

THE CHALLENGES FOR INDIA'S EDUCATION SYSTEM

Dr. Manju Badhwar
Principal
Satpriya College Of Education
Rohtak

India's education system turns out millions of graduates each year, many skilled in IT and engineering. This manpower advantage underpins India's recent economic advances, but masks deep-seated problems within India's education system. While India's demographics are generally perceived to give it an edge over other countries' economies (India will have a youthful population when other countries have ageing populations), if this advantage is restricted to a small, highly educated elite, the domestic political ramifications could be severe. With 35 per cent of the population under the age of 15, India's education system faces numerous challenges. Successive governments have pledged to increase spending on education to 6 per cent of GDP, but actual spending has hovered around 4 per cent for the last few years. While, at the top end, India's business schools, Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) and universities produce globally competitive graduates, primary and secondary schools, particularly in rural areas, struggle to find staff. Indian governments have seen education as a crucial development tool.

The first part of this paper provides a historical perspective on the development of the education system in India, highlighting the changing emphases within government policy. Since Independence, the education policies of successive governments have built on the substantial

legacies of the Nehruvian period, targeting the core themes of plurality and secularism, with a focus on excellence in higher education, and inclusiveness at all levels. In reaching these goals, the issue of funding has become problematic; governments have promised to increase state spending while realizing the economic potential of bringing in private-sector financial support. The second part of this paper examines how recent governments have responded to these challenges, which have remained largely unchanged since Nehru's era, despite the efforts of past governments and commissions to reform the Indian education system. Attention will be paid to more recent policy initiatives, both those of the previous BJP-led administration and the proposals of the current Congress-led United Progressive Alliance. It will become clear that the same difficulties that existed nearly sixty years ago remain largely unsolved today – for example, the need to safeguard access to education for the poorest and most disenfranchised communities of India.

The evolution of India's education policy Elitism, Nehruvianism and development Traditional Hindu education served the needs of Brahmin families: Brahmin teachers would teach boys to read and write. Under the Moguls, education was similarly elitist, favouring the rich rather than those from high-caste backgrounds. These pre-existing elitist tendencies were reinforced under British rule. British colonial rule brought with it the concept of a modern state, a modern economy and a modern education system. The education system was first developed in the three presidencies (Bombay, Calcutta and Madras). By linking entrance and advancement in government service to academic education, colonial rule contributed to the legacy of an education system geared to preserving the position and prerogatives of the more privileged. In the early 1900s, the Indian National Congress called for national education, placing an emphasis on technical and vocational training. In 1920 Congress initiated a boycott of government-aided and government-controlled schools and founded several 'national' schools and colleges. These failed, as the rewards of British-style education were so great that the boycott was largely ignored. Local elites benefited from the British education system and eventually used it to expel the colonizers. Nehru envisaged India as a secular democracy with a state-led command economy.

Education for all and industrial development were seen as crucial tools to unite a country divided on the basis of wealth, caste and religion, and formed the cornerstones of the antiimperial struggle. Following Independence, school curricula were thus imbued with the twin themes of inclusiveness and national pride, placing emphasis on the fact that India's different communities could live peacefully side by side as one nation. The legacies of this Nehruvian approach to education are considerable; perhaps most notable is the entrenchment of the pluralist/secularist perspective in the minds of the Indian people. Subsidized quality higher education through institutions such as the IITs and IIMs formed a major contribution to the Nehruvian vision of a self-reliant and modern Indian state, and they now rank amongst the best higher education institutions in the world. In addition, policies of positive discrimination in education and employment furthered the case for access by hitherto unprivileged social groups to quality education. It has been argued that while access for some marginalized communities continues to be limited, the upward mobility of a few Dalit and tribal households resulting from positive discrimination in educational institutions and state patronage has created role models that help democracy survive in India.

The Kothari Commission: Education for modernization, national unity and literacy Drawing on Nehru's vision, and articulating most of his key themes, the Kothari Commission (1964–6) was set up to formulate a coherent education policy for India.¹ According to the commission, education was intended to increase productivity, develop social and national unity, consolidate democracy, modernize the country and develop social, moral and spiritual values. To achieve this, the main pillar of Indian education policy was to be free and compulsory education for all children up to the age of 14. Other features included the development of languages (Hindi, Sanskrit, regional languages and the three-language formula²), equality of educational opportunities (regional, tribal and gender imbalances to be addressed) and the development and prioritization of scientific education and research. The commission also emphasized the need to eradicate illiteracy and provide adult education. India's curriculum has historically prioritized the study of mathematics and science rather than social sciences or arts. This has been actively

promoted since the Kothari Commission, which argued that India's development needs were better met by engineers and scientists than historians. The perception has remained that students only study social science or arts subjects as a last resort, though recently commerce and economics have risen in stature. The need for change: the National Policy on Education In 1986, Rajiv Gandhi announced a new education policy, the National Policy on Education (NPE), which was intended to prepare India for the 21st century. The policy emphasized the need for change: 'Education in India stands at the crossroads today. Neither normal linear expansion nor the existing pace and nature of improvement can meet the needs of the situation.'

According to the new policy, the 1968 policy goals had largely been achieved: more than 90 per cent of the country's rural population were within a kilometer of schooling facilities and most states had adopted a common education structure. The prioritization of science and mathematics had also been effective.

However, change was required to increase financial and organizational support for the education system to tackle problems of access and quality. Other problems also needed addressing: India's political and social life is passing through a phase which poses the danger of erosion to long accepted values. The goals of secularism, socialism, democracy and professional ethics are coming under increasing strain. The new policy was intended to raise education standards and increase access to education. At the same time, it would safeguard the values of secularism, socialism and equality which had been promoted since Independence. To this end, the government would seek financial support from the private sector to complement government funds.

The central government also declared that it would accept a wider responsibility to enforce 'the national and integrative character of education, to maintain quality and standards'. The states, however, retained a significant role, particularly in relation to the curriculum. The central government committed itself to financing a portion of development expenditure, and around 10

per cent of primary education is now funded under a centrally sponsored scheme. The key legacies of the 1986 policy were the promotion of privatization and the continued emphasis on secularism and science. Another consequence of the NPE was that the quality of education in India was increasingly seen as a problem, and several initiatives have been developed since in an attempt to counter this:

- Operation Blackboard (1987–8) aimed to improve the human and physical resources available in primary schools.
- Restructuring and Reorganization of Teacher Education (1987) created a resource for the continuous upgrading of teachers' knowledge and competence.
- Minimum Levels of Learning (1991) laid down levels of achievement at various stages and revised textbooks.
- National Programme for Nutritional Support to Primary Education (1995) provided a cooked meal every day for children in Classes 1–5 of all government, government-aided and local body schools. In some cases grain was distributed on a monthly basis, subject to a minimum attendance.
- District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) (1993) emphasized decentralized planning and management, improved teaching and learning materials, and school effectiveness.
- Movement to Educate All (2000) aimed to achieve universal primary education by 2010 through microplanning and school-mapping exercises, bridging gender and social gaps.
- Fundamental Right (2001) involved the provision of free and compulsory education, declared to be a basic right for children aged between 6 and 14 years. Other schemes specifically targeted at marginalized groups, such as disabled children, and special incentives targeting the parents within scheduled castes and scheduled tribes have also been introduced. In 1992, when education policy was re-examined, the NPE was found to be a sound way forward for India's education system, although some targets were recast and some re-formulations were undertaken in relation to adult and elementary education. The new emphasis was on the expansion of secondary education, while the focus on education for minorities and women continued. The development of non-formal education Despite Nehru's visions of universal education, and the intentions of the

Kothari Commission to provide all young children with free and compulsory schooling, a significant proportion of India's young population remained uneducated by the 1970s. To address this problem, the Centrally Sponsored Scheme of Non Formal Education was set up to educate school dropouts, working children and children from areas without schools. It started on a pilot basis in 1979 and expanded over the next few years to cover ten educationally backward states.⁸ In the 1980s, 75 percent of those children not enrolled in school resided in these states.

The 1986 National Policy on Education built upon this scheme and recognized that a large and systematic programme of non-formal education was required to ensure access to elementary education. The NPE developed the system of non-formal education, and expanded it to urban slums and other areas beyond the initial ten states. It also revised the system, involved voluntary organizations and offered training to local men and women to become instructors. For instance, the Non-formal Adult Education for Women based in Lucknow (UP) opened 300 centres in rural areas with financial support from UNESCO. As a result of many such local programmes, literacy rates improved significantly between 1981 and 1991: male literacy increased from 56.5 per cent to 64.2 per cent while female literacy increased from 29.9 per cent to 39.2 per cent.⁹ Current challenges and proposals for reform Primary and secondary education: access, quality and literacy Despite efforts to incorporate all sections of the population into the Indian education system, through mechanisms such as positive discrimination and nonformal education, large numbers of young people are still without schooling. Although enrolment in primary education has increased, it is estimated that at least 35 million, and possibly as many as 60 million, children aged 6–14 years are not in school. Severe gender, regional, and caste disparities also exist. The main problems are the high drop-out rate, especially after Class 10, low levels of learning and achievement, inadequate school infrastructure, poorly functioning schools, high teacher absenteeism, the large number of teacher vacancies, poor quality of education and inadequate funds. Other groups of children 'at risk', such as orphans, child-labourers, street children and victims of riots and natural disasters, do not necessarily have access to schools.

ENDNOTES

- 1 For a detailed analysis of the Kothari Commission, see R.N. Sharma, Indian Education at the Cross Road (Delhi: Shubhi, 2002).
- 2 By which all children learn Hindi, their state language and English.
- 3 P.D. Shukla, The New Education Policy (Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Ltd., 1988) p. 2.
- 4 Ibid., p. 3.
- 5 Ibid., p. 6.
- 6 For more details on the NEP and the problems of Indian education in the 1980s and 1990s, see N. Jayapalan, Problems of Indian
- 7 A. Ram and K.D. Sharma, National Policy on Education: An Overview (Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 2005), p. 1.
- 8 Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal.
- 9 http://www.indianchild.com/education_society_india.htm (accessed 15.09.04).
- 10 Nidhi Singal, Focus on Policy: India 2002, <http://www.eenet.org.uk/newsletters/news6/page10.shtml>.
- 11 <http://www.indiatogether.org/2004/jul/edu-kothari.htm> (accessed 15.09.04).
- 12 J. Dreze and A. Sen, 'Basic Education as a Political Issue', in B.G. Tilak (ed.), Education, Society and Development: National and International Perspectives (New Delhi: APH, 2003), p. 3.
- 13 J. Dreze and A. Sen, Indian Development: Selected Regional Perspectives (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 '... education itself is tending to increase social segregation and to perpetuate and widen class distinctions. At the primary stage, the free schools to which masses send their children are maintained by government and local authorities and are generally of poor quality. Some of the private schools are, on the whole, definitely better, but since many of them charge high fees they

are availed of only by the middle and higher classes. At the secondary stage, a large proportion of the good schools are private but many of them also charge high fees which are normally beyond the means of any but the top ten percent of people, though some of the middle class parents make great sacrifices to send their children to them. There is this segregation in education itself – the minority of private fee-charging, better schools meeting the need of the upper classes and the vast bulk of free, publicly maintained, but poor schools being utilised by the rest. What is worse, this segregation is increasing and tending to widen the gulf between the classes and the masses.’ <http://www.indiatogether.org/2004/jul/edu-kothari.htm>.

16 In 1992, Hindu extremists under the leadership of the BJP and other members of the Sangh Parivar demolished the Babri Masjid, a 15th-century mosque in Ayodhya. They claimed the mosque had been built over an earlier temple commemorating the birthplace of the Hindu god Ram.

17 The NCERT, though an autonomous body, draws up the national curriculum framework and publishes textbooks which are used as models by most state governments.

18 This attempt to ‘Indianize’ at the university level includes introducing courses such as Vedic rituals and Vedic astrology. Many of the country’s scientists and social scientists repudiate the latter as spurious science, and not particularly Indian. An appeal against the course is currently pending in the Supreme Court.

19 Judgment by Justice M.B. Shah, D.M. Dharmadhikari and H.K. Sema in Writ Petition (Civil) No. 98 of 2002, Ms Aruna Roy and others vs. Union of India and others.

20 Indian Express, 6 October 2002.