

The Education Commission's Task

The Education Commission, which is under orders to report back to government in less than three months from now has, admittedly, a difficult task to perform. It has been called upon to examine the entire educational structure from the lowest stage to the highest and suggest remedies for obvious anomalies which are a source of growing widespread concern. We expect that the Commission will soon circulate a questionnaire to elicit public opinion on the problems which worry the public, but it would not be out of place to draw attention to certain aspects of the educational scene which in our judgement should receive especial scrutiny.

We often tend to forget that while its basic aim is the same at all stages, the specific goals education should seek to achieve must vary from stage to stage. A primary school must not be required to do what is expected of secondary school, nor should the latter be a miniature of the university. Higher education must insist on stricter academic discipline and more rigorous standards of excellence. Any scheme which loses sight of this distinction between higher and lower stages of education is bound to flounder.

The second thing we should like to emphasise is that any education beyond the primary must have some relation to employment opportunities and must therefore have a practical bias. To train young people to study sociology, philosophy or literature, without preparing them for any profession or teaching them any practical skills is to sow seeds of social unrest. What the country needs is a much larger number of polytechnics and training centres from which trained young men and women could directly go into a profession or start earning a livelihood on their own as self-employed people. We have today hundreds of men and women who have graduated from higher secondary schools or colleges, who however do not know the most elementary skills. They have nowhere to go, and lacking proper means of livelihood some of them have been known to drift into delinquency of one kind or another.

It is, we think, from the absence of a correlation between the realities of life in our society and the syllabuses taught in educational institutions that the present phenomenon of purposelessness in higher stages of education has sprung. No matter what we do to restructure the educational system, the quality of education imparted anywhere depends on the quality of text-books used. We have had occasion to comment on the lamentable failure of the National Curriculum and Text-book Board, to supply good text-books. We do not think that any changes of system will by itself bring about an improvement unless government can guarantee that the text-books placed in the hands of pupils are free from error and inaccuracy and conform to the highest international standards. Protectionism as an umbrella for wretchedly written and produced books has brought us to a pass where we have a whole generation of so-called graduates who cannot distinguish right from wrong. A proportion of them will in due course enter the teaching profession and transmit the ignorance of their own minds to thousands of children. It is a prospect which is truly horrifying.

We do hope that it is to this detail that the Education Commission will devote the attention it deserves. The country has had experience of education commissions, before, from the Sharif Commission of the early fifties to the Hamoodur Rahman and Qudrat-e-Khuda Commissions of the later periods. Their reports contain a great deal of wisdom, but each has been followed by experiments which have coincided with a progressive decline in the quality of text-books because of authority's anxiety to have them manufactured in a hurry to suit the moods of different administrations. Not even the universities have escaped the infection. Now that the mother tongue has been made the medium of instruction at all stages, cheap note-books instead of the standard books, even in technical subjects, are what students, rely on for success in examinations. They do obtain the degrees they work for, but are unable to move one step further ahead, and when they go abroad for higher learning, many, sadly, are obliged to return frustrated.

We propose to return to the subject in the light of whatever questionnaire the Commission issues.

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