Education and Citizenship: Beyond the Rights Based Approach

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Abstract

The thrust of my argument arises from T.H. Marshall's understanding of citizenship that confers an equality of status upon which structures of equality may be built. This implies universal education and not just a right to education and, thereby, imposes a different set of injunctions on the state, ranging all the way from quality to accessibility and to being culturally blind. We must realize that a policy is valid only when it can be enforced and whose norms are citizen, and not group, oriented. Targeted approaches to social goods like education suffer because they usually end up at below acceptable levels of delivery as they do not address the society in general. Not only does this keep the more influential, connected and better off people out of purview, but even the poorer sections of the population believe that a less than optimal package is being given to them. Naturally, this leads to overall inefficiency and corruption which is why a “Right” based approach to education invariably falls short as it is essentially geared towards a target population.

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I

As this seminar is dedicated to the memory of Mr. Anil Bordia, it is in the fitness of things that we always think big. This is the inspiration behind this presentation. I believe that it is time we looked at education in a fashion that does not cleave to official habits and paradigms for they have not served us well so far.

In pursuance of this objective, I would like to position my arguments here in the context of citizenship; sadly this area is rarely consciously brought into play. In our quest for reaching out, we do not quite see the quality of education that we impart. In this we do injustice to citizens for we shortchange some and benefit others. Furthermore, we should also remember that whenever we discuss and plan education, whether at primary or higher levels, we are always thinking about
the future—never the present. If it were just the present, where then would there be any need for policy planning? We would have been quite happy in pursuing traditional forms of thought or traditional forms of education without exerting pressure on the boundaries in any meaningful way.

The reason why education is special is not because it is dealing with issues of the present. Its distinguishing quality comes because it helps to deal with the future. Yet, we never really know what the future holds. That is all the more reason to prepare the young to think in a way that would help them negotiate in years to come. The exact content of what lies ahead are not fully within our ken today but it is essential we prepare the next generation to cope with it. That is what ‘education’ is all about.

The children who are now in school would hardly use the kind of knowledge they learn today when they occupy decision making positions thirty years down the road. So we have also to think about the future, when we think of education. When we think of the future, we cannot help but think of citizenship. Because citizenship is about the future and it is not about the present. If we look at the citizenship, that is, how it has evolved over the years—over decades, even centuries. When democracy began, we had some vague ideas what ‘citizenship’ was about.

In fact, the word ‘citizen’ was used for a long time even before the formal inauguration of democracy. By formal inauguration, I mean, what happened in the mid 19th Century. At that time, in the mid 19th century, did anybody imagine that democracy actually meant that everybody had the right to vote? At that time, at best, the privilege was reserved to the well-to-do properties classes. But it was not good enough. In democracy today we cannot imagine such a situation for with universal franchise, everybody has right to vote regardless of caste, creed community and gender. This was possible because the idea of citizenship kept growing through agitations and interventions and that is how democracy got richer.

Democracy, therefore, does not realize itself in one swift motion. It gradually unfolds. The unfolding of democracy takes place, because serious people took serious steps, sometimes at grave personal risk, to recover uncover the riches of democracy which were not easily visible to most at first glance. That is why it is incumbent upon us to keep the struggle on and keep
expanding the bounds of citizenship, for that is how democracy grows in glory and stature. What better route is there to do this other than through the medium of education? And this is not a wild guess; it has happened elsewhere in the world, particularly with the inauguration of the welfare state.

II

Max Adler, the famous German philosopher said, “The future of democracy does not lie in politics, but in pedagogy” (see Cartright, et. al 1996: 57) Democracy is not about politics, democracy is really about pedagogy.” Keep education out of democracy and citizenship lies unattended. Without education, women would not have agitated for rights, nor would workers demand fair working conditions. When education is seen in the context of citizenship, we realize how truly future looking it is. Today, it is impossible to think of women without the right to vote or workers without the right to proper and humane working conditions. All these movements in democracy happened because democracy has its twin in education and they are both future oriented.

All of us are equal; and it is because we are equal we may pursue our dreams equally. That is where “empowerment” truly comes in. If our dreams are to be collective and shared, children should be an essential part of it. If they are, how can some go to good schools and others to poor or mediocre ones? Such an outcome flies in the face of citizenship which is all the more reason why quality education is not only about individuals doing well in life, but about social uplift as well. That, I think, is where the value of thinking “citizenship” lies. As citizenship and education are future oriented they are moving targets and keep evolving. In such projects, one cannot say that the final hill has been climbed and there are no further peaks ahead. The moment one makes the mistake of thinking this way, a new hurdle emerges just a few steps away.

The famous German Philosopher Karl Fichte who said that human beings are restless creatures. The moment they achieve something, they are thinking of something else that needs to be done. So every time you feel you have won your laurels and think of resting, well, think again. There is another target emerging in the horizon which is worth going the extra distance for. This
realization led him to famously conceptualize the “thesis”, “anti-thesis” and “synthesis”. Hegel first, and then Marx, borrowed this idea from him and developed it in their own ways, but the origin of this formulation came from Fichte.

In other forms of collective life known to mankind the urge of pushing forward constantly is not quite as present as in a democracy. This is because it is only in this form of governance that citizenship finds itself bang in the centre. In other forms of collective life, at best, you press for peace, spirituality, and heavenly compensations, but not about realizing human potentials to the full the way citizenship does. Democracy is thus laden with the future and without education it would be hobbled at the start. True, we don't know what future is? When democracy began, who knew that women would have right to vote, when democracy began? Who knew that health and education would be essential aspects of the welfare state in advanced democracies? But today we in India too can see the promise of citizenship and should do our best to realize it as some others elsewhere have successfully done. As Jawaharlal Nehru constantly reminded himself that he had miles to go before going to sleep, so must we. We cannot take citizenship for granted and sit back. It is too early yet to lock up the door and go to bed. That will just not do as we have to perpetually on the move. This is why education is so essential for our pursuits otherwise we would be stumbling in the dark,

T.H. Marshall once said that democracy confers an equality of status on everybody upon which structures of inequality could be built (1957). So, education is not about being equal in the end, but in providing equality of status through imparting skills so that people can go ahead and be different in their own way. But you have to provide quality education first as the basis without which the second step would be unfair for we all have our very specific dreams and ambitions. So at base citizenship must provide equality of status and that fundamentally implies equality of educational opportunities at quality levels to all. Once that is achieved let somebody be an artist, somebody a physicist, somebody a broker, who cares? ; as far as you have given everybody the equality of status as citizen. We should also be clear about equalization at what level? The answer is: Equalization at the highest acceptable social level. It is not equalization of ends. That is very important. If it is equalization of end, the game is up.
The idea that we first get primary education for all and then proceed towards secondary education and then after a pause, the higher education, then a Ph.D, is fraught with danger. This sadly has been the mantra for a long time going all the way back to my childhood days. We were told that we should spend time and money on primary education and not fritter them away in chasing higher forms of learning as we were not ready for them yet. Once that is achieved we should then take on larger projects for our resources are so scarce.

Likewise we were also told in the early seventies and late seventies that we should have primary health than other forms of health. This kind of thinking is pretty dangerous, because it does not really tune you or prepare you for the future. It only prepares you for the present. If you have problem, deal with it. This is the “Present”! This is most important, finish it first. Now that we have done primary, let us think of secondary. Such forms of thinking are actually retrograde for they do not attend to the present either. Imagine a doctor who has grown up trained in dysentery or diarrhea would hardly have the skills to treat typhoid or tetanus, which also haunt our present. Unless, the medical practitioner is aware of the full complement of medicine, the delivery of primary health itself would be at stake. How can one teach basic medicine because that too is changing every day? It is not the same thing as it was 50 years ago; ask any grandmother if you find this hard to believe. Tuberculosis is known to us because of the advance in nosology and if diagnostic procedures; this is not a disease of the future. Likewise with many other ailments that are unfortunately all around us, everywhere. Today we are able to separate tuberculosis from other kinds of pulmonary ailments because we have learnt so much and are better informed than our ancestors were. That could have hardly happened if education were tending only to the present.

Education ought to be understood in a similar fashion; we cannot stop with primary schools and then fire a stage two rocket later. In which case then our primary education too will suffer because children will only learn about the past. Where will teachers of tomorrow come from that are ready to teach the children who will be citizens years from now. Just as in cases of illness it would be cruel to say that I am going to treat you for dysentery, but if you have appendicitis, it is too bad!” likewise in education too. One cannot stop at teaching the letters of the alphabet and then walk away. Education, like health, is in the round: primary to advanced levels of learning
must happen together or nothing will work. We must think of education in its entirety. And that is why education is future, and education is citizenship, and citizens should not be held back.

III

Today, when we look around us, in gated homes or in squalid quarters, in poverty and desperation, or in sated prosperity, everybody is thinking of the future. It may not have been so clear to us say 50 years back, but today this truth stares at us in the face. Today, we are much more future oriented than we were in the past, which is why we have to think of education not in terms of first step, second step, third step, but in terms of a total and determined thrust. We consequently need to think of higher education all the way to advanced research simultaneously with primary education. As we do not quite do that, we are woefully behind in terms of Research and Development. The major reason why we have been unable to keep up with the rest is because we segregate education into bits and pieces and lose out on research. This latter aspect should be presumed at the start or else children will not be ready to handle uncertainties that lie ahead. Research should find its way to pedagogy at the primary level so that enquiry begins at the time child sits in the classroom and the bell rings. This must be a general phenomenon for we can neither isolate learning to a few islands of excellence either.

Take a look at the Nobel laureates in recent years. Many of them are working in Ivy League institutions (like Harvard, Yale, Oxford and Cambridge), but that is not the full story. In an impressive number of instances they did their path breaking work before they joined these prestigious institutions. They were then bought over by Harvard and Stanford but had attained excellence earlier non-Ivy League colleges and universities. If you look at the 2013 Nobel Prize winners, you find all kinds of small universities figuring in the list. Some of these scientists may even be in non-Ivy League institutions today, and some were there before they moved to these much admired and talked about universities. Nobel Prize winners are not made by Ivy League educational institutions alone and if these places have such a reputation it is because they are constantly being fed by universities outside this charmed circle. As there are so many tributaries of learning that find their way to Harvard and Cambridge that these institutions thrive. Had they been on their own, they would have shriveled up and died.
Essentially, then, you can’t have islands of excellence. You must have institutions across the board that islands of excellence can draw upon. In India, on the other hand, our higher education institutions stand in splendid isolation. They are conceived as islands of excellence but lack the constant nourishment they need from institutions outside. In due course of time it is not surprising at all that they fail and produce mediocrity by the thousands. After the first round of intellectuals who set up the islands of excellence, the second round obviously can’t do the same job. They can’t fit into the same shoes, because they have not been fed adequately by channels outside these islands of excellence.

So again we go back to citizenship, again we go back to the future. This is why without research from the start you cannot have an education that is forward looking.

IV

Democracy tells us to dream, whereas everyday education tells us how to handle the present like book-keepers. Keeping a clean ledger where the balance sheets add up does not favour dreams. Studies have shown that it takes roughly twenty years for your investment in education to kick in and add to our GDP. If you invest today, you do not get GDP returns tomorrow. It needs a long time, decades, in fact. If in this period you behave like a book keeper then you will not support education of the kind we are envisaging. You will think of the bottom line and support poor education, perhaps even imagining you are doing the right thing. We do not want that kind of quality, nor do we want low level of empowerment as they only equip us to deal with the present.

Empowerment, like education and like citizenship, must equip us to deal with the future. This is why, I think, R&D is so important. R&D in our country is roughly 1/240th of R&D in USA, 1/3400th of the R&D in Japan and (what hurts us today), it is 1/60th of Korea- even neighbouring Korea is much higher than us. A Planning Commission study tells us that in middle income countries, IT industries spend roughly 15% of their turnover on R&D, but we spend less than 3% (Gupta 2002: 48)
In this context, let us take a look at the Basque province of Spain. This region today has developed spectacularly over the last three decades and is the most advanced part of Spain. More importantly, it is next to Germany in terms of most human development indices. One of the reasons the Basque people did so well is because they spent huge amounts on R&D. Today if you want a space in Techno Park in Bilbao, you have to commit yourself to the investing 10% of your turnover in R&D. If you cannot do that, you cannot get a space in the Techno Park, no matter how well connected you might be. Not too long ago Basque country was the last in most respects in Europe. Today, Basque country is the first in the doctors to peasant ratio, in health and longevity and in innovations. How did they do it in twenty five, or thirty years? Simply by pursuing higher education along with primary level instruction and did not make concessions to mediocrity at any point. If you are thinking who leads in alternative sources of energy in Europe today, go no further, it is the Basque country. Among other things this province is also the leader in wave energy, which is going to be a huge boon for all of us in the future.

So if you are looking at education and citizenship, don’t look at felt needs but felt aspirations, which are about the future. A democracy that addresses only “felt needs” is in the stone-age as far as realizing citizenship is concerned. Democracy like education must listen to the “felt aspirations” of the people. If you look at the needs of the people, you are a little old book keeper. But if you look at the aspirations of the people, you become an enterprising democrat. And aspiration of people is all about delivery, not about book keeping. When the Prime Minister stands at the rampart of the Red Fort and says that I have increased the education budget by so many crores, health budget by so many crores, transport budget by so many crores, we stand up and cheer. But why? We should be asking, but what about delivery? Where has all that good money gone?

We have some shameful figures that tell us how sad our actual delivery of education is on the ground. The better off send their children to private schools, but some of these places are not well-equipped either, particularly in villages. As many as 31% of children in these institutions cannot read a simple paragraph when they are in class five, even though their parents spent a small fortune on them. This figure climbs to about 50% when we look at government run schools (see Desai et.al., 2010: 83). This is how poor actual delivery is.
In the same way, one can have primary health centers (PHCs) everywhere, but if 39 million people go to poverty yearly because of ill health, that is bad news (Sinha 2011). In such a situation does it really matter if there are PHCs at regular intervals in village India? If after 94% habitations have a primary school within 1 km. this is the kind of education children get, what then are those schools doing? After primary school, there is 50% drop-out rate before they go to class-VIII, another 43% after that (Desai 2010: 82).

What good then is it to have schools in your neighbourhood? It is when we take “delivery” seriously that these figures begin to really worry us. As aspirations are not being met, the numbers going to private schools have ballooned. In 1980, only 2% of kids went to private schools but by 2010, 21% of rural kids, and 51% of urban children go to private schools (see Desai, et.al. 2010: 83). In this connection it is worth reading up what Panchmukhi and Mehrotra are also pointing out (2005). Clearly, children are going to private schools to meet their felt aspiration. For felt needs there is that ill-equipped “pathshalas” round the corner, but do they really want to be there?

Need is static, aspirations are dynamic. Aspirations unite people in a way that “needs” do not; they divide the population. So when we have targeted education policies for Scheduled Castes, education for Scheduled Tribes, education for slum dwellers, etc. I see a great danger in it. I see, segregation where there should be citizenship. Yet, some would counter this and exclaim: “But where is the money?” My answer to such people is that there is never the money. Even advanced countries did not have the money when they embarked on these programmes. They did all of this, not when they were rich, but when they were poor. That’s how they became rich. This is the truth of the matter, like or not. But a good book keeper will say, ’No, we don’t have the money.’ A good book keeper will say, ’I have to balance my ledger-sheet. As long as the ledger sheet is balanced, money in or money out, I don’t really care, how well you are educated.’ But that is not how a state can usher in universal education or universal health.

I know that the current wisdom on such matters reflect a book keeper’s attitude. I know that it is practical, and even more pragmatic; but I think it is dangerous in terms of citizenship, and in terms of equipping the young for the future. What is the point, if democracy and citizenship only
reflect this miserable present? What good is it to reflect caste, religious divides and vote banks? Democracy has to change the present, not reflect the present. Anyone who says, 'I am democrat, because I reflect the present', is a liar. Anyone who says, 'I am democrat, I’ll change the present', is the person you should cheer for.

I do know two families rather intimately in Jaunpur district (UP) who actually are BPL households and who actually send their children to private schools. So you can imagine that they practically do not eat at all, but they hunger for the education of their young. The private schools that I am talking about are not the private schools that you may have encountered in cities. They are not that good looking, or well staffed, but nevertheless they charge money and parents spend, because the teachers turn up. Another anecdote needs to be related to complement this one. In eastern UP, this time in Badhohi district, I came across a village where I met a large number of carpet weavers/farmers. They told me that they refused to teach children how to weave carpets, as their parents had taught them, because they do not want them to grow up and grow old in the village as they did. They want them to leave this depressing rural confine and keep looking over the mud walls for signals that might take them away; even to a city slum. There the hope is that tomorrow will be different from today, but in the village it is a daily grind and a repetition of yesterdays. But even that is a caricature, because villages today are changing very rapidly. And the Bharat versus India that dichotomy, which many of us propound with such energy and gusto, is becoming less and less relevant today. What remains incontrovertible through all this is that aspirations are now on the rise and only universal quality education, and not education for the poor, will serve the purpose.

V

We come finally to the issue of “Right to Education”. This phrase is a misleading one for there is a lack of clarity regarding what it entails. It sounds as if it is addressing citizenship, but actually it is not. This is straight UN jargon and should be seen along other high sounding slogans that right to health, right to clean water and the rest. When we use the term” rights” particularly in health and education, we are on tricky terrain. The government may now tell us that there is a
public hospital out there, whose standards are extremely questionable, but that is where we must go to if we want our right to health to be satisfied. One might end up in such a place, but that would be because there is no better alternative. In education too, setting up a government school does not meet the right to education or else why should so many private schools have come up which charge the earth? The state would however plead not guilty. After all, there is that little structure out there without a blackboard, or a proper roof, or proper teachers, but it is a school nevertheless and, therefore, the right to education has been met.

Further, if a child is found not going to school, whom you are going to arrest; the Father; the Mother; the School Head Master; the District Magistrate? Who is answerable? Nobody knows.... Instead of “rights” which can be easily fobbed off, what we need are clear policies on education, or on health. When there is a policy of universal education it is clear who would be responsible for setting it up and who will be charged if things go wrong and standards fall. The term “rights” sounds grand, but its delivery record in the field of education and health is dismal and will always be that way. Unfortunately, most people are enamoured by the term ‘Rights’ and do not understand how easily ‘Rights’ can be undermined. When, on the other hand, there is an articulated policy then it is possible hold people responsible for poor delivery of these public services. The “Right to Education” is neither pushing education nor citizenship forward; all it is doing is inflating enrolment figures. Quality of instruction and reach of good teachers are issues that are not addressed in such circumstances which is why one needs to abandon the language of “Rights” in such cases.

I must repeat this last point once more before I end. If citizenship does not have within it, utopian elements, and if citizenship does not see its future beyond the immediate, then such a project is bound to fail. Instead of utopia we will have a dystopia on our hands and negativity will set in. The only way to keep negativity out, both in terms of education and citizenship, is to constantly think utopia. And when you think utopia, you are thinking forward- you are thinking citizenship. That is when ‘empowerment' really manifests itself.

What is our Utopia? Not targeted education, but universal education! Can this be done? Of course it can and has been in many democracies around the world.
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