

Universal Education In Perspective

A child's right to receive an education provided by the state is today such a universally recognised truth that it can never be questioned. But the type and content of education, which can differ from state to state, or country to country, is an entirely different matter for one of the fundamental freedoms is that people are free to choose the system which they believe are best suited to the needs of their wards. Whether the type of education a country chooses for its formal system will be pleasing to everybody or not, raises pertinent questions which relate to standards and standardisation, in other words, quality of instruction. Generally, however, when speaking of education as provided by the state one must realise this has, of necessity, to be imparted at a level which the state can not only afford but which is suitable to the needs of the majority which means for the greater good of the nation.

As state provided education must be able to satisfy the major portion of society to the exclusion of any felt private needs and desires, it also has its strict limitations. For, when generalising, it should also be remembered that we are dealing not only with the average person with his, or her, average talents and abilities and, who will in the main live out their lives within an atmosphere of mediocrity. Special training, however, may be needed for the mentally retarded child and, conversely, advanced training may be the needs of the genius, but it still is a painful fact of life that, for the majority, what is provided in public schools is usually sufficient for their needs but care must be taken to determine what is actually sufficient.

Although non-formal modes of learning have gone a long way in helping to bring more children within the formal system and, although this is obviously commendable in a country with high rates of illiteracy, this is not the answer to any country's needs when endeavouring to ensure that all children receive a minimum standard of education for, although it has served its purpose as a intermediate arrangement, it can never become the prototype for a controlled state system of education.

The SAARC agreement on primary education calls for certain basic necessities one of which is that there must be no political manipulation of the education arena, especially at the local level. In addition, the curricula must not, under any circumstances, be allowed to be manipulated, or tampered with, just to forward someone's political ambitions. Although such a point may be fundamental to a democratic set-up, it is surprising how frequently it continues to be ignored by those holding the seat of power.

It must always be remembered, however, that no matter how high our aspirations in this area may be, basic education is intended as a tool for social transformation by guiding people towards the pursuit of human values. If this ideal is to be realised, the educational sector must start now to "get its act together" by laying the proper foundation now. Primary education will, of course, be compulsory and of a uniform standard and, most importantly, available to all and, above all, it must be based on our own experiences if it is at all to meet national aspirations.

Finding the resources and working out the most effective way for reducing costs is necessary but it has to be a secondary issue to quality and content. But, as the lack of a reliable professional cadre at policy and management levels continues to handicap even the best intentions of man and government, this is one area which must be addressed before earmarking a significantly higher percentage of national income for the education sector than at present for, if we cannot "come up with the goods" so to speak, throwing good money after bad is useless.