

Commitment to Education: Are We Failing?

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The Promises in the Constitution of India

The idea of a democratic state has its basis and its goals in freedom, equality of opportunity, agency and justice which requires the participation of all its citizens. There are various ways in which this idea has been expressed, the most remarkable being the preamble to the Constitution of India. It is a declaration by the people of India of forming themselves into a group that would give each individual certain equal rights and equitable opportunities.

The key terms in the preamble to the Constitution are justice, liberty, equality of status and opportunity, and fraternity. As is clear, each demands from the citizen concern for other citizens underpinned by an understanding of the meaning of these terms. It also expects the governance system to respond to the challenge of making each of us aware, knowledgeable and capable of striving for these goals. We have committed to social, economic and political justice and equality of status and of opportunity in our preamble. This promise in a caste-ridden, extremely gendered, culturally diverse, economically highly stratified, politically divided unequal society showed far-sighted vision. To understand the perspective, meaning and implication of the ideas enshrined in the preamble, as well as for citizens to have the capabilities to make it possible, education is the central tool.

The way to this appreciation of equitability and respect for the others, apart from the possibilities of punishment on the areas enforceable by law, is to build in all citizens an understanding of these terms and inspire the confidence to become aspirational. So, this clearly first requires the knowledge of possibilities, followed by the belief that anyone can actually aspire to be whatever she chooses. This is in line with the rights or the capability approach, articulated by Amartya Sen and others, who postulate that the real freedom consists in choice-making resulting in the freedom to grow requiring, in turn, growth in capabilities, which gives rise to the sense of equality and agency. Both for understanding **how far we have come**.

The commitments in the Constitution were and are divided into the category of fundamental rights and policy directive principles. While, the progress on both these dimensions has been stunted, education was not made a fundamental right. It is of course also important to recognise that we have not yet even achieved what were provided as Fundamental Rights. There is no equality in terms of caste, creed and gender. There is also no guarantee of freedom from exploitation or even of equal freedom to choose religion yet. The discourse in today's scenario is periodically laden with strife and categories of citizens are discriminated in ordinary situations.

Underprivileged people – a number which includes many categories such as those from castes that are considered untouchable, minorities particularly Muslims and tribals - are marginalised and discriminated against in different ways with basic liberties such as living, occupation and diet being restricted. Some can be punished if their shadow falls on another person; many cannot sit, leave alone eat and be friends with, others and some have even been told to go and live in some other country. Families have been attacked, assaulted and thrown out from their homes when a member from the community makes the mistake of forming a friendship or a relationship with a person from so called higher, privileged castes.

Another issue of gross inequality is gender, with women earning less than men, not having rights to property or for children to bear their names. Prescribed styles of dressing ensure that there is an acceptance of these norms which, if flaunted, could result in unwanted sexual advances and even attacks. It is clear that no law enforcing agency can ensure these, or other, rights. Although we have moved forward, we are far from making this possible at this moment for all citizens. The right to Constitutional remedies (leave alone push for making directive principles operative) demands that the citizens must first understand the rights to be able to formulate a petition or case to be placed before the courts.

The arguments to place education in the Fundamental Rights could not be made acceptable to constituent assembly and hence education was placed in the Directive Principles. It is unfortunate that equitable education, which is the cornerstone of democracy, did not gain acceptance. Efforts at making education universally available, despite many commitments has never become top priority, losing out to, among other things, economic development and internal security and external defence.

However, educational opportunities for all is the first step towards building equal opportunities. The enrolment figures show that perhaps most children enter school, but they also show a large number of children dropping out fairly quickly and by secondary school most have left. It is also unclear if some of the dropouts are in reality non-entrants. So even the first steps towards universalization of education and opportunity with equity seem to be unsuccessful. We need to think about the reasons for this and the implications of the term equal opportunity.

In a stratified society, organized education, in order to be equitable, has to compensate for the differential support and opportunity available outside the formal structure, with additional investments in those who lack support and inputs at home. It also has to ensure that all those who arrive at the school gates feel welcome and reasonably comfortable. It has to be thus aligned to their experiences and needs. The question that forces itself in this scenario is – are we doing this? If we recognise equitable education as the cornerstone of movement towards democracy, we have to look at the education system as it has functioned and the policy statements it has brought out.

One factor in making education inequitable is the expense involved in educating each child. The spectrum ranges from privileged children with support and resources to children for whom even coming to school means a big parental investment. The gap remains wide, because of a stratified government system.

Schools are rated on the basis of entries to merit lists and high scores in public exams and development of a sense of fraternity and self-worth is undervalued. No mechanism tracks if schools add these values, In addition, there is a clamour for greater competition, and filtering, a tenet that works contrary to the principles of inclusion

and retention. The emphasis on high scores and comparative performances, ignoring differences in background and opportunity, ensures that those in need of most support are squeezed out of the system even more rapidly. Those among the underprivileged, and thus unentitled, who manage to breach the wall face even more starkly prejudice and antagonism, as has been demonstrated by events in the past in connection with IIT and IAS entrants.

Another losing battle has been the one fought for increased resources for underprivileged children. The recent cut of Rs.11000 crores in the education budget has to be seen in this context.

Even though the expenditure per child has moved up from as low as 1500/- annually to the current figure around 12200/- as the median¹, it is miniscule in comparison to the figure of 12-13 lakhs per annum per child spent in the elite private schools⁶ of the country.

There is a lot written about the humiliating exclusion and the way school comes across to underprivileged children. It is well recognized that most children moving out from schools are actually those who are pushed out because of the unfriendliness of the schools. The dominant belief in the school system, indeed in society, is that children from underprivileged backgrounds cannot learn and that there is not much any one can do about it. There is a reluctance to accept the Constitutional commitment to provide everyone equal opportunity and ensure that all children are capable of aspiring to any position. There is an unspoken agreement that prized the positions in education, in the economy, and even in governance or the executive, considered to be prized can only be accessible to the dominant middle classes and the elite. The prevailing attitude is that the underprivileged are intellectually and attitudinally inferior. In his recent book, 'Looking Away', Harsh Mandar describes eloquently some of these beliefs and notions. Studies reveal the absolute disdain and disrespect those responsible for the future of underprivileged children have for their learning abilities. In a sense, the responsibility of the crime of inequitable education is placed on the victims themselves.

The symbols and the practices in schools arise from the beliefs and rituals of the upper caste Hindu traditions and neither recognize nor accommodate the diversity of students. Extracts from textbooks

indicate that the reader is assumed to be an upper caste, economically comfortable Hindu student. Eid is described as the festival of our Muslim brothers, Diwali is the festival of the nation, statements like *'he was poor yet he was honest,' 'Rita's father was poor, they only had a scooter and no car', or 'Tribals live in jungles'*, abound. These symbols, rituals and descriptions exclude most children. Since teachers are untrained in the principles enshrined in the Constitution, they are unable to counter these signals.

It is interesting to recognize that contrary to what we hear people saying in boardroom conversations or in elite homes about the impertinence of the poor and of the minorities, in reality their voices are rarely raised or heard. It is not surprising that schools that attempted to have an inclusive student population have had to face a rapid exodus of the privileged and middle class children as soon as some underprivileged children are included. They leave citing arguments that these children are different and do not have same values, they do not have any aspirations or purposes and their beliefs are different; therefore, our children will be 'spoiled' by being with them. This pressure is faced not just by the private schools but also by government schools. Since ordinary government schools cannot exclude any children from admission, now even the lower middle class avoid them. It is not surprising, therefore, for the schools to feel a pressure to exclude the underprivileged children from participation. Private schools with fee structures based on their clientele, are even more stratified. The only way to challenge this extreme stratification of educational opportunity seems to be to have a common school system a move which may have been easier to make when India became a republic. The challenge of making the upper classes believe in a common system seems impossible at this stage because of the lop-sided social and political strength. We are already seeing the pressure of international comparative testing on even rural schools, resulting in government schools becoming ghettos of children of underprivileged and excluded communities, attracting less and less resources and attention, moving towards less aspirational education thereby condemning these children to continued inequity.

Another issue of importance is the attitude of the system to the learning of children and the way it analyses the stratified and the so-called inadequate learning. The larger belief system that operates is of

those people whose role is to facilitate and support schools in their work and who have the notion that all those who are close to the school and the children, including the teachers, are incompetent and do not want to work. As a result, new directions are constantly given and imposed on the teachers, leaving them with no freedom or agency, hence, initiative for independent functioning. Diversity is ignored, with teachers and children merely following homogenized instructions. Thus, while there is no space available for the teacher or the school to choose their path, the administrators and governors of the education system place the responsibility of not learning at the door of the teacher, the parent and, finally, the child. The push to ensure that everyone learns within the same time frame without being provided additional support or means, leads to the teacher and the children not being able to cope. In any case, in general teachers' own attitudes and beliefs are also not very sympathetic to children's ability to learn. As well, it is likely that some teachers are not committed to the notion of equality that is a constitutional right of every child.

There is then the aspect of purposes of education as felt by different communities. The Preamble describes the purpose being towards equal opportunity and to develop the understanding of democracy and hence of justice, liberty and fraternity, so that citizens can both demand justice and respect the rights of others to do the same. The nature of education that emerges from the Preamble is a universal, inclusive and adaptable programme. It is important to recognize this, as otherwise priorities are likely to get skewed.

Some of the ways in which the purposes of education could be viewed are

- a) for maintaining and preserving the system
- b) for individual economic well-being and proper use of resources
- c) to build a strong nation and vibrant economy which encourages good citizenry
- d) to build a just and humane society

Each of these need deep reflection and different focus and analysis.

In the late nineties and the first five years of the 21st century, there was a lot of talk about revamping the government school system to ensure universality and quality to all children first. The effort was promoted by the belief that focus of school

education must be to provide a better workforce so that both the individual and the nation would benefit. . This is from one of the most sincere and concerned Project Director of a State, *'In my view, if there is a population structure that is educated, it will form a strong nation and the nation will not face any problems. Even the social problems will be reduced. The nation will be a power house because the educated can be trained and would work more productively. Once they are economically independent, contribution to the savings of the state would be high leading to a galloping economy.'* He added, *'We have a good population structure, a lot of people are between 18-45 years of age. This is the most productive age and these people are capable of working hard. If they were all to become educated then they can be trained to take up more useful jobs.'* There is a lot in this statement that talks positively about education, but what it does not include is the need for the population to be a part of the process of considering options in changing their present situations.

In conclusion it would appear that we have deviated from the guiding principles that the preamble suggests to us in the creation of an equitable society by emphasizing only on economic progress and servitude. Preparation of the majority to fit in to the roles of serving others in some way instead of bringing down barriers in society. The conversation is about enmeshing children in family work and about producing more for the nation. The idea of childhood and the option to dream and aspire seems to be considered a privilege of only those who have 'merit'.

There are other crucial considerations in the relationship of educational processes and inclusion of the diversity of children equitably. These relate to the nature of knowledge and the way it could be transacted in the classrooms and the school. It also relates to the nature of the structures that provide educational experiences. Only a few critical aspects of these have been considered here. There are many steps to these critical issues, but they are all clearly only a product of the larger concerns of convictions and beliefs about diversity and equity and in the will to make it happen.

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