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Democracy in the Indian Constitution

Prakash Iyer

Anubhuti: You know I am generally disillusioned with the way I teach citizenship. Our curriculum breaks democracy down into bits and pieces – equality, power, freedom, solidarity, patriotism, toleration – and each of them has multiple definitions. It is almost as if I am teaching them words and concepts which they might not encounter in reality for many years.

Ira: Why do you say that? What you are saying applies to everything we teach. I am teaching sine, cos, tan in trigonometry. I don't think many students will ever use these ideas, except those who do engineering. But the point of learning is not only to use the ideas, it changes the way they think.

Anubhuti: Hmmm...you are saying it does not matter if they are not able to use these theories in real life. How do you judge if they have learnt them at all, unless you see them using it somewhere? Your tests make them use these theories, even if they are on a piece of paper and not in reality. In science at least they do lab work and experiments, so they will at least see some of the theories working in reality.

Ira: The same thing happens in mathematics also. The paper and pen is the mathematics laboratory. Remember that joke: "The math department is the 2nd cheapest one to supply to in the university: All the[y] need are pencils, papers and erasers."

Anubhuti: Yes, and the punch line is, "The philosophy department is even cheaper. They don't need erasers." Are you saying what I am doing is cheaper than science or maths?

Ira: You know I am not saying that. But yes, you can do a lot without any experiments or laboratories. So much can happen in the classroom and school itself. I am not teaching my students mathematics in order to make them engineers or scientists. I teach maths to encourage mathematical thinking. You are teaching these concepts in order to make them good citizens, which every one of us has to be. So what is your problem with the curriculum?

Anubhuti: See, I need to teach them to think like good citizens; for that they need to know how to think and how to behave in numerous situations when we are citizens. Not only once in five years when we vote, but also on a daily basis when we cross the road, when we see someone in need of help, when a policeman asks for a bribe...we are always citizens, na. In fact, there is never a time when we are not expected to be good citizens. Even inside our homes.

To do this I am teaching them these concepts and definitions and illustrating situations when these concepts are at play. I have to take it further and create situations when they can see these concepts at play, in reality. That way they will experience what it feels like to be a citizen.

Ira: Which you have been doing for years now. I have even seen you doing it outside class. Remember that time when you saw this boy sharing his lunch with his friend and this lunch sharing session you organized for the entire class? I remember so many such moments you have described.

Anubhuti: Yes, but I am not exactly proud of that. Something is amiss there. I am not doing anything wrong, but this is not completely right either. I used to think the problem is I am quoting Western philosophers, but I realized that in itself is not the issue. Whether an idea is written by an Englishman or American, it could play the same way in India also. So that is not the issue.

What is bothering me is that these are individual concepts that the curriculum is cleaving apart from each other, and then putting up a fight between them – Freedom vs. Equality, Power vs Freedom, Equality vs. Inequality and so on. In reality they all come together and the challenge is not only to see the concepts, but to arrive at the right decision. Finally, life is about making the right decisions, na, not explaining concepts to other people.

Ira: That is true. When we critique policies, we are dealing with particular problems and providing alternatives to the government, not doing a class on freedom or equality.

Anubhuti: That is not all actually. The problem is these concepts give us rules, but they are very abstract, and they do not come together in a way that can help us take decisions in our context. We can say formal equality can be forsaken sometimes when we have to treat some people differently because they are disadvantaged. Now how does one apply this to a particular situation? We need a definition of "disadvantaged". And the list will go on and on.

This is the problem I am struggling with.

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Ira: Aah, now I get it. Your problem is not like the problem of abstract and concrete which we struggle with when we teach mathematics. Your problem is that the concepts do not come together as a comprehensive theory which can tell us how to live our lives.

Anubhuti: You know the problem does not stop there. There are many theories, all of which are democratic – Liberalism, Marxism, Socialism, Communism. If I decide to teach theories, again I will end up teaching them many theories. There is no single theory called Democracy!

Ira: You should invent a new theory called Indian Democracy! I was at a friend's home when they had a visitor who has studied political philosophy. He was claiming that India is more democratic than western countries. He said, we should study our constitution carefully, and we will discover a theory that is more democratic than western theories. I thought he was being boastful about India; as if we are greater than all other civilizations. After all, we learnt democracy from the British didn't we!



Anubhuti: He is not wrong you know. We practice a different flavour of being democratic. Our constitution includes many theoretical perspectives. A little socialism, a little liberalism, some Hind Swaraj. You know most of these concepts like Freedom, Equality that I teach, are interpreted differently in our constitution; different from Western constitutions.

Ira: Uh oh! Now you are being boastful about India.

Anubhuti: No yaa! I am not boasting. It is a fact. Take freedom as an example. Our constitution does not give us absolute freedom to do anything we want. It gives us relational freedom, depending on particular situations we have to limit our freedom accordingly. For e.g., we have freedom of speech and expression, only insofar as we respect public order and decency. That is defined by particular situations in India.

Ira: Huh! How do we even teach freedom without explaining particular situations? You have to teach practising freedom rather than just the concept of freedom.

Anubhuti: Exactly! That is why I am saying this is not similar to your problem of concrete/abstract and application of mathematics. Moreover, in our constitution Freedom of Religion is included in the notion of freedom. Which is not the same as the Western notion which separates freedom from religion. Their constitutions say, religion is a private affair and not part of the constitution. They say that is true secularism – separating religion and politics.

Whereas in India secularism is defined as "equal respect of all religions". The constitution even has some articles that reform religions. For e.g., we have an article that gives minority religions the right to start schools that will conserve their religion. We also have a right to equality that mandates that people of all castes and genders should be allowed in public religious places.

Ira: Wow! That is more complex than the example of equality and inequality that you usually teach. How do we fit our constitution into the concept of equality, secularism and freedom? I was right when I said we have to invent our own democratic theory. Or maybe that person was right that India has a more advanced version of democracy than the western countries.

Anubhuti: It is not advanced or retrograde. We are a different social and cultural context so we need to adapt the idea of democracy to our society. Our leaders knew this. They had rejected liberal democracy even before our independence. They also rejected the western idea of Indian history according to which we were not ready for democracy.

Ira: Anubhuti, you are giving me the answer. You should not teach concepts and ideas separately. You should teach our children the constitution. Why use any other theory of democracy, when we have the constitution which defines what we want India to be.

Anubhuti: You are right Ira. We will have to change the social studies curriculum entirely. Our civics textbooks are so boring and do not teach our constitution. They just state many articles from our constitution and interpret them in one way. Why? They use these western concepts of freedom and equality.

Ira: But we can also interpret the constitution correctly and teach our children how complex and good our constitution is. And very useful too!

Anubhuti: I am going to start writing a set of teaching-learning material to teach the constitution, and the Indian idea of democracy. A little marxism, some socialism, some liberalism and a lot of Hind Swaraj and Indian culture; and how to use our constitutional values in situations that we experience as citizens of India. Who knows some of our children might study this further and invent an Indian theory of Democracy!



Reference

Inspired by "What is political theory and why do we need it?" by Rajeev Bhargava.

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