Source : www.thehindu.com Date : 2022-05-06

THE SCHOOL DRESS IS IN THE CROSS HAIRS

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Education and related issues

‘A uniform is different from a dress code’ | Photo Credit: S.R. RAGHUNATHAN

Nowhere in the long history of education can you find evidence to say that a school uniform is a factor in learning. Yet, a lot of people today cannot imagine a school without a uniform. When they think about a school, including their own, they think about the uniform that makes its children distinct from the children of other schools. Especially on festive occasions when grand events bring all the schools of a city together, people find something deeply edifying in the spectacle of children marching or displaying their smartness wearing a distinct uniform. The public fascination with such spectacles, and the history of the school uniform, point to the single most important role that a school uniform plays: it helps in the regimentation of the young. Uniformly dressed children constitute one of the two archetypal metaphors of schooling. One is that of a garden where different flowers bloom; the other is of an army of little soldiers marching together.

If you divide the world into countries that have a compulsory uniform in their schools and countries that do not, the history starts to reveal itself. Systems of education that evolved under colonial rulers of different types generally favour strict enforcement of the school uniform. That includes us.

If you strain popular memories and scan old photographs, you will find that the idea of a school uniform has spread with urbanisation, prosperity and privatisation. Rural and small town schools seldom insisted on a daily uniform in the early years of Independence. It was required on certain days of the week and on special days. Gradually, when different types of private schools started, they demanded every day wearing of the prescribed uniform. Supply of uniforms for children of different schools offered business opportunities for local cloth merchants, tailors and shoe stores. Instead of offering competitive pricing, the uniform business encouraged local monopolies. In many cases, the schools assented to participate and asked parents to patronise a particular source.

This short, and obviously generalised social history has little apparent relevance to the situation in Karnataka. Nicely hemmed in between the order of the Directorate and the court, a complete uniform code has evolved within a few weeks. Its regime now encompasses the classroom as well as the examination hall. And although Kendriya Vidyalayas (central schools) are not governed by any provincial government, the ones located in Karnataka have fallen in line. Their stance is not difficult to appreciate under the circumstances.

Thus, one of India’s most literate and prosperous States, globally famous for its advancements in the so-called knowledge economy, has emerged as the crucible of educational orthodoxy and control. The school uniform has mutated into a new political tool, and as a means of curtailing the already limited autonomy of principals and teachers. To what extent the politics of the school dress will influence electoral outcomes will become a subject fit for research in the social sciences. Systematic study of the school dress, its history and fascination, was long overdue.

It is interesting that the uniform controversy erupted in the secondary education system of a State that bypassed major policy reforms of the 1960s. Pre-university or junior colleges are left in only a small number of States now. Elsewhere in the country, the 10+2 model recommended by the Kothari Commission nearly 60 years ago prevails. It led to a significant reorganisation of the administrative system in education. Its full potential would have been realised had school

principals and teachers been given a greater say and freedom in establishing the norms that govern institutional life.

Another gain would have been a participatory role for the community in matters of day-to-day life at school. Had the vision of the Kothari report — sculpted by its Member-Secretary, J.P. Naik — been realised in its entirety, bureaucratic authority would have declined, creating greater room for school autonomy. A different kind of politics might have emerged, with the school as its intellectual resource. Karnataka might have been a highly fertile social ground for such alternative democratic polity because of its own history and propulsion towards decentralised governance.

History took a different direction. The picture of a teacher or principal of a junior college in Karnataka stopping a student from entering the examination hall on account of a dress item will serve as a symbol of unkindness for many years to come. Hopefully, her predicament will also become a subject of discussion in teacher education colleges. The question it will raise is: 'Did she voluntarily agree to be so unkind to a student in order to be compliant to orders?' An administrative query might also be worth pursuing: 'Did the Directorate's order on the specified uniform extend to the examination hall?' Notionally it did, but then it stretched the normal role of a school uniform — to provide a collective institutional identity. If that identity covers the examination hall, why do students need a hall ticket, establishing their individual identity? Let us hope the legal argument on this issue will go into these uncharted layers of the lives of learners and examinees.

Even at this juncture, it is worth recalling a key distinction. A uniform is different from a dress code. A uniform is more prescriptive than a dress code. The latter may expect children and their parents to avoid using clothes flaunting status or wealth. A uniform, on the other hand, may well go as far as prescribing not just the colour but also the material and the design or cut. In older times, it was considered sufficient to recommend a dress code; nowadays even a fully defined uniform does not seem to suffice. The social ethos promotes conspicuous consumption (a phrase used by the economist, Veblen), and banquet halls serve this aim as efficiently as schools. Uniforms do help to maintain a veneer of equality in a society where inequality is pervasive.

Education, however, is supposed to promote equal opportunities for all strata and sections of society in more substantial ways. One important contribution that education can make in this direction is to widen the scope of public debates, enabling the participation of all concerned, especially teachers. They are in far closer touch with students from different backgrounds and, therefore, will be more sensitive to what makes classroom life more comfortable for all.

No modern philosopher has explained the problems that underlie this state of collective existence better than Sri Aurobindo. In *The Ideal of Human Unity*, he draws upon diversity in nature to explain why uniformity tempts us, but does not contribute to a sense of relatedness or unity. He extends his analysis to all aspects of social, cultural and political life, including international relations. In our present context, the issue underlying the turmoil in Karnataka has to do with the role of education and the manner in which it functions as a system. As the term 'uniform' suggests, a common dress conveys that all differences have been overcome.

Had that been the case in Karnataka, the Directorate would not have to exert its pressure to seek compliance. The expectations this resilient institution forged under colonial rule harbours in its bureaucratic heart are best illustrated by a story J.P. Naik told me. The Kothari Commission had suggested ways to make classroom teaching less stereotyped, and more lively and child-centred. Soon after the Commission's report received official approval, the Directorate in Maharashtra fired off a D.O. (i.e. demi-official) order to all schools that, as per the desire of the

competent authority, henceforth, all teaching must be child-centred!

Professor Krishna Kumar is a former Director of the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and the author of ‘Smaller Citizens’

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