

A deepening crisis

The more necessary it seems, the less likely it gets. That is the story of public spending on education. In 1966, the Kothari Commission had said in its voluminous report that India should aim at spending 6% of its GDP on education. More than half a century later, we are spending less than 3% of our GDP on education. D.S. Kothari's recommendation gives us a symbolic measure of the importance given to education. At the time the commission chaired by him was drafting its report, India was passing through a difficult period. Famines, wars and political uncertainty were taking their toll. The economy was stuck in sluggish growth, and the idealism of the freedom struggle was waning.

Conditions are rather different today. By any standards, India is more prosperous today and people's aspirations are higher. Education is valued across different sections and strata. Despite this favourable social climate, education has failed to become a matter of national concern. Every year, the Union Budget indicates that it is not a high priority although it is loudly announced to be so. This year's Budget is no different. It offers a marginal increase on different routine expenses and reduction on some. There is no sign of funds to enable institutional recovery after a prolonged period of damage caused by financial cuts in higher education. In elementary education, supply of funds for improvement in quality is no more certain. No funds are in sight to sustain the bold dream of making the Right to Education a sustainable reality.

In his Budget speech, the Finance Minister referred to the importance of teacher education. This was a welcome reference and somewhat rare too. Teacher training constitutes a relatively invisible, low-status sector of the system. It seldom receives high-level attention. A few prestigious colleges that were set up under British rule a century ago have lost their sheen. In the discourse of policy too, teacher training stays on the margins. And the current popular term 'public policy' does not cover teacher education at all. Some years ago, its inner reality was revealed by a commission appointed by the Supreme Court under the chairpersonship of the late Chief Justice of India, J.S. Verma. The report of this commission brought to public attention the dismal state of teacher education, especially the corruption that has seeped into the regulatory system put in place in the mid-1990s. Rampant commercialisation and rigid bureaucratic control combined to stifle any possibility of academic growth in teacher education. The Justice Verma Commission offered several good remedies to improve the regulatory structure, and for a little while it seemed as if things were moving forward. But the progress could not be sustained.

The Finance Minister made a special mention of the four-year integrated B.Ed. (Bachelor of Education) programme as a way forward for achieving quality in teacher training. The big question that has remained unanswered since the commission submitted its report is whether the Central government will spend the money the sector needs. So far, the indications have been that teacher education will have to pay for its own growth. What the government is willing to invest in is mainly the in-service part of the sector. Pre-service courses like B.Ed. continue to have a huge market outside public institutions, like departments of education in universities. The long history of the four-year integrated B.Ed. course in the confines of the Regional Institutes run by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) offers the hope that it may perhaps do well in the broader world as well, but that hope is contingent on a big, presently daunting question.

That question is whether the government is aware of its responsibility towards higher education. Teachers for all levels are directly or indirectly affected by institutions of higher education. A nursery teacher needs to benefit from current knowledge in child psychology, and someone teaching language in primary classes must know how to leverage contemporary knowledge about how children learn reading or how to impart bilingual skills. The secondary teacher is directly affected by conditions in undergraduate colleges. If they have no science labs and adequate

faculty, the graduates who opt for school teaching as a career can hardly do justice to the adolescents who choose to study science. These are reasons why the degraded state of undergraduate education limits the potential impact of training on a schoolteacher's academic capacity.

Barely a decade ago, the Yash Pal report on renovation and rejuvenation of higher education presented a bleak picture of undergraduate education and offered recommendations for improving it. Implementing these recommendations will need increased public spending. Above all else, it will call for an institutional recovery road map. Neither extra money nor a recovery plan is in sight.

It is a legitimate question why India does not worry about its educational crisis or why it does not invest more public funds in education. One way to seek an answer is to look back. In the first few decades following Independence, resources were limited and they were used for other, more immediate needs. Then, for a little while, it seemed as if education might become a priority because social demand for it had increased. However, before this demand could acquire a political voice, the state got seduced by the option to privatise education. Now, we are in an advanced stage of that fascination. Any suggestion is welcome provided it avoids arguing for more funds from the public exchequer. How long this viewpoint will continue to shape public policy in education is anyone's guess.

But one thing is certain. The damage our institutional apparatus has suffered over the last three decades has begun to hurt our long-term national economic interests and social goals. We need to recognise that growing inequality and dissonance among youth are a consequence of malnourished institutional experience. The United Nations discourse of sustainable development should remind us that our national aspirations might get a jolt if we fail to prioritise education.

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