Transforming Indian School Education: Policy Concerns and Priorities

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The new education policy has to envision a new world of values and ethics of learning to learn and live together. If such a policy has to be substantive and not merely rhetorical it must be based on shared values and experiences of people living in this vastly diverse cultural, linguistic, and economic context

It is more than six decades ago that India embarked on the task of transforming the elitist system of education inherited from the colonial past into one that is mass based and built on principles of equality and social justice. The task has not been an easy one. The country also had to contend with galloping population neutralising the progress made in getting children to school and ensuring quality education for all. This endeavour, stretched over more than six decades, has witnessed several significant policy measures resulting in remarkable progress as reflected in near universal enrolment of children in schools. One of the most defining moments in this journey has been the amendment of the Constitution making education a Fundamental Right and adopting the corresponding Right to Education Act by the Indian Parliament in 2009. The country has also embarked on the ambitious path of making secondary education universal and ensuring equitable access to higher education for all. These achievements and policy measures have raised new expectations for the future.

Having achieved near universal enrolment of children in elementary stage and enormous expansion of access to education at all levels the country is poised to move on major initiatives on the quality front and to ensure that children not only go to school but also receive quality education. But this demands several policy reform measures refocusing our attention and investment of resources on certain priority areas. Furthermore, quality improvement has to be ensured without jeopardising the concern for equity. In this brief article I try to highlight some of these steps in school education critically needed for further progress in provision of quality education for all.

Moving Towards Consolidation

Traditionally, both central and state governments have been following supply based approach for locating social sector facilities, in general and for locating schools in particular. This was necessary in order to ensure full enrolment of children in schools. However, this has led to considerable amount of irrational considerations in the distribution of available resources and consequent imbalances in educational facilities. The top-down supply approach has also led to considerable non-utilisation or under utilization of facilities. A major issue that has emerged in recent years is that of small schools in terms of enrolment that are economically

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and academically unviable to provide quality infrastructure and academic facilities such as library and laboratory and so on. In fact, majority of the primary schools in the country have less than 100 children enrolled. This includes substantial proportion of schools that have less than 50 students or even less than 25 students. A progressive policy of consolidation has to be put in place as the situation is going to become even more challenging with the swift demographic shift taking place in many parts of the country; with falling birth rate, the cohort entering primary schools has begun shrinking and the trend is likely to gain further momentum in the years to come.

Such a policy of consolidation has to clearly move towards new framework for establishing new schools as well as combining the existing ones to create viable schools of good quality This would also demand examining alternate means of facilitating participation of children through provision of transportation and residential facilities. The need is urgent as small schools which generally get located in the fringes of villages are invariably inhabited by marginalised groups leading to further accentuation of inequities even with access to school. Therefore, question of properly equipping every school with adequate material and human resources should be determined based on local parameters such as the size and location of the school and the accessibility to neighbouring habitations. It may not be desirable to fix a national norm in this regard.

Primary School: Too Late to Begin Education?

There is increasing empirical evidence to suggest that by the time children reach school-age, it might already be difficult to stop certain types of exclusions. Indeed, a large body of literature in neuroscience, psychology and cognition makes the case for early childhood interventions. In particular, it is clearly established that nutrition and cognitive stimulation early in life are critical for long-term skill development. Undernourished children have higher rates of mortality, lower cognitive and school performance, and are more likely to drop out of school. Thus, learning starts well before the formal entry of the child to the primary school. Indeed, there is a widespread conviction among educators that the benefits of pre-primary education are carried over to primary school. In particular, it is observed that teachers identify lack of academic skills as one of the most common obstacles children face when they enter school. Also, they perceive preschool education as facilitating the process of socialization and self-control necessary to make the most of classroom learning.

It is within this context that institutional support for children before the school age has gained considerable attention in recent years, particularly with respect to health and nutrition programmes. School Readiness Programme and/or attaching pre-school classes to primary schools have been used as means to increase opportunities for girls' education by freeing them from looking after younger siblings. India has a massive programme under the banner of Integrated Child Development Scheme to provide development support to children in the age group 0-6 coupled with prenatal and post natal care facilities for mothers. Yet, the progress is quite slow and commitment of resources is quite inadequate. It is worthwhile to work out an independent policy on preschool education to be pursued along side school education.

Working Children: Issues

For many of the poor, life cycle begins and ends, one generation after another, in a small world of debt and servitude. Deprived of basic education and steeped in intergenerational debt traps, there is no escape route available from the miseries of life. Placed in such conditions people tend to react in unusual ways. One such means is the engagement of small children in remunerative labour which severely affects their education. Yet, education is the only means they look to for liberating themselves from the misery. Perhaps with the exception of some very abusive or callous parents, most parents even from the poorest families would prefer to withdraw their children from work if they can afford it. So the main approach should be to create such conditions that enable parents to send their children to school. An important lesson to note is that mere advocacy on banning child labour is not enough. It is essential to design policies that help delineate concrete alternate programmes of education which effectively take children out of work.

Investing in Teacher : Investing for the Future

Teacher is the central actor to tackle the quality issue. There are several issues related to teacher that need to be addressed with appropriate policy measures. Recent Teacher Eligibility Tests have revealed that a large proportion of the teacher-aspirants do not qualify despite having requisite academic and professional degrees. This highlights the poor quality of the aspirants who seek to enter the teaching profession. While this could partially be offset by improving the preservice teacher education programmes, the real answer lies in addressing the professional needs of the practising teacher on a continuous basis. This issue cannot be tackled adequately through the occasional in-service training programmes organized under SSA or RMSA. Instead it is time to develop a proper policy on professional development of the school teacher. Such a policy should incorporate several critical elements such as subject matter upgradation and use of ICT. The vision should be to provide opportunities for lifelong learning for improvement and upgradation. The policy should also effectively link participation in professional development programmes with career prospects. A corollary of this would be to present an integrated perspective on teacher support and supervision. Besides these measures, in order to instil a sense of ownership and institutional commitment among the teachers, the policy should be to appoint teachers to specific schools. It is time to question the colonial

practice of appointing teachers to the system and not to the particular school. The issue is debated repeatedly, but centralized control over teacher posting and transfer is too powerful a political tool that no state government seems to be ready to act. Finally, despite the recognition of the centrality of teacher, in the traditional management framework, the education authorities as well as the school teachers and even the community members tend to view teachers only as passive recipient individuals whose role is only to implement the decisions made for the larger system. Using the agency of the teacher to transform the classroom processes with focus on learning requires a fundamental shift in school governance. But, how would this change be brought in? This throws a major challenge, as this would require new sets of skills and attitude among all the stakeholders. The traditional programmes of teacher education and in-service programmes for headmasters and administrators should be geared to meet this challenge. These are important questions that need to be urgently tackled.

Reshaping the Gender Discourse in Education

Many consider that the problem of universal elementary education in India is essentially a problem of girls' education. Though positive change is visible in recent years in terms of decreasing gender gap in school enrolment across all states, are we doing enough with respect to education of girls? Several factors seem to be impeding the education of girls. Girls are doubly affected by the absence of effective early childhood education programmes as they are invariably burdened with the responsibility of caring for the younger siblings. Distance norms for opening middle schools work against the interest of girls as often they are not allowed to go out of the village for schooling. Further, provision of basic infrastructure and women teachers in the school could considerably influence the situation as indicated by recent efforts through various primary education projects.

It is important to recognize that not getting the girl-child enrolled in the school, leaving the school without completing the elementary cycle, or deciding to withdraw the girl child from the school midstream, or deciding not to go to upper primary school or secondary school – for statistical purposes these are just events and the children get categorized and counted as unenrolled, dropout and so on. But in reality, exclusion from schooling is not just an event or a statistic; not a momentary decision but a complex process involving many factors in the personal life of the child and the family. When a girl drops out of the school, many events precede shaping the course of action – some located in the family, some located in the community and the peer group, and many located in the school where the girl is supposed to be studying. Understanding exclusion demands exploring these turns and twists in the personal life history of the young child. Such an exploration cannot be done merely by asking questions to the parents and teachers or even the children themselves. It requires tracking children individually and in groups as they join the school, move up the grades or leave the school. This would be critical for building a description of the complex processes involved in exclusion and delineating the underlying causes. Policy to address this process will have to be linked to local dynamics that surrounds the girl children at home, in the community and the school. Support to the girl child will have to flow following the life of the girl children over a sustained period of time and transforming the events that surround their lives. Several programmes have been launched including the more recent 'beti bachao, beti padhao' programme. Yet it is necessary to formulate a more comprehensive policy for girls education that goes beyond the school years and shift the focus from mere parity to gender equality. The policy should also address the needs of reorienting the youth in order to socially impact their attitudes as they grow. The policy should also address the education of young men and women

who enter colleges and universities who would eventually shape the societal values and orientations.

ICT and School Education

The tremendous potential of ICT in recasting the quality of school education experiences is widely debated and discussed. However, policies and programmes that effectively transform the school experiences of the young learner need greater attention. We have to move beyond the current paradigm of supplying hardware and proprietary software to schools and embed ICT into all aspects of school life. It should be recognized that ICT is already part of every growing child; withholding its use in schools in an integrated fashion only creates alienation of school from the larger life space of the student. Further as a UNESCO report entitled 'Our Creative Diversity' points out, exclusion from technology places those concerned at a disadvantage in the coming "information society." It creates an ever larger rift between high society, between high technology and the modernization of the elite on the one hand, and the marginalization of the majority of the population on the other. The swift pace of high-tech advances drives another wedge between youngsters. The haves will be able to communicate around the globe. The have-nots will be consigned to the rural backwater of the information society.

Learning Achievement to be the Primary Focus

Learning is at the centre of all educational processes. Parents send their children, after all, expecting them to master reading and writing and acquire knowledge. It is difficult to condone poor performance of schools on this count. Poor learning levels act doubly against the interest of the marginalised groups. However, it is misleading to treat school quality as synonymous with pass percentages in public examination or placement in national league tables based on national testing. If quality with equity overcoming the problems of exclusion

and discrimination is the concern, definition of school quality cannot be based on marks and grades alone which often hide underlying inequalities. Two broad sets of factors that cause inequity in quality have to be recognized and dealt with, namely, inequality of provision of quality schools and secondly inequitable practices and discrimination *within* schools.

Further, experience as well as research findings indicate that macro level reform processes can improve school quality only to a limited extent. The focus has to shift to individual schools and local level action. The focus of national programme recently launched under the banner of 'Shaala siddhi' paves the way for formulating a comprehensive national policy in this regard adopting 'school improvement planning' as a core strategy for building local capability for institutional development as we well as to inject a sense of ownership and accountability to school functioning. Another strategy adopted in this regard to is to develop leadership capability from within the school for meaningful transformation. Policies of school governance have to engage with building leaders for schools of the future embedding new knowledge and skills necessary for sustainable development.

Refocusing the Curriculum Debate

Curriculum is critical determining the quality of education imparted. There has been considerable attention paid during recent years to revamping the school curriculum. However, the discourse has remained truncated as the focus has been mainly on the representation of events and personalities in the social science and history textbooks. This narrow concern has to give way to a more comprehensive policy engagement in determining the contours and contents of the school curriculum. In particular, the focus has to encompass science education effectively as no country can develop without the supply of well equipped professionals in science and engineering. In fact, an emerging trend observed across the world is to create special pathways for bright and interested children to pursue science and mathematics through specially designated institutions commonly addressed as STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) schools. Unfortunately, science education has received highly inadequate attention over the years: often, one comes across instances where science and mathematics are taught by teachers without professional qualification in science. The Right to Education Act mandates appointment of specialised teachers at the upper primary classes. But, this may remain only a cherished goal if corrective measures are not taken through policies making science learning attractive at all levels and tracking children towards science at early stage with special schooling provisions. It is important to get the best scientific minds in the country to engage with budding science students exposing them to frontier areas of knowledge and research. This could possibly begin by involving our top science and technology institutions such as IITs and IISERs and the scientific research laboratories by establishing special schools attached to these institutions or in their neighbourhood in order to facilitate participation of senior professionals from these institutions imparting science education at the school level.

Engaging the Civil Society and Private Sector: New Framework

The last two decades have witnessed emergence of a number of non-governmental organizations actively engaged in school education. Generally, these organizations work closely with the community and respond to the ground reality. They have indeed become strong voices in favour of education of the marginalised groups. During the same period, corporate sector has also begun to show significant interest in promotion of school education. This is in contrast to the traditional approach in which public schooling catering to the needs of the poor has been the exclusive responsibility of the Government. Generally, the efforts by the three stakeholders, namely, the Government, NGOs and Private entities have been viewed as three distinct compartments. It is time that a comprehensive policy is framed to find common ground and propose a framework in which the Government, the NGOs and the private schools occupy common public space of education in a mutually supportive fashion and not occupy exclusive domains that divide. Obviously, the State has to play a significant role in this as market forces may not be sensitive to diversity and equality nor to the concerns of sustainability.

Conclusion

Crafting a new policy for a country as varied as India is indeed a difficult proposition. The 'rights perspective' as enunciated in the RTE Act set the tone for moving ahead in this difficult endeavour. Implementing the principle of equal rights requires shared experiences and the narrowing of the range of inequalities. It is necessary to think about the kinds of institutions that facilitate or hinder these goals. Continued inability to overcome gross inequalities would lead to an incomprehensibly wide range of experiences and interests in the society. A society in which the range of inequality is so extensive is one in which members share little. They cannot understand the claims and grievances of one another and they fear that recognizing the claims of those who are much different will come at their own expense. The new education policy has to envision a new world of values and ethics of learning to learn and live together. If such a policy has to be substantive and not merely rhetorical it must be based on shared values and experiences of people living in this vastly diverse cultural, linguistic, and economic context. There is, in fact, unprecedented groundswell in favour of education throughout the country that raises a sense of optimism for the future. The policy of the future has to be built on this sense hope and aspiration. ❑

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