

Education in the UPA Government Common Minimum Programme

On the whole there is very little that is new on education in the Common Minimum Programme and hence it does not really contain an exciting set of proposals. But since it outlines the priorities of the UPA government, one has to take serious note of it. Being a mix of social, economic and political priorities, the document outlines some issues clearly, some vaguely, some less coherently and some are wanting in critical detail. Many important issues have been conveniently ignored altogether. Perhaps a CMP of a coalition cannot be otherwise.

JANDHYALA B G TILAK

The Common Minimum Programme (CMP), announced by the United Progressive Alliance of the present government is neither exciting, nor has it any new in it. But it is still an important document as it reveals the intentions of the present government, its main priorities, policies and programmes. At the same time, it should be noted that it is neither a plan, nor does it spell out the intentions of the government in detail.

The intentions of the government with respect to education development have been spelt out as six points under the section of 'Education' (and health); there are three more paragraphs in various other sections that refer to education; and there are a couple of other places where some important implications for education can be drawn. The various education promises made in the CMP can be classified into: (i) promises reiterated; (ii) promises repeated with marginal modification; (iii) promises that remain vague; (iv) issues that remain in background; and (v) other issues. This short article concentrates on a few important issues.

Promises Reiterated

The Elusive 6 Per Cent Goal

First, one of the most reiterated promises refers to spending at least 6 per cent of GDP on education. The share of education in national income is the standard indicator of national efforts on the development of education in a society. This reflects the relative priority being accorded to education in the national economy. On the recommendation of the Education Commission (1966), the government of India quantitatively fixed a target of investing 6 per cent of national income on education by the public exchequer by 1986. The goal remains elusive nearly 20 years after the target date. As a result, the goal first set down in the 1968 National Policy on Education, was reiterated in the 1986-1992 National Policy statements, in every subsequent Five-Year Plan and was announced even from the ramparts of the Red Fort. This is one of the glaring promises that continues to remain a goal repeatedly postponed, unfulfilled and often reiterated.

This proportion has increased from about 0.6 per cent in 1951-52 to about 4 per cent of GNP in 2001-02. It needs to be underlined that the current proportion is less than (a) the requirements of the system to provide universal elementary education of eight years for every child of the age-group 6-14, and consequent growth in secondary and higher education, as universalisation of elementary education in a comprehensive sense includes universal provision of resources, universal enrolment, and universal retention, and (b) the proportion of GNP invested in education in many other developing, leave alone developed, countries of the world, including in Africa. According to the *Human Development Report 2004*, India ranks 78th with respect to share of the public expenditure on education in GNP, among the 137 countries on which such data are available. India was devoting 4.1 per cent of her GNP to education (1999-2001). In comparison, a large number of countries spend more than 6 per cent, some more than 8 per cent and a few more than 10 per cent. Some of the countries, which spend more than 4 per cent of GNP on education, include countries, which are economically poorer than India. The target of spending 6 per cent of GNP for education still eludes, and unfortunately may continue to elude in the near future though there seems to be some consensus on this issue, as ironically manifestos of almost all political parties have stated so. The need to raise this proportion considerably needs no overemphasis. Almost all – from laymen to experts – plead for the same, though there are no detailed recent estimates on what should be the desirable and feasible proportion of GNP for education. The Kothari Commission had suggested that a higher (more than 6 per cent) would need to be allocated to education during the later period (after 1986).

The goal earlier set for accomplishment by the end of the 10th Five-Year Plan, is, according to the CMP, to "be done in a phased manner" and no clear date is fixed. An interesting point is that while in the recent years, attempts have been made by the government to interpret the goal to refer to total (public and private) expenditure, the CMP makes it clear that it will be 'public spending'. Secondly, international statistics like those of UNESCO

Figure 1: Growth in Public Expenditure on Education as Per Cent of GNP

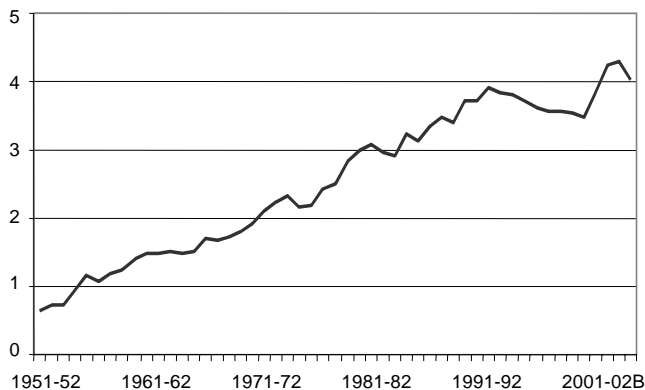


Figure 2: Education in the Budgets of the Union and State Governments (Per Cent)

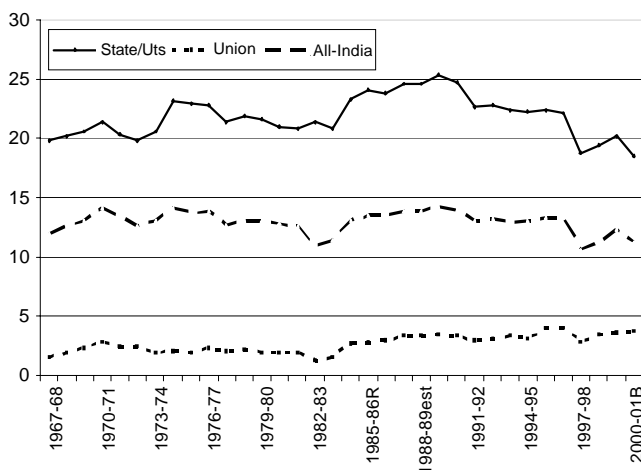
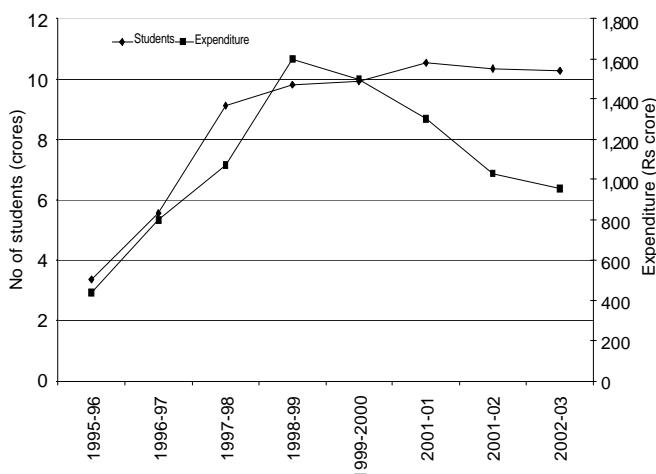


Figure 3: Midday Meal Scheme: Number of Children Covered and Allocation of Resources



and UNDP refer to the indicator as a proportion of GNP and not GDP. Though the Kothari Commission had simply stated national income, it would be better, if it is clearly defined as a proportion of GNP.

More importantly, the goal may remain elusive, unless a detailed financial plan is prepared. After all, both the union government and the states have a responsibility of fulfilling this promise.

Hence the financial plan has to indicate how the allocations to education in the union and states' budgets will be increased in 'a phased manner' so as to reach the goal. In the union budget, education accounts for less than 4 per cent of the total, and in the states' revenue budgets it has been stabilising around 20 per cent for the last several years. The total on the whole, seems to be stabilising around 10 per cent – declining from 14 per cent in the early 1980s to 11 per cent by the end of the last century. The expenditure on capital account in either budget is insignificant. In the absence of any detailed plan, the goal may continue to remain as a unfulfilled promise.

The CMP adds, in the same point of the agenda that at least half this amount will be spent on primary and secondary schools. Already, half to more than half of the total public expenditure on education is being spent on elementary education, as the goal in the recent years has been to spend at least half on elementary education. It would be better to stick to this goal, so that reasonable proportions are allocated to secondary and more importantly to higher education. What has not been explicitly stated earlier or now in the CMP is how much will be allocated to higher education.

The Midday Meal

Another important issue that the CMP has reiterated refers to the provision of nutritious noon-meals to all school children. The CMP promises that "a national cooked nutritious mid-day meal scheme, funded mainly by the central government, will be introduced in primary and secondary schools". The midday meal scheme, funded by the union government, is already being implemented in several states. So it is not introduction, that is needed but to strengthen the scheme, removing anomalies that are being reported. That midday meal improves the participation of children in schools and that it improves the nutritional standards and health of the children are well known and that it produces a variety of externalities in term of equity. Hence it is indeed a welcome measure that while according to the current scheme a meal is provided only to primary school children, and at best in some cases it is extended to upper primary school children, the CMP promises to provide it to primary and secondary school children. That is, it is being extended to the whole school system.

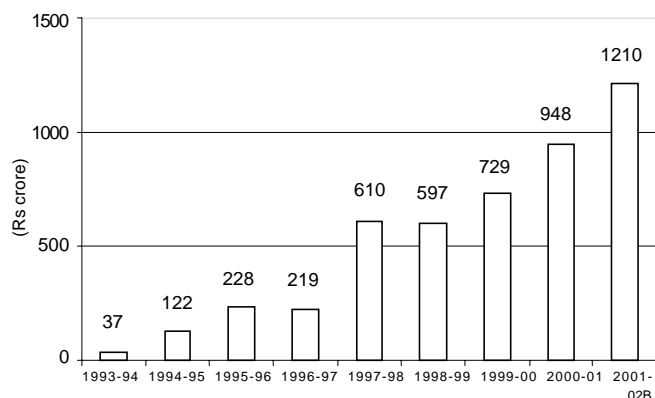
In recent years the allocations to the midday meal scheme have not been in consonance with the increasing enrolment. From 1998-99 onwards, in particular, the number of children covered by the scheme marginally increased; but the allocation of resources has declined quite steeply (even in current prices). The number of children covered by the scheme increased from approximately three crores in 1995-96 to about 10 crores in 2002-03; but the allocation has declined from about Rs 1,600 crore in 1998-99 to less than Rs 10 crore in 2002-03, indicating the non-seriousness of the government. We should hope that the UPA corrects such anomalies at the macro level, and helps in improvement of the functioning of the scheme at the micro level.

Promises Reiterated with Modification

The Education Cess

The CMP proposed a cess on all central taxes "to finance the commitment to universalise access to quality basic education" and this is also one of the few proposals that has been immediately

Figure 4: Growth in External Aid for Elementary Education



acted upon. The very first union budget of the UPA levied an education cess of 2 per cent on all central taxes. This is a welcome measure. It is also forecast that this will yield a total revenue of Rs 5,000 crore per year. This may seem to be a substantial amount, and some felt that cess can replace the need for external aid for elementary education, as the cess revenues in a year will exceed the recently concluded aid agreement for US \$ 1 billion additional aid for elementary education, consisting of loans from the World Bank and aid from the DFID, European Commission, etc, for a three-year period (2004-07).

The issue of an education cess has been under discussion for quite some time. There used to be an education cess for primary education in many states in the 1950s and the 1960s, and perhaps even earlier. But slowly it disappeared due to political and economic reasons. In recent years, a proposal was made by the Swaminadhan Committee on technical education (1994) to levy an education cess on the corporate sector for financing technical education; but this has not received the attention of the government. The NDA manifesto had proposed a cess on 'non-needy' students, which may look like an additional fees.

One can expect the education cess to provide substantial revenues to the elementary education sector. It is hoped that all the revenues from the cess will be allocated, like an earmarked tax, exclusively to elementary education. It also may not be wrong to expect that it will be additional to the union government's allocation to elementary education, out of the general pool of revenues, and that this will be spent on quality dimensions of elementary education. Though this Rs 5,000 crore looks like a substantial amount, it must be noted that this might form only 10-12 per cent of the total government (union and states) expenditure on elementary education in the country (which is about Rs 40,000 crore), underscoring the point that still about 85-90 per cent of requirements for elementary education have to be met out of the general revenues of the government.

The need for additional allocation of cess revenues and even the total budgetary allocation for elementary education have to be seen in the context of the growing financial needs of the elementary education sector. Only a few years ago, the Tapas Majumdar Committee has estimated that the country needs additionally Rs 1,37,000 crore once a 10-year period to provide elementary education to all as a fundamental right. It may have to be noted that though the estimate seems to be 'astronomical', it amounts to only Rs 13,700 crore a year, and about 0.7 per cent of GDP a year on the average. One of the important messages

of the Tapas Majumdar Committee report was that equitable and quality universal elementary education was affordable.

Promises that Remain Vague

The Poor and Access to Higher Education

The CMP promises to ensure that "no body is denied professional education because he or she is poor". But the mechanisms for providing/improving access to the poor are not spelt out. Given the recent assertions by the government, it is clear that low fees, scholarships and freeships are not on the agenda. On the other hand, promotion of student loan programmes by the commercial banks – not by the education department or the government as in many other countries – is the preferred solution. The Congress Party manifesto has promised setting up an Educational Finance Development Corporation (EFDC). It is not clear whether the loan programme would be run under the overall umbrella of the EFDC. It may be recalled that the Swaminadhan Committee had suggested in 1994 the setting up of an Educational Development Bank of India with contributions from the union and state governments, the corporate sector and others. But the proposal has remained a proposal.

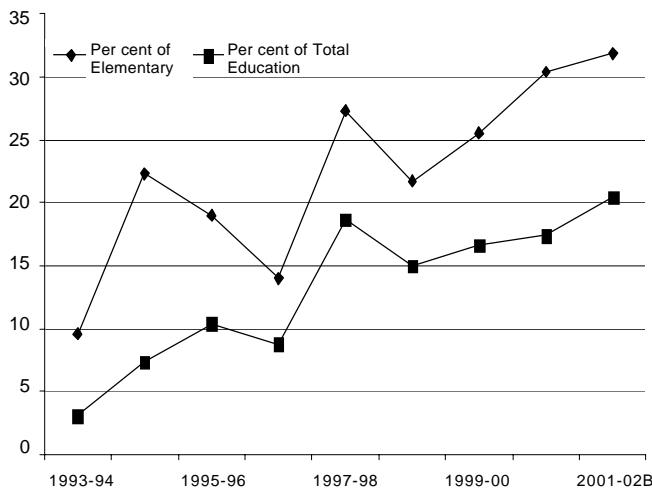
The general favourable attitude towards student loan schemes being offered by several commercial banks ignores a few very important features of these programmes. Loan programmes rarely work as substitutes to state financing, as very few loan programmes are found to be 'financially efficient'; the rates of recovery/repayment are very low even in developed countries. They are also not found to be promote either educational efficiency or social and economic equity. More importantly, while cost recovery measures like student fees transfer the responsibility of financing higher education from the state to the families, student loans further transfer the responsibility within families from parents to the students themselves, as if higher education is not a public or social good, but a highly individualised private good and the society does not have any responsibility for higher education of its citizens. This also implies a radical change in financing – from the present generation paying for the future to the future paying for itself. All this can create very serious problems in the formation of values and attitudes among the youth, which may prove in the long run to be costly for the very sustenance of sustainable humane societies.

Issues that Remain in the Background

External Aid for Elementary Education

One of the current issues that CMP preferred to be silent about is external aid for elementary education. In recent years, the quantum of external aid has increased significantly – from Rs 37 crore in 1993-94 to Rs 1,210 crore in 2001-02 (budget estimates). As a proportion of total union government's plan expenditure on education, aid has increased from below 5 per cent to above 20 per cent during this period. More importantly, as a proportion of the union government's plan expenditure on elementary education, it increased from about 10 per cent to above 30 per cent. These are indeed high proportions for a developing country like India. But the macro level trends in total public expenditure on education lead one to doubt whether external aid does add to the domestic spending on education, or does it substitute the

Figure 5: External Aid for Elementary Education as Per Cent of Union Government Plan Expenditure on Education



national efforts, as no noticeable increase in public spending on education can be observed. But relative to the total education budget in India, foreign aid seems to be insignificant. In fact, looking at the relative size, one may doubt whether at all we need aid for elementary education.

At the same time, the growing amount of aid seems to be raising several uncomfortable questions, such as (a) will external assistance for education increase donor dependency? (b) will aid lead to external influence on domestic educational policies, and if so whether it would be desirable? and (c) above all, will aid really contribute to long-term development of education in the country? Answers to these questions are disturbing. It is well recognised that aid has created new attitudes on the criticality of foreign aid for improvement in elementary education, and inequalities between regions and sectors (and even sub-sectors) funded by external aid and others, besides inflicting changes on overall policies because of the explicit and implicit conditionalities associated with aid.

The Barefoot Education System

The second most important issue that CMP is silent about is the government policy on para teachers and education guarantee scheme schools. In recent years there has been a significant growth of under-qualified and under-trained teachers, under different names, para teachers, shiksha karmis, gurujis, sahayaks, vidya volunteers, etc. Similarly there has also been a wide acceptance by union and state governments of the education guarantee scheme. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and even the proposed draft bill relating to free and compulsory education have accorded a status to these schools and teachers equivalent to normal formal schools, and fully qualified and trained teachers. Most state governments favoured the scheme of para teachers and the EGS schools, as they save huge resources on the one hand and avoid managerial problems of teachers on the other. At the same time, governments can claim to have marched a long way towards fulfilling the constitutional directive on universal elementary education. But the likely effects on quality of education can be too serious to bear in the long run, or even in the short run. The underlying view is that elementary education does not require a fully qualified and trained teacher, nor does it require good

infrastructure! The barefoot teachers and 'barefoot' schools may finally produce a 'barefoot' system of education!

Privatisation of Education

Third, quite surprisingly, the CMP, supported by left parties, is also silent on the controversial issue of privatisation of education. The rapid growth of privatisation at all levels of education, including (a) a steep increase in fees and other measures of cost recovery, (b) growth of private schools, and (c) even privatisation of public institutions, along with globalisation/internationalisation of higher education, and the problems that these phenomena have been creating do not seem to be of any concern for the various partners of the UPA, including the left! Is the silence to be taken as an approval of these trends?

Free and Compulsory Education

Another issue on which the CMP is surprisingly silent refers to the free and compulsory education bill. Though it promises to protect the rights of the children, it does not refer to the free and compulsory education bill, that is expected to make education a justiciable right of all the children in the country. A draft bill prepared by the NDA was reviewed by many, and some have suggested the withdrawal of the bill and redrafting it afresh, and some have suggested a major revision. It is widely held that the revised or redrafted bill should define (a) 'free' education meaningfully, keeping the constitutional spirit of the concept of free education, so that all kinds of charges and payments to schools are abolished; the need to spend on education by the households does not arise at all, and even the opportunity costs of education are compensated to a great extent, (b) 'education' to include formal full-time school education, and not non-formal and informal education, not education through correspondence courses and other distance modes, (c) quality of education, so that there is no place for low quality and low cost alternatives such as education guarantee schools and para teachers, and that it aims at equal good quality for all, (d) length of compulsory education to include preferably schooling up to the end of school education, i.e., up to Grade XII and until age 18, and (e) 'compulsion' to mean more on governments to provide access to good quality education to all, than on parents, though compulsion on households and parents could also be built in. It is also felt the bill should indicate, at least, a long-term goal to march towards a uniform system of education for all.

Since the Directive Principles could not effectively direct the government, and the 86th Amendment to the Constitution does not seem to 'amend' the approach of the government, perhaps we need a tough bill that comprehensively and unambiguously defines the various parameters, along with a reasonable time-bound plan to fulfil the long cherished goal. It is not enough to promise that the UPA government "will fully back and support all NGO efforts in the area of education" (emphasis added). In fact, reliance of the government on NGOs should be minimum as far as fulfilling the constitutional directive is concerned. Secondly, given the nature and functioning of several NGOs, it may not be desirable at all to promise to support 'all' NGO efforts. The CMP also intends to encourage women and their associations to assume responsibility for all development schemes relating to including primary education. Basically, any

reliance on NGO efforts, should not lead to reduction in the responsibility of the government. In the same context, it may also be mentioned that some of the initiatives proposed in the CMP such as strengthening elected panchayats, empowering gram sabhas, devolution of responsibilities and funds directly to panchayats, should not lead to abdication of the responsibilities by the union government and marginalisation of the elected state governments.

Other Issues

Too Many Commissions?

The CMP proposes to set up a few commissions: a national commission for education to allocate resources and monitor programmes, a commission for minority educational institutions to provide “direct affiliation for minority professional institutions to central universities”, a national commission to see how best the welfare of socially and economically backward sections among religious and linguistic minorities, including reservations in education and employment is enhanced, and a new commission to look at the issue of centre-state relations. It also promises to provide constitutional status to the minority commission. All these proposals have important implications for education. The proposed national commission for education to allocate resources and monitor programmes, seems to be either duplicating the work of or taking away the responsibility from the Planning Commission. After all, it is the Planning Commission that does or should allocate resources to the states for education and monitors the progress of the programmes. The rationale for providing direct affiliation of minority institutions to central universities is not clear. If at all affiliation to central universities is desirable, it would be better to affiliate selected institutions of excellent quality in teaching and research to central universities. Such selected institutions could include minority institutions. Otherwise, apart from creating a not necessarily desirable different layer of institutions, this might unnecessarily burden central universities and might affect their quality in teaching and research.

Transfer of Central Schemes

The CMP proposes to transfer all central schemes, except in national priority areas like family planning, to the states. It may be recalled that central schemes, that include centrally sponsored schemes, centrally assisted schemes, and central schemes, have a specific connotation and are formulated with a specific objective. It may not be desirable to transfer all central schemes to the states. In the case of education, the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, an umbrella programme of all central schemes in elementary education, was launched only a few years ago; and according to the original proposal, the scheme is to continue with sharing of funding responsibilities by the union and the states in the ratio of 50:50 from the 10th Five-Year Plan onwards. As the UPA government does not seem to be against the scheme, it may not be practicable or desirable to transfer any education scheme of the union government to the states.

Some Welcome Promises

The welcome features that the CMP proposed are not many. They include the promise (a) to ensure all institutions of higher

learning to retain their autonomy, (b) to empower women educationally, (c) to promote modern and technical education among all minority communities, hopefully by mainstreaming the minority communities, (d) to provide for full equality of opportunity, particularly in education and employment for the scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, other backward castes and religious minorities (it does not explicitly include economically poor), (e) to universalise the ICDS scheme, and to provide “a functional anganwadi in every settlement and ensure full coverage for all children” and (f) to create proper infrastructure in schools for NCC, NSS, physical development, sports, and cultural development of all students. Some of these statements appear to be the usual rhetoric, and may continue to remain so, unless concrete action is planned.

Other issues that the CMP promised, which essentially look political in nature, and which also seemed to have received serious attention of the government include ‘reversal of the trend of communalisation’, and review of select higher education bodies such as the ICHR, ICSSR, etc, and the appointments made therein during the period of the earlier government. On the issue of languages, the CMP is not coherent and clear: it proposes to consider declaring all languages as official languages, and Tamil as a classical language (a decision taken in September), and to strive for recognition and promotion of Urdu under Articles 345 and 347 of the Constitution.

On the whole, there is very little that is new in the CMP, and hence it is not really an exciting set of proposals. But since it outlines the priorities of the UPA government, one has to take serious note of it. Being a mix of social, economic and, more importantly, political priorities, the document outlines some issues clearly, some vaguely, some less coherently and some are wanting in critical detail. Of course, many critical issues have been conveniently ignored altogether. Perhaps a CMP of a coalition government cannot be otherwise. [27]

Address for correspondence:
jtilak@vsnl.com