

Re-imagining education

A . R . V A S A V I

FOR long years now we have lamented the crisis of our education system – its divorce from the larger society, its production of unemployable persons, its questionable orientation, its poor functioning, and the continued exclusion of the poor and the disadvantaged. Much of the narratives of the crises have become commonsensical although thorough research on each of the themes is awaited. But, we now need to re-imagine what direction and orientation our education system must take, for we are at a juncture where alongside great and widespread expectation about mass elementary education there

is near complete despondency and demoralization about the state of higher education.

Between these poles of hope and despair, we must cast our eyes on the immediate and distant goals and means and re-imagine educational ideas and practices which will enhance individual capacities and collective responsibilities, foster the building of a democratic society and nation, infuse moral strength and critical thinking – in short, challenge the reproduction of an iniquitous and hierarchical society.

There is an urgent need to do so as education is today being imagined

and directed by a range of players for whom education is to primarily serve their own goals and purposes. First are the education entrepreneurs who, in the context of neo-liberalism, are being abetted and aided by the state, and who seek to make education a sector that is largely privatized and produces individuals suitable for the market. Reflecting such an objective is both the functioning and orientation of education institutes which are sought to be run as profit-making enterprises in which the language of the market predominates. Their functioning is on lines of manufacturing companies in which managerialism and its norms and idioms of profit, control, competitiveness, productivity and market values prevail over the philosophy of education as a public good.

In the current climate of the growing dominance of the market, we are witness to a submission of the education agenda to the norms of the market to an extent that there are now calls for a 'just-in-time education' to match the 'just-in-time management' practices. Forsaken here are the very requirements of the basics of education for a life and not merely a livelihood. We hear similar pronouncements of goals for education; witness the politician educationist who calls for the five Ds of education: devotion, democracy, decency, decorum and development!

Closely aligned are the advocates of high technology who assume that the problems of accessibility, mass outreach and the urgency of bridging the education gap can be met by the wonders of technology. The recent success and visibility of the information technology industries and the iconisation of the computer built on this cacophony is advanced as a magic wand that can address the problems of accessibility and be the route through which the potential of

the nation becoming a world superpower can be realized. So popular have the IT industries become that they now define the higher education options for a large proportion of adolescents who seek careers in the industry irrespective of their aptitude or interest in the subject. Drawn on this new global imaginary and ambition are the range of international development and aid agencies for whom India's education is to be directed in terms of producing the globally viable worker and whose efficiency and universally valid cognitive skills must be assessed through standard tests, reviews, and retraining.

In many ways, equally insidious are the cultural and religious fundamentalists who see in education the last resort to stem changing life-worlds and who seek to create and/or sustain education as a sectarian agenda. The growth of such establishments has been prolific, with Saraswati Mandirs sprouting in even remote areas and the Madrasas emerging as viable alternative learning spaces for Muslims. New age and charisma-based religious movements now see education as the foundation on which to build their new devotee-clients. No wonder, the chains of schools and higher education institutions run by organizations such as the Mata Amrithanandamayi group, the Sri Sri Ravi Shankar Foundation and others are gaining presence.

An unexpected section that remains resistant to re-imagining education is the established education apparatus – the range of organizations and institutions that supposedly oversee the 'development' of education but are entrenched in either outdated or borrowed notions of education. Oblivious to the realities, needs and aspirations of people, these institutions have continued to produce and

reproduce educational paraphernalia which is largely irrelevant and decontextualised. This may explain the focus on textbooks or the exam orientation and closure of our education system to the idea that education can be a creative and critical exercise.

In this context of a fragmented and contested imaginary of education we must return to the question that Martin Buber posed long back: 'For whom and for what is education?' To this we must add other questions so that education can be re-claimed and re-imagined as the central tenet of our lives, as we live it now and for what it can be tomorrow. These questions are: What type of education can/must we have? Is it adequate to have literacy for the masses but a global education for the elite?

The language divide, with English for the elite and the vernacular for the masses, falters any attempt to bring about a conversation among different socio-economic classes. For many of us, schooled in the language and thought of English, our inability to engage with the national and regional language speakers is not only our handicap but also a great in-built divide that stymies any creative collaboration. Recognizing the strength of our plural and diverse language pool requires a re-thinking of the language policy so that the current refrain of the inevitability of English in the context of globalization, which has led to the erosion of the polyglot traditions, can be halted.

To this must be added the urgency of ensuring that there are goals and means to be adopted so that accessibility can be assured and education becomes the fount of a new society. How a democratic society and nation can ensure access of all to the type of education they desire is our single biggest challenge.

What interlinkages must there be between the state, society and the market so as to deliver an education system that recognizes the changing nature and relationship between all three? The interlinks between the three are often noted and accepted as inevitable. Yet, today there are unprecedented and sharp shifts in society making its very structures nebulous. Macro and micro economic, socio-cultural and political processes are dis-embedding and re-embedding our societies. Agricultural societies are subject to a sharp erosion of their knowledge base, know-how and skills. Artisans, handicraft workers and a range of occupations and skills related to medicine, metallurgy, carpentry, architecture among others, that were based on inherited and orally transmitted knowledge systems have been either made redundant or marginalized as inappropriate for a modern economy.

In this context, what requirements of society must education cater to? Should the ancestral knowledge base be privileged over the drive towards the market-determined service and industrial economies? Or is a combination of both possible, where ancestral skills and knowledge can be meshed with new technology and know-how? In seeking to integrate such issues, it may be critical for our curricula designers to re-think the curricula itself – from one that privileges teaching to one that privileges learning, so that both teachers and students see learning as a continuous, open and dialogic process.

The role of the state in matters of education must be interrogated, in particular the tendency to proclaim policies without attention to their implementation and impact. Take for example the reservation policy, lost in a populist posturing that provides no

practical programme but has served to heighten hostility between caste groups even as the benefits themselves remain questionable. Urgent reviews of the policy, its functioning and impact are required if the historical disadvantages of select communities are to be addressed through positive discrimination. Attention must be paid to the processes of selection, development of tailored programmes, adequate academic and social support and periodic review of the policy itself. It is important that the attempt to provide an advantage to historically disadvantaged communities does not merely become a populist political game with negative consequences for the actual programme.

The nature of different regional states compounds the difficulty in pursuing holistic education agendas. Neoliberal states, in subscribing to the agenda of the market and privileging the market, overlook the rights of a large number to access education. But even radical, left-leaning states subscribe to populist demands and in privileging access and numbers overlook the need for quality in education. Within this context of altering societal structures and ineffective state support, the market has come to define the markers of success. Ideas of excellence in education are now determined by the pay packet that students, primarily from the techno-managerial schools, can command even as little encouragement is provided for a range of other subjects and knowledge.

What institutional design must we consider so that institutions function on democratic norms, where inter-disciplinary engagements are made possible, and the separation of research and teaching is bridged? Although citing limitation of funds has become a refrain, a closer look would reveal that more than availabil-

ity of funds it is the lack of democracy, an entrenched democracy deficit that acts as the single-most important reason for institutional malfunction.

Most institutions of learning bear a contradiction in their functioning. In the textual and formal context they are to be rule-based institutions. Yet, the writ of the head of the organization runs large and a single individual is able to make or break an institution. Students then carry with them the culture of autocracy, an absence of norms of transparency and accountability and reproduce in their personal and collective lives the culture of their *alma mater*. No surprise that the assertions of violence in the public life of the nation come not from the non-literate but from those who are lettered and products of institutions? Periodic social auditing which makes the democratic functioning of institutions the hallmark of their performance, must be instituted so that transparency of decision-making and accountability is ensured.

What and which intellectual traditions must we subscribe to? Or, what new intellectual orientation must be generated from the new institutions? The mark of colonialism continues to be internalized and if not indigenous then hybrid and or newly evolved forms of intellectual traditions are hard to come by. Can the disciplinary divides be challenged so as to generate new interdisciplinary practices in which knowledge becomes holistic and competency in a range of disciplines is recognized? The sharply dichotomized 'two cultures' of the natural sciences versus the humanities and the social sciences must be bridged in the learning paradigms so that composite schools that relate to the complex realities of the physical and social world can be developed.

What role should educators play in the life of education institutions, students, society, and the state? There is an urgency to create a sense of belonging to institutions among educators so that education institution building can be enhanced. This is central, as over the years the agency of teachers/educators has been eroded – making them insecure, isolated and insular individuals submissive to structures that determine their employment. The growing distance between teachers and students in which the relationship does not go beyond the mass and generalized teaching needs to be addressed. How can the teacher-student relationship foster collaborative endeavours and make for the growth of both?

The absence of a strong and independent community of scholars and educators has led to the cooption of some by the state. Scholars either blindly endorse the policies or programmes of the state or, as in the more recent years of neo-liberalism, join international aid agencies to become part of their local data collection teams without providing any independent intellectual inputs. This subordination and nexus must be challenged to assert the independent and autonomous nature of intellectuals and enable them to stand for ideas that go beyond the demands of political and or personal economic interests. Equally, the submission of educators to the market must be challenged so that high compensation does not become a criterion for engaging with or producing information that is of limited value and use.

Just as the orientation, agency and linkages of educators and intellectuals needs to be reviewed and their independence and autonomy asserted, similar attention must be paid to the impress of education on the life of

the youth. Given the discourse of the impending and expanding global economy marked by flexible capital and the need for flexible skills, should our youth, one of the most numerous in the world, be subject to these norms and be trained for careers that enable them to be flexible workers? Or should education be the foundation on which youth can become active citizens and also be productive workers? Given that for a majority of our youth, high schools and colleges either mark them as unfit for work or alienated from their families and communities, the challenge of imparting an education that can endorse the pluralistic identities of youth and forge a collective identity of shared citizenship remains.

Finally, how can we retain the plurality of our education system even as we question the growing differentiation of education institutions and programmes? Even as the variety of educational institutions with their historical roots in regional cultures and religions are fast losing ground, a new range of education institutes is taking root. Primarily catering to the demands of a growing middle class and a new transnational elite, private schools are mushrooming all over the nation. How these would cater to the needs of students and address the idea of education, of fostering a common weal, are issues that remain unaddressed. While the growing differentiation of schools reflects the heightened differentiation in society, there is a need to consider the design and implementation of a common school system that can address the current problem of education reproducing the social and economic differences in the nation.

Amid these claims and assertions there has been a silencing of academic voices and others who have engaged with education, its practice

and its institution building. Academics and civil society must reclaim the agendas of and for education so as to make it an inclusive and pluralistic enterprise that caters to individual capabilities and enables collective responsibilities.

All these questions and queries require that we rethink and re-imagine education so that the strength of our pluralistic traditions is retained while enabling learning for new lives and livelihoods. From the enabling of mass basic education to the feasibility of specializations in higher education, we need to balance the demands of diversity with those for regulation. This is crucial lest we submit and subordinate ourselves to the markings of the new international market demands that will leave us only as subalterns of the new international regimes.

An anecdote from Chamarajnar, a tribal district of Karnataka, will summarize the implications of the new global regimen of education in which correct, prescribed answers are solicited. Responding to the question, ‘Where does the lion live?’ during the state-wide testing of children designed by an international consultant, a class II child who lives close to the reserved forest of the area responded, ‘In the jungle.’ The examiner promptly checked the child and asserted, ‘No, the lion lives in the cave.’

Such are the directions which the agenda of mass elementary education is taking. Far from the promise of building on the knowledge and skills of people and enabling every child to learn from its environment and from the outside world, we see the hegemony of a uniform model that seeks to produce a globally adaptable worker. And it is this, the reduction by the new education regime of every student to being only a worker that we must vehemently protest.