

Educational Reforms

What Is Not To Be Done

By Shahid Amin

With an erstwhile professor of economics now as our prime minister, there is great expectation among teachers at all levels of the educational pyramid. All those who dirty their hands with chalk-and-duster, whether in manicured management institutes, or the stable-like lecture-rooms in most universities across the land, are visibly relieved. The dark phase of thought control, the arrogation of educational wisdom to a handpicked coterie of under-qualified academic bureaucrats, the systematic slandering of our tallest scholars as inadequately Bharatiya, the throwing of muck, often quite literally, at some of the most distinguished foreign scholars of India's cultural and religious past — all this is mercifully over, for five years at least. So we hope.

The common minimum programme, while promising to take up universal elementary education seriously, goes on to assure autonomy for university and professional institutions. There is talk already of an urgent need for 'detoxification' of school and college curricula. This is understandable. No doubt there is a need to undo the 'wrongs' done to our institutions, to our children, to our teachers. But let us press ahead only after due deliberation; let the urgency of the task not become an excuse for the darning of frayed ideas and the regurgitation of old mantras, unmindful of their past efficacy and present suitability.

Those in charge of the education ministry — a far better term than the fluffy acronym HRD — must learn to get over the control-centralise itch that seems almost to go with the job. We'd also do well to remember that some of the most odious diktats emerging from the HRD over the past five years, were very often the redeployment of weapons of surveillance developed in the early and mid-1970s. The mindless control over the grant of visas to foreign or foreign-based Indian scholars on grounds of 'sensitivity', and the totalitarian control that the HRD sought to exercise over international scholars wishing to speak in India, were not necessarily the creation of the last government. They date back to an earlier and different, though by no means intellectually less debilitating, consensus on what was properly national.

Not that tax-paying bona fide Indian scholars were necessarily given more leeway, if the myrmidons of state-funded bodies thought, in their fawning wisdom, that they had somehow crossed the academic *Lakshman-rekha*. As we move to free education from the fist of smug, sectarian certitude, let us not hurry over the fact that there once was a well-placed intellectual component of the now-discredited licence permit raj.

Some 30 years separate 1974 from 2004. During this period, the world, India

included, has hurtled through calendrical time at an astonishing pace. Were we to limit ourselves to picking some high points and potholes from the field of education: There has been a phenomenal increase in the international market worth of IIMs and IITs, combined with a hyper-inflation of indifferent regional universities; while most metro universities have held their own under the pressure of a rush of student intake, many premier universities of yesteryears have sunk into second-rate teaching shops; tuition, coaching, tutoring, entrance tests, all these have usurped the place of class room pedagogy: the Great Education Bazaar is now flooded with all manner of indifferent and inferior goods, some of these attractively packaged by branch outlets of overseas institutes and colleges. And then there is the great rush to study in the US.

The new educational dispensation will no doubt address these and several other pressing problems — there is talk of a new education commission. It is not my aim to prepare a laundry list for such a commission. Suffice it to say that this government would do well to involve many more actual teachers, irrespective of rank and age, rather than fall back, as a matter of habit, on academic bureaucrats and retired pedagogues.

The other area of immediate concern would be the issue of middle and secondary school text-books, especially history text-books, which were hurriedly re-scripted in the last regime, so the argument went, to correct the leftist' bias of the 1970s history primers. Here again greater deliberation is called for, and a new consensus, which takes into account the developments in the discipline of history more generally and Indian history writing specifically, arrived at. Educationists have recently drawn attention to the fact that an obsessive Arjun-like concentration on the eye of the targeted-bird — in this case the Indian nation-state — in school books is to rob both the child and the discipline of history of an informative, yet critical perspective on the relationship between our past and our present.

History text-book writers need to take all this into account. They might also like to mull over the forthright enunciation in December 1947 by professor Mohammad Habib, one of the doyens of Indian history: 'The writing of histories should not, as a rule, be directly subsidised by the state... Under the old regime we wrote in a spirit of constraint... Our national leaders should now be willing to pass on to us a fraction of the freedom they have obtained. A state-dominated interpretation of history is one of the most effective means of sabotaging democracy'. Strong words indeed, given that they were uttered on the eve of the Nehruvian consensus, and doubly salutary for a fractured polity that is India today.

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