

## Gross Neglect of Education

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**T**he President's Address to Parliament speaks of 'Vision-2020'. According to the Address, on that year our people will achieve

*100 per cent literacy, health for all, shelter for all, prosperity through knowledge-driven productivity, and a better quality of life—all of these enriched with our value system.*

This is truly a 'Vision'. How do we intend to convert it into reality? Last November the UNESCO released its "Education for All Global Monitoring Report: Is the World on Track?" According to this Report, there are 28 countries in the world that will not achieve by 2015 any of the three targets which, according to the UNESCO, ought to be achieved on that year by the global community—universalisation of primary education, gender equality and halving of literacy rates. India is among those countries at the bottom of the global order in this context. It is therefore shocking that the Union Budget ignores completely the pivotal importance of elementary education and literacy and on the contrary reduces the grossly inadequate amount allotted to this Department from Rs 4904.85 crores to Rs 4904.63 crores.

In November 2001, the government introduced and passed, in a great hurry and in the same session, the 93rd Constitution Amendment Bill (now 86th Constitution Amendment) to provide free and compulsory education to all children upto the age of 14 years. This was on the eve of the elections to the four State Assemblies of Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Manipur and Uttaranchal. However, more than a year later the Constitution Amendment is still to be implemented. In a reply to my Unstarred Question No. 394 of February 21, 2003 the government stated that the Constitution Amendment needs to be "followed by a central legislation with a detailed mechanism" before it is implemented. When will such a central legislation be brought to Parliament? And who will provide money for its implementation? The Budget has allocated to Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan for universalisation of elementary education the same amount as last year. The increase from Rs 1512.00 crores to Rs 1951.25 crores is fictitious and has been

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obtained by cancelling very important schemes such as Operation Black Board (Rs 58.50 crores), Central Plan for the North-Eastern areas (Rs 388 crores) etc. It is most regrettable that these important projects should have been cancelled. Operation Black Board was formulated by the National Education Policy 1986 as revised in 1992. It provided for proper classrooms, eight-year teaching, school library, at least three teachers for every school "the number increasing as early as possible to one teacher per class". (NEP, revised para 5.7) On the other hand, the Education Guarantee Scheme or "alternative" education now supported by the government does not provide for either a school building or teaching material. It provides for only two or three-year schooling, all the classes being taught together by one unqualified, untrained and underpaid para-teacher. (*Para-teachers in Primary Education*, published by DPEP, pp. 47-49) Such a sharp erosion of the standards of the government's elementary education can hardly provide basic literacy and much less a meaningful education. Similarly, it was most insensitive on the part of the Union Government to cancel the Plan provision for elementary education and literacy in the North-East when it is so much required in all those States except perhaps Mizoram.

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THE Tapas Majumdar Committee appointed by the government in 1999 had assessed the additional requirement of Rs 13,700 crores per year for universalisation of elementary education. The Financial Memorandum of the 93rd Constitution Amendment scaled down the requirement to Rs 9008 crores. The government never explained on what basis this was done. Now the Budget allocates for universalisation of elementary education (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan) the grossly inadequate amount of Rs 1951 crores only.

The Kothari Commission had stipulated that a minimum of six per cent of GDP should be spent on education. However, the statistics released by the National Institute of Education Planning and Administration (NIEPA), an apex body of the Government of India, disclose that the expenditure on education as percentage of GNP was the highest in 1989-90 at

4.5 per cent and went down to 3.6 per cent in 1997-98, the last year for which statistics are quoted (*India Education Report*, NIEPA, 2002). This report further states that "amongst countries with a population of 100 million or more India figures at the bottom except Bangladesh"

Whilst the public education system has been grossly neglected in the Budget, sops are given to the affluent sections of society by providing Income Tax exemption upto Rs 12,000 for education of each child. How many parents in this country can afford to spend Rs 12,000 for education of each child every year? This elitist bias is ingrained in our public education system. There are 451 Navodaya Vidyalayas with a total of 1.25 lakh students on their rolls. The Budget for Navodaya Vidyalayas is Rs 490 crores, that is, almost 10 per cent of the total Budget of the Department of Secondary and Higher Education. The Union Government

expenditure for each student at Navodaya Vidyalayas is Rs 39,000 per year whilst for a student in an average school it is about Rs 241—and the total expenditure (including contribution from the States) is about Rs 2000 per student of an average school.

In furtherance of this elitist agenda, private schools in India can now provide foreign qualifications at school level itself without any regard for the National Curriculum. This has been permitted by a circular from the Ministry of Human Resource Development dated January 14, 2001. Several such schools in Delhi and elsewhere have started providing such education on payment of fees of several lakhs per year.

The present Budget and the overall education policy of the government will further exacerbate the already deep divide between the rich and the poor and deny to the vast masses any opportunity for a reasonably good elementary education. •