

Indian Education at the Crossroads

PRAKASH LOUIS

Education is a cultural construct meant to socialize the citizen; transmit knowledge from one generation to another; and generate new knowledge to better all generations. The education system is supposed to contribute to individual growth and social transformation. In the same way, society and polity are supposed to determine the framework of the educational system and to help maintain the educational superstructure. In course of this interaction, conflict and crisis arise. The crisis leads to the formulation of policy frameworks, which introduce debate on education and promote societal reconstruction.

In a poor country like India, illiteracy of the majority continues to pose a serious challenge. The central and state governments have promised to wipe out illiteracy and have engaged in many projects to achieve that goal. The ruling establishment has sought local and international financial support to eradicate illiteracy. While the policies and pronouncements have been ambitious, many marginalized communities have gone from bad to worse.

The framers of the Constitution were well aware of the debilitating effect on society of discrimination against the weak. Thus, they made constitutional provisions to remove all forms of such centuries-old discrimination. Article 14 of the Constitution provides: "The State shall not deny to any person equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India." Article 46 mandates: "The State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, and, in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, and shall protect these from social injustice and all forms of exploitation."¹

In the last five decades, attempts have been made to improve education for all and for the weak sectors in particular, to improve their economic and social standing. Over 30% of the al-

location on education was spent to improve education of scheduled castes and tribes. Many factors, however, operate to deny the weak sectors of their right to education and to prevent them from fully participating in various educational efforts. The introduction and impact of the New Education Policy needs to be examined from this background.²

Many educationists argue that a class-divided system of education has played a central role in molding the patterns of uneven development and disenfranchisement in postcolonial India. In much of urban India, there are two systems of education—English medium (the upper tier of English-medium schools in cities) and vernacular medium (often state run). At the individual level, English-medium education has been a ticket to vertical mobility in Indian society. At the societal level, English-medium education has played a critical role in producing what Kothari calls a modernized technomanagerial elite that continues to have disproportionate influence in shaping the discursive terrain of development and the policies that affect the social fabric. Less visibly, English-medium education widens fractures in society by creating and reinforcing a social, cultural, economic, and discursive divide between the English educated and the majority. This is not to

say that the vernacular medium is egalitarian or free of political agenda.³

Indian Education Today

State intervention in education is closely associated with, if not anchored on, the distinction between producing leaders who will contribute to nation building and engaging the masses in rural reconstruction. While education continued to favor the urban rich, some public pronouncements were made for the rural masses. Anil Sadgopal argues that the Kothari Education Commission (1964–1966) advocated the common school system along with the transformation of schools—government, aided, or private—into neighborhood schools, which will be open to all children residing in a given area, irrespective of their socioeconomic background. The common school was a policy imperative in the first National Policy on Education 1968 (NPE 1968). Parliament twice made a commitment to the goal of building a common school system—first in the 1986 policy and again in the revised version in 1992 (NPE 1992). This commitment was violated twice by the 1986 policy itself—first, through its proposal to set up the *Navodaya Vidyalaya* (New Enlightenment Schools) as a layer above the government school system for the rural elite; and second, through the establishment of another layer of nonformal centers below the government school system for child laborers.⁴

A careful look at the education reveals two dominant trends from 1998 onward. First is the ongoing process of communalization of education in the name of “Indianizing” or nationalizing education. “Casteization” of education is also on the agenda under the slogan of spiritualization. Although noble ideals are projected, the ultimate aim is to thrust upon the citizens the agenda of Hindutva force, or the right-wing Hindu nationalist force.⁵

Another trend is the “marketization” of education. Neoliberal agents, or market forces, have been trying to highjack education for their own

vested interest. The Ambani-Biral Report on Education,⁶ submitted to the trade sector of the Prime Minister’s office, is a clear indication of the growing nexus between the ruling establishment and the business class.

Among socially conscious citizens, the cause for concern is not just the attempt to tinker with the educational system, but the objective of the forces behind it. The *Sangh parivar*, or the right-wing Hindutva force, is hell-bent on introducing change in the educational system with the stated objective of “Indianization, nationalization, and spiritualization.” The right wing will attempt to manipulate and alter the basic structures of society and polity to serve its objective. The corporate sector wants a steady market and is hobnobbing with the ruling class to fundamentally change education. In the long run, these changes will uphold and maintain the hegemony of the dominant caste, the upper class, and retain a skewed, hierarchical, and patriarchal social order. This process seems to be gaining upper hand, but citizens and civil society are trying to work for a democratic, plural, egalitarian, and just social order.

In 2001 another trend was observed in education. On 28 November, Parliament passed the 93rd amendment, making education for the 6–14 year age group compulsory. This step has been widely welcomed, but the amendment has shortcomings that may work against those who have till now been excluded from schools. A large number of child laborers are denied not merely education but also their right to childhood.

The amendment makes education compulsory but not free, and imposes on parents a fundamental duty to send their children to school while not obliging states to invest in making education accessible to all. The minister for human resource development says the states will be encouraged to make such investment in the 5-year plans.

Allocation for education, especially at the primary level, is biased against the rural poor. Geetha Nambisan analyzes the financial alloca-

tion for educational activities: “Financial allocations for important programs of elementary education funded by the central government are revealing. In 1992–1993 the budget estimates for Non-Formal Education (NFE) include—centers (US\$9 million), NFE for girls (US\$6 million), and grants to voluntary agencies to set up centers (US\$4 million). This works out to around 32.3% of the total allocations for elementary education estimated for 1992–1993. Allocations for NFE are almost equal to that for Operation Black Board, which is meant ‘to provide minimum essential facilities to all primary schools in the country.’ Much-publicized programs such as the Bihar Education Project, Lok Jumbis, and World Bank-assisted projects also have sizeable nonformal components and receive considerable external assistance.”⁷

These facts again raise questions about the reality and the government’s rhetoric on education. Vaidyanathan and Gopinathan discuss education policy pronouncements and implementation:

Eradication of poverty and illiteracy figured prominently in the political rhetoric of the Indian nationalist movement even before independence. Achieving universal elementary education within 10 years was included as one of the Directive Principles of State Policy in the Constitution of Indian Republic. The rhetoric continues but the goal remains elusive even after 50 years of planning. Governments, both at the center and in the states, irrespective of their ideology, have not pursued this objective seriously and with vigor. Resources allocated to education have been woefully inadequate and, with higher education absorbing a rising proportion of allocations, elementary education has remained on a semi-starvation diet. The idea of making elementary education legally compulsory for all children has not evoked much enthusiasm. Some states have enacted the necessary legislation but none has exerted itself to get the law enforced.⁸

Education Discussion Group

A group of educationists, academicians, activists, and concerned citizens met and discussed the issues that ail the education system, and formed the Education Discussion Group (EDG) in September 2001 to discuss, debate, and evolve strategies to address the current crisis in school education. EDG held its First National Consultation on Education in Delhi in December 2001. Participants from 10 states included teachers, social activists, educationists, and policymakers. While the immediate focus of the consultation was on the communalization of education, the running theme was the need to evolve a broad perspective.

The participants identified regional issues in education and decided to focus on them, while EDG agreed to be a national watchdog. To advance the discussion and evolve alternative long-term state-level and national strategies, the group decided to hold a more intensive consultation in April 2002.

Three broad themes were identified for the consultation:

- monitoring of textbooks to see how much they reinforce gender hierarchies, social inequalities, and communalism;
- ways and means of ensuring equal access to education; and
- issues related to pedagogy in curriculum formulation and teacher training.

The response was overwhelming. Three days of intense, heated discussions raised awareness of the educational crisis. Wide-ranging, stimulating presentations persuaded participants that this exercise would be a long-term process, not a sporadic event. They agreed that they should build networks of communication to exchange ideas, share experiences, develop short-term and long-term strategies for educational interventions, and engage in dialogue and debate.

The national consultation focused on the issues raised by the National Curriculum Framework (NCF), released by the National Council of

Educational Research and Training (NCERT) on 14 November 2000,⁹ as a “gift” to the children of India. The participants felt that on Independence Day the values enshrined in the Constitution should be reaffirmed so that future generations can realize the long-cherished dreams of true independence.

National Consultation

The national consultation began with a lecture by Krishna Kumar of Delhi University, who focused on the implications of state education policies. He raised fundamental issues, emphasizing the need for continuous enquiry and evaluation of state policies, and for interventions. He pointed out that the government, instead of upholding constitutional provisions, was violating them in a variety of ways, most obviously in handling the carnage in Gujarat, and in the formulation of NCF.

Major Issues in the First Session

NCF evoked widespread criticism, discussion, and debate among educationists, teachers, and parliamentarians. Instead of taking their concerns into account, NCERT went ahead and issued syllabi in line with NCF in January 2002.

The Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE), which includes representatives of all states, was not consulted in formulating NCF. A few eminent concerned citizens appealed to the Supreme Court, through a public interest litigation, the first ever pertaining to curriculum. The petitioners argued that NCF violated constitutional provisions that guaranteed secularism and democracy, including equal opportunities. Ironically, most teachers and principals were just concerned with immediate problems, including lack of textbooks.

The participants also made reference to wider political scenario. In a sense, there was a parallel in the way the policies of economic liberalization were adopted in the 1990s—no con-

sultation, discussion, or debate; suppression of dissent; and presentation of a *fait accompli*. The government extended this process to education, which was not surprising as the Bharatiya Janata Party¹⁰ was the only political party with a deep interest in education, with a network of 26,000 schools all over the country.

Unfortunately, virtually all political parties, including Congress and the left, put low priority on education. The Ministry of Human Resources Development portfolio is not a prized ministry, unlike defense, external affairs, or finance. Although the National Policy on Education (1986) was drafted under the Congress government, it showed no interest in implementing its own policy. Past appointments to educational bodies (NCERT, UGC, ICSSR, etc.) had been based on getting people who were willing to do the bidding of political bosses. Thus, the interest of the nation and citizens of the country was mortgaged for party interests.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the education policy was committed to generating a scientific spirit. In the 1970s, the vision was one of common schooling and education in the mother tongue. All these have been relegated to the background. As time went on, the educational system was brought under the purview of political vested interests.

Four major commissions have inquired into education since Independence. Of these, the Secondary Education Commission, (1953) and the Prof. Yashpal Commission (1990–1992) raised issues on curriculum and pedagogy. They suggested that curriculum must be grounded in the world of the student, to lend the lessons a vibrant reality, since it is in the classroom that children imbibe morals, values, and skills.

Examinations are regarded as the end of all education. Worse, teachers’ unions are disunited. The program on universalizing primary education has produced the so-called para-teacher, who is paid a pittance. Para-teachers, 6 hundred thousand today, are not well equipped to educate.

Teachers have virtually no role in writing textbooks and are, at best, given token representation in the process, which is usually undertaken by experts who have no experience in classroom realities. Often, textbooks are simply stuffed with facts. As the writer R.K. Narayanan said, education has become the national sport of teaching children facts they cannot digest. Most poor children are thus severely disadvantaged while middle-class children have access to information. For poor children, going to school becomes a demeaning experience, and fear of failure often forces them out of the system.

The quality of textbooks is shocking. While government reports are printed on art paper, schoolbooks are printed on newsprint, and not for lack of resources. Even states such as Karnataka, which try to project themselves as “modern,” use poor-quality books.

NCF emphasizes values education. The values are supposed to be derived from religious traditions, not from the Constitution. Values education thus undermines the constitutional values of secularism and democracy. Historical records bear testimony to this fact. In 1939, when Gandhiji was questioned in Wardha as to why his *Nayi Taleem* did not mention values education, he pointed out that values could not be taught, they could only be acquired by seeing how others practiced them. Thus, values education attempts to impose one religion in a country historically known for its pluralism.

What the future holds for students, parents, educationists, and society is a big question. The participants of the First National Consultation on Education have become painfully aware that educationists are contemplative rather than activist, regardless of the deep national crisis. Any attempt to rework the curriculum must address the problem of a nation in tatters, where the minorities and the marginalized face the gravest threat to their existence since Independence. The ability to envision a different future must be retained.

Major Issues in the Second Session

The second session was devoted to an analysis of textbooks. The participants raised issues of stereotypes, including stereotyping of gender roles, caste, and tribal or indigenous identities, communal identities, and treatment of class. Focus was on social science books and language books, including Hindi, Sanskrit, and Bengali. Although the discussion was meant to be on textbooks, a number of participants raised important issues of context, including the nature of educational institutions, leading to a rich discussion.

The crucial question raised was how are men and women represented in textbooks?

M.K. Subramaniam said that textbooks in Tamil Nadu did not show a gender bias, an assertion that others questioned, pointing out that few women are represented. Even where they are shown, they are rarely the main characters. Women’s issues are virtually never discussed.

In language, the terms used for men are markers of respect, while those used for women (and lower castes) are less formal, suggesting a clear-cut hierarchy. Illustrations accompanying the text show women to be passive and men to be active. The Sanskrit books used in the Delhi region reinforce gender roles and stereotypes by praising girls who cook, clean, etc., suggesting that they will be rewarded. This type of formulating textbooks reinforces gender bias.

Seema Ghosh pointed out that the Bengali books used in Assam lay down the norms for girls. They “grow up” when they are 4 or 5, must stop playing when they are 8 or 9, and must obey rules when they are 10 or 11. Boys of the same age are at liberty to play football. Females are shown to be nervous, while males are shown to be in control of any situation. The role models for women are Sati, Savitri, Gargi, and Mother Teresa.

A teacher from Madhya Pradesh pointed out that Sanskrit books present Sita as a role model for girls, with special emphasis on her loyalty to Ram until the very end, when she disappears

into the bosom of the earth. Through such models, the qualities of subservience, self-effacement, and sacrifice are inculcated among girls.

In Hindi books from Uttar Pradesh, women figure in approximately 25% of the lessons. In more than half of these, women are shown as mothers of “great men.” Even when “great women” such as the Rani of Jhansi are mentioned, they are shown as having greatness thrust on them, unlike the men who are shown to be born great. Even when women are non-conformists, they are depicted as conforming to norms. For instance, Durgavati married against her father’s wishes, but this is depicted as a marriage in which all rituals were observed. Women are portrayed as materialistic, selfish, and scheming. Roop Rekha Verma mentioned *Hamare Purvaj* (Our Ancestors), which upholds the ideal of Savitri, who is depicted as a chaste Hindu woman, and demands that women adhere to “customs and traditions,” while men are free to do as they wish.

The Constitution envisages a secular state, but the participants raised questions on the secular credibility of the textbooks. Many schools prescribed a weekly for supplementary reading that serialized the story of Mughal rulers, who were represented in a very poor light. Even in textbooks, most characters are given Hindu names. Use of Christian or Islamic names is rare. The only festivals discussed are Hindu. While books in the formal school system in West Bengal tend to be secular, the existence of Vidya Bharati schools in a number of districts points to ominous trends, which the state government has not addressed.

Abdur Rauf focused on the question of *madrastas*, or Muslim educational centers, in West Bengal, of which there are three kinds: those that follow state curriculum, await recognition, and *khariji madrasas*, which impart religious instruction. The last type is often stereotyped as breeding ground for terrorism. However, it was pointed out that the fundamentalists or communalists usually come from

“modern” backgrounds, and that the students of *khariji* madrasas may be backward but they are not fundamentalist. Mr. Rauf also pointed out that secondary school textbooks in West Bengal contained stereotypical notions about Islam and *jihad*, although they were written by “progressive” leftist scholars. He suggested that this was because most of these scholars were upper-caste Hindus, biased against Muslims, whom they regard as low-caste converts.

Poorva Bhardwaj drew attention to the implicit communalism in Sanskrit books used in Delhi. Sanskrit is referred to as *dev bhasha*, the language of the gods. Besides, metaphors and analogies are drawn from Hindu mythology, and dates that are identified as important are drawn exclusively from the Hindu calendar of festivals. This type of exclusivism deeply affects the mental make of the children.

Dipta Bhog and Archana Dwivedi focused on Hindi books in Uttar Pradesh, pointing out how they were concerned with “history,” especially constructing a glorious Hindu past, and emphasized patriotism. Even the two Muslim characters represented in more than 90 lessons were shown as patriotic in spite of their religion. Muslim rulers, such as Akbar, are represented as outsiders, and the battles with them as “national struggles.” This type of distortion of history contributes to the spreading communal crisis. Other religious traditions are appropriated and brought under one religion. For example, Buddhism and Sikhism are portrayed as mere offshoots of Hinduism.

Damayanti Modi pointed out an attempt to create a glorious Hindu past in social science books in Gujarati. Thus, the *Arthashastra* is projected as a text that is unique in the entire world, and Rana Pratap is now projected not simply as a Rajput but as a *Hindupati* (Lord of the Hindus).

The iron grip of the caste system is unaltered. The attitude of the dominant castes toward the lower castes, as spelled out in textbooks, reinforces the exploitative nature of the system. Rama Panchali pointed out that in Madhya

Pradesh Sanskrit books predominantly focused on Brahmins and their rituals, and represented the so-called lower castes as unworthy of a dignified existence. Participants pointed out that most book characters continue to be upper caste Hindus. In West Bengal, however, lower-caste characters are now represented in social science and mathematics books.

Dipta Bhog and Archana Dwivedi pointed out that the Hindi books used in Uttar Pradesh contained a biography of Dr. Ambedkar,¹¹ but even this did not address the issue of caste discrimination. The problems he faced were projected as arising out of backwardness or orthodoxy. They argued that the refusal to discuss caste system, caste discrimination goes to state that the political establishment deprives the students of the information about the logic behind as well as the historical reasons for providing reservation or affirmative action for the weaker sections. Roop Rekha Verma drew attention to the fact that “great men” are often defined as those who show reverence to Brahmins, and are supposed to be from the priestly class within the Hindu social order.

The presentation of tribal or indigenous peoples in textbooks also shows bias. Ritu Bala surveyed Hindi textbooks used in Jharkhand, Rajasthan, Haryana, and Delhi. She found stereotyping particularly apparent in visual representations of tribal peoples, who are almost invariably depicted as dancing, while nontribal people are shown engaged in more “serious” occupations such as teaching, medicine, and engineering. Tribal peoples are also shown as backward, ignorant, and even cannibals. The bias against the tribal population in textbooks reflects the same bias by the political establishment. The government has refused to acknowledge that the tribal population is similar to indigenous peoples in other parts of the globe, thus thwarting attempts by indigenous peoples to build international solidarity.

The projection of Shivaji as a Hindu nationalist grossly simplifies and distorts history. The projection of his conflict with the Mughals as

religious rather than political is simplistic. However, this perception is reiterated and projected in textbooks.

Other general trends identified in textbooks

- Textbooks present the nation as homogeneous rather than diverse. References to differences and conflicts are suppressed. This could lead to monocultural tendency among children and could affect the scope for pluralism.
- This trend is not only observed in the social sciences but also in the language, mathematics, and natural sciences books.
- There are clear indications of communal bias in many books, which is against the Constitution.
- Representation of marginalized sections of society, whether women, minorities, dalits, or tribal people, is grossly inadequate. If ever, they are represented derogatively, or as a segment of the population that needs to be brought into the mainstream.
- Generally, the distinction between myth and reality is blurred, preventing a critical examination of the past. Warfare and militarism are glorified, contributing to acceleration of social conflict.
- While lip service continues to be paid to democracy, secularism, and equity, the images in textbooks do little to nurture these ideals among children, and even produce the opposite results.

The participants suggested that regional variations be examined and information exchanged about attempts to tinker with education. Anita Ghai, an activist working for the rights of the physically challenged, drew attention to the fact that the disabled as a marginalized group had not been considered in the exercise. She emphasized the immediate need to analyze the treatment, or invisibility, of disabled people in schoolbooks. Participants also highlighted the importance of language: how there is a hierarchy, with Sanskrit being projected as a divine language, Hindi as San-

skritized, and the languages of marginalized groups such as the dalits and tribal people as less developed.

Issues of Pedagogy

The national consultation also addressed the question: Do we need values education in our schools? Umakant Chandra Shetty, from Sholapur, described how his organization, Guruji Pratishtan, tried to impart values through story-telling workshops. The government of Maharashtra had introduced a 30-minute session in schools on values education, which had become a mere formality. Guruji Pratishtan envisions inculcating values such as peace and gender equity among students.

The participants were open to explore the place and role of values education in schools, but there were a lot of questions. For one, promoting values education had become a new mantra, a new slogan to enforce one's views. For another, there is a need to know what values are to be inculcated, and for whom? Are textbooks devoid of values? Can values be imparted through textbooks? Are values caste or class neutral?

Another question raised was, Is our schooling system conducive to democracy? Pradip Borthakur argued that the schooling system is inherently authoritarian. Knowledge is presented by teachers, with little scope for dialogue or reasoning. Democracy rests on dialogue, and schools do not equip children to develop skills and abilities to engage in dialogue and evolve a consensus. Since "managing" or "administering" the school is the overarching concern, discipline leads to authoritarianism.

Lachman Khubchandani emphasized that the medium of instruction, content, and accessibility were related issues and could not be examined in isolation. Language is vital in communication, and it is important to emphasize plurality and diversity. Language policy since Independence has been elite-centered. The participants also discussed the importance of providing centrality to mother tongue in the early

stage of learning, which can be done if language is integrated in the planning of educational curriculum.

Abhijit Pathak made a passionate plea to envision learning as a dynamic, aesthetic process by transforming the learning process. At least three critical problems exist:

- Education has reproduced and reinforced social inequality instead of reducing or contesting it.
- What is regarded as worth knowing is closely related to the political economy. Commerce is thus preferred over science.
- The process of learning, or the pedagogy, is oppressive, regimented, and deeply conservative. It is not emancipatory as envisioned by Tagore, Gandhi, or Tolstoy.

Dr. Pathak drew attention to the need to connect education with other struggles. For instance, Gandhi's vision of decolonization was linked to an alternative vision of education. Tagore's vision of education was related to a cosmopolitan ideal that went beyond narcissistic nationalism. Freire envisaged dialogic education as a means to create an egalitarian society. He advocated daily, continuous innovation in the classroom. He suggested that teachers move beyond the text to enable the child to question its sanctity. Teachers should be empowered to develop a symbiotic, dialogic relationship with students, instead of the mindless brutality of most classroom situations. Learning can be a joyful, aesthetic experience instead of a source of oppression.

Third Session: Exploring Alternatives

The National Consultation also explored alternative forms of learning, preparing, and presenting curriculum and syllabus, and of making education responsive to society and society accountable for the educational system. Some of the experiments that were examined as alternatives to the present educational system are as follow:

- *The Ekalavya Experience*

C.N. Subrahmaniam, from Ekalavya, Hoshangabad, shared the experience of trying to develop and transact an alternative curriculum. The experiment began about 30 years ago, in the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme (HSTP). This was initiated by a group of scientists who approached the Madhya Pradesh government with a proposal to develop alternative materials for teaching science in government-run schools. This experiment contributed immensely to the creation of a space for nongovernment initiatives. However, it has never been replicated. Even the space for this kind of initiative has been shrinking.

The Eklavya effort was an innovative experiment to bring about an interaction between the state, curriculum designers, and teachers. The objective of HSTP was to stimulate children's curiosity instead of simply providing information, to relate science to daily life rather than let it remain an abstraction. The project consisted of a package, including textbook design, teacher training, and continuous academic support. It meant discussing issues that teachers and children found problematic, irrelevant, or boring. It also meant changing the evaluation system.

In social science, the aim is to familiarize children with social structures through an interactive process of contextualization to understand how situations impact differently on different social groups. This would help students understand the struggles for a just and equitable social order, and develop basic skills of analysis.

- *Kerala Shastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP)*

Krishnan Kutty presented the aims, experiences, and activities of the KSSP (The Kerala Literary Society), a people's initiative to bring education closer to home. KSSP started in 1962 with the objective of establishing an egalitarian society through educational interventions, including an emphasis on the scientific approach and the development of a rational attitude toward social norms. People were organized and mobilized through cultural pro-

grams through which common people were imparted scientific temper. The emphasis has always been on using the mother tongue. KSSP has 40,000 members, and 2,000 units throughout Kerala.

KSSP envisaged education as means to lift the poor out of the trap of exploitation, and recognized the value of political links with the left parties. KSSP took part in the Total Literacy Campaign, and worked on health, women's development, and environmental issues. KSSP led the campaign to declare the Silent Valley a protected area and was involved in micro-level planning exercises in development work.

KSSP focused on developing communication materials such as literacy magazines, etc. It published books, primarily based on KSSP's research and development activities, worth \$257,000. KSSP has three education research units and environment centers. It has a huge mass base, from where it draws its strength and resources to run science education programs. KSSP does not accept foreign funds.

KSSP worked intensively to develop child-centered and child-friendly curriculums in cooperation with the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) to inform it of intervention processes and, thus, make it more child-centered. Thus, KSSP and the program were involved in preparing school curriculums, which were ready for classes 1–7 and under process for class 8, when the government suddenly changed. It withdrew the KSSP curriculums and brought back the old syllabi. Only a few schools now use the KSSP curriculums.

KSSP sees a major impact of globalization on education. An example was the "black order" announced by the Kerala government withdrawing support for 2,644 government schools for being uneconomical, as they had less than 100 students. These schools are now being handed over to private institutions, which charge high fees. KSSP agitated against this order and is still struggling to force the government to recall it. The government, however, has turned a blind eye to these concerns and is

adopting policies that prioritize the upper class and castes.

- *The Lokshala Experience*

Lokshala, or people's center, is an alternative to *patshala*, or center of learning. The presentations about Lokshala involved two levels: broad policy issues and specific experiences.

A brief history of Lokshala. In 1991 the *Bharatiya Gyan Vigyan Jatha* (The National Knowledge and Science March) or BGVJ saw the coming together of groups working on education, environment, health, and technology under the leadership of Prof. Yashpal, with Prof. Anil Sadgopal as convener. This was closely connected with the All India People's Science Jatha, which involved 50,000 villages and several towns. As a follow up, the National Brainstorming Conference, with over a thousand delegates, was organized in May 1994.

This led to the initiation of the Lokshala process in 1995, with focus on developing an alternative vision of school education based on indigenous experiences. BGVJ organized a meeting of 6,000 persons, including educationists, academics and field activists. It adopted the perspective of working toward a synthesis between academics and activists, and working toward institutional transformation as part of a wider social change.

Several community development blocks were adopted as field laboratories. These included Jahanabad in Bihar, Dhubri in Assam, and blocks in Meghalaya, Nagaland, Maharashtra, Orissa, Manipur, and Jehangirpuri (Delhi). Each field laboratory was unique and developed its own pace and style of functioning. People's perceptions were taken into consideration in identifying priorities, and this provided the basis for intervention. The emphasis was on decentralization and on learning from each other's experience.

Elaborating on the 'Importance of Policy Analysis,' Dr Janaki Rajan pointed out how policy analysis formed an integral part of the

Lokshala process. It involved not only scholars but also people who belonged to a specific geo-cultural area. Policy analysis is a complicated, constant process of inquiry and learning, involving, among other things, accurate translations of documents. It indicates, for instance, that emphasis on nonformal education actually aids and abets child labor.

Policy analysis also shows that the government tends to use education and literacy as synonymous terms, which must be questioned. This was apparent in the way in which the commitment to free and compulsory education for all children up to age 14, guaranteed in Article 45 of the Constitution, had been diluted. Although India accepted the Jomtien Declaration on Elementary Education as a right, this is now being diluted and projected as a commitment to nonformal education.

Ms. Jharsu summarized the experience from Nagaland, where there has been an attempt to create an awareness of education issues among people. Mr. Surjeet shared his experience from Meghalaya, emphasizing on how the Indian college studies seemed alien to the realities of his region. He tried to interact with local teachers, but with limited success. His attempt to set up Science Clubs was not very effective. He highlighted the difficulties in conducting investigations, where people told him what he expected to hear instead of the truth, and this made him realize that he needed to work with the community and learn from it rather than expect quick results. This led to the crystallization of a group that discussed where Meghalaya figured in the overall educational policy of the country. What is evident from his account is that there are no short cuts and easy answers.

Akshay shared the experience of undertaking Lokshala in Jahanabad, Bihar. The group worked on the premise that no effective intervention would be possible without understanding the political and socioeconomic context. They also underscored the need to win the support of the community and to build an inter-

face between ground realities and educational 'experts.' Jahanabad is a district particularly prone to violence because of radical peasant movements. There was a police presence in most schools, which was hardly conducive to their functioning. One initiative taken by the group led to the removal of policemen from schools. Local young men were encouraged to work on a project documenting local history. Some initiatives were also taken to raise questions on the appointment of para-teachers. This had some impact on policy makers.

Perhaps more important were the long-term changes in attitudes and ideas that had been generated by these activities. Education is now recognized as a political issue in the area and has generated a lot of debate within the community. People now understand the difference between education and mere literacy, and can raise these issues with their political representatives, like Members of Parliament, and Members of Legislative Assembly. Social activists have developed a deeper understanding of the political context and have created a space for critical analysis of the existing situation. This process has opened up avenues to search for alternative educational strategies in a region, which is undergoing violent eruption.

Mr. Ray discussed how Lokshala in Orissa began with a state-level workshop. Rice and mangoes collected from the community generated the finances for this workshop. The block selected was Ranpur. It took about three months to convince the volunteers to work without money. When the volunteers visited the area, the villagers were convinced that they were political activists. They could not believe that the volunteers were working on education. Soon retired teachers became interested, and village youths started teaching in some schools despite objections from the government.

One issue taken up by the members of Lokshala was the cramped space in schools while clubs and other entertainment centers in the area occupied a lot of land. Another initia-

tive was taken about textbooks used in the locality. In the Shishu Bharati school, for instance, textbooks showed Akhand Bharat to include Pakistan and Bangladesh, and suggested that war be waged to recover these lands. Children raised questions about the exclusion of local history from their textbooks. There were also efforts to raise questions on the nonenrolment of girls, who were working as *bidi*-makers.

Vandana Sonalkar pointed out that the strength of the Lokshala process lay in its flexibility. It was not bound by any single formula, and did not attempt to replicate the same pattern everywhere. Instead, there was an awareness of specificities. Yet, these were analyzed within an overall vision, which inspired action.

Mr. Abu Baker, another educationist, concluded the session by pointing out that the biggest contribution of Lokshala was in making the government accountable to its promises. While the government opened schools, it was not interested in changing the situation radically. While the children of the poor crowded into schools, the middle-class moved to set up its own institutions like hospitals, colonies, schools, etc. and thereby appropriated more power in its hands. The government, in keeping with this trend, whittled down its commitment of providing education to children 5 to 8 years old and attempted to move the poor to nonformal education. Thus, the marginalized received only poor education. Policy makers and even Dalit leaders have colluded in this oppressive process to deny the poor and marginalized of their right to a life-oriented education. Only the people can change this, and the change shall have to be at the structural level, in the pedagogy and in the curriculum. However, Lokshala also needs to reflect on the fact that this attention cannot be confined to the school. Lokshala is in crisis today, and the advocacy strategy may have to be looked at. It is possible that political parties need to be the focus of advocacy.

Initiatives of the Government

Impact of DPEP

The government introduced the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) in early 1990 with a loan of US\$434 million, of which 24% was spent on infrastructure alone. Another sizeable amount of money was allotted for teacher training, but no money was allocated for the appointment of teachers. As a result, there has been a dependence on untrained, poorly paid para-teachers, threatening the school structure. This was the national scenario. Meanwhile, the Bihar Education Project and the DPEP in Bihar were supposed to provide alternative systems of comparable standards to the disadvantaged groups.¹²

It is worth noting that the loan under DPEP was only 4.5% of the total central government budget on education, yet this tiny contribution of foreign funds has harmed school education. The way DPEP was introduced was also significant. The three apex bodies supposed to discuss and determine education policies—CABE, Parliament, and NCERT—were not consulted. This major intervention in education was simply introduced as a project. Even the District Institute for Educational Training and the State Council of Educational Research and Training were kept out of the scheme.

Instead, the project was handed over to Educational Consultants India Limited for management. Some academics, including university teachers, were co-opted into the project for teacher training and material development, leading to a further divide between those who participated and those who did not. In spite of all the hype, DPEP did not help increase the enrolment of children.

Constitutional Amendment

The introduction of the 93rd Amendment also came under scrutiny. The participants recalled that in 1993 the Unnikrishnan judgment

(Supreme Court) declared education to be a fundamental right. However, the government decided to circumvent this through the 93rd Amendment, which ostensibly guaranteed the right to education but reduced the accountability of government to children. The government also ignored the requirements of children 0–6 years, who are within the purview of Article 45 of the Constitution. As in other sectors, the government abdicates its responsibility in education for this category of children.

Threat of privatization

More and more government schools are being handed over systematically to private institutions. The government, as it does with “sick units” of the industry, declares government schools to be economically unviable and conveniently hands them over to private companies. Recently, 12 schools were shut down in Indore, Madhya Pradesh, and the children transferred to other schools. The land where the schools were was transferred to a commercial complex. In Andhra Pradesh, schools are being closed down and the emphasis is shifting to nonformal education.

In Delhi, elite private schools have been volunteering to run government schools, which hold classes for only 3 hours in the afternoon. Attempts are being made to shift the students from formal school to the open school stream. After school hours, the premises will be used for commercial purposes. This situation has resulted in a steady drop in the enrolment of girls. Thus, the most vulnerable segment of the population will lose even a limited opportunity to get an education and make a living. With girls dropping out, society will be trapped in a web of illiteracy and ignorance.

Pointers for the future

The national consultation generated a great deal of discussion and debate, and the participants felt the need to ensure that some of this

became part of an ongoing process. The consultation identified several areas of concern:

- Evolving systems for networking. The starting point was a mailing list of all participants, but two other possibilities were envisaged: a newsletter and the organizing of consultations at regional level.
- Focusing on ways and means to ensure equal access to education through analysis of alternatives, discussions on policy, and interaction with the community and all concerned groups.
- Textbook analysis focusing on content, language, classroom transaction, class, caste, gender, community, and the physically and mentally challenged.
- Entrusting EDG with the preparation and publication of an education digest on various issues affecting the educational system.
- Establishing a resource center. Materials related to education (textbooks, government circulars, policy statements, evaluation reports, etc.) will be collected from all the states, and a resource center will be built at the Indian Social Institute under the supervision of EDG.
- After a year (March–April 2003) a national consultation will be organized to review the progress made and to plan for next 2 years.

Overall, the participants felt a pressing need to involve more teachers in the process, through the newsletter and teachers' associations, besides working for greater interaction between schools and the community. Another long-term goal was to evolve alternative curriculums. Participants agreed to exchange and share ideas and to discuss them with a much wider audience, to continue with the exercises that had been initiated, and to evolve more in-depth critiques and alternatives. *Education Update*, the newsletter, is just a beginning of this dialogue. It is hoped that, irrespective of the lack of personnel and money, EDG will continue to work to make the education system democratic, egalitarian, and pluralistic.

In the 1970s civil society launched an initiative. *Education for our People*, advanced by political activist Jayaprakash Narayan, who called for a “total revolution,” suggests seven points to bring about an egalitarian society:¹³

- Transform unegalitarian social and wage structures and pursue program of simultaneous and complementary social and educational reforms.
- Shift the emphasis from teaching to learning, stressing the incidental and nonformal channels of education, involving the entire community in the educational processes rather than depending exclusively on professional teachers, and making the system decentralized, diversified, elastic, and dynamic.
- Start a movement of education workers and activists to radically reform the education system from within and from outside.
- Give high priority to changing the ethos of the entire system so that hard and dedicated work to pursue knowledge, excellence, and social transformation becomes a way of life.
- Make hard political and academic decisions to make the system purposeful and effective.
- Emphasize the primacy of work among the people at the grassroots level.
- Underscore the significance of a mass movement in solving the day-to-day problems of the common people and in helping them come into their own. Only such a movement will generate the socioeconomic forces needed to provide good education. The educational effort will strengthen mass mobilization to improve the quality of life.

Endnotes

1. See Kothari Commission Report, 1968. This commission, headed by D.S. Kothari, was created to assess the entire educational scenario of India. It worked during the 1964–1966 period. For more details refer to Atma Ram, *India 50 Years of Independence: 1947–1997—Sta-*

tus, Growth, Development. (Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporations, 1998).

2. Louis Prakash, Literacy, Education and the Weaker Section in Bihar: Issues and Perspectives, *Journal of the Council for Social Development*. Forthcoming.

3. David Faust and Richa Nagar, 2001, Politics of Development in Postcolonial India: English-Medium Education and Social Fracturing, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 28 July, p. 2878.

4. Anil Sadgopal, 2001, Political Economy of the Ninety-Third Amendment Bill, *Mainstream*, 22 December, p. 47.

5. It is not argued here that tinkering with educational system is a Sangh Parivar pastime. A similar exercise was carried out by the Congress Party when it was in power. From early 1970 onward in Maharashtra, there were attempts to introduce changes in the textbooks. In Uttar Pradesh consistent attempts were made to reduce the importance of Urdu by the Congress government right after Independence.

6. Ambani-Birla Report entitled "A Policy Framework for Reforms in Education" submitted to the Prime Minister's Council on Trade and Industry, April 2000.

7. Geetha Nambissan, 1996. Equity in Education? Schooling of Dalit Children in India, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXXI. No. 16-17, pp. 1011-1022.

8. A. Vaidyanathan and P.R. Gopinathan Nair, eds., 2001, *Elementary Education in Rural India: A Grassroots View* (New Delhi: Sage Publications) p. 21.

9. Murali Manohar Joshi, minister of human resource development of central government, chose to release the National Curriculum Framework on the day when the country remembers Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the country's first prime minister, whose birthday is celebrated as Children's Day.

10. The Bharatiya Janata Party is the largest party in the ruling coalition of the National Democratic Alliance at the national level.

11. Dr. Ambedkar hailed from the lower castes and was discriminated against in spite of his being equal in all respects with his contemporaries. He struggled hard and became the main architect of the Constitution.

12. For more on this, refer to Ministry of Human Resources Development, Government of India, 1992, *Annual Report 1990-91*, New Delhi.

13. Citizens for Democracy, 1978. *Education for our People: A Policy Frame for the Development of Education* (1978-87) (Mumbai: Allied Publishers).