

Active Citizenship in School

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The past year has been like no other. The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc not just in terms of lives lost but also in terms of the disruption of normal life. As this reportⁱ shows, this disruption affected the poorer sections disproportionately, deepening the already wide chasms between the haves and the have-nots. One area where this has been felt acutely is in the education sector where, while a small minority has access to the internet and online classes, a large percentage of their counterparts have virtually forfeited a whole year.ⁱⁱ

While this was an unprecedented situation, what could have saved us from this disaster? What can we do better so that if we are faced with a situation like this again, the same injustices are not perpetrated?

The obvious answers are improvement in state capacity and investment in public goods, such as public health and education. But if we had to define one game-changing solution, it would be the concept of active citizenship. What is active citizenship and what does it entail?

With the widening and deepening of democracy, the common lesson from around the world has been that citizens and the kind of involvement they bring into civic affairs will directly impact the kind of democracy we will have. So it follows that, for a democracy to deliver the goods for us, we need to have aware and active citizens.ⁱⁱⁱ Active citizenship is premised on encouraging citizens to use their agency to make claims on the state. At a very basic level, it involves and engages with an understanding of democracy as a republic, the primacy of the Constitution and fundamental rights and directive principles as outlined in our Constitution. You may say that these are elementary concepts, but just ask a few people what the difference between Independence Day and Republic Day are and you will be surprised by the answers you get!

It would be instructional here to understand the foundations on which modern democracies stand, namely, electoral participation, citizen protests and claim-making on the State. These are the

common ways we participate as citizens. Electoral participation comes automatically given the din of elections and protests are fairly commonplace. But claim making for basic amenities that a state/government is obligated to provide is something that citizens have lost control over. Adding the fourth element, that of active citizenship, can help us regain control over making claims on the State, which stated simply refers to demanding that the government deliver to us what it is mandated to do by the very nature of the citizen-state relationship.

To summarise, an active citizen, in addition to checking the boxes as a law-abiding individual is also an aware, participating citizen, working with fellow citizens, lawmakers and local governments to manage governance. For example, the lakes of Bengaluru have been transformed from areas of filth to sanctuaries of peace thanks to the efforts of citizens working with ward officials and local corporations.

Understanding our democracy

In the battle for rights and making claims, citizens often feel defeated because they do not understand how the state machinery functions. Consequently, understanding and fighting for vital services remains a distant dream. Therefore, this process of education must begin at a foundational level to help us internalise important tenets of our democracy. What is the value in bringing these to the fore at a foundational level? What problems will it solve?

Awareness of rights

At a basic level, it will help citizens to increase their awareness of their rights. Awareness is the first step to change. It is when students are aware that they can identify situations that are less than ideal. For example, only when students know that the state is obligated to maintain law and order will they begin to notice and internalise that the local police is duty bound to maintain law and order in

their communities. As children, they may not be able to march into the police station and demand implementation of law and order but will be able to influence and spread awareness amongst their peer groups.

Awareness of social issues

The state, the markets and society form the three pillars of a modern democracy. Raghuram Rajan in his book, *The Third Pillar*, makes an excellent case for strengthening the third pillar, namely society. Society has been weakening over the last few decades owing to the failure of the state, citizens giving up their demands on the state once they move up the economic status ladder and their general apathy. Active citizenship can also help in strengthening this third pillar and make incremental changes towards an egalitarian society. For example, the state can have a regulatory framework to tackle discrimination on the basis of caste. But it is equally important for society to play a role in these matters. Active citizenship by way of communication and awareness campaigns on social issues are most effective and the best way to teach children to grow up as aware, active citizens.

Finding solutions

Understanding governance structures, local governments and frameworks will bring in a solutioning mindset amongst students. For example, awareness of ward-level committees and the way they function will make students understand that governments are accessible as well as accountable. They could come up with innovative solutions that would solve specific local problems which, given the diversity of our country, need hyperlocal solutions. For example, solid waste management is an area that is hyper localised, and students could come up with ideas about how to deal with this in the context of their neighbourhoods.

Teaching citizenship in school

Having addressed the *what* and *why*, we should move to the *how* of this: Democracy eventually depends on involved citizenry. While there is a considerable focus on getting the fundamentals of mathematics and the physical sciences, do we spend enough time on how we can teach citizenship to children? How can interest and involvement be created in the classroom? Since the classroom is a microcosm of the larger society, it would be useful to reflect on tools and methods used. Here are

some ways in which we can inculcate the spirit of active citizenship in classrooms.

Daily news and debates

While classroom teaching could be used to discuss concepts on citizenship, local governments and law making, can we include just reading news headlines and discussing news for ten minutes every day in the school assembly? A weekly deep dive into news based connecting it to concepts being learnt in the classroom could help students grasp these better. This weekly exercise could be in the form of debates between students taking positions on important issues. For example, a debate on the farm laws and the issues involved.

Understanding Parliamentary processes

A school level election followed by a mock parliament to introduce a culture of debate and dissent would help explain the parliamentary system. In a culture that does not encourage questioning easily, it is very important to encourage constructive debate and discussion. This will give important lessons to children on values of bargaining, empathy and compromise which are important skills in policymaking and public life. While this is democracy in action what we should reinforce and reiterate is the fact that all of this happens within the framework of a constitution. It would help if schools draw a larger charter which would act like a constitution. This would drive home the fact that a constitutional republic is what differentiates modern democracies over a monarchy.

Understanding Democratic processes and concepts

As a run-up to every major election, schools could revise and review aspects related to adult franchise. For example, history of adult franchise should not merely be taught as 'all citizens above 18 years old...' but with a historical context of the freedom struggle or suffrage movements across the world. The practicalities and pressures of syllabus completion may make this difficult. We could look at earmarking time every week to tie the common threads across subjects, for example, studying suffrage movements could be linked to lessons on democracy and gender rights awareness. Similarly, lessons on food patterns in geography could be tied in with themes of unity in diversity.

For a democracy to truly deepen and for the last person to benefit from it, it is imperative that we follow the 'catch them young - watch them grow'

approach and invest in citizenship lessons for our children. At a time when the world has seen an increased centralisation of governance, as citizens,

we need to wrest the initiative back. It is up to us to turn a new page so that we can realise the dream that we set for ourselves 70 years ago.

i <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/what-2020-did-to-india-s-inequality-11610982667419.html>

ii (<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/delhi-survey-school-education-govt-facilities-computers-7146867/>)

iii (<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/a-leaf-from-stacey-abrams-book/article33156100.ecex>)



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Instead of treating children as citizens of the future, curriculum developers and teachers ought to look at them as citizens at present (Howe & Covell, 2009). The experiences [provided to them] should be designed to help children see what they can do here and now to bring a change in their own lives and that of their communities.

Richa Pandey, Inculcating Active Citizenship Through Stories, p 90.