

Education and Girlhood

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It is a matter of honour and privilege for me to speak in the memory of J.P. Naik. The subject I will discuss was of great interest and concern to him. This lecture will take six turns in the course of about an hour. **First**, I will explain why I prefer to talk about girlhood rather than girls. **Second**, I will try to respond to the question 'What is education?' At the **third** turn, we will briefly examine why knowledge requires an autonomous space. At the **fourth** turn, we will reflect on the psychological split in the state's mind in India. This will help us explain, at the **fifth** turn, the state's difficulty in engaging with culture, specifically the culture of girlhood. In the final or **sixth** turn, we will acknowledge the difficulties that the new age of assertive consumption presents for the education of girls. I will conclude by describing a gift given to a little girl by her father.

Why Girlhood?

I will talk about girlhood rather than girls. I have two interrelated reasons for this choice. One reason has to do with my understanding of girls' upbringing. The other has to do with the difficulties that the term 'childhood' presents when we apply it to refer to girls. The considerable body of scholarship that now exists on girls' upbringing in India and my own attempt to study this subject have convinced me that the concept of socialization does not convey the intensity of upbringing we notice in the context of girls. By intensity I mean the determination with which social institutions, such as the family and kinship, act in order to mould a girl into a pre-sculpted model. Leela Dube uses the term 'inescapability' while depicting one major dimension of a girl's preparation for the life destined for her as a woman (Dube, 2001). The metaphor of metal casting comes to mind. What is known as the lost wax method draws our attention to the malleability of wax that has been intricately crafted by expert hands to leave the exact marks of a chosen design on the clay that will serve, after it is fired, as a mould for metal casting. The term 'girlhood' refers to the culturally crafted mould used for imprinting the mind of the female child from the earliest stage of life. The idea of imprinting helps us to recognize the difficulties we might encounter if we use the term 'childhood' to describe the early part of a woman's life. It goes without saying

that we are referring here to a pattern rather than to individual lives among whom one might notice many exceptions to the pattern.

To use the term 'childhood' for referring to this early stage of life invokes the normative meanings that childhood has acquired as a term. The historical trajectory of childhood as a concept refers to Europe since the 18th century, but its normative connotations have spread across the globe since mid-20th century (Kumar, 2016). The normative attributes of childhood arise from the general theory of citizenship, and within it from the idea of child rights. The normative characterization of childhood revolves around the idea of freedom, especially freedom from fear. Such an idea is hardly reconcilable with the pattern we notice when we attempt to study the everyday life of small girls. The cultural metallurgy I mentioned earlier ensures the internalization of knowledge about the life that is exclusive to girls as children.

What is Education?

We will return to this subject, but let us first talk about education and ask a question as direct as 'What is education?' I will attempt an answer by using the corpus of knowledge that has developed over the 20th century about the nature and growth of the human mind. Of course this corpus of knowledge is not without debates and ambiguities, but it also includes vast areas of consensus, especially on matters like how children think and learn. On the basis of this consensus we can give the following answer to the question 'what is education?'. Education is the means to obtain an entry into the social world while ensuring existence in the physical. 'Physical' and the 'social' are not simply two dimensions of the milieu in which a child is born. Rather, they are two forms that the milieu takes. The key difference between them is that the physical milieu is visible or tangible while the social milieu is not. In its physical form, the milieu can be grasped by sensory means. But in its social form, the milieu waits to be discovered, and its discovery requires knowledge and skills. How the social milieu impinges on 'me', 'my' life, must be found out and understood by each human child individually.

Why do the two milieux differ in this manner? The reason is that the physical milieu exists and is composed of elements that are living in the present, whereas the social milieu is composed of elements whose life is continuous with the past and it merely touches the present. In other words, the constituents of the social milieu have been shaped by a past which borders the present. No one can see the past and the shaping that the social milieu

went through in the past right up to the present moment in which the child stands. Only with the help of imagination--trained to notice and understand the shaping imparted to the social milieu in the past--can the child discover and grasp it. This is the task education must accomplish if it is education as distinct from socialization. The latter term represents a process that facilitates the child's induction or entry into the social world so as to ensure adjustment to it. Socialization takes place without making the mind specifically aware of the entry. Education, on the other hand, subjects the entry to all the demands that consciousness makes on cognition. The process of education can, thus, be expected to diminish the ineluctability of the social world by revealing to the learners's eye that the social world has a long past in which it evolved through human effort.

Tension between home and school

This analysis points to a necessary tension between socialization at home and education at a school. While the home provides knowledge for the child's induction into the social world and adjustment to it, the school is dealing with different domains and kinds of knowledge, not necessarily consistent with the knowledge acquired at home from the family. While some kinds of knowledge acquired at school may promote acceptance, even appreciation, of the social world represented by the family, other kinds may undermine well sown the seeds of dissatisfaction and questioning, thereby undermining the family's role in preparing the child to adjust to the social world, its norms and values. We are not interested just now in the quality of education that a school might provide under the systemic conditions prevailing at a given time. We are referring to the school's nature as an institution to which society has assigned the task of enabling the young to access the knowledge available in different fields and making it graspable. There are times when the curriculum carries the signs of having been designed to indoctrinate.

More usually, the different domains of knowledge or the subjects covered in the curriculum carry potentially contradictory messages or ideas that might unsettle young minds groomed at home. This is one reason why education sometimes has unanticipated consequences. The manner in which we defined education earlier suggests that the process of educating the imagination and intellectual energies of the young will attain its potential to the extent the school enjoys a certain degree of autonomy in its functioning. I am referring to autonomy in the manner knowledge is interpreted by teachers, the methods

they use to teach and assess, and the resources of knowledge to which the school provides access. The greater the autonomy, the better the chance that the school will educate, in the sense indicated by our earlier discussion.

State's Instinct and Role

In modern times, the school functions as an institution of the state. What kind of state a society has is a moot question, but all present day societies seem to have delegated the task of educating the young to their states. If we look at the historical origins of the state in India, we recognize the stamp of colonialism on it. As discussed in my *Politics of Education in Colonial India* (2013a), colonialism is both an ideology and a set of practices. As an ideology it entails a particular kind of relationship between rulers and the people over whom they rule. The colonial state apparatus was designed mainly to maintain law and order, to speedily re-establish it when it broke down. This function continues to define the primary job of the Indian state even as other functions have emerged and accrued over time. These other functions arise from the value-framework of the Constitution, and are generative in their nature.

Between these generative functions and the older, dominant function, there is a gap. For this reason, the Indian state behaves as a psychologically split organism. Between its instincts and its consciously made choices, there is a sharp split. The instinct is to control. This powerful instinct makes the state chronically apprehensive of the possibility that ordinary people might go out of control. The colonial perception that the majority of the 'native' population comprises the so-called masses exacerbates the state's apprehension of losing control. The conscious part of the state's personality is motivated by more benign feelings towards ordinary people and a differentiated image of the population. These feelings include the awareness that ordinary people are capable of behaving like responsible citizens. The idea of a citizen who has a stake in the state's functioning has acquired a kind of half life: it drives the political side of democracy, while governance remains an exercise of control.

The state's difficulty in engaging with people's culture arises out of this split. History points to 1857 as the point when the colonial state decided to practice aloofness from cultural matters. Over the following 90 years preceding independence, the colonial state handled social policy with restraint and caution. It meant that laws that deal with cultural practices like child marriage would remain vaguely worded and difficult to implement. The use of the term

'child' in the phrase 'child marriage' encrypts a wider tendency, not necessarily of colonial origin. This tendency is to equate boys with girls in the general consideration of being children, thereby overlooking the vast difference between the lived experience of the two sexes in the context of their social existence in the family and community in a matter like matrimony. The M.V. Joshi Committee (1928-29) which examined the consequences of child marriage presented a vast amount of medical and other kinds of evidence demonstrating how painful and horrific little girls' experience of marriage can be (Rathbone, 1934). We can hardly compare this experience with that of boys who are married away during childhood. Gender neutrality of this law belongs to the wider phenomenon of the colonial state's sense of its limitations. Colonial relations between the state and society implied a specific and studied caution in matters dealing with women. The public argument for this special caution was that women represent the core of culture. This perception allowed public policy to essentialize women's lives and matters pertaining to women. In effect, the state adopted the male perspective and leave patriarchy undisturbed, to be reinforced in new forms under the regime of modernity. In education, the cautionary stance--towards matters designated as being culturally sensitive--meant the promotion of girl-specific curriculum policy. Strong continuity between home and school came to be regarded as a condition for the spread of girls' education. Under this approach, the school would do nothing that might weaken the norms, knowledge and self-identity cultivated through socialization at home.

In our own day, the acceptance of this condition remains a tacit policy and a common perspective. Non-discrimination between boys and girls means overlooking the lives girls lead at home and the reality of their daily experience of negotiating the distance between home and school. The girl who walks into the school gates wearing her uniform does not leave behind that other girl whose life at home is encircled by custom and ritual, and the demands and expectations of the family and community. The two girls inhabit the same body but they lead contrasting mental lives. The secular knowledge dispensed by the school to both boys and girls acquires a different set of meanings for the two sexes, reconstructed by their gendered selves so as to serve their culturally assigned roles in life. The assignment carries the force of imprinting on the girl's awareness that her body must serve as her primary agency both instrumentally and symbolically. The meaning that school knowledge acquires for a boy cannot be compared with what it might mean to a girl who has

already internalized the culturally approved perceptions of the body's primacy and instrumentality.

Levels of Fear

Fear and preparedness for submission are deeply etched in socially sanctioned girlhood. Fear needs to be located in the broader mapping of the desirable female life to be lived under patriarchy. This broader perspective enables us to distinguish three levels of fear. In my recent book, *Choori bazaar mein larki* (Kumar, 2013b), I have attempted to map an archeology of fear in a girl's mind with the help of these three levels. At the surface level, fear refers to the body in terms of injuries that might deface it. This is an important level for us to grasp the implication it has for infancy and early childhood, especially in the context of play. The power of play to absorb the young in the joy of sheer physicality of the body loses its relevance if the parental gaze conveys an anxiety for the distant consequences of an injury caused by vigorous play. Girlhood means learning to be afraid of these consequences with reference to matrimony. Mahadevi Verma (1999/1937) used the metaphor of merchandise to describe a girl's body. The object of merchandise must stay intact while it waits for a customer.

At the next level, fear covers sexuality. Internalization of the fear of being violated takes many forms and requires the communicative gaze of the adult, but in this domain the gaze is surrounded and assisted by the vast and varied powers of mythology, its representation and celebration. The helplessness experienced by Draupadi or, under a different circumstantial sequence, Sita's ordeal are among powerful mythological depictions of fear that girls must internalize in their journey of growth towards becoming acceptable women. The mythical representation of fear covers both its importance and its management through acceptance of dependence on the male. This deep lesson is relevant for the third level of fear at which fear refers to independence and freedom. Fear of freedom ensures that the self is fully merged or dissolved into socially given identities. Absence or weak presence of a personal self (Gupta, 2015) has significant consequences for motivation to pursue and sustain personal goals.

These consequences of early or primary socialization at home present a formidable problem for education. However, the problem never translates into a challenge. This is because the state, the custodian and manager of education, is historically conditioned to practice reluctance whenever it is

required to engage with culture (Kumar, 2010). For the state, equality between the sexes means a balanced presence of boys and girls in the classroom. Their differential experience of education is not even acknowledged in the state's own documents. In an arithmetical sense, equality has been achieved. In matters like curriculum, textbooks and teacher preparation, the state's policy has made a certain amount of effort to focus on girls, without addressing girlhood, i.e. the culturally constructed life of girls. Neither male nor female teachers are equipped to deal with conflicts and contradictions that arise in the annual calendar and everyday school life between educational aims and the aims of girlhood. While education implies the pursuit of aims chosen by a girl herself, girlhood means pursuing matrimony and motherhood as the highest aims of a woman's life. The school has little interest in a girl's life at home. By practicing neutrality or non-discrimination between boys and girls, the school overlooks the consequences of the lives they lead at home. It also ignores the layers of fear, including terror, sculpted in girls' inner, mental world by cultural imprinting through mythological and folk narratives, customs and rituals. The small number of girls who either escape this imprinting or manage to use their education to practice freedom quite often find themselves in the role of Abhimanyu, the young hero of Mahabharat who had to fight an all-round battle all by himself. Girls' education can take credit for producing a few thousand Abhimanyus who have symbolic, inspirational value for many others. For the vast majority, education creates a pleasant memory, of a time when, inside the walls of a school or college, freedom from terror could be experienced during the day.

New Alliance

This role of education may shrink and get tougher to perform in the foreseeable future on account of a growing alliance between custom and capital. This alliance between the market and culture is tightening its grip on girls' lives, thereby giving new strength to girlhood. Socializing the girl into an acceptable woman by facilitating her internalization of the body project is a shared agenda of the market and custom. From the market side, partners include the various industries involved in the production of body-merchandise and the electronic media where this merchandise is advertised and promoted. Television and cinema are also involved in the process of seeking girls' cooperation and active participation—by the exercise of her agency—in the body project. Assertive consumption of objects and services associated with the body reinforces the culture of girlhood. It is a travesty, not unusual for

our times, that girls' cooption in the body project is interpreted in certain quarters as evidence of their agency.

The parents of a little girl who studies in a nursery have bought a dressing table for her. She has learnt to use eye-liner and knows how to choose the right colour of lipstick to suit a dress. With peach pink blusher on her cheeks, she preens as she looks at herself in the mirror. Her parents watch admiringly as she starts tottering towards them in her high heel shoes. Many of her classmates participated in similar attire in an annual event of her nursery. Their long educational journey has started.

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