

WRITE PRESSURE

The moment of birth of something good is always exciting. The massive rally being organized in New Delhi by the National Alliance for Fundamental Right to Education in order to demand the right to education is the signal that pressure group activism is coming of age in India. Jaded by electoral rallies and empty rhetoric, people can now actually participate directly in something that affects them concretely. The draft bill proposing to make education a fundamental right is still hanging fire in Parliament, caught and forgotten in the whirlwind of political disruptions. All those campaigning for universal and free elementary education now have an influential forum, as do those whose prime concern is universal literacy. It is possible, even if the public rally attracts 1,00,000 people, to remind the government that there are other priorities than the saving of politicians' skins.

India has entered a danger zone in which it has few companions. The level of literacy in the country is so low that all the long-term fruits of its new economic policies are likely to wither on the tree. An illiterate population in the 21st century is paralysed from the point of view of locational and employment mobility. Economic liberalization can mean little when it creates jobs and there are no takers. Besides, in the age of the information technology revolution, illiteracy is a serious danger. Not only will people be left behind, but they might also find it impossible to know what facilities are available simply to carry on with their lives. India has entered the millennium with the largest number of illiterate people. So these dangers are only too real, and the less the time wasted on analysing reasons for the failure the better. Making education into a fundamental right would be a meaningful step certainly but what is immediately needed is full attention to infrastructure and the examination of the substance of achievement levels. This is what Nafre and its members can work at most effectively by actively engaging in programmes for the spread of education and supporting groups which do the same. But as a pressure body, its job would also be to ensure that the state and Central governments focus on compulsory elementary education and non-formal adult teaching as priorities.

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BILLS ON THE FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT TO EDUCATION