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# Schools of War and the Scholar's Dilemma

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This is a book about education and nationalism – a subject rather too familiar in the universal language of educational policy under the regime of modernity. What distinguishes it is that it is also about childhood and socialisation, culture and politics, and the recent social history of western Maharashtra. The fact that a single volume can offer insights in so wide a range of fields and disciplines should suffice to indicate the scale of the author's attempt and success.

Veronique Benei presents her fieldwork on a richly laid-out disciplinary plain constituted by an impressive familiarity with scholarship in social history, anthropology, political theory and post-structural aesthetics, not to mention Marathi language, literature and cinema. The range of disciplinary interests and territories covered in the book is not merely impressive: it establishes the nature of challenge involved in studying stititutionalised education as a political process. The normative character of education normally presents a burden to the social anthropologist who seeks merely to describe and who does not believe, and can afford not to believe, that education interferes with society by attempting to shape it. Veronique Benei does not seem to carry such a burden inasmuch as her own normative agenda is peace in a violent world. She presents her data on the "war culture" of Maharashtra's elementary classrooms as a proof of the dangers inherent in modern education though she recognises that schooling by itself does not suffice to perpetuate a war culture.

## Study of Socialisation

Perhaps, the most important contribution of this book will be to the study of socialisation. Indian sociology being no major exception to the colonial footprint that higher education as a whole carries, there has been remarkably little progress over the

## BOOK REVIEW

### **Schooling Passions: Nation, History and Language in Contemporary Western India**

by Veronique Benei (*California: Stanford University Press*, 2008; pp 346, price (cloth: \$75.00), (paper: \$24.95).

decades in the study of Indian childhood, the forces and factors which socialise children at home and the interplay between these factors and schooling in modern India.

Veronique Benei makes us aware of the interplay though her work is focused on the learning that the school attempts to bring about. While she analyses that learning by familiar means, such as discussion with teachers, study of textbooks, and observations made in the classroom and in other spaces on different occasions, she goes well beyond these familiar sites and sources of data by reconstructing through words the lives of village adults in different settings, happenings in the street, and the rituals performed on festive occasions. Benei offers a glimpse of scenes in action and translates sounds and movements into descriptions. She crafts the sensory world in which children grow up and enables us to grasp the range of experiences which socialise children at home and between home and school.

### **Micro-Mapping of Life**

It is hardly possible for a review to do justice to the meticulous micro-mapping of the life of a Marathi-medium and an Urdu-medium school in Kolhapur that Chapters 4 and 5 of this book provide. In both cases we are shown the inner life of the classroom where pedagogic authority is exercised to construct knowledge and culture, and we are also shown life outside the school. Benei's anthropological labour and interpretive effort impart to these two chapters a value which will be especially

high for social scientists who have been accustomed to treating the school as a minor site of cultural and political action.

Benei's data and analysis offer us two dimensions for recognising the school's role as a social institution. The first dimension holds the tension between the national and the regional, while the other dimension holds the tension inherent in Hindu-Muslim relations. In the case of the first, Benei guides us to notice the specificity of Maharashtra's regional identity, formulated as the Maratha self, crystallises in two major curricular domains, namely, history and Marathi language. By studying the interstices between textbooks and popular culture, the author is able to establish the social consensus which underpins education as a modern institutional process. She uses classroom observations, analysis of textbooks (especially, the Grade IV book which introduces Shivaji) and street life portrayal to show how "conceptualisations of the Maharashtra regional state and the nation state are both partly predicated upon shared ideals of Hindu masculinity and femininity" (p 166). A composite picture of relations and duties emerges: boys are to become men whose lives derive meaning from preparedness for war, and girls are to become mothers of such boys. In the second dimension, schooling serves to crystallise the otherness of Muslims. School-related processes, Benei says, "feed upon existing structures of feeling", leading to "sharper differentiation of identifications" which endow upon Muslims an "irredeemable otherness".

In the portrayal of the Urdu-medium school, Benei shows how the language chosen and used to carry out teaching creates a world of its own and how this world provides spaces where a history and a mental geography which are different from the ones constructed in the Marathi-medium school, are born and nurtured.

### **Pratinagar Military School**

Although gender runs across the book as a theme, its links with the political economy are somewhat more elaborately explored in Chapter 6 which presents Benei's inquiry into a state government-run Sainik

school in Pratinagar. Unlike the central government's Sainik schools, which are meant for children of the armed forces, the Sainik schools in Maharashtra seem to constitute the state government's response to a culturally articulated demand. The study of Pratinagar military school generates interesting data but adds little value to the larger thesis that modernity, now evolving in prosperous pockets of India, is essentially an enterprise of the nurturance of masculinity and its deployment for the putative safety of the nation.

As it turns out, the Pratinagar school provides an "evidence" of a rather creative project under which sexual polarities appear to be transcended in favour of a more balanced growth – at least that of boys – and extreme regional aspirations are transcended in favour of a national agenda. The reader is left somewhat confused by this chapter, not just by the data presented, but also by the belaboured application of "queer" theory and the deployment of Gandhi – and even Nehru, with the help of one short quotation – to rationalise an otherwise puzzling situation.

This chapter does detract from the otherwise rigorously sustained consistency of the analysis of what Benei calls the making of "visceral citizens". Apparently, she found in the Pratinagar military school a mixed-up reality and an even more mixed-up ideology. The mixture is so thick that no amount of postmodern theorising helps.

### Mixed-up Ideology

This recalcitrant chapter reminds us how even deep and sensitive anthropology runs itself into risk by ignoring the need for a systemic overview and structural understanding. Benei helps us grasp the current positioning of Hindutva politics and pedagogy within a modernising economy, but she throws us back to our own resources to guess why the governance of education in Maharashtra has stayed so aloof from and untouched by the dynamic social and economic ecology of the state.

No doubt one can utilise the awareness of the consciousness, the emotions and the sensory elements which underlie the everyday operations of schooling, but one does feel deprived of greater possibilities of learning at the hands of an observant

scholar. One feels compelled to wonder whether the vigour of a methodologically liberal, interdisciplinary stance conceals a tacit commitment to ignore the structures of administration and the practices which historically reproduce the backwardness of education in an economically forward state. Why the National Curriculum Framework 2005 did not make much headway in Maharashtra can be explained, much too easily, by citing the bureaucratic inertia and its function in the given political set-up. Such an explanation does not tell us why 15 other states have participated in a centrally-sponsored process of reform with greater enthusiasm. But Benei's analysis does help us wonder about the limits within which a modernist agenda of widening the scope of civil society operates in Maharashtra and about the cultural history which sets these limits.

### Future of Education

Benei's work can make the reader both enriched and concerned about the future of education in Maharashtra. She takes the reader into the ethos of elementary

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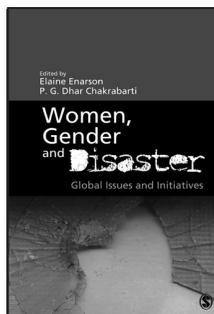
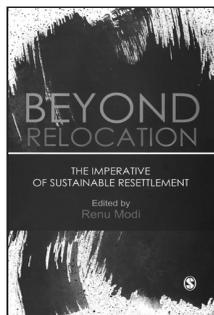
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This book emphasizes the need for reforming laws and policies dealing with displacement and resettlement in the Indian as well as the global context. It analyses the issues of risks, impoverishment, entitlements and survival strategies of those displaced.

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### Women, Gender and Disaster

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edited by **Elaine Enarson**  
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**Women, Gender and Disaster: Global Issues and Initiatives** examines gender within the context of disaster risk management. It argues for gender mainstreaming as an effective strategy towards achieving disaster risk reduction and mitigating post-disaster gender disparity. Highlighting that gender inequalities pervade all aspects of life, including health, income, education, welfare, political voice and violence in public and domestic spheres, it analyses the failure to implement inclusive and gender-sensitive approaches to relief and rehabilitation work. While examining positive strategies for change, the collection focuses on women's knowledge, capabilities, leadership and experience in community resource management. The authors emphasize that these strengths in women, which are required for building resilience to hazards and disasters, are frequently overlooked.

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classrooms in Maharashtra and we grasp what sense children make of a narrowly defined – both in a functional and an ideological sense – curriculum. Hers is an agenda to reveal the collective cognition, with reference to the nation, its freedom and the history and goals of that freedom. She pursues this agenda by tracing the emotional contours of socialisation which occur when the teacher's own identity and personality bring the given body of knowledge home to the child, and indeed, closer to the child's home world. It makes a sense to respond to such a book both intellectually and emotionally.

In the intellectual sphere, it reminds us how poor the system of education in Maharashtra really is, in terms of the teacher's pedagogic training, the designing of the syllabus and the textbooks and the quality of administration and supervision. It lets us see how little a difference has the economic and industrial development of the state made to its educational planning. At another level, in the sphere

of emotions, it frightens us about the regime of Nazi-like acculturation of young minds, into internalising a vision of aggressive nationalism.

### Conclusions

The book does evoke a question about the sociology of its own knowledge, its production and reach. One cannot imagine that the book will find even a limited readership in teacher training institutions which form the underworld of the academia. Some of them have contributed indirectly, through the shoddy training of the teachers whose classrooms Benei observed, these institutions are unlikely to be its recipients or interpreters. This is partly because of the nature of the market of academic knowledge in India, and partly because of the institutional structures and arrangements involved in the production and processing of knowledge in once colonised societies.

The worlds of the teacher and the teacher educator are rather far apart from

the world in which a book of this kind will meet its implied readers. And in this sense, Benei's work stays clear of the business of education, its preoccupation with shaping the world, and not just studying it, or at least preventing it from heading towards violent disasters. Though it is about education, it belongs to the safer and subtler spheres of human existence where the music of ethnographically accumulated knowledge can be heard and enjoyed. The inhabitants of those spheres have sensibilities rather different from those of the teacher who toils amidst elementary schoolchildren, elucidates badly produced textbooks whose contents hide the venomous fuel which accelerates social disintegration. Veronique Benei is deeply anxious about this destiny and she has given us a remarkable means to contemplate it.

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