ECONOMICS AS SOCIAL SCIENCE

Lead paper presented at

National Seminar on
ECONOMICS EDUCATION IN INDIAN SCHOOLS

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Organised by
Department of Education in Social Sciences and Humanities
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Abstract

This article focuses on defining the discipline of Social Science, and the manner in which social sciences have been incorporated in our school curriculum. An attempt is made to clarify the perspective of a social scientist, the concepts it deals with, the skills it tries to develop and the values it is concerned with. Accordingly, what should be the method of inquiry which will help the learner to acquire the necessary abilities.

Economics is an important social science. Economic understanding, which implies at least a basic understanding of the operation of the economic system is an essential part of everyone's education. From the moment of birth to that of death our existence is influenced by the economic forces controlling the structure of our society. It is in this context it becomes imperative that economics as a leading social science forms a part of our school curriculum. Economics is a subject which touches all our lives intimately. It is quite surprising that for a long time economics has not enjoyed a more important role in our secondary level curriculum at an early age. This article makes an attempt to focus attention on how economic understanding can be integral to the entire social science curriculum at this level. The areas of the curriculum which specifically focus on economic values, concepts and generalizations underlined are also highlighted. In classes IX and X there is a separate component of economics in the curriculum. What skills and competencies need to be stressed through this course are discussed.

At the senior secondary level economics forms part of the curriculum as an optional course. The study of economics here is looked at both from the micro and macro economics principles. The thrust is on basic principles of the discipline and an understanding of Indian economy along with Statistics. The paper tries to explore the methods and approaches needed to help students to learn to think about economic
situations objectively and rationally for themselves rather than masses of institutional
details or memorize lists of unused economic concepts.
Economics as Social Science

We are living in a society that is changing its values, its beliefs, its technology and even its knowledge and understanding. Schools can no longer be regarded as providing all that the future adult needs by way of preparation for life and livelihood. But, what the school is able to provide must be such that it contributes to a flexible mind and outlook so that the inevitable change which these future adults will experience do not come as a traumatic shock. It surely implies that our secondary schools must provide a less specialized and more general education so that our students are not left to choose too early. Moreover, a deliberate decision to concentrate on life skills and abilities through an interdisciplinary curriculum would be a better choice. It is in this context, that Kothari Commission in the early sixties suggested a common core curriculum of ten years followed by two years of optional course at the school stage.

NCERT in 1976 developed national level syllabi for 10+2 levels. The syllabi has been revised several times since then. The last revision took place in 2005. According to NCF 2005, Economics is taught as a social science and the structure of social science syllabus is composite till class X, and optional for the Senior Secondary Level. The organization of the courses has also undergone tremendous change. As a part of the composite course economics is included either in political science or geography at the Upper Elementary level. At the Secondary Level, a separate and a more specific course has been designed. But it remains still an integral part of the composite social science syllabus. For the Senior Secondary School an optional course in economics is offered. Since economics forms an integral part of our school curriculum it is important to understand the nature of economics as a discipline, especially from the perspective of social science, to enable us to follow the suitable approaches and plan the appropriate methods of inquiry.

Nature of Economics as a Discipline

A Rationale

‘Economics is the science of economizing’ (J. Calderwood). Scarcity is the fundamental concern of economics. While attempting to respond to this fundamental problem all economic systems try to accommodate the social goals like security, stability, equality...
and **freedom** along with **economic growth**. Economics tries to conduct an enquiry into some central questions, concepts and generalizations associated with these goals. In doing so, the economist replaces the emotional, and unreasoned judgements by objective rational analysis. Therefore it is a social science. According to J. M. Keynes “The theory of economics does not furnish a body of settled conclusions immediately applicable to policy. It is a method, rather than a doctrine, an apparatus of the mind, technique of thinking which helps its possessor to draw correct conclusions”. Thus, economics provides an awareness of, and ability to use a set of analytical tools called economic theory to socio-economic goals. In this respect economics is no different from other disciplines. It is a social science. “Economics is concerned with the society as a whole and with the activities of the various groups and institutions in relation to each other. It contains – consumers, businessmen, farmers, workers, savers, investors, corporations and federal state and local government. It therefore is a social science” (J. Calderwood)

**Social Dimension of Economics**

In the past 150 years there has been a greater emphasis on the **social dimension of economics** which is closer to our social sciences curricula in schools. It will be quite relevant to elaborate on this because this has clear implications for our curriculum and its transaction. Since the social dimension of economics is more concerned with ‘**common good**’, the production of goods and services in an economy is undertaken in such a manner that **human welfare** is maximized for the members of the society. The co-existence of the economic perspectives with social values is the main concern of a social science. “An economic philosophy that accommodates the common good leads to an economics that does not shy away from ethical considerations and distinguishes itself by focusing on persons as citizens who stand in relation to each other, instead of treating people as acquisitive consumers”. (Mark Lutz) Economics as a social science tends to equate human welfare with a **just** society in which a person’s well being is measured by the standard of individual material well being as well as by distributional and moral factors.

Recognizing a social dimension of economics opens the way to reconceptualize the elemental economic concepts of **efficiency**, **equality** and **competition**.
Let us take up efficiency which is measured by a standard economist by a person’s ‘willingness to pay’ because this process favours the rich over the poor. A social scientist would reject efficiency as a yardstick in public policy. “why in the name of real efficiency should grain ever be used to feed the pleasure horses of the rich rather than to feed the unemployed and their families?” Willingness to pay too often reflects an ability to pay which is determined by the distribution of wealth and income. In other words the ‘given preferences’ on which the classical economic theory constructs the house of efficiency are to some extent merely a reflection of a ‘given’ socio-economic inequality. Readily granting that some income differentials are legitimate, one must nevertheless examine the very roots of unwarranted inequality exhibited in society.

Social scientists also de-emphasise competition. Although competition can be, and very often is, a very dynamically beneficial and socially constructive force, the fiercer the competition the more resources consumed and the more divisive and socially wasteful the competitive solution is likely to be. Social welfare, common good and competition stand in conflict with each other.

Economics as a social science, as has been described here is deeply rooted in human welfare. A complete harmony among the individual activity, social values and social institutions is most needed by the society today.

The concern that economic activity and growth exhausts natural resources is not a new one. In the last 300 years there have been recurrent fears concerning the adequacy of timber supplies of population outgrowing the world’s food supply, about the depletion of coal reserves and so on. It has been recorded that if the past growth trends of population, industrialization, food production and resource depletion were to continue the limits to growth on the planet will be reached sometime within the next 100 years. This demands an immediate redesigning of the economic systems guided by the redistribution of resources. We have moved ahead from growth to sustainability in our journey towards economic development.
The above social concerns as expressed by the social economist and indicate how the study of social sciences by our young learners need to be restructured and redesigned both in terms of courses prescribed and the approaches followed in its transaction.

**NCF 2005 and the Social Science Curriculum**

The disciplines that make up our social science curriculum namely history, geography, political science and economics have distinct methodologies that often justify the preservation of boundaries. NCF 2005 in its vision statement on social science has emphasized the need for opening the boundaries. In the effort to revise the social science curriculum it has tried to select themes from all the social sciences such that the interdisciplinary approach is possible in understanding the phenomenon. Further, it believes that in a world of conflict and confusion it is important for our children to acquire an analytical and critical mind, towards the social economic issues confronting their life in particular, and society as a whole. The position paper states “The social science curriculum hitherto emphasized development issues these are important but not sufficient to understand the normative dimension, like issue of equality, justice and dignity in society and polity. Teaching of social sciences, has thus been linked up to the role of an individual in contributing to this ‘development’. In view of this gap, there is a need to achieve a shift in focus from utilitarianism to egalitarianism that would address concerns as above”. (NCF 2005)

**Teaching of Economics at the Secondary and Senior Secondary Level**

This section focuses on the specific content areas of economics as they figure in the curriculum at different levels, and the possibilities of various skills and competencies which can be developed as attached to social science. Also, the attitudes and values that can be integrated at the transactional stage are discussed. The aim is to look at the content and its delivery from the social sciences’ perspective.
The Upper Primary Level

Civics has been replaced by a new subject Social and Political Life in the middle school social science. The subject focuses on topics related to social, political and economic life in contemporary India. The unit on Rural and Urban Livelihood in class VI tries to touch upon some of the economic issues related to the sources of our livelihood in different settings. The most important concept is that people wherever they are need to work. Work results in the production of goods and services. These goods and services are used by other members of the community who need them to satisfy their wants. The exchange of goods and services for money results in earning an income. People therefore take up different occupations according to their abilities and opportunities available. Everyone in the society therefore needs to do some or the other work to earn his or her livelihood. Lack of opportunities at one place leads to the displacement of people from one place to the other, from one production area to the other, often creating inequality in the society. Also moving from villages to towns and from agriculture to industry and services brings changes in the occupational patterns and the social structures. This leads to theme trees to take up some very serious socio-economic issues like:

- Why do people get trapped into poverty?
- Why do some earn less and some more?
- Are there more poor people in the villages?
- Aren’t there poor people in cities as well?
- What is the difference?
- Would shifting a person from one place to the other reduce his poverty?
- Should we work for an area to be rich or people to be rich?

Some generalizations through the above analysis might keep learners visualize that it is important to provide more and more opportunities to work. When people work, they add to the total production of that area. The income of the people, as well as of that area increases too. This is important because we all need basic amenities of life wherever we live. The teachers should help their learners explore these concepts all around their life; wherever they are, and in whichever setting they live- rural, urban, slums. They can find out for themselves what all types of occupations people are doing; whether they have
equal opportunities of work or not? Why are there differences in the incomes of the people and the kind of work they do? How does a person’s occupation and income affect his life style? By organizing simple activities to interact with the community at their level, followed by brainstorming session, in small groups (in the class) the teachers can help widen their understanding of the socio-economic realities. Facilitating the peer interactive mode of learning will not only enrich each learner but bring them close to each other. Similarly, the theme ‘Markets’ in class VII touches another real life situation. It describes some simple elements of economic life of people by exposing children to another world of work-business and trading. The purpose is not to teach the economic theory of market or the business cycles directly. But how market as a hub of all kinds of economic activities facilitates the process of exchange and the distribution of goods. An understanding of a wide range of concepts, processes and relationships could be developed which in turn will bring the world of business and trade live to the learners weaving together the concepts like price variations, quality, competition, scale of production, production organization, trading chains, kinds of producers and consumers and so on. How and why they are interdependent and interrelated; how business is an ever expanding activity? The dimensions and opportunities it provides for trading and employments to the producers and buyers, both in terms of variety and choice is something which catches the lifeline of every one in the society. Children should be allowed to critically think of all these to help them comprehend the theory of business cycles and theoretical interpretations of difficult market operations which they will study in their higher classes.

A knowledge and early exposure of the basic concepts will surely contribute towards creating a better understanding for even those who are going to choose the world of work early and may not get a chance to study economics or business studies further. Again, the major issue which the teachers can help the learners identify could be inequality, competition, consumerism and the personal profits against equality, common good and social welfare. How important are our choices as individuals requires serious thought and the learners should be sensitized before they go out into the world of work independently. If this is so, definitely implies that our methods could not be
confined to simple narrations or story telling/reading inside the classroom. An experiential learning in inquiry mode through discussions, peer and community interaction can only lead to this kind of self awareness. Teachers are expected to start planning their lessons such that the learning of economics is interdisciplinary in nature; free from the boundaries of one discipline alone.

**The Secondary Level**

The subject matter and the themes chosen at the Secondary Level are more specific and connect directly with the economic concepts; though the focus of the course remains the social science, as the problems and issues raised are socio-economic in nature. Let us consider chapter 1 in class IX textbook which is the story of an imaginary village Palampur. Through the story of the village an understanding about the sectoral division of an economy is developed. The Village Economy perhaps is the smallest unit of our economic system. All the economic activities of a village are clubbed into farming and non-farming activities. Farming representing the agricultural, and non-farming as the socio-economic infrastructures. People of the village as the lifeline of these activities are the center focus and various factors of production are instrumental in conducting them. The factor incomes facilitate the ongoing economic processes of consumption production and exchange in the village. Now it is evident that to tell the story of the village Palampur is not the purpose. Instead, to help the learners establish linkages between a country’s economy and the local economy is what is envisioned here. The teachers should therefore facilitate a study of the indigenous economic system of which the learners are a part. It could be a city, a town or even a locality in a metropolitan. The concept structures are going to be the same; though studied in a different institutional setting, through a different set of production structures. The learners by this time are expected to have acquired some basic skills of expression and interpretations. So, they can be motivated to do critical thinking and problem solving exercises while they conduct simple market/community surveys.

Though factual knowledge is not the aim some kind of analysis and interpretation of economic data will help in constructing their own understanding about the facts they have
collected through hands-on experiences. The same can lead to a construction of their own ideas and opinions about a problem or an issue. For Example, ‘Poverty as a Challenge’ and ‘People as Resource’ are the themes where data on poverty in India or the definition of Poverty Line is less important than thinking about, how such a large chunk of the population of a country is living in a state of object poverty; despite innumerable schemes of the government to alleviate poverty? How varied and huge is the platform of vulnerability? Why can’t the desperate and the vulnerable groups be helped in our country? A country in which a section of population gets everything for asking, why is this gap and inequality? Now the most important question is, whether inequality of income and constantly increasing gap between the rich and the poor the real challenge? Can’t this human resource in the society be occupied (employed) in such a way that on the one hand it helps them improve their own life and on the other create social harmony in the society? After all the human population of a country is also a resource. Every system capitalist or socialistic is expected to convert this population into more productive members. What should be done to ensure that consumerism and utilitarianism gives way to egalitarianism? May be through a just and fair distributions of goods and services in the society. The children at this age should be made to think of these questions very seriously. The thrust therefore has changed from knowledge and understanding of the facts and concepts of poverty and population, to the critical and reflective thinking about the deeper and more serious issues confronting us. An egalitarian society demands a change in the attitude towards the ‘poor’ and ‘vulnerable’.

The teachers should involve their learners into experiential learning, rather than simply narrating the facts, and often, dictating notes on definitions of poverty line, forms of unemployment and so on.

The economic themes chosen for class X also connect to the social science directly. The students here are exposed to the basic functioning of our economy in an era of globalisation, liberalization and privatization children need to carry an analytical understanding of these concepts as trends of the global economy are often in direct conflict with the interest of the common man and the local economy. A simple
knowledge about the functioning of the MNC’s might be quite meaningless. It is believed that if the learners have been apprised and exposed to these economic phenomena in real life at the local level in their middle classes, it would not be difficult for them to decide that a mad inclination towards Foreign Direct Investments may not actually develop the nation and help prosper the masses. It will eventually increase the gap between the poor and the rich because those who have the necessary capital and other resources would bring expensive technology only to exploit the cheap labour and other resources. What is stressed here is that economic growth might not lead to social equality and human welfare. A comparative assessment of the growth patterns of these multi-national corporations, and their relation with the socio-economic growth of the country is what the teachers need to highlight. The task is challenging because our methods of transaction have to be constructive, and problem based rather than narrative and descriptive. A variety of sources other than the textbooks should be explored by the teachers and the learners to establish horizontal and vertical sequences in the concepts and contents learnt through different themes over the years. Several activities in the form of role plays, case studies, other than the one quoted in the text book, informations occurring in the print media- newspapers, magazines need to be collected, collated and the classroom strategies should be planned to generate an interest in the issues involved.

These modes of transaction would facilitate the development of a variety of skills e.g. the skills of observations, listening, reading, writing, communication, presentation and interpretation of data, besides the social skills of community interaction. Learning becomes not only enjoyable but also more meaningful for the individual learner and the society.

**Higher Secondary Stage**

The higher secondary stage offers a choice of streams to the students according to their need, interest, and aptitude. The foundation laid at this stage should be able to equip them with basic knowledge and the necessary skill and attitude to make meaningful contribution to any field they choose. Since, subjects and courses have not been grouped into separate streams and students are given the choice of opting for subjects or courses
from any group according to their need, interest and aptitude, economics is offered in combination with all subject areas sciences, commerce and humanities. The teaching of economics therefore is far more challenging, though subject specific. The teachers are expected to encourage the learners to explore higher levels of knowledge and to generate new insights in the process. For example the approach to deal with the subject matter of Indian Economic Development should be to enlighten the young learners about what India has achieved and not what it has not been able to do. The provision of supplementary material in the classroom increase the autonomy of the teacher and also provide a level of confidence in planning activities and projects for these learners. The Teacher and learners should constantly be working towards this.
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