Aims of Education: Policy documents and demands of democracy

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In this short article I will try to briefly comment on aims of education as they are reflected in a few policy documents. Then will try to argue for development of critical thinking as an important aim of education in a democracy.

Three documents on education policy, namely, the Kothari Commission Report (1966), National Policy on Education (NPE, 1986/92) and the Ramamurty Committee review of National Policy on Education(1990), read together reflect a definite shift towards liberal humanistic education and an increasing emphasis on the individual. The Kothari Commission sees education primarily as a tool for social engineering, though the vision of a desirable society presented in the report does contain glimpses of the ideals of equality and social justice. However, education is seen primarily as a tool to make individuals fit the chosen vision of society, rather than as active participants in evolving that vision. A careful reading of the first chapter of Education and National Development (Report of the Education Commission 1964-66) leaves no one in doubt that the main concern is national development and the development of human resource is a precondition for that over arching goal. Education is a means for development of human resource and, therefore, is extremely important.

The NPE 1986/92 takes individuals more seriously and there is a definite shift towards critical thinking, but still the individual is regarded as a resource to be used to achieve national goals rather than an active participant in defining these goals. The Kothari Commission derives aims of education from the national goals, though the aims of education may contain elements of individual freedom and critical thinking, but the justification for these last two is sought in terms of national goals. The NPE 1986/92 seems to recognise independence (from national goals) of educational aims as well as the independence of their source of justification, but seeks to correlate them with the national goals. This is an important difference in perspectives of these two documents.

The Ramamurty Committee Report (Towards an Enlightened and Humane Society, 1990) lends full support to developing rational autonomous individuals who have the abilities to participate in defining and critiquing national aims and objectives, as well as equipping people to work towards achieving both personal and national goals. Here the overarching aims of education are derived from a broader concept of human being and society and it is expected that the national goals will be in agreement with this broader view of humanity.

However, while the policy documents suggest a shift in direction towards a more humanistic and emancipatory education, one does not see this in the curriculum documents. Instead, one sees a shift in the opposite direction, away from liberal humanistic leanings, towards a more instrumentalist view of education.

For example, the Minimum Learning Continuum (1979, NCERT) sees individuals as a national resource much in the fashion of Kothari commission report. But there is also an emphasis on developing abilities for rational decision making which implies autonomy. The total framework of this document emphasises conceptual learning and development of
various abilities and skills. It denounces equating education with memorisation of information and other textbook contents. In spite of the limitations of this document it still presents a vision of education that is broader than its successor documents.

_The Minimum Levels of Learning at Primary Stage_ (NCERT, 1991) sees the learner more as a socially productive unit working for economic development rather than an autonomous decision maker. The ideal here seems to be to mass produce workers who can contribute to economic development as defined by planners. It’s claims to be competency based rather than content based seems weak, as it is more concerned with allegedly socially useful information and attitudes rather than critical thinking.

_The National Curriculum Framework for School Education_ (NCERT, 2000) has mentioned almost all important ideas in some context or other. The conflicting tendencies in the framework make it very difficult to place in the context of this article. The marking features of this document are, one, an anxiety to be able to cope with the world, never questioning the shape it is taking, nor staking a claim to have a right to participate in giving that shape. It is a curriculum just for coping with it, at the terms dictated by those who have the courage to shape the world. Second, a docile kind of citizen who is very concerned with cohesive society without any commitment to equality and justice, or sees equality as a means to achieve cohesiveness but not as a value in its own right; who has ‘scientific temperament’ but does not ask sharp questions from the culture and religion; who is gullible enough to believe in whatever is advanced as ‘latest trend in education’ without subjecting it to rational enquiry.

Thus there is a difference in the vision of education as pronounced in policy documents and what is implemented on the ground. A charitable explanation of this dichotomy could be that the liberal humanistic shift in policy will take time to translate into actual curricula and other concrete action plans. But actually one notices that the curricula are moving in a reverse direction. Thus perhaps a more plausible explanation would be that policy pronouncements are made for public consumption under the pressures of democratic polity. The pressures of economic globalisation and market forces is felt more acutely at the level of curricula and programmes of implementation. While at the policy level we give the impression of holding our ground for social justice, democratic values and dignity of individual; at the level of the later the pressures of masters of the markets are accommodated with alacrity.

Deliberative democracy and education

India is a multicultural and multiethnic nation. It has many languages and a representation of all the major living religions of the world. The caste differences within the Hindu society further complicate the picture. It has quit a range of regional climatic differences. Economic and natural resources vary from place to place. There is uneven distribution of wealth and socio-political power. The question is: can the representative democracy, as we know it, deliver the goods in such a situation? Can it ensure a fair distribution of the benefits of social co-operative efforts? Can it ensure that the voices of each group will be heard with equal sensitivity? Can it ensure that the world view and cultural norms of each group will be accorded due respect to them? If yes, under what conditions? If no, what needs to be done to remedy the situation? And how are these questions related to the issues of curricula and aims of education?
Democracy as it is functioning today; interpreted simply as majority rule; does not ensure socio-political and economic justice. It does not ensure equality among citizens, it does not ensure fair distribution of goods produced by social co-operation, and it does not ensure participation of all in framing the rules for distribution of those social goods. When the communities and groups become aware of inequity mated out to them or when they see a possibility of wresting out a greater share of the pie they start bargaining. They start building pressure on the existing government and political parties. The governments and political parties function on a crude form of majority rule. Therefore, manufacturing majority becomes the order of the day. Unprincipled give and take between the groups and secret deals between the representatives of the groups and political parties become the norm, and the common man on the road becomes absolutely powerless. The agitations and rhetoric on the issue of reservation for Jats, and currently of Rajputs, of Rajasthan in government jobs under OBC quota is a good example of this process. This process reduces a nation and state to a joint stock company, in which the bigger share holder is in control and the minor share holders can only watch him appropriating all benefits.

This state of affairs is perhaps a stage in the learning curve of the nation that is engaged in mastering the art of governing itself democratically. This process of experimenting with various ways of power grabbing should give way to a more reasoned way of power sharing for the good of all, in due course, one may hope. In this context one must ask ‘what are the conditions that may help a democratic state achieve greater equity and social justice’? One has to look beyond the representative democracy to find an answer to this poser. Two things come to mind more or less immediately. One, greater participation of all people in decision making; and two, serious rational deliberations on all issues related to policy making and setting up procedures to use power vested in decision making. Direct participation of people is possible only at the local level. Therefore, if the people are to participate in making decisions that affect their lives, these decisions have to be made locally. This points in the direction of decentralisation. But decision making at local as well as at state and national level has to have some criteria to be rational. Has to have some shared norms or yardsticks to judge what is desirable and what is not. Without such a criteria the decisions will be made according to the whims or interests of the dominant groups. Democracy presupposes inclusion of all and absence of discrimination. Therefore one pointer to such criteria could be the common good (sarva jan hitaya). It is at least theoretically possible to refer all decisions to the greater common good, if we are in possession of such a commodity. However, it is no mean task to manufacture a notion of common good in a multicultural society where the moral and social values of different groups and communities may be at variance with each other, where economic interests of different groups and communities may be in conflict with each other. That is where rational public discourse comes in picture. Understanding each others positions, articulating what is ones cherished way of life, accommodating the view of others and arguing for space for ones own life style; demands a conversation tempered with concern for the other and guided by reason.

The common good need not necessarily be conceived as a golden principle discovered, formulated and fixed for all times to come. It could be conceived as a set of values evolving through rational public discourse among all the citizens. An evolving consensus among all the citizens through public deliberations where every one takes part on equal footing and where reason is the only arbiter. This discourse has to be truly public in the sense of widest possible participation to be effective and of any value. This discourse can not
be limited to choice of voting at the election time. Every political decision and every policy has to be constantly and critically evaluated.

An ideal public rational discourse presumes interest of all citizens, availability of relevant information to all citizens and well developed critical thinking abilities among them. But citizens are not born with interest in public matters, ability to make sense of information and critical abilities. They have to learn all this over an extended time and acquire these abilities gradually. This learning can not come about on its own, special efforts have to be made for all this to happen. That is where education comes in. An education aiming at development of critical thinking, other abilities related with rational decision making and interest in public affairs is a necessary precondition for well functioning of a democracy. This can not be an education system wedded to producing easily governable citizens equipped with productive skills and consumer interests to keep the economy smoothly running and growing. Education for deliberative democracy has to aim primarily to empower citizens with critical abilities, interest and courage to make their voices loud and reasonable enough to the extent that they cannot be ignored. Of course, productive skills have to be necessary part of the package but they alone cannot hold the centre stage and be all. It is a fundamental duty of a democratic state to educate all its citizens suitably for the above mentioned purposes.

When a state emphasises education only for economic growth, population control and conditioning citizens in its chosen values it is behaving in an undemocratic manner. When a state elusively emphasises education to cope with the externally set agenda of globalisation it is failing to protect the very principles that gave it its legitimacy. When a state twists curricula in order to favour a particular party in the national public discourse it is betraying democracy and justice. Therefore, the emphasis given to respect for equality of all and development of reason is one important criteria we have to measure our curricula and text books against.

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