

India's new education policy seen as 'a unique investment'

by Susan Maitra

Within days of the landslide December 1984 election which gave Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi a direct mandate, the government of India announced that a new education policy for the nation would be formulated.

For the first time education was raised to cabinet status, and is now incorporated in the new Ministry of Human Resources Development. A national debate on educational reform was launched in early 1985, and during the course of the year discussion continued among the general public as well as educational professionals. To focus the debate the education ministry produced a draft document, "The Challenge of Education—A Policy Perspective," an analysis of the state of education and the problems to be solved that pulled few punches.

In early 1986 the National Policy on Education (NPE) was submitted to the parliament, and following its acceptance in May, a series of 23 task forces began work to hammer out a plan of action for implementing the ambitious policy. During late 1986, the various action plans were submitted to parliament, and state education ministers were mobilized to press ahead with implementation.

At the crossroads

The new policy calls, on the one hand, for a sweeping overhaul of the existing educational setup from the standpoint of a national standard of excellence, cultural values and development of a work ethic. On the other, the policy projects a determined effort to extend quality education to the whole population. In particular, the policy resolves that by 1990, every child of 11 years will have had no less than 5 years of schooling, and by 1995, all children will be provided free and compulsory education up to 14 years of age.

The policy initiative was motivated by urgency, as indicated in the NPE's introductory section (excerpts of which are reprinted here). In nearly 40 years since independence, India has not come close to fulfilling the mandate of Article 45 of the Directive Policy of the Constitution to provide free and compulsory education for all children through the age of 14 by 1960. Today some 60% of India's population, or 450 million individuals, remain illiterate. Nearly half of the so-called primary schools, mostly in the rural areas, lack even rudimentary facilities such as buildings, teachers, and teaching aids. Sixty percent lack drinking water. In some 200,000 towns of 200 population or more, according to the Fourth

All-India Survey of 1978-79, there are no schools at all. On the other end of the scale, serving less than 2% of the population on a mostly hereditary basis, are universities and other centers of higher learning which are of widely varying quality.

It is not that there has been no effort over the years, or that the problem came up suddenly. There has been no lack of forthright studies documenting the chaos and deplorable conditions in education, and the resultant terrific waste of human potential. It is striking to note that the 1968 education policy directives, which are largely the basis for the new policy, themselves echo many points made in the 1904 education review conducted by Lord Curzon for the British colonial regime. The colonialists had their own cynical motives for sabotaging education in India, but even since independence—primarily for lack of tough political leadership in the face of admittedly awesome resource constraints and a host of problems from the colonial legacy—entreaties to remedy the problem have been implemented only nominally.

Whatever the cause, the result from every angle is now recognized to be disastrous for the nation. There is no correlation between the manpower requirements for a growing economy and the organization of the educational institutions. Efforts to introduce vocational education starting in 1976 have been singularly unsuccessful, with poor quality and management of the programs reinforcing a pernicious cultural bias against the dignity of labor. Typically, there is in India a surplus of engineers and managers and an absolute shortage of skilled production-line men and technicians.

More fundamentally, the educational failure is a failure to build the country's citizenry as a literate and informed population, constantly absorbing and discovering new ideas, which is at the heart of the question of national identity. For a country like India with a rich cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity overlaid historically with a succession of imperial conquests, the issue becomes all the more complex and politically charged, but at the same time, essential to tackle decisively.

All of these considerations motivated the launching of the NPE.

'Operation Blackboard'

Though the NPE is broad in its scope, there are several elements of the package which, if carried through, can be

expected to have a decisive impact: the commitment to elementary education, the establishment of a pace-setting school in every district of the country, a concentrated effort to institutionalize vocational education, and the evolution of a genuinely "national system" of education.

The most powerful aspects of the policy are reflected in "Operation Blackboard," a phased drive for immediate improvement of primary schools across the country. The aim is to ensure provision of minimally essential facilities, starting with a school consisting of two reasonably large rooms that are usable in all weather, blackboards and chalk, maps and charts, toys and games, and other learning materials. Proceeding block by block and district by district, it is planned to cover 20% of the schools by 1988. School construction will have first claim on two of the larger government programs for rural employment, and designs have already been finalized for standard schools costing about \$6,000 each to construct.

The new thrust in elementary education will emphasize both universal enrollment and, as important, *universal retention of children* in the schools up to 14 years of age, as well as a substantial improvement in the quality of education. Indian educational planners have acknowledged that the nicely climbing enrollment figures they have achieved in the past mean nothing in the face of intractably high dropout rates that correlate, not surprisingly, with poverty levels. Of 100 children enrolled in Class I, it is estimated only 23 make it to Class VIII.

To actually achieve universal primary education, the NPE relies very heavily on extending various schemes for "non-formal education" (NFE) initiated several years ago into a large and systematic program spanning the entire country. A network of NFE centers, relying on the support of the voluntary agencies and local village governments, will be set up for dropouts, working children, and girls who cannot attend school for the whole day. Though a systematic evaluation of these schemes has yet to be made, in some projects the dropout rate has been reduced to 10%.

At the secondary level the thrust is on improving the educational stream leading to higher studies, on the one hand, and systematically introducing quality vocational and technical education, on the other. To broaden the base for higher education, and excellence and creativity generally, a program to set up one "model school" (*Navodaya Vidyalaya*) in each district of the nation by 1990 has been taken up. These schools will make quality education available to mostly rural children irrespective of their parents' ability to pay or their social status. Education, including room and board, will be free, with admission based on a standardized aptitude test geared to account for diversities in language, and lack of formal training and other idiosyncracies of status and geography in otherwise gifted children.

The basic commitment of the NPE is to evolve in a deliberate fashion a "national system of education," with a common educational structure, a national curricular framework

and national norms, and coherent institutional and administrative framework rooted in the local communities and districts. The Central Advisory Board of Education, which includes all of the state education ministers, is being upgraded to play a pivotal role in moving the strategy forward nationally. At the same time, District Boards of Education will be created to manage education up to the higher secondary level, with direct accountability both to the local communities and to the state education office. An Institute of Education and Training will also be established in each district to focus on training and in-service courses for elementary teachers and personnel working in the NFE and adult education programs.

This and other measures for teacher training aim to systematically upgrade the quality and accountability of education at every level. The establishment of an Indian Education Service as an all-India service will help to bring a national perspective to education administration and management.

The resource challenge

Whether the goals of the NPE will be reached at this critical juncture depends on one thing: leadership. The challenge is daunting, not the least because of a cumulative record of failure to take decisive action, and the pernicious pressure of the international malthusian lobby, whose influence is seen in the NPE's clause stating that population growth must be brought down. Although in absolute terms the government expenditure on education has been consistently high and steadily increasing, it continues to fall far short of recommended levels, not to speak of actual requirements. In this respect, education has been the victim of a planning process which ranked it "one among many" priorities. As a result, education has consistently claimed 10-13% of the plan budget—second only to defense—just enough to qualify it as a "going concern," but not enough to make the needed breakthrough in establishing a viable national system.

From about 1.2% of national income in 1950, educational expenditure rose to about 3% of GNP in 1965, and has been stuck there ever since—recommendations from the 1966 National Education Commission that it should reach 6% by the 1980s notwithstanding. Moreover, 85-90% of the education budget—and in some cases fully 98%—is eaten up by teachers' salaries and salary administration alone!

Even now, the NPE is locked into an education budget for the Seventh Five Year Plan (1985-90) that was finalized before its adoption. The government has vowed that the Eighth Plan, beginning in 1991, educational spending will be doubled to the level of 6% of GNP. But for the next three years, apart from furthering the considerable effort to mobilize and orient the educational bureaucracy and mobilize the necessary political push behind the program at all levels, with the exception of the model schools program, implementation of the NPE will rely on doing what can be done with existing funds and *ad hoc* efforts at supplementary fundraising. Already, the 1987-88 budget has come up with an additional \$50 million for education, more than 20% of which will go

to elementary education and "Operation Blackboard" in particular.

An international comparison of educational investment on a per capita basis puts the magnitude of the challenge to India's leaders in the most dramatic light. The Indian education budget rose from 3.2 rupees per capita in 1950, to 12.1 rupees per capita by 1965—about 1/100th that spent in, for instance, the United States. But then India's school-age population at any given time is about the size of the total American population! In 1989-90, according to the Planning Commission's Expert Committee on Population Projections, India's elementary school-age population will be more than 100 million—nearly twice the total population of most of the European nations! The cost of schoolhouses alone is a formidable figure.

The resource constraint itself poses a political challenge quite apart from the need, recognized in the NPE, to elicit mass demand for, and participation in, making the new education plan work. The predicament of Indian education is bound up with the problems in the economy and the lack of sufficient economic surplus generation; at the same time, it is one of the keys to unlocking the country's economic potential.

Other hurdles

In the first place, education is largely the responsibility of the various state governments, which have over the years jealously guarded their plums and prerogatives in this area. In a developing country where cash is always short, politics is one of the more lucrative professions, and everything—including education—is highly politicized. Since in India the states are generally language-based, and in a broad sense culture-based, establishing a truly national education system is a qualitatively more complex proposition. In 1976, the parliament took a bold and controversial decision to place education on the "concurrent list," making it a matter of both state and central government responsibility.

Besides the sheer magnitude of the numbers, the resource constraints and political-administrative challenges, the linguistic and cultural-religious diversity of India introduces a range of highly charged conundrums into educational policy-making that would make any professional educator shudder. One of the most serious and intractable problems, for instance, has been the issue of the medium of instruction at the various levels of schooling. Should it be the local or vernacular language?—there are 15 modern languages in India with fully developed literatures recognized in the Constitution, and more than 1,500 dialects. Should it be Hindi?—a language of the primarily northern majority population, declared in 1947 to be the nation's "official" language, but which is rejected outright in the south. Or, should it be English, the language imposed by the colonial rulers to, in Lord Macaulay's words, create a class of individuals Indian in appearance but English in tastes, opinions, and values?

The so-called three-language formula, devised in 1956

and accepted by consensus over the years as a solution to this problem, has yet to be really implemented on a nationwide basis. In this formula, education up to Class IV is strictly in the vernacular. In Class V, in addition to the mother-tongue, either Hindi or English is introduced. Thereafter, both Hindi and English are required, and, in Hindi-speaking areas, another modern Indian language, for instance, the southern Tamil language, is to be added. Any two of the three languages must be carried through to the 12th Class.

Documentation

'National Policy on Education'

Following are Parts I and II of the National Policy on Education, 1986 approved by the Parliament of India in May 1986.

Introductory

Education has continued to evolve, diversify, and extend its reach and coverage since the dawn of human history. Every country develops its system of education to express and promote its unique socio-cultural identity and also to meet the challenges of the times. There are moments in history when a new direction has to be given to an age-old process. That moment is today.

The country has reached a stage in its economic and technical development when a major effort must be made to derive the maximum benefit from the assets already created and to ensure that the fruits of change reach all sections. Education is the highway to that goal.

With this aim in view, the Government of India announced in January 1985 that a new Education Policy would be formulated for the country. A comprehensive appraisal of the existing educational scene was made, followed by a countrywide debate. The views and suggestions received from different quarters were carefully studied.

The 1968 education policy and after

The National Policy of 1968 marked a significant step in the history of education in post-Independence India. It aimed to promote national progress, a sense of common citizenship and culture, and to strengthen national integration. It laid stress on the need for a radical reconstruction of the education system, to improve its quality at all stages, and gave much greater attention to science and technology, the

cultivation of moral values, and a closer relation between education and the life of the people.

Since the adoption of the 1968 Policy, there has been considerable expansion in educational facilities all over the country at all levels. More than 90% of the country's rural habitations now have school facilities within a radius of one kilometer. There has been sizeable augmentation of facilities at other stages also.

Perhaps the most notable development has been the acceptance of a common structure of education throughout the country and the introduction of the 10+2+3+ system by most States. In the school curricula, in addition to laying down a common scheme of studies for boys and girls, science and mathematics were incorporated as compulsory subjects and work experience assigned a place of importance.

A beginning was also made in restructuring of courses at the undergraduate level. Centres of Advanced Studies were set up for post-graduate education and research. And we have been able to meet our requirements of educated manpower.

While these achievements are impressive by themselves, the general formulations incorporated in the 1968 Policy did not, however, get translated into a detailed strategy of implementation, accompanied by the assignment of specific responsibilities and financial and organisational support. As a result, problems of access, quality, quantity, utility, and financial outlay, accumulated over the years, have now assumed such massive proportions that they must be tackled with the utmost urgency.

Education in India stands at the crossroads today. Neither normal linear expansion nor the existing pace and nature of improvement can meet the needs of the situation.

In the Indian way of thinking, a human being is a positive asset and a precious national resource which needs to be cherished, nurtured, and developed with tenderness and care, coupled with dynamism. Each individual's growth presents a different range of problems and requirements, at every stage—from the womb to the tomb. The catalytic action of Education in this complex and dynamic growth process needs to be planned meticulously and executed with great sensitivity.

India's political and social life is passing through a phase which poses the danger of erosion to long-accepted values. The goals of secularism, socialism, democracy, and professional ethics are coming under increasing strain.

The rural areas, with poor infrastructure and social services, will not get the benefit of trained and educated youth, unless rural-urban disparities are reduced and determined measures are taken to promote diversification and dispersal of employment opportunities.

The growth of our population needs to be brought down significantly over the coming decades. The largest single factor that could help achieve this is the spread of literacy and education among women.

Life in the coming decades is likely to bring new tensions together with unprecedented opportunities. To enable the

people to benefit in the new environment will require new designs of human resource development. The coming generations should have the ability to internalise new ideas constantly and creatively. They have to be imbued with a strong commitment to humane values and to social justice. All this implies better education.

Besides, a variety of new challenges and social needs make it imperative for the Government to formulate and implement a new Education Policy for the country. Nothing short of this will meet the situation.

The essence and role of education

In our national perception, education is essentially for all. This is fundamental to our all-round development, material and spiritual.

Education has an acculturating role. It refines sensitivities and perceptions that contribute to national cohesion, a scientific temper and independence of mind and spirit—thus furthering the goals of socialism, secularism, and democracy enshrined in our Constitution.

Education develops manpower for different levels of the economy. It is also the substrate on which research and development flourish, being the ultimate guarantee of national self-reliance.

In sum, Education is a unique investment in the present and the future. This cardinal principle is the key to the National Policy on Education.

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