

EDUCATION

Of rights and duties

A classroom in a Madhya Pradesh village. The children are reeling out their impressions of the word citizen: "A citizen should be law abiding"; "a citizen should work for the nation"... When asked what they meant by "working for the nation," prompt came a reply; "Dying in the border". This was an instance quoted by Anjali Noronha of Ekalavya in her paper "Developing a Democratic Citizen in a Traditionally Hierarchical Society - Challenges for the Civics Teacher," which she presented at a colloquium on Schooling and Citizenship held at the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), Bangalore recently. The seminar was interrogating the role played by education in enabling citizenship.

More often than not citizenship is understood in narrow terms - as encompassing activities such as being law abiding, 'working' for the nation, voting, and so on. And when these activities are gaining fresh ground in the backdrop of various social and political changes occurring within the Indian nation, an answer like "dying in the border" does not come as a surprise. In the process, what remain unspoken are the various other definitions that add towards a unified understanding of the word citizenship. These unspoken definitions, which include the rights, decisions and empowerment of an individual, formed the highlight of the seminar.

That empowerment can be brought about primarily through education is an undisputed fact. But sadly, education poverty is a stark reality and also the main drawback of our nation today. Dealing at length on this bleak truth was the paper "Education Poverty in India" by Jandhyala B G Tilak of Delhi's National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration. Tilak's paper accepted that "lack of awareness of the value of education" and "lack of interest" on the part of parents are important factors of education poverty. But he chose to dwell more on the reasons behind the apparent "lack of interest," which included "poverty conditions of households, costs of schooling and the poor quality of schooling facilities available" to the poor. The long array of facts - regarding education and poverty in India, age-specific attendance rate in school education during certain time periods, enrolment



rate of children in rural India by Household income groups, percentage of children attending, not attending and never enrolled, and so on - which Tilak used to substantiate his arguments for making education a guaranteed right were, in fact, pointers to the governments' and the community's developmental failure.

Taking off on the same lines was another paper "The Social Bases of Elementary Education Deprivation" by A R Vasavi of NIAS. Her paper went on to discuss how the "inability of the poor to access education...is compounded by their position in the society and the nation as marginal members," that is as members of low-ranked caste groups, tribals or adivasis. Even if a child from these communities gains admission to school, s/he is soon to drop out owing to the treatment meted out by the teachers and classmates belonging to the upper castes. Adding to this inequality is also gender discrimination. An important point her paper sought to highlight is the near absence of the contributions of the elite to the educational upliftment of the poor.

Backing her arguments were some findings of a study she was involved in, conducted by the Sociology and Social Anthropology Unit at NIAS. The study was conducted between October 1999 and November 2000 in six areas in India. A composite report of the study conducted in Bangalore, titled Urban Poverty and Basic Education Deprivation, would surely be of interest to the community, teachers, elected rep-



representatives, parents, education department personnel and others interested in promoting elementary education.

Both Tilak's and Vasavi's papers pointed out that a chief factor for children dropping out is the uncongenial school environment. That the syllabi itself adds a great deal to this uncongenial situation came up for discussion in Educationist Padma Sarangapani's paper "Indigenous Knowledge Traditions and Schooling." Anjali Noronha's "Developing a Democratic Citizen..." and another Ekalavya member Alex George's "Images of Sarkar in Civics Text". Taking the case of the Bhaiga community in central Madhya Pradesh, which boasts of rich indigenous knowledge of healing and medicinal art, Padma sought to bring out the contrast between the education that is

A colloquium on Schooling and Citizenship sought to interrogate the commonly available notions of citizenship in school textbooks and teaching

formally thrust on the children there and the community's knowledge traditions that they acquire through the oral mode. The main crux of her argument was the need to inculcate indigenous knowledge traditions in mainstream schooling. While Anjali's paper sought to show the notions of citizenship that children as well as teachers bring into the classrooms and how these notions are shaped by their caste positions, Alex's paper attempted at highlighting the gap between what the civics texts propagate and what the child observes and perceives. Reiterating Padma's point that community knowledge for children is as important as the national curriculum was another Ekalavya member R N Syag. In his paper on "Education: Needs, Demands and Mobilisation," he stressed the need for community

mobilization (a refrain that echoed in nearly all the presentations). Syag cited his NGO's participation in mass mobilization at a local level in Madhya Pradesh. Clearly the government, he noted, had failed in its responsibilities towards imparting fair education. However, he also called upon the NGOs to make a radical shift in their approach towards the government as "involving politicians has become an inevitable necessity as the panchayat is now a strong body". But can we also afford to imagine a situation where the government is not involved?

Lecturer Manish Jain's paper "Civics, Citizen and Human Rights," and researcher Sarada Balagopalan's paper "From Street to School: Citizenship, Formal Education, and the Marginal Child", in their own ways attempted to scrutinise the various colonial and trans-national discourses shaping the ideas about citizen. Deriving from personal experiences and research, educationist Jane Sahi, researcher Shalini Punjabi and Director of Aditi Mallya International School Geeta Narayanan spoke on the issue of "Class and Organisation of Schools". A psychosocial development among school children is as important as enabling them politically. A paper that sought to throw more light on this aspect was psychologist Malavika Kapur's "Promotion of Mental Health and Psycho Social development Among School Children: Experiments and Experiences". Dwelling on the topic of educational philosophy were papers by Lakshmi Rameshwar Rao of Vidyaranya School, Hyderabad and freelance journalist and NGO activist S P Udayakumar. The final session witnessed a discussion on "New initiatives for public education," with Azim Premji Foundation's C V Madhukar's paper on "Fostering Public-Private Partnerships for Universalisation of Elementary Education".

That a community mobilization was as crucial as re-orientation of government's policy for creating an overall awareness of the notion of citizenship among children marked the crux of the two-day colloquium. But the total absence of government representation in the colloquium, which had a large role for the government to play, was a glaring factor.