

Politics and education

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He is a district education officer (DEO) of a district where even political parties hesitate to claim that India is shining. He spent two days with me, visiting schools. That is unusual. Many DEOs don't see any need to visit schools. He questioned the teachers empathetically but relentlessly. Officials treating teachers as fellow human beings is also unusual. The questioning was focused on two things: how to get the out-of-school children back and how to help the ones from most disadvantaged homes to learn. He was driven and socially sensitive, but also had sound educational understanding.

He regaled us with stories of skirmishes with the mightier powers in the system, of which he seemed to have more than his share. One was about the local MLA (member of legislative assembly) insulting him in a public meeting. He responded by announcing in the same public meeting that he will see to it that the man loses the next election.

That man did lose the election. The DEO did have a role to play. He mobilized the teachers, to campaign village by village. His political leanings were clear, so I commented that he ensured his own party candidate's defeat. He agreed and said there were greater things than party affiliations, nation building is one of them, and added as an afterthought that you can't insult people in public and get away with it, whoever you are.

This man is just about as good an educational administrator as one gets. He is also a political animal. It's his intense social purpose that fires both his educational work and engagement in politics. This shouldn't surprise us; education is political in both a narrow sense and also in a broad sense.

In the narrow sense it is often directly part of party and electoral politics, with teachers and administrators directly participating and influencing the power equations of their communities and constituencies. But education influences politics deeply and fundamentally in the long run by altering the very way in which politics is structured and citizenship is exercised. We will get to the deep politics of education; let's first consider some things on the surface.

Teachers constitute 20-40% of the state government workforces. As much as 99% villages in India now have schools within 1km. This provides direct reach in to the most basic geographical communities in India. This structurally deep and comprehensive coverage of India by the school system enables teachers and teacher unions to play a role in politics

on a continuing basis, and often significantly in elections. This political engagement is not merely for the sectional interest of teachers, but is an integral part of the on-the-ground organizational jostling of political parties.

This shouldn't convey the impression that all or even most teachers are flag waving members of some party or the other. But certainly enough are to be an important element in the local political equations. No wonder, a big national level politician recently threatened teachers in a particular state, with dire consequences, unless they supported his party.

Education is widely recognized, understood and used as one of the most important social processes for the development of individuals and the society. Most choices and practices in education, at their core will also have political roots and implications. This is true for aims of education, curriculum, institutional arrangements, inclusions and exclusions, school practices—almost everything.

For our school education, the basic political roots are expressly drawn from the constitution, let's take a few examples. The National Curricular Framework 2005 emphasizes within the aims of education, its role as enabler of democracy and in developing individual autonomy. The Right to Education Act, 2009 is aimed at an inclusive, egalitarian society. The various mechanisms of support for disadvantaged or discriminated groups directly draw from constitutional frameworks.

But these constitutional roots only set the limits and inform education at a very fundamental and broad level. Often choices within this are the real issues of politics. It's much like the rest of the polity: people and parties operate (or profess to) within the constitution, but have sharply differing agendas and policies.

The real political battleground in education has been in textbooks, in school culture and policies related to language. For example, glorification of the Soviet Union, vilification of Tipu Sultan and sprinkling a dose of ancient texts in science are all political choices. Textbooks have become weapons of insidious politics, given their significant influence over actual education. Political battles in school culture have been fought through rituals—choices on celebration of events, of festivals and assembly prayers. Choice of languages taught in school, the variants of language that get primacy, for instance, sanskritized Hindi over Hindustani, and treatment of English have been political instruments and statements.

This deep politics of education can't win immediate elections, but when done systematically and then sustained, can shape the political character of society significantly. When we vote in polling booths, most of which are in schools, it's in a way symbolic of the influence of schools on politics at multiple levels.

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