

Making education reforms more meaningful

By Krishna Kumar

Nearly two decades after the National Policy on Education was approved by Parliament, the school-going child's life continues to be afflicted by rote methods and the chronic fear of doing badly in examination.

FEW CAN distinguish between the terms 'curriculum' and 'syllabus.' The tendency to view both in the context of examinations is rampant. For teachers, the prescribed textbook serves as the *de facto* curriculum. As for the National Curriculum Framework (NCF), hardly anyone outside the limited world of professional pedagogues and planners can recall what role the National Policy on Education (1986) intended to assign to this invention. It was designed to bring systemic coherence and parity in quality standards across the country. It is widely misconceived as an instrument of uniformity; in reality, it was meant to serve as a reminder of core national values and priorities around which diversity and flexibility in curriculum and syllabus could be structured to meet the needs of a rapidly expanding system.

The 1986 policy stressed the need to make education child-centred. Nearly two decades after the policy was approved by Parliament, the school-going child's life continues to be afflicted by rote methods and the chronic fear of doing badly in examination. Yes, there are plenty of people who feel unmoved by this reality. But R.K. Narayan did succeed in touching the nation's heart when he made his maiden speech in the Rajya Sabha in 1991, inspiring the Ministry of Human Resource Development to set up a committee under Professor Yash Pal to prescribe remedies. Its 1993 report gathered dust while the problem got increasingly worse. One terrible symptom is the increasing number of children who contemplate or actually commit suicide during examination time.

The 1986 policy assumed that India would universalise elementary education before the end of the century. That did not happen. Today, as high a proportion as 53 per cent of our children are eliminated by the system before Class 8. That terrible figure should drown the nation in embarrassment, triggering emergency measures, but we all have got used to it. When I mentioned the number at a recent TV show on the National Curriculum Framework, no one responded, as if it was irrelevant to the discussion. Most of the show time was spent on allegations about the lack of participation in the NCF revision process. Not many could recall that the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) had set up a large steering committee, chaired by Professor Yash Pal, and as many as 21 National Focus Groups. It also invited public opinion through advertisements in 28 national and regional dailies, organised regional seminars, and meetings for consultation with the States and rural teachers. And now the document is

with CAGE (Central Advisory Board of Education), where the previous NCF was never discussed.

This recent history of eight months of intensive nation-wide deliberation among professionals and other stakeholders appears to have been drowned by weightier subjects such as Ambani's inheritance, Jinnah's role in Partition, and the difficulties in tracking black buck shooters. Suicide by farmers arouses no one's interest. So why should we be surprised that Gokhale's move to make primary education free and compulsory evokes no awkward memory or enthusiasm 94 years later? The children that Gokhale's legacy asks us to worry about are poor and mostly rural. Their high dropout rate, as it is officially called, is a key symptom of the system's inability to reform itself. If an intrinsic urge for reform is a measure of systemic quality — as a recent UNESCO report suggests — then we deserve to be rated poorly. Indeed, resistance to reform is so high that you are forced to wonder why the system attracts any criticism at all.

The new NCF discusses quality in terms of the resources available for infrastructural needs, professional training of teachers, and provision for monitoring. It relates quality to the experiences provided to children to enable them to construct knowledge. This approach calls for the recognition of children's creativity and motivation to learn. The belief that every child has a personality and a unique potential is fundamental to the development of a democratic system of schooling.

Four decades have passed since the Kothari Commission recommended a common school system. That vision is a shambles today and cannot be resurrected magically in the middle of sharp socio-economic contradictions. What is possible and important is to initiate long-range reforms, starting with steps to improve systemic efficiency and accountability.

The new NCF focusses attention on two sets of challenges for reform: pedagogic and systemic. The first set includes rational designing of syllabi and textbooks, teacher training and examination procedures. The second set calls for more resources for school infrastructure, and a change in roles and power relations from the ground level upwards. Both sets of reforms have been appreciated for long, and in stray pockets — usually with NGO involvement — have been successfully tried out. Numerous innovative projects have established that school functioning can be improved with community involvement. NCF recommends that the approach used in such experiments be mainstreamed. Among pedagogic reforms, an important one recommended is the involvement of school teachers in the preparation of textbooks, not merely in reviewing them after they are written.

The most urgently needed pedagogic reforms are those related to teacher training and examinations. Institutional structures available for these two sectors need to be strengthened, which means that the National Council for Teacher Education and the various examination boards need to be given

considerable academic support. NCF proposes delinking competitive entrance tests from school-leaving examinations. A nodal agency is suggested for the former so that children are saved from the ordeal of endless entrance tests and to discourage coaching. In Tamil Nadu, the Government has already taken an important step towards reducing the role of coaching in children's lives. Hopefully this step will lead to greater consensus on ways to select the most creative, rather than the most expensively coached, for professional courses.

In the context of examinations taken at the end of Classes X and XII, the NCF suggests many radical remedies for reducing stress and importance of rote memory and speed. As for work-related knowledge and skills, the NCF asks us to recognise out-of-school agencies capable of providing 'work benches', using local resource persons and practitioners of heritage crafts. The new NCF also recommends art in different forms to be made a necessary part of children's education. NCF 2005 is firmly grounded in the Constitutional vision of India as an egalitarian and secular society, committed to self-transformation towards social justice in all its dimensions, covering gender and caste disparities.

In the grip of negativity

Today, the entire system of education is in the grip of negative and cynical feelings. The dignity of teaching has been violated, provision for health and education in villages has reached minimalist levels. At least one State has declared career teachers a 'dying cadre'; contractual appointments are being made in other States as well, and training has been turned into a transparent ritual. Civil society seems determined to ignore the health and education of rural children. Voices like those of Jean Dreze and P. Sainath are far too few to make an impact. Professor Yash Pal's idea that we should cultivate a child-inspired, and not merely a child-centred, approach deserves political attention across ideological boundaries. There are plenty of cynics who say nothing much can be done, that all the ideas recommended in the new document have been discussed earlier, that the system is far too complex and sick to be reformed, and so on and so forth. Then there are people who associate quality with private initiative and have no faith in the state's ability to sustain a long-term reform effort.

Add one more section — which smells politics in everything — and you get a panoramic view of the crowd which does not want to believe that NCF 2005 might mark a beginning of something positive. As Professor Yash Pal says in his foreword to the NCF, India's educational adversity is self-imposed, and it can be overcome if we learn to appreciate children's own capacities. Once that message begins to sink, a lot of things will show signs of change.

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