

The social sciences are now taught, in one form or another, in schools throughout the country. This was not generally the case in the past. Before independence, the teaching of subjects such as sociology, political science and even economics was confined mainly to the universities and colleges. After independence there was a steady expansion in the teaching of the social sciences in universities and colleges, and the demand soon grew for their introduction in schools.

The social sciences are sometimes described as the policy sciences, although the contribution of disciplines such as sociology and political science to the making of policy is indirect and limited. In any case, it would be unrealistic to aim to make school students into policy makers or even policy advisers. At the same time, a general awareness of how economy, polity and society work can help them in later life to understand the role of policy in public life. It can provide them with a basis for taking an informed view as to why some policies and not others are adopted, and, among those that are adopted, why some succeed and others fail.

My view is that the more significant contribution of the social sciences is not in the training for policy making but in the education for citizenship. An educated citizenry is indispensable for the proper working of a democracy. One does not pluck the qualities that make a good citizen out of the air; one needs a certain kind of education to acquire and promote them. To be a good citizen it is not enough to be well informed about physical and biological phenomena; the good citizen must also have an informed understanding of the social world of which he is a part.

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Having pointed to the importance of an education in the social sciences, I must dwell a little on the difficulty of teaching

the social sciences at the school level. At that level it is far more difficult to teach sociology or political science than to teach mathematics or physics. I would like to make this point as emphatically as I

can, and then try to explain briefly why I believe it to be true. In what follows I will focus mainly on sociology and political science but what I say applies in a broad way to most of the other social sciences as well.

There is an absence of settled opinion on many if not most significant topics in sociology and political science. This makes the pedagogic problem for teachers who have to deal with pupils aged fourteen, fifteen or sixteen rather different in those subjects from the problems to which their counterparts who teach physics or chemistry have to attend. This fact is not sufficiently appreciated by those at the apex of policy making for schools.

Let me explain the nature of the problem a little more fully. My colleagues in the sciences, particularly the physicists, tell me that I greatly exaggerate the extent to which opinion is settled in their fields of study and research. They point out that at the frontiers of physics there is little settled opinion. This is indeed so, and bound to be so at the frontiers of any field of knowledge. But in sociology there are differences of opinion not only at the frontiers of the discipline but also at its very foundations. It is this that makes the teaching of the subject particularly difficult for school teachers.

I had the good fortune to be a teacher of sociology at a premier center of post-graduate study and research. After the students had settled in, I was able to indulge in the luxury of telling them that in our subject the question was more important than the answer. For advanced students I had developed the practice of administering tests at which I would ask each student to formulate his or her own question and write an answer to it, saying that the student would be evaluated on the question as well as the answer. But the students soon got wind of what I was up to, and then came prepared with questions from previous university examination papers as well as answers to those questions. Indian students are past masters at getting around the



snare and pitfalls of any examination system.

In teaching post-graduate students I felt it my obligation to tell the class that more often than not there was no one correct answer to a particular question. I am not sure that even at that level I convinced all my students. At the age of fifteen or sixteen the pupil wants to know what the correct answer to a question is so that she can do well in the examinations and get on with her life. The physics teacher or the chemistry teacher can satisfy the pupil much more easily without compromising his integrity than the teacher of sociology or political science.

The constraints of the examination system on both students and teachers cannot be wished out of existence. Those constraints can lead to serious distortions in the teaching of a subject like sociology. Both students and teachers see themselves as victims of the examination system. As a matter of fact, they have very little control over the system which tends to be overhauled periodically in ways that appear arbitrary, capricious and incomprehensible to the vast majority of them.

The compulsions of organizing examinations on the scale that we seem unable to escape creates relentless pressures for the standardization not only of examination questions and their expected answers, but also on teaching and writing of textbooks on which the teaching is based. Some subjects fare much better with standardization than others. Teachers and examiners in the social sciences do not wish to fall behind in the inflation of grades that has become a common feature of the examination system. Inevitably, examination and teaching in the social sciences tend to follow the pattern that was first established in the natural sciences and seem to work reasonably well there. This smoothens out the paradoxes and uncertainties that lie at the heart of social, political and economic life.

The teaching of the social sciences to school children is complicated by what may be called the 'value problem' in these disciplines. The separation of value judgments from judgments of reality - or 'ought' questions from 'is' questions - does not pose the same kind of challenges in the natural sciences that it does in the social sciences.

The social sciences deal with facts that are complex, amorphous and fluid. Any science has to treat with respect the facts as they are, whether those facts relate to nature or to society. In the natural sciences it is relatively easy to

insulate the observation, description and analysis of facts from the pressures of common sense and popular sentiment. This is not the case to the same extent when we deal with society, polity and economy. Our personal preferences creep into our perceptions and our representations of the facts with which we have to deal. The social sciences have developed their own methods for dealing with facts in an objective and systematic way. Those methods are not identical with the methods used in the natural sciences. But that does not mean that the social scientist is any more free than the natural scientist to use his common sense or his personal preference in place of the observation, description and analysis of the relevant facts whether in teaching or in research.



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Educated Indians have an irresistible urge to moralize and, in my experience, this urge is particularly strong among teachers. But moralizing cannot be a substitute for description and analysis according to the methods of science, whether natural or social science. Here, there is a difference between the two kinds of science. The teacher of physics can scarcely indulge his urge for moralizing while dealing with electrons and protons or the teacher of chemistry while dealing with acids and alkalis. Teachers in the social sciences, on the other hand, often feel that they have the freedom to do so while dealing with the family, the bureaucracy or the free market. As a consequence, they tend to present their preferences and prejudices as simply the values of a just society. This leaves some students confused while it makes others opinionated.

Some believe that teachers of social science have a special

responsibility to instill and foster the right values among their pupils. It is not clear, though, as to how exactly they are to do this, whether they should do it separately from the description and analysis of social facts or as an integral part of that process. To build a particular set of moral values into the description and analysis of society, polity and economy is a very difficult undertaking whose pitfalls should not be taken lightly. I referred earlier to disagreement in the social sciences about fundamental matters relating to concepts, methods and theories. It is over what should be regarded as the best values that this disagreement is likely to be most acute.

There are, of course, certain basic values embodied in the Constitution of India. The nature and significance of those values should be explained to all students and they should be encouraged by their teachers to adopt them. But the Constitution sets down its basic values in very broad and general terms. It is when we come to details and specifics that the real disagreements come to the surface. As they say, the devil is in the detail.

Should we strive to elaborate one single set of values within the framework of the Constitution for the education of all school students throughout the country? I am not at all sure as to how far we can or should go in that direction without violating the basic principle of liberal democracy which is the tolerance of a diversity of values, including a diversity of conceptions of the good society. If there is one thing that we ought to be proud of and cherish in the Indian tradition is its tolerance of the diversity of ways of life among the people of the country. Our zeal for the promotion of 'value-based

education' through the social sciences should not undermine that spirit.

The point about diversity of social practices and social values ought to be emphasized - when we speak of Indian society as a whole. India is a vast society with a multitude of languages, religions, tribes, castes, sects, associations and parties. To promote a single set of values or to advocate a single conception of the good society without offending the sentiments of one or another section of this vast and complex society is a difficult undertaking which few can accomplish effectively and tactfully.

I come back in the end to the observation with which I began: the contribution of social science teaching to the education for citizenship. Educating school students for citizenship requires first of all encouraging them to think clearly, systematically and objectively about the social as well as the natural world. Beyond that, in the social sciences, it is important to give them some knowledge and understanding about the varieties of economic, political and social arrangements in such a way that the description and analysis of facts is not subordinated to the preferences and prejudices of zealous teachers and writers of text-books.

Finally, if we believe that diversity is our greatest treasure, we must encourage our students to take a serious interest in this diversity and to value it. Here the most significant contribution of the social sciences to the education for citizenship will be to encourage our students to cultivate an enquiring attitude towards their own ways of life and a tolerant one towards other ways of life.

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