

When we first started work on social science at *Eklavya* for the middle school in the 80s, it was difficult to make sense of the section on Civics in the state textbooks prevalent then. The chapters were either a set of rules and procedures or a moral science lesson for 'ignorant and uneducated' citizens. The sequence of chapters almost followed the Constitution headings with many lines taken verbatim from the document. This was all correct but made no sense to the students. The memorisation of important questions was a quick and swift way to get it out of the way for both teachers and students.

The alternative framework that we adopted for Civics was to enlarge its scope to cover relevant themes from social, political and economic life. We also decided to look at contemporary political life and discuss the institutions as they work in reality while contrasting them with the ideals of law. All this was part of the innovative Social Science programme of *Eklavya* from 1986 to 2002. We worked on Social Science textbooks, teacher training and new forms of assessment.

However, two contrasting viewpoints remain embedded in our education culture. The first calls for passive citizenship that speaks of the need to educate others or of deficits of ignorance that need to be filled. This perspective is shared by a large group reinforced by years of repeating such arguments in civics classes. Among them are many government school teachers who look upon themselves as bureaucrats who cannot be openly critical of the government.

The second is the view of a much smaller group of government teachers who believe in informed and critical citizenship, who would be open to discussing failures of our democracy. A critical citizenship perspective has gained limited acceptance. In this, all citizens are considered equal and therefore, the poor and disadvantaged sections cannot be talked down to. One does not blame them for their poverty or the injustice meted out to them. The social and historical reasons for injustice, inequality or lack of fraternity in the contemporary world are

discussed in a more nuanced manner.

These conflicting viewpoints come up in many interactions with teachers and education administrators in the state or central bodies and deeply affect curricular design and process, in many significant ways. Critical citizenship is resisted in the curricular reform process, hence, it requires a deep engagement and dialogue so that one point of view is not thrust upon the other. To recall some examples from teacher sessions:

At a teacher training session in Rajasthan, a group of teachers protested that they would not discuss hypothetical questions, such as the concept of direct democracy in a *gram sabha*. They insisted that we keep the discussion to the set of rules present in the State. Years of Civics teaching had made them look at the subject as a collection of rigid rules to be passed on to the next generation.

In Chhattisgarh, one group of teachers insisted that the seasonal migration of labour from the State could be mentioned without using the term *palayan* (forced migration). The State had declared that there was no *palayan* while the railway stations at Raipur and Bilaspur were filled with people who were desperately boarding trains to Delhi.

Issues of bonded labour, domestic violence or any issues of human rights were difficult points of negotiation in curricular design. When facts could not be denied, or if we used government reports, the response to deflect the issue was that these children are too young to understand these issues. These are better left aside for they damage these impressionable minds. Others would suggest that we talk of ideals and not discuss the grim reality. The framework, chapters and examples in curricular sessions all required long hours of debate and negotiations.

The two groups with different belief systems remain, though perhaps in varying numbers. Extensive dialogue with teachers when new and modified textbooks are launched has been the missing link. Without this, classroom processes do not change, even when there are better curricular materials.

Passive vs critical citizenship

Passive citizenship view

The passive citizenship view among the leadership has the capacity to derail new initiatives. Consider these two instances:

A vocal politician in our field area who opposed our programmes would say that our chapters incite people to revolt against elected representatives since the chapter on *Panchayat* showed people protesting outside the house of the MLA, demanding action against corruption. On the other hand, a liberal secretary of education in Madhya Pradesh, who was to approve the textbook for government schools, once advised us, 'You can be critical of the government, but don't lampoon'. The collaborative programme with the government survived for as long as it did because of such liberal views.

In around the year 2000, *Eklavya's* Social Science textbooks were adopted by a few elite schools in Indore. The teachers at one school were initially hesitant but later started enjoying their classes. In the next academic session, the Principal at this school changed. The new Head called the teachers for their opinion on the initiative. Teachers were honest and very supportive, asking for the programme to be continued. However, the Vice Principal quietly advised the teachers that the Principal was looking for 'evidence' to discontinue the programme. The teachers told us that the next time they are asked, they would be non-committal, to protect their jobs. The programme wound up since the leadership was of the opinion that teachers just needed to be sincere in their work and that textbooks with a critical perspective were a western approach, irrelevant to our country.

Critical citizenship approach

A critical citizenship approach will imply finding confidence and ways to discuss sensitive issues in your own context. Consider some examples:

Many of the new chapters have space for engaging with and bringing in views that children gather in their own social situation. However, it is the ability to engage with different perspectives and with conflict that is most telling. A lady teacher from an elite school in Indore, while hesitant in discussing caste reservations, was very vocal on reservation for women. Taking a cue from one of the questions in a chapter, she began to narrate stories that she had witnessed and how reservation provided the stepping stone for many women. However, they have to do the expected housework as well as their jobs. This was questioned by some male students.

Suddenly, there was an avalanche of evidence from the girls in the classroom, narrating stories from their own families. The way she guided the class through this spontaneous debate was amazing.

One day, I received a phone call from a younger friend that she was aghast at the questions being asked at a teachers' meeting. They asked her point blank, 'Would it not be best for us to be a Hindu *rashtra*? This would end this everyday strife.' Her first reaction was, 'How could they ask this? This goes against the Constitution. It took her some time to realise that the question is less about the Constitution and more about the kind of society that we might become. Why should we reject a theocratic position today? The Constitution is a living document and reading this with care can help reaffirm our faith in its values. It has to be acted upon not just by lawyers and courts but in all other forms of discourse.

Similarly, a teacher who was discussing a passage from Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography *Jhotaan*, narrated that she faced a sensitive situation in her class. This was part of the social and political life NCERT textbook for class VI. Some children targeted the Dalit students and started teasing them saying *jhadu laga*, copying the experience Valmiki had faced in his school. The teacher was shaken as her entire discourse was overturned by their behaviour. Later, she decided to spend considerable time discussing the caste practices prevalent in her context. From her own experience and by asking pointed questions such as: Is a separate glass kept at home for some? Are some people allowed only in the courtyard? She made a long list and discussed how they violate the concept of equal dignity for all. To her credit, she was able to do this without stoking personal animosity among students.

The nature of citizenship that we take as our belief – passive or critical – is going to become all the more important in the near future. In the contemporary situation, where divisiveness in society is being stoked by current legislations, such as CAA or 'love-jihad', we are likely to see an oscillation towards a passive citizenship belief by the State. Emphasis is likely to be on duties, discipline and sincerity while human rights, social welfare, marginalisation and exploitation in society would be viewed with suspicion. In all likelihood, liberal spaces for curricular reform are going to be limited.

However, even in this pessimistic scenario, we may

yet find unexpected spaces for welcome curricular interventions. However, we need to move towards non-curricular spaces in a much more creative and vigorous manner, if we are to hold on to our belief of critical citizenship. Hence, what we can learn from teachers' actions is discussed below.

Actions speak louder than words

One of the things that needs to be done is recognising and encouraging teachers' initiatives in their context. In India, democracy was constructed against the grain, both of a society founded upon the inequality of the caste order and of an imperial and authoritarian state. If the initial conditions were unlikely, democracy has had to exist in circumstances that conventional political theories identify as being equally unpropitious: amidst a poor, illiterate and staggeringly diverse citizenry. Not only has it survived, it has also succeeded in energising Indian society in unprecedented ways. Introduced initially by a mincingly legalistic nationalist elite as a form of government, democracy has been extended and deepened to become a principle of society, transforming the possibilities available to Indians. *They have embraced it, learning about it not from textbooks but by extemporary practice. Yet the very success of India's democracy also threatens its continued institutional survival.*' (The Idea of India, Sunil Khilnani. *Italics mine.*)

Citizenship education should be a *lived experience and an engagement with democracy in one's own context*. This endorses what Sunil Khilnani expressed in his book. This is also the time where its survival is being threatened. Before I discuss what may be feasible for the future, I outline below the many thoughtful and creative ways in which teachers have practised democracy. The contribution of such actions goes a long way to the deepening of democracy in our society. If we look at the lived experience of teachers, we are sure to find many examples in our own regions. It is just that we have been blind to them and do not recognise their worth and potential.

I know a Dalit teacher, part of the social science group who lived for over two decades in the village where he was posted. He was passionate about Dalit issues but would not discuss them much in the classroom or even with us. I realised much later that he chose symbolic moments and subtle ways to support the education of Dalit children. One incident stands out clearly in my memory. A parent approached him for the Transfer Certificate of his child, but he would not come into the school premises. He preferred to speak from the

courtyard. The teacher understood and he stepped out of the classroom and slowly got him to come in, sit on the chair, even though the father was rather uncomfortable. He carried on a casual conversation while he hunted for the certificate in the files. Meanwhile, the entire class watched the incident and absorbed its meaning.

There were many other ways of practice for him. He supported the education and hostel fees of a girl from a very poor family and she went on to become a teacher amid extremely challenging circumstances. Many boys from poor families were encouraged to take the class VIII examination so that later they could seek work in the growing transport sector. Years later, this teacher explained that many of these actions were feasible only because of the *tacit support from his colleagues at school*. It was a silent fraternity that avoided public discussion and kept a low profile while their impact was substantial.

Another Dalit teacher from a neighbouring village established a tuition centre for students of the village so that they could compete for the entrance examination of *Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya*, where education and care are state-supported. He was successful, though it is rare to find a Dalit teacher run a coaching class that all the caste groups in a rural society attend. It is through such experiences that students would imbibe the notion that within the school space all are equal though this is not true in the village space.

A group of teachers from a school devised a simple formula to encourage the education of girls at their middle school. Under the *Operation Blackboard* scheme of the Government (1986), women were appointed as primary school teachers, with positive results. There were more girls completing primary education and enrolling for middle school, a level at which family pressures and security issues begin to mount. This group of teachers, rooted in the local community, assured the parents of the security of the girls and urged them to let them attend middle school. Since the school was on the outskirts of the village, as a basic measure, the girls were let off first and given a lead time of ten minutes when as a group, they would easily reach the village chowk. This simple tweaking of rules added so much more confidence among parents and girls enrolled in large numbers.

In another instance, the principal and social science teacher at a high school for girls began a transformation process with the construction of a boundary wall and followed this up with the proper

distribution of books, scholarships and uniforms. They also ensured that classes were held according to the timetable. The enrolment in this school increased from 80 to 400 girls within a year, with many girls leaving smaller private schools to come back to the government school.

A teacher at a village middle school would come half an hour early and write down the main news of the day on a small blackboard. It would be short and cover many topics. He would cleverly choose local, national and international news. Children would read this and often copy it down in their notebooks during the break. This was a time when TV penetration was beginning to increase but few newspapers would be distributed across the large village. The travel experience of children was limited to surrounding villages and rarely even to the neighbouring towns of Ujjain or Dewas. Over time, this practice started showing results. Children would ask questions in class, often related to places mentioned and also questions such as why does an earthquake occur or why has war taken place? Some snippets would be discussed among them and also at home. They were quite involved and would look forward to the news of the day. It was their window to the world.

The lady teachers of government schools associated with the Adolescence Health Programme of *Eklavya* were clear that many issues required frank discussions with girls. Some of the topics involved discussing gender, domestic violence, menstruation and contraception – not easy topics in a highly patriarchal society, but these women were surprisingly undaunted and supported each

other to conduct these workshops. This sense of purpose and eagerness to use this opportunity came from their own deep struggles with the same issues. It had not been easy for any one of them to become teachers and then to manage dual roles within the family and school. The fraternity in this women's group was remarkable and has lasted over the years.

In the context of school education, there has been a focus on curricular materials but almost no dialogue with teachers on their perspectives and world views. In the lived context of a democracy, many teacher experiences show us multiple ways of meaningful engagement. The subtle methods used by them to engage with constitutional values show creative pathways if only their autonomy is strengthened. The culture of autonomy for the teacher and the school team is the more crucial determinant for change. The Adolescent Health Programme team's suggestion is that one way could be to take up thematic workshops, build a teacher peer group and keep a loose curricular link without falling into the narrow spectrum of completing the syllabus. (*Anu Gupta, Health Education: Some insights*)

It is clear that in citizenship education there is no one formula for action. There can be many supportive structures, but the actions will emerge in an organic manner within the local context. The idea is to think outside of the regular curriculum and build a cogent framework for the themes. It is important to build on the participation of teachers, discuss their perspectives and enlarge their autonomy for action.

This article is dedicated to the memory of the late Panna Lal Chavhan of Dewas.

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