

Persistence and Crisis in Indian Education

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Introduction

In our globalising world, local and regional crises can be seen as reflections of a much larger global one. Yet, each concrete crisis will have its own peculiarities and these are often better understood in terms of their own historical roots rather than explained as the contemporary consequences of an ever interdependent world. This is certainly true of those crises whose origins predate our post-modern world. Our contention is that Indian education has been experiencing precisely such a crisis, and our attempt here will be to investigate its colonial origins and to trace the continuity and persistence of the system into our post colonial times.

The Colonial Origins

The India Act of "1813 was the first important landmark: in the East India Company's education policy", (Basu 1982: 91) for it included "a clause requiring the annual expenditure by the Directors of the East India Company of a lakh of rupees on education" (Report of the Commission on Christian Higher Education in India 1931: 63). Earlier the Company had refrained from such commitments, but now the earlier ban on private enterprise in education in its territories was lifted in 1815 (ibid). In 1833 the Company's allotment to education was increased to ten lakh rupees (Chamberlain 1899: 32). But the government's commitment was never adequate to the task.

For it adopted a 'downward filtration' approach as first proposed by Lord Auckland in 1839, and described by Nurullah and Naik thus:

"the Company was expected to give a good education (which then necessarily meant education through English) to only a few persons (these may or may not be from the upper classes) and leave it to these persons to educate the masses (through modern Indian languages)" (Nurullah and Naik 1951: 113).

The implicit class and caste bias of such an elitist policy was inevitable. It was only strengthened further by the adoption of Macaulay's minute
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of 1835 in favour of English as the medium for European learning. This effectively destroyed the old indigenous system of education and put the new western one decisively beyond the reach of the masses.

The Company's Education dispatch of 19th July 1854, called the Wood Dispatch, rejected this theory in principle, but

"replaced it with the doctrine of state withdrawal in favour of a system of grants-in-aid to privately managed institutions. The expansion of education became dependent on the private agencies who were willing to carry the burden which the government pleaded inability to bear" (Heredia 1981: 15).

Subsequent to the grants-in-aid code, "about a third of the cost of education was borne by the private agencies, two-thirds by the government" (Neill 1966: 102). This relieved the government of some of the financial cost and much of the organisational initiative in education, but it led to "the laissez-faire policy, enunciated by the Indian Education Commission (1882)", (Basu 1982: 108) also called the Hunter Commission.

The rapid expansion of education that resulted from this, caused serious concern to the government. Curzon tried to put some order and consolidate education with an emphasis on quality over quantity, but in spite of the Indian Universities Act of 1904, the Calcutta Universities Commission, chaired by Sir Michael Sadler in 1917 still found the system "fundamentally defective in almost every aspect" (Report of the Calcutta University Commission: 1917-19, 1919: 302). The demand for education especially western and English education, fuelled a rapid expansion by private agencies motivated by the desire of upward mobility for their respective caste and/or religious communities. Thus in 1967 J.P. Naik estimated that "85 percent of our colleges and 65 percent of our secondary schools are in the private sector" (Cited by Dickinson and Appasamy 1967: 123).

Following the missionaries, as each new group jumped on the educational bandwagon, the brahmins after 1882, the non-brahmins after 1921, the dalits with Ambedkar in the 1940s, and the adivasi seva mandals in the 1950s, government recognition and grants were demanded not on the basis of performance and quality, but on the principle of equality and non-discrimination (ibid 127). Later with education coming under the provincial and state governments, the politicisation and commercialisation of education certainly has not helped more worthy pedagogic or demo-

cratic purposes, but it has rather co-opted education to communal and commercial ones (ibid 125).

A unique feature of the official education policy in British India was its strict religious neutrality. This was according to Arthur Howell "absolutely without precedent or parallel elsewhere, besides being entirely opposite to the traditional idea of education in the East," or for that matter in Europe at the time as well (Cited by Ghose 1991: 57). The 'Pius Clause' for which Charles Grant agitated in England, was rejected by the Company's charter of 1793, and though the charter of 1813 and 1833 gave the missions greater freedom, the government retained its religious neutrality.

Thus in his farewell address to some missionaries Lord Bentinck in 1835 reaffirmed that "the fundamental principle of British rule, the compact to which the government stands solemnly pledged, is strict neutrality... with the religious beliefs of the students". The Wood Dispatch of 1854 forbade any religious instruction in government schools, and the Education Commission of 1882 reinforced this. Queen Victoria's famous proclamation of 1858 solemnly prohibited "all interference with religious belief or worship of any of our subjects, on pain of our highest displeasure" (ibid: 58).

We are not arguing here "that this religious neutrality was a question of moral conviction on the part of the government. Even people like Sir Charles Trevelyan, prominent in the educational controversies of the 1830s and Mounstuart Elplinstone, in Bombay, in spite of their secular credentials were more than just sympathetic to the missionary agenda in education. However, we would not agree that this religious neutrality was simply a matter of historical accident (Naik 1965: 85). Given the diversity and depth of religious affiliations in India, this was an obviously pragmatic political necessity. Indeed,

"this was unquestionably one aspect of British policy in India. All reasonable men took it for granted that the government should interfere as little as possible with the manners, customs and ideas of subjects whose loyalty was not and never could be more than precarious" (Neill 1966: 86).

The Relevant Implications

Here again with regard to the wider context of education in India we conclude with some tentative observations for further consideration.

Firstly, in spite of much liberal inspiration and many noble ideals, government educational policy failed in effective executive follow-up. It is interesting to note that although the Company officially accepted responsibility for public education in 1813, the government in England did so only in 1833 (Nurullah and Naik 1951: 270). But the difference in their delivery was one of the political will and vested interests involved. Other private Indian agencies in education were overly constrained by more narrow communal pre-occupations, and though the nationalist movement was the inspiration for some, it was never quite strong enough, in spite of Gandhi's challenge, to break free from the system they inherited and operated within.

Even the religious neutrality of the formal system was less a committed secularism than a political expediency and this tended to follow whichever way the political winds would later blow. For the grants-in-aid code readily allowed the public good in education to be coopted by private interests in the community.

Secondly, the new western institutional model and the English language through which it was implemented dismantled the old indigenous system of education and set back vernacular literacy. The overall literacy statistics tell the tragic story convincingly. Using literacy percentages as a vital indicator, we have the following figures for British India: 1881- 4.8%; 1891 - 5.6%; 1901 - 5.3%; 1911 - 5.9%; 1921 - 7.2%; 1931 - 9.5%; 1941 - 16.1% (Population of India 1989: 70).

Thirdly, not only was the expansion of the new education system unable to make up for the demise of the old one, it was itself inadequate to meet the needs of an industrial and an egalitarian society. The emphasis was on liberal not technical education, which existed more in intent than in effect. For as Lord Curzon himself admitted: "the plant of technical education in India, subsisted mainly on platitudes in vice-regal and gubernatorial speeches" (Basu 1982: 57). In sum "the low rate of literacy, neglect of mass education, as well as of technical and vocational education, and the methods of teaching, were all handicaps in the path of development" (Basu 1962: 21).

Moreover, higher education was extremely elitist a small tip of a pyramid with a very inadequate base. The focus here was on the transmission of knowledge, not its creation, and that too more in the arts than the

sciences, more generalists than specialist, more liberals than professionals.

And so like much else in the country at the time, Indian education continued to be a colonial appendage to the British system. In spite of, and partly because of the contribution of the missionaries and the role of other various agencies involved, Catholic or Protestant governmental or private, nationalist or communal it remained "a colony, intellectually, culturally and even spiritually subordinate to the West and England" (Mathew 1988: 156).

The Contemporary Context

However, with the political awakening of India and the freedom movement, there "was a growing awareness among British officials of the political dangers of English education" (Basu 1982: 66). This was a threat that put the government in an obvious dilemma with regard to education, specially at the higher level of the University. And yet, as Krishna Kumar insightfully argues, if "the concept of citizenship underlying the vision of the educated man in colonial India is examined in its ideological roots", (Kumar 16) a fundamental "homonym between the colonial and the nationalist views of the role of education" (ibid 42) is apparent.

For as the East India Company evolved into a colonial state, commercial exigencies had to be replaced by political socialisation with regard to its subjects. Towards this end, colonial education was to be more than an assembly line producing clerks; it was to train the student in moral uprightness before the law and to be a loyal subject of the colonial order. "The emphasis it placed on the formation of dependable habits concerning the use of time and space was directly related to the demands of factory life" (ibid 191).

Moreover, the very elitism of the system especially in higher education, could not but make the educated Indian feel as patronisingly towards the illiterate masses, as the colonial sahibs felt towards him. The argument between the government bureaucracy and the Indian intelligentsia was in fact over the claim to speak for the Indian masses. Would it be a Curzon or a Gokhale! (Nurullah and Naik 1951: 446). But at another level the "identification between the educated Indian and the colonial state consolidated the boundary walls around school knowledge" (Kumar 1991: 15) and left thus masses of India out

Thus, in spite of the high-minded rhetoric, what the nationalists did really achieve was less a change of political structure than a 'circulation of elites', political swatantrata — independence from British rule, not Gandhian swaraj — democratic self-rule, For the people, however, this only meant that the white sahibs were changed for darker ones. Indeed,

"It is worth asking which of the two roles of education was more influential in shaping the cultural and political life of India at the turn of the century - the role of strengthening group solidarity among the educated, or the role of disturbing traditional hierarchies. The first is rarely acknowledged, whereas the second has been highly over estimated" (ibid 36).

For an elitist system is best able to do the first, but only a mass-based one can achieve the second. This has not as yet happened in our country, certainly not with secondary or even primary education. On the contrary, the pattern of development has only accentuated the elitism and paternalism, the injustice and domination in the Indian state. In all this "the education system in independent India remained an agency contributing primarily to the maintenance of law and order" (ibid 19).

The nationalist promise of equality of opportunities for all Indians expressed itself in education as an irresistible demand for the expansion of the system, which was fuelled by the class/caste bias of vested interests, "who exploited the code for missionary purposes, profit, communal advantage or political gain" (Heredia 1981: 24). The social commitment to equitable access for weaker sections through reserved admissions for them is still being resisted on the grounds of 'merit', which is still defined by an examination system that in any case favours those, who already have a privileged access to the means to excel in it, with even further access and privileges. So "what really began as the dream of social transformation became a demand for avenues of upward mobility of individuals" (Kumar 1991: 194).

The anti-brahmin, and other backward caste movements in western and southern India did mobilise and broaden the educational base in society somewhat, and this augured well for the break down of traditional hierarchies. But soon enough the "transformational force" of these movements "was subtly neutralised by utilitarianism and channelised towards the task of creating a market society" (ibid). Eventually, these too settled down to secure their own communal advantage, with the consumerist allure of the market-place, leaving the other underprivileged and disadvantaged groups behind.

The radical alternative urged by Gandhi's 'basic education', which wanted to validated local skills and knowledge to make education self-sustaining, and to integrate it with the lives of the masses, was never given more than lip-service and such a half-hearted implementation, that it was almost deliberately predestined to fail. No wonder then the social equality and the economic development which education was to deliver for all, became increasingly problematic and is now in crisis. Hence,

"the first conclusion we may draw from this review and social analysis of the educational developments over the last thirty years of independence is that the old pre-independence systems and structure of education have, by and large, been maintained and continued.... The second conclusion that emerged is that while the system carries on in its obsolete fashion, a considerable expansion — a wider spread of education — has taken place" (Kamat 1989: 166).

Conclusion

Given this fundamental continuity between pre and post- independence education in India, one need hardly be surprised at its failure to contribute in a more significant way to the overall development of the country. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that one of the most underdeveloped aspects of this country is precisely its human resource potential because of the failure of its education system.

What we have evolved along the way is a dual system of education, repeatedly bemoaned yet eventually accommodated, i.e., limited access to quality education for a middle class elite, and less than universal availability of massive mis-education for the underprivileged masses (Heredia 1992: 21-23). Higher education is perhaps where such dualism is most acutely expressed, allocating high resources to some of urban elite institutions, while the lowly rural undergraduate colleges flounder. Today with increasing state withdrawal and privatisation in education, this duality can only be strengthened to the detriment of the country.

The dehumanising consequences of this tragedy are inescapable: the massive illiteracy, that renders innumerable people unemployable; the large scale school dropouts in the primary stages already, that makes child labour almost inevitable. Unless we can make education for all one of our topmost social priorities, unless we can find the political will and the creative imagination to mobilise the economic resources to operationalise and implement this priority, there seems to be little chance of a breakthrough in this persistent crisis. In fact what we are witness-

ing is a continuing breakdown of the system, which in several states in the country is now tumbling into chaos.

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