

The notion of education for all and ensuring all learn to read and write and have access to all sources and choices of education is a recent one. It is a part of the movement to evolve a society that respects all human beings and treats them with a sense of equality. This movement is less than a century old and does not cover a large part of the world yet. It is not even a widely accepted principle in places where it is mandated, in spite of the policy and the international agreements and pronouncements.

### **Maintaining social hierarchies**

The tenuous idea of providing aspirational opportunities to all members of the society was a big departure from the historically transmitted iniquitous treatment and lack of opportunities for the large majority of people. The idea of education for children may have been a part of many earlier societies in some form or the other but in most of these, education provided to all children was not the same and it was not compulsory. In many places, there were different kinds of schools for children from different backgrounds and even their curricular expectations and methods were different. The principle of these schools and the broad principle that guided schools was largely towards maintaining social relations and social order. The statement attributed to Tsar Nicholas I in the 18th century sums it up best:

‘It is necessary that in every school the subjects of instruction and the very methods of teaching should be in accordance with the future destination of the pupils, that nobody could aim to rise above that position in which it is his lot to remain.’

This idea of education is very different from one that would allow for and expect social mobility seeking to keep the continuity of the social hierarchies and situations the underlying philosophy in the statement of maintaining iniquitous social order. This is in stark contrast to some of the recent philosophical positions. For example, the more recently articulated human capability theory, of which Amartya Sen is a main proponent, argues that education is the way to build the capabilities,

as well as aspirations, of children so that they can choose to become a part of society in a role they want and in the choosing that is aware of all the possibilities that exist and feels empowered to be any of that. This expectation from education is much more than what the international agreements and the right to education provide for. Yet, even the right to free and compulsory education has come with a lot of struggle and the commitment to its implementation leaves a lot of gaps. For example, it does not clearly specify the aims and purposes of education in the same manner as the human capability framework does. So, the point is that while all societies want children to be educated in some way, the philosophical principles, the aims and therefore, the intent and the mechanisms visualised can be very different. So, we need to think about why all societies want all children to be educated and what is the education appropriate for them.

The requirement is clear that all human children would be taught by the society and that they would have the ability to learn and this is part of human development and socialisation. The need for education to be more than what the family could provide access to as the available human knowledge increased, led to the emergence of some as teachers and for some organised form and structures for them to teach children. As a result, schools of different sorts came up in different societies and communities. These teachers and these organised forums were very different from the nature of the present-day schools. They were neither funded by the State, nor run by it, nor available to all and were largely not for common good. It was largely for the good of the elite and maintenance of the state.

The education processes at that time were oral communication and comprised the essence of the rules, regulations, norms and rituals that the communities were based on. The scriptures being taught also contained the development of a perspective on and a view of life and being. This was, however, embedded in the ways of

behaviour and rituals that were taught. Apart from this, there was knowledge about nature, rules of logic, science, trades and crafts as well as the then available medical knowledge that was taught. The forms and structures of imparting these were varied and so was the content, even though many essential principles may have been the same. There was no compulsion, however, that required all children to be formally educated in this or any other knowledge.

We can also say that as societies developed the nature of schools, how they were run and what was taught in them also changed. And as we move comparatively closer to today, that is, in the period around the 15th Century, education began to be led by the institutions that were connected to some form of spiritual and religious moorings (*ashram* schools, *madarsas*, convents, monasteries are all examples of that). All these spiritually inclined structures were not part of organised bodies and in many societies, were run by individual teachers. What was expected to be learnt and what was taught and assessed also varied from society to society and indeed from institution to institution.

The question of inclusion of all children in the process of education arose due to the need to provide parents the opportunity to go to work in places that had fixed hours of work and where it was important for the worker to follow a certain discipline of time and manner of work. Besides this, some skills were also needed, for example, it was also required that a child must be able to follow instructions. So, like the training of the warriors and the upper elite girls to be society women, now there was a reason to have children from other backgrounds to be in the school. Education expanded to include a wider set, though whether all children could learn was hotly debated as well. The tension between the few who believed that all children could be taught in some way or the other, and the many who believed they could not, continued. This is evident from the story of Socrates teaching the slave boy and similarly, the film about an English professor teaching a girl from a different background to be and function as a lady (*My Fair Lady*) indicates the struggle that has been in the consciousness of the society about inclusion.

However, the evidence of learning shown by socially and economically deprived children, the capability shown by girls in doing science and mathematics and other such examples,

gradually, forced the system to accept them as equal, at least on paper. In practice and in thinking, however, attempts to research to find evidence, citing chosen anecdotes to argue and using other means to show that deprived children and girls are inferior, and incapable of learning abstract and complex ideas continues. A lot of effort is also addressed towards conclusively demonstrating that the iniquitous treatment is justified by citing previous karma or the current potential and capability.

In the end, the advocacy of those who believed in equality of humans and the overwhelming evidence against inherent comparable incapability led to a change in the policy articulation and the framework based on the premise that all children do not need to be educated and in fact, a large majority of them are not even capable of learning.

As pointed out above, girls were a major component of the excluded children as they were in almost all cases left out by design not just from educational processes, but also from senior positions and as research leaders. The few women who were educated were educated in the limited framework of education for the girls and not through a universal programme for all children. The inclusion of all girls in a universal school programme and expecting them to do mathematics, science, engineering, etc is still not widely acceptable, even to people who have the task of educating them and making their education possible.

The inclusion of all children in the education process, therefore, has to recognise the role of the state and the common people in this effort. Education also has a cost: the costs of the school, the costs for the family to send the child to the school and cost and ability to support the child in her/his learning after school. With the low income available to many families it is not possible for them to find the money for meeting the costs of sending and supporting children learning after school.

As I have said in the beginning, the dominant understanding about the approach to educate everyone is to be useful members of the society and help form a stable society. It has an implication that each child must get education as per the role that is decided for her or him.

## Emergence of the new elite

The democratisation of society, industrialisation and the churning up of opportunities had led to education becoming necessary and hence, possible for a larger number of people. There were (are now many) more children in schools than before. The increased complexity of society and skills required for production and management demanded (and demands now) a much larger number of such persons and with varied skills. And even among those who worked with hands, there were many who required specific education and skills that were crucial to the economy. There was some mobility after the change in the means of production and the nature of the market that led to more mixing and emergence of a new elite. This elite also wanted to share leadership as well as economic gains. The growing economy and technology and this struggle brought in 'meritocracy' as the major criteria for access, selection and mode of exclusion. This had to engage with the co-existing notions of democracy and welfare. The resulting undercurrent of tension between the strands of education to be exclusive and education for a larger number and diverse set of children has continued in various ways. As the concept of democracy and welfare role of the state grew after the experiences of the earlier half of the 20th Century, so did the need for every child to be formally educated and the concern about the purpose and nature of this education. The Indian Constitution reflected the struggle between the maintenance of status-quo in social hierarchies and the inclusion of all in a common programme of development. The preamble articulated a commitment that was difficult to achieve and also was hard to accept and have faith in for the administrators.

The 1986 education policy brought the tension to a head and put into focus the real intent and prevailing policy and public belief by defining education as *human resource development*. The choice of words was clear: human beings were 'resources', they were meant for the development of the nation (read economy and the market), like the funds for development. Each individual is an isolated individual and the goal of the economy and the market is to maximise consumption without any concern for equitability of distribution. The principle is to focus on individual needs to build possibilities for maximum individual pleasure, possessions and consumption of materials. The individuals have no social responsibility, because the accepted

principle is that those who are without even basic necessities are in that situation because of their lack of educational investment (in terms of their own effort and in terms of their parents' commitment, effort and contribution for their education). Thus, this inspired by the Human Capital Theory (HCT) implies that in such an economy, the educational objectives and activities have to be increasingly determined by *market analysis* and such technical considerations that help the market grow rather than any other ethical or moral principles.

The fundamental challenge to including all children in formal good quality education programmes today is therefore the lack of faith in the philosophical moorings that demand it. The promise in the Preamble of the Constitution is neither understood nor accepted. It is clear that the inclusion that desires equality of opportunity cannot be achieved without ensuring that the exposure, facilities, choices and options for development, at somewhat comparable level, are available to all children.

The process requires the belief that all children can learn and need equal attention and care. The expectation in the human capability theory from education is that it would give each child the awareness, possibility and capability of choosing her/his pathway and being what she/he wants to be. In contrast, the prevailing principles on which education system is built, develops the child growing up as a part of the human capital wealth and be an income generator in the economy to maximise market exchanges. This formulation considers all expense on education as economic investment and seeks a return on investment in terms of growth of the economic production. As the possibility of expansion of numbers of jobs and upward mobility has declined, education for more people is increasingly being threatened. Education has increasingly become a narrower and narrower sieve to filter out a lot of children. That has become its operative purpose and its purpose and its availability adjusted accordingly. Good quality education has thus become more exclusive and more and more specialised, with expensive opportunities being created for the elite. While the conceptual documents and stated objectives may be close to the spirit of the Preamble and some nuanced shades of the capability theory, the reality is that even the rights framework has become restricted to education that is minimalist and aligned largely to the human capital theories.

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