



Education and the architecture of an inclusive society

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Author Profile

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As an educationist involved with the process of learning at school level, I cannot help but stress the importance of education in building an inclusive and peaceful human community.

The global quest for peace and harmony in a world torn apart by conflict and violence has to begin right at the grassroots level, with the education of the world's children, millions of whom are out of school, never having held a book in their hands; many of them trained more in the art of handling weaponry than the skills of learning; many of them innocent victims to drug peddlers and smugglers; easy targets for the divisive and disintegrative forces in the world to carry out their plans for creating racial strife and communal and ethnic disharmony.

These economically deprived, out of school children, in the course of time, will swell the ranks of the adult illiterates, and it is an accepted fact that an uneducated populace provides the breeding ground for the growth of fundamentalism, obscurantism, superstition and bigoted mindsets, where hatred and violence are more in evidence than love, peace and harmony.

A global priority today is education. We need to ensure that all children get to school, and that the education imparted is holistic, wholesome and wedded to the concepts of national unity, global peace and international understanding.

As far as India is concerned, we have a literacy figure of about 61% with approximately 268.4 million illiterate adults and fifty million children still out of school.

If we aim for an inclusive society we have to also ensure that our education system is truly inclusive, bringing under its umbrella the tribal and rural poor, the backward minority groups and the mentally and physically challenged children, all of whom have been neglected for too long. This has been stressed in the Educational Policy of 1986.

The necessary prerequisite for building an education for a composite culture is to ensure that all our children not only have access to education, but are also given equal educational opportunity as well as an education of acceptable quality.

It is rightly said that there is hardly any country today that is mono-cultural, and many governments are in the process of making fundamental changes in their educational policies and systems to cater to the needs of different racial and ethnic groups in their countries.

India, in particular, with its one billion people of diverse groupings, is multi-cultural, multi-linguistic, and is the birthplace of many religions of the world. And in spite of many onslaughts on our democratic polity and threats to our secularism and pluralism, we have remained committed to the secular and democratic values laid down in the Directive Principles of our Constitution, and which form an indispensable part of the Educational Policy of 1986.

It is essential that our state-run and secular schools be open to children of all communities, castes and religions. They must cater to their different cultural and linguistic needs, and provide an educational environment which is non-threatening, which does not alienate or divide, which accepts differences and yet seeks to provide an overriding culture that is composite in nature, based on the ideals that India treasures – secularism, social justice and equity, and a democratic way of life.

Why do we find more and more children of minorities seeking education in separate schools? Why are more such schools opening? Why are fewer children of the minorities studying in so-called secular schools? Does it not signify a sense of insecurity among the minority families, a feeling of isolation, of alienation? Are we, in fact, being truly secular or are we allowing the religion and culture of the dominant majority community to penetrate unduly into our state-run schools, undermining the meaning of secularism?

There are many ways of looking at secularism, but to my mind, a secular school is one that considers religion to be a personal affair, respecting each child's personal faith, giving equal respect to every religion and the right to practice it at home or in its place of worship, but keeping it out of the school setting. Rather than practice or preach the tenets of any one religion, one should inculcate a spirit of scientific humanism, of peace and brotherhood, and a value system based on truth, beauty and goodness, social equity and justice, working for national unity and a global consciousness.

It is only when children of different communities work and play together that they understand and accept each other's differences, and can build a climate of tolerance, developing a common identity and composite culture. They begin to speak the same language of togetherness and national identity. If children of different cultures and communities are isolated and studying in their mono-cultural schools, where will we get the inter-mingling of different cultures and the weaving together of the different threads of our national fabric?

Schools can achieve a multi-cultural approach to education through their admission policies, their ethos and philosophy, through a broad-based, holistic curriculum, their textbooks, their co-curricular activity program, and through the re-orientation of their teachers.

I look forward to the day when the common neighborhood school concept becomes a reality; when children from all communities and socio-economic strata, living in the same area, live, work and play together in the same school. We need to create the conditions for making it possible, raising the quality of local schools with community help; working on mindsets and most importantly, creating the political will for its implementation.

At all costs, we have to resist the onslaughts of communalism and narrow parochial thinking in education, and uphold its secular nature. We have to fight the attempts to introduce the ideology of Hindutva into our schools in the name of the Indianization, nationalization, and spiritualization of education, or, for that matter, any form of fundamentalist thinking. We have to develop in the minds of our children, the value of rational thought, of developing inquiring/inquisitive minds, and encourage them to have a broad and liberal outlook on life.

We are familiar with the move at the Center by the BJP government, which replaced the 1986 Policy of Education with a new curriculum framework. Among other things, it sought to make Sanskrit and the study of the Vedas and Upanishads compulsory for all students, and to create a value system based on the wisdom of only our ancient Hindu saints and seers, without considering all other sources from which values can be derived.

The process of discarding and replacing the history textbooks (written by renowned scholars and historians) started with a circular from the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) that deleted certain chapters from the texts at various levels. The schools were also instructed to inform students that these chapters will not be included in the examination, but most horrifying of all, it prohibited the schools from **‘discussing them in the classrooms’**. So the spirit of inquiry and academic freedom, which are an essential part of Indian ethos, in the view of the CBSE, were no longer to be enjoyed by schools.

To build an inclusive society and a composite culture in a country so diverse and plural as India is not an easy task, especially at a time when local and regional identities are being rigorously asserted, when certain communities are feeling isolated and alienated from the political and civil polity, when there is such marginalization of the socially and economically deprived sections of our society, so much poverty, illiteracy and social injustice prevail, and when the majority of women are still disempowered. These are the issues that need to be addressed. Liberal and progressive thinkers, intellectuals, educationists and enlightened citizens have to work together in their different fields to meet these challenges, build our national identity and integrity and resist all attempts to weaken our national fabric. Education has a key role to play in bringing about the social and economic transformation of our society without which the building of a composite culture and inclusive society will remain a distant dream.