

Privatising education State's role will remain

By Ashok Chopra

ONE will have to be an outright optimist or gifted with self-deception to argue that all is well with our system of education at both school and college level. Numbers have swelled and quality has declined to the point where basic communication skills — oral and written — are virtually non-existent today even among graduates.

Why are skill shortages mounting at a time of rising unemployment and why are our students ill-equipped to meet the demands of the market? Is it merely because of lack of funds or because educational bureaucracy has stifled all creativity in schools with its insistence on prescribed syllabi and an examination system that tests rote learning and recall rather than inventiveness and imagination? Is privatisation, the buzzword of our times, the answer or will it merely caricature Colonel Blimp, the great figure of the English cartoon world during World War II who observed that the only thing you can say about chaos is that chaos is good for free enterprise!

First, the definitional problem and the limits of the privatisation debate that the new HRD Minister has sparked. Like the projected disinvestments of public sector units, does privatisation mean, in the first instance, the dissolution or at least limiting the role of the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and the State Councils of Educational Research and Training (SCERTS) that have evolved as textbook publishers to the nation? Or is privatisation merely tantamount to a plea to large companies to take over or at least invest in education, especially in the school sector, from where any meaningful reform in upgrading the quality of education would need to begin? Or is privatisation a step towards more research and development (R&D) and hence targeted towards science, technology and medicine.

Apart from the straws in the wind, the exact scope of privatisation is not clear except perhaps that the government would like to unburden itself of some of its responsibilities in keeping with the general liberalisation philosophy which is in the air these days. Assuming that privatisation is the first step towards denationalisation of the school sector — the tertiary sector is open in any case — what does it mean? Does it mean denationalisation of school textbooks in both Central and State board schools? Or does the Government want to limit its responsibilities to a broad supervisory role and conducting of the school-leaving examinations after handing over the institutions to large corporations?

There is already a very large private-sector-managed school sector — every major industrial house has a school or a chain of schools spread across the country — quite apart from the missionary schools

that are run according to their own norms and principles and only follow the Government's instructions with regard to syllabus for different grades in schools. Does the Government want to enlarge this sector by giving further concessions with regard to land and other infrastructure facilities because it is now clearly recognised that it is only the privately-managed schools that have been able to ensure a modicum of quality where most of its students are concerned. The big question is: will the private sector come forward, and if so, under what terms and conditions?

The private sector would come to the school sector if there is an adequate return on investment either by way of tax concessions or tax holiday, rather like what the Government offered to the nascent hotel industry in the early sixties. Private industry knows that the school sector is a rapidly expanding market. The esti-

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ated school-going population of 2.75 crore grows at the rate of 10 to 15 per cent annually and there is money in it provided massive initial investments are subsidised by the State in some form or the other. Of these numbers, the critical mass of the middle class base which is interested in quality education and is prepared to pay for it, is rapidly expanding. One simple fact should suffice to illustrate the reality: private tutorial institutions, especially for competitive examinations for engineering, medical, business and other professional courses after the school-leaving class 12 examination, have an estimated turnover of Rs 15 to 20 crore every year and they are unable to cope with the growing demand.

But while private industry or even the small entrepreneur squanders money in schools, its sight is fixed on the urban middle class. It is not interested in the rural and semi-urban sectors where, quite from a discernible lack of interest in education, it is difficult to attract teachers. (The Navodaya School opened in district headquarters, have not been able to make much of an impact primarily because teachers are reluctant to remain cooped up in small towns.) Given this reluctance the expectation that the private sector will fill the gaps, both in terms of quantity and quality of school education, is a forlorn hope. private sector philosophy is simple: you can't have quality if you believe in equality of opportunity for all.

If the thrust of the privatisation debate is to directly attract corporate finance in higher education — rather like American corporations that support universities — then it is clear that it would invest only in areas are interested in: engineering, business and finance and to a limited extent, in medicine where return is uncertain. To an extent this is already being indirectly via consultancy fees on specific high-tech jobs. Direct funding has not yet been formalised except in such institutions as the Birla Institute of Technology and Science, Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, Jannalal Institute of Management and a few others.

There has not been any large corporate investment in higher education and is unlikely unless research linked to the direct needs of industry. In America large corporations or industries support higher education of talented students because they are directly hooked on to defence or aerospace research. We do not have these conditions here and will have to explore our special requirements where talent in universities can be tapped.

But given the intrinsic nature of private sector enterprise — strict accountability and returns — even the most generous investments by private industry will make only a small dent in the quality of education both in schools and universities. The greater share of responsibility will have to be borne by the State, as has been the practice so far. What could or at least should change is the terms of future contracts for teachers: initially short-term contracts which could be renewed or confirmed after five years. Academic qualifications like M.Phil and Ph.D have not been able to ensure quality largely because higher academic research, at least in the social sciences and humanities, has no relevance to the real needs of students. What is needed is a new type of educational bureaucracy. Educational institutions today need fund-raisers, not scholars in the classical mould.