

# Children as Citizens

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One of the most important problems every society faces is how to prepare young people for life in it. How should one behave with one's family, neighbours and community, with one's employers and employees, the government and its critics and so on? Especially important is what to do when there is a conflict of views and desires, which can occur over everything, ranging from whom it is acceptable to love to who should get more resources, what is worthy of respect or even what is true. Should one act with restraint or rage? Should we respect individuals or give preference to community identities, to equality or hierarchy? Do we try to talk about things or ask others to decide for us? Do we seek consensus or accept dissension? There is a great deal of debate over what an education that prepares young people for life should look like.

The question of how humans should live with each other is at the heart of many normative and reflective narratives like those to be seen in religions, political ideologies, academic writings and school textbooks. Some progressive pedagogues follow Rousseau to say that all good lies within children themselves, and if only teachers and parents got out of the way, then children would automatically discover for themselves the best way to act. Most other educationists are less sanguine about this and propose a variety of ways of teaching a culture of public and family life. They recommend varying degrees of autonomy for children to reflect and decide for themselves. While some think that they have absolute truths to hand over, many believe that humans must always be tentative and open to other points of view. There must be some balance, it seems, between socialising children into virtues and learning to reflect on moral issues. Where exactly that balance lies, however, is not easy to see. All this is

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Smaller Citizens: Writings on the Making of Indian Citizens** by Krishna Kumar, Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2021; pp xvii + 149, ₹395.

complicated by the way power shapes our understanding. The cultural and political agendas of powerful institutions and cultures like those from West Europe and North America have intermingled with agendas coming from our own land. In the latter, too, there are pulls and pushes in different directions from various political ideologies, castes, classes, genders, communities, and so on.

### Understanding Childhood

Indians must make their way through all these contending voices to decide what to cultivate in young people. To merely say that we must struggle against Western ideas and practices is too simplistic. There is much to learn from them and many ideas are also part of our own traditions. It is equally simplistic to suggest that all cultural positions are equally valid. Instead, we have to go through the difficult process of understanding our genealogies, scrutinising their validity and learning to build new intuitions, concepts, aesthetics, practices and institutions. This is the challenge facing not just India, but many other parts of the world, too.

Krishna Kumar has been one of the foremost Indian scholars struggling to see how this might work out. One of the most prolific educationists in this country, he has the rare ability to write equally lucidly in Hindi as well as English, practising a much-needed bilingual approach to scholarship. His 1991 book, which was revised in 2020 as *Politics of Education in Colonial India*, is among the two or three books that everyone wanting to figure out what to do in Indian education should read.

The slim volume is a collection of Kumar's lectures and essays from the last decade around the theme of growing up into citizenship in India. The opening chapter sets out his basic framework of an India that experiences modernity through the arrival of the British and is still struggling to find its own interpretation of it. This struggle can be seen in the way Indian communities, the state, and schools look at childhood and adolescence. Kumar agrees with many sociologists of childhood that modernity shaped a vision of childhood that extended longer than how most other cultures saw it. This extension of childhood gave individuals more protection from the demands of work and sexuality and thus permitted them to have more time for their own development. The Indian state has pushed for this by passing legislation like the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, which mandates compulsory schooling for all till the age of 15 and by enacting a series of laws, increasing the legal age of marriage. Kumar points out that both of these conflict with widespread practices in India. Consequently, there has been an ongoing tussle between Western modernity and indigenous views over how childhood should be defined, particularly over what the state wants to do with children.

### School as a Site of Modernity

The contemporary school is an important site where the agendas of modernity are pushed forward and many collisions can be seen there. Kumar underlines how they have gendered, class and caste dimensions. Girls, for instance, come to school carrying with them from home a special concern with their body and a future role of a married woman and mother. This clashes with the principles of the contemporary school system, which claims to uphold modernity's ideals of individual freedom to choose one's life and passions. Kumar believes that the school is rightfully a site where children should get the freedom to unleash their growth. This necessarily means some contradictions between the school and the family,

with the latter characteristically being a place to socialise children into their customary roles instead.

Kumar points out that the Indian school system has many paradoxes—one of which is that it claims to be liberal and gender-blind, while actually being deeply gendered. Its curricula and processes address the movement of boys into new social roles, while quietly refusing to challenge the family's role expectations for girls. Girls learn a girlhood, Kumar says, not a childhood. The Western liberal notion of a free rights-bearing individual is conspicuously absent in it. Kumar believes that in spite of having a fractured male-centric practice of modernity, schools have still proven to be a place of refuge for girls where, for a while at least, they are protected from the fears that they are otherwise expected to live with.

Kumar broadly believes in the potential of modernity and holds that the state must be responsible for fulfilling it. He emphasises in several essays that the RTE was a historic milestone for our country. The universalisation of elementary education, which it legislated into place, was not conceived as just a mechanical getting of certificates. Instead, it was meant to be an education that enabled children to discover and fulfil their possibilities. This legislative intervention formally carved out a distinct space for childhood in our country.

### **Challenges to the RTE**

In a magisterial essay, Kumar outlines the main challenges that the RTE has faced from within the education system itself. It is an essay that everyone working in the domain of education should read. Kumar starts by saying that with the right to education being seen as part of the right to life, the Indian state has acknowledged its responsibility for ensuring that every citizen gets to live a life of dignity. However, the implementation of this responsibility by the state leaves much to be desired. The focus has been more on access rather than on the quality of education. Today, with the continued decline of public schooling and growth of private schools, even that access is under attack.

The features of the education system that have been barriers to the vision of childhood and dignity embedded in the RTE include an intrinsic series on exclusions when moving from elementary to secondary and higher levels. Historically, exams have served a gatekeeping role to reduce numbers going from one level to the next. Such a deeply entrenched system of annual examinations serves primarily to exclude and not to help in the goal of learning which assessment is otherwise so important for.

The overall system of higher education, too, is very poor in quality, with only a few halfway decent pockets among the otherwise vast numbers. Such a higher education has naturally failed to throw up the required number of teachers with adequate knowledge of the subjects they are to teach. At the same time, teacher education is a morass of corruption and incompetence. A few institutions producing star recruits of a handful of high-paying firms serve to blind us to the mess that is the rest of our education system. Meanwhile, fast-growing privatisation is further distorting the purposes of education. It is pushing learning away from what is good for children towards what is good for consumerism and big business instead.

The market and India's social divides draw careful attention from Kumar. He points out that the increasing nexus between the states and markets is punching holes in the limited protection that was being afforded by the state to girls through schooling. They are now increasingly exposed via market processes to gendered roles and identities and to a culture of commodified work, which the school was trying to present a bulwark against. Modernity claimed to be offering the possibilities of liberation through institutions like schools. The potential for liberation is now facing new challenges.

Part of the difficulty has been the way modernity has been defined as quintessentially urban as opposed to a modernity that had roots in rural areas, too. The result of this has been that education has been overwhelmingly defined as an urban-centric exercise of upliftment of the ignorant rural masses.

Education under modernity privileges getting a choice in what to do with one's life, but for rural children, this is assumed to only mean moving to urban areas. Villages got defined by the British as symbols of tradition and this narrative continues on in contemporary India. Across several chapters, Kumar rues the fact that the city is seen as the teacher and the village as the one who has to be taught, much as the colonial rulers were teachers and the natives the taught. This has become embedded in our development discourse and in our development workers, with very mixed results. The possibility of a modernity that works through both rural and urban society has been denuded.

### **Marginalisation**

The education system that our model of development has created is hurting the poor, Dalits and particularly Adivasis the most. Schools and employers operate with a kind of Darwinism where only those at the top of the heap deserve any respect and consideration. The rest, it is thought, deserve to remain lying in their muck. It is rare to have any serious discussion of caste in any schoolbook. A notable exception to this are the social studies books developed by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) when Kumar himself was its director. Adivasi languages and cultures have, for the most part, been bulldozed and suppressed, thereby losing the many pedagogic possibilities that a dialogue with them could have created. All this happens in spite of the Constitution and the many legal commitments the state has made at different times. Yet, Kumar refuses to throw up his hands in despair and continues to demand that we hold the state to its responsibilities.

### **Alternative Systems/Visions**

Kumar has been arguing for many years that we need not see Indian education as a hopeless, barren space that needs infusions from Western-trained educationists and policymakers to begin to flower again. He has often written about Gandhian basic education as a paradigm that carried within it some

of the best ideas of contemporary education. It is fitting that the last essay in his book is on the work of Devi Prasad who studied in Rabindranath Tagore's Santiniketan and later joined Sevagram to work on the place of art in Indian education. Prasad believed that all children had the tendency to seek self-expression, which was the basis of all pedagogies that emphasised active learning. He did not focus on the elite forms of art alone and believed that all kinds of art were actually interconnected and integral, refusing at a deeper level to distinguish between weaving and painting. The importance of art lies in it providing a kind of "nourishment" that leads to harmony, Prasad said. This was what established a predisposition towards peace in human subjectivity. Such ideas, unfortunately, have little traction in our times where online coaching has become a vast market promising that children will "triumph" over the world and be "victors." So much so that after Prasad wrote in 1959 the original version of his now-classic Hindi book on art in education, it disappeared and he himself almost forgot about it. It was only when someone showed him an article by Kumar on the book in the 1980s that he rewrote it in English as *Art: The Basis of Education*. In its prelude, he credits Kumar for the revival of his book.

Given its origin in disparate talks and essays, there is much that this book perhaps could not have addressed. Kumar does not refer to different perspectives on citizenship education in the academic world, for instance. Nor does he take up the many different cultural and historical models of what it means to become a person in the world. One also wonders if some ideas would have benefited from being discussed in a more qualified manner.

### **Problem of Modernity or Patriarchy?**

For instance, colonialism is said to be responsible for the state holding back from intervening in how girlhood is defined. This, however, is a much older pattern in India, going back from the Mughals to Manu and perhaps beyond, where states avoided regulating or legislating on local customs. It is under colonial modernity instead that there is widespread acceptance that laws will get passed on domestic matters like the age of marriage. Perhaps in schools it is patriarchy and not modernity that is responsible for not trying hard enough to change girls' social roles and norms.

Kumar's pedagogic vision emphasises the agency of children in making sense of the world. At the same time, though, there is a particular context that they are part of. We understand quite well now that no one hangs between the earth and the sky in an

individualistic, free manner; everyone is part of a certain culture or other. This has raised many questions like how to learn to be part of that culture and how to deal with differences and inequalities of power. Indeed, this is perhaps one of the biggest issues facing our times. In his sensitive essay on regimentation and nationalism, Kumar recommends teaching

one, to redesign syllabi and textbooks so as to provide room for critical reflection on culture and history; and two, to prioritise peace values such as tolerance, non-violence and conflict resolution through negotiation. (p 53)

It is not clear how the latter sits with his injunction for autonomy. It would have been good to have learned how Kumar recommends we balance these two contending goals of education—enculturation into particular ways and critical reflection on everything.

Past readers of Kumar would see in this book what he is currently thinking on the themes that have concerned him over the years. Newer readers would understand why Kumar's influence on Prasad in a way symbolises his impact on scholarship on Indian education. He is one of a dwindling numbers of Indian voices today who remind us of the profound questions that face education and society.

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## **EPWRF India Time Series**

### **Expansion of Banking Statistics Module**

*(State-wise Data)*

The Economic and Political Weekly Research Foundation (EPWRF) has added state-wise data to the existing Banking Statistics module of its online India Time Series (ITS) database.

State-wise and region-wise (north, north-east, east, central, west and south) time series data are provided for deposits, credit (sanction and utilisation), credit-deposit (CD) ratio, and number of bank offices and employees.

Data on bank credit are given for a wide range of sectors and sub-sectors (occupation) such as agriculture, industry, transport operators, professional services, personal loans (housing, vehicle, education, etc), trade and finance. These state-wise data are also presented by bank group and by population group (rural, semi-urban, urban and metropolitan).

The data series are available from December 1972; half-yearly basis till June 1989 and annual basis thereafter. These data have been sourced from the Reserve Bank of India's publication, *Basic Statistical Returns of Scheduled Commercial Banks in India*.

Including the Banking Statistics module, the EPWRF ITS has 28 modules covering a range of macroeconomic and financial data on the Indian economy. For more details, visit [www.epwrfits.in](http://www.epwrfits.in) or e-mail to: [its@epwrf.in](mailto:its@epwrf.in)