

I.P. Desai Memorial Lecture: 11

**EDUCATION AND SOCIETY
IN POST-INDEPENDENCE INDIA -
LOOKING TOWARDS THE FUTURE**

Krishna Kumar

CENTRE FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
UNIVERSITY CAMPUS, UDHNA MAGDALLA ROAD,
SURAT - 395 007

PREFACE

The Centre for Social Studies has created an endowment fund to honour late Prof. I.P. Desai, the founder-Director of the Centre. As part of the programme, we have instituted the I.P. Desai Memorial Lecture series. Prof. Krishna Kumar delivered the eleventh lecture entitled 'Education and Society in Post-Independence India - Looking Towards the Future'. It gives us great pleasure to make this lecture available to a wider academic community.

We are grateful to Prof. Krishna Kumar for having readily responded to our invitation to deliver the lecture. I must thank my colleague Dr. Biswaroop Das for preparing the copy for the press.

September 1998

Lancy Lobo

Centre for Social Studies
Surat - 395 007

Education and Society in Post-Independence India - Looking Towards the Future

Krishna Kumar

Major changes were introduced in India's economic policies at the beginning of this decade. Although some of these changes were in the offing for at least a decade, the formal announcement of a 'new economic policy' looked rather dramatic because of the terminology used in it. The older terminology of government policy used words like 'planning', 'mixed economy', 'self-reliance' and 'socialistic pattern'. This terminology had its origins in the fifties when India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, had opted to keep India formally non-aligned in the post-war world, standing on its own legs but leaning somewhat to the left. The new terminology of the nineties also stresses the importance of standing straight, but this time one can notice a tilt to the right. Words upholding the new climate of government policy and dominant opinion are 'liberalisation', 'privatisation', 'globalisation', and 'market-friendliness'.

The change is not entirely of India's own making. The end of the cold war has a lot to do with the change of climate in India and elsewhere. It is also related to technological changes, especially in electronics and communication. A vast accommodation is taking place world-wide between the owners of capital and others whose main possessions are natural and labour resources.¹ To many, especially in the west where reception of change is always a bit dramatic, this one is being seen as the end of history. In India, where change usually invokes the belief that this too will pass, the new policies and changes accompanying them in society and politics have aroused a passionate debate. Many people of my generation, whose memories of childhood are overshadowed by Mahatma Gandhi and Nehru, feel suspicious and bewildered. Up until yesterday the state reflected our belief that India's modernisation could take place without sacrificing village self-reliance. Somewhat suddenly we find that the state has changed its rhetoric, that

geography of both the nation and the village has turned fluid and permeable. We feel uncomfortable teaching our children that self-reliance and moderation are myths in an interdependent world.

The present debate on the future of the new economic policies can be summarised in three scenarios. In the first scenario, the new policy will achieve a resounding success, fulfilling the targets set by its proponents, including the World Bank. India will achieve a high rate of economic growth by accelerating exports and attracting foreign capital. Poverty and unemployment will diminish as the benefits of increased productivity percolate to the bottom layers of society. These bottom layers, let us note, comprise no less than sixty to seventy per cent of the population. Those who inhabit these layers are landless rural labourers, peasants with small holdings, village artisans, urban workers employed in household industries, informal jobs and building construction. In the first scenario, this vast mass of the population will gradually become a literate workforce, capable of participating in a fully monetised open economy.

In the second scenario, this mass will form a politically restive underclass even as the export-driven economy deepens social divisions. Its fruits will be cornered by the elite minority, actively participating in the global exchange of goods and services. In this scenario, the new economic policies lead to disaster. The state exhausts itself maintaining security for the wealthy so that the misery and revolt of the poor do not disturb their enjoyment and interests. India gets into a debt trap, so its already emaciated efforts in health and education deteriorate further. Speeded up industrialisation, mining, damming, forest-cutting, transport and urbanisation cripple the environment's capacity to let the small-scale peasant, the artisan and the tribal subsist on it. Forced to quell frequent eruption of disorganised turmoil from among the dispossessed, the state sheds its democratic character and acts like an agent of multinational companies.

In the third scenario, the new economic policies will neither fully succeed nor disappear. The rich will reach western levels of consumption, and fringes of the underclass will get inducted into a peripheral relationship with globalised production and services. The rest will find political means of restraining the pace of globalisation. After a brief period of higher growth rate, the economy will slow down and foreign capital will flee. The state will remain a major player in distribution of scarce resources in addition to performing regulatory roles

in the context of large-scale privatisation. The outcome of the new policies will become increasingly difficult to distinguish from older trends.

The plausibility of all three scenarios is quite high, given the multiplicity of factors relevant to India, but I will defer my preference till the end. The window of education through which I am used to looking at the world is not particularly useful for making precise predictions. Education is said to be a good door to the future; it is not a good window to look at the future. For one thing, the outcome of education depends on many things we may never teach in schools - things that children and young people absorb as part of their socialisation from the wider milieu. Had it not been so, British colonial education would have produced only subordinate officers and clerks, not ideologues of national freedom and others who fought for it. Similarly, the Soviet Union would have been saved by the third generation of children brought up on the belief that the Union was a wonderful achievement. In the last six years during which the so-called economic reforms have been actively applied in our country, the news in education has been particularly confusing. During this period, when the state was supposed to shed its welfare burden under the World Bank's tutorship, massive programmes of literacy and primary education have been underway. True, the latter is funded by foreign aid and loans, and the procedures followed in this well as well as the literacy projects do not arouse full confidence, but one can hardly doubt that these nation-wide programmes have responded to needs long neglected by the state. Similarly, the imminent amendment in the Constitution, which will make elementary education a fundamental right, may not itself signify a major shift in policy; but, in the context of judicial activism and the growth of interest in children's education among voluntary organisations, we can expect the Constitutional amendment to accelerate the demand for accountability in the system of education, particularly from its bureaucracy.

These developments do not look very compatible with the usual rhetoric of structural adjustment and liberalisation policies. Perhaps the real implications of these policies are yet to surface. For example, the claim that mass literacy and primary education have now become the state's priorities will face a test only when external funds for these areas dry up as they must after some time. Budget cuts in universities are an early symptom, some people argue, of the negative influence that liberalisation policies will have on education. They also point towards the private universities bill which is in the offing. The strong and open

salesmanship with which some foreign universities have started to lure Indian students is another symptom. However, it is hard to judge how much real change these symptoms indicate, given the strong and fairly continuous trends entrenched in the Indian system of education. These trends have been entrenched in the system since its formation in the later half of the nineteenth century. In order to assess the long-term implications of the recent changes, we can fruitfully reflect on the trends which have been visible for a long time. We can focus on the shape these trends have assumed during the last fifty years of India's independence, and then speculate on how the emerging economic regime might affect them. For the present discussion I will group these trends in three broad categories.

In the first group we can place tendencies related to the drastic reduction in the number of children who proceed beyond the primary or the junior secondary stages. A cursory look at the number of schools in India (Table 1) suffices to convey the point that if all children enrolled in primary schools proceeded to complete eight years of elementary education as the writers of the Constitution had desired, the junior secondary or the 'middle' schools will have a serious problem accommodating them. Compared to the 590421 primary schools India has, there are only a little more than 171 thousand middle schools. The ratio between middle and high schools is somewhat better, which means that those who survive eight years of schooling have a higher chance to stay longer, at least till they meet the first public examination to which I will refer later. Relentless elimination of children from the system takes place during the earliest grades. Official figures confirm that some 44 per cent of the children enrolled in grade one leave the school before reaching grade five, and those who do not reach grade eight are 63 per cent of the original population of grade one. These figures are depressing enough, but they are not accurate, and the reality is a lot worse.²

Collection of accurate enrolment and attendance figures had remained a chronic problem for as long as the present system has been around. And the problem has been mainly in rural India where three fourths of the population resides. The Quinquennial Review of 1917-22 mentions how when 100 village schools were checked in one day in the United Provinces - present day Uttar Pradesh - the total enrolment claimed by teachers was 8303, average attendance was said to be

5516, and the day's actual attendance was 4903. A visit to a village school in UP would show today's situation to be no different, and over-reporting much worse, considering that state documents show UP's dropout rate to be lower than the national average, lower than that of states like Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat, which we know have better functioning systems of primary education than UP has. The fact is that we cannot judge the reality of rural primary education, especially in the less less literate northern Hindi belt, from any set of statistics. The gap between census figures and the ones collected by the ministry of education - known since the mid-eighties as human resource development - was spotted a while ago, and most recently a report has humbly acknowledge that no two sources of information seem to match.

The collection of accurate figures has received considerable international interest and funds in the recent years, apparently because regional choices made by external investors of capital are likely to be influenced by the quality of available labour. The basic cause of inflated reporting continues to be neglected though it has been known rather well since the days of the British. This basic cause is the subordinate, indeed powerless, status of the primary school teacher. Over the decades, higher officials have socialised and trained the teacher in dishonest record-keeping. It is on account of this training that we have grossly inaccurate knowledge of plain facts like how many children enrol, how many attend, and how many qualify for promotion to the next grade. The game of numbers goes on though everyone can see through it. We cannot have a basis for better planning of rural education till the teacher remains too subservient to feel free to maintain honest records of enrolment and attendance.

It is instructive to notice that the heavy rate of early elimination from school has remained almost stable over almost three decades. Old, entrenched tendencies such as the urban bias of the curriculum and school literature, service conditions of teachers and the chronic paucity of non-salary expenditure are reflected in this stability. But it also reflects deeper socio-economic issues which have to do with the choices made in food policy in the sixties and the general pattern into which developmentalism as a global and national phenomenon fell since that decade.³ The attempt made in the first decade of independence to link primary education with rural crafts under the 'basic' education programme inspired by Mahatma Gandhi was abandoned in the

mid-sixties. The focus of the new strategy adopted then was to nurture long-term educational opportunities for owners of larger and better land holdings. Referring to the highly iniquitous distribution of land, the Education Commission of the mid-sixties calculated that 'at present there are nearly 6 million farms of 15 acres or more (out of 50 million farms)... If we assume that ownership will change at 3 per cent a year, this means nearly 200000 new farmers inheriting such farms every year. It seems reasonable to think that by 1986, 1 in 50 of these may be an agriculture graduate.' The commission endorsed the new agricultural strategy which was to enable the bigger landowners to enhance their material opportunities. Known as the Green Revolution, this strategy aimed at making India self-reliant in the production of wheat and rice by the use of new, hybrid seeds demanding heavy use of chemical fertilisers, pesticides and water. The strategy did achieve its goal, but at a serious cost. Smaller landholders were pauperised, regional inequalities deepened, and the natural environment deteriorated. The new approach depended on large-scale farmer; their political lobbies put further holes in an already weak programme of land reforms. Their dominance encouraged the populist politics and programmes of the seventies. Large-scale displacement, migration to city slums and break-up of the community and family affected an ever-growing segment of the rural population of children. The new policies had paradoxical outcomes, such as lowering of child mortality but no significant rise in nutrition and health. Absolute hunger declined, but chronic hunger and illness persisted. It was a bit like higher enrolment, but poorer attendance and early withdrawal.

Also during the sixties, India fought three wars. Defence needs naturally gained far greater visibility and urgency, leading to the development of an impressive military-industrial complex. Literacy, rural education and health had never been high priorities; the new climate made it easier to neglect them. Cold war perspective and the international politics of food and supply of arms provided external help in setting India on the road to redefining development as consumption and spectacular application of science and technology. About a fourth of the total population was regarded as adequate as the operative universe in which development programmes and a modern market economy could be seen as working. Enrolment statistics, despite their general unreliability for the early grades, testify to this sketch. Retention rate between grades 1 and 8 remained almost stationery from the early

sixties to the early eighties, showing that a little more than one fourth of the children who enrolled in grade one could last in the school till grade 8. This proportion is reported to have grown to 37 per cent (Table 2).

This is not difficult to guess the collective identities of the children who fail to survive at school. They are children of landless agricultural labourers and subsistence peasants. Caste-wise, a substantial proportion of them belongs to the Scheduled Castes who have been granted special rights including reservation in higher education and representative bodies, in the Constitution. Table 3 shows how sharply their presence at school shrinks between grades 5 and 8 and there onwards.⁴ The situation of children belonging to many of the Scheduled tribes is worse, especially in the central Indian belt. Forest-dwelling tribal communities have had to bear the brunt of state initiatives in dam construction, development of tourism with the help of game sanctuaries, and mining. Apart from such destabilising experiences, bias against tribal cultures and languages also makes the school curriculum and the teacher a deterrent for the advancement of tribal education. Then there are rural artisans, the creators of India's glorious handicraft traditions. There are about 40 million crafts people in India, out of which about 12 million are in the handloom sector alone. How trivial, and in that sense irrelevant and demeaning, the standard school curriculum is for the children of these craft communities can be judged only by spending a day in Chanderi or Benaras with a craft family. No wonder, one realises in a rather simple, unscientific way, these children stop coming to school early. Finally, the child residing in an urban slum is always a likely case of early withdrawal or elimination. The uncertainty and violence of the milieu in which the slum child lives often combines with neglect and violence at school in addition to the pressure of parental poverty which drives the child towards work.

The second dominant tendency I wish to elaborate on is the preponderance of higher education. When India became independent, the proportion of literates in the total population was 12 per cent (about 18 per cent if we exclude children below five from the total population). Spread of literacy and primary education were rightly perceived as national priorities by the eminent leaders of that period, yet the first commission appointed soon after independence was asked to focus on university education. The second commission, appointed a few years later, was asked to focus on secondary education. Not only such official

panels, the growth rate of enrolment and of the number of institutions also show that secondary and higher education expanded more rapidly than elementary education. This was consistent with the earlier trend; independence merely triggered fresh enthusiasm for the growth of institutions at the higher level. Demand for higher education had been made since the late nineteenth century in the articulate and loud voice of the literate upper-caste elites. Independence gave further strength to this voice. Starting a university or a college affiliated to it became a means of expressing political or regional clout. Thus, in the first twenty five years of independence the number of universities grew more than four times and then doubled itself in the next twenty five years. As Table 4 shows, the annual growth rate of enrolment in higher education outpaced the rate at which elementary education was growing. This was true of institutional expansion too, especially in the sixties. The proportion of expenditure on higher education rose very substantially in the second five year plan of the late fifties and remained high throughout the seventies and the early eighties.

There is more than one way of reading this story. The obvious reading is that secondary and higher education developed at the expense of mass elementary education. In sociological terms, the culturally dominant and economically stronger sections of society used the state's resources to consolidate their hold on the expanding state apparatus of new functions and opportunities. Tuition fee was kept at minimal levels, with the justification that this would allow weaker sections to avail college education, but it enabled mainly the strong to further strengthen themselves by qualifying their children for the highest available opportunities in the job market. Who was going to college and who was not doing well even if he got there somehow - such enquiries established the expected truth.⁵ But it is also true that a limited number of the more tenacious aspirants for higher qualifications from relatively poorer, in some cases, rural backgrounds were able to avail higher education because the tuition fee was so heavily subsidised. They and the specially designated Scheduled Castes served as adequate means of legitimising an arrangement which suited the post-colonial rhetoric of nation-building and attainment of self-reliance.

That last point is the gist of the second reading of the differential rates of growth we see in Table 4. Expansion of higher education, including the establishment of advanced research centres and

academies, had an immediate, palpable role to play in Nehru's India - to give India a sense of presence in the post-war international order. Founding an infrastructure of basic industries was a priority of Nehru's regime. A special effort was made to establish India in atomic and space sciences. After the war with China in 1962, these priorities stopped looking ambitious: they became necessities for a country which found itself placed in a hostile geography. Pressing requirements in transport, energy, modern agriculture and chemicals spontaneously translated into advancement of science and engineering, making them far more urgent and important aims of the unwritten education policy than the opening maintenance of decent village schools could ever be. So while the pursuit of equality and social justice waited for political means, education became the primary means by which suitable boys and girls could be legitimately selected for higher professional and academic degrees. To maintain legitimacy for its ruthless selection devices, the system of education required an accommodating secondary school system linked to a multipurpose higher education through a public examination. High rate of failure in school leaving examination kept what check was possible on the numbers of college entrants, and those who entered but could not proceed for coveted professional courses found enough room in general arts and science courses to satisfy what has aptly been called the 'diploma diseases'.

Rise of a national intelligentsia, linked together across geographical and cultural boundaries, by English education has been cited by historians as a prime mover of the nationalist struggle against the British. Technology of press, transport and postal system enabled it from late nineteenth century onwards to form civic and political associations, participate in some areas of decision-making and carve out a liberal public space in which certain kinds of conflicts could be ironed out through deliberation and negotiation. Early growth of higher education and its rapid expansion after independence helped in the institutionalisation of these functions. There is truth in the claim that the national intelligentsia, including the bureaucracy, the judiciary, and the academia, has helped India stay one, along with democratic politics and the state's coercive might. If we acknowledge this truth, we must also admit the price paid for this kind of unity in terms of neglected priorities of mass welfare, particularly in education and health. Colleges and universities trained the elite intelligentsia, while the masses had the franchise alone to train themselves to participate in the liberal institutions

of parliamentary democracy. Of late, colleges and universities have produced a substantial number of activist negotiators across the state-people interface. Their role has been especially notable in the struggles for the protection of human rights, the environment and women's rights. Rather different from the men and women engaged in active politics in earlier periods, these new leaders of local action purposely elude political identity, but they are playing a widely appreciated role in redefining the scope and behaviour of older institutions like the press, the bureaucracy and the judiciary. Howsoever unjust and poor in quality, the higher education system must get the credit for training these new as well as the older players of liberal democratic games.

The third and last tendency I wish to discuss is that of inherent divisiveness in the system. Multiplicity of sub-systems is hardly inconsistent with pluralism, but I am talking about a divisive tendency which protects class interests. The term 'class' sits ill with Indian social realities; it rarely implies anymore than sectional interests which seem to be moving towards the formation of a class. Thus, educational activity under the banner of religious or linguistic community, which has been sanctioned in the Indian Constitution for minority groups, and caste can sometimes give the impression of contributing to a class-forming process, at other times its opposite, namely a process impeding class formation. A clearer point can be made in relation to the practice of private schooling of a kind inspired by Britain's public school model. Inasmuch as norms and rituals indicate group consolidation, the so-called public schools in India have contributed to the making of an Indian bourgeois class which forms an important and dominant segment of the national intelligentsia.⁶

Rituals which reinforce loyalty to the institution, a sense of tradition and the feeling that 'we' belong to a community of similar schools are important elements of the agenda of socialisation public schools pursue. But the core of this agenda is to impart facility in the use of English language. Competence in English is the single most important maker of a young person's eligibility for negotiating the opportunity structure that the modern economy has made available. Those who lack competence in English have remarkably limited scope for moving into higher income and higher status roles. However, skill in English does not act as an isolated determinant of one's social destiny; rather, it acts as

composite indicator of long-term advantages and their numerous psychological outcome. Early streaming into a fee-charging private school is one of the major items of bio-data of those displaying fluency in English in youth. With minor expectations, all such schools use English as a medium of instruction in all subjects from the earliest grades onwards, in contrast to the schools run as part the state system which use a regional language as a medium. The medium sets the two systems apart. Public schools were rather few to begin with: about fifty at the time of independence, but the term 'public school' is not easy to define today when the original mode of the British public school can at best faintly recognised in the dozens of bio-diverse forms its progeny has taken. The genotype covers more than the 3,237 secondary schools listed as unaided private schools, forming about 15 per cent of urban secondary schools in the country. Today one can see the genotype reflected in certain kinds of state schools as well as state-aided schools in the bigger villages. As a maker of distinction, both educational and economic, English language has gained wider appreciation apart from freeing itself of the hospitality it once symbolised.

Spread of the public school model and the consequent erosion of the concept of a common, neighbourhood school are expressions of a deeper tendency in the system to provide emerging or neo-elites with islands of moderate security and hope of self-perpetuation.⁷ The state's inability to run a credible, universally accessible system has encouraged this tendency, but there is also a socio-cultural urge to form justifiable islands. Thus, in the early sixties a separate network was created to serve children of the central government's employees who are transferable throughout the country. This network had 20 schools to begin with; today there are 818. In the mid-eighties a chain of schools was proposed to serve the 'gifted' rural child, identified by means of a test for eleven-year olds. There are 359 of this kind now - one per district, admitting some eighty children every year in grade six. These are all residential schools, offering a kind of public school education to the children of the wealthier farmers, barring the usual category of entrants from the Scheduled Castes and Tribes with reserved seats. These and a few other categories of privileged schools run by some of the state governments are all affiliated to the central board of secondary education (CBSE). At present, its network covers some 4,800 schools with about 5 million children. These include private schools. The CBSE

and another privately run board, we can say, conduct the matriculate and the senior secondary examination throughout the country for the elite layer of schools which produce a substantial proportion of the national intelligentsia.

Exclusive schooling is a better term to name the complex social streaming that takes place in India under the auspices of private or non-government and special schools run by the government. Exclusive schooling has been on a rapid rise over the last two decades or so. It has an obvious functional rationale in a society in which less than four out of ten children are able to survive at school beyond grade eight. They also have a symbolic rationale easy to comprehend. The lotus flower, which is the seal of Saraswati, the goddess of learning, figures in the emblem of many exclusive schools, covering the point that good learning sets its gainer apart from or above the surrounding mud of ignorance. How vast and thick this mud is can be estimated from the combined success rate of the grade ten and grade twelve examinations conducted by the provincial boards to which the vast majority of schools are affiliated. Out of the 8.8 million students who took the grade ten or high examination in 1990, 4.1 million or about 46 per cent passed. Out of them, 3.8 million took the grade 12 or senior secondary examination in 1992 in which only 1.7 million or 45 per cent passed. Thus, the two examinations left just 19 per cent of the total number of students in provincial board schools in the country who could aspire for higher educational qualifications and the jobs they might lead to. Success rates of the two all-India boards is routinely much higher although the examinations conducted by them are believed to be tougher. The CBSE is perceived as a norm-setter for what new topics or segments of knowledge should be included in the syllabi of different subjects in provincial boards. A textbook flaunts status when it says that it covers the CBSE syllabus, just as a school announces its status by flaunting affiliation to the CBSE, rather than to a provincial board, in its signboard or brochure.

I now wish to speculate on how the new economic policies are likely to influence the three tendencies I have discussed, and also on how these tendencies might influence the future of the new economic policies. It is quite clear that the proponents of liberalisation have been able to exercise more effective pressure in favour of mass literacy and primary education than well-meaning advisory pannels or the intelligentsia had been able to exercise at any point in the last fifty years.

Literacy and schooling not only promise a more trainable and compliant work-force, but also a more brand-conscious population of consumers. The recent adult-literacy campaigns and the ongoing foreign-funded programme for strengthening primary education can be expected to make some impact on the drop-out rate, especially in rural areas where a conscious demand for education has now become a reality. Also, the poor quality of school provision has been stronger factor responsible for the high drop-out rate in rural areas than the use of children for labour. It is in urban areas that this latter phenomenon has greater applicability as an explanation for early school-leaving. The new economic regime is likely to worsen rather than improve the state of child labour. It is also likely to accelerate migration from rural to urban areas. Liberalisation was inaugurated with a devaluation of the currency in order to boost exports. This kind of effort to give to Indian products a competitive advantage in the saturated market of consumer goods in the wealthy world inevitably implies low wages and a decline in the real income of the labouring poor - a phenomenon which has already begun to be noticed. These effects of the emerging economic policies can only sharpen the contradiction between growth of demand and of provision for primary education on one hand, and the incapacity of the pauperised to spare their children for schooling.

Even with the decline in drop-out rates remaining largely confined to rural areas, the burden of an increased number of school survivors on secondary education significant. Private, or rather commercial, initiative - an aspect of the new economic regime will come forward even more that it has already done to absorb this pressure. The state's drive to invite private capital to penetrate the countryside for the exploitation of natural and labour resources is likely to be met with the demand for employing local boys and girls on a preferential basis. In the context of the recent assignment of local autonomy in decision-making, this demand may combine with more serious assertion of territorial rights. Such assertions have been characteristic of the political groups. They have forced a healthier kind of federalism on polity, but they can also slow down the pace at which private capital, domestic or foreign, might dream of striding across the Indian sub-continent.

The second and third tendencies are likely to get exacerbated in the emerging socio-economic order. The diploma disease is showing no sign of abating; in fact, the status-giving role of degrees has just begun to show its powerful lure among the educationally and economically

deprived sections of society. The lure implies that these sections will compel the state to remain the major provider of higher education. The elite will increasingly look towards private and foreign institutions, but the state-supported system of college and university education will remain dominant despite erosion of standards and norms. Over the last few years the university system has sat on choices available to it for survival in the era of structural adjustment. Budget cuts and flight of scholarship to foreign-funded research outfits and foreign universities seem to have become the order of the day in metropolitan cities. A general diminution of academic life is taking place seems part of a global trend inimical to ideas and contemplation. Applied research, evaluative studies, monitoring and feasibility surveys are typical of the tasks left for the brighter young members of the academia to do. On the other side of the coin, one can already see student unrest taking shape in many campuses in response to the impoverished infrastructure. It appears certain that youth politics will absorb the energies triggered by regional and coalition politics. Unlike the sixties when campus trouble remained tied to rather trivial issues, student politics of the coming future appears destined to mirror the issues shaping real politics.

Two kinds of issues have surfaced over the recent years. Social justice is the general theme of one kind, and collective self-identity is the main theme of the other kind. Historically, the former theme mobilised the culturally downtrodden, labouring classes, whereas the latter theme inspire the literate, upper caste. Significant and sometimes startling shifts and unexpected alliances have occurred over the recent years, suggesting that the Indian political scene will continue to present puzzling permutations of its two nodal themes. Politics of identity, featuring revivalist militancy, is no more as strident today as it was a few years ago, but its agenda has not changed much. Redefining the content of education is a part of this agenda, and indoctrinating the youth continues to be an important activity. However, the arrival of new and educationally qualified actors from among the downtrodden is speedily altering the balance of political forces, especially in northern India. How these actors will shape the details of the new political economy remains somewhat uncertain.

This picture suggests that the new economic regime will neither work nor collapse. The strength of Indian democratic institutions will almost certainly wear down the initial thrust exhibited by advocates of liberalisation. To an extent this has already happened, and one can

expect the slowing down to become more manifest. The reason for this is not far to seek. Neo-liberalism and globalism have little to offer to societies in which the core struggle taking shape today is aimed at establishing the values of social justice and dignity of the human being. Among the vast sections of the Indian population who are participating in democratic processes for the first time in history today, there is no sign of boredom with modernism and with the values associated with it. Their struggle today is to define modernism with autonomy and imagination. What shapes this struggle will take in the immediate future cannot be predicted with precision, but one can already see that the glib saga of an emerging global culture living on internet and satellite television is unlikely to gain relevance beyond the well-established limits of the elite strata. Turmoil and resistance, which characterise the life and culture of the mass of India's population living in rural areas can only intensify in response to the growing arrogance of the elites. The enormous social restiveness that India has witnessed in this century must continue, and those who choose to invest in India as part of their global initiative will have to swallow their peace of mind, much as they swallow their conscience when they invest in China.

In the context of knowledge and education, let us recall the fact that India's long traditions in these spheres did not sit well with the system and practices introduced under colonial rule. We can hardly expect these traditions to dissolve in the face of the new, cheap version of knowledge as electronically accessible information. The signs are that our system of education will remain in discomfort for a while to come, seeking indigenous ways to achieve pedagogic modernism that might be compatible with old pedagogic values like rigour and memory. India is much too big to become an indistinct member of a global community of consumers served and controlled by a handful of mega-ventures. In the past, selective acceptance and application of technological choices was forced upon Indian elites, both by pressure from below to stay slow and by the pull of tradition to query the new. It seems plausible to expect that, with the advancement of participatory democracy in the years to come, India will become more capable of reminding the West of what it misses in its own creation. I say this because the West has been and promises to remain India's major preoccupation and a source of drag in the growth of India's imagination.

A few weeks after this lecture was delivered, a major event which seems capable of influencing the political economy for a while to come, took place when the Prime Minister declared India to be a nuclear-weapon state after the completion of a series of five successful nuclear tests. In the light of the analysis presented in this lecture, these tests can be seen as a continuation of the policy-choices made by India's elites since the mid-sixties. These choices favoured the spectacular uses of science and technology, and the systematic building of a military-industrial complex, over the improvement of basic areas of welfare, such as health, education and employment. It is significant that the government responsible for exercising, with panache and glee rather than embarrassment, the so-called nuclear option, has also indicated its reluctance - on account of the usual financial reasons - to introduce an amendment in the Constitution which would make elementary education a fundamental right of every child. Barely a few weeks ago the passage of such a bill looked imminent.

It is quite possible that when this government falls and a new coalition takes over - symptoms of such a transition are gathering - elementary education will again assume some priority, especially if international funding for it remains available. Such shifts in state attention are only to be expected in a polity desperately stuck in a constant search for populist causes. Mass education does seem to have qualified now as a part of pro-people rhetoric. Even the present government, which is committed to the politics of identity as opposed to the politics of social justice, has included universal primary education in its national agenda. While shifts of attention and emphasis may occur with each succession of government, expansion of private schooling is likely to remain a dominant feature of the education scene. Increased NGO activity in rural areas can be seen as a variation of this theme.

A worrisome implication of the arms race, which the nuclear tests will exacerbate in the subcontinent, is the growing unlikelihood of the content of school education becoming sensitive to children's milieu and their day-to-day concerns. Curriculum policy has been dominated by ideological aims since the mid-sixties, and this domination is likely to intensify now. So far mass education has been used for ideological propaganda in several areas, for example, to propagate the Green Revolution strategy and to hide its devastating effects on the

environment and on regional economic balance; to legitimise and popularise elite perceptions of poverty, inequality and population. In the coming era of further weaponisation of India and Pakistan, we can anticipate children's education being used even more concertedly than before for spreading a culture of faith in the decisions taken by the ruling elites. This role of education will undoubtedly clash with the deepening of the urge for participatory democracy, often distorting it in no small measure and leaving the door open for authoritarian tendencies to assemble and seize available opportunities. It is, of course, quite possible, that democratic urges will prove difficult to quell as they did earlier.

Notes

- 1 For a comprehensive analysis of this vast 'readjustment', see Gabriel Wackhermann, 'Transport, Trade, Tourism and the World Economic System', *International Social Science Journal*, (151: 1997), pp. 23-39.
- 2 In what is literally a jungle of documents on this subject, the relatively more revealing are these three: *A Handbook of School Education and Allied Statistics*, MHRD, Government of India, 1996; *Human Development Profile of Rural India*, Vol. 1, NCAER (November, 1996); *Primary Education in India - A Status Report*, Core Group on Citizen's Initiative on Primary Education, Bangalore, 1997. The World Bank recently published a book-length review called *Primary Education in India* (1997). The slightly older *Education for All - The Indian Scene*, Published by the Government of India on the occasion of an international conference in 1993 continues to be useful for some of the statistical information rather different from routine.
- 3 For a discussion of the sixties, especially of the linkage between agricultural and educational policies carved out during this important decade, see my 'Agricultural Modernisation and Education' in S. Shukla and R. Kaul (eds.), *Education, Development and Under-development*, (New Delhi: Sage, 1998), pp. 79-98.

4. See Geeta B. Nambissan, 'Equity in Education? Schooling of Dalit Children in India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, (31: 16 and 17, 1996), pp. 1011-1024, for an overview of research on the subject.
5. In a study of examination achievement, A.R. Kamat and A.G. Deshmukh (*Wastage in College Education*, Poona: Gokhale Institute, 1963) found that upper caste students enjoyed far better chances of excelling in examination. Apparently, studies of this kind, which compare the performance of different castes or classes, have not been in fashion.
6. The discussion here is based on my *Learning from Conflict*, (New Orient Longman, 1996).
7. On the rise of private education in recent times, see Geeta G. Kingdon, 'Private Schooling in India - Size, Nature, and Equity - Effects', *Economic and Political Weekly*, (31: 51, 1996), pp. 3306-3314.

Table - 1

Number of Educational Institutions in India

Primary Schools	590421
Middle Schools	171216
High Schools	71055
Higher Secondary Schools	23588
Colleges (of general degrees)	6569
Engineering and Medical Colleges	721
Universities	215

Source: Selected educational statistics, Government of India, 1995-96.

Table - 2

Drop-out Rates during Primary and Middle School Years (%)

	Grades I - V	Grades V - VIII
1960-61	64.9	78.3
1970-71	67.0	77.9
1980-81	58.7	72.7
1990-91	44.3	63.4

Source: Selected educational statistics, Government of India, 1995-96.

Table - 3

Scheduled Caste Children in each grade as a Percentage of Enrolment in Grade I (1986)

	Rural Schols	All Schools
Grade V	40.3	43.8
Grade VIII	21.1	25.8
Grade X	10.9	14.9
Grade XII	1.8	3.6

Source: Fifth All India Educational Survey, NCERT, 1992.

Table - 4

Growth of Education

Enrolment (Average Annual Growth rate in %)				
	Primary	Middle	Secondary	Higher
1951-61	6.2	8.0	9.2	9.8
1961-71	5.0	7.1	8.6	12.6
1971-81	2.6	4.5	5.0	5.6
1981-89	3.3	5.1	6.9	5.5
Institutions (Average Annual Growth rate in %)				
1951-61	4.7	13.8	9.0	10.0
1961-71	2.1	6.2	7.8	12.5
1971-81	1.9	2.7	3.3	2.3
1981-89	1.3	2.5	4.6	1.5

Source: Tilak, JBG and Verghese, NV, Financing of Education in India, (Paris, UNESCO, 1991).