

How far have our post Independence efforts to educate India succeeded? Are the failures due to any constitutional liabilities? What are the safeguards and strategies provided under the National Education Policy (1986) of backward classes? An overview that details for the education policies and suggests possibilities.



Ours is a multi-racial, multi-religious, and multi-lingual country. For centuries together, people have lived here and worked here, in times of war and of peace, in the days of plenty and of poverty, in the midst of social tensions and of harmony. The constant interaction of diverse social and sociological forces of varying intensity, operating for centuries together, has resulted in the evolution of the present system. Naturally, this system is neither uniform nor homogeneous. Disparities still exist at many levels, and weaker section of the society are not yet free from discrimination and exploitation in their social and economic life.

The removal of age-old disparities is a complex problem involving many social and cultural issues. The causes of inequality of opportunities are many and varied in nature. On the educational front, they spring from lack of facilities for primary, secondary and collegiate education, and differences in standards of educational institutions, poverty, differences in home environment, wide disparity between the education of boys and girls and disparity between the educational development between the advanced classes and the backward classes like the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

Fully conscious of these inequalities and disparities, and of the need to remove them, our constitution makers made adequate provisions in the Constitution of India to safeguard the interests of the backward sections. Articles 14, 15, 16 and 29 guarantee equal rights to all citizens and forbid any discrimination on the basis of caste, religion, language or sex. Article 30 imparts the right to minorities to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice. Article 340 provides that the President of India shall appoint a Commission to investigate the conditions of backward classes and suggest measures for their development.

SAFEGUARDS

UNDER THE NATIONAL

EDUCATION POLICY (1986)

FOR THE

BACKWARD SECTIONS.

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The National Education Policy (1986) significantly prefaces its chapter on Education for equality as follows:

"The new policy will lay emphasis on the removal of disparities and to equalise educational opportunity by attending to the specific needs of those who have been denied equality so far."

The policy outlines detailed measures aimed at education for women's equality, education of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and of other educationally backward sections. The education of the minorities, of the handicapped and of the illiterate adults also get special mention in the policy.

According to the Programme of Action drawn up under the National Education Policy, women comprise 57% of the illiterate population, 70 percent of the non-enrolled children of school stage are girls. The main features of the targets and implementation strategy to achieve women's equality as laid down in the policy will consist of:

- i) gearing the entire education system to plan a positive interventionist role in the employment of women;
- ii) Promoting women's studies as a part of various courses and encouragement to educational institutions to take up active programme to further women's development;
- iii) widening the access of women in programmes of vocational, technical and professional education; and
- iv) creating a dynamic managerial structure to cope with the targets envisaged.

The central focus in the educational development of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes is their equalisation with non-SC/ST population at all levels and stages of education. The programme of Action recalls that the



all India literacy rates of Scheduled Castes is 21.38% and that of Scheduled Tribes is 16.35% as against 41.20% of non-SC/ST population, according to the 1981 census. The literacy rates for women for the above categories, as also the enrolment rates particularly of girls are much below their population proportion, calling for urgent systematic action. The measures contemplated for the improvement of the situation include the provision of incentives to indigent families to send their children to school regularly till they reach the age of 14, pre-matric scholarship scheme for children of Scheduled Castes, recruitment of teachers from Scheduled castes, opening of schools in tribal areas, incentive schemes for the Scheduled Tribes, establishment of residential schools, etc.

Safeguards guaranteed to minorities occupy an important place in the National Policy. Part IV of the policy states:

"....The Govt. of India has been pleased to sanction a grant of Rs. 35,000/- for the construction of an auditorium-cum-recreation hall under the campus projects scheme. One of the conditions of the grant is that the students should contribute free voluntary labour."



"Some minority groups are educationally deprived or backward. Greater attention will be paid to the education of these groups in the interests of equality and social justice. This will naturally include the constitutional guarantees given to them to establish and administer their own educational institutions and protection to their languages and culture."

The Programme of Action, in Chapter IV of the Report, has given in detail the various measures proposed to be taken to translate these guarantees into action. The following extract from the Programme deserves special mention:

According to 1981 census, the religious minorities constitute about 17.4% of the population of which Muslims are 11.4%, Christians 2.4%, Sikhs 2%, Budhists 0.7% and Jains 0.5%. Ministry of Home affairs have identified Muslims and Neo-Budhists as educationally backward at national level. It was agreed that the State Governments may also identify other groups which are educationally backward at the State level. Special efforts need to be taken to bring these educationally backward minorities on par with the rest of the society and to make them participate fully in the national development activities".

The National Policy makes a special mention of the education of the handicapped and states that the objective of the various measures outlined would be to integrate the physically and mentally handicapped with the general community as equal partners to prepare them for normal growth and to enable them to face life with courage and confidence.

Referring to our backwardness in the area of Adult Education, the National Policy recalls that while the percentage of literacy in the country has increased from 16.67 to 36.27 percent during 1951-81, in absolute num-

bers, the number of illiterate persons has increased during this period from 300 million to 437 million, women comprising 57% of the illiterate population. The situation among the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes is particularly bad. The fruits of modern education and continuing education are denied to this group. The National Programme of Adult Education has drawn up a detailed time-phased programme covering approximately 40 million people by 1990 and 60 million by 1995 laying emphasis on skill development and creation of awareness among the learners of national goals, of development programmes and the need for the liberation from oppression.

Educationists and social reformers have always looked upon education as an effective instrument of social change in the fight against illiteracy, ignorance, inequality and poverty. As Gunnar Myrdal has observed, the process of learning exercise a profound effect on the lives of men and women in the contemporary world. The education and progress of the backward classes is intimately connected with the welfare and development of a country like India. Experience of the last 40 years has taught us that if the backward sections failed to get modern education and continued to drag their feet, the pace of development will be appreciably retarded. As the Education Commission 1964-66 has rightly pointed out:

"One of the important social objectives of education is to equalise opportunity, enabling the backward or underprivileged class and individuals to use education as a lever for the improvement of their condition. Every society that values social justice and is anxious to improve the lot of the common man and cultivate all available talent, must ensure progressive equality of opportunity to all sections of the population. This is the only guarantee for the building up of an egalitarian and human society in which the exploitation of the weak will be minimised".

It is, of course, true that the constitution of India, and the National Policy on Education do provide very significant safeguards for the education of the backward sections of this country. But this projects only one side of the picture. As to how best the aims and objectives of the contemplated measures are achieved would, in fact, depend on the extent to which the guarantees and safeguards are meaningfully and effectively implemented in the country. There is no denying the fact that the problems involved are too complex and too deep-rooted to be solved within a short period by any one section of the people or administration. The country's efforts in this behalf can succeed only if there is a basically sympathetic and large-hearted effort on the part of the people and the voluntary organisation, duly supported, coordinated and monitored by the Government of India and the State Governments.