

Learning by degrees from

Education for all is only possible by decentralising the decision-making processes, writes **Tapas Majumdar**

The United Nations' Educational Social and Cultural Organisation's International Institute of Educational Planning at Paris and India's National Institute of Educational Planning, which is an autonomous organisation of the ministry of human resource development, had jointly organised an important workshop this August in New Delhi. Its purpose was to finalise the implementation strategy of district level planning in India.

As is well known by now, the Indian government had embarked upon its ambitious district primary education programme last year beginning trial runs in 43 districts of India in Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Assam, Haryana, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. It was thought expedient to take stock of the year's experience before embarking on the full programme covering all the 110 districts that had been selected for inclusion under it for the eighth plan period.

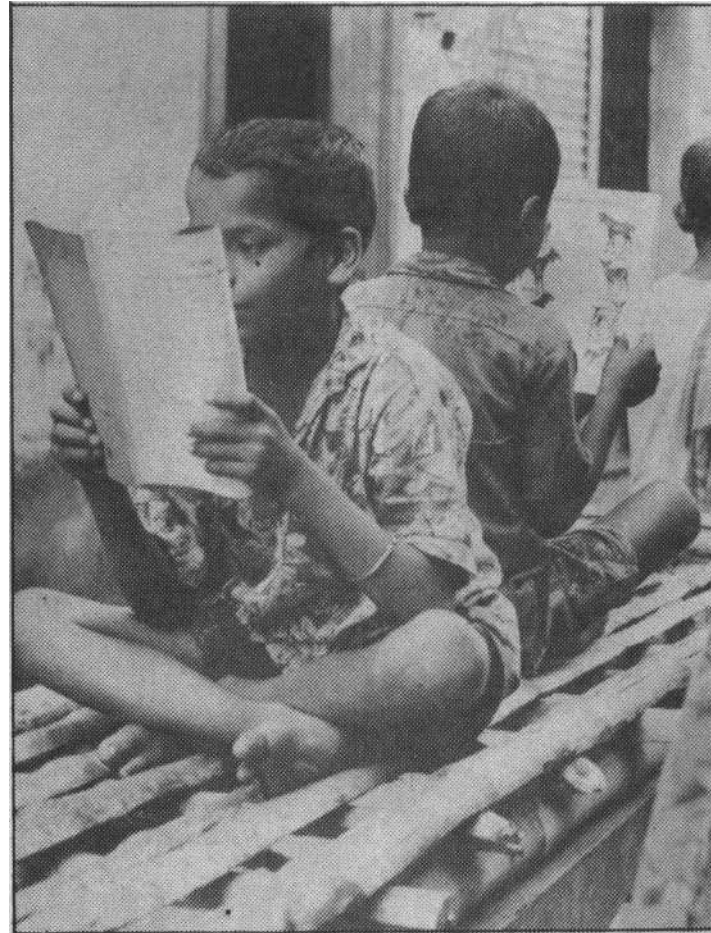
This was clearly the right thing to do. Except that the experience that was gained could not relate, for obvious reasons, to some of the basic questions that have to be addressed first. In saying this I do not wish to belittle the importance of what has been achieved, which came out clearly at the workshop. Almost for the first time, district education plans were made after detailed discussions and consultations at the local level and a fairly dependable feedback system between the grassroots primary schools, the district authorities and the DPEP headquarters was in the process of emerging. For the first time also one noticed dedicated professionals of the NIEP, and not only ministry bureaucrats being involved in this entire process.

But the basic questions still arise because two entirely new parameters have been introduced in the Central government's education for all, while their full political and social implications remain yet to be worked out through public debate. The first parameter is the role to be played by *panchayati raj* in educational planning and administration including recruitment, deployment and control of teachers and

The second parameter is the quantum of foreign assistance being inducted into the basic including primary education sector on a massive scale for the first time in the history of independent India. While we are entirely in a hurry to reach the 21st century ahead of other developing countries, there should have been time also to ponder whether rushing into decentralised planning of education with our negligible internal resources and without the necessary political and societal preparation, we are not going to compound in the present decade the hazards of the coming ones.

The first and more important of the two new parameters is possibly going to change the character of the Indian Constitution itself in a very significant way by adding another layer of democratic government to the functioning of the polity. The new third level of constitutional authority in the shape of the *panchayati raj* bodies is virtually created by the Constitution (73rd Amendment) and Constitution (74th Amendment) Acts of 1992. These now enable Article 243 of the Constitution to provide for bodies like the district planning committees and the metropolitan planning committees to deal with, besides certain other subjects, the planning and administration of education. Education thus becomes now a concurrent subject at three levels of democratically elected government—the Centre, the state and the districts.

The second new parameter—that of external assistance to India's basic education projects—is arguably temporary. But its sheer dimension both in absolute terms and in terms of the proportion of contribution it provides to a project should not go unnoticed. The total estimated outlay on the seven new projects in the basic education sector is Rs 29.26 billion for the eighth plan period. The expected flow of external resources for the support of this outlay is Rs 24.51 billion, which is about 84 per cent of the total. The DPEP alone claims Rs 19.50 bil-



Cartwheeling to erudition

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As one finds out at the end of every financial year, even spending a large amount of money honestly is a fairly difficult exercise. Spending it wisely as well may be doubly difficult for people in the panchayati raj institutions that are going to

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The speed and enthusiasm demonstrated by the Central ministry in this respect were obviously meant to be exemplary and expected to be infectious. One was, however, most

able to make out what the large body of the state education secretaries really thought of this part of the strategy of implementation. Particularly considering it would be they who would have to do the implementing even before the panchayati raj bodies and the district and sub-district planning committees to be organised have been placed in motion.

Another feature was the large and diverse international presence at the workshop. Apart from the specialists from the HEP headed by its director, there were representatives and professional experts from the donor agencies like the World Bank, the United Nations International Childrens' Emergency Fund, the UNESCO, the European Community, the Overseas Development Agency of the United Kingdom and the embassies of Sweden, the Netherlands and France. This is quite an impressive array of experts, though the significance of their presence on this scale was apparently lost, at least on the reporters covering the event, judging from what one read in the newspaper accounts subsequently.

The DPEP is rightly seen by the international funding agencies as the flagship of India's new education policy. But they have put some of their eggs in other baskets too. The DPEP is, of course, the major response to Jomtien 1990 but at least some of the other six projects are not only more compact but also more directly targeted in terms of the Jomtien call for education for all.

One example is Mahila Samakhyas, a project on education for women's equality through organisation of women's collectives. It covers 20 districts and has a total outlay of Rs 513 million, the whole of which is being covered by external assistance. Adoption of such projects show, as a member of the HEP pointed out, that it is for the first time the international community and hopefully the government of India too were taking an integrated view of the challenge of education for all, embracing formal schooling and education for special ly targeted sectors of the popu-

lation together and thereby also for the first time emphasis on the need for attaining a satisfactory quality of education in all its delivery systems.

It may be remarked that this is exactly what our Constitution had also demanded. But to use a fine distinction that Amartya Sen has made us familiar with, this is not necessarily what our society has demanded. The social will is the prerequisite of the political will in a democracy. Because it was wanting many of our solemn political promises have remained only our pious wishes.

There can be no doubt that the goal of education for all can then be pursued only by the eventual decentralisation of the decision making processes in the education sector. But this is not the same thing as only having a good district plan. We have to relate such a plan and its implementation to the various target groups. For that one must have a completely reliable system of democratically installing the panchayati raj apparatus, and then keeping its governmental components in place all the time, just as it happens at the Central or state levels.

The recent postponement of the panchayat elections in Uttar Pradesh, for example, may raise reasonable fears that the third tier of democracy introduces a new level of uncertainty at the district level. Decentralised planning and its implementation cannot obviously thrive on such fears.

It is entirely possible that at least some of these fears might prove to be exaggerated. At the end of the day, the main default of the DPEP might turn out to be no more than a simple time overrun.

There would still remain one basic danger that has to be faced in a large and fragmented society, more at the local municipal or village levels than at the aggregative state or national ones. This is the danger of society being forced to permit local obscurantist or casteist politicians to hijack education and use it for a blunt instrument of disintegration rather than a fine tool for the integration of Indian culture.

Not to have at least some doubts on that score, as panchayati raj begins to run education for all in this country, one has to be a very firm believer in the liberal myth that education always liberates the mind,