

The Problem with Schools

The Politics of Gender, Community and Modernity: Essays on Education in India

by Nita Kumar;
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In *The Politics of Gender, Community and Modernity*, Nita Kumar brings together the scholarly fields of history, anthropology and gender studies to consider the past and future of India's educational system. The strength of this collection of essays (the majority of which were individually previously published) lies both in its serious scholarly engagement with these diverse academic fields, and in its serious political commitment to finding solutions for the problems faced by the Indian educators, families and students. The appeal of these essays, together in a single volume, lies in the terrain that they cover, from ethnographies of classrooms, neighbourhoods, and homes to theoretical arguments about the importance of gender to the study of education, and the failures of the project of modern education in India, especially in its provinces. In this ambitious collection, Nita Kumar formulates arguments that are historical, historiographical, sociological, theoretical and about ethnographic method.

New Typology

In the first section of the volume, Nita Kumar lays the ground for her subsequent analyses. For Kumar, many of the typologies conventionally deployed to understand educational institutions are not meaningful. The distinctions between government-affiliated schools and those not affiliated to the state, between Urdu and Hindi medium schools, and the

idea that all English medium schools are better than vernacular medium schools, are interrogated, and shown in general to be useless. Instead, Nita Kumar proposes a different set of criteria with which to think about schools: What is their relationship to the families and communities amongst which they exist? What is the experience of children in these institutions, and the quality of education given there? Kumar adds her new typology to two more commonly known accounts. The first is about the limited numbers of people who received a modern education in provincial south Asia until the 20th century. The second is about the qualitative difference between education in large cities or metropolises on the one hand and provincial towns, her object of study, on the other. These two accounts along with the range of institutions that Kumar describes in the typical provincial town illustrate just how much of the story of Indian education remains to be told. The character of the education received by large numbers of Indians, especially those educated outside of English language schools of big cities, that is, an incredibly large portion of the schooling of independent India has been poorly understood. What follows are glimpses in to the history of education in India, both in its colonial past and in the present. The book's organisation finds its most convincing justification in its final chapters, where Nita Kumar ties together her reflections on the colonial history of education in India, and her ethnographies of its present failures, to provide an agenda for education in the future. It is here that Kumar outlines her programme for post-colonial education – a reformism that sets itself against the colonial legacies inherent in today's educational system. The easy narrative of India's modernisation – and westernisation – through education, first through the training of a westernised elite, and then through the rapid expansion of schools

in the post-independence era is here irrevocably broken to bits.

Plural Nature of Education

In its place emerges one of the most compelling arguments made by Kumar, threaded throughout this volume, about the plural nature of education in modern India. The argument is that the project of modern education as it emerged in India and continues to exist today has been both incomplete and hybrid. This has been poorly understood, Kumar argues, partly because of the considerable failure of histories of Indian education to attend to the training/education provided by women (mothers, aunts, sisters, grandmothers and servants) and communities in the home and neighbourhoods – in the family – away from formal institutions of learning. As an example, Kumar takes the westernised elite of the colonial period, who are staple subjects of modern Indian history writing. She argues that our analyses have been marred by an inability to recognise the educational labour performed by the many unpaid subjects who were involved in their learning. Nineteenth century social reformers, Kumar reminds us, received along with their western education other forms of training in the home, from mothers, servants, etc. In drawing our attention to this plural learning, Kumar has articulated and outlined an important project for 19th century intellectual history. One wishes that she had had the opportunity to expand upon the trajectories that she imagines for this project with further evidence from the actions or writings of these reformers. She is right to point out that many of these men had women in their lives who were likely significant influences, and that these women and the alternative forms of knowledge that would have circulated through 19th century Indian homes are both important and hard to recover. Kumar has just begun to answer the larger questions here: How exactly would our understanding of these multiple sites and forms of education change the way that we understand 19th century social reform or other grand themes of Indian history? Were these plural forms of education at odds with

each other? If so how? These are certainly questions worth pursuing.

Ethnographic Articles

The beginnings of Kumar's own answers to these questions can be glimpsed in the more ethnographically-oriented articles of this collection. In these essays as well, Nita Kumar is interested in the many forms of training received by children, gendered training that shapes children's relationships to the home and town, or the training imparted by communities, such as weavers to their children. Here, Kumar runs up against one of the most central problems in the study of modern education in India. The tension in this scholarship lies between wanting to claim the fruits of modern western education for all students equally – especially in terms of the upward mobility that it enables – and at the same time, acknowledging the violence entailed in the regime of modern education as it exists in India today (its violence on other forms of knowledge, on students and on families). The violence of contemporary Indian education can be understood in several ways, and Kumar seems most troubled by the failure of that system, its failure to reach all students in a qualitatively equal way, its failure in fact to create the modern individuals and future citizens necessary for the nation. And so the critique here is angled slightly differently than it had been in her historiographical mode. As Kumar states, "I argue that the politics of the community are abrasive and violent, restrictive and destructive, much as the politics of the nation state are in their different ways...The politics of the community are *worse* because of an additional reason – they produce a subject who occupies an unrewarded position in the state" (p 7). In the present, Kumar comes firmly down on the side of the modern educational institution (in its as yet unrealised form). She is not just interested in providing equal access to modern education, she also believes in the positive capacities of modern education to impart civic virtues.

How then does Nita Kumar resolve the tension between her own commitment to modernity – "I suggest that there is no other path for the Indian state or its citizens to follow..." (p 233) – and her impulse to defend educational institutions that are embedded in the community which "may be pedagogically weak, but they are not 'symbolically violent'; they do not impose the 'cultural arbitrary' of the dominant group

of the society on other groups" (p 61)? In other words, how does she resolve the tension between the state and educational institutions as universalising agents and the other cultures that surround India's children? Kumar's response is alluded to in her treatment of India's colonial elite. Here, she suggests "that there is no *inherent* conflict between these two experiential worlds [English and Indian] and because to live in plural worlds was a norm" (p 12). She develops this idea further in the final essays of this volume, on post-colonial education, when she explains that in the school she is involved in running, educator's attempt to bring these worlds together by "...see[ing] how much has been gained by the nation in 'preserving' entrenched knowledge..., and also how much has been gained by assimilating English and western knowledge into the Indian systems, we can have a vision of how the home and the school need not be counterposed and could work together very productively" (pp 311-12).

Nita Kumar is right to point out that there is nothing inherently conflictual in the different worlds that Indian children occupy, and that schools should make an effort to be less antagonistic to the home environments of their students. Clearly the inability of many schools to engage the worlds of their students, in the teaching of, say, languages or history, has been a central part of their general failure to generate enthusiasm for these subjects or for school more generally. This picture, of course, becomes much more complicated when we understand, as Kumar does, that the different worlds of children are indeed at times in conflict. And here, one would have hoped that Kumar would provide a more creative answer. She ends her collection by taking recourse to the idea that students (as indeed servants, her other example of those who might be objects of pedagogic intervention) should be put in a position where they can choose between different ways of behaving and being in their world. This elusive sense of choice in a world, when extended beyond the school and family, to politics and economics – that is to processes and events not controlled by the scholar or educator – is difficult to grasp precisely. This somewhat unsatisfactory ending, especially for those interested in the issues of radical difference and their place in modern democracies, had this reader all the more eager to pursue answers to the formidable issues that Nita Kumar has placed on the educational agenda. **EPW**

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