The Challenges for India's Education System

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Summary

• This paper, the first in an occasional series on India's education system, places the current issues facing education in India in a historical context.

• Since Independence, successive Indian governments have had to address a number of key challenges with regard to education policy, which has always formed a crucial part of its development agenda. The key challenges are:

- improving access and quality at all levels of education;
- increasing funding, especially with regard to higher education;
- improving literacy rates.

• Currently, while Indian institutes of management and technology are world-class, primary and secondary schools, particularly in rural areas, face severe challenges.

• While new governments commonly pledge to increase spending on education and bring in structural reforms, this has rarely been delivered in practice.

• Most of the changes undertaken by the previous BJP-led government were aimed at reforming the national curricula, and have been criticized for attempting to 'Hindu-ize' India's traditionally secular education system.

• Improving the standards of education in India will be a critical test for the current Congress-led government. It will need to resolve concerns over the content of the curriculum, as well as tackling the underlying challenges to education.

Introduction

India's education system turns out millions of graduates each year, many skilled in IT and engineering. This manpower advantage underpins India's recent economic advances, but masks deep-seated problems within India's education system. While India's demographics are generally perceived to give it an edge over other countries' economies (India will have a youthful population when other countries have ageing populations), if this advantage is restricted to a small, highly educated elite, the domestic political ramifications could be severe.

With 35 per cent of the population under the age of 15, India's education system faces numerous challenges. Successive governments have pledged to increase spending on education to 6 per cent of GDP, but actual spending has hovered around 4 per cent for the last few years. While, at the top end, India's business schools, Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) and universities produce globally competitive graduates, primary and secondary schools, particularly in rural areas, struggle to find staff.

Indian governments have seen education as a crucial development tool. The first part of this paper provides a historical perspective on the development of the education system in India, highlighting the changing emphases within government policy. Since Independence, the education policies of successive governments have built on the substantial legacies of the Nehruvian period, targeting the core themes of plurality and secularism, with a focus on excellence in higher education, and inclusiveness at all levels. In reaching these goals, the issue of funding has become problematic; governments have promised to increase state spending while realizing the economic potential of bringing in private-sector financial support.

The second part of this paper examines how recent governments have responded to these challenges, which have remained largely unchanged since Nehru's era, despite the efforts of past governments and commissions to reform the Indian education system. Attention will be paid to more recent policy initiatives, both those of the previous BJP-led administration and the proposals of the current Congress-led United Progressive Alliance. It will become clear that the same difficulties that existed nearly sixty years ago remain largely unsolved today – for example, the need to safeguard access to education for the poorest and most disenfranchised communities of India.

The evolution of India's education policy

Elitism, Nehruvianism and development
Traditional Hindu education served the needs of Brahmin families: Brahmin teachers would teach boys to read and write. Under the Moguls, education was similarly elitist, favouring the rich rather than those from high-caste backgrounds. These pre-existing elitist tendencies were reinforced under British rule.

British colonial rule brought with it the concept of a modern state, a modern economy and a modern education system. The education system was first developed in the three presidencies (Bombay, Calcutta and Madras). By linking entrance and advancement in government service to academic education, colonial rule contributed to the legacy of an education system geared to preserving the position and prerogatives of the more privileged. In the early 1900s, the Indian National Congress called for national education, placing an emphasis on technical and vocational training. In 1920 Congress initiated a boycott of government-aided and government-controlled schools and founded several 'national' schools and colleges. These failed, as the rewards of British-style education were so great that the boycott was largely ignored. Local elites benefited from the British education system and eventually used it expel the colonizers.

Nehru envisaged India as a secular democracy with a state-led command economy. Education for all and industrial development were seen as crucial tools to unite a country divided on the basis of wealth, caste and religion, and formed the cornerstones of the anti-imperial struggle. Following Independence, school curricula were thus imbued with the twin themes of inclusiveness and national pride, placing emphasis on the fact that India's different communities could live peacefully side by side as one nation.

The legacies of this Nehruvian approach to education are considerable; perhaps most notable is the entrenchment of the pluralist/secularist perspective in the minds of the Indian people. Subsidized quality higher education through institutions such as the IITs and IIMs formed a major contribution to the Nehruvian vision of a self-reliant and modern Indian state, and they now rank amongst the best higher education institutions in the world. In addition, policies of positive discrimination in education and employment furthered the case for access by hitherto unprivileged social groups to quality education. It has been argued that while access for some marginalized communities continues to be limited, the upward mobility of a few Dalit and tribal households resulting from positive discrimination in educational institutions and state patronage has created role models that help democracy survive in India.

The Kothari Commission: education for modernization, national unity and literacy
Drawing on Nehru's vision, and articulating most of his key themes, the Kothari Commission (1964–6) was set up to formulate a coherent education policy for India.[1] According to the commission, education was intended to increase productivity, develop social and national unity, consolidate democracy, modernize the country and develop social, moral and spiritual values. To achieve this, the main pillar of Indian education policy was to be free and compulsory education for all children up to the age of 14. Other features included the development of languages (Hindi, Sanskrit, regional languages and the three-language formula[2]),

equality of educational opportunities (regional, tribal and gender imbalances to be addressed) and the development and prioritization of scientific education and research. The commission also emphasized the need to eradicate illiteracy and provide adult education.

India's curriculum has historically prioritized the study of mathematics and science rather than social sciences or arts. This has been actively promoted since the Kothari Commission, which argued that India's development needs were better met by engineers and scientists than historians. The perception has remained that students only study social science or arts subjects as a last resort, though recently commerce and economics have risen in stature.

The need for change: the National Policy on Education

In 1986, Rajiv Gandhi announced a new education policy, the National Policy on Education (NPE), which was intended to prepare India for the 21st century. The policy emphasized the need for change: 'Education in India stands at the crossroads today. Neither normal linear expansion nor the existing pace and nature of improvement can meet the needs of the situation.'[3]

According to the new policy, the 1968 policy goals had largely been achieved: more than 90 per cent of the country's rural population were within a kilometre of schooling facilities and most states had adopted a common education structure. The prioritization of science and mathematics had also been effective. However, change was required to increase financial and organizational support for the education system to tackle problems of access and quality. Other problems also needed addressing:

> India's political and social life is passing through a phase which poses the danger of erosion to long accepted values. The goals of secularism, socialism, democracy and professional ethics are coming under increasing strain.[4]

The new policy was intended to raise education standards and increase access to education. At the same time, it would safeguard the values of secularism, socialism and equality which had been promoted since Independence. To this end, the government would seek financial support from the private sector to complement government funds. The central government also declared that it would accept a wider responsibility to enforce 'the national and integrative character of education, to maintain quality and standards'.[5] The states, however, retained a significant role, particularly in relation to the curriculum. The central government committed itself to financing a portion of development expenditure, and around 10 per cent of primary education is now funded under a centrally sponsored scheme. The key legacies of the 1986 policy were the promotion of privatization and the continued emphasis on secularism and science.[6]

Another consequence of the NPE was that the quality of education in India was increasingly seen as a problem, and several initiatives have been developed since in an attempt to counter this:

- **Operation Blackboard (1987–8)** aimed to improve the human and physical resources available in primary schools.

- **Restructuring and Reorganization of Teacher Education (1987)** created a resource for the continuous upgrading of teachers' knowledge and competence.

- **Minimum Levels of Learning (1991)** laid down levels of achievement at various stages and revised textbooks.

- **National Programme for Nutritional Support to Primary Education (1995)** provided a cooked meal every day for children in Classes 1–5 of all government, government-aided and local body schools. In some cases grain was distributed on a monthly basis, subject to a minimum attendance.

- **District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) (1993)** emphasized decentralized planning and management, improved teaching and learning materials, and school effectiveness.

- **Movement to Educate All (2000)** aimed to achieve universal primary education by 2010 through micro-planning and school-mapping exercises, bridging gender and social gaps.

- **Fundamental Right (2001)** involved the provision of free and compulsory education, declared to be a basic right for children aged between 6 and 14 years.

Other schemes specifically targeted at marginalized groups, such as disabled children, and special incentives targeting the parents within scheduled castes and scheduled tribes have also been introduced.

In 1992, when education policy was re-examined, the NPE was found to be a sound way forward for India's education system, although some targets were recast and some re-formulations were undertaken in relation to adult and elementary education.[7] The new emphasis was on the expansion of secondary education, while the focus on education for minorities and women continued.

The development of non-formal education

Despite Nehru's visions of universal education, and the intentions of the Kothari Commission to provide all young children with free and compulsory schooling, a significant proportion of India's young population remained uneducated by the 1970s. To address this problem, the Centrally Sponsored Scheme of Non Formal Education was set up to educate school dropouts, working children and children from areas without schools. It started on a pilot basis in 1979 and expanded over the next few years to cover ten educationally backward states.[8] In the 1980s, 75 per cent of those children not enrolled in school resided in these states.

The 1986 National Policy on Education built upon this scheme and recognized that a large and systematic programme of non-formal education was required to ensure access to elementary education. The NPE developed the system of non-formal education, and expanded it to urban slums and other areas beyond the initial ten states. It also revised the system, involved voluntary organizations and offered training to local men and women to become instructors. For instance, the Non-formal Adult Education for Women based in Lucknow (UP) opened 300 centres in rural areas with financial support from UNESCO. As a result of many such local programmes, literacy rates improved significantly between 1981 and 1991: male literacy increased from 56.5 per cent to 64.2 per cent while female literacy increased from 29.9 per cent to 39.2 per cent.[9]

Current challenges and proposals for reform

Primary and secondary education: access, quality and literacy

Despite efforts to incorporate all sections of the population into the Indian education system, through mechanisms such as positive discrimination and non-formal education, large numbers of young people are still without schooling. Although enrolment in primary education has increased, it is estimated that at least 35 million, and possibly as many as 60 million, children aged 6–14 years are not in school. Severe gender, regional, and caste disparities also exist. The main problems are the high drop-out rate, especially after Class 10, low levels of learning and achievement, inadequate school infrastructure, poorly functioning schools, high teacher absenteeism, the large number of teacher vacancies, poor quality of education and inadequate funds. Other groups of children 'at risk', such as orphans, child-labourers, street children and victims of riots and natural disasters, do not necessarily have access to schools.[10]

Furthermore, there is no common school system; instead children are channelled into private, government-aided and government schools on the basis of ability to pay and social class. At the top end are English-language schools affiliated to the upscale CBSE (Central Board of Secondary Education), CISCE (Council for the Indian Schools Certificates Examination) and IB (International Baccalaureate) examination boards, offering globally recognized syllabuses and curricula. Those who cannot afford private schooling attend English-language government-aided schools, affiliated to state-level examination boards. And on the bottom rung are poorly managed government or municipal schools, which cater for the children of the poor majority. Therefore, while education for all is safeguarded by the Constitution, and a majority of people can now access educational resources, the quality of the education that young people in Indian receive varies widely according to their means and background,

which is a worrying and problematic trend.

In India's 600,000 villages and multiplying urban slum habitats, 'free and compulsory education' is in fact basic literacy instruction dispensed by barely qualified 'para teachers'.[11]

The thrust on elementary education over the last two decades and the growing aspirations of poor communities resulting from their participation in a political democracy have already led to a situation where most children at age six are enrolling in schools/learning centres and residential bridge courses. However, the poor quality of these schools and their rudimentary physical and human infrastructure often lead to children dropping out of the school system without learning or continuing in it with limited learning. An emphasis on food, livelihood and health guarantees is therefore simultaneously required to level out the initial disadvantages of the poor in the educational sphere stemming from malnourishment, poverty, and health-related debility.

The present Indian government, the United Progressive Alliance, appears to be committed to confronting these challenges, as reflected in their Common Minimum Programme (see below). The introduction of a 2 per cent education cess (surcharge) on tax, a stress on employment guarantees and the establishment of a National Rural Health Mission are thus welcome developments in this respect.

India's aim of providing basic education for all stems from the empowering and redistributive impact of education. Until recently, literacy, and the related issue of access to schooling, have taken precedence over curricular content. J. Dreze and A. Sen argue:

> Literacy is an essential tool for self-defence in a society where social interactions include the written media. An illiterate person is significantly less equipped to defend herself in court, to obtain a bank loan, to enforce inheritance rights, to take advantage of new technology, to compete for secure employment, to get onto the right bus, to take part in political activity – in short, to participate successfully in the modern economy and society.[12]

Dreze and Sen argue that the 1991 census indicated that about half of the adult population were unable to read or write.[13] Unsurprisingly, literacy rates vary widely between states, and between genders. The northern Hindi-belt states, whose economic performance has been worse than that of western and southern states, have lower literacy rates. Female literacy varies from around 34 per cent in Bihar to 88 per cent in Kerala; male literacy varies between 60 per cent in Bihar and 94 per cent in Kerala. Rajasthan suffers the widest gender difference: female literacy stands at 44 per cent; male at 77 per cent. One of the main aims of education policy in the 1990s was to accelerate the progress of literacy and school attendance and to create an equitable system for girls,[14] as had been planned by the Kothari Commission in 1964.[15]

In recent years, however, attention has shifted away from the provision of basic literacy skills and

towards debates surrounding the content of school curricula. These debates have been particularly concerned with the traditionally secular emphasis within education, which has become vulnerable since the successes of avowedly Hindu political parties.

Curricula content

The BJP, which dominated coalition governments from 1998 until 2004, initially came to power with an agenda heavily influenced by Hindutva, including the introduction of a uniform civil code under Hindu law and the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya.[16] Since a significant proportion of the BJP's electoral constituency comes from right-wing Hindu organizations, such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), it was expected that the government would further the rather chauvinist aspirations of these groups. However, in most policy fields it took a moderate stance, since it needed to maintain the support of its coalition partners, many of which were regional and secular in nature.

But the reverse occurred in the field of education. The 1999 election manifesto of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) included a section entitled 'Education for all', which appeared in harmony with the reforms implemented under Rajiv Gandhi. The preamble stated that 'State support for education has been wholly inadequate. Quality education is fast becoming the preserve of the social and economic elite of the country.'

When the NDA came to power in 1999, the BJP kept control of the two most senior positions in the Ministry of Human Resource Development, which included education policy. Two party hardliners, Murli Manohar Joshi and Uma Bharti, took the positions of Union Minister and Minister of State respectively. The former oversaw the expansion of the network of RSS schools and the appointment of RSS members or sympathizers to top national education bodies.

In 2000/01, the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT)[17] issued a National Curriculum Framework for school education under the slogan of 'Indianize, nationalize and spiritualize'.[18] The framework called for the purging of all foreign elements from the curriculum in state schools. These included the British legacy as well as aspects of Indian culture which were seen as having been introduced by the Mogul invaders.

The new policy involved a massive textbook revision. The revisions were contested by a petition to the Supreme Court brought by three activists who argued that the NCERT had not followed the correct procedures of consultation with the states and that it had tried to introduce religious teaching, which is forbidden by the Constitution. However, the Supreme Court rejected this petition.[19] The new history and social science textbooks were accused of promoting an anti-minority outlook through flaws and omissions.[20] The BJP argued that it was correcting formerly one-sided interpretations of history. Sixteen pages in three history textbooks in years 6, 7 and 11 were removed. These included a paragraph suggesting that there was no archaeological evidence of settlements in and around Ayodhya around 2000 BC. In an interview Murli Manohar Joshi explained that the changes were made following complaints from Jains, Sikhs, Jats and others who felt aggrieved by the events depicted in the old textbooks:

> We examined them and the NCERT made a decision to delete them. (…) Certain authors of history have tried to distort history. They have given it a purely leftist colour. They say that India had no history of its own because they are guided by Marx. They teach the history of a nation that was mainly defeated and conquered by foreign powers. It's a travesty of facts and an attempt to kill the morale of a nation.[21]

Aside from accusing India's historians of an underhand communist agenda, Joshi also denied that the RSS had been involved in the process,[22] arguing that, in science books, discoveries were falsely credited to the Western world: 'Was the invention of computers possible without the invention of the Indian binary system, zero and one?'[23]

The changes were an attempt to increase pride in being Indian, but concerns were raised that Indian culture was presented as Hindu culture, ignoring India's pluralistic roots and the contributions of Muslim and other minorities. This was a reversal of the Nehruvian view of the roots of India's education system. The Human Resource Development Minister responded to the widespread criticism from the historical profession by calling the criticism 'intellectual terrorism unleashed by the left … more dangerous than cross border terrorism'.[24]

The press described the moves as the 'saffronization' of education, and it became a national issue in 2001 when non-BJP parties within the NDA said that even if the Human Resource Development Ministry insisted on the new curriculum, they would not accept the changes in the states they ruled. There were two main criticisms of the new education policy: first, that they were directed by the communal agenda of the Sangh Parivar and were contrary to the principles enshrined in the Constitution; and, second, that education was the responsibility of the states and changes could not be centrally imposed.

In Delhi, the Congress chief minister, Sheila Dikshit, said she had no problems with the old textbooks and would happily have reprinted them. However the NCERT refused permission and insisted that the new textbooks with the historical revisions be used. So, instead, the Delhi state government created its own books.[25]

Aside from what was happening in state schools, the RSS started to expand its influence in education and health. The first RSS-backed school had been established in 1952 by some RSS members whose aim was to contribute to 'nation-building' through education. There are now more than 50 state and regional committees affiliated to Vidya Bharati, the largest voluntary association in the country.[26] These coordinate around 13,000 institutions with 74,000

teachers and 1.7 million students.[27] The expansion of RSS schools was a major pillar in this strategy, essentially circumventing the traditional separation of education and religion. This expansion has been funded in various ways, including through charities operating in the West. According to a recent report published by Awaaz, a London-based secular network, almost a quarter of Sewa International earthquake funds raised from the UK to help Gujarat were used to build RSS schools.[28]

RSS teaching is centred on knowledge of culture or Sanskrit Gyan. The RSS, however, also sponsored an agenda paper on education that the central government tried to present before the Conference of State Education Ministers in October 1998, suggesting that these and similar texts could in the future be made compulsory for all schools.

RSS schools teach a Hindu-centric world view, which works both to highlight the difference between Hindus and non-Hindus and at the same time to emphasize the role of Hinduism as the source of all human wisdom. The proposed legislation to legalize RSS schools, enabling them to receive state funding, would be a significant policy change for a country so traditionally committed to the provision of secular education. As Nalini Taneja observes:

> Through a directive that makes all schools running for 10 years automatically entitled to affiliation and recognition, the BJP govt. has ensured large transfers of state funds to RSS schools in the states of BJP govt., especially if it can be easily shown that govt. schools are not functioning well.[29]

While there is doubt about the impact of the 'saffronization' of the education system,[30] nonetheless it was this issue that the UPA government tackled first. Only a few weeks after the elections, on 12 June 2004, the government ordered a panel of historians to be constituted to advise on the issues of communalization and inadequacies of the history textbooks of the NCERT. The three history professors, S. Settar, J.S. Grewal and Barun De, submitted a report which concluded that 'the textbooks prepared since 2000 are so full of errors and sub-standard that we find it impossible to recommend their continuation'.[31] The panel acknowledged that though there are different interpretations with regard to historical facts, at school level history teaching should reflect a consensus. The Executive Committee of the NCERT subsequently issued a note to all schools, explaining that the report had been accepted, but that because the academic session 2004/05 was too advanced the books would not be withdrawn until the 2005/06 academic year. The note also gave some advice on how to cope with flaws in the history books, detailing errors and page numbers and promising to reprint and make available the old textbooks.[32] It also emphasized that history was not to be used for political purposes:

> The past has a value of its own and distinctive fact of its own, not to be twisted for present purposes, either of the state or regional predilections of that

element of the past as *it was*, distinct from the past as *we would like it to be today*.[33]

The Minister of Human Resource Development made a statement in parliament on 20 July 2004, promising to restore the earlier books in the next academic session. However the exercise has flagged up the flaws in the old textbooks, which were seen as too dry, and lacking narrative and emotion. While the government will try to address this in the medium term, in the short term it will focus on restoring pedagogy 'which helps raise questions and prevents indoctrination'.[34] The curricula changes introduced by recent BJP-led governments indicated a shift from the Nehruvian tenet of secular education and diverted attention from more deep-seated structural problems in India's education system, such as the need for universal access to quality education. But for non-BJP parties, the development of a Hindu-centric education system presents a major political concern and, as is inevitable in a representative democracy, political issues take precedence over more substantive issues. The challenge for the present government will be to move past this political obstacle and push through more comprehensive reforms, rather than simply undoing the policies of its predecessor.

Funding and higher education

Under the Constitution, responsibility for education is shared between central and state governments. The central government sets policy, stimulates innovation and plans frameworks. The state governments are responsible for running the education system on the ground. This has exacerbated problems since states have differing resources to allocate to education. It is the inadequacy of resources that has recently become the most pressing and central issue. Allocation is another issue. When resources are scarce, what are the state's priorities? In general southern, richer states do better than the poorer, northern ones.[35] According to *India Together* reporter Summiya Yasmeen:

> The Central and state governments are hard put to mobilise 4 per cent of GDP for education. (...) With 59 million children out-of-school and another 90 million in school learning very little, the common school system is not a utopian ideal dug out from the archives of the Kothari Commission, but an imperative that will decide India's place in the comity of nations.[36]

The standard of educational facilities, and the quality of education, are generally higher in primary and secondary schools in richer states than poorer ones, such as Bihar and Jharkhand. In higher education, differing availability has itself contributed to the economic differences. The IT-based success of southern states owes much to their higher number of engineering colleges, and consequent greater pool of graduates.

The number of engineering colleges demonstrates incredible diversity, and has helped contribute to the concentration of high-technology industry in southern

India. But the disparity between these states and northern states is dramatic; Bihar, for instance, has less than one engineering college for every 10 million people in the state; Tamil Nadu has almost four colleges for every million people.[38] The growth of the IT and BPO (Business Process Outsourcing) industries and the concomitant spread of computer use and application in the private sector has had a significant impact on the expansion of the highly skilled labour market, and thus on higher education. In fact, private-sector education is a growing field in itself, estimated to make up nearly 2 per cent of GDP. Unfortunately, this top-quality education is restricted not only geographically to those areas where the IT industries are based (as we have already seen), but also according to ability to pay, as the private-sector educational institutions charge prohibitive fees.

Negotiating the need to share the burden of funding higher education between the public and private sectors has been a continual problem for the Indian government. For example, the 1986 reforms reinforced the independent status of higher education institutions, but led to a gradual decline in government expenditure in this area. The government faced a serious resource crunch and decided to reduce the subsidization of higher education by around 50 per cent. Two committees were set up to mobilize additional resources for universities and technical education institutions. Universities were encouraged to raise fees and to turn to the private sector for additional funding.[39] Consequently, the balance between the public and private sectors becomes almost synonymous with a balance between excellence and access. While it is important for India to produce top-quality graduates, it is equally important that the opportunity to gain a degree is not restricted to privileged communities.

The University Grants Commission (UGC) holds a large measure of responsibility for negotiating this excellence/equity dilemma. It does not simply provide grants to universities and colleges, it also maintains, and tries to raise, academic standards in higher education, frames policies to this end and advises the central and state governments on the subject of expanding and improving higher education. However, the proportion of the education budget allocated to higher education has gradually decreased from 24 per cent in the 1970s to around 9 per cent today. This is posing a problem as Indian universities and colleges are of varying quality. Widening access is also an issue – only 6 per cent of those aged between 18 and 23 enter tertiary education.[40] Dilip Thakore asserts in *India Together*:

> With the annual outflow of students fleeing India's second rate tertiary education institutions showing no signs of abating and a growing number of foreign universities clamouring to establish campuses in India even as government budgetary allocations for higher education are shrinking rapidly, UGC top brass have no option but to focus on their mandate to raise teaching and learning standards in academia and also to teach business

illiterate college and university managements to gradually become financially independent.[41]

In the light of these recent trends and difficulties, the NDA manifesto pledged to ensure the independence of higher education institutions, but in fact control was centralized in the past few years. The party's proposals represented a tip in the balance away from public funding towards the private sector, but at the same time displayed a commitment to controlling the upper echelons of higher education institutions by appointing party sympathizers (including RSS members) to the top posts. In addition, pro-Hindutva policies were to have a notable impact on universities, colleges and other academic bodies, which critics argue amounted to a centralization of control over the education system.[42]

Critics claimed that vice chancellors of various universities were appointed on the sole criterion of their sympathy with the new policies:

> In Delhi University, while the BJP was holding the State Government, all democratic norms were flouted and the functioning and role of the statutory bodies such as the Academic Council completely undermined. Governing Bodies of Delhi Administration and other colleges were filled with known sympathisers of no academic achievements or interest in education with a view to ensuring appointment of affiliated persons as Principals for the colleges. Appointments to teaching posts were similarly ensured through this process. These RSS filled Governing bodies were openly used for undermining the autonomy of the University, and giving support to corruption and goondaism [hooliganism] on the campus. In flouting and withdrawing many aspects of the agreement arrived at with the teachers last year, the BJP government is devaluing education itself.[43]

The personnel changes were not confined to universities.[44] New appointees to the Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR) supported the VHP campaign on Ayodhya, while RSS supporters or sympathizers have been appointed to the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies in Simla, the Indian Institute of Mass Communication and the All India Council for Technical Education. Moreover, the National Museum galleries have been renamed and the choice of items displayed reflects the Sangh Parivar's view of Indian history.

As mentioned above, the authority and autonomy of the University Grants Commission was undermined with regard to teachers' salaries, promotion and working conditions. The UGC was being used to commercialize education and to cut state funding. Personnel at the National Institute of Planning (NIEPA) and the NCERT were also changed.

The BJP's policies in this area have extended beyond educational institutions alone, and have had a considerable impact on academia as a whole.[45] These events have led to concern within academia. Sharad Pawar, leader of the Nationalist Congress Party,

observed: 'Research scholars should not tarnish the image of inspiring personalities.'[46]

The greatest success of the BJP's education policy has been neither the introduction of new textbooks nor the emergence of RSS activists at the helm of national education institutions. It is that the discriminatory discourse appears to have been accepted by the public, many of whom grew up with Nehru's secular ideals of constructing an inclusive Indian national identity. On top of the existing problems in the education system, the BJP added a further concern – that through education India's inclusive identity would be directly eroded.

Recent statistics on the expansion of tertiary-sector education highlight the scale of the problem faced by the new government for creating and implementing policy in this area. The number of colleges and universities across the country has risen from 565 and 25 in 1953 to 15,600 and 311 respectively in 2004. Simultaneously the number of students in higher education has risen from 230,000 to 9.28 million and the number of staff from 15,000 to 462,000. India produces over 2.5 million university graduates per year.[47]

The commission for the Tenth Plan (2002–7) has set itself the target of identifying and designating 25 universities 'with potential for excellence' across the country. These institutions will be 'funded at a higher level to enable them to attain excellence in teaching and research', according to the UGC concept paper.[48] Along with a few hundred colleges, they will be given full academic freedom to experiment with the curriculum, introduce innovations in teaching, conduct their own examinations and award joint degrees with affiliating universities.[49] In addition, quality control issues resulted in the creation of the National Assessment and Accreditation Council of India (NAAC) in 1994 with the objective of assessing and grading institutions of Higher Education on a scale from 1 to 5.

These proposals appear to reflect the need to invest in higher education to attain the high quality now demanded by the growing economy. The role of the NAAC is particularly important for achieving increased accountability for publicly funded institutions. Clearly, the current government understands the need for university subsidies, but it is not yet certain whether these subsidies will be directed so as to widen access to those communities traditionally excluded from tertiary education.

Conclusion

The educational changes introduced by the BJP did not play a major role in the May 2004 general election. While access to education was an issue in some rural areas, roads, power, water and jobs were more important. The NDA manifesto on education had changed in emphasis, moving towards a more 'communal' and nationalistic stand. Three points stand out:

• The focus on Indian culture, heritage, and ethical values in syllabuses will be strengthened.

• The downgrading of Bharatiya languages in school and college education will be checked. Teaching in the mother tongue will be encouraged.

• Efforts will be intensified for the propagation of Sanskrit.

While the Congress-dominated United Progressive Alliance government remains in power, these policies will not be implemented. But education will remain a key issue in Indian politics. The government will have to deal with the inherent problems in the education system and, for its own long-term political survival, it will need to reverse the changes introduced by the NDA.

As mentioned above, in its Common Minimum Programme, announced on 28 May 2004, the government pledged to raise public spending on education to at least 6 per cent of GDP, impose a cess on all central taxes to 'universalize access to quality basic education' and reverse the creeping communalization of school syllabuses of the past five years. Both the budget and the Independence Day address stressed the importance of education as a key to tackling poverty, one of the main causes of which is illiteracy. The president, Abdul Kalam, has called for expenditure on education to be raised by 2–3 per cent of GDP.

The government has already experienced a number of criticisms from its parliamentary opponents. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) criticized the UPA's moves on textbook reform for 'falling short of what the new government has incorporated in the Common Minimum Programme in its section on education'.[50] It also looks as if relations between the central and state governments will remain strained. In August 2004 the BBC reported that ministers from five BJP-run states walked out of a meeting called by the government to devise a new national education policy.[51]

Moves to desecularize Indian education under the previous government were, in part, an attempt to strengthen the BJP's future voter-base. But they also stemmed from a widespread recognition that India's education system fails large numbers of its young people, either because education is not available or because it does not provide students with relevant skills. The Common Minimum Programme represents a welcome attempt to reassert the traditional vision of education in India, concentrating on access, quality and secularism. But while these aims have remained largely unchanged since Nehru's era, it remains to be seen whether the current government can become the first administration to confront and manage the balance between excellence and equity.

Endnotes

[1] For a detailed analysis of the Kothari Commission, see R.N. Sharma, *Indian Education at the Cross Road* (Delhi: Shubhi, 2002).

[2] By which all children learn Hindi, their state language and English.

[3] P.D. Shukla, *The New Education Policy* (Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Ltd., 1988) p. 2.

[4] Ibid., p. 3.

[5] Ibid., p. 6.

[6] For more details on the NEP and the problems of Indian education in the 1980s and 1990s, see N. Jayapalan, *Problems of Indian Education* (Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2001).

[7] A. Ram and K.D. Sharma, *National Policy on Education: An Overview* (Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 2005), p. 1.

[8] Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal.

[9] *http://www.indianchild.com/education_society_india.htm* (accessed 15.09.04).

[10] Nidhi Singal, *Focus on Policy: India 2002*, *http://www.eenet.org.uk/newsletters/news6/page10.shtml*.

[11] *http://www.indiatogether.org/2004/jul/edu-kothari.htm* (accessed 15.09.04).

[12] J. Dreze and A. Sen, 'Basic Education as a Political Issue', in B.G. Tilak (ed.), *Education, Society and Development*: *National and International Perspectives* (New Delhi: APH, 2003), p. 3.

[13] J. Dreze and A. Sen, *Indian Development: Selected Regional Perspectives* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[14] Ibid.

[15] '… education itself is tending to increase social segregation and to perpetuate and widen class distinctions. At the primary stage, the free schools to which masses send their children are maintained by government and local authorities and are generally of poor quality. Some of the private schools are, on the whole, definitely better, but since many of them charge high fees they are availed of only by the middle and higher classes. At the secondary stage, a large proportion of the good schools are private but many of them also charge high fees which are normally beyond the means of any but the top ten percent of people, though some of the middle class parents make great sacrifices to send their children to them. There is this segregation in education itself – the minority of private fee-charging, better schools meeting the need of the upper classes and the vast bulk of free, publicly maintained, but poor schools being utilised by the rest. What is worse, this segregation is increasing and tending to widen the gulf between the classes and the masses.' *http://www.indiatogether.org/2004/jul/edu-kothari.htm*.

[16] In 1992, Hindu extremists under the leadership of the BJP and other members of the Sangh Parivar demolished the Babri Masjid, a 15th-century mosque in Ayodhya. They claimed the mosque had been built over an earlier temple commemorating the birthplace of the Hindu god Ram.

[17] The NCERT, though an autonomous body, draws up the national curriculum framework and publishes textbooks which are used as models by most state governments.

[18] This attempt to 'Indianize' at the university level includes introducing courses such as Vedic rituals and Vedic astrology. Many of the country's scientists and social scientists repudiate the latter as spurious science, and not particularly Indian. An appeal against the course is currently pending in the Supreme Court.

[19] Judgment by Justice M.B. Shah, D.M. Dharmadhikari and H.K. Sema in Writ Petition (Civil) No. 98 of 2002, Ms Aruna Roy and others vs. Union of India and others.

[20] *Indian Express*, 6 October 2002.

[21] Interview with M.M. Joshi in Sharma (2002), p. 215–18. (See note 1 above.)

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid., p. 208.

[24] *Indian Express*, 20 December 2001.

[25] *Outlook*, 18 August 2003.

[26] For a more detailed description of the RSS-sponsored Vidya Bharati network, see Sharma (2002).

[27] Vidya Bharati institutions function under a variety of names including Shishu Vatika, Shishu Mandir, Vidya Mandir, Sarasvati Vidyalaya, etc.

[28] See *In Bad Faith? British Charity and Hindu Extremism* (2004)(London: Awaaz – South Asia Watch) for a detailed analysis of how the RSS gets international funds to support its activities, including education. *www.awaazsaw.org/ibf/*.

[29] Nalini Taneja, *http://www.cpiml.org/liberation/year_2001/september/saffronimp.htm*.

[30] Most of the 35 states and Union Territories have their own Boards of Examinations and the textbooks prescribed by these boards vary from state to state.

[31] Report of the Panel of Historians, MHRD, June 2004, *www.ncert.nic.in* (accessed 08.09.04).

[32] Learning History without Burden, A Note to School Teachers, *www.ncert.nic.in* (accessed 08.09.04).

[33] Ibid. Italics in original.

[34] Ibid.

[35] For a detailed analysis on the dilemmas of resource allocation and planning see J.V. Raghavan, 'Educational Planning in India', in Tilak (ed.) (2003), pp. 49–62. (See note 12 above.)

36 *http://www.indiatogether.org/2004/jul/edu-kothari.htm* (accessed 15.09.04).

37 *http://india_resource.tripod.com/higher-education.html* (accessed 15.09.04).

38 Ibid.

39 *Reforms and Innovations in Higher Education* (Delhi: Association of Indian Universities, 2001), pp. 138–9.

40 *http://www.indiatogether.org/2004/may/edu-ugc.htm* (accessed 15.09.04).

41 Ibid.

42 Pratap Bhanu Mehta, *The Hindu*, 8 January 2004, p. 10.

43 Nalini Taneja, *http://www.cpiml.org/liberation/year_2001/september/saffronimp.htm*.

44 Ibid. for more details on personnel changes.

45 For example, Sangh Parivar members have intimidated authors and publishers of books critical of Hinduism or Hindutva. A civil injunction was laid against a historian, D.N. Jha, who wrote a book on beef-eating in ancient India, while the ICHR has withdrawn from publication two commissioned volumes on the freedom struggle, which included documents showing the RSS and Hindu Mahasabha collaboration with the British. In January 2004 Oxford University Press withdrew a book in India by James Laine from the University of Minnesota entitled *Shivaji: The Hindu King in Islamic India*, following violent protest by far-right groups upset by anecdotes about Shivaji's personal life. He is admired for his stand against the Mogul empire and is considered a national hero. The research centre in Pune, BORI, where the book was researched was also vandalized.

46 Ibid.

47 *http://www.indiatogether.org/2004/may/edu-ugc.htm* (accessed 15.09.04).

48 Arun Nigavekar (2002), *Tenth Five-Year Plan in Higher Education*.

49 *http://www.indiatogether.org/2004/may/edu-ugc.htm* (accessed 15.09.04).

50 Nalini Taneja, 'On History Textbook Review', *http://pd.cpim.org/2004/0620/06202004_nalini.htm* (accessed 17.07.04).

51 The ministers (from Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Rajasthan, Jharkhand and Goa) objected to a statement by the federal education minister, Arjun Singh, that distortions should be removed from school textbooks. This followed claims by the governing Congress-led coalition that the BJP had attempted to introduce a Hondu nationalist agenda through the books. The BJP monisters also said they would not implement a changed syllabu in their states. *www.bbc.co.uk* (accessed 11.08.04).

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