

WHAT IS WORTH TEACHING?

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Preface

Dialogue on education in our country mostly takes place in a fractured discourse. On one side of the fracture is the language used by the planner, the economist, and the sociologist of education. On the other side is the language of the psychologist, the pedagogue, and the teacher. Neither of the two languages is capable of capturing the tension that every Indian child must cope with in order to be educated.

The tension has its origins in history, and it lives on because of poorly informed planning, but it cannot be diagnosed if we study history or planning in isolation from classroom pedagogy. It is in the curriculum and in teacher-pupil relations that the tension finds its sharpest expression. And this is where educational research and its popular terminologies reveal their stunted, straggling development. Only a fusion of the two languages I have mentioned can help. This is a tall agenda, and these four lectures can at best be seen as a small, individual preparation for popularizing the agenda.

I am grateful to the University Grants Commission for enabling me to deliver these lectures at Baroda, Indore, Saugar, and Delhi under the National Lectures scheme during 1986-87. I have greatly benefited from the discussions these lectures aroused, especially at Baroda.

The fourth lecture was born (obviously in a somewhat different form) a little earlier than the rest at Baroda --at the Department of Child Development. It pains and educates me to remember that no teacher or student of education attended this lecture, just as no child developmentalist attended the other three. This is a small proof of the fracture I am concerned with.

New Delhi

ONE

What Is Worth Teaching?

In our country we do not normally think of curriculum as a 'problem' -- in the sense that it involves imperfect choices and decisions made on the basis of defensible, and therefore challengeable, perceptions. We have an educational culture that is firmly dug into the rock of 'received' knowledge. In such a culture, nobody asks why a certain body of information happens to be equated with education. Under our very different climate and historical circumstance, the influential American curriculum theorist, Tyler, would have been happy to find such a large number of people who are used to accepting the validity of one particular structuring of educational knowledge. Another thing that would have made him happier in India than in his own country is the ease with which dissociation between curriculum and the child's immediate socio-cultural and physical milieu is accepted, and the zeal with which 'principles' for curriculum designing, teacher training, and so on, are demanded and applied.

My concern is not with 'principles' but rather with the problem of curriculum. Inherent in this declaration is the assumption that there are no principles for developing a curriculum. In the dialogue of education, my agenda is to dispel the notion that there are certain time-honoured, proven rules capable of guiding us when we want to prepare a curriculum for Children's education. The position I wish to support is the opposite one -- that there is no escape from reflecting on the conditions obtaining in our society and culture if we want to give worthwhile education to our children. The problem of curriculum is related to our perception of what kind of society and people we are, and to our vision of the kind of society we want to be. By taking shelter in the 'received' perspective and the 'principles of curriculum development' that it offers, we merely shun our responsibility and allow ourselves to be governed by choices made long ago or elsewhere under very different circumstances.

The problem of curriculum is related to the first of these three key questions to which most of educational research and reflection is addressed:

What is worth teaching?

How should it be taught?

How are the opportunities for education distributed?

Although the three questions are independent and can be pursued by themselves, they are related to each other at a deep level. Until we arrive at that level in this present inquiry we can pursue the first question -- 'What is worth teaching?' -- by itself. Whatever we can determine to be worthy of being taught is the proper candidate for inclusion in the curriculum. The obvious issue here is how to determine 'worth'. What kind of value can we put upon different types of knowledge to distinguish between worthy and unworthy kinds as far as their candidacy for becoming material for educational transaction?

We can distinguish between two routes to solving the problem. The first consists of deciding the worth of what we want to teach in view of the learner. The second consists of determining worth in terms of the intrinsic value of what we want to teach. I intend to chalk out both these routes, and then to decide how satisfactory or otherwise they might prove in solving the problem of curriculum as I have defined it above.

Route One: Learner's Viewpoint

It makes immediate sense to assess the worth of something we are about to give by taking into account the receivers viewpoint. Education is something that adults want to give to children, so what could be better than judging the worth of what we want to teach in terms of children's own perception of it? The analogy of gift is obvious; when we are about to give a gift, we often choose the gift by considering the receiver's personality, likes, and needs. Attractive though the analogy is, applying it to education has obvious difficulties. One arises out of the fact that education is not for just one child. Hundreds, in fact millions, of children may be involved. So we will not get very far by considering the likes and needs of each child. Most likely, we will have to be content with a generalised understanding of children's personalities.

The second difficulty in applying the gift metaphor to education arises from the very nature of the knowledge that we as adults might possess about

children. As adults, we may be able to think, to some extent, on behalf of children, but we cannot totally submerge ourselves in the child's point of view. I may be charged with mystifying childhood, but I feel it is important to remember that the ability to look at things from the child's viewpoint is a special kind of ability. There is evidence to say that for adults to have this ability may require a cultural context. In the West, such a context was created by the availability of Rousseau's reflections on individuality and freedom when industrialisation increased the need for childcare and the possibility of child survival and health.

The point is that although it is appropriate to determine the worth of what we want to teach in terms of the child's perspective, it may be extraordinarily difficult for us adults to take the child's perspective in the matter we are considering." Three reasons for this difficulty may be distinguished. First, children are interested in off kinds of things or can develop interest in just about any form of knowledge, depending on how it is presented to them. So, what is worth teaching and what is not are not particularly relevant questions from children's point of view. Secondly, children cannot be expected to articulate their view of the worth of something as abstract as knowledge. Put simply, as Donaldson does, 'the young child is not capable of deciding for himself what he should learn; he is quite simply too ignorant.' At best, what children can be normally expected to articulate is liking or preference, and this brings us to the third reason, namely, the likings expressed by children keep changing, as they grow older. Therefore, it cannot provide us with a reliable basis for making sustainable decisions about what we should teach them.

Going by the first route then, our best chances lie in agreeing to think on behalf of children rather than in trying to find out what they think. Now if we agree on this more modest possibility, we can soon identify one basic sense in which 'worth' can be determined: 'It is worth teaching something only if it can be learnt'. I am referring to 'worth' in the sense of being worthy of the bother of teaching. This is admittedly a rather pedestrian sense of worth, but nevertheless a useful one, for it can protect us from putting in a lot of wasteful effort of which we can find numerous examples today. The mismatch between what modern child psychology tells us about how children learn, on one hand, and the expectations embedded in school curricula on the other, is so sharp and violent in our country that it looks an exercise in redundancy to identify little examples. Indeed, the danger of giving single examples is that people in charge of curriculum planning might

respond by acknowledging these as lapses and remove them, leaving the edifice of an unlearnable curriculum intact.

The example I will discuss here belongs to the early phase of school learning when the distinction between knowledge and skill is a hard one to make. Learning basic skills, such as reading, involves the translation of several discrete kinds of knowledge into a gestalt of readily available responses. Learning how to read requires the child to apply his knowledge of the world, people, and language to construct a highly dynamic system of decoding graphic signs. Recent research in the pedagogy of reading tells us that the success of reading instruction depends on the encouragement given to children to use their prior knowledge of language (in its oral form) and the world to decode printed texts meaningfully. In the light of this research the alphabet centred instruction given in Indian primary schools, and the lack of incentives for children to use their hypothesis forming ability, discourage children's search for meaning. Repeated failure to make sense of what they are reading damages the self-concept of many children, leading them to drop out of school. Of the others who do learn to read, many become mechanical readers -- in the sense that they can scan a printed page but cannot associate the text with their own experiences. We will return to this problem in the concluding chapter. Here it should suffice to say that if reading were taught in a manner in which it could be effectively learnt, the enormous wastage characteristic of our primary education would be less. At present, only the exceptionally persistent or motivated children are able to relate to the text, that is, to read in a meaningful way.

Psychology and pedagogy, thus, can help us organize and teach knowledge and skills in effective ways. This is a significant contribution towards solving the problem of curriculum, but one that can be appreciated only after a decision has been made about the kinds of things that are worth teaching in the first place. In other words, psychology or pedagogy cannot tell us what to teach, only when and how. Psychology can tell us even less about the validity of combining different kinds of knowledge under one school subject. The choice of knowledge and the manner of structuring it have to be determined on some other grounds. If we wanted to decide whether it would be a good idea to introduce 'folklore' as a compulsory school subject at the primary stage, no amount of psychological or pedagogical knowledge would help us take this decision. The decision has to do with our perception of the place of folklore in our socio-cultural milieu. It requires reflection on our cultural choices, the socio-cultural milieu. It requires reflection on our

cultural choices, the socio-economic underpinnings of these choices, and on the implications of the choice of folklore as a school subject for all children. But once the decision to teach folklore has been taken, we can refer to child psychology and pedagogy to determine how to break up folklore into learnable and enjoyable sequences and what kind of teaching would most suit this new subject.

Route Two: Value of Knowledge

Let us turn to the second route which consists of examining the worth of what we want to teach in terms of its intrinsic value. The word 'intrinsic' is difficult to interpret, and it can land us in trouble if we are not careful. I have used it to characterise a route which involved ascertaining the worth of knowledge from the child's perspective. Our brief inquiry revealed that this route presents enormous difficulties beyond a particular point --the point at which one can separate knowledge that cannot be learnt. Beyond this, Route One has little help to offer. Route Two differs from this inquiry in that it does not refer to the child. What we are after is the possibility of identifying something intrinsically valuable in the knowledge we want to impart -- something that would qualify it to be in the curriculum under the only condition that it is learnable (i.e., the condition that Route One has taught us to respect for its usefulness).

On the face of it, the kind of inquiry we are making looks like the inquiry philosophers are known to make by asking -- 'What is true knowledge?' What they want to know in that question is: What is real knowledge as opposed to spurious knowledge? Supposing a philosopher could answer this question, would it be of use to us as teachers of children? Again, in rather too obvious a sense one would say 'yes'. If someone could convincingly distinguish true from false knowledge, surely no one would like to teach false knowledge. The problem arises when we recognise that unlike philosophical inquiry, education is a mundane business. Whereas philosophy is supposedly concerned with the pursuit of truth or true knowledge, education is mostly concerned with people, particularly people as parents, their aspirations (collectively expressed by the institutions they support), and with the social reality, which shapes these aspirations. Education deals with knowledge in a rather limited context, which is defined by the social reality of a particular period and locale. Mannheim, I believe, was right in pointing out that the aims of education could only be grasped historically simply

because they were shaped by history and therefore changed from one period and society to the next.

Despite its interest in 'truth', education deals not so much with true knowledge (even if such a thing could be ascertained and acknowledged by all) as with how knowledge is perceived in a given social milieu. Howsoever much teachers, many of whom may be inspired by ideals of one kind or the other, may want to train children to distinguish truth from falsehood, they can only do so within the context of what has been perceived and installed in the curricula as worthwhile knowledge. Crudely speaking, they are in schools to teach what counts as knowledge. And what counts, as knowledge is a reconstruction, based on selection, under given social circumstances. Out of the total body of knowledge available to human beings, not all is ever treated as worthy of being passed on to the next generation; the rest waits in appropriate archives for either oblivion or resurrection under changed circumstances. This is, of course, a generalisation, for we know that 'society' is hardly a unitary system in the matter we are dealing with. At some point, we will have to treat this matter more carefully, and examine how the composition of society, and the corresponding composition of the structure of educational opportunities, affects the choices of what is taught in schools.

For the time being, however, the generalisation that school knowledge is a reconstruction, involving selection of knowledge, should suffice for us. It can help us recognise the wide-ranging interaction involved in the process of reconstruction of knowledge. The interaction involves creation, codification, distribution, and reception, and it takes place under the shaping influence of economy, politics, and culture. What knowledge becomes available at schools for distribution has to do with the overall classification of knowledge and power in society. Schools supply individuals whose knowledge and skills are appropriate for the tasks generated by the economy and supported by politics and culture. Schools are able to supply such individuals with the help of appropriate reconstructions of knowledge. The 'star warrior' delineated by Broad is not a product of fortuitous circumstances. He is an unmistakable product of America's contemporary politics, economy, and culture, as was the member of the Indian Civil Service a product of colonial India in the early twentieth century. The role of the American and the Indian educational systems in producing these archetypes is fully examinable in terms of the reconstructions of knowledge that the two systems are based on.

Operating under the influence of economy, politics, and culture, the system of education sullies knowledge with associations of various kinds. Each association is like a watermark -- cannot be rubbed off, for the agencies that leave: the marks are more powerful than, indeed beyond the control of, education. By studying educational systems in the context of social and economic history we can find several examples of such associations. Let me examine two of them, the first one relating to science. India's exposure to the West under colonial rule contextualized science within the dynamics of colonization. Due to its association with colonization by a Western society, science became the target of xenophobia in many quarters of the anti-colonial consciousness and struggle. Apathy to science, or worse still, suspicion of science and hostility towards it grew as part of nationalist consciousness. Baran cites the opposite case of Japan:

its being spared the mass invasion of Western fortune hunters, soldiers, sailors, and 'civilizers' saved it also from the extremes of xenophobia which so markedly retarded the spread of Western science in other countries of Asia.

To gain entry into the Indian school curriculum, science had to make a hard struggle, and even though it now has a secure place, it covers only a narrow spectrum of the activities permitted in the school. Basically, the culture of Indian schools remains hostile to science. If, for the sake of brevity, I describe the culture of science as that of touching, manipulating, personally observing, and making sense, then the culture of our schools could well be described as promoting the reverse by counter posing all these. Fear of science and all that it stands for continues to be embedded in our school culture and curriculum; why it is not openly expressed is a different matter.

Gandhi's proposal for 'basic education' offers another example of the influence of the sociology of knowledge on the school curriculum. An important aspect of his proposal was the introduction of local crafts and productive skills in the school. In functional terms, the idea was to relate the school to the processes of production in the local milieu, with the declared aim of making the school itself a productive institution. Gandhi thought that the elementary school could not possibly get very far in a poor society if it did not produce a substantial part of its own needs." But, apart from this functional aspect (the practicality of which has been debated), the proposal for basic education also had a symbolic aspect to which considerably less

attention has been given. Symbolically, by proposing to introduce local crafts and production- related skills and knowledge in the school, Gandhi was proposing allocation of a substantive place in the school curriculum to systems of knowledge developed by, and associated with, oppressed groups of Indian society, namely artisans, peasants, and cleaners. It was no less than a proposal for a revolution in the sociology of school knowledge. For centuries, the curriculum had confined itself to the knowledge associated with the dominant castes. Basic education was proposing a subtle plan to carve a room for the knowledge associated with the lower castes, including the lowest. In a truly 'basic' school, children were expected to clean toilets. Effective implementation of basic education would have seriously disturbed the prevailing hierarchy of the different monopolies of knowledge in our caste society. In truly functioning basic schools -- and they would have been common schools -- the cultural capital of the upper castes would not have carried the stamp of total validity as appropriate school knowledge.

The association between certain forms of knowledge and certain social groups is of importance to education because it characterizes the very image of the Educated Man prevalent in a society in one particular phase of its history. As a result of this association, education becomes synonymous with certain area of knowledge and certain other, corresponding areas of ignorance. Let me use an example from my own daily behaviour as an educated man, not quite what is known as the 'Westernised' Indian, but sufficiently so to be incapable of using the indigenous names of months. My illiterate house help uses the Indian calendar and has little knowledge of the Western calendar. We often have considerable difficulty determining whether we have understood each other. As an uneducated person she expects that I won't know the system she is used to; conversely, I as an educated person expect that she might know only the Indian system. Our ignorance of each other's calendars contributes to our identities as educated and uneducated persons. It so happens, obviously due to the economic and political dynamics of our society, that ignorance of her system is an attribute of my image as an educated man. I am not supposed to know whether *Sawan* comes first or *Aghan*. On the contrary, her ignorance of the Western calendar is a proof of her lack of education because knowledge of the Indian calendar is not one of the attributes of the educated Indian in postcolonial India. She is from a lower caste background, which I am not. The kind of knowledge she has is associated in post- colonial India with the poor and the illiterate. Brahmin priests using the Indian calendar for specific ritual jobs do not disturb this association, for in using the Indian calendar they are not

acting in their capacity as modern educated men, but in their capacity and from their status as Brahmin priests.

In every age, the educated man is defined differently, according to the associations that areas of knowledge and corresponding areas of ignorance have with different social groups. Dominance and distribution of the power to define roles play a significant part in determining the attributes, which the educated man will be expected to possess. Thus, the problem of determining the worth of a form of knowledge, to a certain extent, arises out of the distribution of knowledge in society. The distribution of knowledge at a particular point of time may itself be an indicator of the distribution of the opportunities to be educated in that period. For someone who wants to make a curriculum, the question is: 'Out of the prevailing forms of knowledge, which ones will I choose?' It is this latter question that we have been pursuing along Route Two, and we have found that the educational worth of a certain form of knowledge cannot be determined according to some purely intrinsic characteristics of the knowledge in question. We have seen how important a role symbolic associations play in shaping the perception of knowledge in society.

Need and Character of Deliberation

On the basis of this inquiry along the two routes, I wish to argue that the problem of curriculum cannot be dealt with as an act of social engineering. It is an act of deliberation. In a society like ours where material capital and the cultural capital associated with education are so unequally distributed, curricular deliberation cannot escape conflict. How shall this conflict be resolved? Any deliberation is based on the assumption that no voice will be wiped out. Were it possible to wipe out a voice, the problem of finding room for it in education would not arise. Indeed, the contrary is more important: that in a polity where no voice can be expressly wiped out, education may offer a useful means to phase out certain voices or to make them inaudible. Dominant groups may use education, more specifically the curriculum, to see to it that voices other than their own are represented so inadequately, feebly, or distortedly, that they would develop a negative appeal and gradually lend themselves to be phased out as candidates for room in curricular deliberation. None of this needs be a conscious process; it may actually be a quiet, civilized dynamic of dominance. Agreeing to perceive curriculum as an act and product of deliberation, rather than a given, rational construct, is by itself a good preparation for enervating the dynamic.

The failure of education to reach the oppressed groups in our society is directly related to this dynamic. It is easy to lay the blame for this failure at the door of poor motivation among the backward and administrative inefficiency. These are the culprits whose faces we have grown accustomed to seeing smeared in educational debates. But the failure also offers us evidence of the inadequacy and narrowness of curriculum deliberation in our society. Curriculum designing for the school stage is the charge of the bureaucracy of education, which includes the quasi-bureaucracy of the state-controlled institutions of pedagogical research and training. It has never been treated as an act of deliberation. Inquiry into the structures of knowledge embedded in the prevailing curriculum has never been on the agenda. The task of reorganizing the structures of knowledge, and the related task of reorganizing the perspective from which knowledge will be represented have not been perceived as important tasks.

Curriculum deliberation is a social dialogue -- the wider its reach, the stronger its grasp of the social conditions in which education is to function. The only way to expand the reach of curriculum deliberation is to include teachers in it, and this is where the problem of curriculum encounters its greatest challenge in the culture of education in India. In this culture, the teacher is a subordinate officer. He is not expected to have a voice, only expertise. What little curriculum deliberation does take place in the higher circles of educational power remains extremely poor on account of the absence of the teacher's voice. But this is not a plea merely for the involvement of a greater number of people in curriculum deliberation. Numbers matter, but more important is the capacity of a deliberation to be sensitive to the dialogues going on in the wider society. Judging the differential importance of specific dialogues and determining the stance education ought to take towards a dialogue are difficult tasks, but shunning them would mean permitting the curriculum to remain aloof from the concerns of the wider society. This is the situation we are in and have been in for a long time.³ Issues that our society is grappling with find no reflection or trace in the school's daily curriculum. The knowledge imparted in the classroom transcends all living concerns that children as members of the society might have, as well as all other concerns that the adult members of society have and which will affect children. This kind of transcendental curriculum is not just wasteful, for it does not use the opportunity the school provides for imparting useful knowledge; it is destructive too, for it promotes a kind of schizophrenia. The educated man produced by a

transcendental curriculum sees and seeks to establish no relation between his education and his personal life and conduct. A colonial educationist, Mayhew,⁴ had noted this feature of our education system sixty years ago:

When the educated Indian is most himself, in the expression of his deepest emotion, and in the domestic or communal enjoyment of his leisure, he shows the least trace of what our schools and colleges have given him.

Modern pedagogical planning, particularly since independence, has attempted to bypass rather than remedy the dissociation between our schools and our society. The name of bypass was psychologism, which consists of the claim that the broad principles of children's psychology are adequate basis for developing suitable curricula and materials. We have seen earlier that psychology can at best provide a limited answer to the problem of curriculum. But one school of psychologism needs to be examined in special, for it has virtually ruled the minds of many of our avowedly modern and scientifically oriented institutions of pedagogical research and planning, particularly since the sixties. The school I am referring to is that of 'behavioural objectives' of education schematised in taxonomy by Bloom. Followers of this school argue that the objectives of curriculum and teaching need only be defined in behavioural terms, such as 'analysing', 'translating', or 'inferring'. What knowledge content is used to achieve these behavioural aims is immaterial. The idea is to allow allowing the child to develop skills that can be used in relation to any content or situation. This view of curriculum is often called the 'process model', for it emphasises the process of learning more than the content i.e., how something is learnt rather than what is learnt. Clearly, the model denies the problem we have been discussing, namely the problem of identifying worthwhile knowledge in relation to the milieu, particularly the socio-cultural milieu of the child. It promises a technical means to transcend the milieu, and it legitimises such transcendence in the name of effective instruction. The model had obvious appeal for Indian educationists who had been accustomed, since the beginning of colonial policies in education, to seeing the socio-cultural milieu as an obstruction rather than an asset for education. The behavioural model came here during the sixties, the so-called 'development decade', when Indian planners were eagerly looking towards the West, particularly towards America, to find technical solutions to all kinds of problems.

The promise of the behavioural brand of psychologism is a deceptive one, as Daniels has already shown and I will elaborate on Daniels' critique. The

fault lies in ignoring the nature of action concepts. Actions or behaviours (e.g., obeying, analysing, etc.) do not have a one-to-one relationship with certain acts. One act of obeying may be altogether different in its motivation, aim, and implications from another act of obeying, depending on the circumstances under which the act has to be performed. To use Daniels's term, action concepts are polymorphous in that they stand in super ordinate relationship to subordinate acts. Many different kinds of acts or behaviours can be accommodated under the label 'obeying' or 'analysing'; and these same acts can be classified under other action concepts. This is how labels like 'loyalty', 'discipline', and 'service' came so handy to educational planners of Hitler's Germany. By merely using behavioural labels to characterise the intended curriculum, we do not solve the basic problem of curriculum formulation, but evade it at an enormous risk of distortion of the aims of education that we may have in mind. Only by examining the intentions of the learner, the conditions under which learning has to occur, and the means or conventions of teaching to be used can we ascertain what precisely will happen.

This is how the problem of curriculum is related to the distribution of educational opportunities and to methods of teaching. The distribution of opportunities for learning in a society is an important factor influencing both how 'worth' of a certain kind of knowledge is perceived or weighed and how knowledge that is regarded as worthy of being taught will be represented in educational materials. We can take for granted that the knowledge produced and possessed by groups whose access to education is poor will not be regarded as worth of being taught in schools. Who would regard for example, the knowledge of the *Baiga* myth of the world's creation as worthwhile educational knowledge? For that matter, even the knowledge of animal behaviour that the *Baiga* have acquired over a lengthy acquaintance with the jungle of central parts of India is unlikely to be regarded as worthwhile educational knowledge. Room for *Baiga* mythology in educationally valid knowledge required of Indian children is linked to the *Baiga's* own access to education and their educational performance. *Baiga* children have poor access to opportunities for education. Moreover, the *Baiga* child's chances of doing well in the education system are also very poor, at least partly because the *Baiga* worldview has no resonance in the school curriculum." The school is the outpost of an alien culture and system of knowledge in a *Baiga* village.

How the method of teaching affects the character of what is taught can be seen in science. The distinctness of science as a school subject comes from the need for experimentation by the learner. Of course it is possible to teach science without experimentation, but then it loses its distinctness. If distinctness is a criterion for considering an area of knowledge as a separate subject at school, then there is no point in teaching science as, say, literature. As a subject that demands experimentation and independent inquiry by the learner, science is associated with freedom of judgement and equality between the student and the teacher in the presence of objective facts. Science education is supposed to be conducive to secular values precisely because it makes ascribed authority redundant. But if science is taught in a traditional manner, with the authority of the textbook and the teacher's word, and without opportunity for experimentation, it would cease to have a secular character and value. Once it loses its original character, owing to the application of conventional pedagogies, science can well become an instrument for authoritarian control in the classroom, and later on in society. The practice of science in a context that does not permit equality or open questioning can potentially lead pupils into imbibing values that are antithetical to science.

And not just the character of what is taught, but the volume of content too is affected by the methods of teaching. For some time now, a favourite theme among curriculum developers in India has been the 'load' or volume of content described in the syllabus for each grade level. Despite the acknowledgement by the highest body of educational research, namely, the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) that the 'load has become excessive,' no solution by way of actually cutting down the load has been pursued. The content to be 'covered' has become absurdly heavy in all school subjects. The textbooks give a reliable glimpse of this situation. Let us look, for example, at the grade six-history text prepared under the auspices of the NCERT. It 'covers' Alexander; Chandragupta Maurya, Bindusara, and Ashoka in one paragraph each. If we look more closely, we will appreciate the teacher's predicament when she tries to explain a sentence such as this to eleven year olds: "Alexander had invaded India because some of the northern areas were included in the great Persian empire of the Achaemenid rulers" Who were the Achaemenid rulers? Where was the Persian empire? What did it mean to 'include' some areas of India in that empire? No teacher has the time to answer such questions, let alone the time to allow children to explore them in the library (if there is one). No solution is likely to be found for the problem of 'curriculum load' until it is

diagnosed correctly. The problem of volume of content at any grade level does not originate in the so-called 'explosion of knowledge', which is frequently referred to in our country in discussions of curriculum. It originates in the archaic notion of curriculum as a bag of facts and in the equally archaic view of teaching as a successful deliverer of known facts. Unless we shed these notions and accept more modern, humanist concepts of curriculum and teaching, we are going to remain stuck as teachers with impossibly large syllabi and fat textbooks to cover. The quasi-bureaucratic organizations responsible for curriculum planning in our country will go on packing the syllabi tighter and tighter, all the time seeking justification in the explosion of knowledge with which our 'backward' country will have to cope. This process of mistaken action and legitimating of action can stop only if we recognize that curriculum planning involves a selection of knowledge, and teaching involves the process of creating a classroom ethos in which children want to pursue inquiry. We hardly need to add that a curriculum based on this view of teaching can be prepared, and implemented only after the teacher's right to participate in the organization of knowledge and the child's right to autonomy in learning are accepted.

TWO

Textbooks and Educational Culture

Textbooks are universally used but they do not mean the same thing in different countries. Their practical use in the school's daily routine and their symbolic function vary from one educational system to the next. In some countries, textbooks are published only by private publishers; in others, only by the government. In certain countries, state authorities merely recommend suitable textbooks, leaving school authorities and teachers free to select the ones they like; in others, specific textbooks are prescribed by the state, and no deviation is expected or allowed. In some countries, textbooks are purchased by the school and provided to children in the classrooms; in others, it is the children who must buy their own copies of the prescribed textbook and carry them every morning to the school in a capacious schoolbag.

Perhaps the most important variation, from the viewpoint of pedagogy and curriculum, is in the manner in which textbooks are used. In some educational systems, the teacher decides when she wants children to consult

a textbook She prepares her own curricular plan and mode of assessment, and she decides which materials, printed or otherwise, she wants to use. Textbooks are just one of the many aids available to her. Such freedom can only be dreamt of in other educational systems where the teacher is tied to the prescribed textbook She has no choice -- in curriculum or materials or assessment. A textbook is prescribed for each subject, and the teacher has to teach it, lesson by lesson, until there are no more lessons left. She must ensure that children can do the exercises given at the end of each lesson without help, for this is what they will have to do in the final examination. The textbook symbolises the authority under which the teacher must accept to work. It also symbolises the teacher's subservient status in the educational culture.

Since the use of textbooks, the process of their production, and their symbolic function in the teacher's daily routine vary so much, it is wrong to talk of textbooks in a global sense. Yet, that is what happens all the time.' Pedagogical writings typically assume that textbooks have an universally accepted function. And not just pedagogical writings, even educational planning exercises are often based on the assumption that textbooks are a value-free, globally relevant input. International studies and aid-based production of textbooks are often based on such an assumption. Yet, it ought to be self-evident that when the World Bank finances a project to improve textbooks in the Philippines, or when a Canadian publisher modifies a textbook to make it marketable in the West Indies, or when a team of textbook writers in an Indian state organisation consults an American textbook to gain new ideas -- in each case, the term 'textbook' refers to a distinct commodity whose practical and symbolic functions will be shaped by the socio-economic and cultural milieu in which it will be used. In each case, the textbook will be a part of the overall educational culture whose meanings will be determined by the structures of interaction prevailing among state authorities, teachers, and children.

In the ordinary Indian school, the textbook dominates the curriculum. The teacher is bound by the textbook since it is prescribed, and not just recommended, by state authorities. Each child must possess his own copy of the textbooks prescribed for each subject, and he must carry all the textbooks along with notebooks (popularly called 'copies') to school everyday. The teacher spends most of class time simplifying or interpreting the textbook and familiarising students with its content to the point where it can be easily memorised. With some variation in different subjects and at different levels,

the textbook is used for class routines like loud reading, silent reading, comprehension exercises, recapitulation, homework, and tests. At all levels of school education, the textbook acts as a substitute syllabus or rather as the operative part of the syllabus. Students expect to be examined strictly within the limits of what the textbook contains on any topic. For the teacher, it acts as a structuring device, offering a programme of sequenced action, which applies uniformly to all schools within a provincial or nation-wide system.

Colonial Roots

The argument I wish to present here is that the textbook- centred character of school pedagogy in India is related to the historical circumstances under which India's present education system developed. More specifically, the roots of the textbook culture can be traced to the early nineteenth century when the East India Company took certain definite steps for establishing an education system. The new system acquired a final, bureaucratic format in 1854 from Sir Charles Wood's Despatch. Among the major decisions taken by the colonial administrators during this period, the following are of special interest for us:

(i) The new system would be governed by a bureaucracy at every stage from primary schooling onwards, and in all aspects including the structure of syllabi, the content of textbooks, and teachers' training;

(ii) the new system would aim at acculturating Indian children and youth in European attitudes and perceptions, and at imparting to them the skills required for working in colonial administration, particularly at its middle and lower rungs;

(iii) The teaching of English and its use as a medium of instruction would be a means of this acculturation and training;

(iv) Indigenous schools would have to conform to the syllabus and textbooks prescribed by the colonial government if they wanted to seek government aid;

(v) Impersonal, centralized examinations would be used to assess students' eligibility for promotion and to select candidates for the award of scholarship.

The textbook culture originated in the operational meaning that these policies acquired under the socio-economic and cultural conditions prevailing in India at the time. These conditions are not easy to characterize. The Procedures applied by the colonizer to gain control of the indigenous economy, and later on the indigenous culture, became increasingly complex as the Indian response to colonization developed its contradictions originating in class interests and cultural instincts. In general, even as the native economy with its subsistence agriculture and village-based crafts crumbled under the pressure of taxation and foreign goods, new aspirations spread among the class of people who had profited by acting as middle-men between the English colonizers and the Indian population. These aspirations acted as catalysts for the reception of the colonizer's worldview through education. Colonial education meant that its beneficiaries would begin to perceive themselves and their society as consumers of the knowledge supplied by the colonizer, and would cease to see themselves as people capable of producing new knowledge.

Education was thus supposed to reinforce culturally what colonial policies were aimed at achieving economically. Colonial economic policies in India were aimed at creating a class of consumers of goods manufactured in the colonizer's home country. What steps were taken for upliftment of the colony did not intend to: establish a production economy (for this would harm the very purpose of establishing a colony in the first place), but rather to legitimise and consolidate administrative control. Colonial policies did not just leave the productive capacities of the Indian society untouched, they actually destroyed such capacities through direct means like introduction of new land systems and the dumping of British machine-made goods, and indirect means like education involving training in unproductive skills and socialization in colonial perceptions.

Teachers and Teaching

The imposition of a bureaucratically controlled system of education had a dramatic impact on the old vocation of teaching. Instruction in the basic skills was widespread in many parts of India at the time when colonial control of the economy was established. Religious schools were also common. Teaching as a vocation had a base in the caste structure, and it had been known in the sub-continent for many centuries as a special form of social activity. Teachers had traditionally enjoyed reverence. Often, they combined priestly functions with teaching. In the indigenous schools

surveyed by Adam in 1835 the teacher exercised autonomy in choosing what was worth teaching and in deciding how to teach it. Mostly the curriculum consisted of acquaintance with culturally significant texts and the learning of skills useful to the village society. In these matters, most teachers went by conventions, but they had the freedom to make choices.

The new system of centralized official control eroded the teacher's autonomy by denying him any initiative in matters pertaining to the curriculum. Not that the earlier situation offered many alternatives, but it did not impose choices as the new system did. Apart from the official curriculum and texts, the new system also imposed on the teacher the responsibility to fulfil official routines, such as the maintenance of admission registers, daily diaries, record of expenditure, and test results. These routines became associated with the fear of punishment and monetary loss, particularly when student performance during inspection began to be used as a criterion for financial grants. The fear led not just to behaviours like sycophancy, self-debasement, and zealous waving of English flags at the time of inspection, but even to the tendency to give extra punishment in case there was any suspicion that a boy might have offended the inspecting officer.

Teachers' behaviour towards bureaucratic authority, including their behaviour in the matter of sticking to the prescribed textbook, can hardly be understood properly without taking into account the enormous difference of salary and status between the teacher and the officer. At the beginning of the century, a primary school teachers salary was ten times less than the salary of a Provincial Education Service Officer, and at least four times less than that of a Subordinate Education Service Officer. In 1920, when a trained primary school teacher in the United Provinces had to start his career with Rs. 17 a month, a deputy inspector started at Rs. 170, and a sub-deputy inspector at Rs. 70. In Bombay, where teachers got a somewhat higher start, a trained primary teacher was given about Rs. 30 while the average for an officer of the Provincial Education Service was Rs. 486 and that for an officer of the Subordinate Education Service Rs. 114 per month. Along with this striking difference in salaries went the contrast in power and status. A sub-deputy inspector could mar a teacher's career and therefore inspired awe.

Among the new professions that emerged with the consolidation of colonial rule after the 1857 revolt, such as legal and medical practice,

teaching soon acquired a low position. Compared to civil service, school teaching meant a socially powerless, low paid job, and compared to the other professions, such as legal and medical practice, teaching projected a rather unspecialised image. A substantial part of the school teacher's daily routine, consisted of fulfilling official requirements such as maintenance of accurate records of admission, tests, and money. For a long time, maintaining carefully recorded stocks of prescribed textbooks and dispensing them for a small commission were among the official responsibilities of the teacher in several parts of British India.

Had teachers been given a role in syllabus preparation, and had they been given the freedom to choose suitable textbooks, their identity could perhaps compete better with that of other professions, which offered autonomy in professional matters. The possibility of such autonomy being granted to teachers could only arise out of a demand from among teachers or as a result of reform in the policy of the education department. Poor salary and status kept the first route blocked, and the other was obstructed by vested interests. Such interests did not exist when textbook production first started under the auspices of a School Book Society in Calcutta in 1817, but as soon as schooling facilities expanded, particularly after the mid-nineteenth century, vested interests developed rapidly.

A letter in the Statesman in 1868 complained that 'every inspector has his own friends and prestige's to serve, and thus a good deal of jobbery is perpetrated in the name of uniformity in textbooks. Missionary houses were among the dominant interests in the textbook business, and as the century advanced they were pined by houses importing or reprinting books published in England. Three major English firms, namely Oxford University Press, Macmillan and Longmans, established offices in India in the early years of the twentieth century. The influence they carried' in curriculum committees, consisting mainly of bureaucrats, was far stronger than what India publishing houses could muster. This situation changed a little after Indian ministers were appointed for the education departments in the wake of administrative reforms in 1921. The average teacher's lack of freedom to choose textbooks remained unchanged. His role continued to be confined to helping children to learn, or rather learn by heart, whatever text had been prescribed by the department's bureaucracy.

The textbook culture was a joint product of the soil as it existed and the conditions created by the colonial bureaucracy. The soil was of archaic

pedagogical practices, which treated memorizing as a mode of achievement. This is how W.D Arnold, the Director of Public Instruction in Punjab during 1857-58, described the concept of learning he found popular among people when he came to Punjab:

We found a whole population agreed together that to read fluently and if possible to say by heart a series of Persian works of which the meaning was not understood by the vast majority, and of which the meaning when understood was for the most part little calculated to edify the minority, constituted education.

The new textbooks could not change the existing convention of mechanical reading and rote learning. Rather, the convention found in the new textbooks a convenient agency to perpetuate itself. If only the new education had tried to relate learning to the child's real life and milieu it would have posed a threat to the existing convention of learning. This could have happened if teachers had received a better deal both in terms of money and status, at the hands of bureaucrats. The colonial administration chose not to increase its financial burden by increasing teachers' salaries. It left the teacher in a meek professional role, which could only perpetuate the textbook culture.

Examinations and the Curriculum

The policy of impersonal centralized examinations made a major contribution to the textbook culture. Examinations were impersonal in the sense that students were examined by someone other than the teacher. The idea of impartial assessment meant spot testing by the inspecting official and public, written examinations at terminal points. In these examinations, secrecy had to be maintained over both the question papers and the identity of the examiners. With its aura of strictness and impartial treatment of all examinees, the examination system played an important role in the development of a bureaucratic system of education. To the English administrator, examinations, like textbooks, were a means of norm-maintenance. As Shukla has pointed out, colonial policy used textbooks, written examinations to evolve a bureaucratic, centralized governance of education. The official function of the examination system was to evolve uniform standards for promotion, scholarships, and employment, and thereby to consolidate government control. In the social context, the examination system served the purpose of instilling in the public mind the

faith that colonial rule was fair and free of prejudice. It imparted this faith by being impersonal, hence non-discriminatory in appearance, and by being so wrapped up in secrecy.

In practical terms, the examination system required students to rehearse endlessly the skills of reproduction from memory, summarising, and essay-type writing on any topic. Students were examined on their study of specific texts, not on their understanding of concepts or problems. An early report by Kerr records that when the first uniform code of rules was prepared for government institutions in Bengal, the 'class-books' on which candidates for scholarship were to be examined were specified. A little later, in 1845, an even greater narrowing of the syllabus was implemented by 'fixing' not just the particular textbooks but 'the exact portion of each which were to be studied for the next scholarship examination.

Whatever could not be examined within the norms of the examination system (i.e., a written, essay-type answer to be assessed by an examiner unknown to the students) was kept out of the curriculum, however useful, relevant, and interesting it might be. This is how theoretical, especially literary, study acquired a dominant place in Indian schools and colleges. Literary study fitted nicely within the frame of textbook-culture and written examination. Practical or vocational skills, and subjects dependent on practical skills, such as science subjects, were a misfit in the frame. For a long time, they were not allowed a place in the approved curriculum, and later on when they were allowed a place, it was peripheral. Literature had an advantage over science in any case as it was perceived in the formative phase of colonial policy as a useful instrument of acculturation. As Chatterjee has mentioned, an important difference between the view of J.S. Mill and Macaulay, both influential theoreticians of the early 19th century colonial policies, was that Mill considered both European literature and science necessary for the education of Indian children whereas Macaulay favoured literature. It is Macaulay's view which prevailed even though Mill's position had its supporters among influential Indians like Raja Rammohan Roy. Emphasis on literary study set the stage for the textbook-culture, and once the textbook culture was born, it reinforced the dominance of literary study and skills in the curriculum.

Another implication of the examination-textbook link was that the curriculum remained alien even hostile, to the student's milieu. Since examination was centralized, it could only accommodate the most general

kinds of information as opposed to information reflecting a specific milieu. In a country like India, where local milieu are so sharply varied, both geographically and culturally, the demands of a centralized examination system could only be met by a curriculum that transcended local or regional specificity. The nature of questions appropriate for essay- type answers complimented this tendency of the curriculum. The tendency was further strengthened by the dominant role that colonial perceptions played in the selection and representation of knowledge. At the height of the Victorian period, colonial perception of India consisted of broad impressions of the degeneracy of her culture and the destructive effects of her climate on the Indian character. As Welsh has shown, these impressions were reflected in school and college textbooks. The sweeping nature of such impressions -- which were both products and feeders of the Victorian tendency to form grand theories about why certain races were backward and certain others so far ahead -- found a fitting medium in the textbooks prepared for a centralized examination system. At another level, only this kind of generalized 'knowledge' could be expected to fulfil the agenda of acculturating the Indian student in colonial perceptions and attitudes. Any specific or locally relevant knowledge of social affairs, politics, or even one's own life and one's surroundings was debarred.

A more specific case of how alienation of the curriculum strengthened the textbook-examination linkage and the textbook-culture can be found in English as a school subject. The textbook written for the teaching of English used literary pieces whose idiom and images were mostly steeped either in the domestic world of the Victorian bourgeois, or in its counterpoint - the natural world of Wordsworth and his early contemporaries. Neither of the two worlds was accessible to the Indian student. Poems about the English spring or winter were as unrelated and strange to the Indian climate as were the happy family stories foreign to the Indian way of life. Texts of this kind could not be read for meaning: they could only be memorized. Conventional pedagogy of reading too contributed to the tendency to memorize, but the role of alien symbolism in making the texts unintelligible was equally significant. Lester's gives a useful description of how textbook literature encouraged the tendency to memorize a lesson for reproduction at the examination:

Stories in one-syllable words that English children enjoy, tales of domestic life, of cars, of faithful dogs, of snow and skating, only muddled the minds of those who had never seen ice nor felt cold, who were trained never to let a

dog, which ate filth, come near them. As for the pictures which accompany two syllable-worded stories about kettles and tea pots, pudding and turkeys and cosy fireplaces in the cottage kitchens where a table is spread for Sunday dinner, and chairs are drawn up while everyone bows the head to listen to the father asking the blessing, it seemed a mad, if not immoral, world that was being presented. The only thing to do was to learn it all by heart and repeat it rapidly when called upon.

The precise effect of the examination system on the student's orientation towards education cannot be understood without taking into account the relationship between examinations and the opportunities for education and employment. The examination system served as a turnstile between the opportunities for education and the opportunities for employment. Although educational opportunities, in relation to the population, remained very limited throughout the colonial period, they outnumbered the opportunities for employment shortly after the new system of education was introduced. Colonial rule was not designed to, and never did, release the productive energies of the Indian society; the only opportunities for work that it could create were in the administrative domain. Already by the last quarter of the 19th century, this domain was saturated. Despite the extremely narrow spread of education, people with certificates and degrees could not anymore be accommodated in government jobs. Examinations were now required to play a role far wider than that of norm-maintenance within the education system. The new role was to keep eligibility for jobs under severe control by keeping the rate of failure high. Any lowering in this rate led to instant worry among colonial rulers. The matriculate and the B.A. examinations, in particular, became watchfully guarded turnstiles to keep the numbers of those going past them under strict control. Loosening of the turnstile would mean invitation to social discontent arising out of joblessness among the eligible.

This function of examinations as an agency of social control resulted in a deep fear of failure among young people. The fear became part of the lore of childhood, and the consequences of failure became a recurring motif in literature." Fear of failure in the examination had repercussions both on classroom interaction and students' own strategies of preparation. When the main concern of both the teacher and student was to prevent failure at the examination the best possible use of classroom teaching could only be to prepare students as meticulously as possible for the examination and this was done by confining teaching to the contents of the prescribed textbook.

On the student's side, the ability to consign vast amounts of printed text to memory became highly valuable. Metaphors of bodily storage of knowledge became a part of children's culture. Storage of knowledge for guaranteed reproduction in the examination notebook at the end of the year would hardly have been possible without the construction of a strong symbolic association between knowledge and the prescribed textbooks. In the biographical account of his Punjabi ancestry since the middle of the nineteenth century, Prakash Tandon's recalls how in his grandfather's days:

the boys had coined a Punjabi expression, remembered even in our days, wishing that they could grind the texts into a pulp and extract knowledge out of them and drink it.

The examination-textbook linkage became stronger as the system of education expanded and as the stagnation of work opportunities exacerbated the competitive character of the system. The linkage defeated all attempts to reform the curriculum and methods of teaching. Gradually, this defeat utterly diluted the spirit with which ideas and programmes of reform were voiced and heard. Commission after commission, starting with the Hunter Commission of 1882-83 bemoaned the stultifying role that examinations had begun to play. Similarly, the obsolete nature of the curriculum was criticised and exhortations were made to change it. Writing in 1910, Alston drew attention to his feeling that colleges had become rival cramming institutions, and he pointed out how absurd it was that politics, history, and economics were taught from single texts. 'Books and not subjects are prescribed', he wrote, expressing his impatience with the narrowness of the curriculum and with the tendency among both students and teachers to identify the curriculum with the textbooks. Alston's irritation over the absurdity of the situation and the impossibility of reform is just one sample of what was to become the perpetual mood of educational discourse in India.

Finally the use of English as a compulsory subject in the secondary school, and as a medium of instruction and examination could well be assigned an important role in the rise and perpetuation of the textbook-culture. As a foreign language, English posed a dual challenge to the Indian student. He was first supposed to master its grammar and its basic vocabulary, and then to use this barely mastered medium for the study of other school subjects. English was not a part of the average student's ethos, nor could the average student ever hope to be exposed to a native speaker of English. Learning the language meant making the best use of the dictionary, the textbooks

(especially the textbook for grammar), and classroom instruction, which was devoted to the teaching of the textbooks and grammar. The famous Bengali scientist P.C. Ray, described the place English held in the curriculum in 1913-20

A boy in an ordinary school from IV onward has to learn something of grammar, composition, phrases, idioms, homonyms, synonyms, difference between 'shall' and 'will', etc. Now for the matriculation course over and above these, he is expected to have mastered the contents of at least a dozen standard books. Even on taking up his L.S.C. Course, he is not exempted from the overwhelming burden of textbooks of English Prose and Poetry.

Learning English under such circumstances could only mean an enormous and continuous effort, on a scale that would leave no time or energy to grapple with the subject matter of other school disciplines. Memorization of the textbooks of these other subjects was the only convenient way to avoid failure at the examination. As Annie Besant explained, the students were struggling to follow the language while they should have been grasping the facts. Their only resource was to utilise their extraordinary power of memorising by learning textbooks by heart and reproducing them in the examination.

After Independence

Structures of pedagogical transaction, once established, do not give in to change easily. Colonial pedagogy outlasted colonial rule; and in independent India, curriculum continues to be textbook-bound. While the system of education has expanded enormously since Independence, it has not been able to shed colonial policies of prescription of textbooks and examinations. A major change has come in textbooks production with the emergence, mainly since the sixties, of state corporations, which have monopoly rights over the publication of textbooks, especially for the elementary grades. The state has thus extended its role well beyond that of choosing suitable texts and prescribing them. The establishment of NCERT in the early sixties further reified the state's responsibility in curriculum and textbooks by creating a permanent organizational base for these matters. Private publishers still have some interest in the business of school textbooks, but their clientele is restricted mainly to private, especially unaided schools.

Teacher training and examinations continue to be two 'weak areas of the system. Since school teaching has continued being a low-status profession, teacher training remains a poorly rated academic field. The training of elementary level teachers in particular, and all school teachers in general, remains largely untouched by an academic grounding in modern child centred pedagogy. Such; grounding could possibly dilute the patterns of teacher-pupil interaction associated with the textbook-culture. Another factor that could dilute these patterns is improvement in the physical condition of schools. Most Indian schools continue to have poor quality buildings and very little teaching equipment. In elementary schools, the only teaching aid universally available is the prescribed textbook According to the Fourth All India Educational Survey, 40 per cent of all primary schools have no blackboards, 53 per cent have no play space, 71 per cent have no libraries and 57 per cent are without concrete structures.

The tension between local versus national concerns, which is characteristic of the broad political context, has also been a key feature of curricular reforms since independence. Reforms initiated by the government have mostly emphasized the generalized as opposed to the localized kinds of knowledge and symbols. This description would succinctly apply to the nature of curriculum reforms undertaken by the NCERT during these last 25 years of its existence. Earlier, the situation was somewhat ambivalent. During the fifties, curriculum policy was characterized by a conflict between the pull towards local relevance under Gandhian 'basic education'. Gandhi's plan for educational reform was defeated both by ideological opposition to his vision of a self-reliant rural society and by deliberate attempts to make implementation ineffective. Textbook publishing houses were among the lobbies that made such attempts.

The trend towards centralized, as opposed to localized, development of curriculum and texts favours the continued use of prescribed textbooks as the dominant tool of pedagogy and as a symbol of the prescribing authority. This has led to a new contradiction. Schools are now expected to assist in the development of the child's total personality, and not just impart the basic skills as schools did in the past. The new task demands the use of child centred methods of teaching and decreased reliance on the prescribed textbooks. It also demands greater autonomy for teachers. This is the area where the new expectation from schools contradicts the pull towards further bureaucratisation and centralized management. Autonomy for teachers would imply greater professional self-reliance, demand for higher status, and

local control. The fear of such demands continues to force the education system to reject the option of truly professionalizing its teachers. Professionalizing the schoolteacher would not just mean superior academic training; it would also mean conceding to the teacher the right to autonomy in matters pertaining to the choice of materials for teaching and in the construction of the daily curriculum. It would also mean some chance of thinning textbook culture.

Nearly half a century ago, Mahatma Gandhi had envisaged such an event:

If textbooks are treated as a vehicle for education, the living word of the teacher has very little value. A teacher who teaches from textbooks does not impart originality to his pupils. He himself becomes a slave of textbooks and has no opportunity or occasion to be original. It therefore seems that the less textbooks there are the better it is for the teacher and his pupils.

THREE

Implications of a Divisive School System

In the first chapter we had briefly considered how the distribution of educational opportunities could affect the organization of knowledge in the curriculum. In this chapter we will return to this point and examine it in terms of a somewhat different and deeper concern for School pedagogy. Briefly, the argument we will follow in this chapter is that the narrow spread of education and the divisive nature of the school system makes the pursuit of humanist aims in pedagogy extremely difficult.

It is commonly believed that the quality of education in India has declined even as its 'quantity' or spread has increased. The late J.P. Naik had captured this popular belief in the title of his book, *Equality, Quality and Quantity: The Elusive Triangle in Indian Education*, published in mid-seventies.' To this day, most of us are accustomed to seeing the tables of enrolment figures stacked up to defend the system of education against any hint of a charge of fall in standards. The tables do not, of course, defend the system directly, but they do provide a kind of emotional back up. They are meant to suggest that we have been busy taking education to the masses, and this may have left us no time to worry about maintaining high standards. The argument that flows

from this understanding is that today our education has so little capacity to produce excellence because the system has become so wide.

The argument pursued here is the opposite, namely that our education system has remained so backward because it is so narrow. I call it 'backward' for a widely accepted reason, namely its low capacity to produce or encourage excellence. This is true not just in science, technology, and the social sciences where the inputs required for the pursuit of excellence are somewhat complex, but also in sports where the necessary inputs are of a fairly straight-forward variety. Even there, countries with fewer people to choose from and with lower levels of development routinely beat us. If one of the functions of education is to harness excellence, then surely our education system can appropriately be called backward. The roots of our education system's backwardness lie in its narrowness.

Although the facilities for education have enormously expanded since independence, the system continues to be 'narrow' in three distinct senses. The more obvious sense in which the system is narrow pertains to its coverage. Literacy figures are one indicator of the system's reach, but the more telling figures are those indicating the rate of elimination or educational mortality at the primary level. Out of every 100 students who enrol in grade one, only 37 attend grade five. All those proceeding beyond this stage must learn and socialize in a shrunken human environment. The maximum shrinking occurs between grades one and two --a point to which we will return for some detailed probing in the next chapter. Out of every 100 children who enrol in grade one, 37 stop coming to school some time during the first year or, at any rate, do not show up for grade two. This phenomenon, generally known as the 'drop-out rate', has remained largely unaffected by all the progress claimed in the area of elementary education over the last two decades. The primary school has continued to function as an agency of relentless elimination. It makes sure that the literate Indian will remain part of a minority, and the educated Indian will remain part of an even narrower minority.

The second aspect of the narrowness of our education system has to do with a division within the limited population of children who manage to go to school and persist there. The division consists of two sub-systems, namely, the 'common' and the 'exclusive'. The first sub-system consists of children who depend on the state for their school education, and the second consists of those whose education is paid for by their parents. The co-

existence of these two parallel streams of schools ensures that children of the better-off are separated early from the children of the poor. The separation occurs as part of the rites of admission to the second category schools. These schools represent the 'open market' where urban white-collar parents can buy 'good quality' education for their children. The schools belonging to the first category, on the contrary, represent the state sector. As a welfare agency, the state conveys little assurance to the white-collar class, even to its bottom rungs, that the expectations of this class will not drown among the far more pressing demands of the vast majority consisting of the labouring masses. Moreover, the white-collar middle class parent is anxious to 'protect' his child from the rougher world of the children of the poor. This anxiety is the source out of which comes the drive and the finances to start private schools in every nook and corner of urban India.

This anxiety of the educated middle class is, of course, not something new; only, it is now finding a sharper expression than it had found earlier. Let us briefly place this anxiety in a historical context. The dynamics of colonial rule meant that the lower strata of society would aspire for the same educational and employment opportunities, which the upper strata had. In many parts of British India, the struggle against colonial rule took the form of the urge for upward mobility in the lower strata of the population. Organized expression of this aspiration in several parts of British India, particularly in its major towns, presented a serious problem to the propertied and professional classes. Many members of these classes, and certainly the leaders, had been inspired by the equality-oriented ideology of English utilitarianism. At the same time, they had their dominant position in the established social structure to protect.

The ideology of utilitarianism itself provided the answer to this conflict. The utilitarian model of democracy had projected the market as the locus of egalitarian values. In the context of education, this meant the individual's right to invest in the maintenance of private schools. In any case, the colonial government rarely lost an opportunity to sing the glory of initiatives that came from the native community in the matter of setting up of schools. The Victorian ideal of 'self-help' was there to put moral verve into the government's song, and the art of imperial budgeting for the colony provided the financial rationale. This combination of the government's appeal on the one hand, and the anxiety of the propertied Classes on the other, led to the emergence of separate institutions for the children of these classes. The model for such institutions came from England's famous

residential 'public' schools. The early attempts to establish such schools in India were made by English administrators and Indian feudal interests in the latter half of the nineteenth century. By the early decades of the twentieth century, the aim of setting up 'public' schools in India had crystallized enough to bring together feudal and commercial interest groups. The list of contributors to the Indian Public Schools Society for the opening of the Doon School included both types of sources. The exclusive character of Indian 'public' schools was clear enough, but the utilitarian veneer of belief in equality was never dropped. What helped to maintain it was the idea of meritocracy. Scholarships were provided for children who were found eligible in 'merit' tests but whose parents could not afford the tuition and other fees of a 'public' school. The concept of 'merit' included both curriculum-related abilities and behavioural symptoms of upbringing in a propertied or middle class environment. These are the criteria that all types of present-day exclusive schools use to legitimate their right to select children. The political climate of contemporary India forbids any institution to show the slightest signs of bias towards higher strata of society. The pressure to look democratic hangs heavily in the air. A policy of enrolment by competition suits this air, and also solves the problem of the propertied and the urban middle classes. It permits these classes to make whatever parental inputs are necessary in early childhood to match the requirements of 'merit'-detecting school-tests for enrolment. The idea of competitive entry is so functional indeed in the late twentieth century Indian ethos that the central government has jumped into the fray for providing privileged residential schooling to the 'meritorious'. This is what gives the Navodaya scheme its populist political character.

A key feature of all types of exclusive or elite schools is that their students live in a restricted universe. The elite school selects its clientele out of the larger population, and thereby constructs a narrow sphere within which its clientele must socialize. This practice alienates the school from its milieu. Wherever admission policy departs from the principle of neighbourhood, school population ceases to represent the social reality around. This would be true anywhere in the world, but it is more sharply true in a society like ours where every milieu is economically heterogeneous. The wealthy Indian likes exclusiveness, and so does the middle class, but neither can manage without domestic servants and a whole range of other services. Since each mansion has a servant's quarter and a nearby slum, the out-of-school environment of an Indian child invariably consists of both riches and

poverty. This applies just as well to villages as it does to cities. This is why when a school closes its door to the poor; it ceases to be a part of the milieu.

This constitutes a major pedagogical drawback for our elite schools. They cannot use their milieu as a learning resource simply because the milieu contradicts their attempt to construct a homogeneous universe within their barbed wire boundaries. Use of a foreign language as the medium of instruction is only a symbolic manifestation of the elite school's overall attempt to alienate itself from the milieu. The functional alienation, implying the impossibility of drawing upon the school's milieu, is far more acute.

Before discussing how this alienation affects pedagogy and the pursuit of quality, let me move to a third, philosophical, sense in which our education system is narrow. This third indicator of narrowness has to do with the concept of Man underlying education. Educators remind young people everyday that education must refer to the whole man -- or to the human personality in the widest sense of the term. Let us consider for a moment what this worship of Man is all about. At one level it refers to the qualities we associate with Man's nature, qualities which have enabled mankind to achieve all it has achieved in its long history. At another level, it refers to the basic unity of all mankind, and the unity is nothing if it does not include equality of all men and women on certain basic criteria related to the conditions that are necessary for Man's survival. So, in education when we refer to the whole Man, we mean those aspects of Man, which apply to all. We want the child to know his humanity, realise his potential as a human being; also, we want him to respect the humanity that lies in every man and to know how to treat others as fellow human beings, irrespective of their personal weaknesses, colour of skin, and sex, let alone their social status and income.

We can hardly dream of moving towards this aim in a school whose admission policy consciously aims at homogeneity of social class, ability or behaviour. It may offer high quality or rigorous instruction, but its instruction will not answer the child's search for meaning. This is because meaning arises in interaction with other human beings. One's relatedness to other people is what creates the context in which acts of inquiry become meaningful. Such a context remains permanently stunted or underdeveloped in a school, which has a restrictive admission policy. This kind of school negates the very idea of the relatedness of human beings. A school that has only one segment of the wider society represented in it is greatly depleted in

terms of a human context. Its children are forced to seek relevance of their activities in a narrow sphere of interactions. What is relevance except the truth of inquiry in relation to life?

Lacking a rich human environment, the elite school seeks to inspire its children with unending opportunities for competition and achievement. Institutional loyalty and personal achievement are presented as interlinked motives. Children are encouraged to compete individually from day one at school on the grounds that their competitive spirit will bring glory to the school. Thus, personal aggrandizement is legitimised in the name of institutional goals in the same way that the market economy validates possessive individualism by referring to the national good. Elite schools serve the market economy by socializing children to believe in the goodness of possessive individualism. Serving this role, however, makes them vulnerable to a serious contradiction

The contradiction lies in the elite school's emphasis on competition and meritocracy on the one hand, and its hankering after modern, progressive methods of pedagogy on the other. Progressive ideas in pedagogy, since Froebel, demand that children be treated as children -- as autonomous, free people, rather than as raw material to be moulded after stale preconceptions that adults might have. In the latter half of the twentieth century, progressive pedagogies have come to stand more firmly on this view of the child than ever before because now they have scientifically developed knowledge of the child to back them. After Piaget, all rationalist and instrumentalist notions of curriculum and teaching have no steam left in them. Piaget's work has made it possible for an adult to think on behalf of the child, and to appreciate what learning means to the child. The implication of Piagetian theories is clear -- that learning takes its own time; that it may be destructive to speed up learning or development?

Such an idea is totally against the pedagogy and ethic of the competitive elite school. With its commitment to egging the child on to higher and still higher levels of achievement and competition with others, the elite school naturally treats 'time' in an instrumentalist manner, i.e., as a commodity. According to this perception, time can be compressed, and children can be made to learn more and faster than they might do on their own. With this philosophy, elite schools cannot offer what David Elkind, famous American child psychologist, says is absolutely crucial to sound learning -- 'large blocks of time in which the child can totally engross himself in an activity.

Pressure to learn faster and to outshine others kills all intrinsic motivation to learn. What remains is that urge to make the teacher and parents feel happy and proud of you. Intellectually, most children studying in our prestigious city schools are burned out by the end of primary grades.

It is hardly surprising that despite their privileged status, their access to the best of materials and equipment, and their freedom to deal only with the allegedly brighter children, our elite schools have not produced world-class talent. They have produced any number of bureaucrats, military officers, managers, businessmen, and journalists, but how pride worthy is their contribution to science and technology, sports, and the arts? One or two names like Homi Bhabha aside, the record is poor. For understandable reasons, the merit lists of elite schools lack the names of great litterateurs in Indian languages, but why do they lack names of people who might be expected to make breakthroughs in science and technology, architecture, and the arts? Why haven't the elite schools mitigated our backwardness as a nation, our dependence in every sphere on the advanced countries for ideas and inspirations?

To a certain extent, the answer to this question lies in the overall curriculum and culture of our elite schools. Following the example of British Public schools, our own public schools, and later on other elite schools, emphasized institutions; loyalty, liberal interests, and sports, at the expense of individual excellence in specialized academic fields. They also discouraged the pursuit of knowledge for the sake of any practical use. As Wiener points out in the case of British Public Schools, our elite schools too produced any number of administrators and military men, but very few eminent scientists, engineers and industrial entrepreneurs. Strange though it sounds, but there is reason to see our Public School culture as the agency through which the attitudes and values of England's landed aristocracy have cast a lasting spell on our elites. The recent emergence of a powerful competitive ethic has not influenced this legacy. The function of this ethic was to maintain exclusiveness and high status, not to encourage specialised excellence. In any case, the competitive ethic could not possibly have provided impetus for individual excellence as I have explained above.

On the strength of its recognition and status in society, the elite school sets the pace for pedagogical practices and ethos in the common schools. Indeed, the common schools have no choice except to imitate the elite schools as best they can. Already depleted in terms of resources and material, the

common schools make life further oppressive for the child by copying the competitive ethic of elite schools, along with the craze for individual achievement and the fetish of institutional prestige at ceremonial events. Yet another factor that diminishes the common school's ability to provide children with genuine opportunities for learning is the demoralization of its teachers. In fact, both teachers and children in ordinary schools now feel that howsoever hard they may try, they cannot expect better than second-rate success. This feeling is likely to increase in the years to come as the elite sector expands even within the government system, offering special privilege and status to its clientele.

By nurturing the elite sector and by allowing it to influence the common schools, we have closed all options for progressive pedagogy to flourish in our midst. The elite school has proved incapable of finding escape from its colonial archetype, and the common school has become demoralized. There is hardly any room left for progressive pedagogies within either system. Outside education, the socio-political and economic climate favours the continuation of dependency and neo-colonial relationships. The economic level is the central arena in which dependency and underdevelopment are expressed, but their roots lie in the educational and cultural climate. As I have argued above, oppression of the child, and rejection of his right to autonomy are the main features of the educational climate, which contribute to the backwardness of our cultural and economic life. We rewrite the contract of our dependence every morning in our oppressive schools.

I will end this discussion by discussing how the separation of the rich children from the poor, and that of the supposedly bright from the average, make certain key reforms in education impossible. My explanation hinges on the distinction between sponsored and context mobility's. Although the Indian political system supports context mobility and emphasizes equal educational opportunity, the continuation of elite schools keeps the avenues of sponsored mobility open. It is well known how the different types of elite school systems offer to their clientele routes of sponsored mobility to elite jobs. The routes pass through elite institutions at the higher education level. From nursery onwards, there is a network of exclusive institutions, which allows the elite to maintain their position of advantage.

Such a network would have met with serious threats from mass-based politics if there were no mechanism in the education system to counter-balance it. The mechanism, which precisely serves this function, is that of

examinations. While exclusive schools and colleges ensure special treatment to the children of the wealthy, mass examination promises total parity among all candidates. Examinations carry the message of equality in exactly those features such as the secrecy of the paper setters and evaluators, strict invigilation at the time when examinees write answers, impersonal marking, and delayed declaration of results. While exclusive institutions make sure that the elite has a means to provide privileged treatment to its children, mass examinations -- featuring strict parity among examinees -- keep the confidence and aspirations of the masses alive. Thus status-based streaming and mass examinations are two conflicting characteristics that together endorse the legitimacy of our education system.⁶

Historically, mass examinations served the function of evolving a bureaucratic system of education. They implied uniformity of standards and expectations. In the early period of the development of our education system, examinations provided to the rising middle class a sense of hope and belief in the fairness of the colonial order. While elite schools provided safe routes towards status professions to the children of the privileged families, mass examinations offered to the rest of society the assurance that status can also be achieved through competition. The examination system could offer this assurance with credibility because it was so ritualised. It required students to rehearse endlessly the familiar skills necessary to enter the newly introduced channels of secure jobs in the service of the colonial government. As the civil service was the major elite role to which education could be expected to lead, all examinations became preparatory to and therefore similar, in terms of requirements, to the competitive examinations for civil service jobs. This association kept the curriculum stable and confined to the prescribed syllabus and textbooks.

The basic character of our examination system has not changed to this day. Examinations continue to focus on the capacities to memorize and reproduce, and consequently, classroom instruction too concentrates on these capacities. Indeed, the examination system keeps both curriculum and classroom teaching in its grip. Even the most imaginative teachers, few as they are, find it hard not to succumb sooner or later to the demand that they should teach for the examinations. The demand never dies among students, even after they have had repeated experiences of the joy of learning under a spirited teacher. It is unlikely that the examination system can be changed as long as the structure within which examinations serve a social function remains intact. If early selection (on whatever grounds) and sponsored

mobility continue to be openly and widely practised, examinations too will continue to be what they are, i.e., a means of testing the ability to copy from memory. And they will overcome any attempts that might be made by well-intentioned planners to reform curriculum and instruction towards greater dynamism and innovativeness. If we hate to have such sterile curricula such lifeless methodologies of teaching~ we ought to know that the supportive cause of such pedagogical backwardness is in the divided structure of our education system.

FOUR

Reading in Primary School

How many more illiterates will India have, and what percentage of the world's illiterates will belong to India at the coming turn of the century? Answers to these dramatic questions form the staple statistical crescendos of conference speeches. Evidently, our performance in the pursuit of mass literacy is the central theme of our dismal system of education. The expansion of the education system has not had any striking impact on literacy. While primary education has expanded -- as given data show - 3.3 times during the four decades following independence, the percentage of literates in the total population has just about doubled itself, and that with dilution in the norms of recording literacy-related skills in census surveys. Why has primary education performed so poorly?

The search for explanations has typically been made in the context of the economic conditions prevailing in rural India. The question why primary schools fail to retain children long enough to make them permanently literate is usually explained away by referring to the poverty of rural parents. Studies leaning on the 'culture of poverty' concept continue to hold sway, and they tell us that poor parents 'withdraw' their children from school mainly because they are too poor to afford to keep children at school rather than at work. Rarely does anyone wonder if primary school pedagogy could have some thing to do with the school's failure to retain children long enough to make them literate. This is the direction I will pursue here in search of an explanation for the poor performance of primary education in the context of literacy. I will argue that the entrenched pedagogy of reading may be at the heart of the problem of early elimination from school.

Early Elimination

India's education system does not cover all children of the primary school age (i.e., 6 to 11 years). Precisely what proportion of children it covers is a matter of some controversy. School enrolment figures for grades one to five, compiled by the Department of Education, convey the impression that nearly 90 per cent of the 6-11 year olds in the country are enrolled in primary schools or non-formal institutions. The recently released selected statistics of the Fifth All India Educational Survey further strengthen this impression. Prominent among the researchers who have questioned the impression is Yash Aggarwal who has worked on the line John Kurrien had pursued earlier, showing the large difference between the figures of enrolment given by the Department of Education and those collected by the census. Going by the responses collected under the 1981 census, Aggarwal concludes that only 47 per cent of the primary school age children are actually in schools, either formal or non-formal. Out of the rest, perhaps quite a few are enrolled but they are not attending school. The discrepancy between census data and enrolment data is very wide indeed. The Government's pressure on teachers to enrol every child in the community can be accounted for by referring to the high rate of elimination (official term 'dropping out') from school. Indeed, the two explanations compliment each other. Teachers enrol children under orders from above, but fail to keep them at school. This is what the well-studied phenomenon of 'dropping out' is all about. Earlier planners, most prominently the late J.P. Naik, used to call it the wastage rate, for they thought the resources spent on a child who leaves school before completing a stage are wasted. Naik had worked out the wastage rate to be about 60 per cent between grades one and five, i.e., out of 100 children enrolled in Grade one only 40 reach Grade five?

There is no reason to think that this rate has declined. Apparently, collection of age and grade-wise enrolment data was discontinued in the early seventies. This may be why the statistical appendix to the document called 'Challenge of Education', which outlined the perspective for the 1980s education policy, was content to carry a table (compiled in 1983) showing grade-wise enrolment rates up to the 1970-78 batch of elementary school going population.⁵ According to this table, the national average of elimination between grades one and five was 66 per cent. In other words, out of the 100 children who enrolled in 1970-71 in grade one, only 34 remained until grade five. Of the 66 who left, 39 had already done so within the first year, resulting in 61 per cent enrolment in grade two (compared to grade

one). These rates of elimination seem to have remained quite stable, which implies that the general processes of socio-economic development and change have not had much impact in this matter.

Widespread and stable though the phenomenon of early elimination has been, it continues to be rather poorly understood. The general belief is that economic pressures on children and parents of 'backward' socio-economic backgrounds are responsible for the high incidence of premature school leaving. This belief gains support from the fact that child labour is widespread in India. Children's usefulness as cheap and readily available labour is widely cited in social and demographic research to explain why school enrolment does not remain stable over the elementary years. No less than 500 studies have been listed in a recent annotated bibliography on the so-called 'drop out' rate. With few exceptions, these studies conclude that poverty drives parents to withdraw their children from school. The assumptions underlying the majority of these studies are clear enough. The major assumption is that early elimination is caused by poverty and backwardness. The argument is simple: since almost all children who leave school early are poor, this kind of behaviour ought to be related to poverty.

No study has yet explained why the child's labour value changes dramatically between grade one and two where the elimination rate is highest. As the enrolment data given earlier indicate, 39 out of the 66 children (per 100) who stop attending school between grades one and five do so within grade. In other words, nearly 61 per cent of the 'drop out' children belong to the youngest age group attending school. Most likely, these children are five to seven years old. Now if these children are leaving school due to the economic necessity of their families, there ought to be a sudden jump in the children's labour value between grades one and two, roughly age six to seven. Surely we need a medical explanation for this sudden jump. Otherwise why would, a parent send his child to grade one but withdraw him before grade two? The question takes the bottom out of the theory that early elimination has a satisfactory economic explanation in our conditions in the late twentieth century. It also hits at the research convention of asking poor parents why they 'withdraw' their children from school. The basis of such interviewing lies in the 'culture of poverty' theory, which continues to influence social research in India.

It is time we turned our attention to the child's perspective on this problem. One of the questions we would ask if we took that child's perspective is:

'Does the primary school provide what a grade one child is looking for?' The paramount motivation in a grade one child is to make sense of the world around him. Poor health, malnutrition, and oppressive control of the child's routine can weaken this drive but they cannot wipe it out. The child of six, irrespective of his existential conditions, is curious about the world, and wants to manipulate it, and understand it. One of the primary means of doing these things is language, and a grade one child is already familiar with its marvellous capacities. He has already used it to establish relationships, to internalise these relationships, and then to apply the internalisation to explore a wider world. Along with movement, touch, vision, hearing, and smell, the child of six is familiar with the exciting possibilities of language. He knows from social lore that school is when he will learn two new, powerful, skills namely, reading and writing and much else.

We can hardly capture the associations of growth power, and knowledge that the five plus child makes with the school before entering it. If we are able to hold even a small fraction of these associations in our view, we would know how frustrated the child must get after he has spent a few days at an average primary school. He would find out that the school is not the place where he can 'make sense' of the world. Skills that any child would use to solve new problems have no place in the grade one class. Indeed, 'making sense' and 'solving problems' are not on the agenda at all. What is on the agenda, to begin with, is to learn the shapes of letters that form the syllabary, and to know the names by which they are called. The child is required to master the syllabary by sounding out the names of all the letters and by practising to write them out correctly over and over again. When the syllabary has been mastered in this manner, the child is called upon to recognize the different letters forming a word given in the primer, and to pronounce the word. The words he is asked to confront at this stage are part of a long convention of pedagogy, and have nothing to do with a child's perception or curiosity.

Moreover, the school has hardly anything that the child is free to touch, manipulate, and examine. The Fourth All India Educational Survey showed that over 50 per cent of primary schools in India did not have a concrete structure, playground, or even drinking water facility, 40 per cent were without blackboards, and 70 per cent had no library of any kind. The school is a colourless, alienated, stuffy little place from the point of view of a six year old. Any excuse would be good enough to stop going there.

Literacy and Meaning

This reconstruction leads us to hypothesise that the pedagogy of language, particularly reading may be at the heart of the problem of early elimination. The manner in which our primary schools attempt to impart the capacity to read could well hold in it an explanation that we have not yet heard. Listening to this explanation, does not mean that we negate the validity of other explanations, such as the ones related to poverty and child labour. There can be no doubt about the impact of destitution and hunger in the family on school attendance. The point is to prepare a model consisting of all the salient features of the phenomenon. The few researchers who have paid some attention to pedagogical conditions of primary schools have treated them as a peripheral aspect of the overall picture. It may be worthwhile to look at pedagogy more carefully, particularly the pedagogy of reading and writing. These are the two foundation skills on which the edifice of the school's system of teaching and certifying rests. Also, competence in reading and writing determines the child's ability to benefit from the information storage systems that are characteristic of a literate society. The school system as we know it today is a key agency serving literacy-based information storage systems essential for modern social organization. If the school fails to impart lasting literacy to a great proportion of its clients, it must be seen as a case of serious institutional dysfunction in the overall social system. We have reason to accept that such dysfunction has occurred in our country. Early elimination rates are one indication of this. It is self-evident that the majority of children who enrol for primary education abandon it without acquiring lasting literacy. Of the children who continue to study, a great many do not acquire the ability to comprehend what they read. The dismal performance of Indian students in the IEA tests was only a proof of what every secondary school and college teacher knows from daily experience.

In the sphere of reading, the common practices applied in our primary schools sharply contrast with what scientific knowledge about the reading process suggests. The general state of the teaching of reading in grade one is close to what contemporary reading researchers would identify as the 'traditional' approach. In brief, this approach is characterized by the treatment of script as a complex package of information's to be learnt for their own sake. Children must learn the names of different letters, and they must develop the ability to recognize them separately and as part of a word. Only after this familiarity with letters becomes reliable is the child allowed

to apply it on a sentence representing a meaningful statement. This takes time, for the process involves a considerable amount of mechanical work, which offers no immediate pay-off or satisfaction. Reading is treated in this approach as an end product, which the child must wait for, suspending his desire to find meaning in written material, especially to find meaning with which he can relate.

Current research on the reading process tells us that the desires to relate and to find meaning are at the heart of reading. It is now understood that reading and writing skills represent later stages on the continuum on which symbolic interaction through talk, play, and drawing appear earlier. The continuum encapsulates the human child's desire to be involved in communication. We cannot isolate the tasks involved in reading from this continuum without seriously altering the nature of these tasks. If we teach children to recognize letters as an isolated task, we influence the nature and the role of this task in the overall process of reading. Children breaking down words into letters, and sentences into words are a common sight in Indian primary schools. Those who do so internally may far out number the ones who do so verbally, and this category could well be applied to many adult members of the literate population. For a child who has learnt to read letter by letter or word by word, there is no choice except to recode the text into a sound system which then has to be decoded via the phonological, syntactic, and semantic components. It is an arduous and necessarily wasteful process, which overloads the child's short-term memory and the capacity to pay attention to meaning.

There is of course a chance that children taught to read by the traditional methods may also become competent readers. The presence of a loving and encouraging teacher can imbue any process, however mechanical, with a sense of worth. This would be especially true if the teacher has all the time in the world to work with the child. One suspects that this condition was at work during the years when only a few people were required to possess literacy skills. Availability of leisure, freedom from competition, and the small number of pupils for a teacher were the other complimentary conditions that made the traditional approaches of imparting reading skills reasonably successful. These conditions were characteristic of a society whose culture sanctioned an elite to monopolise the means of using literacy and the means to store accumulated knowledge, particularly knowledge about the society's past. In such a society, a teacher could well afford to expand the process of learning to be literate in every possible mechanical

detail. In turning the phonology and the graphology of the language into a full-blown curriculum, he did not have to worry about imparting a sense of meaning at every stage. In the cultural milieu we are referring to, a sense of meaning need not have been a part of the daily learning experience, for meaning was generated elsewhere, for example, in the association between educational opportunity and high social status.

We confront an altogether different set of circumstances today, under which the persistence of traditional methods of reading and writing presents a case of cultural anachronism. Industrial development and the socio-political institutions that are conducive to industrialization demand mass education, especially, mass literacy. Industrialization breaks down the collective meanings and sources of self-respect that an oral culture might offer to its members. Particularly under capitalism industrial development forces all members of society to generate meanings by individual effort, and to be prepared to surrender self-respect if the meanings thus generated do not help one stay afloat in the market economy. Some societies have to a certain extent succeeded in softening this power of industrial development by projecting national identity and ideology as reservoirs to which individuals can turn for deriving a sense of worth. But even these societies have not neglected the task of assisting the individual child to generate a sense of personal meaning through education. This is the reason why child-centred methods of education have been accepted as essential not just in the bourgeois United States but also in the former socialist Soviet Union. The significance of these methods lies in the capacities they have for sustaining mass motivation for learning and for making sense of situations. The methods were born out of the needs created by industrialization, and they continue to serve industrial development, both by imparting universal and effective literary, and by sustaining the individual's desire to live and to like sense of conditions brought about by the advancement of industrialization.

Cheaper Sector?

The problem in a country like ours is that it wants to industrialize without investing in primary schools. So we continue to keep the primary school in conditions that make child-centred methods inapplicable. The naming of the recent, much-publicised 'Operation Blackboard' shows how badly the state has treated primary education all along." The fact is that in India, as in many other so-called 'developing' countries, primary education has been customarily regarded as a cheaper sector in comparison to secondary and

higher education. This view of primary education is reflected in the inter-sectoral gap that exists in educational financing of the richer, 'developed' and the 'developing' countries of the world. Whereas in higher education, the richer countries make five times greater per capita investment than what the poorer countries make, in primary education the richer countries spend thirty times more than what the poorer countries do per child.

Another manifestation of the view that primary education can do with lower-order resources can be found in the educational budget since the fifties. As compared with 1950-51 when primary education accounted for 40 per cent of the expenditure incurred on education as a whole, in 1979-80 it accounted for only 24 per cent. 'Plan' allocation for primary education similarly declined from 56 per cent in the First Plan to 29 per cent in the Seventh Plan. This decline becomes particularly meaningful if we place it against the continual increase of India's child population and the increase in the number of primary schools. In comparison to the 150,000 primary schools that India had at the time of independence, it had about 500,000 at the beginning of the present decade. The implication is clear -- that educational policy did emphasise expansion of primary education but permitted the thinning of resources allocated for it.

If primary education is to be regarded in future as a key agency for achieving mass literacy, then the perception of primary education as a cheaper sector will have to change. Early schooling of a kind that offers children an absorbing environment and a real chance to become literate implies an expensive model. Such a model will mean extensive equipping of primary classrooms with material objects. The creation of appropriate spaces for learning and play equipment will be the first requirement, followed by an on going supply of equipment. At the moment, manufacturing of primary level learning resources is part of a rather poorly developed small-scale industry. Certain sectors of the industry, such as the manufacturing of indigenous toys, are under great stress. In other sectors, such as the manufacturing of modern play devices, and children's books, there is both lack of direction and absence of norms. Regeneration of primary education cannot materialise without the investment of very substantial monetary and organizational resources in the manufacturing of pedagogical materials. What gives this condition an added significance is the prevalence of the 'textbook culture', which we have discussed earlier. A product of colonization, this culture encourages school pedagogy to stay literally within the specific lessons of the prescribed textbook. Poverty of the primary

school exacerbates the rigidity and thinness of classroom work. The dominance of prescribed textbooks can be expected to abate if the manufacturing and supply of pedagogical resources, especially of children's literature improves.

The equipping of primary schools for curricular enrichment also requires modernization of teacher training and change in the career conditions of primary level teachers. At present, the primary teacher is a powerless and poorly paid professional functionary of the education system. One implication of the primary teacher's powerless position in the system is the absence of opportunities for the exercise of judgement and imagination in matters like curriculum and preparation of text materials. This situation is exacerbated by the bleak pre-service training available for primary teachers. What academic content it has is largely obsolete, and its skill-related component lacks practical value for actual classroom setting. Literacy teaching is a particularly weak area of teacher training curricula. Recent research and theorisations in the areas of reading and writing are largely unknown in Indian teacher training institutions, although at some of them one can find a part of the staff parroting the recent Western jargon. What puts the icing on this sad situation is the old belief that teachers need only skills, not theory. This belief makes the recent advances in reading research irrelevant for us, for the major implication of this research is that the teachers must understand the theory underlying recommended practices. The teacher who is ignorant of the theory behind ideas, such as building a classroom ethos conducive to individual interpretation and intelligent guessing, is unlikely to be able to build such an ethos.

Changes in classroom conditions along the lines indicated here are incompatible with the powerlessness of the teacher and the poverty of resources available for primary schools. How will these features of the present system permit an alternative model to gain acceptance? The question forces us to remember that perceptions of education are rooted in the political economy of a society and therefore cannot be radically altered in isolation. A certain degree of change in the state's level of concern for primary education is all that we can hope for if sufficient pressure on the state is built up. In the pursuit of this restricted aim, we may do well by reminding those who hold state power that steps to improve primary education may not necessarily involve social conflict. Acharya has indicated the possibility of discontent arising among the richer farmers if effective primary schooling obstructs the supply of cheap child labour. It is unlikely

that the discontent of the richer farmers will find expression in violence or further oppression, but even if it does in some cases, the 'risk' does not justify the state's unpreparedness for investing larger resources in primary education unless the state is merely an instrument of the richer strata of society.

END