

Social justice, sexual education, the need of our times

Caste and gender are the deepest social cleavages in our society. The intersection of these two social identities plays havoc with the lives of adolescents/young adults in Indian schools and colleges. There are frequent reports in the media on the caste conflicts among adolescents/young adults as well as consensual sexual relationships between adolescents/young adults of different castes inviting criminal penalties and action. Education about social change and sexuality are closely related. Training young minds in critical thinking and social justice is essential to address this issue and to create a healthy society.

Education for democracy

In a hierarchical society, it is hard to create well-functioning democratic institutions based on equal rights for everyone. In the name of celebrating tradition, an emphasis on racial purity and a protection of cultural values only leads to the majority/powerful being dominant and aggressive towards the weak.

Electoral democracy encourages and establishes affirmative action of distributing opportunities for the depressed communities. The state even criminalises caste and gender-based discrimination. In reality, this has little effect on destabilising unequal social codes and discrimination in practice. The state as an organisation reflects the structure of society and thus makes the rights of the depressed difficult to realise. The idea of citizenship in a democratic society demands the empathetic understanding of the lives of fellow citizens and critical thinking about one's own life. Enhancing empathetic understanding of others in a modern society that contains many divisions is the only hope of sustaining democratic institutions. Education for critical thinking requires challenging our own lives, beliefs and faith and how they affect the lives of others in a complex world. This is what education is supposed to aim and achieve.

Children generally look to elders for help. Parents and the elderly try to keep children comfortable and in the process, children learn that they can command others. On the contrary we should teach them that self-help and at the same time seeking help is not a sign of weakness. No one is perfect. We are all vulnerable in more than one way. Rather, weakness is something to be recognised as inevitable. When seeking help is not a shame, helping is a responsibility. That makes us more humane and sociable.

As a child enters adolescence, he realises that vulnerability is not only because of one's physical frailties but also because of social and economic settings in life. Recognising this aspect of vulnerability is a key step in attaining social



R. Srinivasan

is Member, State Planning Commission, Government of Tamil Nadu

When education is a right, it is only natural that sexual education is a part of it, which will, in turn, transform gender relationships in society

justice. Education should remove the narcissistic tendencies that we may develop in our desire to control others, particularly women and the weak. Thus, children develop compassion and raise a supporting and critical voice for the weak.

Though education is initiated at home, learning abstractions and active learning are what begin in school. Socratic active learning is important in this education venture. Humanities and arts provide scope for active learning. Artists move beyond the mental confines of ideologies. Humanities give us the intellectual training to accept ideas and also search for alternative ideas.

While society may create ideas that are in conflict with the ideas imbibed from school, it is the continuous engagement of this conflict that demands critical thinking which in turn invites a daring re-imagination of one's own society and relationships. Rigorous training in logical reasoning and critical thinking creates the vision that lives in a democracy are full of reasonable disagreements among citizens of different religions, cultures, wealth, class, physical impairment, gender and sexuality.

Teachers are vital in enabling social justice education. Teachers should understand and accept that social justice education is essential for a well-functioning democracy. Teacher absenteeism, blaming children for a lack of learning potential, discouraging children and physically abusing them are all outcomes of this lack of faith in social justice education. If a teacher realises his/her agency in democratic education, then the teacher finds suitable pedagogy to teach social justice; this is because society is the workshop, and the academic material, the guiding path.

A different yet vital education

Sexual education is also an important aspect of social justice education. More than providing knowledge about healthy sexual development and sex education, sexual education prepares students to respect gender identities and interpersonal relationships. The importance of consent in sexual intercourse and a respect for personal boundaries, as well as the ability to stop perpetrators of sexual abuse are important aspects of sexuality education. In a recent judgment, the Calcutta High Court said that children have a right to access sexual education and sexual and reproductive health services. When education is a right, it is but natural that sexual education is a part of it.

Research has shown that sexual education delays the time of the first sexual intercourse, reduces its frequency and curbs sexual abuse and risky sexual behaviour. Sexual education trains students to understand the social constructs of

gender and to respect others' sexual preferences. In this perspective it has a social justice content as boys and girls treat each other with respect and also develop a deeper understanding of other gender identities (LGBTQA+). Sexual education in school will transform gender relationships at home and in society, and will be the most desirable outcome.

Need for government support

As in the case of social justice education, sexual education requires a strong impetus from the government. Just as there is a questioning of caste and social hierarchy through social justice education, it is essential that through sexual education, children are given a perceptive understanding of gender relationship stereotypes, guard against abusive and risky sexual relationships. Though sex education is a small part of the general school education curriculum, sexual education has rarely been taught in Indian schools. The Adolescent Reproductive and Sexual Health Strategy (ARSH) (2005) and the National Adolescent Health Programme (Rashtriya Kishore Swasthya Karyakram or RKSK) are two recent initiatives by the Union government. Children, even in the pre-adolescent stage, have a natural curiosity to know more about sex. Capitalising on this curiosity to provide them the right type of sexual education is a prudent strategy to equip children to have a safe and healthy sexual life and to respect and accommodate gender differences.

While courts in India are debating the criminalising aspect of consensual sexual relationships of adolescents, the education sector should inform the legal aspects of sexual relationships as well. There is no dearth for curriculum design, teaching aids and pedagogy for sexual education. Many international and national bodies have created curricula, reading materials and teaching aids. All that is needed is to train teachers and implement sexual education as a compulsory part of the school curriculum.

The Government of Tamil Nadu has instituted a committee (with Justice K. Chandru as Chairperson) to recommend measures to remove discriminations based on caste and community in schools and colleges. Other States are grappling with this issue. Many a time caste clashes have a link with the sexual behaviour of adolescents/young adults. The sustainable solution to the issues of any form of discrimination is in establishing the fact that all are equal and that empathetic understanding and an accommodation of differences are essential for a healthy democratic society. The fact is that social justice education and sexual education are the need of our times.

EVASTALIN

Activi

Women's political empowerment — more talk, less action

In any country, the political empowerment of women is generally possible with two routes — the first is to reserve seats for women in legislature by means of legislation and the second is to have provision for quotas for women candidates within political parties while nominating candidates. There are examples for both that have been adopted in various countries, in turn helping women's political empowerment. Neighbouring Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan have opted for the legislative route and are faring better in terms of representation of women in their legislatures. For example, in Pakistan, 17% seats are reserved for women in its national assembly; Bangladesh has reserved 50 out of 350 seats in its Jatiya Sangsad and Nepal has reserved 33% of the total seats for women. Statistics show that there is an improvement in the number of women legislators being elected crossing the percentage of seats reserved for women which is a sign of women's political empowerment in one way or the other.

The world and India

There are many countries where there are no laws mandating quotas for women, but political parties are required to give a certain percentage of tickets to women candidates. Australia (38%), Canada (31%), South Africa (45%), and Sweden (46%) have no legislatively-backed quotas in their Parliament, yet most of these countries have more than 30% women in their respective Parliaments. This is clear evidence that quota is not the only route for women's political representation. There is another route of reservation within parties while giving tickets, which is equally effective for women's political representation.

The debate about women's political representation has been going on in India for long; in fact the Bill reserving 33% seats for women was passed in the Upper House on March 9, 2010 but could not be passed in the Lower



Sanjay Kumar

is a Professor at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies



Vijay Kumar Suvvada

is a master's student in International Electoral Management and Practices, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai

Fielding few women candidates in the Assembly elections even after a law was enacted this year is a reflection of the lack of political commitment in ensuring greater women's empowerment

House as the United Progressive Alliance Government (UPA) was not in the majority. The Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance government has chosen the quota route for the political empowerment of women by enacting the Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act of 2023. It is considered a milestone in terms of women empowerment (reserving by law 33% seats in State Assemblies and Parliament). It is important to note that the Bill was passed in the Lok Sabha with a huge majority, only two Members opposing the Bill.

Assembly elections this year

There is hardly any doubt that this is a welcome step in the direction of women's political empowerment, but the patterns of ticket distribution in the recently held Assembly election do not indicate the same commitment for women's political empowerment as was shown by the leaders of various political parties in Parliament.

An analysis of the pattern of ticket distribution for these Assembly elections suggests that political parties have hardly made any effort to give more tickets to women candidates even as a sign of gesture. An analysis of the number of tickets given by both national and regional political parties to women candidates suggests that in Madhya Pradesh, for the House of 230 seats both the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Congress fielded 24 and 27 women candidates, respectively, in the 2018 election. After passing the reservation Bill just before the elections, they have fielded women in 28 and 30 seats, respectively. In Telangana, out of 119 seats, the Bharat Rashtra Samithi, formerly known as Telangana Rashtra Samithi, the Congress and the BJP have fielded 10, eight and four women candidates in the 2018 elections; in the current elections, the numbers were 10, 11 and 12, respectively. In all the five States, no political party has reached even the 15% mark in giving

tickets to women candidates — far less than the mandated 33%. It is obvious that political parties are more interested in viewing women as voters than encouraging and empowering them as legislators.

In the 2022 Assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh, the Congress party had reserved 40% of seats for women which was a bold and innovative move in the Indian political arena. Had other political parties such as the BJP and the Samajwadi Party followed suit, the most populous State in India would have seen 40% women legislators on its floor, in turn setting an example for other States and even nations. In Assembly elections in Odisha (2019) and West Bengal (2021), the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) and the Trinamool Congress (TMC) fielded more female candidates and won the electoral battle. The TMC's tickets to 46 women candidates, resulted in 32 candidates winning.

Discouraging signal

The initiative of enacting the women reservation Act, 2023 is a commendable move by the parliamentarians of the day. But, due to its linkage with the new delimitation which will be done after 2026, we can say that the law looks good only on paper. In spite of not having any law, regional parties such as the TMC have fielded candidates successfully and won electoral battles. The question arises: what has hindered the national and other regional parties in showing commitment towards women empowerment by increasing the number of their women contestants during these Assembly elections? Not having an adequate number of tickets to women candidates even after a law has been enacted (though it will come into effect by 2029) does not send out a positive signal about political commitment to ensure women's political empowerment.

The views expressed are personal

EVA STALIN IAS