

Hurdles which make the po



This is election time and politicians should be selling dreams. But our politicians prefer to buy voters. They do not offer hopes of a better

future, but fears of a worse one. So, they peddle sectarian favours, not universal progress.

For instance, they could offer universal literacy, but will not. They can buy votes by offering reservation for not being literate. But the cure that intellectuals recommend is worse than the disease: they advocate compulsory education.

Ours is a polity where the most blatant criminality can flourish unchallenged, and yet they want to punish (send to prison?) poor parents for not sending children to school. That is misplaced concern for justice.

There is a case of a peon — of all places in a national think tank for school education; he, by simply being in government service, is financially in the top 20 per cent of the population. But he spends on drink and not on schooling. He doubtless deserves punishment, but for every

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such peon, a thousand others genuinely cannot afford to school their children. Should their poverty be punished?

As a brutally frank Bastar tribal once told me, if he sent his children to school, they will cease to work as tribals do. Leaving home — for a more uncertain future — they might get into bad company and into a poorer environment. He has a point. Will literacy offer better social and economic prospects? Better domesticity? Not as long as there is a surplus demand for the labour of illiterates, and a surplus supply of what neo-literates are willing to do. Our education produces more *babus* than the economy can support, and fewer productive Workers than the country needs. This imbalance makes education a questionable benefit for ones too poor to provide for their children. }

Intellectuals, meanwhile, are playing the well known parent-child game: they deem the poor to be ignorant children. Acting like parents, they want to dictate to the poor, punish them if they do not fall in line with what the intellectuals de-

side is good for them.

But intellectuals forget that parenthood carries responsibilities too, and they are not discharging such responsibilities — by for instance, providing their "children" with a secure economic and social future. Also, the greatest self-restraint should temper compulsion. As a thumb rule, unless some 99 per cent of the people accept the imposition willingly (at any rate, do not resist it), policing costs of compulsion will become excessive, and may exceed its benefits. So, before compelling the likes of the drunken peon, we should make education-attractive to the likes of the Bastar tribal.]

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But intellectuals forget that parent-hood carriers responsibilities too, and they are not discharging such responsibilities — by for instance, providing their "children" with a secure economic and social future. Also, the greatest left-restraint should temper compulsion. As a thumb rule, unless some 99 per cent of the people accept the imposition willingly (at any rate, do not resist it), policing costs of compulsion will become excessive, and may exceed its benefits. So, before compelling the likes of the drunken peon, we should make education attractive to the likes of the Bastar tribal]

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thing better, making them unattractive.

All this boils down to economic prospects. The country can afford vocational training, but not the bookish education favoured by our educators. But if many educators do want to promote vocationalisation, they are being ham-handed.

The problem lies with our thousands of years old casteism: the department of education will not inter-dine with the department of labour or of industry — they belong to different castes! Vocationalisation requires that these departments work together jointly, but as each department is determined to protect its own patch, that is quite impossible. Similarly, although educators are misfits in this, they too want to monopolise vocational training. Such training is best done by craftsmen, not academics; it is learnt best in the work place, not in class rooms. Vocational skill is an art requiring much practice. That is possible only in the work place. So, to make primary education attractive one must make middle school education produce what the economy

will support — production skills. Needed is a joint effort of academics and master craftsmen or, in other words, a sandwich of education and training — say, alternate weeks of schooling and training.

Such a sandwich system requires co-operation among several departments of government. That is one hurdle. It requires cooperation and mutual respect between academics and master craftsmen. That is a second hurdle. It also requires that parents be compensated for the sacrifice they make in letting children learn. Then, in villages, water and fuel should be made available free to the poor; for, it is mainly the responsibility of children to supply these goods to the family — for the price of boarding. In towns, cash earnings of working children may have to be compensated. So, vocational training should be a Earn-While-You-Learn scheme.

The massive additional funding, of around Rs 10,000 crore a year, that universal education needs is affordable, but requires that teachers and instructors must be chosen only on the basis of merit. That is not acceptable to our politicians; neither to our teacher unions. So, universal education remains a distant dream.