

Modernizing Indian education

Kothari Commission revisited



The Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE), headed by Kapil Sibal, human resource and development minister, recently approved several reforms to modernize the Indian education system. Though a welcome step, according to many, the reforms do not reflect a comprehensive approach towards education.

Interestingly, it was the Education Commission under DS Kothari in 1964 that had set the wheels in motion, and most of the current changes are based on the Kothari Commission report. However, most educationists are of the opinion that if the government wants to adopt the Kothari Commission recommendations, they should be adopted in totality and not bits and pieces. The current reforms, they feel, are creating a further divide instead of projecting the vision of the commission.

As Janaki Rajan, former director SCERT and faculty, education department, Jamia Millia Islamia University, says, "The Kothari Commission made the recommendations in keeping with a broader vision. But the reforms that have been introduced by the present ministry are partial in nature, lacking a bold vision." Echoing Rajan's view, Madhav Chavan, director of educational NGO Pratham, adds, "The ideas seem to be floating. As to how the government is going to implement these ideas vis-à-vis the Indian education system, has not been clearly documented."

As JP Naik in his book, 'The Education Commission and After', explains, the commission aimed to create a democratic, secular and egalitarian society, which would be based on science and spiritual values and wherein the evils of poverty, ignorance and ill health would be eliminated through a humane use of scientific and technical knowledge. So the recommendations were components of a larger social change.



Citing the example of the new grading system in CBSE schools from the current year and optional class X exams from next year, Rajan points out that Kothari Commission, too, had talked about reducing the importance of external exams, but for every single school student. "In the present case, the class X board exam will be optional only for a select group. When a reform benefits only a small section of society it cannot be termed as transformation," she adds. CK Saluja, lecturer, department of education, Delhi University, says that Kothari Commission was the first to talk about a common school system in India to avoid segregation and different standards of teaching. It was with this in mind that the grading system and the idea of laying less emphasis on exam had been proposed."

As Saluja adds, instead of working towards a common school system, we have further divided schools into Pratibha Vikas Vidyalayas, Kendriya Vidyalayas, government schools, public schools, international schools, and so on. Despite its limitations, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009, which ensures free and compulsory education to children aged 6-14 years, is being considered as the government's biggest achievement. However, the initial euphoria has met with some criticism. The exclusion of children - before six and beyond 14 -has generated controversy. Educationists feel that pre-primary education lays the foundation of a child.

Moreover, the Act remains silent on the definition of 'school.' According to Rajan, as far as common knowledge goes, "a school comprises elements like teachers, buildings, toilets and playground." In 2001, the government rolled out Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), a flagship programme, for achievement of universalisation of elementary education (UEE) within a specified time-frame. Today, SSA is being implemented in partnership with state governments across the country. It aims to address the needs of 192 million children in 1.1 million habitations. Though the government - in its recent budget - has allocated an amount of Rs 13,100 crore to implement the scheme, Chavan feels, "We have been allocating money without estimating how much should be spent per-child . There is a need to put an average per-child cost, both at the state and Union level."

The sixth pay commission has given a boost to the basic salaries of teachers and college lecturers. Kothari Commission too had placed emphasis on pay scales of teachers. It mentioned that for quality and committed teachers it was important to pay attention to their salary, as well as bridge the gap between salaries of primary, secondary, college and university teachers. But the sixth pay commission has ignored that aspect. Sarvesh Naidu, director, Pathways International School, sums up, "We have been downplaying the role of primary school teachers, when they deserve no less than the others in the profession." (TNN 14 September 2009).