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Applying experience

The proposal to introduce 'compulsory' primary education in forty thanas is a laudable plan of action. For a long time, the concept of universal primary education has been agitating the minds of planners and its realisation a constant dream. The National Education Advisory Council delved into the problem and has come out with a framework which should augment the process of spreading education throughout the country. An issue worth debating is whether we can possibly make the process encompass the whole country at the outset or compartmentalise the problem and take up in a scientific manner one block at a time.

The present proposal will obviously be following the latter course. What is important to bear in mind is that whenever a larger problem is subdivided into smaller sections, for effective handling of the issue, the danger of losing track of the final objectives which the programme in totality should be able to achieve presents itself. The NEAC has piquantly spelled out the goals of universal primary education. We have to splice these agreed objectives with the experience coming through the implementation of primary education schemes in the selected forty thanas. Several aid giving agencies have expressed their willingness to help our efforts in the primary education sector. External assistance will be most fruitful in matters of expanding physical facilities. But in such fields as redesigning the curriculum, it is local planners who should come out with indigenous programmes.

Often we tend to forget that there is no substitute for experience which one gathers through dealing with a problem. In the education sector we ought to be able to obtain this experience from the pilot projects and the findings from these experiments should be collated to help work out the next programme of action. It is doubtful whether such utilities have been derived from the various pilot and model secondary schools set up in the past. There is nothing fundamentally wrong with these institutions; what actually went amiss is that there was no monitoring over the activities of these institutions.

If we want the experiment with universal primary education in the forty thanas to be of far-reaching usefulness, we must build a mechanism for collecting and interpreting relevant data regarding the efficacy of the programme. The NEAC can be asked to build this mechanism. Or the latter should be able to take a non-partisan and pragmatic view of the results.