

Elementary Education as Fundamental Right

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The bona fides of the UF government's intentions in respect of school education in the country will be established not so much by putting through a constitutional amendment as by the government spelling out its detailed plan to raise the required resources and by the concrete steps it takes in that direction at once - in 1997-98 itself

WHILE fighting any sickness, half the battle is won if it is diagnosed properly. This is as true of nations as it is of individuals. Both the experts and the politicians in India are agreed upon the root cause of numerous afflictions that India chronically suffers from. It is the lack of educational facilities, particularly the lack of facilities for elementary education for the masses. Whether it is poverty or disease, crime or corruption, casteism or linguistic chauvinism, religious bigotry or economic stagnation, there is unanimity that all these evils in the country spring from one major cause: lack of facilities for universal elementary education in the country. No one can find fault with this diagnosis.

Going by the truism quoted above, half the battle being waged against these evils is already won - by correct diagnosis. In fact, it was won half a century ago, when the Constitution of India enjoined upon the state to provide, within a decade, compulsory schooling to all children up to age 14. In the current school reckoning, this means till the eighth standard.

Alas, the goal of universal eight-year schooling to all the children in the country is nowhere near fulfilment, even today. In fact, even universal primary, four-year schooling is not yet accomplished. In respect of pre-primary education for the age-group 3-6, whatever efforts are made, are all at the initiative of non-governmental agencies, generally with a strong profit motive.

Against this background, the UF government in New Delhi has come up with a proposal which, presumably in its considered view, will be a significant advance over the present level of non-achievement. The government proposes to enshrine the right to elementary education as a fundamental right of every child in the country. Such a commitment will entail amendments to the Constitution of the country. It is expected that the UF government will soon set its machinery in motion to achieve this, as soon as it is free of its more pressing problems. Such a change

is, in fact, part of the common minimum programme of the UF.

The number of children in India, in 1994, was 34.5 crore, about 38 per cent of the total population. Out of these, about 13 per cent or roughly 13.7 crore are below age five. Even if the state does not venture into pre-primary education for the present, this would mean that it would need to look after the schooling of some 25 crore immediately and this figure will keep climbing up, at least for a few more five-year plan periods.

Happily, the enrolment of students at the start of the primary stage, at least on paper, is close to 100 per cent. But 34 per cent of these drop out in the primary stage itself. The enrolment comes down steeply at the entry point of the middle school. Only 44 per cent of the potential students enrol in the fifth standard. In case of female children, the proportion is much less. According to ministry of education estimates, there are above 6.5 crore children in the age-group 6-14 who are out of schools and should be in schools. (Of these, about half are from the four Hindi-speaking states). In the opinion of some other experts, this figure may be an underestimate and the true figure is about 7.5 crore. According to the report of the Human Development Committee, there are 4.5 crore children who are deprived of school education, because of the policies of past governments. This author has come across the figure of the number of child-labourers in India being close to 10 crore. Of course, hardly anyone of these 10 crore will be attending school.

These estimates should give an indication of the dimensions of the problems involved in making elementary education universal and compulsory. In a country of India's size and population, every programme involving the entire population is bound to be of gigantic proportions. It is a very encouraging sign that the UF government, despite the daunting scale of the difficulties, has committed itself to make elementary education a fundamental right of the citizens. The logical consequence of this major step would be that whatever

financial outlay that would be needed to make universal elementary education a reality in the country will have to have, at least ought to have, the first claim on government funds. It would therefore be natural to have some rough and ready estimate about the monetary outlay that such a major constitutional change will entail.

The World Bank estimates that putting all Indian children in the age-group 6-10 into school would require an additional 7.5 lakh teachers and 13 lakh classrooms. One need not accept every statistics that emanates from the WB. In fact, without getting into details about the peripherals (additional number of teachers needed, number of classrooms, books, notebooks and other students' aids, transport, handicapped children and children with special needs, etc), one may simply go only by the government's own projections in this respect. In concrete monetary terms, the ministry of education estimates that an expansion of school education on the scale envisaged above will cost a minimum of Rs 40,000 crore during the Ninth Plan period and, of course, the figure will keep increasing in subsequent plan periods.

Keeping in mind the present-day thinking of leaving more and more spheres of economic activity to private (as against public, state) initiative, it would be natural to leave the matter of universalisation of elementary education also to private educational bodies and other NGOs. However, the current experience is that by and large NGOs enter the field of education only when there are prospects of direct and immediate monetary returns. It is obvious that elementary education for the masses on the above scale holds no such prospects, so that if the country and its government are serious about the goal of universalisation of elementary education most of the necessary funding for it will have to come from public funds.

The amount of over Rs 40,000 crore in five years or roughly about Rs 8 to 10 thousand crore per year seems large in absolute terms but does not look all that large if it is put in proper perspective. For a country which subsidises consumption of petroleum products to the tune of some Rs 5,000 crore or more per year, where annual subsidy on using electricity, fertilisers, even on construction of 5-star hotels and innumerable other items (not to mention the residences, foreign travel, medical bills of the VIPs) easily runs to well over Rs 10,000 crore per year, finding another Rs 10 or 12 thousand crore per year for elementary education should not be hard at all. Only last week, the central government agreed to part with a large amount per year in additional wages and perks to its employees as part of

a new wage settlement. Surely, the present central government of the UF in New Delhi which, for the first time in 50 years, claims to have grasped the vital importance of school education in the country, will do at least as much for the 7.5 crore of the Indians of the next generation as for the present 40 lakh central government employees.

It is all a matter of getting the priorities of the nation straight. It is true that in respect of education, the Constitution-makers of the country recorded their priorities on paper 50 years back by requiring that education till the age of 14 be made compulsory to all children by 1960. But the fact remains that this was not accomplished. No one doubted the sincerity of purpose of the then leaders, just as no one needs to doubt the sincerity of purpose of the present leadership. But one may with justification question whether, 50 years on, another declaration of intent, even requiring a constitutional amendment, will have any better chances of success. In what way have the ground realities changed that by going through constitutional amendments and by periodic declarations, there will be more concrete, real achievements to show this time, at the end of the Ninth Plan?

The Indian public will feel more reassured about the future of universal school education if the government spells out, in concrete terms, how it proposes to raise Rs 40,000 crore which will be needed for the purpose. There is no provision for such massive expansion in the much touted 'dream budget' of 1997-98. For many years now, the educational planners are proposing that at least 6 per cent of the GNP should be earmarked for education every year and of that at least half should be reserved for elementary education. This is also accepted in the common minimum programme of the UF. Two budgets of the UF government have come and gone and yet the actual figure still hovers around 3.7 per cent, same as under the earlier much-maligned Congress regimes.

How does the government propose to raise or divert the resources on the requisite scale needed for the massive expansion of the school system? The bona fides of the UF government's intentions in respect of school education in the country will be established not so much by going through any constitutional amendments as by spelling out its detailed plan about how it plans to raise the resources and by the concrete steps it takes in that direction at once in 1997-98 itself.

About the proposal for making elementary education a fundamental right, some other implications also need to be kept in mind. Presumably, a fundamental right is justiciable. Would this mean that government can punish the guardians of a child for not

sending him or her to school? This is presently contemplated in Gujarat, without any recourse to any constitutional amendment. Conversely, can a guardian sue the authorities for not providing school facilities in the child's neighbourhood? Can an NGO, for example, working for abolition of child labour, sue the parents of children who are not being sent to school? What about providing a school-going child with uniforms and accessories? It is not clear if all these questions have been thought out. At least, the thinking of the government on such points is not made public.

A more realistic assessment of the ground realities would suggest that, instead of taking on the entire caboodle of elementary education on its plate, it may be more prudent to concentrate on primary education first, that is, education for the age-group 6-10. Instead of declaring elementary education as a fundamental right, it will be far more useful if the government makes it constitutionally obligatory on itself to spend say 5 per cent of GNP on education, so that even when the present rulers with noble intentions are not around the government's commitment to the good cause will continue.

There are sound reasons for concentrating on primary education in the first instance. The country has already made a reasonable start in that respect. As reported above, the enrolment at the entrance to the primary level is reportedly close to 100 per cent. Would it not be better if major efforts are directed towards keeping all these students in schools? At least as the first step? There is also another reason. According to many reports, an average worker in India has only about 2.5 years of schooling. For a country which has opened its doors to competition from international level technology, this is woefully short. To stand on its own feet in the face of multinationals and imported finished products, what is urgently needed is a skilled workforce with adequate awareness of the precision levels in modern tool-rooms (even in agriculture). If such a workforce is to be created, the country has to start from the schoolroom. To do that, it is necessary that all or almost all students are in the schoolroom first. After achieving universal four-year schooling throughout the country, one can plan for middle level and for technical/artisan education on much firmer foundations.

Notwithstanding the declaration of the government of its resolve to make elementary education a fundamental right, the actual indications are not too hopeful. The prime minister has gone on record proposing that every aspirant of the HS Certificate (after the 12th standard) should be required to teach five students. A proposal such as this

only shows two things: (1) The PM and his advisers are not aware of the trauma which the 12th standard students are already undergoing while preparing for their examinations. To burden them with the responsibility of educating youngsters would be as sensible as to fix a quota for each primary school teacher for bringing in vasectomy volunteers. (2) The PM and his advisers are evidently not aware of the ease with which a determined person can procure a certificate, any desired certificate, in this country. If the prime minister's proposal is implemented, it will simply open a brand new avenue for self-employment all over the country (of touts for these certificates). Only, this avenue will very much be in the realm of the parallel economy. Surely, that is not the intention of our well-meaning prime minister?

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