

Ideals of Citizenship

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Education is the process that prepares a child to be a part of his/her country. It should make the child a good and responsible citizen and give him/her knowledge of the roles to perform, along with the reasons for doing so and the various forms of these. It is important for a good citizen to not just look out for oneself but be aware of others. Good citizenship means considering the wider context and being prepared to participate in and engage with efforts to deal with and change situations detrimental to the nation or any of its people.

There are many factors that shape a child, her notions and ways of engagement. The first of these is her family and the community around her. It is the desire of all families and the need for all societies that their children are so educated that they become a harmonious part of the community and integrate to the way it functions; that they feel at home in it; that they contribute to it; and eventually, gain confidence and assume the responsibility to take it forward.

With communities becoming larger and structurally more complex, children interact with many more persons who are outside their family, even those who their families may not know. They come across new situations and have to interact with strangers. They have to negotiate encounters with strangers and others who are not strangers, but also not part of their families. Children have to develop relationships and understand how to deal with these without the support of their family, except in the case of certain general edicts in real situations.

Learning the nuances of interaction

Children have to deal with situations in their immediate sphere that require them to make choices. Their immediate sphere that influences them the most includes those who may care for them, those who may be indifferent and even those who may want to manipulate or use them. A child needs to understand how to distinguish between these and respond to each appropriately. In particular, a child must know when someone is trying to manipulate him/her through temptation

and/or domination and resist it. For this, one of the things that the child must be educated about is the personal self, their body and rights and what others may do to it.

There is also the need to be educated about the patterns of approach in such cases. As society and situations keep changing, the pattern and nature of the possible manipulative and violative behaviours can also change, so the education of the child must be extended to include newer responses. These needs for education and learning are a part of the entire process of becoming a member of society and being protected from possible hazards.

In brief, a major aim of education is for the child to grow up safely as a citizen, be aware of the surroundings and have the ability to protect herself within it. For this, she needs to know the precautions and care in using implements and facilities that may have potential hazards, for example, walking on the road, being around electrical connections, water bodies etc. The child also needs to be aware of the basic norms of co-existence and interaction, for example, while playing a game, rules need to be followed, everyone should get a turn, and no one can win all the time. In being a part of the community, the child has to learn the customs, rituals and ways of functioning of the immediate and the extended family. Opportunities to learn all this are generally available to children growing up in a community. Much of this is not even clearly articulated, consciously imparted or enforced but is a part of the tradition and culture that the child experiences. This education affects the way the child grows up and develops her belief system.

A child has several rights - of being looked after, being protected, being educated to understand all of this and more, the right to her share of the resources and activities around. This means that there are rules of behaviour and participation that are duties, that is, the child is also required to fulfil certain roles. The education of the child in the community includes all of this and is a natural process.

Rights and duties in a complex society

This process of *acculturation* is not enough in terms of the education required. We know that societies have to develop, transform, adapt and adopt new ways as well. This makes curiosity, exploration, inquiry and asking questions important. The child should have a right to be educated about all this so that as a grown person she can make choices and be capable of dealing with new situations and challenges that may be somewhat different to those the community around has been aware of. We also know that the community is a part of the larger society that constitutes the nation and the world. A child needs to know that access to this knowledge is possible and that she has the right to choose what to become and not be restricted to the few choices around her and, in particular, be bound to the only or the very few choices available in her family and community. The framework of rights, when we include this, becomes suddenly much wider.

In a society that is already very complex and increasingly becoming more complex with specialised roles requiring specific preparation, each child needs to be aware of these and of the availability of the possibilities of these opportunities. For instance, children must know the roads to reach these choices and the mechanism that would help to prepare for them. This is a right in a country that is democratic and promises equality. This implies that there must be an educational process that enables a child to know about the roles of being an artist, a musician, an engineer, a doctor, a teacher or a nurse and the preparation required for each.

In reality, the actual circumstances children live and grow up in are far from this. It is obvious that within this right is embedded the responsibility of the child to work towards the goals to be reached and make the effort to fulfil their aspirations. So, while it is the right of the child to expect to be provided with the resources and the opportunity, it is her responsibility to put in adequate effort. In a community, there cannot be many rights without responsibilities of some sort but there should not be children trapped in situations where they have only responsibilities and very few or no rights. It is important for any society to ask itself about the responsibilities and the rights that society considers necessary and how it will ensure that these will reach all children. It is for each one of us to ask whether the balance of rights and responsibilities is fairly distributed among the children of the nation.

Learning to be national citizens

This natural education of children drives from the context they live in. It comes from their families, community, media and other sources with mixed perspectives on the roles and rights of the individual in society, mutual relationships and interactions. There are market forces wanting to create demands and aspirational values in children that promote competition or create a sense of unreasonable entitlement and demands. These forces can hide reality by misconstruing equality, diversity and plurality. There are social and political forces that misinform and attempt to radicalise the young.

Due to the increasing social media usage and access, a lot of unregulated information now reaches everyone. Users need to be able to assess the nature, intent and veracity of the information received. The context of these can be different kinds of mobilisation for parochial gains, including elections. An important element of being an informed and active citizen is the ability to sift through the messages and to form a reasoned view on these aligned with the basic tenets of a democratic constitution.

Education for citizenship requires developing the tools to enable children to achieve this knowledge. These tools are: firstly, the ability to access newer sources of knowledge and this means the ability to read with confident comprehension and the desire to know more. Secondly, also required is a sharpened ability to assess whether a point of view, a statement (or text) is logical and internally consistent and how it matches with what other sources convey. This requires an open mind and a temperament that can suspend judgement. These sharpened tools of foundational abilities, reasoning, temperament, however, need a basic ethical framework. This framework will suggest the principles of using the tools and must emerge from constitutional and human values. Along with foundational literacy, foundational mathematical ability, scientific and rational temper, these have been again underlined in the National Education Policy of 2020.

The Preamble as a promise

The essence of values for Indian citizens emerge from the Preamble to the Constitution, a statement of promise by all people to each other. The promise is for equity, justice, liberty, and fraternity along with scientific temper and reason. The promised social, economic and political justice has many

implications, including that of the treatment of diversity in schools. Education makes everyone aware of assessing the treatment of diverse people and respond to inequities.

The promise of *fraternity* is the most important of the promises made in the Constitution and necessary for building togetherness in diversity and respect for the plural forms of living. It is this value that is at the core of all others and without it, none of the others can become ingrained. The ramifications of building fraternity are vast and encompass the desire to become close to diverse others and accept them as being the same as oneself.

Liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship allows a citizen to feel the confidence to think, express and argue freely and to worship the way she thinks appropriate.

Other values

Equally, it requires forbearance to accept diversity and respect plurality of beliefs, ways of thinking, ideas, forms of worship and expressions of alternate ideas and forms. In the Indian context, with its diverse faiths and forms of worship, ensuring this liberty for oneself is intertwined with allowing it to others. This requires an awareness and opportunities to participate in or be an interested spectator in the celebrations and ways of worship of different faiths. This sense of acceptance is essential for claiming democracy for oneself.

Another essential aspect of being a democratic citizen is to be able to participate in the democratic process with understanding and intent. Participation in the democratic process is not about supporting or opposing the government in power and certainly not restricted to voting. It means being aware of and analysing what is happening, assessing and judging the work of the government and administration, asking questions to seek justifications for the steps taken and decisions made. Being a good citizen is not about being an obedient subject to those in authority but being an informed citizen who seeks to better not only her life but that of others, as well. To be an educated citizen in a democracy means:

- Having the ability to acquire and judge information
- Obtaining and assessing evidence, perspectives, views, analysis, projections
- Appreciating logic and reason

Only these three attributes can engender the

confidence to feel somewhat equal to those governing and administering and the ability to appreciate the importance of one's role as a citizen and not be overwhelmed into accepting authority like a feudal subject

Patriotism

An important component of being a citizen is being concerned about the nation and being public-spirited. However, the ideas of being patriotic and responsible as a citizen need to be examined. It is necessary to question the notion of the nation, the meaning of patriotism and the whats and whys of it. Asking questions and disagreeing with governmental or administrative actions is not unpatriotic.

Citizens must appreciate and act with the recognition that it is people who constitute the nation. Any idea of a nation that is devoid of the concern for the people in it and demands unending sacrifice for the abstract idea of nationhood is an undemocratic formulation. Pride in oneself and one's nation has to be calibrated with the realisation that one's pride can only be respected if one respects and honours the pride of other individuals, communities and nations.

We need to recognise that the past can only help us to recognise mistakes, it cannot make life better today. There is a need to place the past mistakes in today's context and examine the idea of a sovereign republic and what ensuring the unity and integrity of the nation means. Is it devoid of respect for people and all diversity? Does it mean a push towards homogeneity and the hegemonic ascendance of one way of thought and one faith? Does it mean sowing the seeds of fear and anger against other communities or individuals? It must concern itself with the people who inhabit the country, as it is not merely about physical land and geography. Overemphasis on that and on the nation as an abstraction, looking back to the past, being hyper-nationalist, parochial and non-inclusive is disrespecting the idea of being Indian as conceptualised in the Constitution.

Role of the school

It is towards this idea that the school processes need to and can contribute. This can happen with the development of a culture of participation and togetherness among all in the school; taking up a

variety of joint tasks and activities; embracing a culture that includes shared roles among students and teachers towards contributing to the work of maintaining and running the school. This will entail groups having the responsibility and authority within a framework of planning and executing their ideas for the different tasks assigned to them.

The tasks of the coordinating groups can be the maintenance of equipment, ensuring that the classrooms and the premises are clean, looking after the grounds and the plants, helping ensure attendance, supporting those children who need help etc, in short, a system and culture of participatory responsibility for the functioning of the school. It could include being a part of informed decision-making, for example, about timetables, school activities, functions and other such areas. These, within the framework of the overall structure, can help students develop a sense of collaborative work and accept the decisions of the majority when they have different viewpoints and participate in the review and planning with an open mind to take criticism and suggestions positively. These would also work as forums of dialogue where students can ask questions about school decisions.

The closest to the idea of common schools are public schools as they can cater to children from diverse backgrounds. In school, they can come together to play, talk and listen to each other, eat and share food. They learn how to conduct themselves and also, the language, ideas and games from each other. By participating or observing the plural rituals in the environment of the school, they can develop resistance to misinformation campaigns that demonise some sections of the people. In sharing food during break or as colleagues sitting next to each other during the midday meal, many barriers are pulled down.

However, all this can happen only if the school respects fraternity and does not itself distinguish between students and encourages them to form friends, associates, team members across the boundaries of caste, community, family professions and economic statuses. Playing together as a team, learning to win and lose and accept the results, rubbing shoulders with one another in cultural and other activities and tasks for the school develop an understanding that can withstand many challenges.

For the idea of justice to sink in, transparency and objective responses to students is essential. The internal functioning and activities of a school, for example, through providing experiences of

working together, ensuring transparent treatment and ensuring mixed groups, are important for the development of acceptance of diversity in the microcosm of the school and are also a preparation for immersion in the wider society and its challenges. This preparation must include engagement with concerns that are wide and affect the macrocosm. Concern for others, the unknown and the unmet and their challenges through discussion and knowledge about current events, resisting being influenced by and preventing mobilisations around sectarian issues, having a concerned response to the larger crises unfolding (as in the mass migration of people in the recent pandemic), promoting responsible ways to treat the environment, stemming degradation, urging the use of sustainable materials, products, methods and avoiding consumerism. All these are ways of being aware of social responsibilities through participating in community projects and acting on them in some way.

In summary

Much of this is not easy for schools to do, but the effort to raise the bar of an enabling environment is attainable. The school can initiate dialogue across macro- and micro-contexts that children can be aware of and touched by. Taking up some actions outside the school and in the community are indications of being a socially responsible and good citizen; secular participation in teams and groups, forming non-sectarian friendships ensure a fraternal feeling across diversity. It would require children having to do things like team games, taking joint responsibility for school tasks, organising small and big events in the school, helping each other through diverse needs etc.

But over and above this, citizenship training requires that children develop the ability to confidently acquire new knowledge by reading and from other sources; express themselves logically and clearly; have a positive image of themselves; have a strong ethical system and be fearless. Citizenship is about each learner being confident of her importance and being responsible for her role.

For the school to make this possible depends heavily on having a committed team not only of teachers but the entire staff and an atmosphere where this team also feels secure, self-assured and has a sense of citizenship. They must be confident of being able to hold a dialogue with the outside world, including parents, knowing

that it may not always be harmonious and aligned to the values described above. This will require them to understand citizenship, have the ability to appreciate what they can push through in the school's socio-cultural environment and be able

to put aside their own prejudices and loyalties to allow open and fair conversations so that children learn to form their own reasoned views imbued with humanistic and Constitutional values.

References

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