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Interview

India has not taken education seriously since independence: Prof. Krishna Kumar

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School students at the 'Clean-Kochi' campaign launched in Kochi on July 25, 2005. File photo: H. Vibhu

India's education system has remained a much-discussed, but less understood social issue. Its linkages with development are complex, and so are the economic and social dynamics that arise from factors such as access, quality and curricula. Prof. Krishna Kumar, former Director of National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), in a conversation with The Hindu Centre's Saptarshi Bhattacharya, discusses at length the multiple elements that are required, including the role of the state, to create a purposeful education system for India's citizenry. Excerpts:

In India, where social inequalities are deeply entrenched, education is largely seen as a leveller and as a means for the marginalised to achieve social mobility. Do you see that happening?

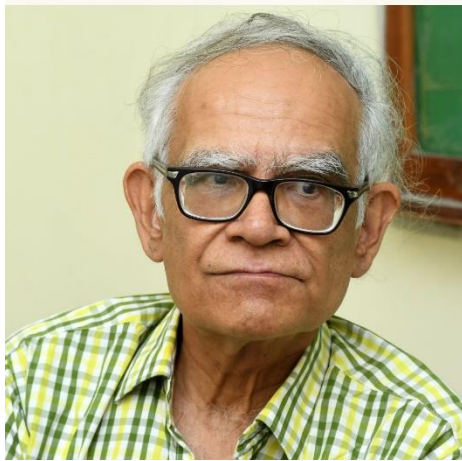
Education is a Janus-faced area of social action. On the one side, it does create the possibilities of change in social relationships; on the other side, it's a preservationist role that education performs. It permits society to reproduce itself. Now, which of these roles will come to the fore, or which of these roles will dominate in a certain period of history depends on historical circumstances and the extent to which a state is able to understand the agency of education and apply the agency for the goals which people agree on.

“ *If social inequalities are entrenched in a society and are institutionalised in some of its most powerful formations, then our expectations from education will need to be backed by very strong and sustained effort if we wish to persist in our hope that it will act as a leveller.* ”

This idea that education is a leveller is in that sense a very innocent idea. If social inequalities are entrenched in a society and are institutionalised in some of its most powerful formations, then our expectations from education will need to be backed by very strong and sustained effort if we wish to persist in our hope that it will act as a leveller. That is the broad theoretical statement with which we need to proceed. Has education performed a levelling role in our society more than it has performed a reproductionist role? I would say it is a mixed picture. If you look back, not simply at the recent period but at the last 150 years since the mid-19th century, roughly when what we today call modern kind of education started, then you would say that yes, education has permitted certain degree of change in the social order. Now, this statement needs to be nuanced by referring to specific regions. In certain regions of India, especially in the latter half of the 19th century, education did create a ripple which was capable of creating a considerable tumult in an otherwise very strong and stable social order.

Education was one of the factors that caused that ripple. That's also a very important point to remember that education rarely acts in isolation. It contributes to efforts that are going on in the broader social sphere. If those efforts are aimed at change in the social order, then education might contribute to it in a somewhat significant way. Now, this is what you will notice did happen in Maharashtra in western India.

It happened because already there was considerable social turmoil in the world of western India. It reflected in the lives and ideas of social reformers like Jyotirao Phule. You will have to go into the social history of that region to see why that manifested at that particular point. Phule got very interested in the possibility of education being used for furthering the interests of the lower castes.



Prof. Krishna Kumar

That's what leads us to the still bigger ripple, which, by the time we get into the 20th century in the same region, we'll see in the shape of Ambedkar. What do we learn from that? We learn that education represents a long rhythm. It is not something that brings about visible change within a short period. The key is whether that rhythm is sustained over a period. And that's what happened in western India from about 1870s onwards and continued to happen all the way up to the 1930s and the 1940s.

In this period when there was considerable tumult in the caste system, it was not as if the upper castes were not utilising education for furthering their ends. They were, in fact, in the forefront of this exercise and were developing new skills to be able to remain in that position where they were. So, education was performing different roles within the system, if you are choosing caste as a parameter. And how the other castes were able to become the dominant force of the new middle classes in western India even as the lower castes were entering into the ladder of upward mobility to an extent. It is that picture which has been used to understand what happened after independence.

After independence when state formation was happening through the constitutional vision, the idea of a special provision which would allow social justice to occur got into the mainframe of the state policy. And that surely has brought about some kind of what you might call sponsored mobility for the lower castes. To what extent it has disturbed the social hierarchy of an old society we still actually don't know. Perhaps, to a certain extent, it has in western India. It certainly seems to have brought a considerable change in the social hierarchy from the 1920s onwards. Now these are very specifically regional phenomena. We cannot say similar things about, for example, many parts of northern India where, to begin with, modern education under the auspices of colonialism was late to arrive.

“ *There is almost a 100-year gap between coastal India and hinterland India of specially the north in the introduction of modern educational institutions under the colonial rule.* ”

There is almost a 100-year gap between coastal India and hinterland India of specially the north in the introduction of modern educational institutions under the colonial rule. That's a pretty considerable gap; we are talking about four generations at least. In the north, especially in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, we are seeing an absence of any movement like the Satya Shodhak Samaj of western India or the social justice movement of southern India. So, there, education gets isolated as an instrument of mobility. It doesn't result in much. Modern Uttar Pradesh is as steeped in the old social structure as it was 70-80 years ago. Whatever has happened was because of the reservation system. To some extent, it brought out the voice of the lower castes; it created leaders who express their voices in the field of politics.

I am not saying that these are not important changes. I am making this point only to prove that when education is working in isolation from larger social movements, then it creates only very minor effects and the reproductionist role remains dominant. Groups of society which are already in a position to benefit from opportunities may acquire even more ability to benefit and to maintain their dominance, which is what we see in many parts of northern India. There, education has remained a rather weak tool of bringing about any significant social change.

So, in balance, one would say that if we are looking at such a vast area like South Asia, then I think the picture is very mixed as far as the role of education is concerned. But, to conclude this part of our conversation, I am reminded of a statement by Amartya Sen made many years ago. He said, "Why should we despair about the benefits of education? As you sow, so you reap!" We didn't sow much. So what we are reaping is also something quite limited as a whole. We didn't sow much in elementary education, we sowed very little in higher education and so the harvest is very limited, and in certain parts, it is very limited.

You mentioned that social movements are very important for education to take shape and effect change. Which one comes first? Are you implying a symbiotic relationship between the two or are you saying that one leads to the other?

It's an interesting theoretical question and I don't want to place it in the metaphor of chicken and egg. If you look around the world, not just in India, you will notice that there is a certain

degree of indeterminacy. There are countries where beginning of widespread education paved the way for industrial growth. And there are countries where industrial growth took place and paved the way for widening of education. So, we don't have a theory which will apply everywhere.

One thing we know from the history of education around the world is that education is a sub-system. It rarely leads the way. Whereas, economic relationships, ownership of land, ownership of means of industrial production—these create conditions in which society develops various kinds of dynamisms. Those dynamisms then get further pushed by education in one direction or another. But education on its own rarely leads the way for major dynamic processes in society.

That's what the history of education in most parts of the world would suggest. It will be difficult to come across a society where education led the way for change. That would be a very nice thing to happen but the idea of it is very innocent. Historical forces that are located in economic relations or in cultural processes are more important than education itself. In fact, how education will be used depends on a pre-existence of an enlightened leadership. Otherwise, you may want to use education but you don't understand how education works. In that case, you won't be able to utilise the potential that good education offers to a society to increase its inner intellectual capacities, to reform itself, or sometimes to transform itself.

You had mentioned in your lecture at the Madras Institute of Development Studies on November 24, 2017, that the 1911 Bill brought by Gopalkrishna Gokhale for compulsory primary education for boys was defeated primarily because of the landholding community. This is a pointer to how social structures play a role in the way education is imparted to communities across the world...

“ *The annual compulsion to migrate is certainly not conducive for children's schooling.* ”

Or if any education is imparted. Land ownership is a very big question in our society across South Asia. And it is not in the interest of large landowners to not have access to child labour. That was the case why the 1911 Bill did not move forward. Land still is a major issue. Although land reforms have occurred in many parts of India, they have not been radical enough to make sure that nobody suffers the absence of any possession of ploughable land. In fact, if you look

at present day India, you are struck by the vast proportion, a considerable proportion of the rural population which is landless and is looking for opportunities in earning through labour in others' land. This is the mass of people who are constantly in search of labour opportunities. They are all migrating from this area to that depending upon the harvest season and the possibility of finding work there. That kind of annual compulsion to migrate is certainly not conducive for children's schooling. Schooling requires regular attendance. It requires some attention, support from parents, support from home. All of these things won't be applicable to this considerable class which, I am told, is, at least, about 20 per cent of our population; the landless labourers. They are a very vulnerable class of people. Whether they stay in the countryside or whether they come to the city, they will remain vulnerable for a considerable number of generations unless something radical happens to provide them with livelihood. Once that happens and a certain stability is achieved by a family from that class of people, then the next question comes in: whether provision for education is good enough for such vulnerable children to benefit from it.

Well, as you know this is the class of people who today constitute a considerable proportion of the urban poor and they remain equally vulnerable there because poverty means frequent illness, involvement of children in family income and so on. These are not conditions conducive to benefitting from provision of education even if it is made on a modest basis. You need much stronger measures if you are to reach those children and really make education have impact on their lives. So, this would be an example of how economic relations and economic conditions are far more important for initiating a process in which education can make a contribution.

What we are seeing today in India is employability becoming the buzzword. It is interchangeably used with skill development. Similarly, we speak of jobs and not work, work being a constitutional provision. Do you think that the system is gradually moving away from a knowledge-based structure to a skill-based regime sans aspirations?

“ *But that's where the [German] state and the workers' unions have worked together to ensure that automation doesn't spread at a wild and reckless speed or on every direction. Certain areas in which automation is possible scientifically or technologically is not being allowed. And society as a whole, for the sake of its own welfare, agrees to maintain certain areas still available for employment even if automation were possible.* ”

I think you are compressing too many time zones and too many discourses. There are too many issues getting compressed in this. And I would like to first of all respond to this business of skills. Suppose we agree that our youth need skills, tell me, who is imparting those skills? The Skill India Mission, which began with UPA-I, actually has got very, very limited initial mileage after so many years. If you look at Ministry of Labour's own programmes of the last 30 years, those programmes have really never taken off in any big way. You need to actually look at Arjun Sengupta's report, a multi-volume report written under the UPA-I to see the scale at which we needed skilled young people to make the informal sector of the economy get somewhat galvanised. That report has just not been bothered about. It wasn't even bothered about by the government that had set it up, forget about now.

So, what I am trying to now start on the track of saying is that many of these points that you are raising are actually somewhat deceptive discourses. They have cluttered our perception and our awareness of the broader picture of very fundamental changes occurring in the economy. They are not unique to India. They are occurring in many parts of the world. The question is to what extent we are aware of those changes and their impact on work, employability, and all those terms you are using today.

Those fundamental changes have to do with change in technology. Automation of work which earlier was done by human beings creates a major situation where human beings are not needed. If you are a weaver and if your art of weaving is turned into software, then you are likely to be laid off.

This is today a situation which is being faced in many countries. But certain countries have managed better to handle the situation without causing massive displacement of people from work to being work less than other countries. We must ask why. Germany is one such case. It is not as if it is backward in terms of the new technologies that create automation. No, it is not backward at all. But that's where the state and the workers' unions have worked together to ensure that automation doesn't spread at a wild and reckless speed or on every direction. Certain areas in which automation is possible scientifically or technologically is not being allowed. And society as a whole, for the sake of its own welfare, agrees to maintain certain areas still available for employment even if automation were possible.

Same is the history of Japan. To this day you can visit Japan and see how many forms of human labour are still maintained outside the automation possibility simply to make sure that

the overall balance is maintained in employability. In certain areas, employment is not open to hi-tech kind of jobs. It is maintained at a low-tech level for that reason.

Now, this is where our problem can be understood. We as a society—and I would hate to call ourselves today a third rate society in a sense that we are not, but in an intellectual sense we still are—we perceive technology as a toy and we go ahead for it as if it is going to solve all our problems; as if it doesn't require the state's intervention, the state as in the expression of the collective wisdom of people, as an instrument of power, authority; as if we can let technology solve all our problems. So, we have ended up in a situation where certain areas of work where considerable number of people were employed, they are throwing those areas into automation and not letting those people be employed. We feel that that's a sign of further progress, which in fact is a proof of our myopia.

Just consider what change is made in the countryside by the use of, let's say, combines for harvesting. Each harvester displaces a few hundred people from the possibility of work during the harvesting season. This is the story of a considerable part of India, especially northern India. Or consider if you buy a machine to clean your roads in the morning. How many people you displace from this form of work? It is not as if it could not be improved in terms of its demeaning characteristics. You could have low-tech technology in the hands of people who were otherwise employed for maintenance of clean roads. But one single large machine which passes through streets displaces vast numbers of people. In the area of banking, in the area of postal services, in the area of teaching itself today, all of these examples of reckless automation can be found. By reckless I mean that which is myopic.

“ *So, if you call this kind of skilling for a particular job as education, then you are seriously undermining the concept of education, and seriously underutilising the potential of education for creating a citizenry which is thoughtful, which is imaginative, which is capable of exercising choice. Those are the real domains of education.* ”

Now we can get back to this question: whose job is it to create employable labour? Is it the job of education? This discourse is very problematic. This discourse is problematic because it seriously underutilises education for social ends. It also seriously distorts the concept of education. If you use education mainly to create employability in the present set up of the economy, then you are really using education for very short-term ends, because no

employability today can last very long given the change in machinery. Whatever skill you offer today will become quite meaningless after some time. If you call this kind of skilling for a particular job as education, then you are seriously undermining the concept of education, and seriously underutilising the potential of education for creating a citizenry which is thoughtful, which is imaginative, which is capable of exercising choice. Those are the real domains of education. If you dumb down that role of education into these kinds of goals like creating employable labour, then I think you are wasting whatever investment you want to make in education, which in any case is so limited in our case. It's a grand wastage of not merely the investment but also the opportunity. If we have institutions which can educate, then utilising those institutions for this kind of purely skill-oriented education is a waste. But even this hasn't taken off is what I wanted to say. Deceptive discourses have cluttered our vision and our ability to see where vast failures of policy have occurred. Since we had not given a thought, it continues to occur to this day.

After the 1970s, when education was brought under the concurrent list, we have seen national goals being set for education in India—the National Policy in 1986, which was revised in 1992, programmes like the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) and the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), and the Right to Education (RTE). State- and district-level institutions were set up to support these policies and programmes. How do you see the performance of these institutions over the years?

“ *You go to many sub-district-level institutions, like BRCs and CRCs, and you can see that not a bird sings there now that there's no money to maintain. CRCs are supposed to be the seat of some academic substance. So is the Cluster Resource Centre supposed to be if you read the SSA document.* **”**

It is a very mixed picture and it differs a great deal regionally. You are talking about district-level institutions and some sub-district-level institutions. Now, both these programmes that you referred to—the DPEP and the SSA—first of all, ran as a parallel exercise and, in a way, bypassed the system as it existed. They were pursued in a project mode and that meant that they were given a sort of a special track on which they could move at a much faster scheme than the system otherwise allows. In this case, the system is the Directorate of Education in the states. Instead of working through the Directorates, these programmes worked through independently set up bodies which did not have to worry about either the financial constraints

or the administrative constraints of the Directorate system through which the schools were functioning traditionally.

The structures which were created under these new flagship programmes didn't get assimilated in the old system sufficiently well in many parts of the country. Before these flagship programmes were begun as a result of the '86 policy, certain institutions were set up at the district level, like District Institute of Education and Training (DIET). Those are working reasonably well in the government sector in many parts of India. But in certain cases, you will find that they are seriously understaffed and, therefore, unable to function properly. They haven't had continuous, sustained investment from the state's side.

That picture is also today looking much worse because of the privatisation of the teacher education sector. For each DIET maintained by the government today, there are thousands started by private investment and they seriously outnumber what you have in the government sector. Today, more than 80 per cent of teacher training institutes is in the hands of private players. These private players are of all varieties, mostly quite poor varieties. So, the DIET itself has got marginalised in quite a few States in the country. Nevertheless, I would say that it is a structure that has lasted and certain States are maintaining it with greater affection and better financial protection than others. There are healthier DIETs you come across in Karnataka, for example, or in Kerala than in Uttar Pradesh or Punjab, there being considerable diversity in terms of health of the DIETs. As I said to you, DIET now is an island in an ocean where private teacher training institutes for elementary education are far more prominent.

The J.S. Verma Commission appointed by the Supreme Court actually looked into the 200 cases brought to its attention and it just summarily closed them because they were all bogus. And this was Maharashtra State.

There are such cases all over the country. The picture is very visible. Now, if we come to the sub-district-level structures, like the Block Resource Centres (BRCs) or the Cluster Resource Centres (CRCs), these were started under these flagship programmes and they replaced the inspectorial system which the directorate was capable of handling since the olden times. These sub-district-level structures were actually very interesting and they were functioning reasonably alright in many States when the SSA was still flush with funds. But once the funds have kind of dried out, the Directorate is not used to these structures because these structures were not created by the Directorate or under the Directorate. So, harmonising these new structures with the old system became an issue all over the country.

The late Anil Bordia was appointed the chairperson of a committee a few years ago by the HRD Ministry to harmonise the new and the old. Literally, that was the title and the term of reference. It was called Anil Bordia Committee on harmonisation of SSA structures with the older stable structures. It is a voluminous report and one is sorry to say that it has been simply shelved. So, you go to many sub-district-level institutions, like BRCs and CRCs, and you can see that not a bird sings there now that there's no money to maintain. CRCs are supposed to be the seat of some academic substance. So is the CRC supposed to be if you read the SSA document. These are places that shall serve as the hub of academic activity, reflection, discussion from time to time among teachers in that area. But they are being used mainly, wherever they are still working somewhat, as data collection places where a few people are there to perform this clerical job of collecting data and passing it on. This was not the function of these sub-district-level structures. So, once again the SSA vision has not been sustained and its ability to benefit RTE, therefore, has been lost.

You have special regard for the RTE Act. You have hailed it as a radical document that has come at the wrong time. Could you elaborate on how you view this law in the current context and what are the problems facing it?

“ *Our [RTE] law is actually a bit of a policy statement, apart from being a law. When you read it as a lawyer, you would realise that it places a considerable burden of interpretation on the judiciary. In that sense, you can say that the RTE is a kind of substitute for strong policy statement.* ”

If you say I have a special regard, I find that a bit ironical because I suppose that every Indian should have a special regard for any law. Law is law, and when you don't have regard for it then I don't know what we can expect from law. Now, this law is to my mind a very good law because it is the first law made at the federal level in education field. So, it shows some degree of desire to bring about a certain degree of change in all very diverse parts of the country. It has, therefore, great potential to set a national goal which has to be sustained over time.

Putting every child in school and ensuring that the child stays there for a minimum of eight years is what RTE is all about actually. Then it is about norms and standards and various other things that it articulates in a very reassuring way. It is not simply a statement of free and compulsory education. It also tries to define what it means to educate. So it carries a certain vision of education of small children.

This is, therefore, very different from similar laws in other countries like in China or like in American countries because those laws are very short in their text and merely set certain goals and structures to reach that goal. Our law is actually a bit of a policy statement, apart from being a law. When you read it as a lawyer, you would realise that it places a considerable burden of interpretation on the judiciary. In that sense, you can say that the RTE is a kind of substitute for strong policy statement.

No policy has been made since 1986. No refreshed attempt has been made so far. Even the '86 policy is actually quite vague about what it means to educate children in a manner that they can learn. RTE does that. Many of those involved in the legal profession really wondered as to what extent would RTE be justiciable. Quite a few legal experts are looking at RTE as an area that will gradually open up as cases come in, and they are already coming in in good numbers. Then judges and lawyers will debate on what it means and what kind of evidence is needed.

For example, if you go to court today and say that well, I found a child who is scared of going to school, and RTE says that schools should not cause fear. Suppose you make a writ on that basis, it will be a very interesting case. What kind of assessment mechanism will a court devise or will ask an institution to devise to judge whether the child is actually afraid, or something has happened to make him afraid? That will open up a whole area of judicial vision, judicial insight into the school system. This is the way that, for example, the Japanese system has grown over the last 100 years. Hundreds of cases have paved the way for educational change in Japan since the early 20th Century. Many of these cases were actually mooted by the teachers' unions in Japan, but many were mooted by the civil society.

Over the next 50 years, I think that's the kind of thing I foresee for India in the case of RTE. It is already becoming a course material for many law colleges. In good law colleges, it has already been introduced. As time passes, I'm sure it will become a part of the judges' training as well. May be 30 years from now, we'll be able to look at several judgments which will tell us what RTE's potential was for enforcement of this new, very innovative social law. Today, we are not in that position because it is very new and we are cribbing. Many people are trying to resist it. Some are trying to reverse it or are trying to challenge some of its provisions. This kind of noise is a necessary part, you might say, of our democracy where the fact that the law has been enacted doesn't mean that everybody stands up and respects it and tries to implement it. Instead, we think that we can reverse it, get powers changed depending on how much lobbying we can muster. And all this noise I think will continue for a while, probably more than a decade. In the meanwhile, alternative efforts will hopefully be made and RTE will

proceed to make an impact on the system. So that's how I see the future of RTE. But I think your question was a bit different.

We wanted to look at what the problems are.

“ RTE requires much more direct and much more sustained, predictable support from the state as such. Indirect funding through these corporate social responsibility kinds of donors or NGOs can at best make a selective difference here and there. But it cannot make a pervasive difference. And that is where the impending future for RTE, at least in the northern States, looks rather grim. ”

To begin with, we have a huge financial problem. When RTE was enacted, SSA was in its matured stage. Funds were still available under SSA and these were being given to the States on a declining share formula. The States were used to the idea of receiving additional funds from the Central government. There was the Planning Commission where these things could be sorted out, how much a State requires and so on. Planning goals were set. Those mechanisms now are not there anymore. We are still working with some of the older procedures but the central government is now unwilling to part with its funds to boost State funds.

The argument that the central government is using is that they are implementing the Finance Commission's verdict under which more central government's earnings will be passed on to the States. And now we leave it to the States to decide how they want to use those additional funds. It's not very clear how much additional funds States have under that Finance Commission's formula. Different States have different largesse. The real question is are all the States sufficiently enlightened about the importance of RTE to utilise their funds for fulfilling the needs that RTE has created. That question is very important.

Look at Kerala, for example. It didn't need an RTE to fund elementary education adequately. It was doing that ever since independence. Its share of the State's own annual budget spent on education was higher, almost double that of any north Indian States.

In the north Indian States, which are in a poor shape when it comes to elementary education, it is difficult to imagine that an enlightened leadership is round the corner which will deploy additional funds of its own to education rather than using them for something else which is a political priority. This is where the worry is at the moment—that States that have been quite

poor in terms of literacy. Children's education will probably go through a period of even greater impoverishment, and the gap between the southern and the northern States will increase further in the foreseeable future, unless at the federal level an attempt is made to bridge this gap by mechanisms that persuade the northern states to spend more and, if necessary, to give them more funds. At the moment, that climate is not there. In fact, that climate had begun to dry up even in UPA II.

The idea that States need to be given additional funds did not draw a very sympathetic support from UPA II and after that I don't think the climate has changed much. The new climate pushes States to involve private players, NGOs etc. to fulfil the needs that RTE has articulated. The RTE Act requires much more direct and much more sustained, predictable support from the state as such. Indirect funding through these corporate social responsibility kinds of donors or NGOs can at best make a selective difference here and there. But it cannot make a pervasive difference. And that is where the impending future for RTE, at least in the northern States, looks rather grim. It's the long-term future where RTE will hopefully become a subject of a social intervention through the judiciary because it is now justiciable. It is Part IV of the Constitution. That long-term future looks better than the short-term future.

What in your view is the shelf life of a syllabus/curriculum? Should we have a mandatory timeframe to review the syllabus?

“ *And that's a problem across the country today. We are so sceptical of a teacher's capacity.* ”

I don't think we can discuss this question outside the frame of the capacity for flexibility in a system of education. In societies or countries where teachers have considerable space and autonomy and the regional- and federal-level bureaucracy is much more professionally equipped or where academic professionalism is directly involved in policy making, such questions don't arise because there the word syllabus or textbooks doesn't convey a fixity. It conveys a certain direction, it conveys a certain number of choices which are being exercised by enlightened, well-trained teachers. They know how to handle changes within articulations that are made in the syllabus.

Our problem is that we keep the teacher under tight control and are trying to make the control even tighter by establishing CCTV cameras in their classrooms. We don't want the teacher to deviate from anything or think on their own. And that's a problem across the country today.

We are so sceptical of a teacher's capacity. In any case, we have kept that capacity under tremendous pressure so that it has remained underdeveloped. That is what makes this question still relevant to India in the early 21st century.

What is the shelf life? A syllabus is a document that is a pointer to what should be happening in a classroom. If I want my children to learn about, let's say, climate, it doesn't matter whether they learn climate-related factors or factors that lead to a certain climate in a certain region with the help of the study of one region of South Asia, or they learn it with the help of three regions in three different continents, or they learn it with the help of just their district. It doesn't matter. If the syllabus says that the goal is, say, for children to understand which factors have a steady effect on climate, then the units in which they will exercise their minds with the help of their teacher should be, need to be flexible. But in a country like ours, we specify that in Grade Six you learn about Africa, Grade Seven you learn about South America and North America, and in Grade Eight you learn about Asia. By this kind of articulation, you change the goal. The goal is now not learning about the factors that effect climate. You instead learn about what kind of climate normally prevails in these big parts of the world, like continents. Naturally, then the goal is also changed from learning about the interplay of factors by observing them, by analysing available data on weather through the years. Instead of that, children begin to memorise information about Africa, about Latin America and so on and so forth. This is where syllabus becomes very problematic in our society, because we are so rigid and we turn everything from being a concept into being an item of information to be memorised.

I hope I have explained this internal pedagogic problem of a rigid education system. The problem is related to the status of the teacher and, of course, the teacher's own orientation or attitude to learning, the teacher's exposure to knowledge in undergraduate classes and, later on, in training. All of these factors contribute to this question whether a syllabus should be changed from time to time.

A good teacher is changing the syllabus all the time. But if you don't allow the teacher to handle a syllabus in this sensible way, then the teacher becomes a clerk. She says, yes, it has to be done today and I will do it today. Whether children have learnt it or not is not my bother. I'll take a test and next week I'll do what you want me to do next week. So the teacher waits for orders. If you do that to a system, then of course the syllabus will have a shelf life which is long enough for a government to say it is time to change it whenever they want to change it.

A few years ago, Tamil Nadu came out with a change in curriculum. They brought in something called the *Samacheer Kalvi*, which translated to English means Uniform System of School Education. They also started calling it equitable education. They in fact combined the syllabi offered by different boards of study because they wanted to offer a level playing field to all students. Has it really brought about equitable education?

“ *Most States in India suffer from this multiplicity of authority centres and inadequate clarity about whose job is what. The other problem that is also shared here as elsewhere is that there is very limited or selective involvement of higher education institutes in school education.* **”**

I must confess that I am not deeply aware of either the machinery of decision making in Tamil Nadu or about the several changes that the State has gone through in the last 20 years. As an outsider I have always been interested in finding out more, but barrier of language and frequent changes, change of officers and many things have prevented me from developing any deeper understanding of what drives the change in the State and how it is exercised, and how sometimes certain good things seem to be happening and then they get changed at some point.

Why does that happen? I think we require a study of decision making in education. Also, like in other States, here also there are multiple centres. There is the Directorate, there is the SCERT, there are these boards. Most States in India suffer from this multiplicity of authority centres and inadequate clarity about whose job is what. The other problem that is also shared here as elsewhere is that there is very limited or selective involvement of higher education institutes in school education. You are in this city [Chennai] gifted with so many remarkable higher level institutions for learning that have hundreds of people who have expertise in so many different areas of knowledge. Very few are involved in the process of drafting new curriculum, syllabi, text books etc. at the primary level. That problem you see across the country. We were lucky in NCERT to be able to involve people from IITs and the best universities in the country to draft things with school teachers for primary and secondary levels during the 2005 exercise of curriculum renewal.

We were hoping in NCERT that something like that would happen in the States. But the States don't seem to be keen on utilising this expertise available to them. Plus, there is an impression in these institutions of higher learning that “it is not our job to improve schools”, even though

they keep bemoaning the fact that they get poor stuff to deal with at higher levels. They don't see it as their own creation. Some of those problems are shared here as well but your question is much too specific for me to be able to answer because I don't have the insight.

Each one of these issues have behind it a certain history which I have to spend about six months looking at old files just to be able to make any sense. This will not be easy to do. I suggested to somebody here in Madras [Chennai] a few years ago to choose that as a research subject but somehow the person stopped at a very limited point and could not go deep into unravelling the decision-making processes in areas like curriculum.

In the past 20 years, history textbooks have been tinkered with by governments whose ideologies have been at conflict. What kind of damage does this cause to the child? Is it possible to undo the damage?

First of all, the question is not based on correct information. After the 2005 exercise, there has been no controversy. So what you are referring to is an older controversy which has been settled by the National Curriculum Framework exercise and the textbooks that followed it of 2005-06. So, the question that should be asked is how was it resolved. We are passing through a fairly long period now, nearly 12 years of no controversy about history at least at the NCERT level. And that's what should be the matter of your curiosity. What did we do to resolve that controversy and put it to sleep? If you had said in the last 50 years, I would have agreed with you. But in 20 years, no it is not true. Yes, there was a problem but after 2005 there have been no problems.

That's as far as the NCERT is concerned. But various State boards, like Gujarat for example, came up with various supplementary books and courses.

Yes, in many States that problem persist because they have not studied the NCERT's way of resolving the problem. So I would say it is a question of whether we can learn from the NCERT experience.

May be you can elaborate on that.

“ *For instance, how did the Second World War shake the world? Instead of telling [school students], we have exercises. When the Second World War broke out, one newspaper in Germany, The Times of London, and The New York Times gave very different editorials that day. Here are the three editorials. Read them*

and then find out the perspective from which these three countries were looking at the Second World War. ”

I will elaborate on that by saying that the goal of history teaching is central to the subject. What is the purpose of teaching history to children? That is the question. If you think that the purpose is to expose children to a narrative of history, then you will keep on having those problems. But if you think that the purpose of history is to arouse curiosity about the past and give children an experience of using the tools of the historian to make sense of the past, then you will overcome the problem. And that's exactly what we at NCERT did. In the new text books that have settled those old controversies, we have given children the experience of what a historian does.

How does a historian handle evidence? That's the question we have kept in mind and we have given children throughout the history syllabus opportunities to look at history of a certain period, see what evidence exists, if it has been a source of a debate we have given children an idea of the debate, why do historians differ, what is interpretation of his source. We have given at every level an appropriate sort of primary source with the help of which children can exercise their own ability to maintain curiosity. For instance, how did the Second World War shake the world? Instead of telling them something, we have exercises. When the Second World War broke out, one newspaper in Germany, *The Times* of London, and *The New York Times* gave very different editorials that day. Here are the three editorials. Read them and then find out the perspective from which these three countries were looking at the Second World War.

Similarly, on matters of any controversy among historians, we have given examples of who thinks why on the basis of what evidence. So, we have taken the wind out of this controversy. Let children learn inquiry into history. That has sorted the matter, it has cleaned the air. And that's the way to move forward for boards. They are still stuck in the old historiography. They haven't even read carefully what NCERT did. They are stuck in that feeling that our job is to give a narrative of history. Now if you give a narrative of history, that too from an official organisation like SCERT, then there will be controversies. Many people will not agree with that narrative. And you will keep on having the same problem again and again.

To talk about quality of education falling, what has happened is we have lately seen that access to schools has expanded, but the quality of education has not really proportionately improved. A major reason which lot of educationists point towards is

the ill-equipped teacher training institutions and the fact that they don't produce enough good teachers. How do you think we should address this issue?

“ *There has been a major withdrawal of state investment in higher education. This is true in all parts of the country. The policy to gradually let the state withdraw from higher education is based on the broader economic ideology that it is best to leave higher education to private hands. In fact, this had begun in professional education areas even before liberalisation had begun.* ”

Addressing comes much later. The first step has to be recognition of a problem. Before we recognise the problem in teacher training, let's recognise the problem in higher education, particularly in undergraduate education. That is where all school teachers for the elementary and junior secondary stage are produced. If undergraduate education itself is suffering for at least three decades, if not less, from some very critical problems, then we can't really begin to recognise the problem that we have of quality at the school levels. What is undergraduate education suffering from? It starts with serious shortage of faculty. The word "shortage" is actually a euphemism. There has been a major withdrawal of state investment in higher education. This is true in all parts of the country.

The policy to gradually let the state withdraw from higher education is based on the broader economic ideology that it is best to leave higher education to private hands. In fact, this had begun in professional education areas even before liberalisation had begun. Several professional educational areas like medicine, engineering etc. had already begun to get commercialised and even teacher education had begun to get commercialised before official change in economic policy had begun in the late Eighties. But from the late 80s onwards, the situation become pathological and there are many States where faculty appointments have not been made since late 80s. What has substituted that is the practice of making ad hoc, temporary, vulnerable appointments. This has gradually drawn the more talented and idealistic among the young away from teaching careers in colleges and universities.

We have, as a country, seriously damaged higher education, where people capable of inspiring or igniting young minds have been forced away into various kinds of private options, NGOs or simply abroad. And this lies at the heart of what you are facing or what you are asking me to comment on under the label of quality in school education. If teachers are not being produced at the college level, where will you get teachers from for the school level? When a teacher or a young person who wants to become a teacher at the school level comes

to a training college, that person has already had substantial exposure to college education at the BA or Masters level. That's where the subject knowledge acquires a certain depth.

Young people coming into teacher training courses these days don't have that in-depth grip of knowledge of the subject which they are going to teach at the school level. Even if we had good training colleges, they cannot substitute for that subject knowledge lapse or gap created at the Undergraduate level. Training colleges can at best provide a pedagogic input to existing subject knowledge. That is the initial problem.

The problem is further compounded because training colleges themselves are facing a very major crisis which has been recognised by no less an institution than the Supreme Court of India. It was approached by institutions suffering from serious problems a few years ago. The Supreme Court, in response, appointed a commission under the late chief justice J.S. Varma to look into the problems of this sector. They looked into this sector, found it sick and made a slew of recommendations to improve it. Their analysis is given in two volumes of the Verma report.

Initially, the Central Government which is in charge of this sector through the National Council of Teacher Education [NCTE] a statutory body, felt somewhat compelled to do something about the Verma recommendations. A hope was created about four five years ago that now this sector will be revamped. But that effort has now been almost shelved and the NCTE, an organisation which is suffering from endemic corruption, is now moving from one malaise to another. In the last six months, its decisions and actions have no message of hope at all. So, unfortunately, this long story leads us to the conclusion that with the expanded access to school education we ought to have looked at quality very seriously by improving undergraduate education and by improving teacher education. That has not happened. In fact, we were at crossroads. A few years ago, we took the wrong turn. Now institutional recovery is going to be even more difficult whenever it takes place over the next five to 10 years. I am not an astrologer. I cannot predict when this recovery will actually begin. Right now there are no signs of it.

Also, don't you think that the pay scale for the teacher at the elementary level, primary level and upper primary level, there is a problem over there is well?

Very rightly. The problem is at the primary level. That's the scale which is isolated. The school structure presently provides for one scale for the primary level teacher and then another scale for teachers who are going to teach from Grade Six to Grade Ten. The elementary level which was created or recognised by the Right to Education Act runs from Grade One to Eight. That

new scale is yet to come about and the primary teacher's scale is of course the humblest. Nobody would be attracted by it.

If you were a person with good academic credentials who wanted to serve children and the nation by being a good primary school teacher, the scale will dissuade you and your parents from wanting to aspire for that job. So, nobody aspires for that job. Instead, when other job avenues close and you have no options left, then you are compelled to look at primary level teachers' training for a teacher's job.

Primary level teacher's training, as the Verma Commission pointed out, is dissociated from whatever little benefit it might have of academic affiliation to universities or colleges. The primary level teacher training is remarkably isolated from any academic resource and, therefore, it is suffering from obsolete ideas in psychology, equally obsolete ideas in other aspects of teacher training as well.

A little bit of innovation here and there can be seen thanks to some enlightened officers in the government. As a whole, it is far from fulfilling the expectations and requirements that the RTE Act points towards for the elementary school teacher—somebody who is capable of reflection, somebody who is aware of the social structure and its deeper force which creates very difficult conditions in the classroom, somebody who has a grip on core subjects like mathematics, the sciences, environment studies, social sciences and languages, somebody who has a grip on these subject areas and can then imaginatively inspire children at that young age which is so crucial for future education. That kind of input is a dream today, a fantasy because no more is our undergraduate college system providing that grip on the subject. Without that grip you get persons as I have already said into training and then into appointments. So, a vicious cycle is perpetuated.

Finally, how do you think the role of the state has changed over the years vis-à-vis education?

“ *The state did not recognise education as a matter of national concern or a national interest, like Defence is a subject of national interest. We have to have strong defence equipment, strong armies and air force etc. The fact that we need to have a strong teaching force or good universities, good schools, that kind of feeling about education being an area of national interest didn't exist in the state's own perception.* ”

First of all, let's recognise that the Indian state has never taken education particularly seriously since independence. The education portfolio either in the central government or in the State governments has never been considered a high-status portfolio for a powerful politician to aspire for, right from independence onwards. At the centre, the portfolios that are considered a sign of recognition of political status are basically Home, External Affairs, Finance, and Defence. If you were placed at the education portfolio, it meant that the Prime Minister doesn't really regard you as a serious politician. So, whoever was assigned this portfolio had this feeling that he is a side show of the Cabinet.

That's just one aspect. The state did not recognise education as a matter of national concern or a national interest, like Defence is a subject of national interest. We have to have strong defence equipment, strong armies and air force etc. The fact that we need to have a strong teaching force or good universities, good schools, that kind of feeling about education being an area of national interest didn't exist in the state's own perception. There are no signs of it, right from the beginning.

Nevertheless, the state did feel somewhat compelled to treat education as an area of welfare because the Constitution included it in the Directive Principles of State Policy. That way, occasionally, when some good person got charge of the portfolio of education in the States or in the Centre, some reasonable amount of policy making occurred.

After the 1975 Amendment to the Constitution, education came into the concurrent list. Then, between the Centre and the States, some possibility of a dialogue emerged and some degree of cohesiveness perhaps came within a shooting distance. And yet, when the possibility emerged, that's when the new ideology that education can be relegated to private hands began to germinate.

It is hard to say exactly what in the field of education led to it even before liberalisation policies had come centre-stage in the economy. I realise that that's a subject of big debate. Have economic reforms on the road to liberalised, or privatised, or globalised economy, been good for creating a more efficient state or a more efficient India?

That's a subject for some debate, but as far as education is concerned, one has very little room to feel doubtful that the gradual withdrawal of the state even from the limited role it was performing earlier has proved disastrous since the late '80s onwards. The cue has come from

the centre. Even the States that were beginning to feel somewhat serious about it, stopped finding the resources to make this area a high concern area for state policies.

I would say that from the '90s onwards, whatever achievements had been made in terms of the state's concerns had begun to get thinner. Even though national flagship programmes like the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, which were driven by external support, external pressures, meaning international pressures, pushed enrolment up, the state's concern did not get pushed up. Now that the international pressure has also withered away, those programmes are virtually over.

“ *What you call political will has been lacking in the Indian state right since independence in this sector. What is will? Will is nothing more than sustained desire. Occasionally, desire has been expressed but not sustained.* ”

Our destiny is in our own hands. The RTE Act shows the way to fulfil that destiny. But state concern has not improved any more. In fact, in the last four five years, you would think that the central government's own desire to push States towards fulfilment of goals of RTE itself is coming down. So, what you call political will has been lacking in the Indian state right since independence in this sector. What is will? Will is nothing more than sustained desire. Occasionally, desire has been expressed but not sustained.

You get some good person in some State who pushes matters a little bit. The moment he is transferred that push comes down. So, your question about the State as an institution expressing social, political cohesion and will to take education seriously, had it existed? I would say no. That, unfortunately, continues to be the reality even though here and there you see signs of some earnestness being expressed. But those signs come and go. There is no sustained sense of concern for this sector.

[Resource 1: Justice Verma Commission Report on Teacher Education](#)

[Volume 1 \[PDF 27.8 MB\]](#), [Volume 2 \[PDF 67.1 MB\]](#), [Volume 3 \[PDF 16.6 MB\]](#)

[Resource 2: National Curriculum Framework 2005 \[PDF 1.80 MB\]](#)

[Source: National Council of Education Research and Training](#)

[Resource 3: Yash Pal Committee to Advice on Renovation and Rejuvenation of Higher Education](#)

[\[PDF 1.81 MB\]](#)

[Source: Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India](#)

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