

Krishna Kumar, *Smaller Citizens: Writings on the Making of Indian Citizens*. Orient BlackSwan, 2021, xviii + 150 pp., ₹395. ISBN: 9789354420801 (Paperback).

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Professor Krishna Kumar, an educationist par excellence, has written and continues to write on a wide range of issues that impinge directly or indirectly on the theme of education. In this slim book, he has brought together various pieces written at different times that explore how education interfaces with the notion of citizenship. In particular, through a critical reading of education policies and legislation, of administrative structures created to address teacher training and classroom teaching, and through concrete illustrations of how everyday events whether in schools or outside, in effect, are a reflection of our education system. Kumar's book conveys powerful messages that the system should have contended with a long time ago, and fails to do so even now. This review intends to highlight

these messages, thematically, even as readers are urged to go through the book to get a better sense of the context in which they were told.

Several pieces reveal the paradoxical messages that education seeks to impart from what society, state, and/or family expects children to know, learn and behave as they grow up. Thus, says Kumar, while education is aimed at nurturing freedom of the individual to examine and question accepted norms, the state's interest lies more in 'grooming the regimented individual' (p. xii). Similarly, observes Kumar, 'while the home provides knowledge for the child's induction into the social world and adjustment to it, the school deals with different domains and kinds of knowledge, not necessarily consistent with the knowledge acquired at home from the family' (pp. 10–11).

Nowhere is the disjuncture between learning objectives and societal expectations starker than in the way childhood is conceptualised, and, in what goes around in the name of gender equality. In raising the issue of the power of culture, Kumar highlights the struggle faced by law and the state in coping with child labour and child marriage. While the common construction of childhood is strongly anchored in the European tradition of protecting children from induction into labour as well as 'the protection of children from the knowledge of sexual good and evil' (p. 4), this notion of childhood, according to Kumar, is not compatible with the notion of girlhood—the nature of which incompatibility he illustrates definitively in several of his pieces in the book. While, for the state, equality between the genders more often than not, is more about addressing gender gaps in enrolment, the education system has little or no space, and, nor are teachers trained to engage meaningfully with the culturally constructed life of girls, which in turn lead to differences in the educational experiences of boys and girls.

Kumar's discussion of how rural education is conceptualised along with its implications for rural children, against the larger theme of what he refers to as 'Urban–Rural Polarity' (p. 116), brings together several contentious issues that current education policies and administrative structures cannot resolve. To quote from some of his pieces:

The town is where knowledge about the village is created and sorted...the village must be seen as that which the city is not, and, vice-versa. For the village, there is just one way to liberate itself...and that is to develop into a town according to the agenda of evolutionist modernity. (pp. 24–25)

Rural education has been conceptualised and defined over the last two centuries as a means of uplifting and reconstructing village society.... The city sets the norms, the village attempts to follow them.... This vision denies any possibility of authentic existence to an educated person in a rural setting. (p. 31)

Education of the rural child has failed to depart from the stereotype which associates modernity with city life. Education has indeed exacerbated the rural–urban asymmetry, deepening the alienation of the rural citizen. (p. 111)

Many well-placed modernisers today convey an unmistakable impatience with rural problems. They offer technical solutions for quick, radical effect. Such men rarely have

the historical sense to recall how resilient the Indian village has proved in its long history. (p. 34)

Between the provisions for an average village school and a Kendriya Vidyalaya, the gap is as vast as the social distance between a small-scale peasant and a civil servant. (p. 124)

In a fairly detailed discussion of the promulgation and functioning of the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009, under the rubric 'Equality under a Post-Welfare State' (p. 66), Kumar highlights how the notion that universalisation of elementary education could translate into equality is flawed since, mere access cannot equalise the quality of educational experience. Delving deeper into reasons for the sub-optimal performance of the Act, Kumar points out, among other things, how the treatment of elementary, secondary and higher education as silos rather than as being related, has influenced the share of resources available for primary education, since, unlike higher education, primary education is perceived to be far removed from the immediate demands of the economy, and therefore its needs tend to be ignored. Poor teacher-training compounds the problem in that, even as older impediments identified by a Supreme-Court-appointed Commission in 2012 have not yet been resolved, newer ones have cropped up that militate against any achievement of equality in education as envisaged by the RTE, 2009. These include: 'commercialisation or unbridled privatisation, technology-driven neo-behaviourist influence in training institutions as well as in schools, and enfeeblement of higher education affecting the quality of entrants to teacher-training courses' (p. 80).

Kumar's trenchant criticism is reserved for the Indian state that has, since independence, failed to acknowledge and therefore harness the agency of its communities in its various modernisation/development projects, including education. Taking a historical perspective, Kumar argues how the state used its inherited machinery,

that had nothing to do with people's welfare and which had specialised all along in the maintenance of order was now suddenly required to uplift the poor peasant, teach women how to look after their babies properly, and design primary education for village children.... Before Nehru died, primary education was heading down the path of rapid decline towards a total neglect of basic aims. (pp. 135–137)

The book provokes engagement at multiple levels and for students searching for researchable topics several questions that organically emanate from the writings, including: what is the vision of the 'rural' that we need to have if we have to get out of the morass that we have created for ourselves? What do we learn and how do we engage with our Adivasi population/children if we do not want to perceive their life and culture as an obstacle to modernisation? Do we give them the same education or a different one? What practices (including pedagogical) do we need to institute so that 'regimentation and discipline' as currently understood are avoided but some form of evaluation is adopted to assess whether learning has happened?

Kumar's concluding observation from a critical piece on Kerala, the country's celebrated most literate state, is worth reproducing:

Education remained vulnerable to struggles for cultural dominance. Neither schools nor colleges and universities aspired for the goal of using knowledge for cultural renewal and transformation. (p. 141)

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