
Book Reviews

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AZRA RAZZACK, PADMA M. SARANGAPANI, AND MANISH JAIN (Eds.), *Education, Teaching, and Learning: Discourses, Cultures, and Conversations—Essays in Honour of Professor Krishna Kumar*, Orient BlackSwan, 2023, 379 pp., ₹795, ISBN 9789354425615 (Paperback).

Education, Teaching, and Learning is a valuable collection of 16 essays on diverse themes in education, prepared in honour of Professor Krishna Kumar, an eminent educationist in India, by his former students and colleagues at the Department of Education, University of Delhi.¹ The contributors—former students and colleagues—include teachers, researchers, practitioners in the field of education, and a few associated with non-governmental organisations.

Globally, education discipline is widely understood in two distinct ways: One, as a discipline engaged in the preparation of teachers, and second, as a discipline of social enquiry. In the latter case, it comes close to the group of social sciences, if not a part of social sciences as some tend to argue. As a discipline involved in the preparation of teachers, education is considered a professional training activity. While both can be intuitively related, rarely a marriage of the two is taking place in practice. The education discipline in India is also characterised by the same feature. The book under review roughly testifies to this, as the selection of essays is arranged under two broad themes, ‘Educational histories and discourses,’ and ‘Culture of teaching and learning.’ The first section consisting of seven essays considers education as an intellectual discipline, and the second section of another set of seven essays as a profession, though one may find a little bit of overlap of the issues between the two sections. In addition, the book includes a long and lively conversation by Disha Nawani with Krishna Kumar, who reflects on a variety of personal, professional, and social issues, apart from a long introductory essay by the editors in the first chapter.

In a valuable overview of the discipline, the editors describe the growth of the discipline in India from the colonial period to the beginning of the twenty-first century, focusing on the major shifts in the core disciplinary practices in teaching and research, and in training of teachers. Teacher preparation was the dominant practice during the colonial period, and it continued even after independence for a long period. Education began to be viewed as a field of study only since the late 1970s and even now only a few Indian universities offer academic degree programmes in the discipline of education, while many, including a large number of colleges, are involved in teacher training only, leading to the award of professional degrees/diplomas/certificates in teacher education.

The themes covered in the book are diverse and even disjointed. Curriculum and teaching-related aspects form the two most important themes that the book focuses on, apart from a couple of other issues in education policy and administration.

'Child-centred education' has become a major slogan among educational reformers in recent years. But Sarangapani shows that motivations for these reforms are at least 130 years old, which can be traced to the thoughts of Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, Zakir Hussain, and others. Though many attempts are being made, India continues to struggle to make education truly child-centred, as 'non-child-centred conceptions are still very strong in many parts of India' (p. 110). As she admits, 'changing pedagogy is far from easy and certainly cannot take place on its own, but can only occur dialectically and dynamically through interaction with other parts of culture' (p. 110). Kishore Bharati's Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme has had a significant effect on textbooks and teaching science not only in Madhya Pradesh but it also became famous all over India. Sadhna Saxena, who had a long association with the programme, gives an insightful description of how it originated and had encountered several trials and tribulations before getting stabilised and becoming a prominent innovation in science education. She also narrates a few interesting 'undocumented stories' of the programme. Referring to her ethnographic study of Anand Niketan in Sevagram, Nidhi Gaur discusses Gandhi's idea of a non-violent society and highlights how crafts in the school curriculum help in self-awareness, self-reliance, and self-discipline. Presenting a case study of the education programme in Jamia Millia Islamia, which recognises teachers as central to the teaching-learning process, and emphasises a curriculum that draws upon religious, cultural, linguistic, and moral background of the students, Mohammad Talib in his essay on modes of learning refers to self-directed educational pursuits, which exceed the confines of the school, college, or university (p. 237).

Manish Jain critically reviews the role of civics textbooks in establishing and challenging colonialism during the colonial period in the early twentieth century. He also brings out the dynamics that caste played in the preparation of the textbooks. Malvika Gupta chooses to decode India's policies and practices in the case of adivasi education, and how they, without recognising the specificity of tribal cultures, have resulted in the alienation of children from their roots. Residential schools, Ashram schools, tribal sub-plans, and the policies of assimilation have not been highly effective, as the distinct nature and culture of the tribal children and the indigenous knowledge systems are not accorded due recognition. 'Residential schools remove children from the rhythm of work and learning that forms a "continuum" in the community life' (p. 185). The pedagogy of assimilation is associated with several complexities. Gupta wonders whether there has been a deliberate 'undermining [of] tribal cultures' and whether a 'cultural genocide is going on' (p. 185). The school curriculum has huge potential to correct some deep-rooted traditional unhealthy practices including violence, harassment and discrimination, prevalent in society. 'Violence' may also include use of derogatory language, say against women in the Punjabi songs, often sung

by Sikh adolescent boys. Analysing the popular Punjabi culture characterised by the dominance of masculinity among Sikhs, which gets fuelled further by Bollywood movies and religious factors, Prabhjyot Kaur highlights the importance of the school curriculum to correct this evil. As masculinity and femininity are essentially socially constructed, the entire society has to be aware of the evil and should attempt to correct it, rather than viewing them as ‘normal.’

With the shift in policy focus from inputs to outputs, learning seems to be replacing teaching as the issue of attention. ‘Testing,’ ‘monitoring,’ ‘accountability,’ etc., have undervalued teaching activity and the teaching profession. In the process, the teacher him/herself is undervalued; teachers are considered as expensive and at the same time dispensable. As a result, teacher recruitment policies favoured para teachers, against fully qualified normal teachers. Reviewing the relegation of the role of teachers, Manisha Priyam argues that the teacher is further seen as a ‘political agent,’ and his actions in the teachers’ union are seen as obstructive to education reforms. Nowadays teachers confront several challenges—professionalism, diversity in classrooms with children from varied socio-economic and educational backgrounds and different aspirations, in addition to politics, and power dynamics. As Shirley Joseph, Bharati Holtzman, and Poonam Batra in three different essays argue, despite such challenges, there is scope for teachers to effectively use the pedagogic space and engage with the students sincerely and seriously, help them learn through active participation, remove the culture of fear that students particularly of marginalised sections face, and mentor, empower, and transform them into responsible citizens of the country and also as global citizens.

There are a couple of important contributions in the book on three different issues. Joachim Oesternheld discusses the motives and circumstances under which young Indian scholars went to Berlin University to pursue their higher studies in the UK during the first half of the twentieth century. According to him, students went to Berlin and not to London, not because of any hatred against colonial rulers, but because of the image Germany had, and Germany’s active supportive policies. Students also had political interests and as a result, they became, according to Oesternheld, active members of the Indian Independence Committee intending to harness Germany’s potential for India’s freedom. The same intention led them to collaborate with fascist Germany in World War II, as members of the Free India Centre (p. 81).

In a thought-provoking essay, Rachel Philip refers to a seemingly non-controversial term—‘the talented student’ and how it has evolved as a distinct category in Indian education policy discourses during the post-independence period. She notes that most education policy documents in India have placed the issue of talent at the margin only, except the Kothari Commission’s report and the subsequent policy documents such as the report of the National Knowledge Commission, which accorded a relatively high place to talent. Talent is interpreted either as a special potential for excellence, or general competencies and abilities. While many policy documents referred to the first one and favoured developing talented students with special measures, some have not favoured the idea of having a special category of students, instead of favouring methods to develop general competencies and abilities among all. The first one is considered meritocratic and elitist, and the second, a

democratic approach. Philip opines that the choice depends on how the nation and the role of the student in the nation are imagined.

Razzack narrates her experience of a long journey as a school functionary involved in running several Muslim educational institutions, and the kind of challenges these schools face from within and outside the community, including minority politics and priorities. Students', parents', and community's expectations of schooling are highly diverse, in addition to varying teachers' perceptions of their own roles and lack of commitment.

All the essays form a fresh and stimulating reading. They address critical policy concerns and raise serious questions that make readers ponder over them again and again. The issues chosen are diverse and random—Indian students in Berlin University, Hoshangabad programme, civics textbooks, child-centred education, adivasi education, teacher-training-learning, education for non-violence, Sikh masculinity, and so on; but all are dear to Krishna Kumar. Hence, this is a fitting tribute to his scholarship. Scholars of education discipline would find this volume highly educative and inspiring.

Note

1. This was earlier known as the Central Institute of Education. Kumar worked here for a long period and influenced the transformation of education as a discipline of study in the Institute and elsewhere, and also as an area of public policy discourses.

Jandhyala B. G. Tilak

*Council for Social Development, New Delhi;
Kautliya School of Public Policy, Hyderabad, India
jtilak@csdindia.org; jtilak2017@gmail.com*