



## A. INTRODUCTION

**S**ocial studies relates to our lives and our beings in an intense manner. It is expected to affect our behaviour and shape our world view. It expects the learner to integrate in society even while influencing it.

A common response to the question, why should we have children learn in schools, is 'so that she/he becomes a good citizen'. Social studies finds itself entwined in conflicting strands as it attempts to unravel and analyze heterogeneous notions of societies and citizens even while being rooted in the child's life.

Embedded in the ethical foundations of a social studies program are axioms. For instance, 'all human beings are equal' could be considered an axiom according to the Constitution of India. The axioms we adopt have a direct bearing on how we analyze the world around, from the Bhopal tragedy to gender prejudice we might encounter within our homes.

In a social studies program, the choices of what should be taught and in what manner draws from how we view society and the human being. The Constitutional preamble gives a notion of what we mean by these terms, but there is a wide variety in the manner they are interpreted and the extent of faith and seriousness in them. In many ways, social studies, being inextricably linked to notions of identity, is an arena of battle as it offers routes for the promotion of ideologies and indoctrination. In looking at the purpose of education, these are, however, not the only concerns. There is also the concern to balance stable social principles and their transformation.

Social studies embroils itself in issues that every person grapples with every day; in this lies its richness and its complexity.

The main questions that we have to address when considering the teaching and learning of social studies are:

1. **Purpose:** What are the main purposes of social studies?
2. **Components:** What are the building blocks of a social studies programs?
3. **Perspective:** What is the perspective of the proposed discourse?

4. **Nature:** What is the nature of the discipline, and how does it grow and accumulate knowledge?

5. **Process:** What processes of teaching would be appropriate?

In the following sections, we shall see why the above questions are difficult to answer in any straightforward manner. We will focus on the primary classes.

## B. PURPOSE

The overarching goal of social studies is to help the child understand society and her place in it, to use this understanding to make informed personal and social choices, and to enable her to realize that her choices are influential in shaping the society she lives in.

Such choices have to be informed not just by personal interests, but also by collective social good. Since a good society and a good human being are moral conceptions, a fourth social studies goal is the development of an ethical sense.

A social studies program needs to have some implications for what the child understands of her society and how she deals with it. The program has to gradually help her make better judgements and feel more confident in choosing and deciding. It also has to enable her to take sides, which is critical in a liberal, democratic, plural society. Having said that, it is also crucial for any social studies program to develop in the child a sensitivity towards others' choices and perspectives, to embrace the diversity of beliefs and experience, which adds to the richness of one's worldview.

It is thus clear that social studies contains some part of ethical development in itself. The ethical development suggested here is in terms of helping the child build her own logical and value framework. She needs to be able to make appropriate choices involving benefit to the majority. Often social studies is confused with learning a particular variety of community living and moral science, and is often confined to a list of do's and don'ts that the children have to follow. Such programs tend to reduce the child's space for observing,

experiencing, analysing, formulating ideas, and to develop her own way of working and deciding. In addition, it must make her sensitive to the needs of the collective and to ecology as well.

### C. COMPONENTS

The above three purposes indicate four broad components of a social studies program: Choice, Concept, Information and Skills.

#### 1. Choice

Rather than a set of moralized do's and don'ts, a good social studies program would seek to develop the ability of the child to make the appropriate choices for herself after weighing pros and cons. In this, it is important that she follow principles of rational thinking, enquiry, equity, diversity and plurality – values that are enshrined in our Constitution.

#### 2. Concept

To be able to ask and understand questions, to look for answers and to make choices, it is necessary that we understand underlying concepts. If we do not understand them reasonably clearly, we cannot form informed judgements. In social studies, concepts are the building blocks of understanding. By concept, we refer to the theoretical understanding of a real-world thing or event. Nation, festival, market, citizen, community, human being, home, family, etc. – each of these is a concept.

The social studies program needs to include engagement with the ideas of inter-dependence among people, communication, idea of a human society, evolution of societies, of location and mapping, climate, habitat, market, of governance, of cooperation, diversity, plurality, and so on. These concepts will gradually get more complex and would have more and more inter-linkages. The early specific concepts of a child – a chair; festivals like Id, Diwali, Christmas; home, family – gradually evolve and grow deeper and wider. There is no common conceptual development among all children. Concepts develop in each child with different nuances, and can only be scaffolded using their own, different experiences.

Another example of this can be that as the child grows, from the 'male' superset, the idea of 'father' begins to stand out more distinctly. Then comes a point when the distinction between one father and another become apparent. In this way, the very difference in experience can lend to nuances

in the building of concepts.

#### 3. Information

Concepts are generic patterns and abstractions of the real world. This implies that real world information is the basis for concept formation.

Take the concept of a map. In order to make a map, you need to know where north is and where south is. Similarly, without knowing the variety of relationships and their names, you cannot analyse the manifestation of gender and other kinship relations in our conversations and social processes. To understand the history of a market or a town, we need information of dates and events.



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social studies has a greater need for information than other disciplines such as Mathematics or Science. In Mathematics, once you have a few axioms, you could logically construct all knowledge using them. In Science, we can repeat an experience or even conduct new ones. There is also certainty that given certain conditions, the results of the observations will be consistent.

In social studies, however, it is not possible to engage with a concept in the abstract without having any information or facts to build up the analysis. It is the task of gleaning patterns in information. Hence, what information is provided, and to what level of detail, is an important consideration in the teaching of the discipline. Of course, we need to always be cognizant that information is rarely neutral, and is colored by perspective.

Information is sometimes confused with concept. This confusion arises because information and concept are intertwined, both in their relationship to each other, and in

the common language used to reference each other. In some aspects, information is prior to development of the concept. But once the concept has been developed, it can be used to organise and retain more information. For a child, 'teacher' might refer to her specific teacher – this is information. Whereas the child's mother might use the word 'teacher' to denote both the specific teacher (information) or to the concept of a teacher.

#### 4. Skills

How does information lead to concept; concept to understanding; and understanding to choices? This is the role of skills. Just as logic is a mathematical skill, and hypothesizing and experimentation are scientific skills, there are skills specific to social studies.

Some examples of social studies skills include: recognizing what to observe, observation, analysis of observation, formulating patterns, reflecting on situations, etc. These might seem complex and high order skills, but even young children demonstrate these when they are, for instance, asked to draw a map of their classroom or school, or are asked to conduct a survey.

Skills and concepts often develop simultaneously and contextually.

Let us consider an example to examine the components suggested above.

#### How did Human Civilisation Develop?

Let's assume the task at hand is to understand the development of the human society from hunter-gatherer days to the present. This requires information that humans did not know agriculture, that they hunted animals in groups and slowly started using tools. We need to know that use of metal in tools and weapons came later, primarily as a improved substitute for stone. There is information that can be gathered from cave paintings. To build a conceptual construct, we need an enormous amount of information that cannot merely be gathered from observation and experience.

The skills and capabilities revolve around finding, comprehending and using sources that have information about these elements. This could include simple reading materials that have analysed the observational data, or even interpreting the original descriptions. So while there is no direct observation required, the other aspects of skills are

still necessary. These require many skills and abilities, but are different from the concrete observational possibilities that tasks dealing with Science require.

The concepts included in this analysis of evolution of human society are the changing use of technology, the nature of production, governance, distribution of resources and surplus, nature of trade and commerce, and so on.

The principles of ethics include understanding of development in terms of sustainability, dealing with inequity in distribution, principles of governance that is just and equal, pros and cons of using technology and elaborate trade, etc.

In some of these categories, there are overlapping areas and a hierarchy of components as we move towards a more general and abstract form of knowledge. The abstraction and the distance from the experience of the child – the movement away from learning with concrete pictures and descriptions – increase as we move to the upper primary classes. The generalisations and connections that the child is expected to make also become more complex.

The need for retaining the concreteness of the picture remains.

#### D. PERSPECTIVES

The perspective with which one approaches social issues within the classroom is an extremely vexing question. Does learning to respect equity and justice demand action in situations where there is injustice and inequity – even if it means confronting something immediate in the child's home or in the community? If children explore the situations of injustice and inequity, do they discuss ways and means of changing it? Or should they limit themselves to the Constitution, its promises and structures without analysing how they function in reality? This is a difficult choice.

*Does learning to respect equity and justice demand action in situations where there is injustice and inequity – even if it means confronting something immediate in the child's home or in the community?*

It is not easy to discuss questions arising from real situations in the classroom. Children coming from various backgrounds and socio-economic strata cannot discuss such issues academically. The inequity, social domination and infringement of democracy have names of people and families associated with it. These are loaded with personal relationships and involvements. The natural instinct of the school system would be to avoid conflict and unpleasantness, to hide inequities, and plead for peace and harmony. A good citizen is one who accepts her lot with equanimity and hopes that better laws would be formed and more effective implementation would take place. It may be argued that this is the best choice for a society; but this is in fact just one perspective. There are counter views.

The Constitution of India promises a just and equitable society. However, it does not elaborate what kind of citizens and governance can lead to this. The goal of the elementary school program therefore has to help the child develop this understanding. The question therefore is, do we prepare children to succeed the best in the present situation? Or do we prepare them to question the dynamics and struggle for the goals that were promised?

There is therefore a struggle between a program that focuses on building a spirit of justice and equity in children; and a program that is focused on peace and harmony, leaving the tranquillity of the ancient pond undisturbed.

The child comes to the school with many experiences and interactions with her environment. She has memories of being respected and valued, of being considered part of a group. She also has memories of exclusion, memories of dominating or being dominated, etc. These experiences have structured her behaviour and beliefs. Based on these, and her own silent analysis, she has formed her identity. It is not easy to develop a program which can use these experiences and the identity in a meaningful manner and develop through them a common view. Also, it is arguable whether a common view or a widespread belief system is even desirable. We need to keep in mind that there are many conflicting world views, and it is not obvious which world view should be advocated. We cannot also ignore the fact that the State is controlled by many dominant forces that would also like to shape the child's perspective. The struggle for determining content and its transaction is therefore intense here.

It is thus obvious that there can be many perspectives

with which to develop social identity and to interpret environment, culture and history. The perspective chosen is governed by the presumed relationship of a human being to society, relationships among humans, and an understanding of how children learn. Any list of do's and don'ts, bereft of choice, discretion and rational analysis, is not acceptable. One of the things, therefore, to be kept in mind while thinking about social studies in primary schools is to avoid failing into trap of developing a didactic program.

## E. NATURE OF THE DISCIPLINE

### Is it Social Studies or is it Social Science?

The prevalent impression that the scientific process offered a superior way to knowledge and life; that along with mathematical logic, it formed a complete package to make the human being rational. These led to a rechristening even the social disciplines with a scientific suffix .

The power of science and technology globally, and the belief in the infallibility of evidence-based arguments and rational logic was considered to be the basis of all knowledge creation. This idea embedded itself in all areas of studies, and has led to a value in being scientific. The members of different disciplines in social studies took pains to describe how their discipline was close to Science, and as cognitively logical.

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However, while there is nothing wrong in the need for arguments and formulations to be logical, it is important to recognise that many aspects of human behaviour do not conform to straightforward, rational analysis and logic because there are too many inconsistencies. The question of how belief systems, for example, arise is extremely critical and has to be investigated in a manner that cannot be called

scientific.

Natural science has a method; it has a way of accepting knowledge as valid and within its ambit. The scientific process can have a variety of steps, but there are underlying common principles, and knowledge is eventually accepted when it makes verifiable predictions. But, keeping in mind the sheer variability of human behaviour and reviewing various aspects of society and its changed requires a system of processes that cannot be comfortably contained within a social science nomenclature. Unlike Science, human beings and society are not rational, objective and empirically consistent. It would be good to consider for oneself if the social studies disciplines can have the same criteria as the Sciences to judge knowledge or accept that an idea worth considering has been formulated.

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## F. CLASSROOM PROCESSES

It is difficult for the school to discuss the legal age for marriage, and the freedom to marry, in a society dominated by khap panchayats. Similarly, how do we talk meaningfully about equity, restraint and contentment in an economy pulled by the market forces? The tensions and the implications of the content of the discussions make it difficult to be held in school. There is besides this the question of the ideology of the school as a structure and the extent to which it can allow open ended discussions and explorations of ideas particularly in areas that may have immediate implications for the life of children and adults around them.

While an exhaustive response to classroom processes is outside the scope of this article, we will consider the following four questions:

1. Can there be a common approach to Science and social science in the primary classroom, especially since they are dealt with jointly under 'Environmental Studies'?
2. Can the program be largely built around the student's knowledge?
3. How do you build on the student's experiences, especially in history?
4. Where does a teacher draw a line when it comes to issues of immediate conflict for the child?
5. Can there be an integrated cross-discipline approach to the curriculum, or is a discipline-specific program required?

### **Can there be a Common Approach to Science and Social Science in the Primary Classroom, especially since they are dealt with Jointly under 'Environmental Studies'?**

At one level, a common approach that includes hypothesising, observing social aspects and discovering patterns as one does in the Science, is possible. However, this 'scientific' process cannot be extended to exploration of how societies develop and change, how human civilisations have learnt to use artefacts, and what has been its impact on their lives. It is also not possible to explore the forms of governance and the kind of implications they have for individuals in a society. The complexity of the social dynamics and situations makes it difficult for clear cause-effect relationships to be seen. Instead what we can see is a description of how things are, and absorb the nuances that differentiates things.

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It is clear that even at the primary level, Science and social studies would have distinct approaches. The notion that scientific knowledge is preeminent, combined with the inherent difficulty in social studies teaching has discouraged

the profuse inclusion of social disciplines in the school. Which is why even as a part of EVS, attention is focused on conducting surveys and locating places on a map; and not on analysing the lived experiences of children.

### Can the Program be Largely built Around the Student's Knowledge?

Students have local and personal information at the beginning of the program. Recognising this, we then use it to build wider conceptual structure that builds on and relates to the experiences of the student.

*If the program gives the child the opportunity to find reasons, organise her ideas and make choices, then it will have implications for behaviour of the child. The program would also convey to the child a sense of what society is and how to relate to it.*

The information available to the child is in a variety of forms. It includes family and kin, names of the village of the neighbouring villages, the river that flows nearby, the names of trees around, different types of crops that are grown, where the market is and what is sold there, etc.

The amount of information a child has and its scope increases as she grows older. While some of this happens on its own, a formal social studies effort should lead the child to information and knowledge that would otherwise be beyond her reach. This will require her to observe closely, collect data, to organise these observations, make generalizations from observations, draw inferences, and so on. The child has to be given opportunities to take up such tasks with a gradually increasing level of difficulty.

If the program gives the child the opportunity to find reasons, organise her ideas and make choices, then it will have implications for behaviour of the child. The program would also convey to the child a sense of what society is and how to relate to it. It would suggest ways to understand the happenings in the world around. There are certain principles and social norms that the child needs to be aware of, as well

as be capable of questioning them.

### How do you build on the Student's Experiences, especially in History?

The choice of themes and entry points for concepts has many folk views. The dominant argument is to move from the known to the unknown, and that means moving from what is around the child to the more distant. However, the diversity of backgrounds that children come from make it difficult for this to be meaningfully done. The use of the child's experience can only to be bring in what she knows and to help her analyse it.

There are however, some elements of the experience that may be clearly useable in the classroom. These include conversations about what artisans do, what tools and materials they use, the goods that come into village, the goods that go out, where people get firewood from, where they get water from, what people do during different festivals, and so on. These are all descriptions of observations, but critical analysis around these can make things difficult. It is not easy to analyse why some people have a water source in their house and others have to travel a long distance, or even why some people are even disallowed access to nearby water sources.

There is also the issue of how do you initiate the child into thinking about what happened before. The choice of whether we want to talk about kings, dynasties and their battles, or do something else, needs to be settled first. If agree that at the very least we need a historical perspective that values descriptions of society and of lives of people, then we need to begin this engagement with children. Of course, we can begin with the family tree, and what parents and other elders remember about earlier times. This, however, does not consolidate into the recognition of causes and implications. It does not also give a set of questions that can be examined.

The building of historical understanding using concrete experiences therefore becomes difficult. The framework for analysis requires a wider information base that is not immediately accessible for the child. This can partly be resolved through narrated tales – for instance, descriptions of the lives of ordinary people at different historical times, as told by accessible figure.

By now, it would be obvious that the classroom cannot

revolve around what the child already knows. There is a need for new data to be added to widen exposure. It is also crucial for the child to appreciate plurality and diversity. She needs to keep all this in mind while developing her conceptual structures. Such an analysis can only come by providing detailed descriptions so that the learner is able to establish a specific relationship with the information given. For this, the context has to be rich and well connected.

*Which means that while the asking of uncomfortable questions is inherent in the nature of social studies, an appropriate judgement of how far to push the envelope can only be taken by the teacher in real time.*

It would be important to also ensure that information is provided in a format that is by itself interesting. For example, it could be in the form of a story or a collection of detailed pictures. The examples that one constructs in these stories should relate to aspects of the child's experiences. There can be many ways of making the child engage with these descriptions, including comparing them with her own experience and getting her think and reflect on it. We need to take her back in time, we need to find anchors around which we can peg descriptions of earlier times and make it interesting for the child.

### **Where does a Teacher Draw a Line when it Comes to Issues of Immediate Conflict for the Child?**

It may be comparatively easy to decide what you want to do with physical geography, even though the extent of abstraction needed and the sizes of terrains for which these are significant are themselves frightening. It is also possible to know what to do with the village market or how we analyse for the idea of currency. But when we relate surplus to social dynamics of inequity, and analyse the accumulation of wealth or the justification of private property or inheritance, we are constructing social study concepts that behave differently for different people. We are both constructors of social ideas

and simultaneously are their analysers.

Free class room discourse thus could become critical and even disparaging of the system. Similarly, if we relate geography to the politics of nations, and to the domination and distribution of resources, then the challenge of the middle path between raising questions of inequity and promoting acceptance becomes thinner.

There are many instances of teachers who are convinced that children need to think about 'the other' and be sensitive to issues of equity and plurality, but feel unable to move the discussion forward. Cultural attitudes being deeply ingrained, it is difficult for the school to intervene in a situation of crisis. Any attempt to open a dialogue must recognise that the emotions are raw at the time the differences between communities are the most intense. Also, the prejudice of caste and the relative positions that have been reached cannot only be a matter of rational discussion. In any case, it is not easy to talk about deprivation and segregation among children present in the classroom.

Which means that while the asking of uncomfortable questions is inherent in the nature of social studies, an appropriate judgement of how far to push the envelope can only be taken by the teacher in real time.

### **Can there be an Integrated Cross-Discipline Approach to the Curriculum, or is a Discipline-Specific Program Pequired?**

Transacting social sciences also requires us to examine integrated versus discipline-based programs. The argument for an integrated program is that the child perceives reality as whole and therefore the treatment should be holistic; not based on disciplines. This at the extreme interpretation tends to suggest that the entire program be evolved as an undifferentiated theme, and not as specific development of discipline based concepts.

The radical proponents of theme-based presentation often miss out on ensuring that the key elements that link the primary school to further development. The elementary school programs have a certain serious disciplinary flavour and that increases as we move to the secondary classes. For example, there seems to be a clear expectation that by the time child reaches the upper primary, she has to be able to read maps, that therefore, there must be a program of helping child develop that ability. But this cannot be left to

happen under one overall theme or another.

Similarly to appreciate history, the primary school child has to have a sense of time and of relating it to their activity. The conclusion that you need a historical timeline has to be the basis of any content developed. This requires dealing with a level of discipline-specific abstraction that will not get developed under integrated theme-based approaches.

Having integrated materials might make it more engaging to the child. However, it cannot become an end in itself. It is important to recognize that formal education exists to help the child understand and analyze the whole from multiple

perspectives, and that this requires discipline-specific programs.

### G. FINAL COMMENTS

The questions that have been posed in this article are not such for which we have all answers; they are part of the struggle of developing social studies programs. There is need to develop a wider understanding of the issues in social studies among the entire education community, and especially among primary school teachers and textbook writers, so that it can appropriately inform what happens in the classroom.

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