

# Living life tech-size

Consistency cannot be made a requirement of social policy in a democracy, as Kenneth Arrow's famous theorem has taught several generations of graduate students at the world's best universities. One wonders why Indian students in particular have managed to excel more than others in working out the dozens of variants of this exercise in social choice theory.

Could the reason be that Indian policies have been so routinely inconsistent that Arrow's impossibility theorem did not seem so counter-intuitive after all. Take the curious case of the national literacy mission on whose performance an expert committee chaired by Arun Ghosh has now reported.

Even as late as 1992, the central advisory board of education had endorsed the position that the national literacy campaign targeted to persons between 15 to 35 constituted the main plank of the literacy movement. The campaign had spread out to 275 districts of India covering an estimated population of 88 million. The approved expenditure till this day on the over 330 projects of the NLM is about Rs 5.6 billion.

An innovative and almost universally welcome feature of the project was the involvement of more than five million volunteers in the projects. They included social and political workers of many persuasions, not all of them necessarily belonging to the ruling parties.

All in all, the NLM has been an impressive new venture. But if one accepts the expert committee's report, it may not still have been a success story. This is not necessarily due to careless handling of the programme or the insensitivity to criticism that the NLM is now being accused of.

The NLM was bound to face problems in any case because presumably some persons in charge did not do their homework in 1992. It was in that year itself that India had also adopted the programme of educa-

tion for all as part of its national education policy. EFA, of course, is more holistic, logical and in line with the mandate of the Constitution.

Plain economics suggests that there may not be enough money in the kitty for both the NLM and the EFA. Ever since the Jomtien world conference of 1990, United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation and other international aid agencies have begun to favour education for all: programmes. Thus it no longer makes sense, either ideologically or pragmatically, to think in terms of investment in education for literacy alone.

It seems that in the battle of ideas between the total literacy and the EFA programmes it is the philosophy of the latter that is going to prevail. The NLM might even change to make it indistinguishable from the wider EFA movement. This will however not necessarily end the inconsistency syndrome in the national education policy.

## Education policies should match technological advancement, writes Tapas Majumdar

One question that is seldom raised in India's education policy confabulation is what form of literacy or basic education must Indians have to be able to live in a high technology society.

Literacy since the invention of paper had implied two kinds of ability. First, the ability to write by hand. Second, the ability to read the handwritten word. If this idea of literacy had persisted, many graduate students studying in the United States universities would have failed the first test, and some of their teachers the second. That they still thrive in the world of letters is because the typewriter and its successor, the word processor, in due course have ousted writing by hand almost completely in the American campuses. Literacy there now implies familiarity only with the printed word.

But this remarkable change has so far not proved crucially significant for an obvious reason. The Indian literate, defined by the census as having the ability to read a postcard, is not particularly disadvantaged *vis a vis* the US graduate. The printed word is easier to read for nearly everybody anyway. Moreover, the education for which literacy is supposed to be the foundation can, in principle at least, be the same for both kinds of literates. India might be behind the West in the literacy-education race, but not out of it.

The "new literacy" that the hi-tech society demands, however, is a different creature altogether. There is no getting away from the global dispensation that even a moderate rate of human development in 21st century India will depend on.

Having failed to impart the old kind of literacy to all for the last 50 years, India's basic education movement may now be poised for the big leap forward.

But it is probably once again shying away from the question about the form of education India would need for the kind of society it covets. If the question remains unasked and unanswered, chances are, all the hard work, organisation and resources notwithstanding, the country will end up on the wrong track.

It is difficult to say in which way new literacy is going to be radically different from the old. But the distinctive feature of high technology unfolding despite India's sluggish economic growth might provide a clue.

This is the almost endless capacity of technology to produce simple as well as complicated devices that have "information" embedded in them. These can be gadgets owned only by the relatively affluent to enrich their quality of life and used to provide the

modern infrastructure for transport, communication and education. These can also be brought to the use of Everyman man provided Everyman is taught to read the new symbols.

Hi-tech life of the 21st century probably will not require the average citizen to store human capital in the form of information in memory cells, or even in books and tapes. To an extent, it will live and grow in ntachines. Some might find it repulsive that the ability to read machines will have precedence over the ability to read sentences written or printed on paper. That however seems to be the most plausible fate that lies ahead of most countries including India. Literacy missions in the country must keep the future in mind.

Let me end this with a personal anecdote. A fellow countryman had walked upto me at a Paris railway station looking rather lost. He was plainly illiterate — or so I thought — and needed some help to fill out an Indian government form of some kind. He told me indignantly that one did not need to fill such difficult forms in France any longer and soon would not need to sign even cheques.

I smiled politely as I listened but did not quite believe him. Soon, I found it was my turn to ask for help. I had to confess to my own illiteracy of another kind. I did not know how to coax a journey ticket out of one of those fully computerised vending machines installed on some of the Paris railway platforms.

The man promptly showed me how to use one. He kept on asking me questions about my destination, preferred class travel and the approximate time I wanted to leave. He almost simultaneously kept pressing buttons, gracious to the end to the country bumpkin. The right ticket slid before my incredulous eyes in a moment. Soon I was on my train, leaving my "new literate" friend with the distinct feeling that I had just been a character in a latter day Leo Tolstoy story.