in different places, but there does seem to be a cultural shift towards accepting the equality of all and of saying that justice must be for all, not just my community or my relatives. These universal principles may be more developed in certain places and less in others, facing resistance from those who still have the culture of small-scale societies and whose power and wealth comes from such social structures. For instance, those elected representatives who benefit from the social networks of their jati try to keep those networks strong by favouring their jati-members. Social inequality and injustice may also surface in new forms, with class inequality becoming a prominent aspect of complex societies instead of an inequality between small disparate communities. Workers of different regions, languages and castes who flocked to cities found that they actually had a great deal in common with each other. They found it expedient to come together and press for better wages and working conditions. Of course, it is not necessary that this movement from particularism to universalism always takes place and you can even find in history complex societies like the Indus Valley Civilization collapsing and moving to simpler small-scale village life again. Or casteism and racism may carry on in a less visible manner than previously. Workers of different linguistic groups could form separate groups and begin to distrust and compete with each other.



Mechanical, contractual and organic solidarity

Emile Durkheim pointed out in *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893) that the shift to cultures of complex societies does not come easily. Even though kinship-based relationships become less important (they never disappear), and new groups form and emerge. These societies could still have many forms of domination which feed frustration and rage. One group may oppress others or its members may feel that they themselves are the only good people and everyone else is inferior and uncivilized or worth being spurned and rejected in some way or the other. Complex societies need many things to survive, important amongst which is a sense of bonding or solidarity for them to hold together. This solidarity is needed even in simple, small-scale societies, where it gets created by everyday interactions and festivals. The simple form of solidarity was described by



Durkheim as mechanical solidarity which rests on emotional and fraternal feelings that come out of direct face-to-face interactions.

The creation of solidarity, however, is a much more complicated thing in a complex society. Here, different kinds of people do not usually interact every day with each other. Contemporary complex societies have different specialised groups like factory workers, doctors, teachers and so on and they tend to interact more within themselves than with the others. In countries like India, which have so many different languages, religions and communities, the difficulties in creating solidarity are vast. Tamilians may believe they are quite different from Gujaratis and Kannadigas, while people from Mizoram may get a cold reception when they travel to Delhi. The problem for such societies is always how to create a sense of bonding across all of their many different parts.

One way to maintain a sense of connectedness is through links of mutual needs and through exchanges of goods in the market. Durkheim called this market-based unity a contractual solidarity, but said that it did not lead to a strong and lasting bond. The market alone led to very fragile relationships, since whenever a better deal was to be had, contracts could be snapped and new contracts made. No society could last if relationships were so insecure and temporary. Instead, he said, for complex societies to hold together they needed an organic solidarity, that rested on a culture which could reach out to all different kinds of social groups and divisions. By the term 'organic' Durkheim was drawing an analogy between the way societies had many inter-related groups and communities and the way plants and animals also had many organs which were connected to each other. The well-being and coordinated functioning of all the parts of a plant were necessary for it to survive and thrive. While the analogy of a plant should not be drawn too far, all the different groups within a society also had to get their space and feel they were getting justice and at the same time were able to feel the joys and benefits of being inter-connected. An organic solidarity for Durkheim meant a culture that helped people to feel emotionally connected with each other and this could only be possible if they did not feel that they were being taken advantage of or being pushed into a corner.

Many sociologists have argued that an important task for schools is to build this sense of bonding between different groups, regions and communities. The school is a place where children of different social backgrounds came to learn about a wider world. It is here that a culture of organic solidarity could be created. For this reason, people like Durkheim argued that the state had a special role in guiding schools. If schools were run by one community or by one social class then it would tend to give only the perspective of that group. A culture that was dominated by one region or religion or group could not provide an organic solidarity. It would fail to hold

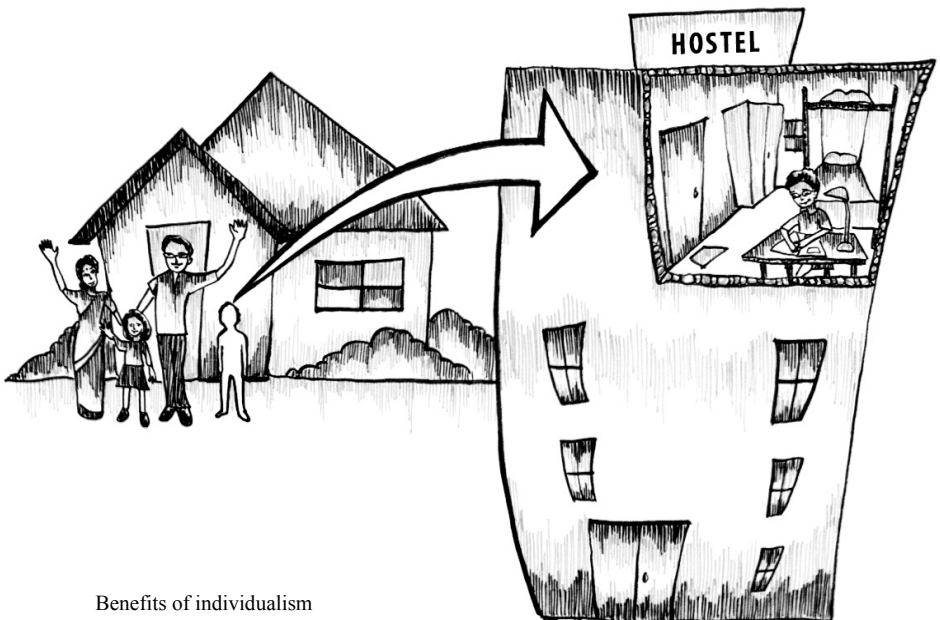
people together as they would resent the impositions being made on them. A democratically elected state was an institution which had the participation of all groups and was a universal body connecting everyone. It was the state, therefore, which had to ensure that a suitable organic culture was built and the main responsibility of deciding what was to be taught could not be entrusted in the hands of this group or that. Of course, that meant that the state itself had to be democratic and fair, giving space to different points of view and finding an accommodation between them.

Individualism, Social Differences and Education

Durkheim and many other sociologists believed that in highly complex societies it was inevitable that people became more individualistic. Small-scale societies prize a sense of collective identity and of feeling part of a family and community. But as societies become larger in scale and people have to deal with very diverse situations which their parents may never have encountered, it is advantageous for them to withdraw from some of their community bonds. For example, many students may have to travel and live in hostels away from their families. It is important that they feel that they can manage on their own and not keep running back home for emotional support and guidance. If a student were to keep doing that and drop classes to rush back for every festival which celebrates togetherness at home, then he or she would lose a lot of opportunities to learn and would remain at a low level of proficiency. While the emotion of bonding with the family is laudable, in complex societies it is desirable that young people also learn to live and work by themselves. Similarly, it is necessary that they learn to think for themselves. The more sophisticated roles of complex societies call for people to make independent assessments of their work and quick knowledgeable decisions. This means that students are expected to be self-reliant and not afraid of coming to

decisions which are different from the majority. Individualism is an asset for complex societies, making people more flexible and enterprising in their actions.

Individualism does not come without its dangers. It is possible for people to be part of one culture and also be pulled in another direction by another culture. A student might find himself drawn to going out to party every evening with his friends and also find himself wanting to stay at home to engage with some exciting new ideas which were taught at school. The struggle to choose between competing cultural systems could be a painful one. Durkheim used the term *anomie* to describe the pains of this struggle. A person being pulled into two directions through competing networks of meanings, values and practices could find herself sinking into a depression. Unable to face her friends and their expectations on one side and her teachers and family on the other, a person may be driven into great anxiety and despair. The *dharmasankat*



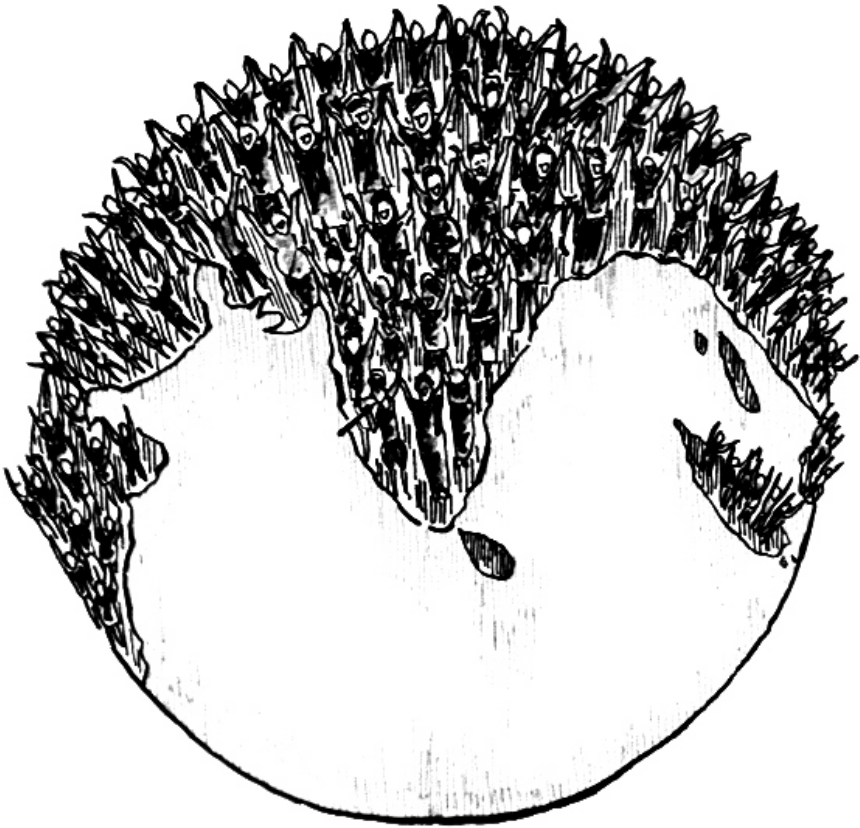
Benefits of individualism

(dilemma of values) which Indian writings talk about points to precisely this kind of crisis. According to Durkheim, anomie could be responsible for many problems, like the drunkenness with which migrant workers try to overcome the hollowness in their lives. It might even be responsible for extreme actions like suicides. An unresolved conflict of norms and cultures could be very painful indeed. On the other hand, anomic states of mind, can also be very creative, leading people to be innovative and find new solutions and new ways to behave. A person unhappy with a state of affairs may want to find or build alternatives. The teacher who feels miserable about the conflict between the norms of her school and her own friends' norms of how to deal with children may find a burst of energy that will push her out of her comfort zone into doing something fresh. She may make a decisive attempt to communicate new ideas to her administration and change the way teaching is conventionally done.

Among the other consequences of the emergence of complex societies is that over the centuries we have seen many countries emerge which are huge in size, with many hundreds of millions of people. They all face the challenge of how to get people to feel togetherness and an organic solidarity. Some have responded by asserting the culture of one community or region over the rest, while some others have taken a more diffused approach. Education has been central to all of them in their strategy of building a cohesive society. All of them face the problem that an organic solidarity only works when their people believe in the justice of their society.

Culture and Identity in Complex Societies

Individualism may be beneficial for complex societies and is undoubtedly growing in today's India. At the same time, culture and identity still remain important for people even in the largest,



Expanding circles of identity

most complex societies. People find comfort and a sense of continuity in their cultures. Consider how this influences marriages and the formation of families. As individualism grows, young people no longer find themselves satisfied with whatever makes their families happy. In 'arranged marriages' the joy which two families got in becoming one got carried over to the relationship between the groom and the bride, too. The happiness of their families was the key to their happiness with each other as well. In times like ours, as students go to far away colleges to study, they no longer depend only upon their families for their identity and for the meaning of what they do. Their culture, the symbols of achievement, of relaxation, of joy are

no longer the same. They seek companions for themselves who share their new culture. It is indeed a growth of individualism, but it cannot be said that culture does not matter. The sources of culture are what have changed. The meanings and rituals of their life now come from their academic and work life, from urban life and from the media.

Culture and cultural differences remain very important even in complex societies, belying the prediction of some social scientists of the last century who thought a new universal culture would automatically emerge. Culture, however, now comes from larger circles and is no longer as localized as it used to be. Whereas a couple of centuries ago, the speakers of Bhojpuri had little access to the printed word, today they have become speakers of Hindi or Hindustani and are part of a huge population that reads similar newspapers and watches Bollywood movies. Bhojpuri is rarely taught in school and many wonder whether Bhojpuri literature has a future. There is, however, also a contrary trend of the rise of Bhojpuri cinema and music that competes with Bollywood. The circles of culture have grown much larger, but the culture one is most familiar with still has a hold over one's heart. When a Hindi speaker wants to sing of love, it is Hindi and Urdu poetry that she turns to, not the English she may be using every day in school or at work.

One of the challenges that a complex society faces is that of bringing many cultures together. This is one of our expectations from education in today's age. We want it to bring diverse people and cultures together in a country and help them feel connected with each other and not just with their family networks. We also want them to feel deeply a sense of humanity that cuts across narrow national boundaries and that enables them to feel the joys and sorrows of people around the world. These are all the demands of our historical era, of this time of increasingly complex societies.

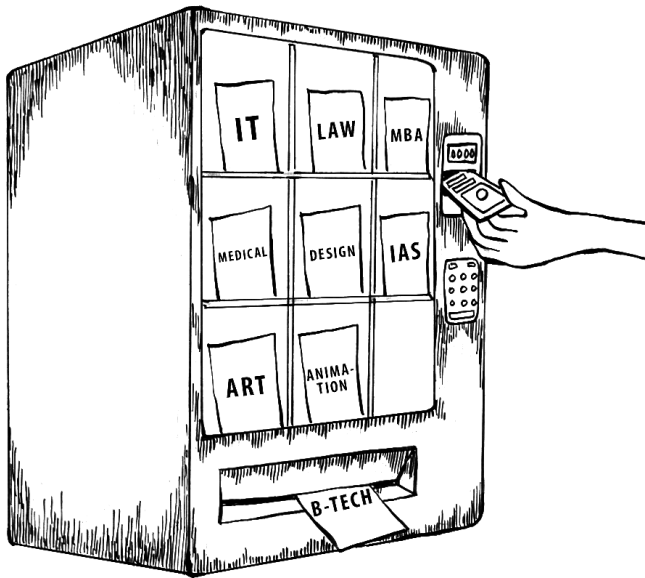
One set of sociologists called functionalists have been particularly interested in how societies cohere and survive. In other words, how different parts and aspects of a society ‘function’ to keep that society thriving. Emile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons and MN Srinivas are examples of such sociologists. A typical interest of such sociology is how education and culture can help complex societies to stay together and deal with their problems. However, it is also true that societies have many internal tensions and conflicts. In the next chapter we will look at the conflicts in society, particularly those which come out of our changing economy and the educational questions which these conflicts raise.

Further Readings

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Education, the Growth of Markets and Social Conflict

3



Several deep-rooted sociological processes affect education in India. In this chapter, we will focus on the growth of markets and the practice of exchanging goods and services through the relationship of buying and selling. This is not just an economic change but a social and cultural one, too. We are seeing a shift

of many relationships which were guided by non-monetary considerations into relationships in which money and its exchange are much more important. With these, we can see changes in the daily experience of teaching and learning as well as in the content and objectives of education, and how schools and colleges are organized. It is important to examine the character of this shift and some of the questions it raises. Privatization of education is a much discussed and controversial topic nowadays. Sociologists argue that it is not just a superficial adjustment in the way education is done, but part of a much bigger transformation happening in Indian society. The direction we choose to move in will have far-reaching implications.

Exchange and Relationships

At the heart of all this is the kind of relationships which we express through our exchanges. Agricultural labourers and craftspersons, for instance, not so long ago used to work for an annual fixed amount of agricultural produce which the owners of land would give them. They might be given food to eat when they visited the house of the landowner and were often considered part of the family, even if they were usually considered to be lower in rank than others. Of course, it was not uncommon that they were exploited and even beaten or sexually abused. But alongside that were cultural beliefs of being the loyal servants of the landowners and the latter believed that they had a moral and religious duty to take care of those who depended on them. Education tended to be something which mainly the bigger landowners and traders received and among other things it also taught this cultural way of relating with the workers. This was a kind of 'production relation' as it created a certain way of producing various things which people wanted.

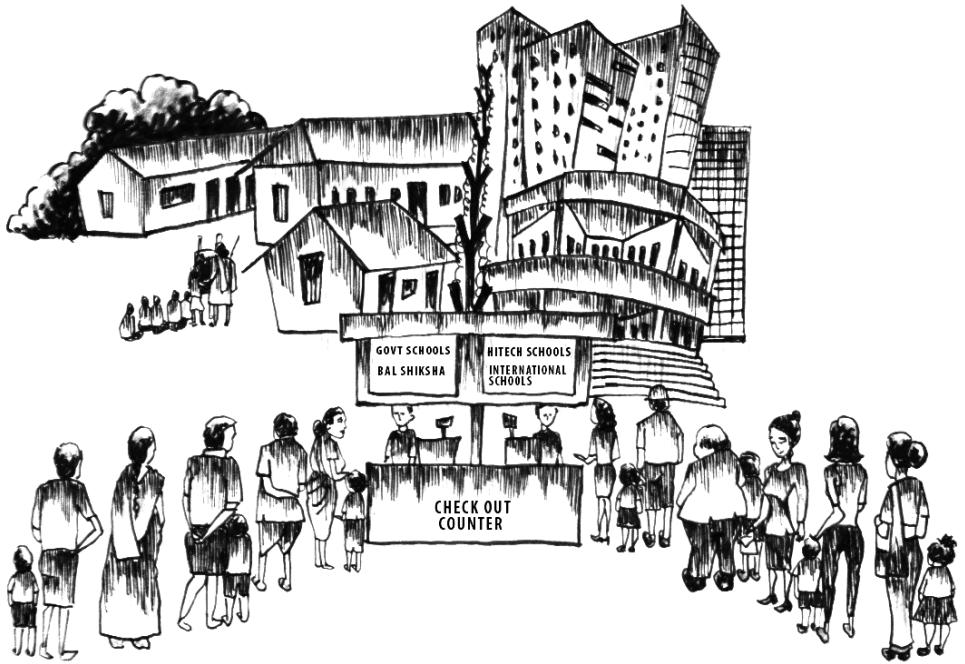
Work was through a set of personal relationships, intended for one's family or for one's master with whom there was a traditional



Feudal and market forms of labour

relationship of subservience, even if the master often abused and mistreated one. Such production relations, which were embedded in a web of cultural meanings, have shifted away into a set of relationships where the primary element is now a payment of a wage in the form of money. The idea of money has, of course, existed for many centuries, but over the last couple of centuries or so it has become the main medium of exchange. Workers in agricultural farms are now paid mostly in wages and not in kind and this can in many situations be the main focus of their relationship with the land owner.

The ways in which goods and services are exchanged and how consumption takes place has undergone drastic change.



Commodified exchange in education

Anthropologists and sociologists often follow Karl Polanyi (2001/1944) in saying that there are three basic ways in which goods and services like food as well as teaching may be exchanged in various societies: through reciprocity, redistribution and commodification. There can be many shades of these, but let us talk about them in a simple way for the moment. It is when goods and services are treated as commodities that their value is measured in terms of money and they are bought and sold through markets. Markets are places where an explicit and open display of goods for exchange takes place, where those who want to sell and those who want to buy by giving something in exchange gather to negotiate and conclude deals. Nowadays, markets mostly use money as the way of measuring the value of goods, but as in the barter system this may not always be the case. Markets are influenced by the supply of goods and the demand for them. Markets have an important effect on the value which something like teaching holds, since the money paid for

it will depend upon how much supply there is of teachers and what kind of demand there is for them. Importantly, there is a lot of emphasis on measurement and on calculating in terms of numbers and money how much different amounts of teaching will be worth. For example, teachers who are much sought after for coaching classes may charge Rs 5000 or even more per student. Their rates are decided by the demand for such teachers and the amount of money which their clients can possibly pay. Similarly, teachers in international schools may earn up to and more than one lakh per month. This is because teachers with the appropriate knowledge are few and also because the families who send their children to such schools can afford to pay large amounts. So, teaching of different kinds is equated with different amounts of money.

In exchanges that are characterised by reciprocity, however, things are not measured in terms of their money worth. Nor



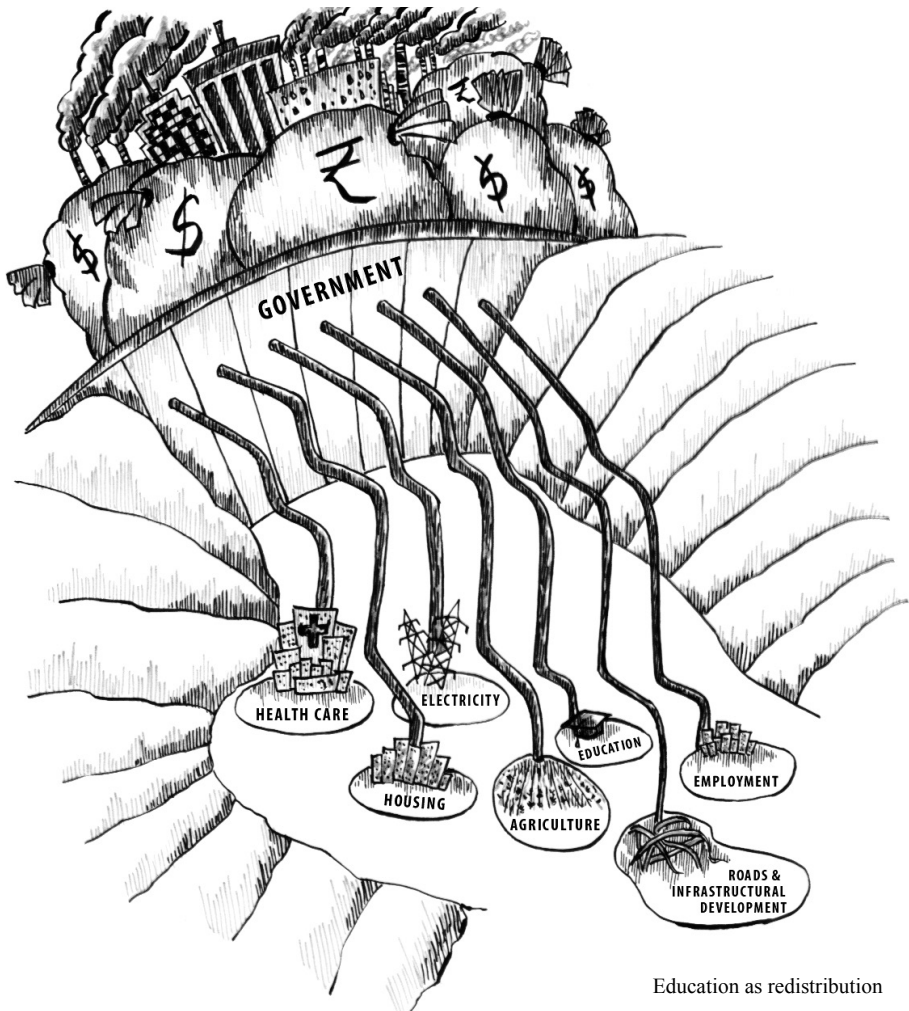
Education as a gift

may there be an open and obvious bargaining of what is to be exchanged for an item. Instead, the emphasis is on goods being exchanged as the expression of certain relationships. For instance, if someone is a good person or a good sister then on certain occasions one gives some gifts to show how one feels and how one respects such a person. Giving a gift of, say, a sari to one's cousin is done to cement certain relationships (or sometimes to tease other relatives, too). There may be other saris or salwar-kameez received from them in turn. While some sense of the relative worth of the gifts is important, they are not usually seen as a gift with money worth alone. Instead, they are an exchange which has a cultural and traditional meaning and may be given or even withheld with such meanings in mind. These exchanges are not just gestures but may make up a way of getting many of our basic needs. However, the idea of a careful measurement and exact payment for services is alien to this kind of exchange. People would be horrified if, for instance, we were to give a gift by haggling to say that if you become a 10 per cent better friend then I shall give you a gift worth 10 per cent more.

Teaching is often seen as such an activity, a gift of reciprocity, not measured in terms of money value but an expression of relationships. In many parts of India, till recently, often schools were run with teachers who would be given a small amount of money by a local rich person to teach children. This was the common pattern of education for most of medieval India. Usually, that money was seen more as an honorarium and less as a wage and teachers were supposed to be teaching not for the money but for the satisfaction of educating. It was common for students to also give gifts to the teacher, but these were not payments in the commodity or market sense, measures of what his services were worth. Instead, they were mainly gestures of respect and love. That they might end up keeping the fires burning in the teacher's house may be true, but was morally incidental. Teachers were

believed to be teaching primarily for cultural reasons and not to make money. Many teachers did this work seeking the respect and satisfaction of teaching, though there must have also been many for whom the gifts and honoraria were quite important to keep body and soul together.

Redistribution is also an important form of exchange of goods and services. It is not about a direct exchange of goods and services and may or may not take place through money. It is guided instead



Education as redistribution

by cultural or political objectives. The landlord who sponsored a village school for instance would have been getting a large amount of grain or other foodstuff as his annual rent from many tenants in his region. He 'redistributes' a small part of this to the teacher. His giving a part of that to the Guruji indirectly returned that grain to many other families in the form of learning. Redistribution led to an increase of the prestige of the landlord in the eyes of the people. It might also give him greater political weight. Not least would have been to ensure that the teacher did not talk about questioning the place of landlords in that society.

The Disembedding of Social Relationships

Reciprocity and redistribution are very much with us even in contemporary times. This pattern, that exchanges are actually part of certain social and cultural relationships is called embeddedness. Most sociologists and anthropologists would say that we are now seeing a distinct shift towards another kind of exchange, called commodity exchange, which occurs through markets and money. Karl Polanyi called this the 'disembedding' of society, though of course this did not mean a complete and total shift like from black to white. Instead, we are seeing a shifting in the shades of relationships. Disembedding refers to the fact that the use of money makes it much easier to move people and resources around.

The use of money has many advantages in exchange. Consider, for instance, a situation where I have a large ripe watermelon and want to exchange it for two litres of milk. My friend Zafar may want that lovely, delicious looking watermelon but does not have any milk to exchange it with, having only a sack of wheat instead. But I don't want wheat, I want milk! Suresh, who lives nearby, does have the milk but is not interested in my watermelon. What he wants is wheat. We are all stuck. The slow growth of the use of money gave a solution to problems like ours. We could convert our respective wheat, watermelon and



Barter and money-based exchange

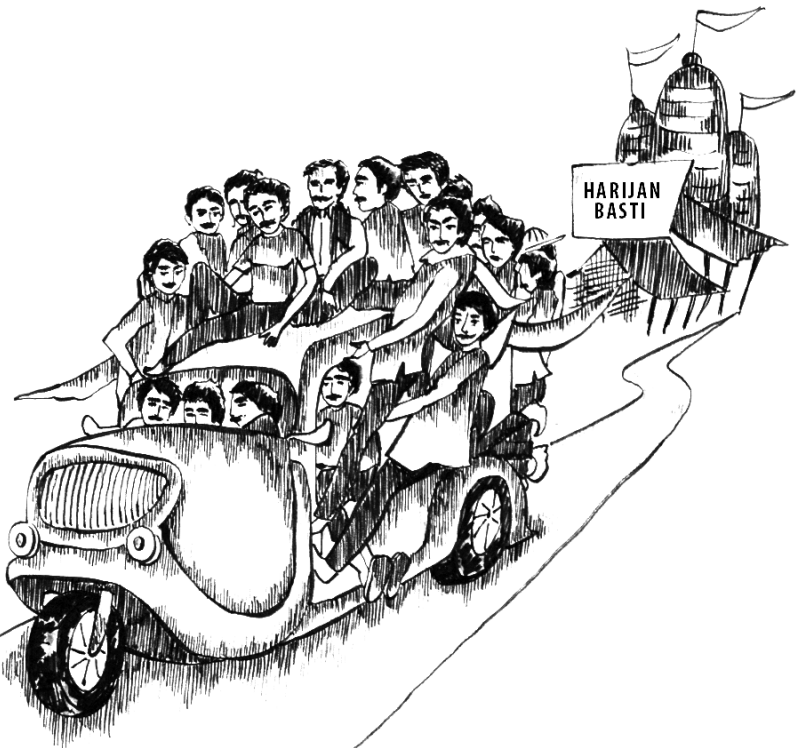
milk into money, which everybody was happy to accept. With the use of money various exchanges began to flow in a smoother and faster manner. The term 'disembedding' refers to a shift from relationships and exchanges which were stuck in a thick, sticky base syrup of social relationships, into an exchange which is now free of many such constraints and restraints. This has led to many advantages and perhaps some disadvantages as well.

In the case of the agricultural workers whom we met at the beginning of this chapter, it has changed drastically the character of their relationships and experience of life. Earlier, they were expected by tradition to serve certain households and receive subsistence in the form of grain and festive gifts from them. This traditional relation is now receding. Now most of them receive money instead of grain. At many places, with the emergence of labour markets labourers can negotiate with different potential employers, and they now have alternative sources of livelihood, too. This is leading to a rapid weakening of the cultural bonds between employers and workers. The bond between the worker and his or her employer now basically stops with the obligation to pay a wage and does not go far beyond that. When searching for work at other places, having an education can make a good deal of difference. It can give workers cultural values and technical skills which are in demand amongst employers. Education can play a key role in helping them access new sources of employment and get into different relationships at work.

Agricultural workers are often from the scheduled castes and with the growth of labour markets it is common to find them choosing quickly to move to the city, away from the old stigma of being subservient to the farming families of their village. As many people say, it is better to pull a rickshaw in the anonymity of the city than to have to work with a lower status and have to grovel before the big farmer of the village.

From Caste to Customer

Sometime in the year 2003, I was sitting and chatting with some older boys and young men at Jasalpur village in Madhya Pradesh. They were from the scheduled castes and we were near their homes, which were in the periphery of the village. In most villages I visited, the scheduled castes lived in one corner towards the outside of the village. Since we knew each other for a couple of years now we were able to talk about the delicate and embarrassing question of how the upper castes of the village treated them. They told horrifying stories of how they were still not allowed into the courtyards of their own classmates' homes. When they visited their upper-caste friends, they were either not offered tea or if at all offered, it would be served in a cracked cup. Troubled by their tales, I looked towards the main road



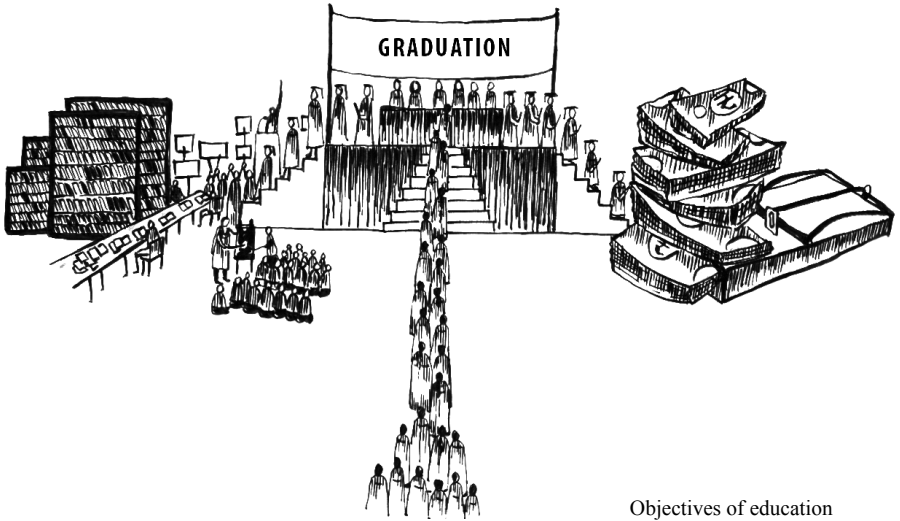
passing through the village and noticed what is locally called a 'taxi' there. It is a door-less canvas covered jeep, which picked up passengers for a small payment, stuffing up to 15 people into a vehicle built for seven. The public transport buses came by after long gaps of time and it were these taxis which served to move people between the villages and towns of that region. "But," I said, observing a taxi operator cramming two more people into his vehicle, "people are virtually sitting one on top of the other in that taxi. How can the owners of the taxi accept scheduled caste passengers? How can all the passengers sit so close to each other?"

The young men grinned and said that when the taxis first began to operate here they would not stop in front of the Harijan basti. They would stop only in front of the temple in the upper caste part of the village. They would be reluctant to take the scheduled caste passengers. But then the number of taxis began to increase gradually and they began to run half-empty. That's when they started stopping here too, in front of the Harijan basti. And now there is such a heavy demand for seats that if anyone objects to a scheduled caste person getting in, the driver curtly invites the objector to just get off.

I told my friend this story later, and he gave a laugh. "For the driver they were no longer scheduled castes, they were only *grahaks* now, customers and nothing else," he chuckled.

The taxis and the buses plying on that road were very important for making schools an attractive place. It was through these vehicles that young men had begun to go to the nearby town to work. For many children and their parents this possibility of new sources of employment led to redoubling the desire to seek a good education.

The character of markets is changing, too, from the informal bazaars of villages and towns to the highly organized and regulated markets which keep goods with detailed product



Objectives of education

descriptions and guarantees that what you think you are buying is actually what you get. In a bazaar or an unregulated market one had to be quite careful about what one was buying and whom it was being bought from. Both buyers and sellers tried to pull whatever advantage they could get from a deal. Information about the quality of a good was scarce and could be the basis of a lot of manipulation. People therefore preferred to buy through known vendors and relied mainly on personal and family connections for ensuring the quality of goods. In contrast, most online internet based stores now give you full details of a product and immediately take it back if you get a piece that is different from what had been advertised. Standardization of goods calls for a big jump in how one works and the kinds of relationships through which work is done.

Education and Commodification

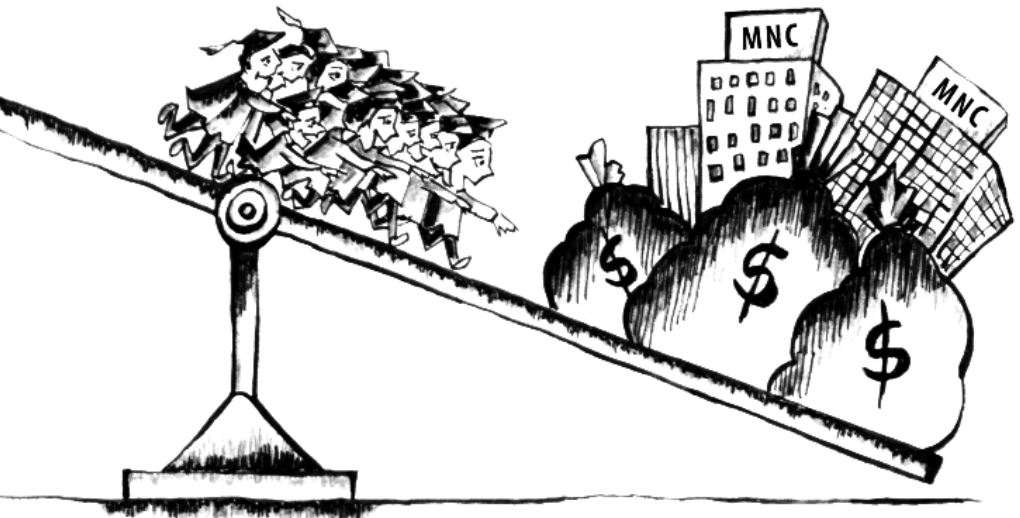
All these developments have had a tremendous impact on the education system. Until the last century or so, education had mainly a cultural role and did not mean much in the labour market, except for a handful of people who became priests or were from

families that acted as clerks and officials for medieval landlords and kings. An important shift is that gradually more and more people now are seeking to sell their labour to earn a living. Education is now much more important in getting them employment. Today, an important expectation from education is that it will help people get a position through the labour market. This shift towards disembedded societies is transforming the role of education in quite fundamental ways. About 50-75 years ago, for many people in India the main role of education was to give an exposure to higher cultures. So they would read the classics in literature, the scriptures and some astronomy and other such knowledges which were believed to give them a more cultured outlook. Today, this must now struggle with the goal of getting a job which will give more money and status and sometimes power as well. This shift in the purposes of education is closely connected with the changing structure of society.

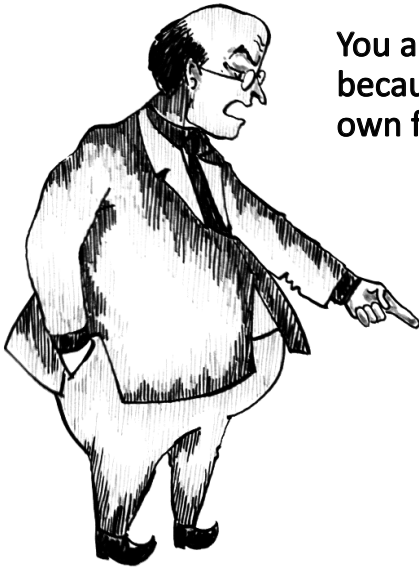
The changes being wrought by the marketisation and commercialisation or commodification of society are very far-reaching and have had



mixed consequences. By commodification we mean conversion of goods and services into a form which can be exchanged through markets and money. Many exchanges do not take this form, for instance, the way a family provides food for its members and its members give and return love and care to each other. People would be horrified if we tried to put a money value to these. Commodification of societies means that many things which were earlier not part of a market system are now becoming part of it. Sometimes, this liberates and gives greater freedom and sometimes it throws people into a situation where they feel strangled by market forces and there is no cultural support in case things go wrong. The implications of these social changes for education are tremendous in terms of what should now be taught in schools, whose benefit schools should aim for and what the purpose of education is, after all.



Impact of the market on education



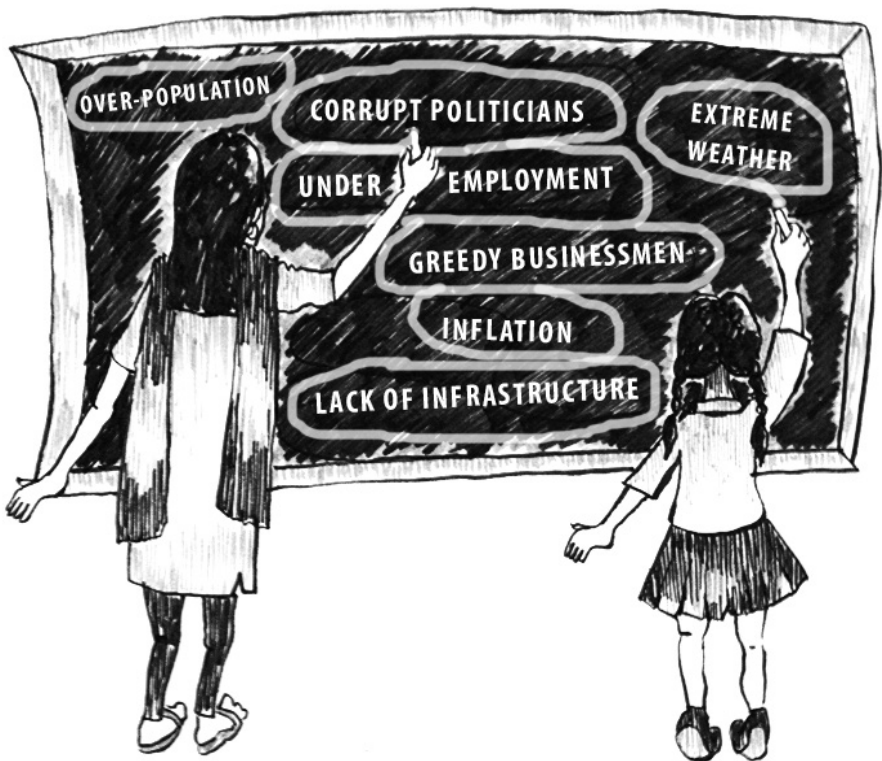
**You are poor
because of your
own fault!**



An important dimension of markets is that they tend to give more buying power to those with more money. In one sense, people are made equal, but in another sense now the difference is in terms of who can influence the market more. Among the questions which the growth of commodification and markets raises for education is whether it is okay if people with more money have a greater influence on education. For instance, education must ask whether it seeks to respond to the demands and needs of those with a great deal of money or to those with little money. These two sections of society may have quite different educational wants. Having a syllabus which teaches the knowledge which the rich want may make no sense to the poor. For instance, many big companies may only be interested in the teaching of computer science in engineering colleges. However, this may not be of much use to the poor, who may benefit more if civil engineering and how better roads and infrastructure is built is taught. Or the poor may benefit from a kind of mechanical engineering and electronics which will improve the

manufacturing that occurs in small factories and workshops. These may not be the priorities of the highest paying jobs and hence the kind of knowledges which are beneficial to the poor may have few people wanting to learn them.

There are other problems too in allowing only markets to decide what education should do. It may even be dangerous for the poor if they are taught to blindly accept whatever the rich and powerful are doing and not learn to raise questions on them. An important thing which many Indians believe we must learn to do is how to protest against wrongdoing and put pressure to get justice and fair dealing. This, too, is something which many powerful people (though not all) may be very uncomfortable



Causes of poverty

with. Commodification of education may thus raise several important questions.

Another change coming up with commodification is that the relation between teachers and parents and students threatens to become like that between a salesperson and her clients. So the school may be seen as a business enterprise and teachers become service staff in the same ways as insurance agents working for an insurance company are service staff. This drastically changes the relation between teachers and students. Teachers are basically delivering a service which is standardized by the management. There is little space here for teachers to be thinkers, helping students to interpret the world or think about it in a creative manner. This pushes us away from the model of a teacher as an intellectual, who is in a relation of gift-giving and reciprocity with students. It also draws us away from the school as a site of redistribution, which does not take as much as it gives, spreading wealth – in the broader sense of wealth – from one place where it is concentrated to another which lacks it.

Markets may dissolve some conflicts and also create new conflicts in society in place of the old. The growth of markets as a model of relationships in education raises many questions which deserve careful scrutiny.

Further Readings

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Capitalism and Education in India

The growth of commodified exchange has drastically changed the relationships in which we live and has had a great impact on the meaning of education in our times. The social relationships which education must address and the meanings of every day life within educational institutions, all are affected by this. One way of understanding how our relationships are getting redefined is by examining the growth of capitalism in India.

What is Capitalism?

Capitalism raises some quite fundamental questions for what education should say or do in a society. A classic nineteenth century interpretation of what capitalism meant for human existence came from Karl Marx (1818-1883). Marx characterised the basic transition of human society in his times as being a movement from what he called the feudal mode of production to the capitalist mode of production. Loosely speaking, the feudal mode of production was what was seen in many parts of India, China and western Europe over much of the medieval period. Society was dominated by large landholders, who held their land through an expression of loyalty to their own lords. A king gave

land to his loyal followers and expected their support and respect in return. They provided soldiers and equipment at times of war along with an annual revenue to the king's coffers. Power came from the control of land and from military might. Many kinds of exchange took place, but kings and landlords were the most powerful social class, not businessmen. Markets were poorly developed in comparison with today and the growth of the economy was slow. Variations of several kinds existed between different parts of the world and there is debate as to whether they can all legitimately be called feudalism, but common to all was a slow moving, primarily agricultural economy and rule through personal relationships of domination and subservience between master and follower. One worked for a master because he was the Master, not because there was a contract for payment. Those who worked on others' lands and were tenants or servants of different kinds often had a culture that saw the master as a kind of father figure. The phrases 'lord and master' and *mai-baap* for describing this relationship express the feudal bonds which existed between



Feudal culture of work and power

a worker and the person he or she worked for. In Hindi there is a word *namakhalal* for those who were loyal to the master. This meant a cultural belief that if one had eaten someone's salt, one had to be loyal to him. The word *namakharam* then because a term of abuse, it was a person who betrayed those under whose obligation he was.

The capitalist mode of production, in contrast, has a fast moving economy, where capital is held more in the form of an easily transferable form like money, rather than land. Capital is invested to get a fast rate of growth and is continuously moved around and re-invested in search of suitable returns. In today's business world, capital can flow quickly into stocks that promise good returns and flow out as quickly as it came if the promise appears to fall flat. In contrast to the feudal mode of production, the capitalist mode of production has bonds which are quickly snapped and rebuilt to meet the ends of the capitalist. Where the feudal worker often saw his relationships as a bond to death, with cultural and moral glues connecting people, the capitalist era is one of contracts, which can be quickly dissolved and rewritten. The main economic source of power is no longer land, but the ability to consolidate and build big concentrations of monetary capital. Those with more capital are able to control markets in a better way and can also produce more than those with less capital. Whereas loyalty was a highly sought after trait in one's subordinates in the feudal era, efficiency, defined as getting the maximum work done for the least cost, is one of the most prized traits in capitalism. The ability to calculate how much effort is put into a task and to design the least expensive solution becomes a highly desired quality. This is a big reason why computers and information technology are so important in this era. They enable organisations to keep gathering information and assessing how much work is being done and at what cost.



The 'skill' of monitoring

A crucial difference between these two modes of production is in the kinds of relationships which become widespread in them. In the feudal mode, the worker is made to work for the benefit of the lord through cultures of loyalty and morality, backed up by threats of physical retribution. In capitalism, the worker is made to work for the benefit of the capitalist through a sense of having made a contract of selling labour power in return for cash, backed up by fears of unemployment in the labour market, which help to keep the workers in line. New relations of production are set up, including the idea of private property. This would mean, for instance, the belief that a factory owner is the sole rightful claimant to a factory and its products (i.e. he “owns” it) and no one else can make a claim to it.

The growth of capitalism is an important contributor to the disembedding of society. Capitalism refers to the process of gathering more and more capital through relations of market-based exploitation. Capital here is typically of an abstracted, disembodied and disembedded kind. Capitalism has a dramatic impact on human society because it makes change possible at a scale which was impossible before. Capital can be gathered and accumulated in a way which is unprecedented. The accumulation of capital in vast amounts now makes it possible to achieve things which earlier could only be dreamt about. The coming together of huge resources make it possible to build huge buildings, factories, institutions and technologies. Capitalism needs continual growth. Capital, after all, is worth anything only when it generates profits. It must all the time be in search for newer pastures and greater returns. In pursuit of these it can be transferred from one continent to another in the blink of an eye. I live and work in Bengaluru, a city which has been transformed by the growth of global capitalism. Two or three decades ago European and American companies discovered that they could get software designed here at a fraction of what it cost them back home. This search for greater profit led to the mushrooming of IT firms in Bengaluru and then elsewhere in India. Many kinds of programming and BPO (Business Process Outsourcing) work moved here. This created great wealth in Bengaluru that made the software and BPO industry the new destination for graduates of many educational institutions in India. For a number of people the meaning of success in education got changed and began to mean getting a job in Bengaluru and moving here to work in its skyscrapers. If you managed to do it then you were a 'success'. Meanwhile in countries like the USA, to be 'Bangalored' meant being thrown out of a job which had moved to my home town. When I go to USA and mention that I am from

‘Bangalore’, I sometimes see people’s expressions change and they avoid eye contact for a while.

Capitalism is one of the important forces leading to the emergence of complex societies today. Capitalism creates new jobs for millions, and farmers and agricultural workers begin to change into wage labour in towns and cities. The search for greater profits creates new technologies that push millions out of work and may later also create new occupations and social classes. The next book in this series will talk about the emergence of different social classes, the relations and tensions between them and what this means for Indian education. Many of the questions facing education today are the result of the growth of capitalism and the new class structure which is emerging in our country and across the world. Capitalism calls upon the education system to give people jobs and not just the cultural orientation which feudal societies were content to provide. Capitalism also creates conflicts between different classes, and school and college education must ask itself whose side it is on. For instance, some say that education should operate mainly through markets, but others say that this means only the rich will be able to buy a good education for their children. The growth of capitalism raises profound questions for the education system.

One must be careful, of course, not to assume that capitalism is the only process which deeply influences Indian education. The growth of democracy, emergence of different interest groups, building of critical intellectual cultures, consolidation of religious organisations etc are pulling our country in different directions. What happens here is only partially driven by the expansion of capitalist processes in this country. The challenges posed by a complex society are also much more than what can be satisfied by capitalism alone, whether it is creating a spirit of universalism or the ability to culturally bond with each other or learning ways



Factors that influence education

of respecting each others' ways. However, the ways in which we deal with this complexity – through nationalism and various other ways of living together in a complex society – owe at least something to capitalism. Sometimes these various processes converge with the trends of capitalism and sometimes may pull in the opposite direction from it. The teacher may draw his beliefs and identity from the stories of the pre-capitalist gurus he may have heard about or may begin to think of himself as a government employee within a vast bureaucracy. Or he may think of his work as primarily creating suitable employees for capitalist relations. Or the teacher may even think of his work as creating empowered individuals who will change and transform capitalism. Yet, within this complicated set of contending forces, capitalism is an increasingly important influence on how a teacher thinks of his work and profession or how children begin to imagine their future lives.

The ongoing changes in India may eventually lead to the creation of a purely capitalist society and state, though of course this is not a necessary outcome. In such a state those who accumulate disembedded capital – typically in the form of money – come to dominate society and culture. This is quite different from say a society in which kings and agricultural landlords dominated. They got their power from the control of land and not through trading in land. Power rested on relatively stable relations of patronage and loyalty along with the threat of violence from the army if you crossed your lines. Under capitalism, power comes eventually from capital accumulated through market-based exchanges, which some say are fair, but which others say are inherently tilted in favour of those with greater capital. Of course, here too, the use of the army and the police to maintain the positions of the powerful remains commonplace.

Education in the Capitalist Era

Such a vast, sweeping social transition raises many questions, prominent amongst which are what should now be the goals and the content of education. For example, it can be argued that an education which celebrates kings and their pomp and majesty is more suitable for teaching feudal cultures and loyalty to the king. For the era of capitalism, what is more relevant is how technology is destroying and building anew many social relationships. It is better that children's education talks about new forces of production and the multi-national corporations which are coming up to become the most powerful institutions of the world. The culture of feudal societies supported the domination of feudal lords. Temples and mosques were supported by powerful landlords and kings and they taught a culture of loyalty to these elites. In contemporary times, schools and colleges are increasingly serving as sources of workers for the capitalist labour market. They now teach a message of being dedicated and

efficient professionals who must serve their managers without questioning them. The notion of merit serves to explain who gets a job and who does not in today's times. It seems also to give reasons why there is unemployment, job insecurity and low wage levels. Instead of asking why capitalists do not try to decrease their own profit and increase employment, people often point to the unemployed. Similarly, it is often said that the problems of the poor are because they do not have merit.

The content of education must be informed by our understanding of the new shapes which our society is taking. The next level of questioning may also be to ask whether one should teach the cultures of capitalism without questioning any of the latter's problems or whether we should teach something beyond capitalism, whether we should create cultures which overcome the problems of capitalism. For instance, should one celebrate competition in schools, which is part and parcel of the life of a worker in the capitalist era? Or should one teach cooperation,



Is competition desirable in schools?

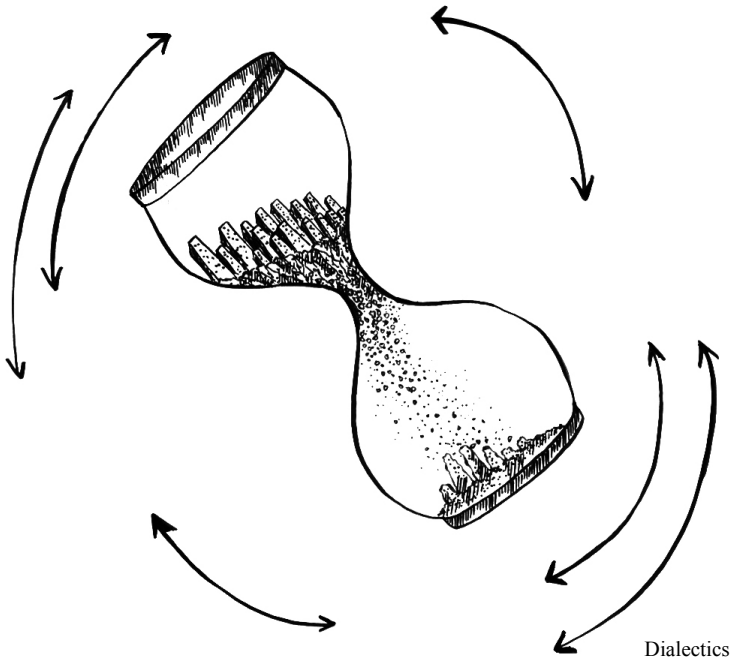


The importance of cooperation

which is becoming more and more important in organizing complex societies as well as becoming crucial for the very complicated production systems of our times. Cooperation is very important for overcoming the exploitation and misery created by capitalism. Choices like those between the values of competition versus cooperation are typical of the questions which sociologists raise for education. Children and adults do not learn cooperation and competition all by themselves. Instead, they learn them through schools and the moral guidance which their society provides. Which one of the two should Indian education emphasise?

Many of the *dharmasankat* or value dilemmas of contemporary times are those of the transition between feudal to capitalist modes of production. In another era we were encouraged to love learning for the cultural values it taught. Holy scriptures, poetry and literature were taught and loved for the exalting and ennobling ideas they held. Often these ideas reinforced the social relations of feudalism, making it appear correct and worth supporting. It is no coincidence that in the Ramayana the ideal son is also the king of the land. In the capitalist era, knowledges are valued more for the amount of profit they can bring, rather than any sense of ennoblement. And these tend to reinforce the new system of power, where it is the MBA and the big capitalist who is now the ideal person, the *maryada purushottam* who upholds the right code of conduct.

An important challenge before educationists is to understand the structure of the capitalist mode of production. And then to ask what kind of social structures will actually promote human freedom. If education is to deliver on its hope and promise of greater human autonomy and the ability to lead a fuller life, it becomes important to ask what are the tensions and contradictions within capitalism itself and how they can be overcome.



Social Tensions and Social Change

Many social philosophers believe that everything will eventually change. Marx famously argued that every social order carried within itself the seeds of its own change. The shift from one mode of production to another was usually a slow, painful process, occurring over hundreds of years. He argued that in all societies there was always some contradiction or conflict at their core. The core might smoulder for generations and centuries, but eventually that contradiction could lead to a polarization of forces and finally end up in a huge change creating a very different kind of society altogether.

In the case of feudal societies, Marx said, the contradiction came out through the conflicts between the ways of the feudal lords and the trading and commercial groups within the same society. Feudal societies were slow moving, with resources

tending to be controlled and accumulated by the feudal elites. The resources would be used for their luxurious lifestyles and for political posturing and celebrations. In contrast, trading groups and those involved in commercial activities saw their own growth coming mainly from their money and not political power or cultural status. Capital would be invested in a careful manner so as to give the greatest return or profit. This profit would then ideally be re-invested to make even more profit. Money was to be used very cautiously and a simple, disciplined lifestyle contributed to the growth of capital – and of the capitalist. This approach towards resources led the capitalist to gradually push for improving the forces of production to get more and more output from the same application of capital. From animal and human powered production, there was a shift to mechanization and the use of fossil fuels, and then electricity. The means of production were continuously improved upon creating better and more effective tools. The relations of production were gradually changed, leading to a widespread acceptance of the idea of private property and the idea that one worked for money and not from a culture of loyalty.

It is only to be expected that the capitalist mode of production, too, would bear seeds within it that would eventually transform it into a qualitatively different production system. To address that question, it would be useful to look at the major contradictions which may exist within capitalism. A new class structure is emerging and the people who control big corporations are becoming the most powerful forces in our country. The owners, boards of directors and the senior managers of corporations have a great deal of influence over the state and central government. The influence of big landlords has declined and so has that of trade unions. The education system is the institution through which educated wage labour is being provided for the economy. The educated wage labour is exposed to many new ideas and must learn to work together in a coordinated way so as to be highly productive. A

section amongst them becomes the managers who control the rest of the employees on behalf of the owners. However, the educated class which works in the formal sector is still a minority in India. There is a vast number of people in India who are skilled workers and farmers and pastoralists and so on. The role of the education system in their lives is much less significant, other than their being the ones whom it has failed and chucked out.

A more detailed consideration of India's class structure will be taken up in the next book in this series. Here, let us look at the broad questions of how this country is changing and which direction it is likely to go in. Asking what contradictions and conflicts are emerging due to capitalism may help in giving us some answers. You may note that the focus on contradictions and conflicts is an important difference from functionalist ways of looking at society. The functionalists pay attention to how society can become stable. Conflict theorists, particularly Marxists, are interested in how societies are dynamic and how contradictions drive change.

Alienation

An important contradiction of societies under capitalism, Marx said, was a sense of alienation, at the heart of which is a sense of not finding fulfilment or satisfaction in one's work. A farmer who works on her own field would at the end of months of effort be able to see a standing crop of golden wheat. This could give her a joy which is near impossible to describe in words. But a person who, for instance, works as part of a large team in a software company is only making a small part of a big and complicated computer program. All that a programmer may be told is that these are the variables which are your inputs and that is what your outputs should be, do the necessary programming to make it happen. There is no sense of deeper meaning, of a larger purpose to one's work. The lack of joy in the meaning of one's work is an important source of unhappiness and tension under capitalism.

In schools and companies alienation is part of everyday life. The student who feels disconnected from what is being taught because the teacher is in too much of a hurry and who cannot see what is the meaning or relevance of what is being taught, finds alienation a very familiar experience. For the teacher, the cost of stopping to take along all the different kinds of students is high. When cost and efficiency are the main values of a school or society, alienation is easy to accept. Or at least for the powerful individuals of that school or society to accept.

Some companies are now beginning to understand the damage which alienation does and are now willing to reduce their profits a little by changing work routines, at the cost of some efficiency, to give people a greater feeling of meaningfulness in the work they are doing. Sometimes this is done only to create more profits in the long run, but sometimes this is done from a genuine desire to give a better quality of life to employees. School teachers are similarly asking how to get more space and time so that they are



Alienation is part of everyday life

able to teach in an interesting and engaging manner rather than just rush to efficiently cover up the syllabus.

In parallel to this is another common social way of dealing with alienation. Many people are responding to this search for meaning through partying and consumerism. Since the work week is full of stress and alienation, the weekend becomes a time to compensate for it through various kinds of hectic activities, outings and celebration. Consumer goods provide many of the meanings which people crave, with an image created by larger than life advertising and the celebration of 'fun' in life. The joy of buying such goods periodically gives a high to the worker's life, glossing over, for a while at least, the tensions and contradictions produced by work. The problem in this is, however, that sooner or later people begin to wonder whether buying the latest gadget or flashy new clothes is really enough to give meaning to your life. The excitement of buying a new thing works only for a few days, after which one begins to feel jaded with it. And the only answer seems to be to go out and buy something new again. This has led to a vast culture of consumption, particularly in the developed parts of India and the world, which has added to the climate and environmental crises we are facing. And yet, people seem to feel unhappy and feel as if they are missing something important in life, which they seek through religion, visiting tourist spots and several other sources.

The contradiction of alienation continues to be present in our society, and it is a moot point whether consumerism and better HR practices (Human Resource management) have been able to cover up its cracks.

Exploitation

A basic feature of capitalism which causes a great deal of stress is that it is based upon relations of 'exploitation'. Strictly speaking, under capitalism profit is enhanced by exploitation of

workers by the capitalist. An example will help to understand this concept of exploitation.

A factory owner may hire, say, an engineer to design a mobile phone. When the mobile phone is ready, suppose it is sold for Rs 5,000. Of that, how much has the engineer contributed and what should he be paid? After paying the engineer his or her fair wage, and taking care of the other costs of running a factory like rent, electricity, etc. the balance is the profit which an owner makes. The problem is that under capitalism usually the engineer is not paid in a way directly corresponding to the contribution she or he has made. Instead, the payment is according to the supply and demand of engineers in the labour market. So if there are many engineers available, they will be willing to work for whatever low salary is offered. Or if there are only a few engineers available they will be able to get a high wage. To take another example, what would be the contribution of the person who actually assembles the mobile phone? Usually such a person is paid a salary which a tenth class pass-out with a couple of years of training will get. This is not actually a measure of the contribution he has made, but of how many such people are contacting the owner and pleading for a job, any job. A fair wage is difficult to get when the negotiation of wages is coloured by imbalances of power. Capitalism is characterised by such exploitation and the manipulation of wages through the market. The market can only be fair under certain conditions, not all.

The concept of exploitation implies that a person is getting less than what is fairly due to him or her. The owner is usually in a much stronger position of negotiation and is able to negotiate as low a wage as the market conditions can sustain. For unskilled work, that is often little more than the worker needs to get two meals a day and report back to work the next day. The contradiction between the owner and the worker is clearly visible in private schools. The fees collected by the school must be



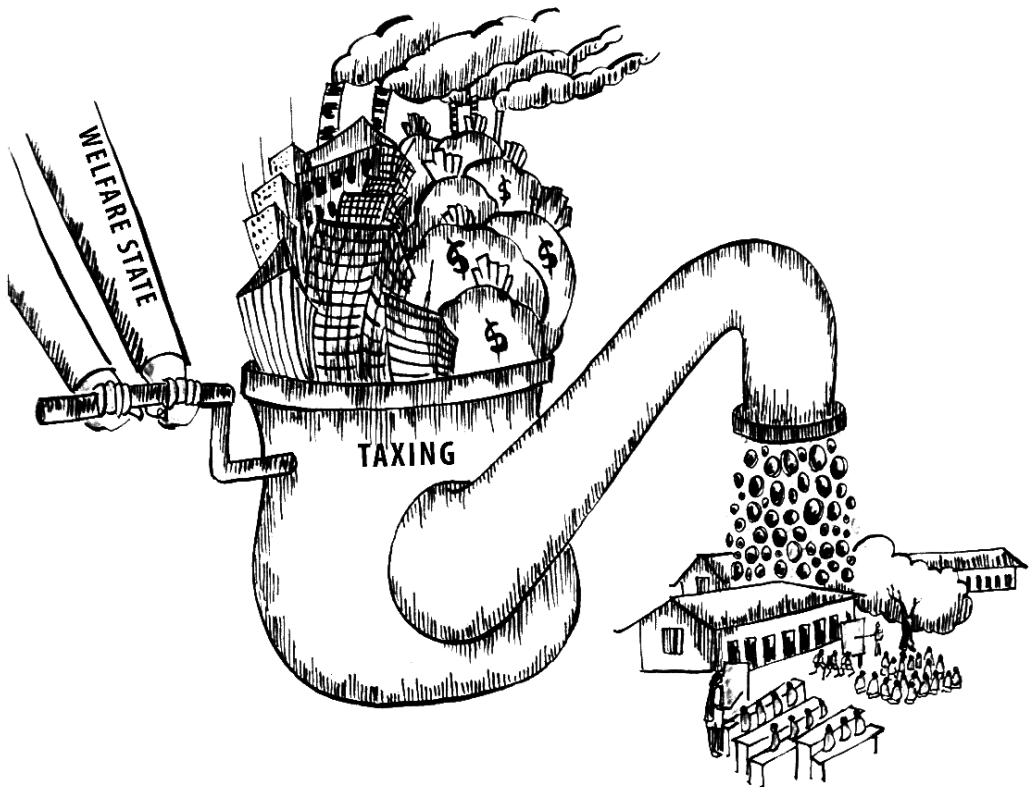
Exploitation

divided between the teachers' salaries, maintenance, the building of new infrastructure, and the owner's profits. One reason why teachers' salaries are so low in private schools is that the owner controls how the total funds are divided. The owner tends to keep as large an amount as possible as profit and then prefers to put money into making new auditoriums and other things which will attract new parents. A better salary for teachers and staff is usually the last priority for the owners and the management. This is why private schools are usually reluctant to share the breakup of their revenue and expenditure. The teachers do most of the work in private schools and yet their salaries do not make up most of the school expenditure.

Exploitation introduces a contradiction within social relations. The unhappiness of the exploited also pushes back upon the system in many interesting ways. Collective bargaining by workers is a common way to balance the negotiation strengths of an employer. Individual employees are too weak to oppose owners and managers to demand better wages and working conditions. However, we now have centuries of workers, including teachers, coming together to form a much more powerful bargaining entity. As a group they are taken much more seriously and cannot be so easily browbeaten or threatened with dismissal. Collective bargaining has been a powerful force which has been changing the way capitalism works. Enlightened employers are also moving to overcome the tensions caused by the workers' sense of exploitation by techniques like profit-sharing and giving them opportunities to participate in decision-making. However, repeated strikes and violence in many industrial areas tells us that this contradiction is far from resolved and still has the potential to drive changes in the way work is done.

Changing Forms of Capitalism

The contradictions within capitalism are slowly changing it. Capitalism is not eternal and static. It has gradually emerged over history and has taken many different forms in different eras. One form was that of mercantile capitalism which mainly focused on making a profit through trade, the East India Company being its most familiar example. Its wanting to control more and more of Indian territories was led by the desire to prevent other competitors like the French and Dutch from coming in and perhaps offering better prices to Indian producers. Later, the desire to control India was led by wanting to keep it as a puppet market for the produce of British manufacturers and preventing it



from setting up its own manufacturing. The British used revenue from India to finance the rest of their trade with Asian countries.

Another form has been the industrial capitalism of the early twentieth century which set up factories to make mass produced goods. Now, we have a globalised era of capitalism where manufacturing is moving away from advanced capitalist countries into some developing nations, and services and trade instead of manufacturing again dominate the way in which profits are generated.

Exploitation is still central to capitalism. However, capitalism has also had to change its character over the generations. It has been opposed by several forces including labour movements, religious groups and environmentalist lobbies. These have led, for instance, the USA to share more of the profits of owners with workers in the period after the second world war up to the 1980s. This led to the emergence of a situation where even semi-skilled workers like electricians and welders could own a house and a car. Sharply contrasting models of production and exchange like those of the Soviet Union, Cuba and China have also made their appearance and newer forms like mutualism continue to be proposed. Capitalism has compromised with labour in many countries in the 20th century by giving unemployment benefits and higher salaries to workers. In western Europe and Canada, this extended to creating a welfare state that took care of the housing and medical needs of all the poor. The universal education we see in these countries is at least partially the result of big companies accepting a high rate of taxation to provide schools for the poor. Government schools are run quite well there and most people send their children to them. The compromises struck between capitalism, the state and various lobbies and interests have shaped modern education in important ways. When we hear the call to universalisation of quality education

in India today, it should be remembered that this is essentially at cross-purposes with the profit maximisation of capitalism.

State, Capitalism and Education in India

In India, like in the rest of the world, it has been believed for the last century or so that capitalism should be controlled and regulated. Society's needs should take primacy over the market and the institutions which regulate capitalism should be answerable to ordinary people instead of the rich alone, for example through a democratically elected government. As in the USA, UK, France, here too it has been the practice that society should have a say in how resources are distributed, what values are promoted and so on, not only the market. The exact balance between society, state and market, however, can take different forms. When India gained freedom, the state took up the main role in guiding India's growth. Private companies were not believed to be capable or trustworthy enough to decide what the people wanted, especially considering the huge numbers of the poor of India.

Our democracy in the 1950s was still largely controlled by a small handful of upper caste and upper class men. While the freedom struggle had emphasised the participation of smaller farmers and workers and had made the ordinary Indian the centre of its appeal, in practice their role in making decisions was quite small. The most powerful groups in the country were then big farmers, big companies and the state itself. These often pulled in different directions and had contradictory interests and orientations. The Nehruvian state had at its top an educated group which was convinced that capitalism could not provide the big solutions for India. The public sector had to take the lead and the private sector came a distant second. It was the government that set agendas for growth and promoted the construction of industrial and infrastructural projects. The state also acted as a model employer, providing salaries and perks to its employees which

were supposed to become the standard which capitalists would be forced to follow. The state provided social protection to its employees ensuring that they were taken care when the inevitable problems of health and age struck. It is also that initial era when government schooling expanded rapidly in India, a phase which came to an end with the Indo-China war in 1962. Government school teachers were uniformly given a respectable salary and there was no widespread use of low-paid contractual teachers. They were the envy of those who taught in private schools.

Some of the problems of state run institutions came to the fore in the 1970s, in a period that is now known as the era of licence raj. Many government employees abused their position and instead of serving the people, often tended to serve themselves. Since the democratic system was controlled by powerful people, ordinary folk were unable to put pressure on government employees to do their job properly. Corruption and incompetence were able to flourish without the safeguard which democracy was supposed to provide.

Under these conditions some people have again begun to propose markets and capitalism as the solution. It is said that when individuals are driven by profit motives rather than values of cooperation and service, they will perform better. So it is argued that privatisation of many industries and services is the way to ensure that they work properly. This has also been the argument given for privatisation of the education system and for accepting the increasing power of corporate houses in India. There appears to be a shift towards corporations and crony capitalism in the voices that influence the decisions of the state. This was already visible in the previous central governments and has increased further under the present government.

Critics of the growing influence of capitalism call the belief that markets can deliver public services better than the state a

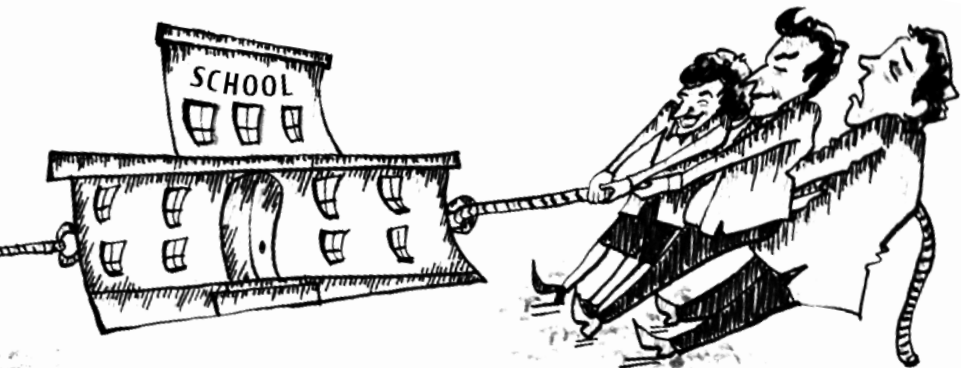
‘neo-liberal ideology’. They say that markets can never deliver justice or well-being to the majority of people. These critics say that capitalism will work mainly in the favour of owner classes and their top managers. The weakening of the state will lead to poorer conditions for the lower white collar workers, and the majority which is made up of farmers, skilled and unskilled workers of this country. This is because the market pays more attention to those with more money and less attention to those with less. With the privatization of education, only the more affluent will be able to afford good private schools, the rest will be condemned to over-crowded low-fee schools with underpaid and poorly trained teachers. The state’s functioning may indeed be distorted by selfish politicians and bureaucrats but this cannot be corrected through the market, they say. Instead, it is greater democracy and transparency, and active participation in politics that can correct the way government schools and hospitals function. More political pressure from the poorer classes is needed to fix things, not more privatization.

In the last few decades the power of capitalism and corporations over the state has increased. They use the state to help themselves grow, to acquire land, subsidies and favourable policies. This has gone hand in hand with their growing influence in the media and popular culture. If we take a panoramic view across India we see pockets of wealth surrounded by a landscape where farming



dwindles due to lack of attention and support. This has led to a widespread trend of investing in education as the way to more secure lives. However the education system itself has not been delivering on that promise. The quality of schools and colleges continues to be mediocre even as numbers have grown exponentially. The size of the white collar employees in this country is still a small fraction of the total workforce meaning that the opportunity to enter that class is restricted. Relatively few are able to make a shift into that class. The rest are failed into becoming contractual delivery men, saleswomen and so on. The power of employees has become relatively less, with the decline of trade unions. Contractualization of employees has occurred in many sectors including education, making teaching a poorly paid career option for most. It is difficult to understand the changing role of the education system in this country without examining capitalism and the debates over it.

Which direction this country and the world as a whole will take is impossible to predict. Marx had tried to do that but most of his predictions went awry. Yet, some problems in a purely capitalism driven world are easy to delineate: corporations and their owners and senior-most managers may become the most powerful people



The tussle to control schools

in this country, education may be about training dutiful company employees, not independent-minded people, only those people will get a higher education that are needed to meet the needs of corporations, a bare literacy is more than enough for the rest. These are what express the logic of capitalism and the need to minimize costs and maximise profits. But there may be other logics in society, too. For instance, a vibrant democracy may be able to also make space for equal respect to every citizen, not just the rich. There may be a pressure coming from cultural beliefs, which ignore profits and insist that some things should be done because they are morally correct, even if more expensive. It may be argued that enlightenment and the freedom to grow into a more cultivated human being are still important, even if that means higher taxes and it reduces the profit of the rich.

Capitalism in India is creating many freedoms by dissolving old relationships which tied people to low productivities or feudal cultures. It also has the potential to create new bondages and inhumanities. But there are many other voices too, in this world. Who knows where we will eventually go and what kind of modified capitalism may emerge. Or perhaps something else altogether. Educationists in India and everywhere else will have to keep engaging with the questions raised by these transformations.

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Education through Formal Organisations

5

The growth of capitalism and the disembedding of social relations which was discussed in the previous chapters makes it possible for huge new factories and institutions to emerge. People are drawn into working together in large numbers that had few precedents in history. They now cooperate and coordinate their actions so as to perform great feats that were earlier thought impossible. This calls for a new way of doing things together to which we now turn our attention. Our times have seen the rise of formal organisations in every sphere of life, particularly in education. This chapter is about formal organisations and the advantages they offer, the difficulties they run into and attempts to overcome these difficulties. There were formal organisations before the growth of capitalism, too. But in the contemporary era these are to be seen everywhere, and schools and universities now almost everywhere exist as formal organisations.

Formal Organisations

A formal organisation is one in which the rules, culture and structure are deliberately and consciously set up and are then consciously maintained and regulated. A family is not a formal

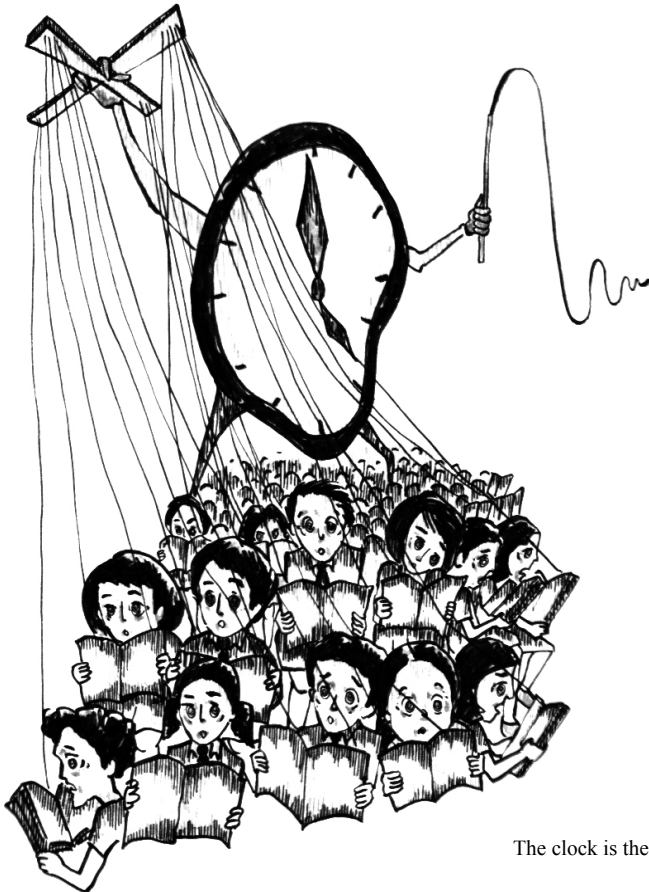


A typical school life

organisation. A family will also have its own spoken and unspoken rules but these develop gradually over generations and centuries through the knocks and lessons of time. Tradition and culture are the sources of norms, which the family tries to teach to the next generation in direct and indirect ways. However, a formal organisation will be far more explicit about its goals and also about the social rules through which it works in achieving those goals. As institutions of learning the *gurukulas*, and even *madrastas* and *pathshalas* of ancient and medieval times may have been based on the family structure. However, most contemporary educational institutions are formal organisations. It is relevant therefore to ask what advantages they may have, if any, over other kind of organisational structures. Their success and ubiquitousness needs to be understood.

A formal organisational structure is what makes it possible to 'school' so many millions of people in a common way. It permits us to have large schools and also coordination between schools.

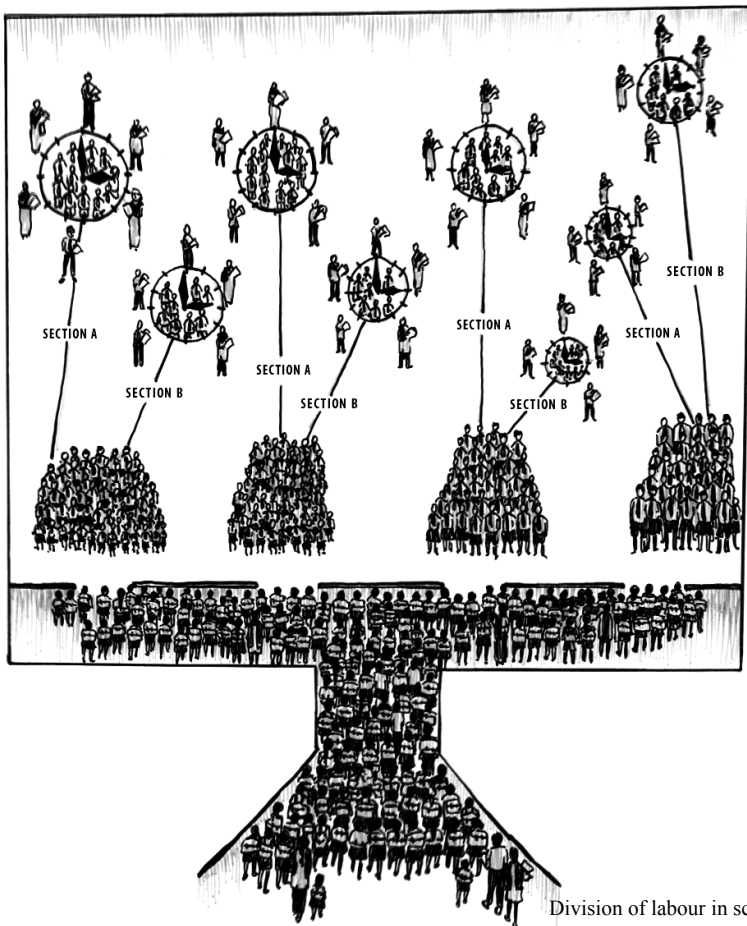
At the same time, it makes me grumble about a boring daily routine that crushes my spirit. A school, for example, is organised around fixed timetables which expects us to be get inspired about Maths from 8:40 to 9:20, History from 9:20, Physics from 10:00 and so on. A formal structure forces me to feel excited about subjects in a rhythm that is locked to a timetable's clock. This often leaves students and teachers wondering whether they have just become slaves and what is the place left for creativity and spontaneity in their lives. These and other questions connected with formal organisations are central issues in our education system today.



The clock is the master

Formal organisations' features were described well by the German scholar Max Weber (1864-1920). He called such organisations 'bureaucracies' but they were to be seen not just in the government but also in private companies and in institutions like hospitals, schools and universities. Weber believed that formal organisations or bureaucracies emerged because they were far more effective in dealing with large scale and complex activities, particularly in those situations where those activities had to be repeated again and again. A family model could work well with say a school that had 10-20 students as in the *gurukulas*. But if we have 500 students or even up to 7000 students which a large contemporary school may have, then it is impossible to teach and manage so many students in the same way as we manage a single family. The formal organisation does things in a different way which have the following characteristic features:

1. *Breaking work into smaller units:* The family or the *gurukula* could keep 10-20 students of different ages together and teach all of them. Teaching 500 students together in a school is very difficult to do. So as numbers begin to rise, they are divided up into different age groups or different knowledge levels so that they are easier to teach. This divides the school into different classes or different learning groups. What is to be taught is also divided up into different subjects which separate teachers could handle. This makes work easier for individual teachers since now they do not have to know all the subjects but can specialise in one or two.
2. *Building a system:* The above means that someone has to sit and think of work as a system. There has to be a flow of events all connecting with one another. Someone has to think of what children should learn in class 1, then class 2 and so on, and then ensure that the curriculum is inter-connected. In a very small school this may not be necessary since the same 1-2



Division of labour in schools

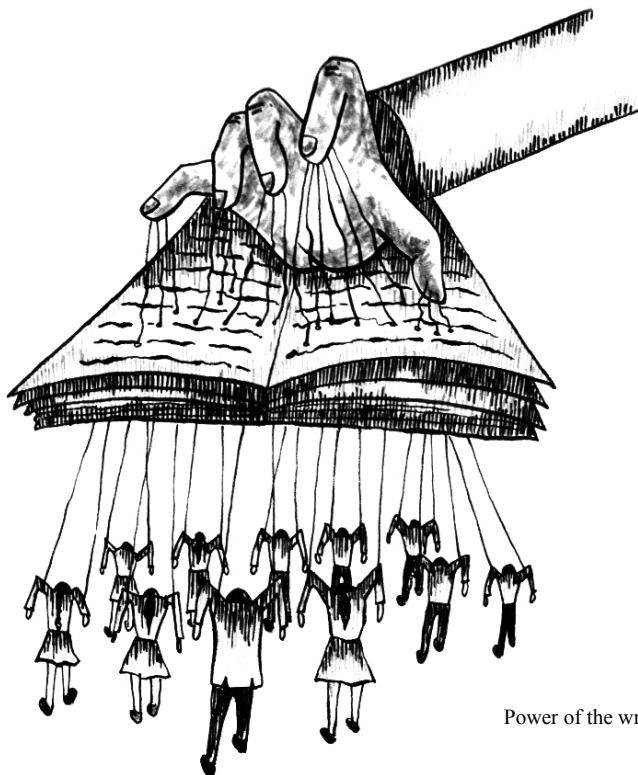
teachers are dealing with everything and can everyday work out what should follow what. But in a large school this has to be consciously thought of well in advance, and continuously checked and maintained.

3. *Explicit rules:* In a family or a small group people's experience of being with each other is sufficient for coordinating with each other. However, if a teacher joins a school with ten classes and is not familiar with its system and tries to teach whatever is interesting to him in class 5, there would soon be complaints from the teachers and students of class 6 and perhaps even of class 4. For smooth functioning, it is important to clearly spell out what is to be taught in class 4, class 5 and class 6. Rules are

very important in keeping a complex society running and they need to be known to all concerned people. A teacher cannot say, for instance, all by herself that she thinks teaching the alphabet is unnecessary in class 1. What is taught in class 2 depends on what was taught in the previous year and there should be a rule to say that it has to be done. Such formally laid out rules are a pain but quite necessary to keep a large-scale and complicated organisation going. They cannot be easily changed at will but their advantage is that they permit coordination and cooperation across large numbers.

4. *Literacy*: Writing rules down was alien in the past to those who were used to small organisations. In such organisations everyone knew what was to be done and what was not and if someone did not know then they could easily be told about how things were done around there. It was also easy to change what one was doing whenever some problem came up. However, this soon created problems when a threshold of a certain size of an organisation was crossed. For instance, when I alone teach all students there is no need to write out a timetable. I have my own mental map of what things I want to cover. But if I am teaching four periods every day in a school with 10-12 teachers then it is best to write my timings out in the form of a timetable and stick it up at a conspicuous place. Or else I may keep going into other teachers' classes at the wrong times. In a sense, literacy also helped to resolve conflicts. For instance, if my friend and I were not sure whose class it was at 10:30 we could go and look at that written timetable. Writing gave great power to the rules and also to those who set the rules.
5. *Hierarchy*: Power is present in all organisations, whether it is the family, the *gurukula* or the modern school. Power is perhaps a necessary aspect of all social life, since we want to control the direction in which we act and to resist pulls

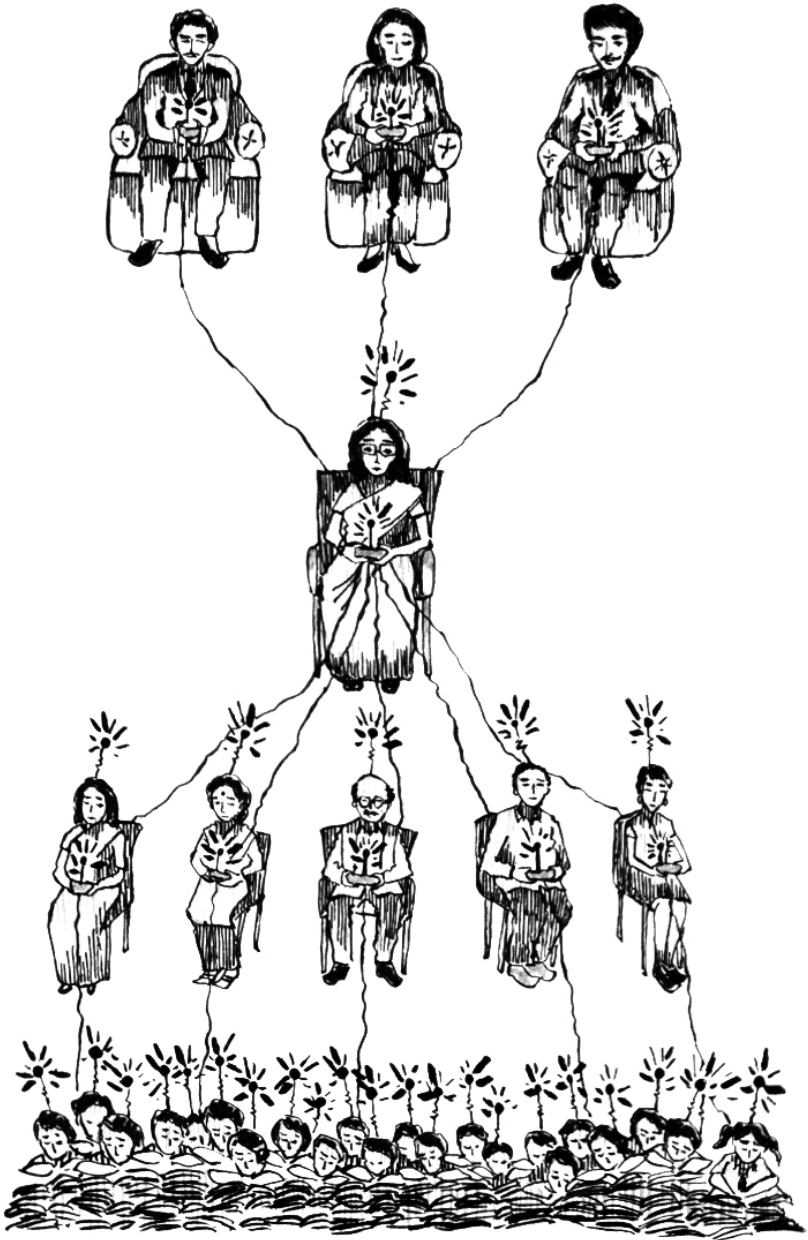
into other directions. For this we must be able to exert our own power. Without power perhaps no organisation is possible. In small groups power may be spread out in a way which is not very clearly spelt out. In formal organisations, however, a clear hierarchy is present and the direction of a lot of that power is explicitly laid out. In the typical formal organisation power is concentrated at the top and everyone else has to follow the directions which come from there. A clear division of roles is present, including who is answerable to whom. So in the formally organized school the teachers are answerable to the principal, who may be answerable to the trustees of the school or to the block education officer. The bottom is considered to be only a tool for the intentions of the top. The control of the bottom by the top is very important as only then can the organisation go in the direction which



Power of the written word

the top wants. If the bottom goes in whichever direction it wants, then the organisation may lose sight of its goals. It is the hierarchy and concentration of power in it which make the formal organisation such an effective body and have made it so widespread.

6. *Routinisation*: The different activities of a formal organisation are analysed and then split up in such a way that they can be done in a routine way. So a daily time table is made, a plan for the entire year is made and so on. This way the teacher and the student can know what to do without any deep soul-searching or stress. It keeps things going in a smooth fashion and also saves trouble in the next year since a plan is already available. 'Routinisation' decreases the emotional and intellectual effort of doing things and speeds things up. Teachers and principals can build a routine of say, having a Saturday afternoon meeting every week, which provides a regular opportunity to meet and discuss various issues. A separate special meeting for each issue does not need to be sought, disturbing everybody's work.
7. *Impersonality*: Linked with routinisation is doing things in an unemotional and impersonal manner. It is simpler to do a large amount of ordinary work if I am calm and neither too excited nor too disgusted by it. If I were to feel delighted and tortured by turns while checking my answer sheets then I would be able to work only at a very slow speed, needing many breaks to recover my balance. But if I see it as just a routine, technical activity then I can quickly zip through the paper checking and walk off. Being impersonal has its benefits. Impersonality gives another set of advantages too, to formal organisations. The different positions and roles in an organisation are not allowed to be connected to particular individuals or their unique tastes and habits. A teacher, for instance, is a sanctioned post in the government education system. Individuals may come



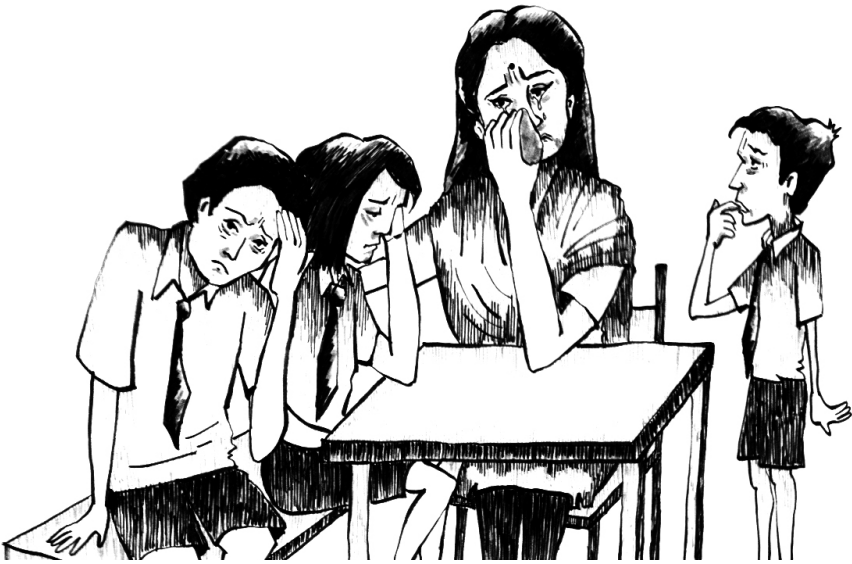
Hierarchy in schools

and go but that sanctioned post remains. The principal has a set of guidelines which deal with the position of a teacher, not that individual alone who has now left. The new teacher will be sent into the old teacher's classrooms and the system will carry on. This impersonality permits a school to carry on from one generation to another and does not allow it to crash if a particular individual is lost. This is very unlike the highly personalized ways in which families operate, where the loss of members can bring them into a severe crisis.

Problems of Formal Organisations

Formal organisations have been a great asset in human history. Every social unit has some kind of political system which controls what happens in it and gives direction to it. As social units became larger, the political groups began to take up a formal structure. The state emerged as a body which had its appointed officials and functionaries and its soldiers and police to enforce the will of the rulers. These began to be increasingly organized in a formal manner. The industrial revolution, too, went hand in hand with the growth of formal organisations and these were what permitted much greater efficiencies and much greater quality control. As religions became larger, the people at their top began to worry about what local priests were doing and the kind of ideologies and rituals which they were propagating. Several religions began to organize themselves into formal structures. As formal organisations became more common, they also became the basic format of schools across the world, facilitating a growth in the size of schools and the integration of schools into regional and national school systems. The development of a formal school passing certificate, for instance, made it much easier for a person to move hundreds of kilometres and show it to smoothly join another institution there.

But the growth of formal organisations has also been a much debated matter in human society at large and in schools in



Is impersonality desirable?

particular. Generations of students and teachers have writhed under the grip of rules and regulations that seem to crush their own feelings and instincts. For instance, the system of breaking a day into eight periods with a plan of different subjects for each period may have many advantages like ensuring that all subjects get covered and students are not swamped with only one subject in the entire day. But there are also days when a class is going beautifully and there is great enthusiasm being generated for a topic and suddenly the bell rings and you have to switch over to reading something else altogether. One wonders then whether the formal organisation helps or hinders a good education.

Several kinds of common problems have been identified in formal education. One of them is that where formal organisations are effective, students and teachers learn to basically follow what the system expects. A working formal organisation has a very strong control over everyday functioning. Those who resist the system, howsoever correct they may be, find that they are up against a terrifyingly strong opponent. Fighting formal organisations

and getting them to change can be quite a challenging task. It is so much easier to just give in and do whatever is expected. Formal organisations tend to prefer subservient, obedient and unquestioning people. This affects the kinds of personalities which get created in schools, both amongst teachers as well as students.

It is very difficult to be spontaneous in such organisations. Everything is so thoroughly structured that following your own instincts and interests is quite difficult. This creates a tendency in people to just follow what others are doing and to do what they are told to do. Which is the opposite of what we need for nurturing creative, active thinkers who can examine and question the basics of this world.

The great power which formal organisations acquire and exert upon individuals can lead to profound cultural violence. For instance, depending upon how a state defines its own culture, it could suppress other cultures and impose only one particular view of the world. This has often gone hand in hand with the rise of mass schooling, where states try to put all children into school and then socialise them into a particular culture. One of the early countries where mass schooling was begun to be practiced was Prussia (now

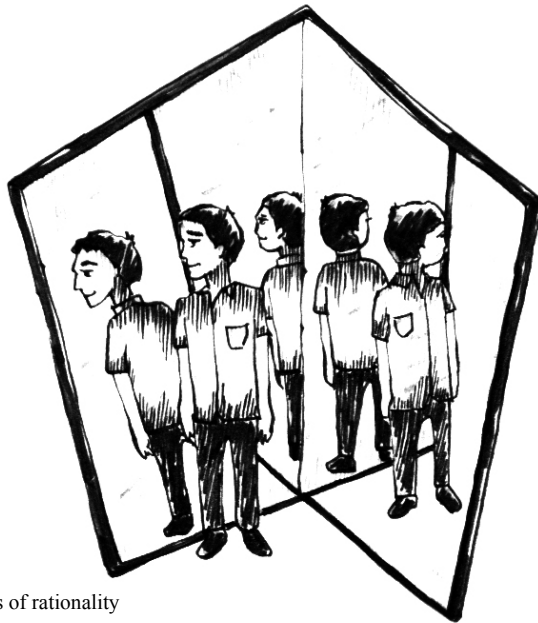


The docile student

a part of modern Germany). The king wanted to promote loyalty to his throne and to create dutiful soldiers whom he could use to push his own political agendas over his neighbouring countries. The formal organisational structure of the school became a powerful aid in his plans. Similarly, many other states across the world have tried to promote different cultural ideals through the formally organized school. The formal organisation has been a very effective way of teaching many kinds of curricula, ranging from nation-state ideologies of having a single language and religion amongst all citizens to teaching ideologies of communism or fascism, or even multicultural tolerance and mutual love and respect. Whatever the curriculum be, opposing it in formal organisations has been very difficult and painful.

Rationalisation of the World

The classical theorist of formal organisations, Max Weber, had an analysis of what the fundamental problem was with them. He said that in our lives we are actually drawn to doing things for many kinds of reasons. For instance, we may be doing things for technical and instrumental reasons, where we have an immediate goal and try to find the simplest way of meeting that. So we try to see how to cover all subjects in school and find that the most effective way of doing that is by making a timetable that distributes time equally across them. But the problem is that we don't live only for technical efficiency. As human beings, we have many different motives and rhythms in our lives. We may feel inspired and passionate about studying and admiring butterflies. This may have no immediate benefits. To take another example, we may have deep values which are not immediately practical and yet we want to act according to them. So, celebrating the Republic Day may appear to be a good day wasted which could have been used to study mathematics and prepare for a competitive examination. But feeling the joy of seeing our flag wave in the wind and to sing



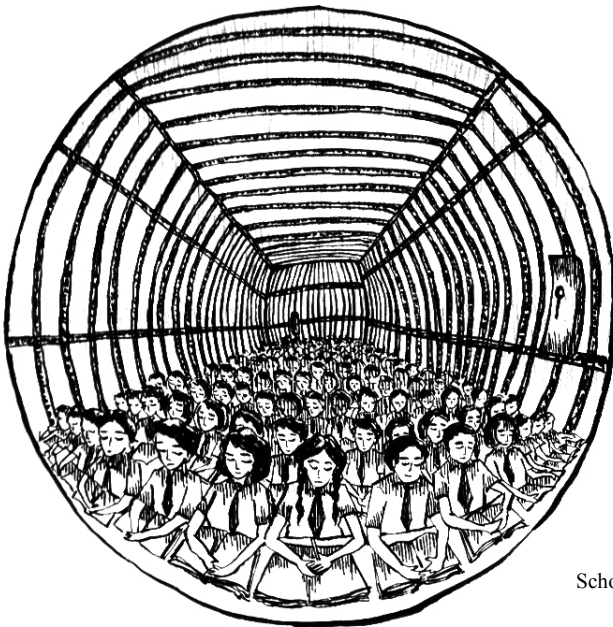
Different types of rationality

our national anthem together is also important for us. At the heart of the difficulties with formal organisations is that they focus only on immediate goals and on doing things to meet immediate needs. This is sometimes called ‘instrumental rationality’ and of course is not a bad thing in itself. We need to do lots of things in a very instrumental way if we want to live in this world, like studying to make a career for ourselves, building bridges to cross rivers and so on. The catch, however, is how to balance our instrumental self with the other reasons for doing things, like emotional reasons, value related reasons, aesthetic reasons and other such non-instrumental motives in life.

Weber believed that we had created formal organisations as a way to help us to do things better but they were slowly growing to become what he called an ‘iron cage’ in which we found ourselves trapped. This is not a problem of schools alone but a problem of the modern era itself. Wherever we see large scale complex societies we find them struggling with how to have humane organisations that retain their sensitivity while also dealing with large numbers.

Many scholars follow Weber in calling this the problem of the ‘rationalization’ of the world. Everything appears to get re-organized for instrumental and technical reasons. In that process the human often seems to struggle to find a space for itself.

Michel Foucault has been one of the best known people who attacked these features of modernity. He said that modern institutions now embed a huge amount of power which controls us in ways which we no longer recognise. He sharply attacked modern schools and examinations. He said that the functioning of the school actually tightens the grip of modern institutions around our lives and enslaves us. Foucault said that practices like examinations make us feel continuously under surveillance and lead us to toe the line every single day so that when examinations come we would perform in a way that made the powerful happy. He said that a vast normalising power has become part of our unconscious self and the desire to appear ‘normal’ has made us docile and submissive.



Schools as jails

Improving upon Formal Organisations

So what can be the answer? Sometimes, it appears that the best way is to abandon complex and large-scale societies and go back to living in small groups. While groups of committed enthusiasts may try doing that, for the rest of this world's population that is really not an option. So many billions of people no longer have the space or ecology to be able to abandon modern ways of living. Another strategy which can be taken is to find ways of building formal organisations that are conscious of their problems and make it a point to be more humane.

Schools and universities encounter a special problem when they function as formal organisations. In bureaucratised schools, we are creating the model of a teacher as a bureaucrat, who works in an impersonal and efficient way, paying attention to the technical details of teaching and subject knowledge. However, the problem is that students learn best from teachers who are deeply humane and not impersonal. It is the ability to make a subject exciting and connected with our most important concerns that draws students



Teachers and children interacting in a small group

into loving that subject. This is difficult to reconcile with the cold relationships that formal organisations seem to promote.

Ivan Illich's criticism of schools was fundamentally an opposition to their impersonality and concentration of power. One of his solutions was to spread power across all the people and not just allow it to be concentrated at the top. Many others have tried to redesign organisations such that they give spaces for smaller groups to develop within a big structure. If ways can be found for small groups to be nested within and coordinate with external groups then they can internally have many informal ways of working, while still having the advantages of being part of large and complex institutions. Setting a cap on the size of a class is an important part of such strategies. So is building cultures of friendliness and personal relationships between teachers, the administration and students.

Most attempts to build 'alternative' schools have made it a point to keep numbers low and set up many norms and rules which ensure that a personalized relationship is maintained. This includes having teachers live with the children, having weekly meetings with students in small groups to discuss affairs of the school, having a lot of talking and dialogue in the classroom and so on. While all these appears feasible to do with small schools, the challenge is to adapt these methods to serve millions.

In the commercial world there have been many attempts to create more humane formal organisations even at large scales. These include companies which decided that no office would have more than 300 people. Once an office or factory grew larger than that it would be split into two separate parts. There have been efforts to build extensive participation in decision-making so that a much larger number of people feel actively involved in their work and not just passive recipients of decisions. Those who have to do routine work are continually given opportunities for a change in

rhythm. Work is consciously sought to be structured in ways that give more space for initiative and creativity in it.

The school as an institution shares many of the features of factories, governments and offices. This is hardly surprising since it exists in a time which leads all of them to share a common organisational form. The solutions to the problems of bureaucratisation may also have some similarities across all these sites. The dilemmas of formal organisations and the rationalisation of our world are at the core of the challenges faced by most other institutions along with schools today. Many problems of teachers and students are actually coming from the formal character of school organisation. Finding ways to provide the benefits of being part of large-scale and complex social systems while also at the same time retaining our spontaneity and humanity is one of the frontier questions that schools as well as all other organisations need to find answers for. Some of the most exciting innovations being done in changing the daily life of the school like having children of different age groups in the same classroom, teachers moving to more engaging teaching practices, giving space to teachers to learn and grow and not just teach mechanically every day, are all actually steps to deal with the challenges of rationalisation and bureaucratisation of schools. These are all ways of helping humanity overcome one of the biggest challenges facing it today.

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Modernity, Identity and Education

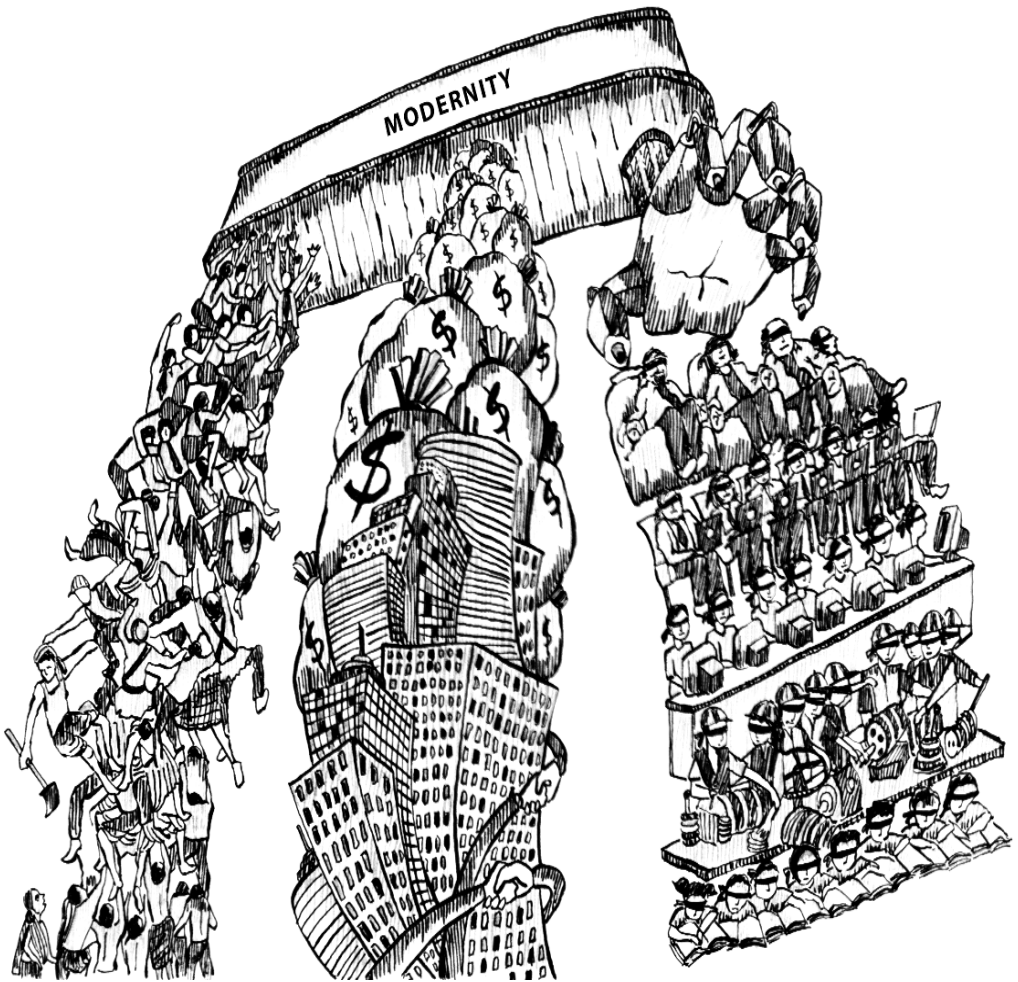
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Indian education has been witnessing quite dramatic changes and is even today being tugged in different directions. We are going through difficult times, where strong differences of opinion and cultural orientation are engaged in a tussle in the public sphere. Conflicts between various political and economic interests have found expression in education as well. This short book has tried to depict some of the important threads in this complicated fabric of our society and tried to spell out some of the challenges and problems being raised by them for education.

There are many ways of describing our education system. Needless to say, the way we describe it guides the way we struggle with it. Some could talk about the experiences of a teacher, some about the daily joys and frustrations of being a student. Others could have talked about the struggles to write a meaningful and relevant textbook. In this particular little book, I have focused more on certain processes that can be called structural and macro in character. These are the processes of the emergence of complex societies, marketisation and rationalisation of institutions, which I have suggested are shaping our basic relationships and identities in the school and university. These are structural since

they give the basic context or shape to many of the situations we find ourselves pushed into as teachers, students, and curriculum designers and administrators. When we find people arguing over whether physics should be taught or Vedic knowledge, when students feel depressed over the daily monotony of the timetable, when we worry about whether studying literature adds anything to our lives, the structural processes outlined in this book lurk behind all of them. They are, of course, not the only deep flowing processes shaping our lives, but are amongst the more important and better understood ones in sociology and social anthropology.

The three pillars of modernity



The emergence of complex societies, marketisation and rationalisation are often said to be characteristics of modernity. When social scientists use the term modernity they do not mean just new and fashionable clothes or modern gadgets. At one level modernity refers to these broad processes of the emergence of universalist, complex societies, capitalism and bureaucratisation, processes which have influenced the lives of billions of people. At a second and deeper level modernity refers to a way of thinking and doing things that gained momentum in some parts of the world, starting two or three centuries ago. At its heart, perhaps this is a shift towards a greater use of reason to understand ourselves and our world and also to rethink what we do. The emergence of social science is an example of modernist thinking, where we try to explain, for example, human poverty by looking at the social and economic causes of it. This would be different from other ways of understanding poverty through a study of the will of God and so on. The greater use of reason gave more strength to ask, for instance, why we should be ruled by the arbitrary will of kings and not through rational debate over what the best state policy may be. Such questioning led to strengthening of democratic ideals around the world. This has had a considerable impact upon how we visualize schools and what we think education should be. Of course, not everyone agrees that modernity and reason are good things. There are those who reject it altogether and then there are others who believe that science and reason are beneficial but have to be seen in conjunction with other things like culture. The struggle between these respective positions is also reflected in what happens in schools.

In western Europe, modernity gained an early foothold around the eighteenth century with the growth of industrial capitalism there, along with an increasing use of technical rationality to plan and redesign everything from streets to armies. In India, modernity was already developing with the growth of bureaucratisation in the Mughal administration much before the British came. When



Questioning arbitrary systems

the British overran this region, modernity got further impetus and grew in its own unique way. For example, Gandhi rejected the external symbols of the British like their railways and industry, but said that it was important to think again about our tradition to make it suitable for current times. This was a typically modernist way of thinking, part of the growth of rationalisation, asking how to redesign everything to make it work better under new conditions. The 'Bengal Renaissance', the Satyashodhak Sabha, the Arya Samaj and Singh Sabha reform movements and many other such intellectual and social movements of the last two centuries in India are examples of Indians trying to find their own version of modernity. They rejected some traditions on grounds of their no longer being relevant to the times and sought a new interpretation of philosophy, culture and education. A great many of the educational issues and questions of India are actually related to the problem of what modernity means and how to put it into practice. Capitalism, bureaucratisation and rationalisation and greater social complexity are pillars of modernity and understanding them goes a long way towards seeing how modernity operates and also the new challenges it poses. A critical understanding of these will help us work out what attitude we should take towards modernity and how to interpret it in our own everyday life.

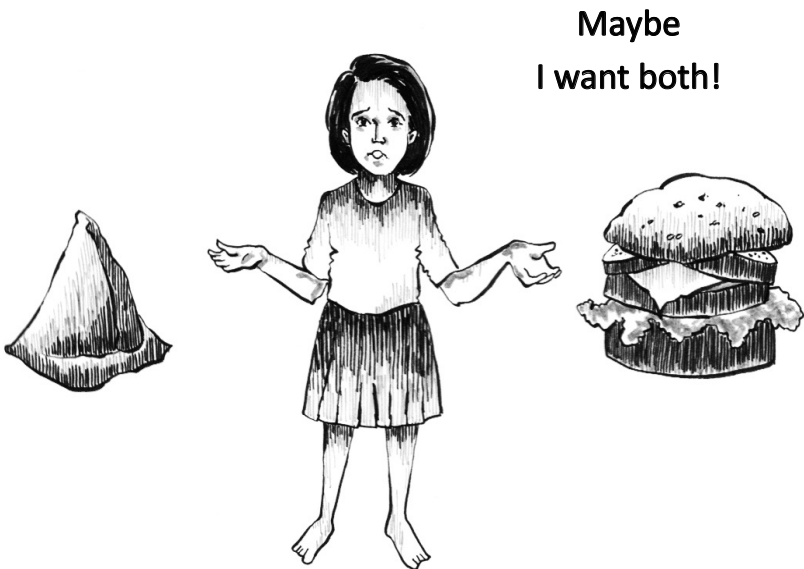
Critics of Modernity

Modernity has not been without its opponents. Debates have raged over marketisation, rationalisation and the challenges of living in complex societies. For instance, people ask whether schools should have uniforms at all and whether dressing everyone in the same way is a good idea. It may have its benefits since parents have to worry less about a clean new dress every day and it also reduces competition amongst children and parents about who has the nicer dress. But it also somehow seems to make life much more dull and boring. Routinization and homogenisation, some critics say, are some of the basic dilemmas of modernity as a whole, not just of bureaucratisation.

Many people say that another important problem in modernity is that it ignores local variations and imposes one single answer on everyone. Apart from being boring, one more problem of the school uniform is that it takes one particular culture, like wearing trousers and shirts, and thrusts it upon everyone else. Modernity, its critics say, pretends it is universal, but actually it is not. Modernity's pretensions of universality are really a violent suppression of the salwar kameez, the mundu, the lungi and the kurta-pyjama. To fit in and not get excluded and marginalised, one has to toe the line of the dominant culture, which masquerades as a universal code. Whenever we apply modernity, including bureaucratisation and capitalism, to people's cultures and their identities, problems emerge everywhere, of a strikingly similar nature. But different kinds of opposition to modernity are also emerging. Some critics say that today's era is a period of rejection of modernity. According to them, people everywhere, from Iran to USA are turning again to identity and religion. Instead of the single answers of modernity, they say, we are now in a historical period which can be called post-modernity. The promise of science in the period of high modernity was that it would provide an answer to

everything. In our turbulent times, it seems like there is no single answer to anything. There are multiple cultures in our country and we accept that they will always remain with us. Bureaucratisation and rationality must be rejected, such critics say. Instead, we must restore local identity and local culture, the celebration of the samosa instead of MacDonaldd's burger, to its rightful place. Schooling need not talk about common cultures, instead it should feel good about celebrating the culture of particular communities or religions or nations.

The shift amongst many scholars towards a critique of modernity can be seen in the fate of something called modernisation theory which had been very popular two-three generations ago. It believed that all countries would eventually become like the developed countries of west Europe and North America. This was said to be modernisation, where every country would eventually develop an elected parliament, would have industries with bureaucratic cultures like those in America and USSR, have universities like them and so on. However, modernisation theory now stands in

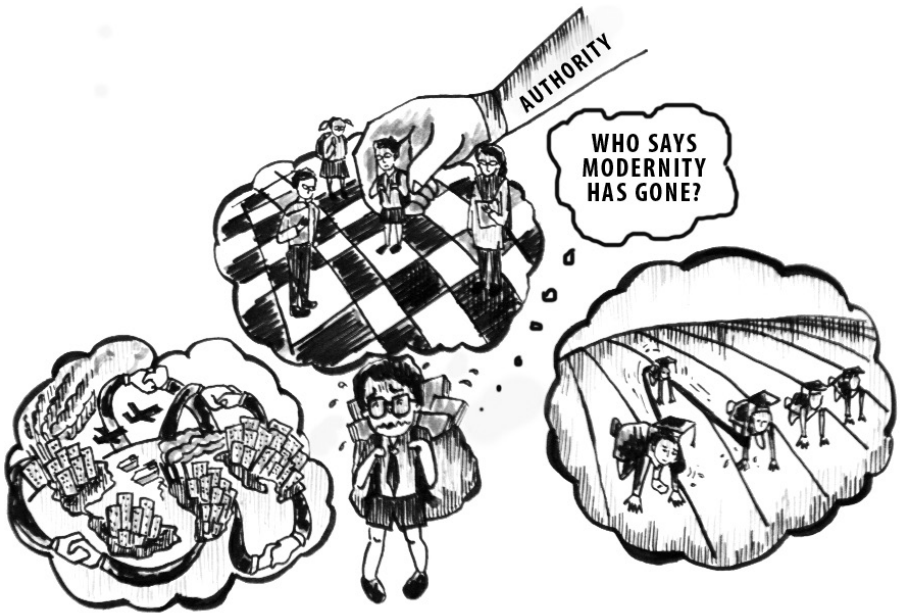


disarray. It is strongly disputed whether the same path to economic development was followed everywhere. Japan, for instance, became a great economic power by developing its industries and management culture in a very different way than America. Singapore and Saudi Arabia became some of the richest countries of the world without any trace of democracy. Universalism was said to be a characteristic feature of modernisation, but it has been challenged in many parts of the world and it is being said that every region has to find its own unique and particular path.

But is Modernity Gone?

Some people look at the growth of identity and challenges to universalism and declare that this is now a post-modern era, where modernity no longer matters. They say that modernity had its benefits, but now we have outgrown them. A little different from them are some others who say that modernity was never a good idea anyway and the ancient ways were best. They declare that the sooner we return to the ways of our forefathers the better it is for everyone. If we call the first group as post-modernists, the second can be called anti-modernists.

A third group takes a more cautious approach to understanding identity and culture and the questions they pose to modernity. They say that modernity is still with us as a social trend and it has not gone away. These people say that our times are characterised by late modernity, not post-modernity. This is a time when we try to revise and improve upon modernity, not reject it altogether. They say that the basic processes which shaped modernity are still with us: we are still faced by the challenges of living together in complex societies. Marketisation and capitalism are still driving change in the world and bureaucratisation is still there shaping the way our institutions function. If anything the power of each of these has only increased, not decreased. Such people point out that in today's times global capitalism has become far more developed and has tied almost all



the countries of the world into its web. Bureaucracies everywhere are getting inter-connected. As I write this people are worrying about getting aadhar cards and connecting them to their mobile numbers, bank accounts and PAN cards. Schools are becoming more bureaucratized, not less, with increased record-keeping and surveillance of teachers. School curricula are being called upon even more strongly in our times to find ways of keeping different parts of India from fighting with each other over water, language, religion and so on. The challenge of dealing with modernity, it would appear, has actually become more intense and not less.

Today identities are getting shaped by markets and state bureaucracies as well. Governments have a decisive role to play in defining people as Kannadigas or Marathis. Advertising and consumer goods fan the excitement of Ganesh Chaturthi and Eid. Identities are taking up a different form compared to what they might have been a couple of centuries ago. We periodically

have conflicts over whether to teach Hindi or English or Tamil or Kannada in schools. The passion over these respective languages is partially because they are connected with identities: personal identities, regional identities as well as political identities. When I lose the ability to speak in Punjabi or I am told not to use what are called Urdu words in a Hindi classroom, then I may feel personally hurt. But these identities are shaped by centuries of struggles, by bureaucratic processes and by the inter-connecting of markets as well as changing ideas of what the state is supposed to do. For instance, two centuries ago hardly anyone thought of teaching what we recognise today as Hindi in schools. There were many local tongues like Malwi, Bagri, Bhojpuri and so on. In a great act of bureaucratisation and rationalisation these have

Where did modernity go?





A teacher controlled by bureaucracy vs an autonomous teacher

gotten standardized into a school version of Hindi, which is closest to the Khari Boli dialect. The Hindustani version of Hindi, with a mixing of languages from different cultures has been gradually pushed out and a sanskritized version of Hindi is now taught in schools. If you want a certificate from school bureaucracies and want to become part of the job market, that is what you had better learn to be proficient in. The shaping of Hindi identity actually still expresses the forces of modernity and cannot be properly understood without reference to them. Similarly, what is considered to be Hinduism or what is considered to be Islam can vary greatly across different regions. It was common for people to worship at different kinds of shrines and have ideas and rituals that mixed and matched whatever was available and attractive to them. The narrowing down of Hindu or Islamic identity into certain specific rituals and symbols is greatly promoted by the uniting forces of capitalism and the rationalisation of religious institutions. To take another example, national identity with its common symbols, languages and cultures is held in place through the bureaucratic structure of the state. In the contemporary era identity itself carries the stamp of modernity.

Perhaps it is wise to keep paying attention to the social processes and the ideologies of modernity and not assume that everything in them is obsolete and dead. Global capitalism continues to change our world and not all the ways in which it is doing that may be welcome. The way in which the world is getting inter-connected may call for us to think afresh about how to retain our humanity. The growth of marketisation, rationalisation and relatively more complex societies continue to be with us, giving shape to our education system and to its challenges. The use of reason continues to be relevant, though few today believe that it can give the answer to all of our problems. In doing anything nowadays we are presented with a range of alternative options and strategies. When hiring a teacher we may be faced with the choice of hiring a Hindu or a Muslim, a Punjabi or a Malayali, a man or a woman. We cannot rely just on intuition and cultural tradition to decide. We also have to ask who would be a better teacher and who knows the subject better. We have to think carefully about that and ask ourselves what evidence can help us to decide correctly. Reason is still relevant for dealing with the challenges of our life.

Education and Responses to Modernity

Many people across the world have worked on ways which do not reject modernity, but try to overcome its problems. The most exciting innovations in education address the issues raised by capitalism, bureaucratisation and universalism in a constructive way without throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Capitalism has made it possible for people to move from corner of the world to another. This has gone hand in hand with freeing them from the oppressive social relationships they were often caught in. Women in the middle class, for instance, find that education gives them new jobs and a way to discover themselves which was not available as homemakers. This has gone alongside many problems. For instance, a culture of competition has emerged which makes the purpose of education appear to be just getting ahead of others rather than

finding fulfilment through meaningful labour. Some educationists are questioning this culture. They point out that cooperative forms of labour may actually be more productive. People learn and work better when they are cooperating instead of competing with each other. For such educationists the creative question is how to build a classroom and curriculum that encourages children to excel through cooperation rather than competition. It should be noted that this is not a turning back to eighteenth century forms of exchange and culture, where people again work for local lords through an attitude of loyalty and bondedness to them, unable to look for alternatives or to question. There may of course, be valuable things to learn from the past, but the search for cooperative forms of labour is not a return to pre-capitalist modes of production. It is instead a way of transcending the problems of capitalism.

Many of the challenges of the classroom are challenges of bureaucratisation. The teacher who must teach six courses in a school year is like the overworked factory worker who is ordered to attend to several machines at the same time. Routinisation and the dullness of creativity appear to go hand in hand with the desire to deal with large numbers through systematization and homogenisation of school learning. This promotes a technical and practical rationality at the cost of personal relationships and a cultural or aesthetic enjoyment of one's work. Teachers inevitably find themselves losing the excitement of relating with children. The problem of bureaucratisation and the growth of technical rationality everywhere is how to maintain a lively human experience in the classroom while also being able to handle large numbers. Teachers and schools are trying to respond to this by rethinking how they organize their work and its routine. This might imply finding an optimum ratio and insisting to administrations that beyond this greater efficiency is only an appearance since quality will begin to fall. One way to deal with the problems of bureaucratisation is giving greater power and

space to teachers in shaping their work situations. Cultivating greater teacher knowledge and letting teachers' commitment and sense of meaningful purpose increase through an intellectual engagement with their work may be the answer to the problems of bureaucratisation. This may work better for improving the quality of education than trying to control teachers in great detail through technology and surveillance measures. This again is not going back to the *gurukula* and replacing all schools with an isolated teacher dealing with just a handful of students. Instead, it is trying to transcend the dilemmas of bureaucracies through a more judicious balance of technical rationality with humanity in the classroom.

The challenges posed by modernity to the human desire for identity and a culturally centred life, rather than one focused on practicalities has led at places to a rejection of modernity. Some argue that modernity distorts identity, converting it into a violent, aggressive desire to dominate others. Globalisation seems to be contributing to the growth of a Hindutva based on anger and a desire to dominate the world, and also to a sense of Islamic identity which wants to go back to the Caliphate to recapture political control of vast regions of the world. But there are also those who argue that modernity need not necessarily lead only to destructive, angry cultures and identities. Modernity may also provide us an opportunity to create newer, more expansive identities. This was the hope of Tagore, for instance, when he wanted nationalism to be based on the flowering of culture rather than upon hatred of a country's neighbours. It was a vision of nationalism that did not need the emotional boost of fear of the neighbour to find its own energy and vitality. For many, modernity seems to have led to a narrower, assertive sense of identity which crushes all dissent and variation to insist that there is only one culture in a nation. But there are also educationists who believe that the job of the school in our contemporary era is

actually to build a sense of solidarity between multiple cultures. It is to help children to feel part of not just one culture or one community, but learn to be able to relate to many. This again, is not a rejection of modernity but an attempt to transcend it, to help it to grow and evolve.

Several scholars like Anthony Giddens have called this approach a desire to move towards a reflexive modernity. It seeks to reflect upon what has been happening and to try and improve it. A blanket rejection of modernity without trying to hold on to its benefits may be shooting ourselves in the foot. This is as dangerous as a blanket acceptance of all the violences of capitalism and bureaucratisation. Perhaps many incremental improvements may be the better way to go. This calls for a reflective process which asks what one really wants to do – to create an education system that helps give expression to our humanity or an education system which only promotes greater profit, greater control? Perhaps we can still hope that human beings have the capacity to look back at what they are doing and then work to improve upon it.

Further Reading

- Beck, U. 1992. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage.
- Giddens, A. 1990. *Consequences of Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Tagore, R. 1921. *Nationalism*. London: Macmillan and Co.

Responses to modernity



About the Author

Amman Madan has studied Anthropology and Sociology at Panjab University, Chandigarh and Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. His current work is on the themes of social inequality and civic education. He is associated with the NGOs Eklavya and Digantar and is part of the Education Dialogue Trust. He is Professor of Sociology and Social Anthropology at Azim Premji University, Bengaluru.

This book explores some of the basic changes happening in our times and the questions they pose for education. The three broad areas it deals with are: (i) the emergence of complex societies in today's world, (ii) the impact of capitalism and commodified exchange on society and education, and (iii) the growing rationalisation and bureaucratisation of society and education. Many social scientists consider these the three pillars of a very important global trend, which is called the growth and expansion of modernity.

A number of today's debates actually rage around whether these are good or bad. Or whether they are essentially beneficial but need to be done in a very different way. The stands we take regarding these three themes deeply affect how we see education and what to do in it. Getting a better understanding of them therefore affects our actions and strategies in almost every aspect of school and university education and actually in the rest of contemporary social life too. While trying to introduce these basic questions of our times, this book tries not to force answers or push a single ideologically driven stance. Instead it tries to indicate some of the different kinds of solutions which people have sought.



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