

Education as Vision for Social Change

Elementary Education for the Poorest and Other Disadvantaged Groups: The Real Challenge of Universalisation by Jyotsna Jha and Dhir Jhingran;
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The question of reform in Indian education has usually been conceived of in narrow ways – putting children in school and getting schools to function efficiently. This has been tantamount to missing the wood for the trees. It misses the question of the larger purpose of education – what kind of society do we want to create, what kind of mode of production do we want our society to be built upon, what are the ideologies that schools create and how do they connect up with social change? Debates on education tend to meander either in administrative trivia or see ideals like child-centred education independently of what is happening in the larger society outside schools. Little effort is made to link up with the processes going on in everyday life – the growth of a market economy, a widespread thrust toward democratisation, a fast-changing social structure, the destruction of old inequalities and the creation of new oppressions. It is blandly assumed that if children are in schools and are being taught, everything will automatically become hunky-dory.

Such sociological innocence cannot but serve dominant vested interests in our present political economy. Many prominent Indians pointed out a hundred years ago that the schools set up by the British basically served to integrate people with the new power establishment that was then springing up. That insight on the structural role of schooling continues to hold true. The challenge continues to be that of constructing a fundamental critique of power and society and building an

educational system that breaks free into a wider vision of both. It is unfortunate that the independent Indian state, which should have been at the forefront of such a radical critique, is instead content with minor and conservative tinkering around, happy to let market processes have their way.

Jyotsna Jha and Dhir Jhingran's study represents a refreshing break from the usual unambitious literature emerging from government policy-making circles. In their *Elementary Education for the Poorest and Other Deprived Groups: The Real Challenge of Universalisation*, as the sub-title suggests, they try to go into the heart of the matter. It is truly a pleasure to see a study talking the language of the universalisation of elementary education, but cutting loose to argue that poverty and powerlessness are by far the greatest obstacles to achieving its goals. It is these that discourage the poor from sending their children to school much more than anything else. This is a timely reality check for our policy-makers, reminding them that the state's slogan of universalisation of education is actually tied up with the removal of inequalities and oppressions from this land.

Jha, Dhir Jhingran and their team of researchers focused on how various kinds of deprivations contribute towards decision-making regarding schooling. They display considerable methodological sensitivity towards trying to understand what kinds of factors and processes add up to or subtract from people's decision to send their children to school. The study is obviously influenced by the traditions of studying decision-making in economics, but does not get into a mathematical treatment of the same. A key principle organising their inquiry is the distinction between a desire for education and a demand for education. They argue that developing a commitment for education has a high cost for the poor. There may be a widespread desire for education, but many factors must combine before a certain threshold limit is reached beyond which regular attendance or even enrolment is attained. A strong point of

the study is the emphasis on understanding the context within which children, their parents and their communities live. It is the context which to a large extent defines the contributory factors and whether the threshold limit is reached or not.

Fieldwork for the study was conducted in the first half of 2001, and took place in 11 rural districts in 10 states, of which nine are among the poorest districts in the country. Two districts were deliberately chosen to represent richer areas and round off a good deal of heterogeneity in contexts among the total of 37 villages studied. Fifteen slums in five cities were also studied, ranging from the environment of a large mega-city to a small flood-prone railway junction.

The study describes in some detail the economic relations which underlie poverty in the places studied. In rural areas accessibility, availability of basic amenities and the character of agriculture are examined. Ownership of land, the availability of wage work and the proximity of resources like forests are important factors that deeply influence the quality of life of the poor. Intertwined with these are caste and religious identities, which add their own bonds and flavours to the compulsions of the poor. To their credit, Jha and Jhingran throughout accept and seek to bring forth the variations in the nature of poverty, both among diverse regions and among groups within the same region. They also pay attention to the differences to be seen in the conditions of the scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, girl children, Muslims and OBCs.

Yet, in all that diversity, there emerges a common picture of the life situation of the poor. This is characterised by a life of hardship and great insecurity. Survival depends on a very thin thread and there is little in reserve to tide over a crisis. Debts are incurred regularly and while they keep people alive their repayment sucks the poor dry of whatever resources they had any chance of gathering. As such, there are severe odds against taking a long-term view of life and planning for the future. When life depends on such wafer-thin margins the labour of children makes a vital difference to the poor.

This coincides with what the poor said to the field teams when asked for the reasons for non-enrolment or non-attendance. By far the most common reasons have to do with children being diverted to

income-generating activities, helping with the cattle and the farm, taking care of siblings while parents go out to work, and the cost of buying school dresses and textbooks among others. In short, the major cluster of reasons is associated with keeping the family's head above water. Reasons like schooling being boring or the school being far away are clearly not the most commonly cited ones among the poor. Among the very poor and girl children, their importance falls even lower, with family survival reasons gaining further.

The urban poor have a somewhat different pattern. The greater availability of wage work and higher consumption patterns lead to a greater pull away from school into child labour outside the home. At the same time, there is a greater commitment towards education among parents who see the linkage of education with power all around them. School environments have a much greater role to play in urban slums, with a much larger number of children saying they stay away because they find school boring or oppressive.

The study also seeks to understand the poor who do actually send their children to school. In many cases it is simply that there has been no recent crisis forcing the sudden withdrawal of the child from school. In other cases, where circumstances have been quite desperate, it is the parents' commitment to schooling which keeps children in the classroom, even at the cost of additional debts and hardship. Parents' commitment emerges largely as a cultural force, influenced sometimes by political movements or by long-term visions, or by hopes of future employment. The regular functioning of a school with a sufficient number of friendly teachers also does make a difference. Its absence simply adds to the steepness of the climb which children and their parents have to make to reach school.

The study concludes that there are three dimensions that are critical to the universalisation of elementary education: (1) the socio-economic context, (2) the household situation, and (3) school availability and functioning. After a brief summary of the state policies on education over the past two decades, Jha and Jhingran restate one of their central arguments (p 249): "The inclusion of children from poor and deprived groups in the fold of sustained schooling can be achieved only with a fundamental change in the approach and functioning of the schooling system, on the one hand, and the socio-political empowerment of the poor and the deprived on the other." A clear long-term vision is called for, which does not distract itself with isolated short-term measures. This would

require among other things, the bulldozing of vested interests who resist any attempt for basic change. It would need a reorientation of personnel all over the bureaucratic hierarchy towards a more inclusive approach when dealing with education for the poor. Several unorthodox measures such as motivation camps, remedial teaching and seasonal hostels would need to be made part of the mainstream strategy, while maintaining in them the same high standards which are expected of conventional measures.

In government there must take place a shift in the meaning of accountability from allegiance to rules and orders to the actual achievement of the defined goals. Decentralisation must take place so that the ultimate accountability is to the people. There must be a marked improvement in the quality of governance so that it delivers at least the basic amenities of life to the poor. Good governance is the keystone of the entire effort. Without it there can be no empowerment of the poor and no universalisation of education. Parallel to this must take place a wider process of empowerment through social and political movements. Education must enter into the agenda of all the social forces acting in the country; only then through their joint efforts can the universalisation of elementary education take place.

The data and analyses presented in Jha and Jhingran's study should be carefully examined by all those interested in designing a better educational system. The depth and extent of their survey are not commonly to be seen in the literature on India. The emphasis on poverty as the major obstacle, in particular, provides much food for thought. They make several valid points, but one still wishes that they had carried their critique further. Implicitly the kind of education they would like to see universalised is basically one that integrates the poor with the mainstream economy and culture. Education seems to be aimed at bringing people into the middle-class, preferably with government jobs, and enable them to interact and negotiate with the market and the state. One wishes that they had taken this opportunity to reflect upon this critically and one wonders if this is really what education should seek to do. Is there not something better that education is all about?

There is another way of looking at what education seeks to do – it aims at building a new kind of society, one with justice and freedom, where everyone gets the context and support to live up to his or her greatest potential. The real challenge of universalisation then would be how to

implement such a vision of education for social change. The authors break out of the cosy niceties of conventional thinking about education, but still do not go far enough.

The challenge is to understand how education operates within a given social structure, both reproducing it as well as sowing seeds of change. The way out is to work out what the alternatives are, in terms of modes of production and cultural patterns, and how education can tie up with various other agencies in moving towards those alternatives. There is the urgent need to try and create a vision of an economy and polity that would provide a basic minimum to all and thus bring people to a point where they actually have some freedom of choice. The universalisation of freedom is at the heart of the universalisation of education, and that should not be confused with the technical detail of getting a 100 per cent enrolment figure in schools.

The development of a fresh vision of education is thus linked to the larger process of rethinking what it means to be an Indian, and what it means to be developed. To reduce universalisation of education to the narrow aspects of building schoolrooms and improving textbooks is to deny the vast potential of the idea. Jha and Jhingran's report is a timely reminder that the universalisation of education is about much greater things; it is about the universalisation of the ideas of freedom and equality and the full realisation of individual potential. When we seek these through education, we are firmly and relentlessly brought back to the question of radical change – of building a just and free society based upon a mode of production that emphasises the joy and self-fulfilment of labour. [27]

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