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BOOK REVIEW

Un/common schooling: Educational experiments in twentieth-century India

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The modern schooling system, which is largely Western, was implanted by the colonial rulers in most of their colonies during the 19th and 20th centuries. Having displaced the then-prevailing Indigenous education systems, some of which were very strong, the Western system has taken firm deep roots. This has happened in India too. Noting the irrelevance of the Western model and its exclusionary nature, social thinkers and freedom fighters like Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo and Zakir Hussain developed alternative models of education. But these models could not stand in competition with the Western model during the colonial period or even during the post-independence period. As a result, they vanished or remained as isolated experiments, and the Western model became the mainstream model everywhere. Gandhi's *Nai Talim* scheme for basic education was found impractical; and, though still extant, the Sriniketan and the *Visva-Bharati* university[1] which represent Tagore's experiment of *Shantiniketan,* are increasingly losing their unique character as centres of unconventional education.

However, experimentation with alternative models has not completely stopped. Quite a few interesting alternative models have been developed, some of which perished and some continue to exist, albeit only as experiments. Some experiments that continue include *Jiddu Krishnamurti* schools, *Arya Samaj* schools, *Sri Satya Sai* schools, etc., all of which have also taken on board certain features of the formal mainstream system.

India's modern education system is characterised by a rigid formal structure, formal curriculum, highly formalised teaching methods, pedagogical regime, rote-based learning, memorisation, the development of interpersonal skills, and a heavy focus on examinations. By contrast, alternative schooling models focus on joyful

[1] For more information, visit https://visvabharati.ac.in/index.html [accessed 30 October 2023].

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learning through plays, games, stories, pictures, maps, dialogues, crafts, local materials and objects and other creative methods, and activity-based learning in the natural environment. The non-structured method of experimental learning in the alternative models is based on a concept of learning which is very much distinct from the one that determines the modern model. The pedagogical philosophy and the orientation of these schools are much distinct from mainstream schools. They focus on real-life situations and developing multiple perspectives. In the process, children also learn a variety of important life-skills and vocational skills.

Un/Common Schooling is a collection of articles by those who actually founded alternative schools in India, referring to a few lesser-known experiments conducted during the post-independence period, many of which are no more in existence. The experimental schools included in the book include Tilak Nagar Children's Centre in Bengaluru started in 1978 (by K.T. Margaret, Chapter 1), the Sita School in Silvepura, Karnataka, started in 1975/76 (Jane Sahi, Chapter 2), the Sriniketan (Pradeep Kumar Datta, Chapter 4), Vikasana in 1977 in Doddakallsandra in the outskirts of Bangalore, Karnataka (M. C. Malathi, Chapter 5), and Kanavu in Wayanad, Kerala (Shirly Joseph, Chapter 6). Except in the case of the Sriniketan, the authors themselves started these schools, with limited resources, but with personal zeal and enthusiasm.

It is interesting to learn how these institutions have functioned and how the teachers have tried to sustain the interest of the children and parents even during those few years of primary-level schooling. One might expect the authors to have described how these institutions operated in terms of funding of their activities, which were low-cost and limited. Obviously, these are private initiatives, started by "progressive" or "idealistic" individuals or a small group of like-minded people, and small, local-level institutions, supported by local communities. They did not receive any state funding, which has not changed today, and there are no big corporate or charitable trusts behind them. They are mostly micro-level, small-scale voluntary initiatives, mostly in remote rural areas. They represent individual responses to general dissatisfaction with the mainstream education system. While the book covers only a few selected cases, a large number of such experimental schools are operating in India.

The book also includes the story of Eklavya, founded in 1982 in Madhya Pradesh (by Rashmi Paliwal, Chapter 3), which promotes innovative curriculum and teaching practices in public schools. Ekalavya has been successful in enhancing its pedagogic goals of science, social science, language and mathematics education; but it concentrated on the system, not on persons – students or teachers; in a sense, the strategy has been impersonal, as Paliwal observes. It also could not convince the teachers sufficiently to change their strategy from concentrating on examinations-focused syllabi and questions.

In addition, there are three interesting essays depicting women's life stories. In Chapter 7, K. N. Sunandan highlights how family and community interact with schooling of the people, of women in particular, especially marginalised women. Her essay also outlines the powerful role care and kindness play in developing strong relationships between teachers and marginalised students. Similarly, Megha Sharma (in Chapter 9) highlights the role of family and neighbourhood networks. Based on

interviews, Shivangi Jaiswal (Chapter 8) describes the educational journeys of four women from their maternal home to their in-law's place, from becoming a wife to becoming a mother, from migrating from a small town to a city for education that promises job prospects.

In the experimental schools, most of which are located in rural areas which do not have many civic amenities, small groups of children – mostly first-generation learners aged between 4 and 14, some of whom are dropouts of formal schools, – sit together; multiple languages the children are familiar with are used, using mostly the children's mother tongue as the medium of instruction; a range of unstructured activities are introduced; and the children are encouraged to explore their local environment in innovative ways. The children learn language, mathematics, sciences and social studies, in addition to art and music, crafts and athletics, in informal settings and through unstructured but creative methods.

However, these schools have not been able to diametrically change the aspirations of the students/parents. In essence, the main problems these alternative experiments face include their relevance for their students' later schooling at secondary/higher level in regimented formal schools, sometimes English-medium schools, and for future work opportunities. These children find it difficult to transition to formal schools; and even face serious problems in getting admission to formal schools. As Jane Sahi observes, "The alignment between people's expectations of schooling and what we were ready to provide seemed increasingly shaky as time passed. All the aspects which had earlier been taken as positive building blocks seemed to become irrelevant" (p. 43). The problems revolve around the medium of instruction, the method of teaching and learning, the system of evaluation, learning versus the craze for marks, cooperation versus competition, and many other aspects, including the stigma attached to attending such alternative/experimental schools meant for the downtrodden. Even building schools with locally available materials in a traditional mode became inappropriate. The hope seems to remain unfulfilled that "as this generation [of students who come out of alternative schools] grows up and takes part in public affairs and/or in raising the next generation, it will hopefully want a more liberating education in schools" (p. 69). The students of these schools, like the students/parents of mainstream schools, somewhat surprisingly aspire to go to English-medium schools, learn English, and go to convents. Despite all efforts by the alternative schools, English is seen as the gateway to social mobility.

Against the background of these and similar aspects, some of the alternative schools have also deliberately attempted to modify their own systems at least partially. As Pradeep Kumar Datta describes in the case of Sriniketan, which "continues to carry some vestiges of a glorious past", it "has become largely indistinguishable in its methods and systems from any other school" (p. 25). On the whole, the alternative models have not been able to influence the modern formal school system; they have remained mostly isolated experiments. Some are actually short-lived. It appears that quite a few models described in the book have ceased to exist.

The experience of these initiatives also reveals that perhaps they cannot be sustained for a long period, especially in a period like the present, which is characterised by a high degree of privatisation of education, and also a high degree of bureaucracy in educational administration. Public policies like the ostensible *Right*

to Education Act (GoI 2009) do not recognise alternative schools, and a uniform pattern of schooling has become mandatory. As a result, many such schools – the Sita School, The Tilak Nagar School, or the Vikasana or Kanavu – have meanwhile all been shut down. Alas, they will have to be remembered as mere historical miniatures.

The slim paperback by Janaki Nair provides invaluable reading on how experiments were initiated, conducted and sadly, how they perished. Educationists, sociologists, social thinkers and practitioners will find it a highly valuable archive of information on a social movement at the grassroots in Indian education.

References

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