

EDUCATION POLICY: CRITIQUE AND PROJECTIONS

The Education Ministry released a status paper entitled "Challenge of Education: A Perspective" (August 19, 1985). The invited national debate on the document has begun, in Mainstream and elsewhere. This contribution is a note, outcome of in-house discussions in the Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development, presented at a conference held under the auspices of CRRID at Chandigarh on October 19-20, 1985.

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The document "Challenge of Education – A Policy Perspective" is intended to generate a public debate which was long overdue. This effort is a welcome departure from the past practice of Governments to convey policy decisions without even debating issues. This debate should be generally fruitful for participants, but whether the recommendations, suggestions and desires of the participants, will be included in the prospective education policy remains to be seen.

Essence of the Document

This document attempts to characterise the present status of education and enunciate the policy alternatives available of educational planners in India.

The document suggests that education should serve as a vehicle for orderly social change (paras 4.7, 1.5, 1.8 and 1.13); it should inculcate values like tolerance, national integration, etc. (4.3, 1.24 and 4.11); it should pave the way for equality of opportunity (1.10 and 4.12); and it should provide sufficient skilled manpower necessary for development purposes (4.10, 1.29 and 4.114).

The goals identified for the educational system are that it must generate new knowledge in all fields (4.7); creates skills necessary for employment (4.10); develop personal attributes like scientific temper and democratic spiritual and moral values (4.8), impart knowledge about concepts and information about facts relating to different subjects (4.); etc. Besides this, certain goals have been indicated for education at different levels but they have not been specified in detail.

The document has listed following constraints which understandably impinge on the direction of educational development in India. The major constraints identified by the documents in India. The major constraints identified by the document are nature of production relations, rural-urban disparities and skewed distribution of income (4.37); commercialization of schools (4.25); politicisation of educational institutions (4.27); and absence of detailed scenario of the process of development in the coming decades (4.41). The other constraints identified are incompetent teachers (4.26); poor linkage between vocationalisation and employment (4.30); vested interest of research institutions (4.31); non-implementation of legislation declaring education as a concurrent subject (4.43); inadequate implementation of the three-language formula (4.44); uncertainty about the procedure of registration of schools (4.45); lack of entrepreneurship and excessive emphasis on hierarchical status in decision-making, administration, implementation and management of change in the government departments (4.51); the overwhelming financial squeeze imposed on educational budgets (4.49); and apathy of illiterate parents towards education and the irrelevant educational content (4.73).

Some important tasks pointed out by the document for the educational system are integrated programmes with a common curriculum in India as a whole (3.91); universalisation of elementary education through non-formal channels (4.72 and 4.64); changing the methodology of teachers' training; introduction of new evaluation techniques; depoliticisation of educational institutions, vocationalisation of education; mobilisation of additional resources and reallocation of available resources to priorities like spread of literacy in backward regions and among rural and female population (4.68, 4.69, 2.37 and 3.12); imparting of values like pride in national heritage and national unity (4.97 and 1.25); tolerance and respect for opinions contrary to one's own (4.15); promoting composite culture (1.25); secularism, dignity of labour and self-confidence (1.26).

It has been suggested that the aforementioned tasks may be achieved through widening educational infrastructure with the help of non-formal educational channels like TV, radio, open universities, voluntary agencies and community leaders which shall lead to equality of opportunity, establishment of district education centres and model schools at the district level to cater to meritorious rural pupils irrespective of their social origin; relevant training to in service and prospective teachers; motivating children, parents and teachers through monetary incentives; additional resources may be mobilised and available resources be reallocated in priority areas like backward regions and rural and female population.

This is the essence of the paper, "Challenge of Education – A Policy Perspective", as understood by us. As serious readers of this document we give below our reactions.

Methodological Inconsistencies

The document is inconsistent with regard to the role it assigns to education. On the one hand, it anticipates that dissemination of education will result in 'equalising opportunities and reducing disparities' (4.12). On the other hand, it relegates education to be a mere instrument (1.24 and 1.11).

The document is inconsistent also with regard to the possibility of achieving the desired goals of education. On the one hand, the document attributes the failure of the 1968 Education Policy Resolution to the structural social constraint (3.4), on the other the document sets forth the same goals of education. It reflects the possibility to achieve the goals without overcoming the structural social constraints, by treating them merely as minor constraints (from para 4.37 to 4.48).

The document rightly says that fragmentation of knowledge in the name of specialisation and any attempt to explain reality through different disciplines gives only a partial view of reality (4.57). So the document attempts arrive at a 'holistic' view of society through approaches such as multi-disciplinary or inter-disciplinary (1.6). The main thrust of these approaches is to see a problem or to explain reality through more than one discipline implying that the problems have multiple causes and explanations. This approach explains the existing society as a sum total of economy, political and educational sub-systems and offers solution for each sub-system.

The holistic approach fails on two counts. Firstly, this approach fails to comprehend the linkages between various institutions and does not provide any hierarchy of causation. Secondly, due to the first failure, the holistic approach is unable to advance the real solutions. The inadequacies of various disciplines to explain social reality, cannot necessarily be attributed to the limitations of tools and techniques adopted to study a phenomenon. Instead, the reason lies in the basic assumptions, which form the premises of these disciplines; that economics is about market and its demand and supply laws see people as producers and consumers; that politics is about the state and therefore all forms of power which lie outside it cannot, by definition, be political. A total approach to reality adopts a method which does not break a phenomenon into separate disciplines but treats it as an integrated totality whose intra-connections and inter-connections are studied in necessary detail.

The holistic approach is problem-centred, because the assumption is that the normal order of things is one of undistributed consensus. For example in an industry anything which adversely affects production, such as a strike, is regarded as a problem. This approach tends to preclude an examination of that order which bred the conditions for the strike. Consequently, education has been recognised, by the document, for ushering in changes in an orderly manner (1.6, 3.9). Orderly change is assumed as contrary to strike which may wreck order but may be required by one large chunk of people involved in industry and feel desperate to improve the conditions of work and living etc. Resultantly exploitation is perpetuated but not fought out by the votaries of orderly social change. Vested interests benefit by orderly change and will be the prime movers of all such ideas, not its opponent, as they are sometimes made out to be.

By attributing a holistic character to it, the document tears apart the education system from its social environment and ideological surroundings. The net result is that declining educational quality, sagging enrolment and increasing drop-out ratio, parental disinclination for schooling children, etc., are seen chiefly as problems arising from the inadequacies of the education system. It may be more realistic to view education and the ills afflicting it as also the evils flowing from it, against the broader social background and as a part of the fermentation in the ideological apparatuses of Indian Society. Such a view may help appreciation of the educational demands on and deficiencies of the system in India, establishment of a hierarchy of causation for the ills and evils of education and institution of effective remedial measures in education and other relation spheres impinging upon the development of education.

The document also fails to view social phenomena in their proper historical setting. For example, while highlighting the need for a sense of social obligation and sensitivity to pain and poverty among pupils (1.22), the document attacks snobbishness. Snobbishness is only the natural way of life among the privileged section in a class society.

The document points to the erosion of moral values and the resultant pollution of public life (1.24 and 1.1). As such the document suggests that value education should be imparted in harmony with our rich national heritage (1.14, 4.15 and 4.97) and to promote the spirit of collectivism. The inference drawn is that the people in India's glorious past were not individualistic, money-minded and communal. But the

question is whether people could be money-minded in feudal times when markets were limited in number and transactions were generally made on a barter basis? Could people in the past be communal (in the way communalism is defined in its modern form) when society was not competitive and when regional caste religious identities were not used for enhancing political power and economic profits? Hence, the most widespread values today should not be understood and solutions to their degeneration be found in the existing socio-economic formation. A failure to do this shall lead to the suggestion that mixing of different cultural streams has corrupted India's culture. Hence it may be propagated (as it most often is!) that cultural assimilation into a colourless homogeneity (bordering on Hindu chauvinism) is the best way of propagating moral and human values.

The document does not adequately analyse the socio-economic and politico-cultural characteristics of contemporary India, its conditions in the past and its desired destination for the future. The inadequate analysis leads to the identification of some goals which are possibly not achievable (1.8, 1.9, 1.15).

Some of the goals identified for the prospective education policy in the document appear to be at cross purposes with the existing realities. For example, the inculcation of a sense of social obligation (1.22) and a spirit of collectivism are not logically possible when individualism and competition are the by products of capitalism. Skill formation through education is welcome but skill formation is no guarantee for gainful employment as jobs are created not by education but by the direction and pace of planned development. Similarly, the goal of providing equality of opportunity by widening educational and other facilities is not feasible because majority of India's population is not able to avail if even existing facilities due to socio-economic handicaps. For details, see Westergeerd and Resles (1976) *Class in a Capitalist Society*, Penguin pp 279-314). To elaborate this point the goal of equality of opportunity underlines:

(a) that expansion of educational opportunities will benefit children from wage-earning and poor homes more than children from privileged backgrounds. According to an estimate, 24 per cent of the rural poor have never visited a school and have not benefited at all from the existing educational infrastructure. On the other hand, only 6 per cent of those who enter the educational pyramid manage to reach college and 37 per cent of the educational budget was spend on college education whereas elementary education received only 27 per cent of this expenditure in 1976-77.

(b) that equality of educational opportunities will lead to upward mobility of children of low social origin but high ability and by implication, to downward mobility of children of high social origin but low ability. This mobility is possible in the case of a few individuals but it does not extend to sections as a whole. Expansion of educational opportunities shall not bring a major redistribution of privileges between children of different social strata or classes. It is not to deny the soothing trickle-down effect of such an approach. As in the case of material well-being, growth without social justice leads to a rise in average but a greater rise in disparities between sections of society. Upward mobility (in a society emphasizing growth more than social justice) is nominal. But downward mobility is almost non-existent as public school education, private tuitioning and laws of inheritance (with or without the help of state intervention) guarantee that children born to privileges should remain at the top.

Hence, upward mobility is fluid but in no case free under the existing system, whereas downward mobility is an exception.

Paradoxically, the need to achieve mobility and its non-achievement in practice breeds frustration. This frustration is sought to be contained by sections of the ruling class through promotion of ideas and ideologies such as communalism, fatalism and even fascism. On the other hand, the pressing need for scientific and technological development requires the dissemination of scientific attitudes among larger sections of people. Therefore, the question may be posed as how would the prospective education policy transcend this paradox. How would the expectations which are generated among masses be achieved? How would the performance match the promises? And how would the pressures for equality be met in a milieu of persistent inequalities? The document assigns an elevated status of sections of Indian ruling class to discharge the responsibility of curriculum formulation and of monitoring the dissemination of this curriculum of pupils. This expectation is like the search of the blind man for a black cat in a dark room which was not there. On the contrary this class has fraternized with *tantriks*, astrologers and *jaga gurus*. The India ruling class has shown no sign of inculcating scientific attitudes among people by treating science as a force for the transformation of society and comprehension of political economy.

The document has rightly pointed out that de-politicisation of education institutions is necessary because:

- (a) politicisation has resulted into the creation of pressure groups which are oriented towards demagoguery and are mobilized for electoral purposes only;
- (b) these pressure groups interfere in the smooth functioning of educational institutions for petty ends and breed inefficiency by becoming hand-maidens of immoral promotion-seeking teachers for anti-social 'student leaders'.

De-politicisation is welcome but a simultaneous and more effective politicisation is necessary. Politicisation will include the spreading of democratic consciousness, building a secular and rationalist outlook, developing the comprehension for collective assertions to demystify non-issues and fight for real issues. In this context, it is necessary to depoliticise the whole society, not educational institutions alone and to politicise the consciousness of human beings everywhere.

The solutions for de-politicisation are offered by banning direct elections to students' and teachers' bodies. This solution is reprehensibly undemocratic and will serve as no guarantee against interference by politicised leaders in educational institutions. Education planning can, in this regard, set two tasks, namely:

- (i) the content of curriculum should be formed to help politicise the consciousness of pupils, and
- (ii) the organizational structure of educational institutions should ensure active participation of teachers and students.

The document has also set forth certain achievable tasks for educational planning, such as skill formation primarily to augment incomes of wage-earners and improve efficiency of managers; promotion of research and development for technological excellence; development of skills in languages and communications as also interest in hobbies, games and sports; development of suitable habits of health care and development of care curriculum together with regional cultural specificities.

Universalisation of Education

The document rightly points out that achievements in the direction of universalisation of elementary education have remained unsatisfactory. The tardy development in this respect is attributed, by the document, to (a) limited access to schools of children; (b) inadequate facilities in schools which are accessible such as (i) absence of pucca buildings, (ii) inadequate teaching aids like chalks, blackboards, furniture, etc. (iii) shortage of teachers where a single teacher is supposed to educate three or four classes, (iv) the incapacity of the curriculum to answer the needs of pupils, (v) ignoring of new teaching methods, particularly in the teaching of natural sciences; (c) lack of motivation of parents to send their children to school; (d) paucity of financial resources as reflected by the decline in the total expenditure per child per year.

The identification of these factors as the causes for tardy progress in the sphere of universalisation of elementary education is like the experiment of a godman called Mahesh Yogi. This Yogi is known to have summoned his disciples on a high platform one day to train them in the art of flying without wings. The disciples were pushed from the high altitude into the air, they fell on the ground and broke their limbs. When Mahesh Yogi was accosted to explain his bizarre experiment, he accused his disciples for their imperfect meditation. The Yogi ought to have known that, in the case of physical objects, the power of earth's gravitational pull is stronger than the power of meditation. Similarly, the educational planners should know that access to education is not related to the mere expansion of facilities but to the creation of conditions for availing these facilities. It should also be known to them that the question of creation of the desired conditions lies outside the realm of education and thus calls for basic changes in the socio-economic formation.

The document seeks to achieve universal education through adult education, spreading literacy through nonformal channels, imparting the three R's with vocational education, etc. In a nutshell the expansion of educational opportunities to cover the remotest area and the most disadvantaged sections is seen as an adequate method to universalize education. The emphasis on this method ignores the insufficient orientation among the poor, semi-employed and similar unprivileged sections of society for availing educational opportunities because education does not guarantee gainful employment and in some cases (for example, homes of artisans) children are badly required as helpers to ensure bare subsistence.

The emphasis on the expansion of educational opportunities also ignores the cultural and ideological factors which dissuade parents from sending their children for education. For example, the 'Harijan' landless labourers under the influence of casteism and the 'Muslim' menial workers under the influence of communalism may not even attempt to enrol their children in a school as they may be convinced that

their religious or caste affiliation will lead to discrimination against them in school and thereafter in the sphere of employment.

The document aptly recognises wide disparities among social groups. But it calls for expansion of opportunities for one and all, without specifically attending to the dire needs of the unprivileged sections. The result of such an approach is most likely to further benefit the privileged sections of society and thereby perpetuate disparities. On the contrary, the educational policy needs to provide separate educational programmes for wage-earning and poor people as compared to privileged sections.

The document suggests that community leaders and voluntary organisations can help the attainment of universalisation of elementary education and improvement in the equality of education by: (a) motivating people; (b) acting as watch-dogs on the performance of teachers and of schools; and (c) facilitating the formulation of curriculum.

Another suggestion advanced for the same purpose is the opening of district education centres. The suggestions for decentralisation are welcome. But how will community leaders, voluntary organisations and district level education centres be effective? Have not our existing local self-government bodies been rendered redundant and voluntary organisations made to lose their autonomy?

The document suggests that a model school should be set up in the Central sector in every district of the country to achieve equity, particularly in rural areas, and to impart quality education to meritorious students, irrespective of the socio-economic status of their parents. The existing parameters of merit and the methods of evaluating academic achievement are more likely to favour the children of privileged sections. This effort will be yet another means of taking privileges to the door of the privileged sections.

It is interesting that the document has avoided reference to the large number of indigenous educational institutions engaged in imparting elementary education. Broadly, the types of institutions imparting elementary education are –

- (i) Institutions sponsored and aided by religious organisations, comprising *Maktabas*, *Madrassas*, *Gurukuls* and *pathshalas*.
- (ii) Institutions sponsored by religious organisations but aided by the State Government; Islamia schools, Arya schools, Sanatan Dharma schools, Khalsa schools and Convent schools.
- (iii) Institutions run by private bodies with the so-called modern facilities: Public Schools and Model Schools.
- (iv) Institutions run by the Government: Government schools and Kendriya Vidyalayas.

The first two categories of institutions enrol considerably a lot of students by the document does not want to notice them. The need is to conduct an exhaustive study on the content, quality, need and relevance of the education imparted by these

institutions. It may be further desirable that the educational planners assign some role to this sizeable sector of teaching or disband it altogether.

A suggestion is also made in the document for adult education so as to achieve universalisation of education because it is generally thought that illiterate parents are averse in schooling their children. But adult education is to cover the same illiterate parents who deny schooling to their children. So, who will bring these unwilling parents to attend adult education programmes on whose success the universalisation of education, also adult education, so largely depends? (1.30 and 3.17).

Vocationalisation of Education

Vocationalisation as envisaged in the Education Policy of 1968, could not be successful due to:

- (a) the weakness of the work-experience component secondary education (3.28);
- (b) the lack of professionalism in curricula formulation, selection of courses and training of teachers 93.29);
- (c) the students undergoing vocational education were mostly less intelligent and academically poor (3.28);
- (d) the courses lacked prestige and, therefore, could not attract power (3.27);
- (e) the treatment of vocational education and manual work as inferior by society at large (1.27).

The integration of vocational and technical education with different stages of learning raises the following society issue. The children of privileged sections can afford to undertake advanced courses in professional learning, and acquire technical excellence even before seeking employment, in which case their occupational performance is likely to be much better. Whereas the children of the unprivileged sections are forced by circumstances to seek employment first, and later pursue advanced learning simultaneously, in which case their occupational performance will be comparatively worse. How will integration, therefore, help the unprivileged sections?

On the other hand, the imparting of vocational education through independent institutional arrangements is likely to deflate further the prestige and power attached to these courses because even while they are an integral part of the +2 stage these courses remain unattractive to the talented, meritorious and socially privileged pupils.

In the absence of dignity of labour as a value, these independent arrangements may not help in elevating the status of vocational education. The dignity of labour involves two main principles: (i) doing manual work with one's own hands; (ii) not looking down upon the acquisition and sale of skills perceived to be inferior, particularly by those belonging to privileged sections.

The privileged sections shall not opt for skills perceived to be inferior. This is because power and prestige is attached to certain skills whose importance is determined by ideology and scarcity value. Only the academically poor and less intelligent students who mostly belong to the lower strata of urban and rural population, will join the courses on skills perceived to be inferior, as is happening now. The prolongation of such a situation will further devalue the prestige of the programmes for vocationalisation and will, thereby, perpetuate disparities among different section of society.

Further, the tendency of imparting vocational educational merely to augment the income of existing wage-earners and prepare potential wage-earners and to improve the efficiency of low and middle level supervisors is fraught with the following anomalies. The reduction of human being into a resource available for any use by anyone is contrary to making a thinking and creative human being. The resolution of this paradox of reducing beings into a resource and of making them human beings should command the attention of those eager to march India into the 21st century. The educational planners must consider the imparting of the following along with vocational education –

- (a) high level of general and political education and physical training for building the collective spirit;
- (b) spirit of questioning to erase the centuries-old mentality of obsequious submission fostered for centuries by colonial and feudal tyrants;
- (c) aesthetic education (including Music, Theatre, Literature, Cinema, Pictorial Arts) for education of human emotions and tempering the human will;
- (d) discipline for overcoming future hardships and making consistent efforts to achieve social goals but not for instilling fear (as is most often done). (For details, see Anatoli Lunacharsky (1981) *On Education* Progress Publishers).

In addition to this, vocational education should be integrated with institutions for higher technical education and production centres so as to ensure continuity and efficiency of vocational education and also for the proper absorption of those trained in vocational education institutions.

It should not be overlooked that social inequalities impose constraints on the utility of vocationalisation of education and the privileged sections will continue to monopolise 'superior' skills unless far-reaching socio-economic changes are brought about.

Higher Education

The document has not sufficiently highlighted certain issues pertaining to higher education. Higher education in India caters to just 6 per cent of those entering the education system, is unevenly distributed among different sections of people, teaching oriented and not learning and research oriented, is imitative of the West and suffers from deformities of the colonial past, is not innovative so as to respond to

the existing socio-economic specificities, is biased in favour of individual excellence and not collective excellence, etc.

Further, the system of higher education is characterized by:

(a) Students most of whom have a middle class background and have high aspirations which cannot be generally realized in actual practice due to the low level of development, in agriculture and industry, and also due to the non-recognition of the right to work. This creates conditions for widespread Bohemianism, alcoholism and debauchery among students of higher middle-class background and hooliganism among those with a lower middle class background.

(b) Curricula are oriented towards technical expertise in professional courses, narrow specialization in social science courses and non-applied content in natural science courses, specially in degree colleges and universities. This partial training is inadequate and students undergoing it fail to comprehend and transform the processes of nature and society.

(c) Sizeable expansion at under-graduate level has created a vast reserve of people fit only to perform clerical jobs. These jobs were rated highly during colonial times and continued creation of a reserve is adding to the number of unemployed and unemployable citizens. It is disheartening to note that whereas under-graduate educational opportunities have sizeably increased, those for post-graduate education have declined and for the much needed agriculture, social service and health education have not increased proportionately.

(d) Qualitative teaching and physical facilities are concentrated in some institutions which are islands of elitism and are accessible to only a small segment of advanced learners, most of whom belong to the already privileged sections. The document also points out that the rural areas have been touched marginally by higher education of quality (3.31). In the wake of this fact, the document suggests that higher education needs to be de-subsidized and tuition fees at this level may be increased (3.40). This is an honest admission that inequalities permeate society. But the suggestion for a hike in fees is unbecoming as it implies that if the children of unprivileged sections do not avail the facilities of higher education at present, their claim to do so in future should also be denied.

Concluding Remarks

The prospective education policy should redefine its goals which are desirable and achievable. No education system can, per se, abolish inequalities, and unemployment or exterminate exploitation. At its very best, the education system can create an awareness about the prevalence of these social ills.

The document has rightly suggested that education cannot function in isolation from other spheres of society. So, the prospective education policy should not be announced in advance and should form a part of total planning and policy declarations.

The focus of the policy should be on realization of goals rather than on achieving targets. A goal oriented policy will highlight better the necessity of educating people rather than counting literates among them. Literacy for literacy's sake is counter-productive.

In addition to this the formulation of curriculum should be preceded by the identification of values which correspond to the existing socio-economic reality and the envisaged vision of future society. In this connection, the curriculum may include the conceptual, theoretical and practical aspects of issues like communalism, fatalism, religious fanaticism, corruption, black money, etc. The teaching-learning environment should evolve a form which has a social proximity to the pupils both in terms of its idiom and medium. For example, instead of merely using resources of English to create and disseminate knowledge, indigenous mother-languages should be used to refine our linguistic tools to find native equivalents of modern concepts. The local dialects and regional languages should be developed more thoroughly before slogans are raised to disseminate them.

The suggestion for decentralisation of the educational system by taking district and block as the unit of planning and implementation should take into account the socio-economic and cultural specificities. This may necessitate a re-demarcation of the existing administrative units.

There is a vital need to enunciate separate policies and implement programmes which cater to the specific requirements and aspirations of under-privileged sections of society.