

BOOK REVIEW

Education and Modernity: Some Sociological Perspectives **Amman Madan**

A Book That Makes You Think

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As a distinguished educationist, Amman Madan is known for his insightful reflections on peace, conflict resolution and sociology of education. And this time as I begin to read this slim book, I notice his creative skills once again—his ability to play with nuanced sociological perspectives in the process of examining the dynamics of modernity and education. Unlike a typical academic burdened with the narcissism of the intellect, Madan, I feel, is a gifted communicator; he can make his readers (and they need not necessarily be university teachers and researchers) understand complex ideas, and arouse their interest in diverse ways of looking at education in modern times. No wonder, this book with a creative mix of sociological theories and everyday experience has its own charm. Yes, the book with its clarity of thought and appropriate drawings and sketches is likely to fulfill what the author expects-- ‘sparking in the reader a desire to read more of what various social scientists have had to say about education in our times.’

To begin with, I feel like invoking the idea of ‘sociological imagination’ that radical American sociologist C Wright Mills celebrated. It is the ability to translate ‘private troubles’ into ‘public issues’. Take a simple example. Suppose a Dalit student finds herself neglected and marginalized in her school. Is it because of her own ‘fault’ that she is not ‘meritorious’ or ‘intelligent’? Or, is it because of the prevalent social structure and cultural practices that have not yet been able to eradicate the practice of institutionalized caste hierarchy and associated cultural and symbolic violence? In fact, sociology as a discipline can take us beyond the dominant commonsense, and help us to understand the larger social system for making sense of our biographies. Let me borrow a revealing example from the book. Madan refers to the difficulty which students from rural areas face in making an entry into urban schools. Well, it is easy to say that these students are not intelligent enough to understand what is being taught. But then, if we think sociologically, and see beyond ‘our own little bubble of experience’, our understanding of this issue will get a new dimension. To quote Madan:

Sociologists point to the fact that in Indian schools the syllabus, textbooks, examinations and teachers are all focused on getting white-collar jobs in cities. This makes the schools most comfortable for those students who come from families that are already in such jobs, and makes them alienating and strange for students from other social backgrounds. This realization changes the way we look at the problems being faced by students from rural backgrounds. It is not possible to blame them alone for what is a larger problem of a social system. (p. 19)

Madan invites his readers to the domain of sociology, and seeks to make them reflect on modernity and education. Well, it can be said that sociology as a discipline was a product of modernity—the age of European Enlightenment with its gospel of reason and new modes of

enquiry, and the celebration of ‘progress’ with new social and economic formations like industrialism, capitalism and techno-scientific development. Think of three ‘classical’ thinkers sociologists often talk about—Emile Durkheim, Max Weber and Karl Marx. As Robert Nisbet said beautifully, all these three thinkers were drawing the social landscape of industrial Western modern capitalism. Durkheim was known for his nuanced understanding of the dynamics of complex societies—the way a new form of ‘organic solidarity’ ought to be differentiated from ‘mechanical solidarity’ in order to restore some sort of social and moral connectivity amid rising individualism and occupational/cultural differences. Weber examined the implications of Protestantism/Calvinism in the rise of capitalism. Furthermore, he spoke of the growing rationalization/intellectualization of the world, and the formation of the bureaucratic structure (for managing modern institutions—from schools to hospitals; from banks to factories) as a new form of ‘legal/rational’ authority. And Marx examined the formations of new classes with the withering away of feudalism and rise of capitalism. Furthermore, he saw the contradictions of capitalism through his dialectical reasoning and politico-economic analysis. In a way, the further development of sociological theories in our times could be seen as a kind of creative and critical engagement with these classical thinkers. And sociological theories began to evolve through the contributions of a spectrum of thinkers with plurality of perspectives—say, from Talcott Parsons to Jurgen Habermas; or, from Anthony Giddens to Michel Foucault. And this rich theoretical debate also helped us to enrich our understanding of education in these changing times.

What distinguishes Madan’s book is his ability to draw meaningful insights from the rich traditions of sociological theories, and inspire his readers to examine the social dynamics of education meaningfully and critically. Let me take three illustrations from the book to substantiate my arguments.

First, while referring to Emile Durkheim’s work, Madan urges his readers to think carefully and deeply. Yes, for consolidating the seeds of ‘organic solidarity’, ‘schools need to build a sense of bonding between different groups, regions and communities’. Hence, he understands why ‘Durkheim argued that the state had a special role in guiding schools’. But then, we should not forget that modern complex societies need to continually negotiate with two equally important needs—differences and solidarity, or individualism and social connectivity; and if this delicate balance is lost, we will experience many problems—from anomic disorder to loss of creativity. Although, for Durkheim, ‘anomie’ could be responsible for many problems including normlessness and suicide, Madan with his subtle and nuanced analysis does not forget to remind us that ‘anomic states of mind can also be very creative, leading people to be innovative and find new solutions and new ways to behave’. In a way, he makes you think. Likewise, he admits that ‘it is important to bring diverse people and cultures together in a complex society and help them feel connected with each other and not just with their family members’. While this sort of ‘functionalist’ argument which the likes of Emile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons pleaded for might have its relevance, Madan does not forget to remind the readers that not everything is about order and coherence; in fact, ‘societies have many internal tensions and conflicts’.

Second, while examining the growth of markets and education, Madan comes forward with a very subtle and nuanced argument. He invokes Karl Polanyi, reminds us of the three ways in which goods and services may be exchanged in various societies—say, through reciprocity, redistribution and commodification. Now in our times, as we have moved towards commodity

exchange, and money seems to have become the measurement of everything, Madan recalls Polanyi's notion of 'disembedding' of social relationships. Not surprisingly, the realm of education cannot be free from this process of 'disembedding' and commodity exchange. Madan does not deny its advantages. For instance, these days the discourse of education seems to have liberated itself from the purely elitist preoccupation with the study of the 'classics in literature, the scriptures and some astronomy' for developing a more 'cultured outlook'. Now a clerk in a government office, for instance, wants to spend some money from his savings, get his daughter admitted in an engineering college so that she can become a software engineer, earn money and help the family for upward social mobility. This causes some sort of democratization in an otherwise caste/class divided stratified society. In a way, not everything is bad about this sort of commodity exchange. However, Madan wants his readers to think and ponder, and see diverse implications of this process. No wonder, he also sees the danger of absolute 'commodification of education'. As the market-driven rationality begins to colonize the realm of education in the age of neoliberalism, we are witnessing the steady growth of diverse brands of education shops selling all sorts of techno-managerial skills as real knowledge, and hypnotizing the potential consumers with the mythologies of 'placements and salary packages'. And Madan does not fail to see the limitations of this sort of purely instrumental approach to education. He reminds us that meaningful education should also give us the strength to raise critical questions. Let me quote from the book:

There are...problems in allowing only markets to decide what education should do. It may even be dangerous for the poor if they are taught to blindly accept whatever the rich and powerful are doing and not learn to raise questions on them. An important thing which many Indians believe we must learn to do is how to protest against wrongdoing and put pressure to get justice and fair dealing. This, too, is something which many powerful people (though not all) may be very uncomfortable with. Commodification of education may thus raise several important questions. (pp.59-60)

Likewise, it will be equally dangerous if we allow the culture of commodification to reduce a teacher into a 'salesperson' and students as her 'clients'. It is like forgetting that teachers are essentially 'intellectuals and thinkers helping students to interpret the world or think about it in a creative manner.'

Third, while recalling Max Weber's notion of bureaucracy as a mode of rational-legal authority in formal organizations, Madan analyses pretty well how this form of bureaucratic structure shapes the everyday functioning of schools in our times. In fact, modern schools cannot function in a way *gurukuls* used to operate with 10-20 students. When we have a school with, say, more than 1000 students, we need some sort of bureaucratic structure. We need 'explicit rules'; we need to 'break work into smaller units'; or for that matter, we need some sort of 'routinisation', 'impersonality' and 'hierarchy'. However, he is equally aware of Weber's anguish—the experience of depersonalization and alienation implicit in the 'iron cage' of bureaucracy. Look at Madan's insightful observations and reflections in order to understand the limitations of excessive bureaucratization of schools:

Generations of students and teachers have writhed under the grip of rules and regulations that seem to crush their own feelings and instincts. For instance, the system of breaking a day into eight periods with a plan of different subjects for each period may have many advantages like ensuring that all subjects get covered and students are not swamped with only one subject

in the entire day. But there are also days when a class is going beautifully and there is great enthusiasm being generated for a topic and suddenly the bell rings and you have to switch over to reading something else altogether. One wonders then whether the formal organization helps or hinders a good education. (p.97)

It is this way of seeing that, I feel, has led Madan to urge the readers to converse with the likes of Ivan Illich and Michel Foucault. Illich made powerful arguments against the way schools function and condition human minds and limit our horizons, and then pleaded for ‘deschooling’ society. And Foucault reminded us of the technologies of ‘discipline’ and ‘surveillance’ through which schools—like prisons—create ‘docile’ bodies and minds. In fact, Madan’s intention, as I understand, is not to provide readymade solutions. Instead, like a sensitive pedagogue, he poses questions, and urges his readers to think, reflect, and even enter the domain of ambiguity. He is right in making it categorically clear in the Preface:

I have tried not to stress too much on finding just the single best solution to every problem. To the reader who is used to hearing people say that they have just answers to everything, they may appear a disconcerting style of writing. But I feel that presenting multiple ways of seeing the world may be of more help in the long run. (pp.5-6)

I have no hesitation in saying that this book with its six carefully crafted chapters should be read by all those—I mean teachers, educationists, researchers, policy-makers, parents and young students—who are deeply concerned about the dynamics of education in contemporary times. And as every good book inspires you to expect something more from the author, I too have some expectation. In fact, I would urge Professor Amman Madan to write yet another book, and this time on India’s unique engagement with colonialism and modernity; decolonization and new reflections on caste, religion and identity; and resultant debates on education emanating from Jotirao Phule to Dr B R Ambedkar; or from Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi to Rabindranath Tagore.

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