Education Outside the Fold of Mainstream Education

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BOOK REVIEWS

Un/Common Schooling: Educational Experiments in Twentieth-Century India
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Dewey (1900/1990: 151) argued that in education, history must be considered as "an indirect sociology," a study that reveals the process of becoming and getting organised. If we add to this the element of ideas that shaped the process and organisation, we can expect a curious and interesting narrative which can bring forth tensions and paradoxes that education faces in a specific socio-historical context. Against this backdrop, *Un/Common Schooling: Educational Experiments in Twentieth-Century India,* edited by Janaki Nair, is a meaningful publication. It opens up a complex interplay between what was conceptualised as "alternative education" over the 20th century and what were the diverse ideas and personal trajectories of a few practitioners that contributed to this conceptualisation.

The main introduction by Nair raises certain important questions and issues in the domain of history and the sociology of education in India. Her text compels us to notice an interesting asymmetry. The ideas of Indians on education—which were organically related to the sociopolitical context—acquired the status of being "alternatives," whereas the colonial arrangement remained the mainstream and the port of ultimate arrival. Almost all alternative schools sooner or later made arrangements to help children prepare for public exams. In her interesting and wide-ranging introduction, I found a questionable comment on educational experiments that noted that the experiments "were not attempts to try and overthrow the educational system, or even efforts to challenge or reform it …" (p xxii). The Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme (HSTP) and several other programmes implemented by Eklavya certainly aimed at reforming the system and even challenging it.

The essay on Tagore's Sriniketan—along with a refreshing reflective text on Santiniketan and Gandhi's Nai Talim—offers the earliest idea on alternative education in the 20th century. Four other essays present potent narratives on ideas that emerged as a few teachers or activists set out in the second half of the 20th century to make education accessible to underprivileged children in rural areas, urban slums, and forests. The four essays by K T Margaret, Jane H Sahi, Malathi M C, and Shirley Joseph take us to the realm of small schools in Karnataka and Kerala that became spaces for nurturing childhood and encouraging learning through non-traditional ways. All these persons were members of the Alternative Education Group, and this was where they got their inspiration as well as support. Joseph's description of activities with children and adolescents at Kanavu—the non-formal school—is helpful in drawing out the images of tribal childhood. The sixth essay in this league by Rashmi Paliwal documents the work of Eklavya in Madhya Pradesh (MP) and Chhattisgarh. Out of the six stories of alternative education presented in parts I and II, there is a difference in terms of discourse and the presentation of vision that guided the work.

Three Learnings from the History of Education

The narratives of five alternative schools present an important opportunity to learn three things in the context of the history of education. The first is a set of different ideas of alternative education, their origin and the shape they took in due course of time. The essays present human stories of effort, vision, inspiration, and alliances that were formed. They ignite the curiosity of the reader about individuals who pioneered meaningful education and institutionalised it by creating schools or teacher education institutions, such as Jane Sahi, who drew her inspiration from Gandhian Ashrams, and K Radhakrishna Menon, who made efforts to organise learning in a government school around Gandhian values. Pradip Kumar Datta's essay unravels that Tagore's Sriniketan was set up and mentored by Leonard Knight Elmhirst till the end and Malathi M C writes of David Horsburgh's non-structured education in Neel Bagh.

However, Rashmi Paliwal's essay on Eklavya's work does not do justice to the volume's attempt to record the history of (alternative) education as it is silent on the intellectual ancestry of Eklavya. It presents Kishore Bharati and Eklavya as parallel organisations and is a convoluted text on their relationship with each other and with the Friends Rural Center (FRC). Young researchers or students of teacher education reading this essay will not know that Eklavya was actually established by Kishore Bharati so that it could take the already developed HSTP further. The work of scientists such as Anil Sadgopal and Sudarshan Kapoor from the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, Mumbai finds no mention, even though they had developed a programme on the basis of a similar intervention that they had already made in the schools of the then Bombay Municipality. The context in which Kishore Bharati and FRC worked in collaboration was much larger as it pertained to resolving issues of agriculture, water, and other aspects of rural poverty. People in Kishore Bharati and FRC had a vision for society and economic progress through science and in that education emerged an agenda through which Eklavya was created much later. Paliwal's essay misses the historical details of an important alternative education programme which altered the learning ethos of thousands of schools in MP.

The second learning that the volume offers takes us into the domain of paradoxes and contradictions. It is noteworthy that in Margaret's and Sahi's essays, the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009 surfaces as a source of problems for alternative schools. Margaret writes that while teaching children of a vulnerable community, she realised "that the basic nature of children remains the same. They want to learn, they want to be better people …" (p 22). However, she ends her essay by blaming the RTE Act for the disappearance of the motivation to learn and the urge to do well among children because of the no-detention and no failure provision in the act. Sahi offers a criticism of the RTE Act for making age-related prescriptions for a child's admission and even delayed admission in school. She argues that it "counters a potential for co-operation and learning from each other" (p 33) and sees it strictly in terms of a criterion for judging intellectual and emotional growth. She argues that one of the primary aims of education is to prepare children for meaningful participation in the adult community and age-based classification of children restricts the school from fostering a sense of responsibility. The argument seems far-fetched as the RTE Act did not prohibit the schools from organising inter-class or mixed learning situations, thereby enabling peer support and cooperation. More importantly, it contradicts Dewey's (1975) important submission that "education is a process of living and not a preparation for future living" (p 22).

A point worth noticing is that all the essays escape the issue of teachers' dignity and status which was and is certainly a salient weakness of the colonial as well as the postcolonial educational system. Did the centres of "alternative education" have any interest in galvanising the depressed site of a school teacher's dignity and prestige while some of them were the centres of teacher education themselves? Did they create any alternative models for the recognition of teachers' work? These essays do not dwell on that. The silence on teachers' status is as loud as it is in governmental records of its work on education. The teachers are in the passing.

The third important learning that can be drawn from these essays pertains to the discourse concerning alternative education. What are the contours that have been carved out to construct this discourse? In this context, Paliwal's essay on the work of Eklavya again stands apart from the other five, which use the frame of a child's life, poverty, learning, self-image of children, meaningful work, and so on. However, her essay primarily has techno–managerial and governmental policy discourse which is evident from the use of the constructs such as high-quality monitoring, the success of the programme, measured/measurable indicators, performance of "this" cohort and better than non-SPK (*Shiksha Protsahan Kendra*) children, teacher empowerment, student achievement, strategic focus, and so on. There is a mention of Eklavya's curriculum model but without any description of what it entails and how it could be considered an alternative curriculum to what was there in MP schools. The discourse drives the reader to assume that it could be the "school effectiveness/school improvement model which has the behaviourist model in its base underpinned by technicist and managerial model of schooling and, which is criticised for being reductionist and tautological" (Scott 2008).

Narratives of Alternative Education

There are four essays in part III, along with another introduction by Nair to the "Life Stories Project" under which the studies in this section were conducted. When the reader reaches part III, a jerk in the tone and flavour is inescapable, even though the focus continues to be on those who struggled for access to educational opportunities. The essays demand a shift from school to higher education, including vocational education. There is another feeble connecting thread between the three parts. Some of the life stories presented in part III are of the people who studied in alternative schools or non-formal structures described in the first two parts. Despite this connecting thread, one feels an inconsistency in terms of the issues and focus that emerge in the last part of the book. The sweep in the contexts is wide-ranging from the education of small children who had never been enrolled in a school to women who have enrolled in a vocational education institution after getting married and having children. The edited volume is a blend of life stories—narratives constructed on the basis of interviews and a record of activities with a few gaps at the level of overall synthesis.

The essays in part III have been constructed by drawing upon interviews conducted by researchers in different educational contexts and thus take us to the realm of the sociology of education. The style shifts to research-based narratives constructed on the basis of the responses of the interviewees who were asked to recall their past experiences of schooling and education. Shivangi Jaiswal's focus is different here, as she interviewed four women at an industrial training institute (ITI) in UP who had made a second attempt at education in order to augment their earning potential. The essay by Sunandan K N brings in the ethics of care while describing the educational reforms undertaken in Kerala in the 1990s and the element of caste. Megha Sharma has woven collected stories of school experiences around economic and social identities.

There is an immense potential in the stories presented by Jaiswal as they take us to the realm of education as an important ingredient of economic well-being (Schultz 1963) and its confluence with gender. However, her presentation falls short of drawing insights on both dimensions. What happens when education is accessed by women as a second chance to gain economic self-reliance? How does it intersect with their gendered self? What happens to a woman/girl as a learner when the family insists on her role as a primary caregiver? The narrations take her in these directions, but not her analysis. She would have perhaps benefited from including theoretical resources on the relationship among education, home, poverty, and gender such as that found in Kumar's (2010) work and others which might have allowed her to connect to a larger literature. This would have also enabled her to do a relational analysis between

the gendered division of labour at home and the educational institution's lack of vision and resources.

In Conclusion

All these accounts provide a richness of detail, but fall short of offering insights into the world of men and women as gendered and caste beings while negotiating poverty and their emerging understanding of what it means to be domesticated, poor, disadvantaged, and earning at the same time.

In the world of education, these are unsettling times as the dominant discourse focuses on educational technology and artificial intelligence as a panacea for all issues. There are strong voices in the support of edtech as an all-encompassing resource provider and a problem-solver. Given the aggressive rise and strength of such voices, Nair's volume takes us back to the world of education as a social activity that constantly needs fresh ideas and human effort. Some of the essays here will be instrumental in igniting curiosity about people who thought creatively about education, its space, and the role of learners. In this context, the implications of the insights that the present volume offers are valueable. Given the paradoxes that have emerged among alternative education movements and systemic reform efforts, this volume can inspire people to investigate them further.

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