

EDUCATION

More of the Same

The Planning Commission's draft approach paper to the Eleventh Plan seems to merely echo its masters' voice on education. The Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government has uncritically accorded precedence to the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) that was conceived by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government and the commission dutifully does the same. Incidentally, 'abhiyan' suggests a campaign, but in

reality the SSA is merely a centrally-sponsored scheme, and a flawed one at that. It is not going to universalise elementary education by 2010, far from it.

Recourse to low-quality parallel education for the underprivileged – with para-teachers, alternative schools, education guarantee scheme centres, multigrade teaching and so-called back to school camps – is misconceived. Underprivileged out-of-school children should have the right to education of equitable quality but they are being denied that right. Instead, the Planning Commission seems to be endorsing a dilution of the financial and pedagogic parameters of the 1999 Tapas Mazumdar Committee report that, among other things, dealt with the question of the financial resources required to provide out-of-school children in the 6-14 age group with education of equitable quality. The NDA government did this for the Tenth Plan, and now, the UPA government is following in its footsteps to repeat the blunder in the Eleventh Plan. It is high time the Planning Commission estimate the expenditure required to bring all out-of-school children into the formal school system rather than into low-quality parallel educational streams, and in this, be guided by the norms set by the Mazumdar Committee. Otherwise, the goal of universalisation of elementary education within a specified time frame will remain out of reach.

In fact the Left should pressurise the UPA government to set up a committee to review the SSA in order to do away with the practice of dishing out low-quality parallel educational streams for the underprivileged and instead institute a common school system for all children, irrespective of their class, caste, cultural or linguistic backgrounds. Neoliberal policy is of course taking the educational system in the opposite direction. At the one end, there is the low-quality parallel educational stream for the underprivileged, while at the other, the International Baccalaureate for the children of the power elite. The Planning Commission, if it were really interested in

“more inclusive growth”, which is mentioned in the title of the approach paper, would instead lay out an approach to a ten-year plan, spread over the periods of the Eleventh and Twelfth Plans, to institute a common school system, at least until the high school stage, based on neighbourhood schools in order to ensure education of equitable quality to all children. The approach paper sounds hollow when it says that the Eleventh Plan must make significant progress towards bringing all schools in India up to the standard of the Kendriya Vidyalayas in terms of physical infrastructure and quality and level of teaching. If the Planning Commission were really serious about this, it would have then called for a total redesign of the SSA in order to achieve this goal.

The approach paper talks of taking the road towards the universalisation of secondary education: “A new mission for secondary education, SSA-2 to cover up to class X, will need to be put in place in the Eleventh Plan”. But, going by what it says elsewhere, it seems that the UPA government may have decided once again to follow in the footsteps of the BJP-led NDA government to divert a number of students into vocational courses after class VIII, thus depriving them of a secondary education.

While the approach paper acknowledges that in India only “about 8 per cent of the relevant age group goes to university, whereas in many developing countries, the figure is between 20 and 25 per cent”, it does not even bother to approach the question of how to increase the proportion of students who are not upper class, higher caste, male or urban. Higher education is still largely an elite sphere – an urban, upper class, higher caste, male bastion – and, with the values of individualism and maximisation of private gain being imbibed, this elite is quite capable of perpetuating itself. And despite the talk of associating education with human development, education is fast emerging as an instrument of profit, power and subjugation. **EPW**