

CINEMA TO CLASSROOM CONVERSATIONS

Abstract

Organizing seating in the classroom has always been more than a practical consideration; it has, in fact, influenced the very building of identities and expectations in the classrooms. The classification between “front benchers” and “backbenchers” has contained social stigma, equating seriousness in studies with being close to the teacher, ignoring the differences in the way they acquire knowledge. This article will look into the way in which these categorizations are incorporated into the minds of the children, influencing confidence and involvement within the educational setup. With references to the cultural discussion generated by the release of the Malayalam movie Sthanarthi Sreekuttan, analyzing the response generated by Kerala’s State Council for Educational Research and Training, it will look into the recent debate concerning the removal of hierarchical seating in the classroom. This article, referencing the recent debate in the educational setup, will conclude that educational change actually starts by interrogating daily practice, treating children, in fact, not by their seating arrangement but by their learning patterns.

Introduction

For generations of students, the classrooms have looked the same. The front benches would be filled with the attentive and the praised while the backbenches are usually occupied by the uninterested or simply ‘not serious enough’ ones. First benches are usually occupied by the studious and attentive section of the classroom, the backbenchers are often those who bunk classes, miss assignments and accumulate academic debt.

The idea of backbenchers has always carried many stories. Some were rooted in shame, others in humour or rebellion. For many, it was romanticized— stories of students who skipped classes, scraped through exams and surprised everyone with success. While this wasn’t the case when the seating arrangement started, overtime this seating arrangement quietly shaped identities. A place in the classroom often became a label, one that stayed with children long after the bell rang.

Backbenchers are often described as careless and unmotivated, yet many also remembered as creative thinkers, quite observers or students who never fit into rigid academic modules. The actual point of difference is different learning styles, but schools and classrooms rarely make a space for that.

When a film started a conversation

Recently, this familiar classroom reality found its way into public conversation in Kerala. A Malayalam film, ‘Sthanarthi Sreekuttan’ brought attention to the social stigma attached to backbenchers, questioning why something as simple as seating could decide a child’s confidence, participation, or perceived worth. The story resonated widely, prompting educators to reflect on what classrooms communicate beyond textbooks.

Inspired by this reflection, Kerala's *State Council of Education Research and Training* approved a draft proposal recommending changes to classroom structures. Among the suggestions is the removal of hierarchical seating arrangements, including the traditional backbench system, along with efforts to reduce schoolbag weight. The proposal, currently open for public feedback, reflects a growing willingness to question long-standing norms that have gone unchallenged for decades.

Significance

This initiative matters a lot as it shifts focus from discipline to dignity, it acknowledges that classrooms are not just spaces for instruction, but environments where confidence is built or broken. By rethinking how students are placed and perceived, Kerala's move recognizes that no child should feel written off simply because of where they sit.

Sometimes, meaningful change begins quietly— by listening stories, lived experiences, and asking simple questions. What if no child had to feel smaller because of where they sit? In raising that question, Kerala's step reminds us that education works best when it sees children not as front benchers or backbenchers, but simply as learners.

