



Revisiting Themes in Education: Essays in Honour of Krishna Kumar

Meenakshi Thapan

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This book is a collection of essays in honour of Professor Krishna Kumar, doyen in the education world in India, by his former students and colleagues. The Department of Education (or the Central Institute of Education (CIE), as it is more popularly known) is the premier Department for Education Studies in India including the professional courses of B.Ed. and M.Ed, in its academic programmes. Krishna Kumar spent the best part of his academic career at this Department, apart from his stint as Director of the NCERT in Delhi. He needs no introduction as an author, critic, and leading figure in education studies in India. His significant impact, apart from his academic contribution and the many articles he has authored in the media, is in his mentoring of many students at different levels at the University and his engagement with colleagues with varying interests. This book therefore holds particular meaning because it is more than a token of appreciation: it is about gratitude, sincerity and affection on the part of his students and former colleagues! It is also about the continuation of Krishna Kumar's ideas through research and reflection on various themes.

It is a fine collection, addressing most of Krishna Kumar's concerns about education in India. The introduction outlines some of his most prominent interests as well as his contribution to the field of education and provides a summary of the chapters in the book. It is a competent commentary on the history of the discipline of education in India intertwined with Krishna Kumar's work, and some personalities and institutions that he engaged with. The most engaging essay in the book is one that uses an autobiographical approach to understand the challenges associated with having educational ideals and working them out in practice, especially in the context of a community in which one is located.

Taking on the mantle of leadership in a male bastion is not the work of a practising Muslim woman, and Azra Razzack offers a fresh and inspiring perspective as she walks us through the razor's edge she experienced in her new job as Honorary Secretary of the Education Society of a minority school in Delhi. The difficulties she encountered were paramount in teachers' perceptions of their roles, or lack of, perhaps, and their complete lack of commitment to either the students or the school. The anomie in education comes out so clearly in this personal essay where the triumph of the students emerges as reflective of their agency. Razzack takes us through a nuanced telling of students' expectations, their being thrilled with little innovations, and their demands for better practices at school. However, their lives were at risk as children were often recruited into the petty crime and drug culture that encircled the school's location.

Moreover, Razzack's encounters with members of the community taught her about minority politics and priorities which were often at odds with what was good for the school or its main inhabitants, the children. Razzack survived the years she was associated with the school and left with no small sense of accomplishment, pleased by the little gestures of farewell made by students or grateful parents. Above all, it showed her that being in her position and her engagement with the everyday life of the institution gave her valuable insights into school education that no textbook could have prepared her for. It is a remarkable journey as an administrator, seeking to establish a work culture and an educational setting that favours the growth of children and provides them with the cultural capital they lack.

Krishna Kumar probably faced similar difficulties in his long career associated with the University of Delhi and the NCERT and the section on Conversations in the closing pages of this book seeks to capture some of that. It also vividly brings out the dilemmas Krishna Kumar has faced as an academic and as educator. He notes that the discipline of education has a kind of a 'living edge, a responsibility' so that one is never taken seriously as an academic (p. 356). In my own experience at a premier social science institution, it is considered a pedestrian discipline, with no oomph or saleable quality. It's too much about the 'real' world and hence cannot be used to advantage in cementing one's position in an academic hierarchy that relies on celebrating that which has currency in contemporary discourse. It is also with some poignancy that we learn that what Krishna Kumar values most about his education is his ability to 'stitch and weave' that gives him 'a lifelong sense of emotional satisfaction' (p. 363). To cherish this quality above all others tells us also something about Krishna Kumar the person and the values he endorses. Working with the hands is absolutely crucial to any education and he lauds Gandhi's ideas about this as a 'breakthrough idea'.

Gandhi's reflections on nonviolence also find space in this volume as Nidhi Gaur examines his educational thought and practice. I would only argue that we perhaps need not idealize nonviolence as a virtue as most of us are violent, if not physically, in our ideas, thoughts, interactions of different kinds. Can we be aware of this violence in ourselves and watch the processes as they unfold in our relationships with others? Observation and understanding of violence in our own lives, without posing the ideal of nonviolence, would be the first step in overcoming violence and valuing its absence as part of educational processes. Fear, emanating from the authority of the teacher, the textbook, or examinations, or other sources as Poonam Batra points out, is present in large measure in educational institutions. This limits students' abilities to learn as well as teachers' capacities to function to their fullest potential. Batra delineates the many acts of 'violence', the forms of exclusionary practices in schools that humiliate children, induce fear, and do not allow for a free and harmonious culture in schools. The effort to instill 'discipline' and reform children and young adults remains at the heart of educational practice that serves to restrain, emphasize obedience, and ensure conformity. While reflecting on one's own fears as teachers, and on the wider social and political reality is no doubt important, it is also equally important to first be able to develop a relationship as teachers and students, without dominance or authority and engage with one another in dialogue about the nature of our fears and examine them together. This equal sharing of our challenges helps foreground a culture of interaction at educational institutions that is not based on authority. It is possible to do this and through this also deal with conflict which is inevitable in any institution.

In his conversation with Disha Nawani (in the concluding section of the book), Krishna Kumar suggests that conflict is avoided in alternative schools and that children in such schools are cocooned in a kind of 'rosy, cushioned kind of experience' (p. 370). He particularly mentions the Krishnamurti Foundation schools. Nothing however could be further from the truth! Conflict is a part of everyday life and the Krishnamurti schools are not immune to it and nor do they brush

aside conflict under the carpet. Every situation is dealt with by teachers and students through dialogue with students, often involving parents, and sometimes, certain consequences are inevitable. But these are not imposed in an authoritarian manner. The students themselves are asked to reflect on the conflict and suggest how we may resolve the issue at hand. In this way they are partners in the resolution of conflict whether it is between themselves, with teachers, or with school norms. There is a serious effort to ensure that nothing is left unresolved as this may lead to a simmering of discontent and result in further conflict. In this manner, there is no illusion or ideal about schooling, only an insight into how conflicts must, and can, be resolved! There are other insightful pieces in this book. Malvika Gupta's essay provides a detailed and very informative account of the history of educational provisions for Adivasis. Through her analysis, she deftly brings out the complexities associated with a pedagogy of assimilation. The boarding schools, ashram schools, perhaps represent the worst forms of 'cultural genocide', that Gupta suggests, open up a debate on how to provide education that is more inclusive of Adivasi culture, traditions and life practices. Manish Jain's essay on nationalist imaginaries during the colonial period addresses one of Krishna Kumar's early and continuing concerns with the role of the textbook in pursuing nationalism and citizenship goals through the perpetuation of a national identity. Other essays that address issues surrounding educational policy through the lens of 'talent' in students (Philip), child-centred education (Sarangapani), and reforms vis-à-vis teachers (Priyam) focus on a critique of policy, and suggestions for change. They are well documented and address policy concerns with their ear to the ground and pose important questions for consideration.

Krishna Kumar has had a lifelong interest in understanding learning, its many dimensions, how we may reconstruct our approach to teaching and learning, to help students understand the world they inhabit, and become responsible citizens in a complex world. Mohammad Talib takes up this aspect of Krishna Kumar's interest in his essay on Modes of Learning. To my mind, it is also important to not assume that all learning is not participatory. If we do so, we deny agency to both teachers and students! While textbooks and examinations, based solely on their content, are the norm in this country, all teachers are not merely following occupational diktats without voice or agency. They often work against all odds to help students learn through participation! Sociology, which Talib particularly writes about, is a participatory discipline in itself. Fieldwork is essential to an understanding of social reality and has now become part of the undergraduate and postgraduate curricula in many universities in this country. Sociology and social anthropology in higher education is not only about 'western texts' or the dominance of western writers (p. 231). As is well known, social anthropology in India was not a homegrown discipline. It was an import and to that extent, the classics by western academics were present in the works students read. At the same time, writers such as AR Desai, GS Ghurye, Irawati Karve, MN Srinivas, among others were all part of the same discourse. On the basis of an article by Gerard Heuze, Talib criticizes scholars such as MN Srinivas and Andre Beteille for not supporting affirmative action in the 1990s. Is being 'politically correct' or supporting causes, however worthy they are, at all times the best defining feature of sympathetic or 'participatory' academia? How do teachers teach in their classrooms? What texts do they bring to the table? How do they help students understand the nuances of Indian society through both 'theory' and experience? Some of the best teachers in higher education 'lecture' but the connections they make in that lecture, the texts and illustrations they cite, and their analysis of all this material, helps students understand, with often deep and moving insight, the social world we inhabit. Ethnographies, autobiographies and biographies, archival documents, and other sources all serve to make it a participatory discipline. While the course on 'Participatory Sociology' started in Jamia is no doubt laudatory, we need to be open to other, equally promising, ways of 'knowing' the world.

Perhaps, as an ethnographer, I missed an emphasis on ethnography in this volume! Prabhjyot

Kaur's very interesting contribution on the construction of Sikh masculinity may however fall within this genre. It addresses an oft neglected aspect of gender and sexuality studies in education in this country: how masculinity is constructed in and through schooling practices, the influence of the media, popular culture and of course, socialization practices. Krishna Kumar's early essay 'Growing Up Male' in the Seminar (February 1986) was a timely contribution to masculinity studies in India (unacknowledged by Kaur!). Kaur focuses on popular culture, the cinematic genre, and through her study of students in two schools, examines its influence on Sikh adolescents. In doing this, her focus is more on the cinematic constructs of masculinity and perhaps she sometimes misses out on the significance of Sikh tradition in this process. For example, she mentions 'being helpful' as a characteristic the young Sikh boys most aspired for. She does not comment on this but quickly asserts the influence of Dosanjh on other aspirations of 'being stylish, naughty, and fun-filled' (p. 246). However, 'being helpful' is a characteristic the students have directly received from the Sikh tradition of kar-seva (voluntary labour). The influence of Sikh tradition is undeniable as Kaur herself comments on the 'inner moral constraint' that inhibits a turbaned Sikh from amoral acts. It would be interesting if Kaur could expand on this influence of the Sikh tradition on these young students and the importance of family and religious tradition in their lives. No doubt cinematic influence is increasingly paying a significant role in shaping young minds and their behaviour but uncovering the role of family and tradition in this regard may help us better understand the complex processes that underlie constructions of masculinity among Sikh adolescents.

In gratitude and celebration, the editors have put together a very diverse set of essays as their gift to Krishna Kumar. It must be a moment of pride and honour for Krishna Kumar who continues to reflect and write on education, in all its dimensions, and remains an inspiration to many students and practitioners in education.