

Meet the promise of education: It's a national imperative

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We have had truly diverse influences on our educational system and still have pledges to redeem

To mark 75 years of our independence, here is a (non-comprehensive) list of events, people, trends and ideas from modern India that have shaped our school education, for better or for worse.

Savitribai Phule and her husband Jyotiba ran three schools for girls in Pune in the middle of the 19th century. Their courage in the face of all opposition demonstrated that education is more than literacy and academic subjects, it is potentially the most powerful force for social reform.

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Missionary schools spread across the entire country, beginning in the late 19th century, providing good education, sometimes along with religious zeal. These well-organized schools were often better resourced than others, and captured the imagination of the rich and poor alike. As decades passed, while these schools continued to spread and remain aspirational, the phenomena of faux-convent schools grew, with the sole intent of exploiting the hopes of parents for their children.

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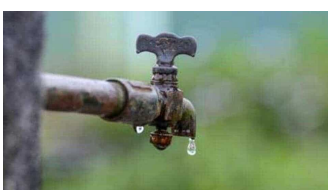
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The powerful ideas of four people have formed the deep subtext of Indian education: Rabindranath Tagore's universalism, humanism and self-realization as the goal of education; Mahatma Gandhi's practical wisdom of education, about combining head, heart and hand for self-reliance; Bhimrao Ambedkar's clear idea of education as the foundation of real democracy, significantly influenced by his own guru John Dewey; and Jiddu Krishnamurthy's notion of education substantially focused on liberation of the self, harmony and holism, which had a profound influence on the 'alternative schools' movement in India.

In 1961, the National Council for Education Research and Training was established with a vision to lead education and foster educational thinking. Subsequently, equivalent institutions were set up in states. The establishment of Kendriya Vidyalayas (KVs) in 1963 was an excellent demonstration of how good education could happen within the public system. Various high-quality public schools have been modelled on these KVs since.

The Kothari Commission submitted a report in 1966 that led to the National Policy of Education of 1968, the first such comprehensive policy. The soul of this seminal effort was J.P. Naik. In the practical architecture of the Indian education system, there is an era before Naik and the one after him.

In the early 1960s, the Tamil Nadu government started a systematic mid-day meal programme in public schools. In 1981-82, the state's Chief Minister M.G. Ramachandran expanded and institutionalized it, forming the basis for our current nationwide mid-day meal programme that provides at least one decent meal to millions of children from disadvantaged homes who may otherwise go hungry.

The Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP) began in 1962 as a citizen science movement to foster scientific temper and rationalism. It had a profound impact on educational thinking across the country. Kishore Bharati and Friends' Rural Society, and subsequently other institutions such as Eklavya, developed and ran the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme (HSTP) along with the Madhya Pradesh state government. The HSTP has played a key role in developing the curricular and pedagogical imagination of education in India. As a side effect, it attracted a vast number of highly capable people to school education. It was also a model for collaboration between public systems and civil society.

The first Saraswati Shishu Mandir was set up in 1962 in Gorakhpur. As the numbers of these schools grew, Vidya Bharati was set up in 1977 to coordinate their growth. Over the years, this developed into what must be the largest private school network in the world, with a real commitment to education and an alternative to commercial private schools, few of which have an actual interest in education. Alongside, these schools have played a pivotal role in a resurgence of education informed by and reinforcing 'Hindu culture'.

Low-cost private schools have mushroomed, most of which sold the promise of 'Convent and English' education while delivering poor quality in every way. Elite private schools also grew in line with India's middle-class growth post 1991.

The single-minded pursuit of engineering and medical college entrance by parents and students relegated all subjects other than math and science to a secondary status. It also spawned India's insidious tuition industry, de-emphasizing learning and achievement in schools, while making entrance tests all important, converting our education system effectively into a testing system. It was in 1993 that the National Council for Teacher Education was established to regulate and govern teacher education, along with a set of policies which let in rampant commercialization.

The second National Policy of Education came out in 1986, which was replaced only in 2020 by the third . The District Primary Education Programme was initiated in 1993 to universalize primary education across 272 districts. In 2001, with the launch of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, access to School Education was transformed across India, ensuring that there was a public primary school in every habitation and a middle school nearby. In 2009, the Right to Education Act made it a fundamental right for all 6-14-year-olds.

A quarter century hence, when Independent India turns 100, hopefully we would have fulfilled the promise of education—"not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially", in Jawaharlal Nehru's words. If so, we would have achieved our nationhood too, very substantially.

Anurag Behar is CEO of Azim Premji Foundation.

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