

# Universal Elementary Education Receding Goal

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***While non-formal education is helpful in creating the ambience for literacy, it is no substitute for formal elementary education. The focus has to be on structural reorganisation and functional remodelling of the formal system of elementary education and linking it with development programmes.***

THE 'Education for All' summit of nine high population countries, namely, Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan and India is going to be held in New Delhi on December 15 and 16. This is rather a follow-up of the World Conference on Education for All held in Jomtien in 1990 which adopted a declaration calling upon all member states and agencies to strive for achieving Education for All (EFA) by the year AD 2001. The government of India recently has released a document called *Education for All: The Indian Scene*. The document has discussed the status of EFA in India, EFA goals, strategy and programme. According to the document EFA in the Indian context would imply expansion of early childhood care and development activities, universalisation of elementary education (UEE) as a composite programme of access to elementary education for all children up to 14 years of age through formal or non-formal education programmes, drastic reduction in illiteracy, particularly in the age group 15-35, provision of opportunities to maintain, use and upgrade their education and facilities for skills development, creation of necessary structure and make education an instrument of women's empowerment and equality and improve the content and process of education to better relate it to the environment, people's culture and with their living and working conditions.<sup>1</sup>

All these are very good but looking back to the past experience one may not feel very hopeful. In fact, notwithstanding the rhetoric, there is hardly any reflexion of creative thinking in the document. It is rather an old story retold. One wonders if the policy-makers took note of the vast literature prepared by the nationalists and committees set up by state governments during the period of Provincial Autonomy and the researches done by the scholars since independence.

It is interesting to note that Central Advisory Board of Education on Post-War Educational Development came to the conclusion in the year 1944 "that a system of universal, free and compulsory education for all boys and girls between the ages 6 and

14 should be introduced as quickly as possible, but that in view of the practical difficulty of recruiting the requisite supply of trained teachers, it could hardly be done in less than forty years". The conclusion at that time was not liked by many nationalist leaders as according to them the nation could not wait so long for introducing universal and free elementary education. Though the reason stated by the CABE might not be adequate, the development since independence only proved how correct the conclusion was. The EFA document stated above acknowledges: "The need for a literate population and universal education for all children in the age group of 6-14 was recognised as the crucial input for nation building and was given due consideration in the Constitution as well as in successive five-year plans. This resulted in a manifold increase of spatial spread, infrastructural facilities increased coverage of various social groups; but the goal of providing basic education to all continues to be elusive".<sup>2</sup> It further states: "The projected population in the age group of 6-14 years, the target group for universal elementary education as on March 1991 was 153 million constituting about 18 per cent of the total population. Of this 51 per cent were boys and 49 per cent were girls. The projected population in the age group of 15-35 years, the target group of adult literacy programmes, is 254 million, constituting about 30 per cent of population in 1991."<sup>3</sup> It has also been estimated that the age-specific actual enrolment ratio would be about 75 to 80 per cent and that the out-of-school children in the age group 6-14 could be as high as 24 million. The estimated figure of working children below 14 years of age was 14.5 million comprising 5.5 per cent of the total child population.<sup>4</sup> However, the total enrolment at the higher primary or middle level (11-14) constitutes only about a third of the total enrolment at the primary level. This only indicates that we have still to go a long way for fulfilling the constitutional directives. If we take into account the problems of fictitious enrolment, drop-outs and quality of education the problem may appear almost insurmountable.

PROBLEM OF NON-PARTICIPATION

It appears that the EFA document emphasises providing universal facilities of education for the age-group 6-14 and upgradation of facilities. The problems of non-participation in the existing system of education which are considered to be crucial by many scholars, however, have not received due attention. It states: "Given the large number of children who do not participate in schools, non-formal education (NFE) assumes significance". It is doubtful if non-formal education as has been devised for the age group 9-14 is of much use. There is strong suspicion among many that the NFE has been devised to get away with the failure of ensuring universal elementary schooling for all the children in the age-group 6-14. There may be no doubt that NFE is less accountable than formal system on the one hand, and on the other, it makes the system further segregative. It is quite some time NFE is in operation but the outcome is surely not up to the expectation.

It is interesting to note that the National Policy on Education 1986, in a way, acknowledged the failure of universal elementary schooling for all children up to the age of 14 and legitimised non-formal education for out-of-school children so as to fulfil the constitutional directives. The NPE states: "It shall be ensured that all children who attain the age of about 11 years by 1990 will have had 5 years of schooling or its equivalent in the non-formal stream. Likewise, by 1995, all children will be provided free and compulsory education up to 14 years of age".<sup>5</sup> However, the NPE did not violate the constitutional directives by taking recourse to non-formal education as the Constitution did not specify what sort of education is to be provided for. Nevertheless, it is important to address the question why the elementary system of formal schooling failed and what are the reasons for believing that the non-formal stream will succeed. It is almost certain, however, that the goal stipulated in the NPE cannot be achieved by 1995.

The pertinent question implicit in the above discourse is why should one be motivated to five years or eight years of schooling or non-formal education as a terminal course. Educational discourses in India, it appears, have not paid the due attention to this question. Universal elementary education was accepted by the planners rather axiomatically till the World Bank provided us with a *raison d'être*, notwithstanding the fact that long before Gandhi had addressed the question while propounding his Basic Education scheme. The Basic Education scheme recommended by the Wardha Committee and accepted by CABE in 1944, with some modifications was quite significant as it was distinct from the existing continuous system of primary, middle and second-

ary education. It envisaged a terminal system of elementary education for the age-group 6-14, which was relevant for an agrarian country like ours. It is all the more interesting to note that during the period of Provincial Autonomy Congress governments of different states set up committees for reorganising the elementary education as a terminal system distinct from the colonial continuous system of education. However, all these hardly could influence the course of development after independence.

#### WORLD BANK PERSPECTIVE

In the 60s the World Bank propounded the human capital perspective and the rate of return theory got currency. Indian planners and policy-makers jumped on the bandwagon without considering how far these theories were appropriate for a country like ours. Even the name of the Ministry of Education was changed to Human Resource Development. Observations of a scholar on the theoretical basis of the World Bank's education policy may be worth noting in this connection. The scholar observed: "A generation after the model ceased to say that was new, they have persisted with demonstrating its soundness, despite the general acceptance outside the Bank that human capital perspectives are indeed useful when prevailing conditions are right... Bank analysis now boldly asserts extremely strong correlations in favour of increased educational expenditures, yet remains relatively silent on just what it is about education that makes people actually or potentially more productive, and which specific types of education are being referred to." He further observed: "More fundamentally, the Bank's continuing adherence to human capital theory reveals something of its stances about the meaning of development. In particular, it reveals a Bank that asserts an interest in fundamentals but which in reality avoids them. The Bank has very little to say about just what education does to make people more productive. It is dismissive of the cultural foundation of education".<sup>6</sup> P R Panchamukhi made an interesting observation while reviewing the researches done in India on economics of education. He observed, "the opportunity cost of schooling rather than returns from schooling are basic determinants of parental decision in a poor socio-economic context of India".<sup>7</sup> One may add that in certain situations a reverse process may operate. A little schooling or non-formal education in general stream may only further complicate the problems of weaker sections of society instead of helping them in augmenting their income or contributing in any way in raising the productivity, particularly in the agrarian sector.

It may be that for the convenience of the working children the non-formal education

has been devised. It is likely to reduce the opportunity cost for education. Yet it may not attract a large majority of out-of-school children unless they find the sort of education offered beneficial for them. It is obvious that much will depend on the relevance and quality of the type of education likely to be offered through the non-formal stream. EFA document does not say how it will be different from the existing formal system in terms of content and how the quality would be ensured when even the quality of formal elementary education is not beyond question. NPE said that non-formal education would be equivalent to formal education. The term equivalent means identical and equal in value. The question remains whether the existing formal elementary education is relevant for the children from the labouring classes who generally do not have any opportunity for pursuing education further.

In other words, can the existing formal elementary education which in the present continuous system is a step to secondary education, serve also as terminal education in the sense that it would be beneficial for those who would not pursue education further, in terms of higher rate of return or higher productivity? It may reasonably be argued on the other hand that the existing education up to elementary level only, in the main stream, is likely to alienate the children from labouring classes from the culture of labour and as a result complicate their problem further reducing their employability. It may not even act as a socialisation process favouring modernisation nor as a process of counter-socialisation. Instead, there may ensue a culture-chaos leading to social degradation.

It is in this connection a few words may be said about the findings of the 42nd round of National Sample Survey regarding the reasons for non-participation in the existing programme of elementary education. It has been found that in rural areas only about 10 per cent of 'never enrolled' children did not enrol themselves for want of schooling facilities, 46 per cent of the non-enrolled could not be enrolled because of various economic reasons including domestic chores while about 29.46 per cent were not enrolled as they were not interested in education. Likewise, percentage distribution of drop-outs by reasons for discontinuance shows that 50.83 per cent dropped out for various economic reasons, 16.29 discontinued because of failures while 26 per cent dropped out for lack of interest in education.<sup>8</sup> The scene in urban areas also is not very different. It may be noted that lack of interest in education appears to be one of the major reasons for both non-enrolment and drop-outs, though participation in household economic activities and other economic reasons together causes the largest number of drop-outs and non-enrolments.

However, lack of interest in education may have some economic bearing as well. In fact, lack of interest in education is a broad category which may need some elucidations.

In the absence of any visible economic benefit people may lose interest in education. In other words, lack of interest in education may be due to uncertain economic return particularly from terminal elementary education. Toiling people in less advanced rural situations may not find any use of the existing elementary education. Agrarian relations in many areas may even discourage the toiling people to go for education. The culture content of the elementary programme may also act as a deterrent. It may make children shy of soiling their hands. On the other hand, landholding employers may not like to employ educated labour lest they create labour problems by asserting their rights. One study in West Bengal found that 53.77 per cent of the respondents belonging to higher strata, namely, jotedars, rich peasants and upper middle peasants opted for employing illiterate field labourers in preference to literate labourers. In fact, 46 per cent of the respondents belonging to higher strata, opined that field labourers would feel shy to work as labourers if educated while 61.97 per cent feared that the field labourers would demand higher wages if they received rudiments of education and 38.20 per cent opined that labour relations would deteriorate.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, the lower strata also were not favourably inclined towards universal compulsory elementary education. In fact, quite a large number of studies on problems of non-participation found that social, economic and other variables external to school education were more important than internal variables like quality of schools in terms of school buildings, teachers and other facilities.

It may be erroneous, however, to pose the problem of lack of interest in education to be either supply-side or demand-side constraints as has been done in the EFA document. The complexity of the problem is beyond such a straitjacket management approach. Both supply and demand sides constraints are implicit in the problem of lack of interest. However, there is no doubt, that the existing programme of elementary education did not appear attractive enough to a large number of children. The total literacy campaign as in progress may have created some sort of urge for education among large sections of toiling masses but it is yet to be seen if the swelling tide would get transformed from temporary euphoria to sustainable reality. As a strategy distinct from the traditional schooling system, TLC may have been proved to be effective in rousing interest at a certain level but it cannot be the substitute for universal elemental schooling.

It is interesting to note that successive commissions on education could hardly suggest any radical departure from the beaten track. It is all the more interesting that though a number of education commissions have been set up since independence, none has been set up exclusively for examining the issues involved in universal elementary education. The first commission was on university education, the second was on secondary education while the third was on education as a whole. It is no wonder that elementary education as a distinct course and structure terminal in itself did not occur to any of these commissions.

The structure of school education proposed by the Secondary Education Commission of 1952-53 failed to recognise elementary education as a distinct course. According to the commission, "The period of secondary education covers the age group of about 11 to 17 years". It recommended that secondary education "should commence after a four or five years period of Primary or Junior Basic education and should include (a) the Middle or Senior Basic or Junior Secondary Stage of three years and (b) the Higher Secondary stage of four years".<sup>10</sup> The report of the Education Commission of 1964-66 also did not recognise elementary education as terminal course, but recommended "ten years of general education which may be subdivided into a primary stage of 7 to 8 years (a lower primary stage of 4 or 5 years and a higher primary stage of 3 or 2 years) and lower secondary stage of 3 or 2 years of general education or one to three years of vocational education."<sup>11</sup> It also suggested that first public external examination should come at the end of the first 10 years of schooling. It may be noted that both the commissions virtually adhered to the existing pattern of primary and secondary education though a higher primary stage for the 11 to 14 age-group has also been mentioned by the Education Commission 1964-66. In fact, the primary and higher primary have been conceived as stages of 10 years of general education. The only change in the structure of school education which received serious consideration by both the commissions was the introduction of higher secondary courses. In the process the agenda of universal and free compulsory education got blurred. The Education Commission, however, recommended that to fulfil the constitutional directives, "Five years of good and effective education should be provided to all children by 1975-76 and 'Seven years of such education should be provided by 1985-86". It stated, "for the vast (majority of pupils there would be a single curriculum from class I to class X, ending with the first external or public examination". It is clear that the

commission followed the general pattern traditionally in vogue.

It may be noted that the Constitution stipulated a time-frame of 10 years for achieving universal education for all children up to the age of 14 years. Later the time was extended to 16 years. The Education Commission allowed a further extension of the time limit and set 1985 as the target date. NPE 1986 pushed the target to 1995. The EFA document pledged to complete the unfinished task by AD 2001. However, no serious attempt has been made to trace the reasons for the failure to achieve UEE so far. Even the rationale behind setting a new target date has not been put forward.

It is all the more interesting that meanwhile higher and secondary education grew at a faster rate than elementary education both in terms of numbers of pupils and schools. Over the period 1950-83 number of institutions dealing with elementary educations, i.e., primary and middle schools, grew at the rate of 3.3 per cent per annum while secondary and higher level educational institutions grew at a rate of more than 6 per cent per annum. Growth rate of enrolment at primary level was as low as 2.5 per cent per annum which was even below the age-specific population growth rate while the rate of growth of enrolment in secondary and higher level was 7.8 per cent and 9.7 per cent per annum respectively.<sup>12</sup> However, the scenario may have changed a little after the introduction of the Total Literacy Campaign. But the available data regarding the outcome of various NFE schemes may not be beyond question.

#### NOT BY GIMMICKS

The EFA document has coined the uncommon word 'Educational *Weltanschauung*' to appear distinct in approaching the challenges ahead. The gimmick apart, there is nothing significantly new in the approach. It reiterates the nation's commitment to complete the unfinished task by AD 2001. It warns, "But let there be no illusions. The task is stupendous and vast. However, the success of TLC has shown that it is possible to complete it if the intensity of mobilisation is sustained at least for a decade or so ... But this is not enough. The other conditions for success must be created and sustained. Among such conditions, three seem to stand out—an educational *Weltanschauung* that is harmony with EFA, adequate financial resources and management".

Interestingly, it quotes Gandhi to explain the failure of achieving UEE and makes a critic of past educational administration. It says, "Educational administration has long tended to be too preoccupied with provision of facilities—schools, school buildings and appointments of teachers to the neglect of the process required to make the system

work. There is enough empirical evidence on the mismatch between access and enrolment which casts doubts on the propriety of this institutional preoccupation. It is this exclusive concern with the facilities of schooling that was impugned by Mahatma Gandhi in his Chantham House Address.<sup>\*\*</sup> However, while quoting Gandhi out of context the document conveniently managed to ignore the significance of the alternative scheme of 'Nai Talim' proposed by him as self-sufficient institutions for mass education based on the principle of "Education through profit-yielding productive labour". It over-emphasises non-formal education as a new strategy but does not care to give some thought to the crucial question of the content of education. It states, "Nothing can bring about the perceptual changes faster than the development and dissemination of a viable and scalable model of non-formal education". As for management it harps on the usual decentralisation and effective monitoring. One, however, does not get any idea how a model of viable and scalable non-formal education would be developed.

It may be interesting to note the observation of the Ramamurti Committee for review of National Policy on Education 1986 in this regard. The Programme of Action for the National Policy on Education 1986 stated, "For their healthy development and to ensure that they enjoy conditions of freedom and dignity, the education system will strive to have all children in whole-time schools of good quality, and till that becomes possible they will be provided opportunities of part-time non-formal education". The Review Committee comments, "It is clear that the POA itself places NFE at a level lower than the formal school. A feeling widely persists, legitimately or not, that NFE is some kind of a second-grade education for the poor, while the formal school is meant for those who are relatively better off. This feeling has grown in the public mind notwithstanding the fact that formal schools themselves are in poor shape and provide, by and large, what can be fairly described as second grade education. The committee examined thoroughly the performances of NFE and could not find a viable and scalable model of NFE. It rather suggested that formal schools over a period of time be non-formalised in the following ways: "Shifting of the school timings to early morning hours, afternoons or late evenings, as per the convenience of the majority of children and in consultation with the village Education Committee and the Educational Complex; adjusting school calendar to agricultural activities, introducing child-centred approach; introducing ungraded class room; and relating content and process of learning with environment and life of the community". It also recommended that "The curriculum at the +2 level should not be allowed to determine the

content and process of education at the primary and middle school levels. The curriculum development for the primary and middle school stages should aim at evolving a self-sufficient model of knowledge, skills and attitudes so that the majority of children who would not proceed to the high schools would be fully equipped to enter the world of work and continue self-learning throughout life."<sup>13</sup> It is all the more interesting to note that the committee also quoted the Chantham House Address of Gandhi but did not omit the sentence "Our state would revive the old village schoolmaster and dot every village with a school both for boys and girls".<sup>14</sup>

One lesson we should learn from our past experience is that there is no short cut for achieving universal elementary education. Non-formal education is surely helpful for creating the ambience for literacy but it cannot be a substitute for formal elementary education. Notwithstanding the importance of non-formal education as a stop-gap measure, the focus should be on structural reorganisation and functional remodelling of the formal system of elementary education, and linking it with developmental programmes. The nation cannot shirk its responsibility of providing a truly accountable system of universal compulsory and free elementary education by AD 2001.

### Notes

- 1 Government of India, *Education for All*, Department of Education, 1993, p 6.
- 2 Ibid, p 8.
- 3 Ibid, pp 8-10.
- 4 Ibid, pp 20-22.
- 5 Government of India, *National Policy on Education*, 1986, Ministry of Human Resource Development, New Delhi, May 1986, p 12.
- 6 P W Jones, *World Bank Financing of Education*, Routledge, London and New York, 1992, pp 234-35, 237.
- 7 P R Panchamukhi, *Economics of Education in India: A thematic Review*, Centre for Multi-disciplinary Development Research, Karnataka, 1991, p 23.
- 8 National Sample Survey Organisation, *Sarvekshana*, Vol IX, No 3, Issue 46, New Delhi, 1991.
- 9 Poromesh Acharya, 'Education: Politics and Social Structure' in *Education and Process of Change*, Ratna Ghosh and Mathew Zachariah (eds), Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1987, p 73.
- 10 A L Mudaliar, *Report of the Secondary Education Commission*, Ministry of Education, New Delhi, 1965, pp 25-26.
- 11 D S Kothari, *Report of the Education Commission (1964-66)*, Ministry of Education, New Delhi, 1966, pp 616, 30.
- 12 Ministry of Education, *Challenge of Education*, 1985, Chapter II.
- 13 Ramamurti, *Towards an Enlightened and Humane Society*, report of the Committee for Review of the National Policy on Education, 1986, New Delhi, 1990, pp 159, 162, 169.
- 14 Ibid, p 133.