



## The Essence of Basic Education

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### Background

Education is considered to be preparation for life in a manner that the growing learner is assimilated in the society but also has the potential, desire and capability to transform it. Our education today is not able to prevent children from moving away from their roots. They are aspiring for professions that do not require physical effort, entrepreneurial risk, a social responsibility and the need for working with peers in collaboration. They are increasingly alone, alienated, and think and undertake experiences, attitude and feelings mechanically. We all feel the force of overemphasis on cognitive aspects and mechanical rationality. Rationality is valuable but not in absolute and by itself. It has to be tempered by ethics and sensitivity. The program of the school also does not include building up a sense of responsibility in the child; responsibility about the school, about friends and about ones own life. People choose to overlean towards materialistic consumerism and leisure rather than enjoying work and ordinary choice of living. It is argued that basic education has a statement to make on all of these and is a way of addressing some of these issues.

### Why education and why the point of basic education

We must in considering this remember that it is not correct to take an educational idea out of its political, social and historical context. It is not enough to say that education is influenced by all these but rather it is driven by these. The purposes, the support and everything else emerges from the understanding the proponents have of these. They are the ideological underpinnings or the bed rock on which the conceptualisation and implementation of education occurs. There is a lot written about the relevance of basic education as well as debates on its actual purpose. It is an idea that has been interpreted in many ways and in many contexts. It has also been examined in terms of whether it is a set of new principles or a combination of old known ones. In this discussion leading to the basic education formulation, the historical contexts of

Indian society and responding to the changes and development outside as well as inside is important to examine. For example, it can be argued that rather than any generous purpose of democratising, the expansion of economic interests necessitated the expansion of educational processes to many more. It can be not denied however, that the expansion of education also implied the acceptance that it is not only a certain set of people who could learn, read and write and be knowledgeable. As the acceptance of a larger set of people to be educated grew so did the discussion on who would educate them, what would the education comprise of, what would be the structure where education would be imparted, what would be the method by which it would be imparted etc. These questions of purpose and objectives, of its governance, control and decision making, its financing and the sources and nature of it, the idea of the teacher and her relationship to the children and the community all formed a part of the points of deliberation and contest. They took the scope of the discourse outside the domain of those trying to restrict it to functional economic purposes.

This struggle around the purpose and implication to spread education continues and also affects the way basic education is looked at. The questions are a part of the discourse that is trying to describe the education system for the country and perhaps even wider. In the Indian context, around and prior to independence the manner in which the government defined education and its purpose and the mechanism it wanted to set up in order to make its reach wider, did not have the same tone as those who were a part of the struggle would have liked. The fact that the system today after over 65 years of independence largely reflects the same principles and the same attitudes poses awkward questions for us.

### Principles of Basic education and the contemporary context

When we look at some of the points of debate we can recognise that the essence of basic education

principle challenge the education system of today. These need to be probed deeper and re-articulated in today's context. This challenge and its implications may translate to fundamentally different specifics from what were articulated at that time. The confusion about the purpose, implication and relevance also arises from the way basic education was implemented and allowed an interpretation that reduced its potent form. The diluted discourse around basic education does miss out on some of the key socio-political as well as economic implications and does not focus the difference in the very purpose of education. The many convenient interpretations of basic educational discourse may as much be a product of deliberate acts of co-option or misunderstanding as they perhaps may be due to inability to shift the context of the articulation to today. It must be acknowledged that this article is also one more interpretation of the idea. The opponents and proponents both may find that this has missed some points that would in their view critically alter the importance, relevance and intention of basic education and this analysis.

A detailed exposition of this concern would require a lot more discussion and the idea here is to present the basic picture of this analysis. We would therefore look at only some of these aspects and share some directions that would be useful to think about. The logical framework would only be hinted at. As an example, one of the points to think about is the inherent principle, self-governance and self-rule for the community. The need for the ideas and vision of the community to build a path itself and hence direct the education of its young is not the same as an Indian Central or a State Government doing that. We need to examine the purpose of education as an enterprise to enable the young to be helpful to the community and be assimilated in it and accommodate to it and simultaneously also make it accommodate to the new ideas learnt. This implies at the core the making of community transformation agents while being immersed in it. Again the notion of community being extended to the idea of (national identity) nation and then to the globe (global citizens) has a very different elaboration from the centrality of closer community and direct human relationships. The lament of some of the proponents of basic education, that modern education is merely literacy and numeracy and hence destructive to the sense of empathy and encouraging exploitation is poignant. We have seen modern education do that. It has alienated people from their communities, disrupted

them without any significant increase in empathy and capability to transform the lives of the people in the community. It has purged communities to make larger sets. We are not arguing whether that is good or bad but just pointing out the change. It can also be argued however, that modern education was not intended to do that or even it is also opposed to it. It is only the way economy and hence society has changed that has led to this.

### **The control of and providing direction to education**

In order to put in perspective the contemporary context of principles emerging from basic education and construct the discourse around it, let us look at some of the key points of the education system today. The education system today is funded and governed by the government. Even though there are many private schools now and their numbers are growing but they are still far less than the number of government schools. And the number of community managed schools are continuously decreasing, squeezed as they are from both sides - government take-over and private schools that are managed by one or a few individuals. There is also a lot of mobilisation around the need to improve the public education system. There is talk around the need to have common schools at least till the students are in the age group where they must all be in school getting education. It is now seriously being considered that compulsory universal education under a justiciable commitment should be available up to class X to all learners. The RtE has already made it mandatory that all children must be in school and stay there at least for 8 years. So the act of right to free and compulsory education requires that each child stay in school and be educated through mechanism that are aligned to the purposes and the manner decided by the State educational bureaucracy in some way. Even in the discussions around purposes the over-hanging shadow of who controls and funds educational processes is clearly visible.

The curriculum and the text books are all produced by the bodies aligned to the government, be it the State or the Central government. This is thought to be according to the spirit, the understanding and the details of the National Curricular documents. The division of the years of education, the areas of emphasis and focus and other such details are also governed by the government. The recent case in point of Delhi University and some private universities having to withdraw their four year under-graduate programs because they were not according to the national education policy that

recommended the 10+2+3 pattern. The over-riding power of the policy to dictate what the universities and Boards of Education can construct as programs and the constant effort of all State governments and Boards of education to claim that their program is according to the National curriculum Framework document is also illustrative of the same. The desire and need to toe the line and interpretation of the government functionaries is not merely because some of these are funded by the government. It is also to use the apparent legitimacy it provides.

The major investment and expenditure on education is however, still made by the government. This money does come from the people but in the form of taxes, CESS and other surcharges. There is no particular product or activity from whose taxation goes to education. Where the money would be spent and in what manner is also decided by the government. The compensation and salary to be paid to the teachers is also something that is not linked to the community and it has no say in the matter. The nature of the teacher, the materials and methods she would use and how the children would be assessed are all decided by the educational structures of the government.

### **Community participation and its implementability**

There have been various attempts to include the community in the process of schooling including in the appointment and management of the teachers and currently the idea of the school management committee with the parents as members appears to come from the spirit of the inclusion. The results of this attempt have been disappointing. The important issue that worries is of the limited participation of community in deciding and contributing to the educational process. The present role of the community at best has only been of subsidiary labour. It has been to help provide for or construct school buildings, ensure or monitor teacher attendance and act as a shepherd for children to the school. There is no other role and contribution. The aspirations from the school education are towards service sector, white collared jobs and government jobs. There is very little scope in school for preparation to be a part of the existing economy around them. While we must try and ensure that everyone has access to any job opportunity, school education, by ignoring the local community, continuously denigrate a large part of the neighbourhood economic enterprise. Also the non-comprehension of the aspirational goals makes the community incapable of an effective dialogue with the school or with their own children. The

recent documents have attempted to raise this concern and have pointed out the need for a larger role. That however, is not even visible on the horizon. Clearly the absence of the enabling factors and the resultant lack of conviction of all sides make both the scope and the actualisation of even the stated roles difficult.

### **Key curricular principles emerging**

In the light of the above let us reexamine the key curricular principles we extract from the idea of basic education. As we do that, we must remember that the current system attempts to caricature the idea of basic education. These principles are not seen in the form they are stated here but are the back bone of the movement that engaged so many people and got them to initiate a varied set of processes for fulfilling the educational and other related goals. The manner in which these ideas emerged was not uniform and they did not reflect specific commonalities either. However, there was a basic spirit that informed these. That spirit arose from the urge for reconstruction and resistance to what was perceived as imposition. It may not be that it was articulated and reflected fully but it was at the base of the idea of basic education. Let us look at some of the principles:

- a. A process that is based on inclusion of the community, its ideas, concerns and experiences. The manner in which this would be interpreted and the extent to which the ideas of the community would be included or attempted to be replaced is a moot point. Given the role of education as both a preserver of culture, tradition and heritage as well as harbinger of new ideas and progress it is difficult to have one view on this. Many Indian educationists of that period therefore ended up with different viewpoints on this. The debate on who is more educated, the illiterate or the one who has 'merely' read books, has not fully subsided.
- b. A process that is set up in the context of the child and is based on and uses her experience. This is another point that has been brought in to focus by the idea of 'constructivism or constructionism' (For the limited purpose of the point that is being made we would not try to analyse their common and different points). This on one hand brings to focus the scope of the knowledge that we are engaging with but also the question what is knowledge and which knowledge is valid. While the consideration of education as a process of knowing is well

accepted, the centrality of child and community knowledge forces the question what should be engaged with in the formal school system.

In a learning process focused analysis this can be reduced as a caricature to the issue of education as a delivery of knowledge vs. education as a process of creation of knowledge. While this is being a bit harsh, yet often the programs of education do forget the frameworks of knowledge validation and emphasise the need for the children to formulate their own answers. This is often also linked to basic education and respect for local knowledge systems.

- c. Use of the language of the child to educate her and a greater use of her language experience. The context of this particular principle has at its base two critical elements. One arises from the specific socio-political context at that time and even now in some ways and the second is from the feeling about human learning mechanisms. The creation of a respect for self and building a sense of identity and positive attitude to the culture, traditions and modes of thinking of the community that the child comes from, requires the use of local language. It also enables her to bring her own concepts and compare them with the formal abstract concepts of the books. The use of local language is also important as it implies its growth and development and expansion to include newer concepts. It is also a means for mobilisation and sharing among the whole community rather than restricting many who do not have access to the new school language and hence can not absorb new knowledge from those who learn it through exposure and through reading. So use of mother tongue is not merely an innocent pedagogic purpose that it would help the child build her conceptual structures but rather is a deeper statement of giving the language of the children and the community a weight and respect and to bring new ideas and knowledge in to it. Empowering the community to structure its own destiny.
- d. Reaching all children and all members of the community, respecting their work and including elements of that in the school. Ensuring the participation of the community in defining what children should learn, in helping children learn and being responsible for assessing them. The local community can give the children understanding and knowledge about different

artisans' roles. The programs must relate to the needs and experience of the community and be sensitive to their choices as well. This may be contrasted with the effort to evolve a national policy of education and a curricular framework that would be binding for all schools and all teachers. The multiple school level choices and reconstructions of the principles of basic education require a diversity that is not a part of the visualisation of education. And that takes away the spirit of personal engagement, ownership, initiative and creativity not just of the community but most critically of the teachers.

- e. Using integrated experiences that develop ethics and concerns (Heart), concepts, procedures and logical ability (Head) and the ability, stamina and creativity to produce things (Hand). In order to have opportunities for children to engage in some trade, school must be located in a setting where children can participate in such activities. It is, therefore, important for the school to be placed where the community can interact with it. These aspects are more important than mechanical considerations like size of rooms, size of playground, etc.
- f. Development of self-confidence, social commitment in children, discovering and taking responsibility for their role in community and functioning of the school.

From the above principles it would also be important to have local community teachers who can be specially prepared for teaching in the elementary schools, particularly in the primary classes. Much more important than a teaching degree would be local knowledge, competence, empathy and understanding of the culture, traditions and language of the children.

#### **The principles in the current context**

It is clearly not easy to visualise these in the current context of education. There is no way the community can be the driver, the provider and the owner of school education in the current scenario. In the last three decades or more, different kind of mechanisms to involve community have been made and at present the RtE has mandated a School Management Committee (SMC) that has parents of the children studying the school as key members. There have been attempts to involve the community in monitoring teacher attendance, in contributing to the school building and over seeing

and managing its construction and some other ideas including that of making a plan for the development of the school along with the teachers. There have been micro and some slightly larger spread efforts to include the culture, language and knowledge of the community as also make noises about use of the mother tongue and multilingualism. The NCF 2005 has emphasised all this along with development of complete personality including experience of work on trade, respect for manual labour etc. Yet these have been all half hearted attempts keeping the large centralised bureaucratic framework intact. In fact with more rhetoric of decentralisation the control and directions have increased and moved further away from the school. The system functions to provide fake or otherwise evidence of the aspects considered important by the centralised authorities rather than be actually sensitive to the community and the children. The education process, because of non-inclusion of the community and because of the centrally determined programs, is becoming extremely alienating. While it may not be necessarily possible or proper to have a school system where schools are governed by the village community, any attempt to handover governance of the school to the elected representatives has been half-hearted and consequently not worked. This is fundamentally opposed to the ideas that basic education includes. For example, the possibilities of involving the community along with its economics, culture and functioning as integral to governance.

The system of education is governed by a need to be universal and homogenous. It attempts to create an illusion of equity by not recognising diversity. The challenges of largeness, homogeneity and skewed aspirations lead to many distortions including filtering of students and the on ground eschewing of real inclusion and a fair deal to those from deprived and marginalised background and those who are at a learning disadvantage. We are fighting the inclination to believe and assume that those from deprived backgrounds are fundamentally unsuited to learning. Any extra effort made for them is going to be waste. The sense is to put the onus on learning on children and community with the argument that if there is no demand no one would get educated, whatever be the quality of the program. And like 100-150 years ago today we have demand for English and English medium education. It would be unfair and unwise to dismiss this as a mythical demand created by perverted minds. In the midst of continuous centralised placements, centralised assessments and competitive performance; the spirit of basic education cannot become a part of the school program.

### Misconceptions around basic education

The foundational principles and purposes of basic education cannot be aligned with comparing children learning, comparing it across regions and making the focus of elementary and secondary education the gate way to better further education and better opportunity. The purpose of education as per basic education cannot be that of a filter. The viewing of school education as an effective sorting machine has led to many misconceptions about basic education. These confuse the principles and the fundamental objectives that work and education and inclusion of community stand for. For example, it may be taken to mean any of all of the following:

- a. It is for rural children and for poor children. These children need education of this kind as they must learn to work with their hands.
- b. Use of the child's mother tongue means only using the language that is spoken by the immediate family of the child, particularly the primary care-giver.
- c. It must include learning the spinning wheel and similar professions in the curriculum, and must restrict the imbibing of new ideas and new directions. The trades or professions chosen for the school have to be rooted in the ideas prevalent when the idea of Basic Education in India was being developed over 70 years ago.
- d. The school should be supported by the income from the produce of the school itself.
- e. Everything done in the school should be correlated with each other and concepts taught through working with different trades.
- f. Basic Education means preparing children for vocations and is a prelude to vocational education
- g. Basic education is only upto elementary level and its principles cannot be useful for secondary and senior secondary education. It has no implications for higher education.

None of these are correct and some of them are actually contrary to the very spirit of basic education. Some of the others can be said to be just about the form and not the essence of basic education. The reasons for these to emerge as the primary notions for many persons lies in the fact that the ideas of basic education emerged during

the struggle for independence as a means to build and aid resistance and have embedded in them the elements including economic and others that were symbols of some form of resistance. The curriculum and ideals of basic education evolved around the idea of nationalism and national identity of a certain kind. They are imbued with that apart from other things. It is an educational process that has the 'community' in participative control of education in a large way and the government itself needs to have a minimal role. All these had to be substantially diluted as the expanded school system needed to be set up even at places where the community was not ready for it. Given the principles and the reality it is not surprising that in implementation the idea of basic education got considerably distorted.

### **Hierarchy, distance and centralization**

The inherent nature of the centralized system where the trust and agency of the school and the teacher has to be subservient to the observations and views of the inspector who would also conduct an external exam, is not aligned to the spirit of education that has a large element of local visualisation and governance. Systems of education like that emerging in the pre-independence scenario emphasised for schools self directed motivation and purposes. Their energy and enterprise came from the perusal of personal and collective visions with a responsibility and opportunity to exercise choices. The challenges on the way had to be met and were not obstacles but

occurrences as they arose out of self directed challenges. There was a sense of creativity, excitement of new learning and sharing. They felt they were doing something purposeful and important and could see the results of their efforts as well. It is not that they could be using excellent methods and the best strategies but it was the best for them and their students because they believed them and more than that owned them as they felt they had themselves created it.

Increasing formalisation, intellectualisation, expertism, arrogance and disrespect due to centralised authority has led to reification of many of these ideas and principles. The increasing knowledge about education, about learning, about society has left those who are responsible for actually transacting education and those who are the major stakeholders far behind. The large centralized structure has not been able to respect either of these groups and make them feel conscious of their role, responsibility and authority in exercising it. The basis tenet of the educational principles of basic education would require fundamentally restructuring the system. It is a moot point whether we want local control or worry that local control would lead to distortions and would be against the program of modernisation. In that case and in case we believe in the State control of education, idea of basic education may not be best way forward.

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