



Checking Areas of Concern: What the Inputs Document has to say about Saffronisation Inequality and Privatisation

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Perhaps it is good to begin a discussion of the Inputs document by noting some methodological problems in the reading and interpretation of any policy document. We should accept that there may not be clear and unambiguous messages in them. These, like many other kinds of texts, can be read in several different ways. There are usually many and often contradictory voices entangled within them. Sometimes there may even be attempts to deliberately leave certain matters opaque and vulnerable to multiple interpretations. To an extent, this is inevitable when a document is produced through a consultative and collaborative process, within which there must have been many struggles and compromises. When we try to interpret policy documents, perhaps we can only try to look out for certain themes and try to see the various rather than single ways in which they have been addressed and, along with what has been said and the presence of various voices, we can also try to look for the silences and wonder whether they are significant or accidental. When reviewing such documents it is important to keep in mind the ways in which they can be used. People will later use a policy document to support their own respective agendas and will try to pull out precisely what supports those agendas, ignoring the rest. One may expect that Hindutvavadis and secularists, proponents of privatisation and those who wish to rejuvenate state support for education and so on will all draw different recommendations from the same document. When we try to interpret policy documents it is good to avoid seeking only one essential message from them. Instead it may be better to see them in their complexity, with their multiple voices and all. This will help to visualise the ways in which such a document can eventually be made use of.

Out of the many ideas and issues taken up by the Inputs document, I shall focus on just three: first, the saffronisation of education, second, the promotion of greater social equality and third, the privatisation of education. These are areas about which many people have expressed their interest and concern regarding which direction national policy may be moving in. They are also areas which I have been long interested in.

Saffronisation

The first question which was in many of our minds when the Inputs document was released was whether this set of recommendations would carry a strong Hindutvavadi assertion. We were especially apprehensive because there was only one educationist and academic in the entire committee. It has therefore been reassuring to observe that no sharp assertion of Hindu superiority or demonisation of minorities has been done. Most of the document speaks a language reminiscent of the way Congress-sponsored documents across the years portrayed the role of culture in Indian education. There are repeated references to the importance of learning to respect diversity and promote tolerance (eg pp14, 30). There is also a refrain of how students should learn to be proud of their country and its heritage (p14). But then what is surprising about wanting young people to be proud of their nation? It has always been a thread in various education reports and policy statements after we got Independence.

There are a couple of small hiccups, but because they are also common in the Congress era, one is not sure what to make of them. For instance, the brief narrative of the history of education in India seems to follow the basic order of early twentieth century nationalist historiography. In this cognitive ordering of the past, the only great historical achievements took place in the Vedic and Brahminical traditions. The story starts with the Vedas, moves on to Sanskritic achievements and then makes a huge leap over intervening centuries and begins talking about Indians reflecting on education in the colonial era. The absence of non-Sanskritic cultures, the Tamil Sangam tradition, Persian and vernacular traditions, the problems of Brahminical domination over education and so on: none of these omissions is surprising since silencing them is an old pattern of Congress discourses on education. This is common in the portrayal of Indian cultural history. We now realise that this picture of the Indian past is incomplete and one-dimensional. There were many other cultural threads in the past. Sometimes their mutual interaction led to great new fusions and flowerings. Sometimes they led to terrible oppressions, too.

The absence of this more complete picture of India's past in the vision of education leaves me a little uncertain regarding the intended purpose. The story of a Brahminical golden age which fell apart with the arrival of Muslims is false, but has become the mainstay of Hindu militant groups. This story ignores all the achievements of the medieval era and also complexities of different classes, regions, communities and cultures struggling with each other. However this narrower narrative is also common to the Congress era. Professor Krishna Kumar has been repeatedly pointing out that Congress-led discourses of Indian culture legitimised the communalisation of education much before contemporary times. In that sense Hindutvavadis have been carrying forward certain discourses which emerged in nineteenth century India and were shared by many political groups. Through this continuity they gain reassurance and legitimacy. In contrast, more rigorous studies of history show that our past has been much more complicated than the story of the 'Golden Age of Hinduism and its Destruction by Islam' presents.

Several questions come to my mind. Is it too much to expect from a document seeking to guide the National Education Policy to be aware of this debate over how to see India's past? Is the consistency of the present document with Congress ways of presenting Indian culture a repudiation and rejection of the violence and aggressiveness of contemporary Hindutva? Or is it a way of presenting a gloss over the same, of making it appear more respectable and conventional? I can only hope that the document is doing the former and not the latter. But one does expect that the historical vision of India's cultural past should be more accurate and informed.

What would have been much better would have been a clear breaking of the stereotypes which Hindutvavadi education has made its centrepieces. For instance, it would have been good to hear the questioning of Brahminical models of the superiority of textual knowledge, of the fusion of cultures which emerges in the medieval era and also the accumulation of legal, astronomical and medical knowledges in medieval Indian universities. Many more examples could be multiplied which provide a more realistic picture of Indian culture

and its education systems. The silence in this regard lends itself to an easy co-option by those who have not kept up with the expanding research in the relation between knowledge generation and the social configurations of states and power in the south Asian region. An assertion of a more complex reality would have made it easier to block a potential co-option. It would also have enjoyed the virtue of being truer.

Social Inequality

One of the greatest challenges facing India's education system is the vast social inequality within it. While a small number of children go to excellent schools, the overwhelming majority are condemned to non-functional schools, poorly staffed and badly run. An important international trend has been to insist upon improving schools for the poor and socially marginalised. This has been at the heart of all major improvements in education systems across the world.

Given the compelling nature of this challenge, there was a great deal of curiosity about what new initiatives and strategies the new education policy could put forth. On reading the Inputs document it appears to have a somewhat mixed up vision of how to decrease social inequality within education and education's consequences. It is staunchly egalitarian at certain places while at others it can easily lend itself to forces which are increasing social inequality. On the positive side, at several points one reads a powerfully expressed concern with increasing enrolments, especially of the historically marginalised groups like ST, SC, OBC, Muslims and of people from regions that have lagged behind others (eg pp 10, 15).

There is also in the section on 'Inclusive Education and Student Support' (pp 23-25)- a welcome acknowledgement that student support has to become one of the pillars of our education system and not be treated as an afterthought. A large number of students from historically and physically disadvantaged backgrounds join up and then find themselves struggling to stay abreast of those with more advantaged histories. Educational institutions from primary schools to universities need to build into their regular routines a process of supporting students so that they can catch up and realise their potential.

In spite of these and several other pro-equality measures, one also gets the impression that more thought needed to be put in by the Inputs document on how to actually promote equality. There is no mention of why it has happened that education-related inequality in India is still so sharp, with such huge disparities between the top, middle and the bottom. Successive education commissions and education policies, for instance, have not been able to make any headway in their demand that 6% of the GDP be put into education. If there is no reflection upon why that demand has not been met, then one wonders if this set of policy proposals will also meet the same fate as those of the 1968 and 1992 NPEs. What, after all, is particularly different in the strategy being proposed here which is likely to give it greater likelihood of success? Does it acknowledge that there are vested interests standing against the expansion of (good) education for all? What can those interests be? Are there some other kinds of obstacles? How will they be overcome? No light is shed on these quite basic questions.

Another basic problem which goes without any response is that of the social biases of school curricula. All the way from Phule's times we have been hearing this criticism that educational curricula and school cultures tend to be inclined towards the needs of the urban, organised sector of the economy, particularly towards industry and services. The present policy document does not consider this a problem area and there is no emphasis on expanding the benefits of education to include agriculture, handicrafts and the unorganised sector. If we wish to decrease the educational and social inequalities in India, then we cannot continue to marginalise these curricular elements. For that matter, across various parts of the Inputs document we see an innocent acceptance of commonly held beliefs regarding what should be in school curricula. It does not seem to acknowledge that there is a cultural politics of the curriculum through which the domination of certain classes, occupations, castes, the male gender, certain languages and certain regions may get strengthened. Thus there is no recommendation to give greater visibility and an active role to women or to people from the North-east and so on. Only some weak and

sporadic gestures are made towards problematising knowledge and its creation and reproduction. What is very common is the refrain of needing to teach skills and using ICT. But that suggests that it is only in technical knowledge and that too of the industrial kind (not agricultural or any other kind) that there are problems in Indian education. This is too simple a way of looking at the problem of knowledge in our education system. If we want to accelerate social equality then we have to also promote knowledges which can empower the poor and marginalised and give them a greater voice in society along with giving them greater mobility. This means looking afresh at what kind of culture we teach and promoting cultures that empower and liberate.

There are simple repetitions of clichés across the document, which seem ignorant of the vast amount of work done in debating the needs of Indian society over generations. One example is the mention (eg p 21) of the importance of teaching rights and duties from the Constitution of India. As umpteen scholars of the teaching of social sciences in schools have pointed out, we need a fresh approach towards the teaching of Constitutional values. Rights and duties have been taught for several decades in India in a way which usually degenerates into a mechanical parroting of phrases. Actually this teaching about the Constitution as a mindless exercise for getting marks may even sometimes contribute to the sense that the Constitution is a dead, irrelevant document and it is instead vigilantism which must be resorted to. One searches in vain within the policy recommendations for an alternative, which is the making of political and sociological knowledge into a living part of our education system. It is when young people begin to understand why ideas of rights emerged and their benefits and are able to pulsate with the struggles and debates around them that they will begin to internalise progressive principles. It is through such pedagogies and curricula that democratic and reflective social behaviour that respects others in one's neighbourhood may begin to emerge.

However, as a whole, the document does not seem to consider it important that young people learn about society, politics and the economy. So how can there be a reflection upon how best to teach

young people to take an active and justice-oriented interest in matters around them? The social sciences and humanities are completely missing from the conceptual framework of the document. Instead, something called 'ethics education' is considered to be sufficient to promote social justice, equality, respect for women and so on (p 31). The general lack of attention given to the significance of cultivating the humanities and the social sciences in this set of proposals is an important shift from the 1986/92 document which paid at least lip service to them. It is also reminiscent of the naive way several political and social groups talk about teaching value education by itself, as if it could be taught without reference to the dynamics of political, social, cultural and economic relationships.

A sad feature of contemporary Indian education is that the disciplines and knowledges which give us the ability to understand and engage with social inequality have lost ground. We need to see the systemic causes of social inequality. Only then can we begin to pull out its roots. Unfortunately the Inputs document only manifests this growing ignorance in Indian culture. Expecting it to respond to a lacuna which it itself expresses, may be asking for the impossible.

Privatisation

The privatisation of education has become the camel which crept into the tent of Indian education, without being invited in by any major national policy document, but is now beginning to claim ownership of the tent itself. In tertiary education already the majority of students are in private institutions and their numbers in school education continue to grow year after year. However, a shift so drastic and with so many consequences on the politics of curricula and on social inequality, was never sanctioned by the previous National Education Policy of 1986/1992. The present Inputs document, too, does not directly examine privatisation of education as a policy position or strategy. Privatisation now seems to be just something which is an ordinary fact of life and apparently accepted as a necessary evil. This lack of a basic consideration of the benefits and cost of privatisation is puzzling. It is in policy documents that one expects a straightforward stand on a controversial issue, spelling out whether they are in favour or against it, or even whether

and what kind of compromise, half-way solution is being sought. But one searches only in vain for a serious, head-on discussion of privatisation.

There are several statements which reassure us that the government will not abdicate its responsibility towards ensuring good education to all. These include the reiteration (with the 1968 and 1986/92 policies) that 6% of the GDP should necessarily be put into education (p 13). There is the emphatic statement that education in India 'should be considered a public good' (p 40). Period. It should be noted that it is not just primary education or school education, but education in general, which is being asserted to be a public good; which, like water and air, should be accessible to everyone. There are also sceptical remarks about the private sector's claims to excellence (p 8) and alleged superiority over government schools.

At the same time, privatisation and the increasing costs of education and the consequent sharpening of social inequalities does not appear as a major theme in the chapter entitled 'Key Challenges in the Education Sector'. This is puzzling, since privatisation is indeed one of the greatest causes of the growth of inequality in Indian education. While inequalities in access are discussed along with several other problems, the role of privatisation in accentuating them seems not to merit discussion here. There is a sentence about commercialisation of education in a section on 'Governance and Management' (p 12), but that seems about it.

The section on financing education welcomes the role philanthropic and CSR bodies can play in promoting education. However there is no statement anywhere saying that education is not to be considered a for-profit activity. This is an important nuance since it is this specific point on which some PPP proposals have met strong opposition. Many have expressed a well-founded fear that, in the name of CSR, public resources may be handed over to private parties so that they can make a killing. It would have been good to clarify that adequate safeguards would be put into place so that public resources do not get covertly made into private capital for the already rich. But the absence of such sensitivities from the document makes one worry.

The growing privatisation of education in India is manifesting itself in the popularity of student loans. This has obvious problems, since loans pull into the market process something which perhaps should not be seen as a market activity. At the heart of this is whether we wish education to be driven by moral choices or by what gives the highest salary. If we start charging high fees for all kinds of education, then only those occupations and disciplines will thrive which give high monetary returns, since people will want to naturally recover at least what they had paid. But there are many occupations which give high returns to society, not necessarily high salaries. For instance if we ask a person to become a medical doctor by paying one crore rupees, then that person will seek to recover that money through his occupation. Most people will accept that this is not what we want doctors to do. We want them to think about serving patients at the least cost to the latter, not to think about how they can recover the costs of their education by prescribing more expensive treatments.

It may be fine for a student who wants training for making software for American companies to be asked to pay a high training fees. That is up to the student and whether the American companies find such a worker still cheaper to employ. But where education is supposed to give a return to our own society, we have to become very cautious about the effects of a high fees upon the social benefits which education gives. If we insist upon running a B.Ed. College, for instance, in a market model with high fees, then we can expect that its graduates will only want to work for high salaries at the most expensive private schools. They have to recover their investment, after all. But this will raise the problem of who will then be willing to go and teach in rural areas.

It is problems like the ones above which have led many people to argue that education should be a public good, it should not be made a private good or a commodity. There are also arguments made about how to keep it part of the market process, but regulating that so as to achieve greatest social justice and welfare. The Inputs document, sadly, does not seem to directly examine this issue or respond to it. A reference to student loans is made (p 41) without discussing whether we want to

promote the further commodification of Indian education. All that is said is that loans will be made cheaper and easier to obtain. Whether student loans are a good thing in the first place is not a subject of discussion at all.

There is another quite elementary problem which most introductory economics textbooks acknowledge which this inputs document does not refer to. Markets are inherently prone to increasing social inequality. If education too becomes part of the market process then how will we ensure it does not become a commodity that the rich can buy more easily than the poor? The Inputs document does not seem to either understand or have a position on this. Or is the absence of comment actually a position? We can only speculate.

So there are contradictory voices here. On the one hand there is the statement that education should be available to all, irrespective of family or social background. On the other hand, there is a de facto acceptance of privatisation without reflecting upon the dangers of increasing social inequality. Nor is there a discussion of the cultural distortions which arise when education becomes part of a commodity relation, where education is sought by keeping in mind its financial returns rather than cultural, political and social returns.

It would have been preferable if the policy inputs had confronted the question directly. It could have spelt out that philanthropic and private players were welcome to contribute so long as their activities did not lead to increasing social inequality or try to create profit at the cost of the poor. It could have said that this country will not accept the denial of opportunities and positive support simply because one was born into a poor and socially marginalised family. It could have said that education in areas which needed to be guided by cultural and moral values would not be allowed to be driven by the logic of profit-making. As of now, the inputs document does not seem to take adequate care of the dangers of leaving these matters ambiguous.

Conclusion

How then does one look at such a document? The dangers of identifying just one 'essential' character have been mentioned earlier. The present Inputs document as it currently exists does make several

sound and praiseworthy recommendations. However, it seems to also contradict itself in certain ways. At several places it also lends itself to being interpreted differently by different interests. The authors of the document do not seem to be aware of debates and international experiences around many of the concerns which they take up. When compared with the 1986/1992 NPE or the older, venerable Kothari Commission Report

and its recommendations, with their much richer vision and treatment of various issues, which was better informed by the research and international developments of their times, the document comes out rather poorly. This warns us of what will happen when the rulers of a country no longer trust academics and scholarship and want to manage education through administrators instead.

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