

SOCIAL JUSTICE, SEXUAL EDUCATION, THE NEED OF OUR TIMES

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'As in the case of social justice education, sexual education requires a strong impetus from the government' | Photo Credit: Getty Images

[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.

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.

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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 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.

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.

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 Swaasthya 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.

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