
BOOK REVIEW

Education and society

(1) Kinnari Pandya, Jigisha Shastri and Vrinda Datta, Teaching the young: The early childhood development profession in India (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2024), pp. xxv+342. Price Rs. 775.00 only.

(2) K.A.Gunasekaran, The scar (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2024) (Translated from Tamil to English by V.Kadambari), pp. xix+98. Price Rs. 375.00 only.

N. Benjamin

N. Benjamin is Visiting Fellow (Retd.), Gokhale Institute of Politics & Economics, Pune 411 004. Email: benjaminnaseeb@gmail.com

These two books are reviewed together as they deal with two social issues. The first book is on early education and the second on the bane of the caste system. Although there are several books on the educational problems of India, the first book breaks new ground on a hitherto relatively neglected field. Azim Premji University, Bangalore, Association for Early Childhood Education and Development and UNICEF had organized a two-day conference on early childhood development profession in 2016. Policymakers, teachers, teacher training institutions, academicians and other stakeholders came together to deliberate on the subject. The book contains selected papers presented in the conference which was held not a day too soon.

Globally the last two decades have witnessed growing interest in the early years of children and the important role that early childhood programmes play in optimizing development of young children. Macro-level inputs like care, nutrition, safety, education, etc., for the marginalized social groups are getting increasing thrust at the national and international levels. The early years' teacher is the most important person in a child's life after the parents and family members. This is especially true with respect to India. All this assumes greater importance because of the prevailing belief that the preschool education

can be imparted by anyone, preferably a woman, and does not require any special qualification or training. However, this is far from true. The brain grows at its most rapid pace in the first six years of life, reaching almost 80 per cent of its adult size. Therefore, expenditure on good quality early education has to be deemed as investment and not a luxury. The book stresses the needful. It has four sections covering different aspects of the problem by different contributors.

In the Fifth Plan a provision was made for an integrated package of essential services to young children on the one hand, and pregnant and lactating mothers on the other. The Integrated Child Development Scheme was launched in 1975. It covers an umbrella of services for the targeted beneficiaries. The integrated package of services of which non-formal pre-school education is one component is delivered by the Anganwadi centres run by locally recruited multipurpose workers for the poorest households. Most programmes have developed their own in-service or on-the-job training. The book rightly points out that it has resulted in a lack of minimum quality standards. Attempts have been made to correct this situation by launching Early Childhood Care and Development courses by different institutions. They are Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Indira Gandhi National Open University and others. The authors rightly point out that the Integrated Child Development Services is a flagship programme of the Government of India. It is one of the largest programmes of the world for early childhood care and development.

The contributors think that the overall results of the working of these institutions have not been all that gratifying. The trained teachers are not able to translate their educational principles into practice. Their knowledge of theory and schoolroom practice remain in two watertight compartments instead of mutually enriching. As it is, gaps in training are responsible for the shortcomings of the existing day care services.

The book contains the Anganwadis teacher's handbook. It seeks to transform Anganwadi Centres into vibrant learning centres for holistic development of three to six years' old children through supplementary nutrition, immunization, health check-up, referral service, pre-school education and nutrition health education. While initially the focus of these Centres was on health and nutrition, subsequently preschool or early childhood education were increasingly seen as foundational to the growth of children. The handbook helps the teachers to implement a developmentally appropriate learning programme.

In the unorganized sector it is a free for all situation with anyone free to set up a nursery school or pre-school without adherence to any standard. The demand for teachers in the private sector is met through unrecognized and unregulated private nursery teacher training institutions. They are often run by ill-paid and unqualified staff.

Some other aspects are also covered in this book. They include Gandhi's Nai Talim, Azim Premji University's pioneering efforts, National Education Policy, 2020, vocational education, deaf learners and their teachers, etc. Apart from Indian conditions, there is a case study of Bhutan. At the end of the book there are recommendations for the way forward. They provide a framework to visualize the gaps and necessary steps towards professionalizing the early childhood development. They include instituting an accreditation and norms framework for early child care and education (ECCE) to provide a professional development growth-path for early year teachers, continuous professional development programmes, ensuring high status and identity of teachers putting an end to the system of honorary workers like contractual workers, etc. Such steps provide a starting point for consolidating the efforts of policies, programmes and practices which have so far determined the course of this education. The book concludes, "Significant steps are being taken by various national bodies towards implementation of the Policy, and there is hope that Early Childhood Development will emerge as a full profession with contours of the profession thriving over the next decade" (pp. 337-38.)

The book covers an important subject which requires to be studied more. At the same time, it has some weaknesses. There are many general statements which are mundane and still mentioned again and again. For example, what has been remarked on p. 186 has been repeated many times both before and after, viz., "It is an undeniable fact that the first six to eight years have direct bearing on children's lives. These early years are crucial in the later development of an individual.... The importance of early stimulation cannot be underestimated."

The book also contains many pictures and a list of acronyms which are useful. Overall, it breaks new ground and a useful addition to the available literature on early education.

The second book is a pioneering modern dalit autobiography in Tamil. The author made his name as a singer. He grew up as a boy of the Parayar caste in the milieu of Hindu, Muslim and Christian communities. Naturally, apart from the Hindu community, it has

references to the Muslim and Christian communities. It is a story of dalit struggle for assertion and emancipation in Tamil Nadu. Its introduction says, "This autobiography bears ample testimony to the fact that wounds made of fire might heal but wounds made of untouchability would continue to give trouble" (p. xvi).

The author writes that he faced caste discrimination from the very beginning. Caste consciousness was strong in the villages so much so that when a stranger arrived, he was asked his caste. At times it was stretched to preposterous limits. Gunasekaran cites an example of it. A high caste person had an epileptic attack and a Parayan attended him. He lifted him up and placed him under a tree, fanning him all the while. Then he took water and splashed it on his face. When the victim regained consciousness, he severely reprimanded the care-giver for touching him. The panchayat directed him to ask for forgiveness for his arrogance! (p. 60.) Again, a school clerk used to come and make the pupils stand caste-wise. He adds, "Even now it hurts to think about those times when we had to stand up in front of the others in the class, shrinking and cringing. They would reinforce caste identities by labelling us as Pallars, Parayars and Chakiliyars in front of our friends who never knew what caste was" (p. 5). Even the college where he studied interminably closed owing to caste fights among the students. Vanity of vanities which was all-pervasive.

The family lived in poverty. The roasted tamarind seeds were peeled off and the white kernels were soaked and eaten. Idlis and dosas were eaten only during Diwali and Christian time. Celebration of family and other social occasions was not within its reach. At home Gunasekaran could not expect three meals a day. There were also weird customs in the society. In Thovoor, for instance, the cheri women (women of communities living outside the village in a ghetto of sorts) were not allowed to wear blouses as per the caste regulations. He gives several examples to this sort. After all, this is expected in the autobiography of a dalit but it causes severe remorse in one's mind.

The book has a short bibliography in the beginning and a glossary at the end which is useful for those who do not know Tamil.

Overall, it is readable for those who have interest in dalit studies and social history.
