7th Social Change Annual Lecture

Social Change as an Object of Educational Inquiry

Krishna Kumar

5 March 2025

SOCIAL CHANGE

Social Change

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Council for Social Development

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Abstract

The term 'social change' has many connotations. Some of these arose during India's freedom struggle, and others have their derivation in the theory of modernisation. The system of education was quite centrally involved in disseminating both sets of connotations. Education is also a personal experience that lasts for many years, during which several personal meanings of social change arise. Inquiry into social change generally refers to structural aspects, such as relations between castes and communities, men and women, parents and children, and villages and towns. The difference would arise from the actual experience of getting educated over a considerable period of early life. This experience is shaped by the state of the system of education and its specific conditions that intersect with one's own life circumstances. This kind of inquiry dispels the generalised image of social change that the dominant theory of modernisation has created.

[1] Professor Krishna Kumar, an eminent educationist and a Padma awardee, is currently Honorary Professor, Panjab University, Chandigarh, India. Email: anhsirk.kumar@gmail.com

Education is treated as an object of inquiry by the rare few who serve either in institutions of teacher training or in departments of education. Many universities, both public and private, lack such departments. People who regard education as an object of inquiry teach courses wherein students inevitably learn that education is a means of social change. This view has achieved the status of a precept. It implies that education is no frill or merely a decorative honour; it has some common use and is, therefore, worth investing in. Such a view of education is also endorsed by economists who see in it a means of improving the capacity of citizens to contribute to a nation's economic growth. The human capital theory did provide a reason as to why the state should take education seriously, but other instrumentalist justifications already existed. One popular justification was that education improves the moral quality of ordinary people—India's colonial rulers held this view. If the maintenance of law and order posed a challenge for them, they saw in education a cheaper means of disciplining the native mind (Kumar, 1991/2014). Pooled together, different perceived benefits indicate a consensus that education brings about social change, even social transformation. The consensus suggests that in contemporary history, when a state owns the responsibility to educate the public, or at least to provide opportunities that all or anyone can avail, the changes that society goes through can be attributed to education. Does it mean that social change cannot be judged or critiqued because it has been brought about by education, i.e., with a sense of purpose? This is what I want you to consider as you listen to this lecture.

As individually experienced by members of a generalised cohort, 'social change' becomes a layered memory. It contains both a dream and a theory that sustained the struggle for modernity—an obsessive aspect of life in the last century. It was a broad struggle which included both politics and popular—though not universal—trust in Gandhi's leadership. Many nations of Africa that the Indian success in attaining freedom inspired, were not as lucky. South Africa was an obvious exception, offering us further evidence to say that Gandhi's leadership was unique. Our initial ideas of social change were embedded in the practicum we attended under him. His teaching encouraged us to embrace a critical view of modernity which included transition to a thoughtful view of tradition and the right

to re-shape it. It was also a political vision of modernity that meant more than modernisation under the state's guidance. As one recalls the long tutorial our forefathers attended during the freedom struggle, one is left with the feeling that within a short period following independence, we lost some of the crucial moral lessons we had memorised. It was the usual failure of education. It helps us learn, but we tend to turn learning into a memorised answer. That is what happened to 'social change'. As a nation or society, we did learn its layered meaning, but ended up with a flat notion in stored memory.

Becoming Modern

Once, in a class on sociology of education, a student asked me, 'Will the word "modernising" still be in use after one hundred years for referring to our society of these days?' It was the late 1980s. The syllabus of this class was designed along the common line of both sociology and education. One of the basic texts recommended in the syllabus was *Social Change in Modern India* by M. N. Srinivas (1968). It is still quite popular although newer texts, which offer a more complex picture of the processes Srinivas had portrayed, have encroached on its popularity in some departments of education. The corpus of ideas available for surveying the sociology of education in India has remained consistent with the functionalist approach Srinivas's text represents. It explains social change with reference to the basic structures of collective life, such as the caste system, rural-urban relations and changes in economic life. The ways in which historical circumstances and the emergence of modern state institutions had shaped certain basic changes in people's beliefs and behaviours, is presented in Srinivas's text as an engaging argument accompanied by several persuasive examples.

Despite the emergence of many post-modern critiques of modernisation, it is widely assumed that the values associated with modernity will endure and deepen. This assumption implies that modern ideas and values will be absorbed by the social fabric, howsoever tenuous the absorption process looks for now. Rationality is an umbrella value of modernity. In it are wrapped behaviours like avoidance of superstitions, belief—verging on

faith—in science, and progress. In this structure of ideas, industrialisation is regarded as an aspect of scientific progress. The belief that science will solve the problems that industrial progress has created has acquired the status of an article of faith under the regime of modernity. This regime gives the state in less industrialised societies like ours a key role in modernising the public mind and behaviour. In China, where the state has played an even more powerful role in promoting science-based means of governance, industrial progress includes the deployment of sharper tools of surveillance and control of the public mind and behaviour. Similar processes are unfolding in our midst with the growing use of digital technology to foreclose the possibilities of protest and resistance. Promotion of ideas like 'smart city' are an indicator of the state's perception of scientific progress in a changed context. Significant changes in education, particularly in its conception of the social character of learning, is a part of the new context of modernity. What once was a means of broadening or opening the mind is now being used for closing it, by pedagogically cajoling it to disengage from wider awareness and concerns. Modernisation is now standing on its head, and education is helping it to do so.

From this brief preliminary examination of the relationship between education and social change we learn that the nature of the change that education encourages and enhances in society is a reflection of what is taught and how. Using the word 'education' without a sense of its curriculum and common pedagogic methods can only lead to vacuous conclusions. Education is not like raindrops which necessarily make the earth green. The curriculum itself, shaped by the prevailing culture of ideas and politics, may be a crucial factor in it. Inside the system of education, ideas play an active role at all levels, but specially at the higher level. As Mamdani (2007) has pointed out, higher education is the strategic heart of the education system where knowledge is created and designed. From the heart it flows like blood to all other stages of the system. The knowledge and model of life it carries is communicated through teaching to all stages down to the nursery. Resistance to the inherent model at lower levels is possible, but it is likely to have limited impact if the higher stages have no room for critical energy, especially the energy to enable introspection or self-reflection.

Understanding Education

Education was quite intimately involved in the pursuit of social change as modernisation. Sociological literature on education uses education as a reference point without going into its own demands and processes. Apparently, education was supposed to bring about transformative change in social relations and culture. The state was perceived not merely as an instrument of governance, but rather as a driving force and a vision provider for the contribution of education towards social change. It was assumed that education would be the state's priority for serving society and modifying it in accordance with the state's vision. In the Indian context, the state's vision was encoded in the Constitution following independence from colonial rule. Change in education itself was, therefore, treated as a factor of its instrumentality in bringing about and guiding social change. The value of education as a means of bringing about social change does not make it the only or the strongest force of social change. Populism in politics, well-backed technologies and economic policies that promote the concentration of wealth are far more powerful forces that can bring change—in social norms and practices—at greater speed than education can. The only difference between these forces and education is that the change brought about by the latter's impact is deeper and proves more resilient. This is apparently because education affects young, impressionable minds, creating predispositions that evolve into visible behaviour after a while. Ambitious rulers are tempted to use education to perpetuate their dominance, and they often succeed but not always or for long, and we must ask why not.

The term 'education' refers both to a concept and a system. We must put on a bi-focal lens in order to distinguish between these two usages, i.e., to distinguish education as an idea or concept from education as a system. For the task of understanding education and discussing it, this distinction serves a crucial role. On one hand, when we use the term 'education' to refer to the ideals and values associated with learning and growing up, we often have in mind what the experience of being educated during childhood, adolescence and youth means to us individually. For many, it is steeped in a certain measure of nostalgia as it reminds us of the time when we were young—

growing up and changing in ways that we cannot easily imagine doing later on in life. Education is inevitably enmeshed with this experience, no matter how unpleasant certain aspects of its might have been.

On the other hand, when we use education to refer to a system, some of these unpleasant aspects slip into the foreground. As a system, education has a history which has shaped the institutions where we experience education individually. Looking through the second lens, we realise that no one can experience education outside its systemic history, which is part of the broader history of a society. Any experience of education, of the best or the worst kind, can be obtained only at an institutional setting which is part of the system and is, therefore, shaped by it, no matter how well it is governed by enlightened founders and administrators.

One other thing about education as an experience that is noteworthy as well is that it is a prolonged experience. Long years of the early part of our life are covered by life at an educational institution. The experience of someone who had only a brief experience which was terminated on account of personal circumstances, is unlikely to have much in common with someone who had a much longer experience. Both in terms of its consequences and nature, the experience of a person who left a school after elementary education will sharply differ from the experience of someone who completed secondary and higher education. In a prolonged experience of education, one has a chance of becoming conscious of certain qualities that education nurtures, in different measures, depending on the institution where the educational experience is received. These are qualities like the ability to sustain curiosity about something, patience in pursuing it, maintaining a sense of time throughout the day, and so on. Then there are values relating to the teacher's daily presence in one's life, respect for her, and recognition of the teacher's authority and judgement. Association with an institution also has a value component, such as the regularity of everyday life, the formation of friendships during the pursuit of knowledge, and so on. Certain cognitive norms are absorbed during school and college life, no matter how limited their institutional wherewithal is. Preparing oneself to be evaluated while responding to the teacher's questions implies that one accepts a distinction between an arguable position and an unsustainable

argument. As an adult interacting with children over an item of knowledge, the teacher performs a didactic role under which correct and incorrect responses are distinguished. The teacher's role also impinges on justice by distributing opportunities to participate, and by praising or criticising. This is, of course, a normative description, and may not apply to the conduct of many teachers.

The orbit of meanings associated with social change is too accommodative to be of specific use to our context unless we customise it to our history and social conditions. That is what I will attempt to do by perceiving social change as an adjunct of state-led modernisation of a society that had suffered colonial rule and fought against it. The link between modernisation and the state has been a major presumption guiding the social sciences for a long time in India. We will use education—its theoretical underpinnings that evolved in modern history—in an attempt to probe some of the presumptions that have shaped the disciplines of social science in India. These are economics, political science and sociology. Pooled together, these areas of learning taught the general theory of development which followed remarkably similar trajectories across many parts of the world. In economics it took a stage-wise principle of growth, in politics a gradual grounding of democracy, and in sociology the adaptation of the values associated with the European enlightenment. Rural-urban relations, the transition from agricultural to industrial economy, and from traditional structures of role division to meritocracy were the core curriculum of higher education in the paradigm of development. Today we hear about the colonial legacy and are swayed by political exhortation to de-colonise. The paradigm of modernisation has sustained the emergence of the market-led state, majoritarian politics and digital-temper. Education as a system has played a major role in facilitating these transitions. Education has systemically embraced these transitions and they, in turn, are now transforming education.

The Promise of Modernity

I want to explore how education helped these transitions to occur, leading us to the present moment, and the system of education to its present state. Implicit in the theory of social change under the process of modernisation

was that gradually our society would acquire the behavioural features characteristic of Western societies. Srinivas mentioned it as an aspect of westernisation. Plenty of evidence that pointed towards such a trajectory was visible—literally, as behavioural changes are—in everyday life as well as in ritualistic aspects of culture. The key question was whether change in behaviour would imply change in values. In several of his essays collected under the title *Mistaken Modernity*, Dipankar Gupta (2000) pointed out that this was not the case. The changes were superficial. The values underpinning them remained elusive. Gupta's point impels us to recognise the problems inherent in the theory of modernisation and social change. One of these basic ideas is the erosion of identities rooted in religion. This had indeed happened in several western countries, but religiosity registered a come back with the rise of fundamentalism and revivalist politics in the West (Martin & Appleby, 1993). This has happened in India as well, and religious nationalism has achieved centre-stage after a prolonged struggle over the turn of the century against secularism as a state ideal.

Behaviourism was at the heart of our own expectations from education and attempts to reform education. Certain aspects of behaviourist pedagogy matched our own traditional ways of teaching, but the excitement that behaviourist psychology evoked, especially with its promise of shaping the desired personality (Skinner, 1968) impressed the early planners of change in our institutions responsible for curriculum, syllabus, and textbook development. Our systemic endorsement of this seductive psychological theory has, over time, produced entirely unanticipated vulnerabilities in the teaching profession. Pedagogic constraints that behaviourist curriculum and evaluation procedures encourage were known, but other, more politically significant, constraints have surfaced without being recognised even now when their implications are manifesting ubiquitously. Behaviourist curriculum, teaching, and examination widens the scope for ideologically inspired discourses to gain common acceptance.

Doubt about the loyalty of religious minorities, and the general atmosphere of animosity towards them, has received an unexpected contribution from modern education in state and private schools. This latter category includes school chains maintained by organisations committed to a

majoritarian political agenda. The state did not prevent their growth; in several states, it was encouraged. When in state schools in certain regions, subtle inculcation of prejudice started, it was ignored, allowing the tacit bonds that existed between religious communities to be undermined. Within the theory of modernisation, there was little scope for recognising contrary imaginaries about democracy and identity politics. The standard view was that democracy promotes participation of the masses by turning them into citizens. Theorists of modernisation and the social change it ushers in, did not fully recognise the possibility of the masses being used politically to usurp democratic institutions and to promote regimentation of young minds.

The behaviourist model of curriculum and pedagogy mechanises learning. This is one reason why the behaviourist approach found lasting favour in bureaucratically-run systems like ours. Under this approach, teaching is reduced to following a fixed protocol and learning is turned into a set of predictable responses. It makes sense as to why a system of education perceived as an instrument of modernisation of society, would find in behaviourist methods of teaching and evaluation a suitable strategy. Changes in social and cultural behaviour matching the broader modernisation programme and the interpretation of modernity inherent in it would look fully attainable if a behaviourist approach were to be adopted in schools. If people are to be treated as targets of specific forms of state discourse and eradication of this or that socio-cultural deficiency, no theory is better qualified for curriculum design than behaviourism. It wipes out several aspects of education as a concept, particularly its promise of encouraging a contemplative mind. Recognition of individual styles of learning and the value-base of individual dignity are also flattened out.

A Mixed Bag

Social change driven by planned modernisation has delivered several outcomes for which the system of education can be given some credit. One of these outcomes is upward mobility for the lower strata and marginalised sections of the society. The education system provided access and eligibility that enabled the reservation policy to bring about practical results. However,

education as a concept and experience has a less impressive record in the context of the reservation policy. Far too many studies have shown that children from downtrodden backgrounds face unpleasant treatment which is often outright discriminatory.

A similar case is that of gender inequality. Girls have attained greater access to education beyond the primary level, and a greater number have gained eligibility and mobility, but their everyday experience of education inside institutions and outside remains chequered. Basic school routines and success give many girls the capacity to speak up, but this very capacity often lands them in conflict and situations of violence. Social change has not diminished the customary perception of girls as commodity in the marriage market. Rather, the marketisation of matrimony has exacerbated the commodification of girls. The perception of a girl that reduces her to just the physical body, has dominated tradition and custom. As Krishna Sobti wrote, the attribution of a mind would shake up the social system and the conventions of girls' upbringing (Kumar, 2013). Modernisation and the system of education did not cause the earthquake Sobti was talking about. In tandem with consumerism unleashed by neo-liberal economic policies, girlhood stayed firmly tied to the physical body and to the cosmetic and decorative industry (Kumar & Gupta, 2020). Education as a concept helps us to critique the social change driven by the market and the market-friendly state.

The report *Towards Equality* (Govt. of India, 1974) made a historic contribution to push the state to recognise gender injustice. Nothing similar happened in the case of the Sachar Committee (1995) Report on the marginalisation of Muslims. It aroused great expectations, but the political context in which Muslim mobility could have been attained was quite different. Yet, education as a system has mattered in this contentious sphere too, but mainly through the concerted efforts of institutions like the Aligarh Muslim University and the Jamia Millia Islamia.

Does eligibility gradually open the doors of deeper advantages such as participation in intellectual exchange and decision-making in crucial contexts? Important though this question is, educational theory does not help us to answer it in a historical vacuum or stasis. The path of progress

opened up by the reservation policy has bifurcated, and the two new roads seem to be leading to rather different outcomes. Radical structural changes in the system of education, especially at the higher level, have taken place over the recent decades. Just when the reservation policy was extended in the 1990s, public universities started to face financial starvation and the resultant decline in their wherewithal to stir the young intellectually. The bifurcation between public and private higher education has meant that the state shall use its funds to let public universities do the needful for social justice while the deeper functions of learning and creation of knowledge are handed over to private universities. They are free to practice a corporate model that controls both the character of knowledge to be created and the future of its well-heeled receivers. Globalisation provides the context in which these new chapters of social change need to be viewed. These chapters cannot be expected to resonate the faith that early theorists of modernisation had in the close link between social change and the constitutional framework of social ethics.

As a system, education in India distributes failure quite generously at crucial transition points, such as at the end of the primary school, matriculation, and so on. As researchers, we have been aware of the vast scale with which the system bestows failure among millions, causing the fear of failure among millions more. Few of us have thought about what failure and its fear mean to the young whose experience of schooling is strewn with it. At the very least, it conveys a sense of inadequacy, and perhaps a connection between one's proven inadequacy and the circumstances of one's birth. Rohith Vemula, the post-graduate science student of the University of Hyderabad whose suicide in 2018 triggered a national public debate, left behind a note that reveals this connection. It is not an easy document to decipher. For one thing, it absolves everyone of the responsibility for his death.

Suicide notes written by young people often do that, demonstrating not just the stress of the final moments of life, but also the slow accumulation of a certain attitude that institutions of education thrive on by inculcating. Individuation of failure is what we can call it. But Vemula gives us other clues in these words—'May be I was wrong, all the while, in understanding world. In understanding love, pain, life, death. There was no urgency. But

I always was rushing. Desperate to start a life. All the while, some people, for them, life itself is curse. My birth is my fatal accident. I can never recover from my childhood loneliness. The unappreciated child from my past'. In these words, Rohith Vemula offers us a precious critique of education as a system, and its efficacy in enveloping a brilliant mind in the mist of legitimacy.

We can extend this reflection by including girls, Muslim, and tribal children in its orbit. There is no easy and reliable way to handle this larger reflective space, and there is no date-based observation possible. We are in the territory of application of what we know in order to decide what we ought to find out and how. We must remember that gender, caste, community, and place of residence are not isolated categories. They necessarily intersect in every individual life. Compounded conditions present unique questions to address in any quest for judging the meaning of social change for the categories we have chosen. A girl who receives a modicum of education in a village or town and achieves a certain kind of success does not necessarily transcend the overwhelming weight of the contradictions she faces between her own aspirations and the traditional expectations of her as a girl. The Abhimanyu syndrome—the feeling of fighting alone—is a useful metaphorical construction for us to consider if we embark on the difficult journey to find out how the experience of education intersects with girlhood (Kumar, 2013). In the case of Muslim boys and girls, we should similarly consider the hostile ethos they face in contemporary political circumstances. Rashida, a major character in Manzoor Ahtesham's *Sookha Bargad* (1976) recognises her predicament in a Bhopal which is fast changing into a communally divided city. The sociological value of this remarkable work of fiction emanates from the historical trajectory its author traces wherein we notice the thinning of the secular ethos that Rashida's father had taken for granted. It was an aspect of social change that carefully researched social histories alone can capture.

In the context of children belonging to the Scheduled Tribes (STs), we are on firmer grounds to say that the recognised goals of education and development do not coincide. If education creates among the successful a sense of individual purpose, the devastation brought about by displacement does not

sit well with that purpose. The advent of factory schools for the tribes of Odisha tells a story that deserves to be decoded by means different from the ones used by the owners of these schools to advertise their achievement.

Rural to Urban

Migration from village to towns and cities was believed to be not merely a symptom but a proof of modernisation. Between the early and the later decades of independence, the only change that occurred in this perspective was that the state began to view rural migration as something to be encouraged—on the ground that it is easier to serve the poor when they shift to urban slums where they are expected to consume more and thereby contribute to speeding up of the nation's economic growth. Was this a change in attitude or a conclusion? It replaced the earlier view that state investment in the countryside would discourage migration. This shift in policy perspective marks an encompassing socio-cultural change in which education has significantly participated. Curricular semiotics conveyed to village children contain the message that cities symbolise the nation's future and the village the past. The village boy assimilated the message early that his progress would mean leaving the village when he grows up. If he belonged to a lower caste, the village ethos would eject him by conveying disapproval of his changed life-style. One way or another, villages and cities became grammatical antonyms.

This perception had begun to take root in the eighteenth century with the beginning of modern education under colonial rule. Independence made little difference except that a residual influence of Gandhi in certain quarters motivated the state to pay some attention to the idea of village self-reliance. The mainstream state policy remained committed to urban concerns. The Covid experience marked an aberration in the well-established pattern. Millions of rural migrants returned home and many did not go back to the cities after the pandemic was over. The effects of this phenomenon on economic geography are not yet clear. It caused a significant break in the general trend towards universalisation of elementary education because children also walked hundreds of kilometers with their parents, leaving their city schools. In the absence of field studies and given the overdue

Census, the social implications of the pandemic may remain the subject of family lore and speculation, but limited data indicate a rise in child labour and child marriages.

If modernisation was also analogous to knowledge and understanding of what is going on, COVID-19 has left us almost as vague about its social impact as its century-old predecessor the Spanish flu. As in every other sphere of public policy, health and education present sharp contrasts across different regions. Comparisons between North and South, and between eastern and western regions are often made to show that there is no single national story. The only exception is the recent spurt in privatisation and ennui of the state. It raises a valid question about compatibility between the older, pre-independence infrastructure of the state and the historically younger regime of the Constitution. The steel frame of the bureaucracy has undoubtedly adjusted to the Constitution's ethical frame, while maintaining its own old identity as the custodian of the law-and-order state. This colonial construction continues to dominate the educated middle-class social ethos. The notion of the masses is also intact despite unmistakable signs of civic awareness and individual dignity. Thus, the dichotomy between state and society persists, and the democratically elected representatives are unable to bridge it. At times of crisis, the law-and-order state comes centre-stage and uses its power to marginalise the civic space.

Advent of Digitalism

Technological change is a well-recognised factor of social change. Transport technologies such as the railways, roads, and buses have been an object of keen interest among human geographers (e.g., Blanche, 1934) and social anthropologists. In the works of Harold Innis, we find deep insights into the impact that transport and communication technologies have made, over the centuries, on social and political formations and the economics that sustains them. Innis (1951) examined the impact of geographical distance on social interaction and how communication technologies alter the pattern of interaction rooted in distance. In his classic, *The Bias of Communication*, he explained how social perceptions of time parallel the perception of physical space.

Social change presents a deep response to the technologies that shape our experience of distance and time. We underestimate the meaning of technology when we view it merely as a tool kit. To use Ursula Franklin's words, technology is culture—something as basic as 'the way we do things here' (Franklin, 1999). India and its South Asian neighbours have witnessed socio-economic and political change on a vast scale over the past 200 years that can be traced to change in technologies of transport and systems of communication. The impact of railways, roads, and petrol-driven vehicles, radio, the press, and television preceded the tectonic changes that the internet and the smartphone are currently bringing about in relations between people and communities, citizens, and the state.

Significant changes have also come in the system of education where the state has chosen to push the maximum use of the new digital technology in all aspects of institutional life—from admission and record-keeping to teaching and evaluation. Both school and higher education now reflect the results of this policy push. Seen in the context of larger social change, educational institutions are now serving to intensify the force and reach of the new technology. These changes have not aroused as much interest among researchers as one might have expected.

An entirely new pattern of child-rearing is emerging. The modernisation theory of social change has the tendency to view all forms of technological change in a functional manner, and perhaps it is for this reason that debates about its multifarious effects on social relations and units of interest have not attracted much systematic enquiry. Also, any objective enquiry is difficult to make because the tools of enquiry are deeply embedded in the new technological ethos. It has turned the regime of capital into a globally run feudal empire which makes and uses every citizen as a surf (Varoufakis, 2023). It is hard to be objective about such a force. What debate there is tends to be polarised, between techno-romantics and techno-sceptics. In the history of social change everywhere, this is a phase of fundamental shift, which is further likely to be sharpened by the pressure we can expect to use Artificial Intelligence (AI) in classrooms. If education was a means of coping with change and understanding it, the power exercised by the owners and managers of the internet-based systems have undermined this capacity.

In our own country, we have become spectators of bitter controversies over the use of new machinery for elections, both in canvassing and voting. Other controversies are buried deep in the debris of fragmented discussions over every conventionally recognised factor of social change, including education.

Childhood is witnessing an upheaval directly attributable to digital technology in its various forms. As a social construct, childhood was struggling in India, with significant regional differences over basic compliance of child rights, in matters such as health and nutrition, education and dignity. At the heart of these rights was children's right to be protected by the state. Its umbrella meant that no adult other than those in the family and teachers could access the child. This protective umbrella has been torn apart by the internet and the so-called social media. Exploitation of children was not easy to fight in the pre-internet age. The battle against it has become much harder. New forms of labour and strategies of exploitation have emerged, and as of now there is no reliable means available to avoid these. The most ironical among the means currently being discussed are the ones used by the owners of global social media platforms. They promise, from time to time, to use their content moderators to block messages and their sources so that children are not exploited sexually and harassed into surrendering to their exploiters.

Both as a concept and a system, children's education is more imperilled today in every part of the world than it has ever been in modern history. Any attempt to inquire into the changes that societies, their cultures, and education systems are facing must proceed in a theoretical vacuum. A vast uncharted terrain faces the most vulnerable stage of human life. Neither the Constitution's promise of protecting children's dignity nor the United Nations' charter of children's rights will suffice to scaffold childhood in the new technological ethos. The study of this ethos would lead us to recognise the crisis that Constitutionally defined social values and the state's capacity to protect them are facing. Pursuit of profit and the use of wealth to exercise power are aims that market activists have succeeded in establishing in major spheres of the economy—including its so-called social sectors—as substitutes for welfare and egalitarian values. This substitution has altered the course of education, leaving it incapable of guiding social institutions towards the goals of social change encoded in the Constitution.

Clearly, the vibrant technology bazaar has usurped the role of education whose own historical legacies had resulted in systemic weaknesses. The teaching of all school subjects, including the social sciences, has witnessed the unsettling pressure that school authorities and policy makers have put on the teacher to use technological devices (Gupta, 2024). Now the education system's intrinsic capacity to regenerate and reform itself has been neutralised by the market ethic. The implications for different frontiers of education as a system are self-evident. In the context of caste, class, gender, and community relations, the market-driven system of education cannot be expected to strengthen the egalitarian framework of values to which education was assumed to be committed.

The power of the pedagogy market has overwhelmed secondary and higher stages of education. Our national temptation to use the new regime of algorithms for everything from centralised admission to entrance tests for professional courses has already taken us into a scenario where no social institution feels secure anymore. From an educational point of view, an MCQ-based selection of a future doctor, engineer, or civil servant is just as problematic as a classroom teacher's dilemma of using visual devices to teach science. Infusing science teaching with hands-on experience was never fully convenient in our schools; now it is being legitimately sidelined because life-like imitation of a dissection or experiment is accessible through digital means. Pedagogic norms and ethics are under palpable threat. How this threat will translate into the precarious balance between learning and opportunity is not hard to guess. Those attending schools with better financial support will do real experiments while their less privileged counterparts will do simulated learning. The complexities of this outcome cannot be brushed under phrases like 'digital divide' and the steps being taken to bridge it.

Ad hoc Work

I met Urmila around 2010 during one of my evening walks in the Delhi University campus. Over the following weeks, I learnt from her a lot that I had missed witnessing during my absence from the university for half a decade. She told me about herself and many others who had planned to

pursue an academic career, but could only get an ad hoc job. Of course I was aware of the 'ad hoc' category among teachers as some of my own students belonged to it. However, Urmila's experience and views helped me see a far wider picture of transformation—of teaching into a service industry similar to couriering and home delivery. 'Gig economy' is the term used to refer to this vast service industry, its key features being complete absence of security and possibility of growth through experience. In colleges, schools, and coaching centres located in district towns, teaching had started to slide into its gig version in the late 1980s.

In my evening walks with Urmila, I realised that under an ad hoc hiring system, teachers and students would both become vulnerable entities in a market economy, as givers and receivers of a fixed service with little scope for collateral benefits that teaching offers as an essentially relational activity. As a senior teacher, I recognised that I was witnessing the end of an era in India's academic life. A brilliant bio-data and a PhD would not suffice for Urmila's generation to settle into a college or university career; instead, she would have to apply every summer to be included in a long panel from which colleges would pick up a handful of candidates for 4-month appointment offers that would not include statutory leave even on medical grounds. Her prospects were the same as a graduate bringing pizza from a restaurant on his motorbike or an Amazon worker delivering a pair of shoes.

Changes in the relation between education and work belong to a wider circle of India's economic transformation into a market society. Education is far more accessible now than it was half a century ago, but unemployment and under-employment of the educated have grown far beyond anticipated levels. Deeper implications of this phenomenon can be read in association with the meaning of a visible breakdown of the role of work in providing a secular identity. If work is purely ad hoc and incidental, it does not turn into experience that might define individual self-identity of being someone who knows how to do something well. Search for identity and self-dignity shifts to other, more conventional sources which offer collective versions of the self without asking for knowledge or skill-based effort. Paucity of stable work opportunities, thus, translates into a massive rejuvenation of

de-individuating tendencies in a society where primordial groupings had posed a major challenge to modernity. Has the modernisation project failed in this respect? The question asks us to pause and notice a dimension of social change that is now making its impact felt in every social institution and the relations between state and citizen.

Education, Its Role and Limits

When we subject social change to an educational inquiry, we learn something about education as well. It is one of the many different aspects of social living and of citizen-state relations. As an aspect of social living, it plays an all-round role of maintaining standards. By means of pedagogic action, education also assists in maintaining standards of work and production as well as behaviour and interaction through language. A major feature of social change in India's modern history is a surge in the demand for education and its systemic expansion making it capable of contributing to adult-franchise based democracy by enabling every child to have at least some experience of education. The promulgation of the Right to Education Act in the early twenty-first century opened a new long-ignored chapter in social history. The continued struggle of this law to become reality is a reflection of deeper contradictions in the process of social change. Indeed, the longer process of expansion was not simple as it involved the challenge of the system's ability to maintain its own standards. In his classic, E*quality, Quality and Quantity: The Elusive Triangle in Indian Education* (1975), J. P. Naik had discussed the stress that expansion of the system was putting on the quality of education. That stress has continued to grow, giving rise to the popular discourse of the system's collapse and of the urgency to outsource to private investors. Non-state players are guaranteed to flourish; whether they grasp the deeper meaning of their educational enterprise and the responsibility associated with it is a tough question, even to raise, let alone to answer.

The speed at which India has moved towards becoming a fully-fledged market society presents a contrast to the slower, hesitant and dispersed change in certain deep-rooted behaviours and tendencies that several late nineteenth and early twentieth century intellectual leaders had noticed. Tagore bemoaned the lack of the spirit of inquiry, especially among

teachers who were expected to instill it in children. Gandhi referred in several contexts to the tendency to choose not to do anything about things around. Ambedkar noticed the poor circulation of ideas and attributed it to the caste system. Since the time these eminent observers of our society wrote, India has made great progress in literacy. However, literacy has not translated into a reading habit, and even the limited sphere of newspapers now seems to be shrinking under the pressure of new visual media.

Conclusion

Social change and education were always assumed to complement each other. Social change needed and boosted education while education helped to deepen and expand social change. In this equation, the attainments of social change, such as mobility and democracy, depended on education on one hand. On the other hand, education was supposed to steer social change towards the normative framework of the Constitution, featuring greater equality, social justice, and fraternity. A widely noticed fact of recent years is the sharpening of economic inequality and the thinning of the social fabric. Education as a system has contributed to this process. Its own weaknesses as well as ill-conceived policies have guided society towards encouraging its own divisions. Even in a matter like language, we can now notice a chasm between vernacular and English-using worlds that were once coming closer. Within the system of education, we notice far greater inequality of opportunity and institutional experience than anyone knew before the full-scale marketisation of education at all levels. The elite middle class born during colonial times have ceased to recognise their role in improving education as a system. Their progeny's flight to expensive private universities and the West is an indicator of their loss of concern for the education of the larger society.

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Watch out for the Special Issue on

Regimes of Exclusion and Rights Discourse: India and Its Diasporas

Volume 55, Issue 2, June 2025

The Special Issue on 'Regimes of Exclusion and Rights Discourse', highlights a lack of adequate focus within the discourse on rights on everyday conditions within prisons and the nature of police and judicial power. It also highlights exclusionary citizenship regimes, insufficiently addressed in the literature on rights, that have impacted migrants, minorities, as well as diasporic populations. By focusing on rights and regimes of exclusion in both formally custodial contexts and elsewhere, the Issue highlights how the nature of existing rights regime is revealed under a combination of an authoritarian government and a pandemic—both of which threatened life, liberty, and dignity in recent times.

Guest Editors: Jinee Lokaneeta is Professor in Political Science and International Relations, Drew University, New Jersey. She is the author of *The Truth Machines: Policing, Violence and Scientific Interrogations in India* (University of Michigan Press, Orient Blackswan, 2020).

Sangay K. Mishra is Chair & Associate Professor in Political Science and International Relations, Drew University, New Jersey. He is the author of *Desis Divided: The Political Lives of South Asian Americans* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016 & Sage India, 2017).

Social Change Annual Lecture[*]

Year	Speaker	Topic
2024	Barbara Harriss-White	Gold in India's Social Development
2023	Madhav Gadgil	Ecosystem People, Biosphere People, Ecological Refugees
2022	Bina Agarwal	Gender, Presence and Representation
2021	G. N. Devy	Thinking of Crime: The State, Migrant Population and the Missing Justice
2020	Uma Chakravarti	From the Home to the Borders: Violence Against Women, Impunity and Resistance
2019	Gopal Guru	Migration: A Moral Protest

*Previously known as the Social Change Golden Jubilee Lecture, this lecture series was started in 2019 to mark fifty years of *Social Change*'s publication.
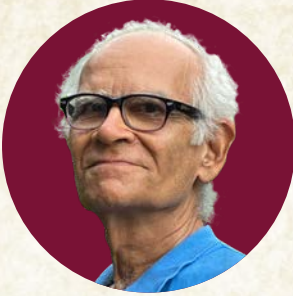
Professor Krishna Kumar did his PhD in Educational Theory at the University of Toronto and taught during most of his career at Delhi University. He was Director of National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) from 2004 to 2010. At present, he is Honorary Professor at Panjab University, Chandigarh. He was awarded an Honorary D.Litt. by the Institute of Education, University of London in 2011. The same year, he was awarded Padma Shri by the President of India.

Professor Kumar has been a Jawaharlal Nehru Fellow, a Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Oriental Studies, Berlin and at the Centre for the Advanced Study of India, University of Pennsylvania. He has delivered numerous prestigious lectures including the Gladwyn Lecture in the British House of Lords, the J.P. Naik Lecture at the Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi, the Maulana Azad Lecture at Kolkata, and the I.P. Desai Lecture at Surat.