

**Krishna Kumar, *Smaller Citizens: Writings on the Making of Indian Citizens*. Orient BlackSwan, 2021, ₹395, xvii + 149 pp. ISBN: 9789354420901 (Paperback).**

Krishna Kumar in an anthology of 18 short popular articles published earlier in the journals like the *Economic and Political Weekly* and *Seminar*, and the newspapers like the *Hindu* and *Indian Express*, explores how the modern schools train young children to become future citizens. The key argument that the author, who is a passionate scholar in children's education, their rights, wellbeing and childhood including specifically girlhood as a whole, makes is: the modern formal education system in India is highly rigid, hierarchical and severely regimented, and it may produce children who would be loyal to the state, comply with the state order, but not the children who can think freely and critically. Not only the children, even the teacher is not allowed to think. How the schools treat young children means a lot for the development of young minds; and how the teachers are treated by the schools mean a lot for the teachers' performance. The overall status of teachers is low, the quality of training they receive is poor and the teacher's job lost "covetability." They occupy the lowest rung in the hierarchy of authority and status in education. Krishna Kumar laments, "The state has failed to impart dignity to the child's teacher, let alone the child" (p. 4); and "[f]or well over a century, India has treated its teachers like messengers who need not know or understand the message themselves" (p. 38), as they are considered "minor cogs in the system's wheel" (p. 104). Recent developments in the post-welfare state, including neoliberalism, globalisation, liberalisation, neo-colonialism, new forms of nationalism, emergence of alliances between market and culture, the policies and approaches of the government and the overall ethos contribute further to strengthening this trend.

Largely focussing on school education, curriculum and pedagogy, which are increasingly shaped and reshaped by emerging markets, and centring around the theme of children and their wellbeing, the author reflects on certain basic issues relating to gender concentrating on girls, rural children and peasants, tribal women, poverty, inequality, caste, citizenship, bureaucracy, teacher training, teaching profession, etc. The author feels that many of these attributes, for example, gender, caste, tribe, rural background and economic status need to be taken into consideration while understanding childhood in India. Kumar observes that "the idea of childhood is applicable in Indian society in a rather limited sense. It remains essentially a biological concept. As a social category, childhood is yet to gain acceptance..." (p. xv).

Krishna Kumar refers to several kinds of tensions and contradictions that exist and grow in the Indian society. The domains and kinds of knowledge acquired at home differ from those imparted in schools. But both are important. More important is "the relationship between education at school and socialization at home" (p. 49), which plays a key role in learning by the children. Apart from tensions and contradictions between school and home, Kumar refers to many others, such as regimentation and nationalism, equality under a welfare state and equality under a post-welfare state, "rurality" and modernity, etc. The practices borrowed from colonial state, which were designed mainly to maintain law and order and demand allegiance to state, conflict with the functions that arise from the value-framework of the

Constitution of independent India. While earlier living in rural communities has a distinction of its own, the public policies have exacerbated the dependent status of the village on urban communities both economically and culturally in such a way that finally the city sets the norms in almost all areas of life and the villages follow them. Rural-urban polarity has been strongly visible. In this context, Kumar refers to the 73rd amendment in the Constitution of India that makes school to fall under the purview of the village *panchayat*, and the Right to Education Act that made education an entitlement of every child, to be made available free. The onus for the execution of the latter is placed on the entire society and the apparatus of the state.

Krishna Kumar also raises a few major contradictions in public policy in this slim volume. For example, child's participation in the family's occupational life is a fact of life, particularly rural life in India, and possibly in many other countries. This is equated to the modern interpretation of child labour and income-generating activities; and all such activities are banned. While the former may be a learning experience, a creative and joyful experience for the children, and hence desirable, the latter, that is, the income-generating child labour activities, is not. The former also promotes dignity of labour, and introduces children to vocational skills. But through laws regarding child labour and compulsory education, the state banned all forms of child labour and wanted every child to be schooled for citizenship. In the process, the children are missing one major effective way of learning. Paradoxically, recent educational policies nowadays aim at introducing children to vocational skills through other schemes and methods.

Krishna Kumar denounces that in modern times the school functions as an institution of the state. But what about private, independent schools or religious schools? Contrary to public schools, it is possible that these schools may not function so; or in a very few cases they also may function as an institution of the state. He does not discuss this issue. Then, it also possible that the state in some countries is benevolent and promotes democracy, autonomy and critical thinking among its children and citizens. So, it is not necessarily bad always if a school functions as an institution of the state, rather than as an institution of self-interested managers of the school or the myopic local communities. School as an institution of the state has both plus and negative points. Historically and in the contemporary period, we note school being used for nation-building in many countries, and the nation-building is based on a particular identity-driven political ideology – good, bad or ugly. So as Kumar admits in a marginally different context, the problem lies “in the nature of the state” (p. 153). For example, the colonial state is of completely different nature compared with an independent nation-state; state in a democratic society differs substantially from state in authoritarian or non-democratic societies; state embedded in the culture of people's welfare would be different from a state in a market dominant economy; and so forth. Then, Kumar values highly children's choices. In a normal society, how much can one expect a child of age 10 to exercise right choices. Almost all countries have made school education at primary level compulsory. This may be based on the understanding that a child of the age 10 may not be able to make good choices and so are the parents who are constrained by several social, economic and other factors. In such a situation, which is common, child's choice may turn to be a utopian idea, particularly in, but not confined to, school education.

Independent India has lost a chance to revolutionise and modernise its education system. As Kumar observes, Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, “just talked about primary education, and allowed primary schools to continue as pre-colonial cultural factories of slow, intellectual slaughter” (p. 136). He further states, “If Nehru had launched some other scheme to modernise primary education, the death of *basic education* would not look so tragic after all” (p. 136; emphasis added). While Gandhi's *basic education* died as no significant effort was made to revive it, the formal elementary education was also not universalised, though the Constitution of India “directed” the state to provide free and compulsory education to all children within a 10-year period from 1950. Education was not explicitly mentioned

as a fundamental right, but only as a Directive Principle in the Constitution in 1950. But drawing from the fundamental right to life, guaranteed in the Constitution, a liberal interpretation has been that education was automatically a fundamental right. As the state did not take it that way, it became necessary for India to make a new amendment to the Constitution making education a fundamental right in 2002 and a new act, the Right to Education Act in 2009. The Act is considered as a major legal measure that the government of India has introduced in education; yet it has to be underlined that the spirit of the Act was already there in the Constitution. The Act has a few positive and negative features. In a critical essay on the right to education (Chapter 4) and in several other chapters, Kumar discusses the potential benefits of several clauses of the Right to Education Act. Referring to the controversial clause of provision for 25% admissions in fee-dependent private schools to children of economically weaker sections, Kumar feels that it as an important social engineering measure, conveying the concern for equality “most sharply” and “it conveys a moral agenda for Indian society and state..., ensuring an active and positive school experience for children” (p. 72). But it should be noted at the same time, as some critics observe, that this promotes further growth of private schools which contribute to widening of inequalities in education and in society at large, apart from that it means a clear admittance by the state of public schools being poor in quality and that children should go to private schools for better quality education! Making a positive reference to the curriculum and pedagogy suggested in the Act, the author, who played a key role in developing the *National Curriculum Framework* (National Council of Educational Research and Training, New Delhi, 2005) highlights the distinction and contradictions that exist between child-centric pedagogy that involves engagement with child’s milieu promoting taste for understanding and self-discovery through creative endeavour and education for citizenship. He is critical of the latter being paid more attention than the former, as the latter, aims at preparing children “for active membership of the global marketplace” (p. 7) and is guided by the changing national and global considerations. While the pedagogy plays a critical role in kindling critical thinking and in fostering democratic values, peace and harmony in the children, the author rightly argues that peace is something that “has to be experienced by children in their everyday life at school, at the hands of a teacher” (p. xvi). On the whole, there is a need to treat children with due consideration, considering the unequal socioeconomic and academic background of children in the schools. Caste, gender and other forms of discrimination, beating children to death or verbal abuse, and other ways of punishment that force young children to resort sometimes to the extreme measure of committing suicide, etc., some of which that Krishna Kumar refers to, are certainly not the right ways of treating young children by the teachers. In fact, school, as a social institution has an important role, it is supposed socialise children to approach the world with the passion to understand it and engage with it, rather than ignore it or fear it (p. xvi). Ironically, school itself is becoming a source of conflict and fear.

Kumar surprisingly senses a feeling of “generous fund flow from the centre to the states...” during the programmes of district primary education project (DPEP) and *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA) (p. 74), while many have shown with detailed estimates of financial requirements, how starved of the funds the education sector, including specifically elementary education has been, despite increase in public funds for a few intermittent years. However, Kumar recognises the existence of several obstacles to proper implementation of the Act, a “promise to be full of struggle and resistance” (p. 37). On the whole, the Act signifies, as he concludes, “one among the many paradoxical attainments of Indian democracy in its struggle to engage with deep social divisions and the state’s colonial heritage of reluctant acceptance of its social duties” (p. 89).

Kumar also offers insightful perspectives on several issues, such as private education, use of technology in education, changing focus in favour of outcomes in schools, paradoxes in the Kerala model of education development, public-private partnership, etc. The new technological environment encouraging extensive

use of technology in classroom teaching, and creating a “pedagogy market”, places the child at a receiving end; strengthening “the instrumentalist ideas in education” (p. 59); it justifies mechanistic models of learning and teaching at the cost of humanistic considerations. He is also rightly critical of the transfer of state’s education responsibilities to private sector – philanthropic or profit-seeking, and other non-governmental organisations in the name of efficiency, as this serves only the national and global corporate interests. New concerns for efficiency and accountability necessitated introduction of outcome-focused approaches which require teachers “to confine their role to implementing a pre-scripted curriculum, mainly in preparation for tests” (p. 88).

Written in a simple, narrative, and sometimes anecdotal—referring to everyday incidents, but serious style, *Smaller Citizens* provides a sharp critic of the current system of school education. This is a small but profoundly interesting and thoughtful collection of essays that intensely engages the reader with some of the fundamental issues relating to children’s education and very closely related aspects of the society, making every actor involved in education to wake up, to introspect one’s own role and performance and to think on how to play a more constructive role in making the children of the present, critical thinkers of the future.

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