# Education for Democracy – The Relevance of Social Science Education in Schools

## Anjali Noronha

We have a subject called social science taught in some form or the other in schools across the world. Sometimes it goes by the name of Environment Studies (like in the present primary schools in India), sometimes as separate subjects – history, geography, civics (or the more Contemporary Citizenship Education in many countries today or social and political Life as in India) until middle school and then as history, geography, economics, political science and sociology in high school. In some countries and at some times there has been a subject called social studies and some kinds of thinking excludes history and geography from the social sciences and treats them as separate subjects while including economics, political science and sociology in the social sciences. For the purpose of this article I will not enter into that discourse, however relevant. By social science I mean all subjects dealing with the analysis of some or all aspects of society and social life seen through some lens or the other. Thus history is part of social science as it analyses continuity and change in different aspects of society and their interrelationships over time, geography as it does the same across regions, economics as it develops and applies the concepts and method to analyze economic aspects, sociology as it does the same for the social aspects and political science for political aspects. Till the elementary level of schooling, the latter three are not taught as separate subjects but are in some way integrated through the subject of civics, citizenship education or social and political life as the case may be.

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Irrespective of how we understand the social sciences, there is often a question in the minds of parents and society in general as to whether the social sciences are relevant at all to the lives of people in today's technocratic world. The first question people ask is what will a child do if s/he takes up the study of any of the social sciences at the plus two or the college level? What kind of 'job prospects' does s/he have? Become a teacher in a school or college, a researcher or academic; join one of the services through the entrance exams? Take up a management field particularly Human Resource Management. All these options are open to a graduate of engineering or a medical student as well so why take up social sciences if the option of the so called technical fields is open?

This attitude percolates to the lower school level as well where students (and parents) have the attitude of children wanting to just pass in the social sciences. Seldom is it asked as to how the social sciences can contribute to make a student a better person or make them capable of contributing to the betterment of society or in fact, how can the teaching and learning of social sciences at school sustain and develop a democracy. Specializing in a social science at the college level needs to be looked at differently from the essential education in the social sciences at the school level.

Having said this, I will focus in this paper on the relevance of the content and method of social science education in school in today's life with particular reference to civics/citizenship education/ social and political life. My main focus will be on the relevance of social science education for building, sustaining and developing a democracy. In doing so, I will outline the challenges faced by social science education from the present power structure of society and its ethics of hierarchical, feudal and exclusive modes of behavior legitimized by the teachers and parents themselves.

### Social Science Education as Education for Democracy

Democratic societies are fairly 'evolved' societies in the sense that they demand of the individual, in practice, a certain set of attitudes, morality, abilities and competence that require a high degree of sublimation of innate tendencies in human beings that are contradictory to the above; so that the principle of democracy actually becomes a practice of democracy. It is only through conscious effort of a certain

kind (education being one of them) that the attitudes, values and competence required for converting democracy from principle to practice can be developed and inculcated.

Historically, modern democracy emerged as a struggle against unequal power systems and centralization of power in the hands of individuals, challenging the contemporaneous hierarchical feudal and authoritarian structures. It often has to face the challenge of imbibed hierarchical values, ethics and attitudes prevalent among the very members who participated in the demand for democratization in the first place. This happens because our own socialization is part of a larger historical process, which legitimizes inequalities and hierarchies as differences in competence or 'god given' fates. It also is perhaps rooted in each individual's innate need for appreciation of self and control over others' lives. Therefore, to establish democracy in practice is as much a struggle within individuals as it is in social spheres and processes. This struggle is what needs to be given space within classrooms and the educational experience. Before we discuss how, let us come back from this little detour to what are the concepts on which democracy is based.

**Equality**: This is the core and most important idea in a democracy. Democracy treats all individuals as equal – the principle of one person one vote is based on this principle of equality. However, we all know that in practice this political equality is not supported by economic and social equality in most modern democracies. In fact economic and social inequality is seen to adversely influence the so called 'political equality' granted in principle through the constitution. A social science education that strives for equality in all spheres, and that develops attitudes that challenge policies that segregate or discriminate – (e.g. differential health and education facilities dependent on the ability to pay or exclusion of certain means of transport like autos from public places like airports and hotels, or demanding action on those that prevent by violence intermingling of castes and classes etc.) is what needs to be developed for a critical citizenry. The idea of treating all with equal respect is integral to the idea of democracy.

**Justice**: From the principle of equality is drawn the principle of equal justice for all, irrespective of their 'status' in society. It is not to be considered OK that certain people will be allowed to get away with a lot that may be 'officially' considered wrong.

**Freedom**: Another basic principle of democracy is the principle of freedom of all individuals. That is why any democratic constitution like the Indian Constitution, guarantees such freedoms – of expression, of movement, of practicing different faiths etc. An underlying assumption is that each individual is a product of her or his own 'free will'. However, we all know that in order to live peacefully in society, one needs to curtail one individual's freedom so that it does not impinge on another's. Yet it is not between one individual and another as to what extent a certain freedom is curtailed – but a collective notion of different freedoms that are to be subscribed by all.

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**Participation**: The most oft quoted quote on democracy is taken from Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg address as being 'Government of the people, by the people, for the people'. In a democracy, therefore, policies and laws are to be reviewed, revised and made by the participation of citizens. If citizens have an attitude of not 'taking on the headache' involving themselves and participating in what could be better and more relevant policies, then the efficacy of the policies and programs are in danger of benefiting only the few who get involved.

**Representation and responsibility to the people**: Modern democracies are representative rather than direct democracies, as nations are too large for direct democracies. Thus the meaning of representative leadership needs to be understood by people, not as rule by the person representing through the vote but as accountability and answerability to people who have elected the leadership. This means that leadership is not unconstrained and cannot do anything that it pleases. It is circumscribed by the constitution, by policies and by the active and critical participation of citizens.

If these are the bases for a healthy and robust democracy, then it requires citizens to:

- Look at all persons as equal,

- Be able to raise issues where people are treated unequally,

- Have an attitude of trying to find ways of correcting wrongs and not be indifferent or cynical about them,

- Be able to critically analyze policies, rules and laws as they affect them,

- Be able to look for ways to collaborate and solve issues, develop skills of collaboration, working together and

- Develop abilities for dialogue – listening and understanding other people's views, developing a consensus etc.

## What does this imply for the Social Science Curriculum and Classroom?

This has implications for both curriculum and classroom pedagogy. In order to develop the above attributes through social science education, children must experience both critical analysis of controversial issues through collegial methods in which they learn to respect diversity, others' freedoms and also be given opportunities for collaborative action. It is through such experience that they would develop values of equality, respect for all, democratic justice and a conviction that things can be changed for the better through democratic action.

Such processes can be developed through a rigorous engagement with aspects of contemporary social, political and economic life as well as an understanding of history and geography through such a critical lens. Rigorous engagement can be through reading, reflection, discussion as well as experience.

Traditional social science education in schools in India is based on transmitting a lot of information which is supposed to be produced at the time of evaluation. Indian education systems also fight shy of controversy. And here we have a situation where, in order to ensure that social science fulfills the objectives of a democracy, controversy must be brought into the classroom and critically analyzed with different perspectives attempting to be understood and better resolutions sought. This has been elaborated upon by Professor Krishna Kumar in his book 'Learning from Conflict'. Examples of how elections actually happen, how citizens

do and can take up issues through due process – like the issue of the environmental and social impact of large dams, increase in vehicular traffic, even of something like hosting the Commonwealth games, expose children to diverse, often contradictory perspectives and encourages them to explore deeper and collectively.

Education for democracy also demands participation in decision making with decisions and resolutions leading to a feeling of success to the participants i.e. the students. In the absence of such a feeling of success on the part of the students, they, the citizens of the future, would develop cynicism towards, rather than commitment to democracy - thus subverting the very objective of social science education for democracy.

Good social science education for developing democracy requires a deep conviction in the democratic processes and underlying concepts on the part of the system, the teacher and the parents. Conviction that democratic processes are the only way in which conflicts and difficult situations can be resolved in a humane and non-violent way – is critical to the success of democracy. In addition, a truly democratic system holds within itself an inherent ability to continuously evolve to higher levels. Hence the social science curriculum needs to develop materials and methods that successfully develop democratic values and attitudes to engage in a democratic manner. It needs to foster abilities for cooperative, collaborative and collegial collective action on public issues amongst students.

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There are examples not only of particular schools but also of larger curricula that do so. The recent social science curriculum and textbooks at the middle and high school level of the NCERT is a case in point. The history and social & political life textbooks of the middle school and the history,

political science and sociology textbooks at the high school level attempt to use case studies that raise controversies, have different points of view and show collective action that has been successful in some measure. Many schools across the country, some whose experiences have been shared in this volume, (Shishu Van (Bombay), Namma Shaale (Bangalore), Poornodaya (Bangalore), Vikramshila (Kolkata), Shiksha Mitra (Kolkata), Center for Learning (Hyderabad and Bangalore), Aadharshila (Sendhwa) and many more, who take the initiative to develop their own curriculum and materials, discuss such issues in the classroom as part of the curriculum and also take their classes to participate in forums that raise issues like Bt Brinjal, climate change or the effect of the Commonwealth games on the common man. Eklavya's social science Textbooks can also be looked at as resource materials for developing a social science curriculum for critical and reflective democracy.

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Neither the new NCERT books' approach nor the approach of the schools or educational groups mentioned above is partisan in any way. They are political inasmuch as democracy is a political ideal which is the basis of our nation's constitution. As citizens of the country, are we not charged with the responsibility to implement the constitution and to that extent democracy? Why then are the abovementioned initiatives looked at as partisan while those that are actually unethical to democratic principles, as legitimate and mainstream?

## Challenges to Social Science Education for Critical Citizenship

The contradiction in perceptions lies in the fact that societies do not change in as formal and straightforward ways as polities do on paper. The fact is that socially and culturally India is in large part deeply hierarchical, feudal (not economically but culturally) and caste based. Each human

being has multiple identities – those of the family, religion, social group, nation, profession. Hence, though formally India became a democracy more than 60 years ago, it still remains functionally and culturally - a fairly caste based, feudal society. Institutional processes that could strengthen democracy, particularly the education system, have in fact buckled under this cultural weight. The teacher, the parent, the community leader would prefer a social science education that pays obeisance to authority rather than being robustly critical of it, and would leave controversy outside children's minds. Hence these figures who are required to be democratic in their behavior and inculcate and encourage such values and attributes in children, actually actively undermine attempts to develop and encourage democratic behaviour. On the contrary, if a minority of teachers brings in critical and reflective thinking into the classroom, other teachers, parents and community members instead of encouraging and supporting her become critical of her and marginalize her. Hence, a social science teacher is often afraid to have a representative system of children for school decision making in a caste based, village classroom lest a girl or boy from the deprived classes be 'elected' and the whole thing becomes controversial.

Classrooms in elite schools that do have progressive methodologies become homogenized elite classrooms rather than socially diverse, mixed ones. Because of the class/caste homogeneity of such classrooms the same kind of activity tends to be less controversial as it does not challenge the status quo in the same way.

This leads to the possibility of different kinds of social science education in different kinds of schools, this differentiation itself becomes unethical to the principle of equality – a basis of democratic society.

## Conclusion

The point I am trying to make is that it is only through the widespread implementation of a democratized social science curriculum and pedagogy in schools on a large scale that a democratic society can be sustained and qualitatively developed. No other subject can fulfill this role. This is the primary relevance of critical and reflective social science learning and teaching. The kind of social science I have tried to elaborate upon in the article above, requires building support systems for its practice through resources, peer groups alongside academic, intellectual and social support

to its practitioners. The readers of this journal will I'm sure take a step in that direction.

Such social science education will not only develop the attributes of critical and reflective democratic citizens, but also inculcate the ability to work in a team in any career and the ability to make critically informed (and therefore to my mind better) choices in a continuously changing world.

Other kinds of social science teaching (giving information, knowing about etc. etc.) do not, to my mind, have much relevance for school education and therefore children can be spared that burden.

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