

## An Insight into South Asian Education

### Education and Social Change in South Asia

by Krishna Kumar and Joachim Oesterheld (eds);  
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This is an omnibus – an edited volume that covers a wide spectrum of issues concerning education in south Asia. The first part of the book looks at education under colonial rule – focusing mostly on Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The second part of the book titled ‘Education and Cultural Change’ also dwells on the colonial period and is India-centric. The next part zooms into relatively more contemporary issues concerning education and nation-building – covering Nepal, Pakistan and India. The last part is titled ‘Education and Development’ – but it is not easy to discern a theme or a central concern. It is difficult to find a thread that runs through the book. As the introduction points out – this book was a product of a project, but it nevertheless leaves us wondering why and how such a disparate collection was put together as one volume.

In the last 15 years people engaged with education have tried to explain the Kerala factor – almost universal elementary education and near universal adult literacy. The roots of the specific trajectory of Kerala come through vividly in the chapters by Sanjay Seth, Margret Frenz and George Ooman. In particular, Ooman’s chapter on the experience of pulaya Christians of Kerala explains how a community lower on the caste hierarchy was able to leverage modern education to break out of cultural subordination. The tensions inherent in missionary schools and the spread of Christianity are captured well.

The role of education in the development of a national consciousness is a fascinating area. Anjje Linkenbach Fuchs explores how the British-Indian education system evolved and adapted to the needs of India. The British system was not imposed in India – but was Indianised and adjusted to the specific situation as it obtained in different parts of colonial India. In particular, the documentation of Hindu laws and local community laws and practices and its efforts to respect some of them while encouraging change in others is captured well. Equally, the gradual emergence of religious neutrality in formal education and the role of protestant missionaries in promoting modern values without aggressively proselytising also comes out clearly. Interestingly, while English language was certainly promoted – modern education promoted bilingualism. Perhaps, this was necessary as a bridge between the colonial rulers and the colonised people – yet, the fact that the system was able to introduce a foreign language while strengthening the native language needs to be injected into the modern discourse of education in India.

The meaningless pursuit of an either-or approach to English medium and vernacular medium in a world that demands people to be multilingual is indeed of great relevance today. Maybe it was the ability of the educated elite to continue to span two worlds that created the space for nationalism and also social reform. This chapter is rich and explores how education led to greater self-confidence and esteem among Indians while giving them a window into the world of European thought and philosophy. The creative tension between the two led to a lot of churning among the educated elite – from Ram Mohan Roy and Rabindranath Tagore to Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. It would, therefore be short-sighted to continuously repeat the popular belief that colonial education was imposed

on India because the colonisers wanted clerks.

Joachim Oesterheld’s discussion of the Wardha Scheme that tried to encourage basic education in 1935 and how it was approached by the Indian National Congress and opposed by Muslim organisation is another interesting chapter. The opposition of the scheme from Muslim leaders and organisations is illuminating. In many ways the two nation theory was played out in the debate on the Wardha Scheme with a demand that “Muslim education should be conducted on separate lines”. If we are to re-visit this debate today, especially in the light of the 2006 Sachar Committee Report and also the ongoing debate on communalisation of education, it is indeed noteworthy that the tension between secular education and religious instruction has been played up by many of the community leaders – effectively discouraging Muslim communities to wholeheartedly participate in secular education. Two quotations stand out:

Without religious instruction, the entire education, according to Muslims, would be defective and incomplete...

– All-India Muslim Education Conference, 1947 (quoted in p 168)

...the conditions in this country, where so many different religions exist, would aggravate the present situation if dogmas of different sects were introduced in school instruction. The provision of facilities for the teaching of denominational religions... may add seriously to administrative difficulties and may even help to accentuate rather than mitigate existing communal differences...

– CABE Report 1946 (quoted in page number 169).

What is noteworthy is that this tension was palpable in northern India – and not so much in southern regions – quite similar to the situation today where educational status of Muslims is far worse in the northern and eastern regions than in the southern and western regions of the country. This chapter and the one following it by Krishna Kumar must be made mandatory reading for those who are in the forefront of educational reform in India – belonging to all sides of the political spectrum.

Krishna Kumar’s chapter exploring the

quest for a secular policy is interesting and challenges the reader to go beyond conventional truisms on the subject. The three models explored in this chapter are – one where the home and school overlap, the second where the two are seen as separate worlds and the third where the intersection between the home and the school is negotiated carefully. The third model demands a lot more of the teacher and the system that prepares the teacher to enable children to think, reflect and also critically look at different scenarios. The pedagogic culture prevalent in most Indian schools (government as well as private) precludes active engagement with issues and does not create space for any meaningful interaction between the world of the child and that of the school. In the last 10 years or so a considerable amount is being written on how the prejudices of teachers and their social/cultural baggage can actively impede leaning among children from socially and economically deprived sections of society. One cannot but agree with Krishna Kumar when he says that, “India’s pedagogic culture – professionally weak teachers, dominance of the prescribed textbooks and the overarching importance of annual examinations – perform in setting apart the orbits of home and school...” (p 206).

### Nation-building

The third part of the book explores education and nation-building. Martha Caddell on Nepal makes quite interesting reading – and is a welcome addition to a poor resource base that exists on the development of education in Nepal. This fails to explore the social/caste diversity in Nepal society and how it has been perpetuated with the advent of modern education. Rubina Saigol’s chapter on Pakistan captures how a Pakistani identity was carefully crafted and promoted through education. She builds her arguments around the speeches and policies of Ayub Khan and how during that phase the spirit was forward looking. She makes an important observation that by Zia-ul-Haq’s rule “nationalism now takes on a backward-looking, inward looking, insular, and insecure aspects. The enemy lurk on the borders – physical as well as ideological borders... Is it really a modernising force? Prejudice, cant, hatred, and superstition, ostensibly belonging to a ‘backward’ past, have not only persisted with educational expansion but in many cases they have grown...” (pp 318, 320).

Padmini Swaminathan highlights one of the most important challenges facing

education today – the interface between employment and education. She underscores the importance of the state playing an important role in not only promoting basic education, but also developing the much needed grey zone between school education and higher education. This is where the greatest potential is and also the greatest demand – yet this is the area that has been grossly neglected in India. This chapter just touches these issues and does not take the potentially powerful argument to its logical conclusion. Anne Vaughier Chatterji’s chapter on the language issue makes interesting reading, but fails to capture the political undercurrents of the entire language issue in Indian education.

S T Hettige’s chapter of Sri Lanka traces the special trajectory of the country and traces the highly controversial language policy adopted in 1956. Yes, it provides people an opportunity to learn in their own language – Sinhala and Tamil, but by making Sinhala the official language it led to greater distancing of the two communities. Protests and agitations against the imposition of Sinhala marked the beginning of a deeper schism in the country. This chapter just touches on the issues and does not provide any significant insight. Sadhana Saxena’s chapter on the adult literacy drive in India is interesting but somehow does not fit into this collection. It stands out and leaves one wondering why the editors decided to include this in a volume that seems to essentially deal with schooling. Jeffery’s (Roger, Patricia

and Craig) paper on Bijnor traces the privatisation of secondary education and how it has come to be accepted by the people (respondents). As the editors point out in the introduction privatisation of education is “barely distinguishable from commercialisation” and its acceptance could perhaps be attributed to agricultural modernisation that has propelled economic growth on the one hand and disillusionment with the government school system – even though the results of government schools are better than the private ones. Francois Leclercq’s chapter is located in Madhya Pradesh and the practice of appointing local teachers with little training and effectively undermining the professional status of teachers. This has significant implication for the overall quality of education and the learning of children.

On the whole – this is an interesting volume, even though the essays do not necessarily hang together. The introduction could have been far more substantive and could have tried to pull the volume together. Unfortunately, that is not the case. As discussed above some of the chapters are interesting and provide insights. This may make a good reference book in a library and would definitely enable a student to familiarise herself with a range of important and interesting issues concerning the spread of education and literacy in south Asia. [www.eri.org.in](http://www.eri.org.in)

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