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Restructuring the Civic Education Paradigm in Indian Schools: Measures to Cultivate a Generation of Responsible Citizens

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Abstract

Political science as a subject is integral to the development of sensible and patriotic citizens, yet it is not given the attention it deserves in the Indian education system. Solidified by the findings of field research conducted in five schools that cater to India's middle-income bracket (the largest segment of the population), this research paper brings forth the reluctance of over 92% of the representative sample to undertake education in a discipline as important as political science- a distressing figure indeed. The sample involved random selection of students of grade 11 in the five schools mentioned herewith; qualitative research was obtained through anonymous questionnaires allowing a safe space for truthful responses, and quantitative data were obtained through access to the schools' records pertaining to subject selection for grades 11-12. This paper will highlight some of the current deficiencies in the system, undertake a comparative study of how it stands vis-à-vis those of European countries, and arrive at recommendations to the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and to the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) on how to improve civic education among high school students in the country, eventually fostering a moral and capable Indian generation.

Keywords: Political Science, Education, Civic Education, Citizenship Education, Indian Education, Curriculum

1. Introduction

In a world more dynamic than ever before, more interconnected than ever before, it is essential to promote the proper instruction of civic studies to schoolchildren to cultivate an Indian generation with a rational national identity; with a unique outlook on the world while maintaining a respect and patriotic duty towards the nation. It is often said that India is only as good as its citizens, and the neglect faced by the civic education system in schools brings forth the challenges of a populace worryingly ignorant of their rights and obligations in society. The colonial mode of education has lingered on in the country with bureaucrats and educators content with the eons-old system and unwilling to disturb the status quo left behind by the British three-quarters of a century ago. Moreover, there has been a surprising lack of research on this issue, and this paper seeks to address this gap. Through an analysis of the current situation supported by on-ground research in schools, and comparative

international best practice evaluations, the paper culminates in recommendations for educational reform and the way forward to ensure that the next generation of Indians grow up worthy of the demonym.

2. Review of Literature

Civic education in the country has been commented on by many noteworthy individuals and organisations who seek to redress the vacuum of quality political science education in the country. Amman Madan in his article on “Old and New Dilemmas in Indian Civic Education” argues that we are faced with the task of reforming the way our children are taught to position themselves as morally good citizens. The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) must look beyond ingraining the values of an ideal subject of the government in students, and should instead focus on teaching the philosophical underpinnings of the Indian state as established on liberal and socialist principles. This paper shall argue that even going a step beyond this—exposing the students to a variety of political schools of thought and letting them make a value judgement by agreeing with the ones they believe best espouse the culture and spirit of India— is a prudent way to be true to the liberal values we so desire, and lead to citizens who can think for themselves without possessing coloured opinions. The Vikas Concept, an NGO that aims to transform students into active citizens, through its research, raises the point that practicality must be embraced in civic education, with students taking action at an early age and observing the impact of their actions at a formative stage in their lives.

The current mode of instruction of political science is one based solely on rote learning as students navigate their way through a cornucopia of legal-jargon and commit it to memory, only to forget all about it the day after their assessments. A 2017 Pew Research Center survey of citizens revealed that a dismal eight percent of Indian respondents were fully committed to a representative democracy, sparking debate about civic education in the country and how well the values being taught were taken up by the students. Rather than focusing on just specific political bodies in India, the syllabus should put forth moral and fundamental questions such as the style of government, the freedom of the people, and the responsibilities of citizens in the democratic process. This argument can be based on the writing of Frank Islam for the Business Standard; understanding his international comparisons of civic education begs the question as to how the educational authorities in India should restructure the syllabus to align with the progressiveness of the West while retaining our culture. Thus, a review of the existing literature on civic education in India brings out the inherent deficiencies in the dogmatic approach to its syllabus and instruction in schools, and that to meet the needs of modernity while being grounded in the Indian culture, major reform is needed.

3. The current shortcomings in the political science education system in Indian high schools

Political science as a subject is one that is integral to our sustainable and principled advancement as a human race. In India, specifically in the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) curriculum, it is introduced as ‘Social and Political Life’ in grade VI, ‘Democratic Politics’ in grade IX, and ‘Political Science in grade XI.’ Manaskriti School in Faridabad, a CBSE-accredited school that teaches civics was observed for this research paper. After many days of observation and interaction with the students, it was observed that civics was not a popular subject amongst them though students enjoyed studying it they were averse to pursuing it as a subject in their further education. Table 1 shows the number of students opting for political science in grade 11 against the total class strength:

Table 1: The number of students opting for political science in grade 11 against the total class strength

Name of School	Total Grade XI Strength	Students Choosing Political Science	Percentage
Apeejay Public School	175	13	7.4%
Manav Rachna International School, Faridabad	140	13	9.3%
Vidya Mandir Public School, Faridabad	504	31	6.2%
Vidya Niketan School, Faridabad	296	21	7.1%
Navjiwan Public School, Faridabad	38	2	5.3%

These dismal figures show that an average of only 7.1% of the total class strength in the aforementioned schools picked a subject as essential as political science after matriculation. In an attempt to observe an accurate trend, the sample has been limited to 5 schools for middle-income families in the district of Faridabad. The figures were compiled utilizing the support of the school authorities as well as data about class compositions in the academic year 2020-21.

When students were asked about their reasons for not taking political science in the form of an anonymous questionnaire, the most common responses revolved around a few common points. Students feel that there are no job prospects for anyone who studies political science; civics students are rendered jobless in the country hence making it an unwise decision to pursue the same. Moreover, civics is taught in a mundane manner- it is predicated upon rote learning of current systems without fostering analytical thought regarding the way one interacts with others in a democracy and other forms of government. A class 12 student from Vidya Mandir Public School recounted instances where he couldn't memorise many terms and instead wanted to question the teacher about the effectiveness of democracy, he was discouraged from doing so leading to the third major problem diagnosed in the political science education in India: there is no room for interpretation. Civics is a subject that is meant to transform students into model citizens, but *what* that model is must be a choice the students should make. CBSE textbooks lay down only how India interprets democracy and how that is the only way it should be taught, but students want to explore their own ideas about further ways to practice governance and civil responsibilities in society.

From these candid responses and an analysis of Political Science textbooks, it can be found that the following shortcomings exist in the National Council of Educational Research and Training syllabus of the subject and the way it is instructed. The content is very rigid and does not allow room for contradictory thought. The examinations are based just on the rote learning of the textbooks that lay out political systems in India, rather than offering a space for students to explore political and philosophical concepts. Stemming from this, activity based learning approach is absent- group projects and modelling of political systems are some of the mediums through which students can explore the syllabus content in a fun and retentive way. The primary reason surrounding its absence is because teachers who teach the subject are trained only in textbook instruction and lack a berth of other knowledge and perspectives (as derived from interactions with teachers of the aforementioned schools in the study). And lastly, the knowledge passed in the syllabus is heavily moderated and censored to support the political views, ideologies, and roles of the government in power; after nearly every election cycle in India, the supposedly 'autonomous' NCERT amends the syllabus to favour the new government in power, defeating the actual purpose of civic education.

A small flavour of these problems can be seen as the topics on federalism, local governments, citizenship, nationalism, and secularism were completely deleted from the syllabus of 12th grade political science students in the name of "coronavirus-induced restructuring" in 2020. These are concepts that form the basis of a society, and regardless of which career path the student chooses, they must have a basic understanding of these topics to be a good citizen no matter what their profession. To sum up, the research conducted against the backdrop of political science syllabus in India paints a picture of a curriculum confined to certain dogmatic ideals espoused in one solitary textbook taught by limited teachers. How then does India's civic education system size up compared to that of other countries?

4. Comparison of the Indian political science education model with those of European nations.

Indian political science education does not rank at the bottom of the pile, but it is nowhere near the top. Here, one can draw on international best practices for inspiration as to how to reform the way civic education is structured and taught in India.

In the French Republic, political science education is compulsory and rigorous, especially until the age of 16. In 2016, the Education Ministry announced plans for new classes that aimed at instilling the values of liberty, equality, and fraternity, as well as justice, mutual respect, and the absence of discrimination, with special

emphasis on secularism. This programme is taught in all primary and secondary school classrooms and aims to teach children to become active and responsible members of society by the time they turn 16. Here, a bulk of the education is imparted to students before the age of 16 as opposed to India where it occurs between the ages of 16-18. A major advantage of the French system is that students are incentivised to do well in civics and are already well-versed in important moral concepts so that they can focus on career-specific education after 16; in India, most students leave political science at age 16, and therefore miss out on the wealth of knowledge they need to be an ideal global citizen so that they can focus on other career-centric subjects. Another noteworthy aspect of the new French Course on Moral and Civic Education is that it is very clearly structured and divided into four *general* areas of knowledge- Sensitivity, Rules and Rights, Critical Thinking, and Social Responsibility- whereas the NCERT syllabus in India is haphazardly delineated with India-specific topics and a lack of global engagement. Therefore, from France's example, one can conclude that India needs a civic education system that imparts most key concepts *compulsorily, before* the age of 16, and in a manner with a global outlook.

Next, India can look at its former coloniser, the United Kingdom, whose education system reflects deeply in that of India, for inspiration regarding social education. Branded 'citizenship education' in the UK, civic education is compulsory for 11 to 16 year olds, and was introduced with an aim "for people to think of themselves as active citizens, willing, able, and equipped to have an influence in public like and with the critical capabilities to weigh evidence before speaking and acting" (Citizenship Advisory Group). After 2002, when this new policy was introduced, the government began encouraging schools strongly to provide students with an environment to practice their learnings in the classroom at a larger level; most public and nearly all private schools saw the establishment of independent student councils, as opposed to powerless bodies in Indian private schools and non-existent ones in government schools. Therefore, politically active students in India are not given an opportunity to explore and expand on their passion at an early age, thus leaving them discouraged and ill-equipped to bring about civic and public policy change. In the UK, the government is in a continuous consultative process with stakeholders including NGOs (such as the Citizenship Foundation, Amnesty International UNICEF, CND, Oxfam, and Red Cross), and professional organisations and networks (such as the Association for Citizenship Teaching [ACT] and Citizen), meaning the education system is enrolled in a constant feedback mechanism that leads to its advancement. In India, the NCERT unilaterally determines the civics syllabus and reviews it with alarming infrequency leading to redundant, limited systems being in force for multiple years at a time.

The situation, however, is not hopeless as may come across; India still has compulsory civic education until the age of 16, its exam-centric approach ensures that students study the subject, and it is taught widely so more students receive the education. One can conclude that the preceding international best practice comparisons highlight the fact that India has a long way to go in terms of civic education, and a better structured, more transparent curriculum designing process is a good starting place.

5. The future of Indian civic education and potential remedial measures

Today, civic education in India is a volatile entity that is dreaded by many students and heavily regulated by the government. A cursory glance at civics and history textbooks in India will show that the topics pertaining to nationalism and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, the ideological parent of the ruling BJP) are given far more weightage than the advents of Gandhi and Nehru. Controlling education, especially the arena of political science, is a tactic that has worked well for many leaders, the most noteworthy being Adolf Hitler and his overhaul of the civic education sphere to introduce the Hitler Youth and integrate virulent antisemitism into the textbooks. The lesson is that social and political education in schools can be a substantial factor for change, and in India, we must ensure that this change is of the right nature. To this effect, a much-needed overhaul is needed in the way civic education curricula are designed and taught in the country.

A few suggestions that can be gleaned from extensive research and the on ground research analysis (the questionnaire responses and the data regarding popularity of political science education amongst 11th graders)

are that civic education should be based on fundamental principles of moral global citizenship- rather than keep textbooks focused on political structures as they exist in India, the NCERT should promote discussion regarding philosophical and social ideas such as secularism, political pluralism, rights and responsibilities, etc. This syllabus for the political science textbooks should be arrived at through a consultative process involving various key stakeholders including NGOs and education experts. This exercise must be conducted regularly at fixed periods of time to ensure that the students are taught what is most relevant at any given point of time. In terms of instruction, activity-based learning must be embraced, with students applying their learnings in the classroom to areas in their immediate environment, the most obvious example being that of student councils in the UK as mentioned. To enable all this, teachers should be trained so as to have, and thus be able to render, a wide bank of knowledge regarding political science and how it permeates our lives in every field imaginable. This training should provide them with the necessary skills to make the best use of online media ensuring fun classrooms rather than those based on rote learning.

Concurrently, in any educational system, the examination system and the way any course is taught is intrinsically linked, so to bring about the aforementioned changes in the civic education syllabus, a new examination mode has to be constructed where students will be asked to undertake modelling exercises, exercise their critical thinking and judgement in scenarios, and write thoughtful essays. And lastly, the bulk of civic education- especially the basic principles that are deemed necessary for every citizen of the country- should be taught to students until grade 10, so that even if they choose to not take the subject thereafter, they will still move ahead with the knowledge of how to be a good citizen and an independent thinker. Responsible citizens inevitably lead to a burgeoning sense of national pride and identity. Currently, 62% of Indians consider themselves to be patriotic (Statista 2018), a disappointingly low number. This lack of patriotism leads to increased individualistic tendencies without concern for the country as a whole. Proper civic education can remedy this concern by encouraging the youth to become more politically engaged in society; a few examples are promoting active participation in national campaigns (such as the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, aiming to increase cleanliness levels in the country, a campaign many of the survey participants admitted to having little knowledge about), and enabling citizens to make informed choices in the best interest of the nation when casting their ballot.

6. Conclusion

As this paper has demonstrated, a subject that is essential for all students to study- regardless of their career path- is being mismanaged by the authorities and is lacking the proper syllabus and instruction. The study conducted in the 5 schools can indeed be generalised to most schools in second tier and below cities, and many schools in first tier cities as well since a largely standardised syllabus is followed across promulgated by the Central Board of Secondary Education. This raises an important concern: India may produce the finest doctors, engineers, scientists, and politicians, but the country will not progress in the right direction unless these individuals have imbibed in them the right civic education from their youth. Therefore, the aforementioned recommendations must be incorporated into the political science education system in India by the National Council of Educational Research and Training on an urgent basis; this change now will lead to a better nation in the future, with citizens who are affirmed in their patriotic and global identity while maintaining a strong moral compass and remaining rooted in clear rational thought.

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