Reform of the Educational System


LIKE the food problem, educational reform is a subject that can be depended upon to appear unfailingly on every agenda. We know what is wrong. We know the answers. Reports and expert commissions have said them many times over and are still saying them. But as long as there is reluctance to face basic issues and take firm decisions can any real transformation ever come about? Such decisions are not likely to be taken when those who are in charge of our affairs find it convenient to side with those who have a stake in resisting change. In the meanwhile we will watch helplessly the explosion of numbers forcing out justments within the creaky old structure. The irresistible demand for education will not be denied. Not a Matter of Minor Changes

After eighteen years a coherent national policy for a national system of education is nowhere in sight. Perhaps, the Education Commission on whom so much hope hangs, will provide us with one. It should, or it will too late. The time to have done this was at he dawn of independence when the mood was receptive to grand changes. What little is done, but a great many things have been done without any kind of consistent objective. The book is disappointing not because the authors do not belong to the category of professional educators. As the preface assets, education is the concern of all. Ironically, almost all major educational reform has hitherto been inspired by eminent men outside the university departments of education). Nobody expected elaborate technical detail about educational practices from such a group, though a knowledge of improved educational practices among the public is essential if they are to co-operate sympathetically with the educators. Such knowledge does exist in the advanced countries. However, educating the parents as to what we are educating the child for can come only after we have settled the latter question first.

Education asserts A B Shah realistically, can achieve only some limited goals in a poor country like India but he loses his practical sense when he declares with poetic fervour that the universities should be thrown open to all and that the problem of numbers is a mere bogey and no conflict exists between quantity and quality. Instead one wishes he had pursued the hint he threw in the opening pages regarding the essential difficulty of educational reform in a developing society. Let us stop blaming the "British system of education" that was imposed on us and which is supposed to have led to our eternal ruin. It is refreshing to find some one refusing to line solace in a scapegoat and willing to admit that the western system of education which brought in a modernizing influence and inspired social reforms in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, failed to liberate the Indian genius because India did not rise to meet the challenge of modernity. Basic Dichotomy

If we find ourselves in an educational mire, the fault lies in the India situation. We are caught in a basic dichotomy — our sense of national identity is roused only through our tradition, while our educational efforts aimed at modernization hang rootless because the indigenous culture having given no shape to the objectives and producers of a coherent education system provide no roots from which the modernising can sprout. Without a meaningful correspondence to the sense of national identity, education cannot become a mass movement. We will continue to produce a few "Westernized individuals" rather than a genuinely "modern" society, to borrow J W Airan's phrase in the book. How can a modern educational system strike roots when the soil is clearly antithetical to modernization and rationality. P N Mathur's preoccupation with Eastern spirituality, whose consumer he himself does not care to elaborate, is an excellent example of the neurotic fixation on the ancient past. We cannot both admire the cobweb and effect the spring cleaning.

The essence of the problem is that we are asking the educational system to perform a feat it has never performed before in history. Formal institutionalised educational agencies are by their nature followers, not leaders of social change. Schools have ever been the effective transmitters of tradition. They reflect the prevailing social values and attitudes and accommodate changes that take place in society. This has been the situation in the advanced countries. In a developing society we turn to education to provide us with an instrument for change and to assist in the difficult task of creating new values and attitudes. "These values have to
be realised in a social and economic context which requires that a process which took nearly three hundred years in the West should be telescoped in about one-tenth the period. Education in India has thus to function in a situation in which neither the cultural concomitants of a modern democracy nor the economic resources for its efficient working are yet available. In a society where status is given as the Indian, an egalitarian ideal is more easily written into the Constitution than transcribed into reality. Educational institutions can become the agency of change only when there exists an informed elite, passionate committed to progressive social change, which has the power and the willingness to use it for that purpose.

Fundamental institutional changes can be brought about only through political means. They can be achieved neither by a handful of dedicated people nor through the traditional machinery which has a built-in mechanism to reject change. Any wonder, then, that we have a genius for reducing great reforms into administrative changes, as one author bemoans? Unless the political leadership implements a national educational plan committed to the ideals we have given ourselves in the Constitution, our educational machinery will faithfully reproduce the present pattern — viz that of educating a privileged few, alienated from their social milieu and having a stake in the status quo.

In this context, T A Barnabas and S K Huibe have in their paper on the "University and the Rural Community" given an illuminating example of how a meaningful relationship between the university and society can be forged. They describe the experiment conducted at Ahmednagar college in integrating the educated elite into the rural community. Their Rural Life Development and Research Project forms a part of the Social Science Department. The students participate in community development projects and simultaneously exploit the valuable scope field trips provide for enriching their sociological and economic studies. But one swallow does not make a summer.

Some of the oilier papers have some interesting suggestions. The functions of the university (which has in fact evolved into a multiversity) and the college must be reformulated, says one of them, making over to the college the task of providing the sense of participation in an intellectual community and the impact of modernity. Amlan Datta's approach to the question of medium of instruction is persuasive. He would have us resign ourselves to a permanent bilinguism (regional language in the schools and English at the higher levels) and eliminate the Hindi-English controversy. Many would agree with him on the way the controversy has obscured real issues. H J Taylor deals with the examination system which he defines as "an instrument designed to reject at least half of any material presented to it". He pleads for a rational approach to the problem of measuring human attainments and recognition of education as "a technology which demands as such expertise as any other". Two papers discuss the importance of university autonomy and the creation of a corps of intellectuals, independent and free from any kind of external pressure. These will not emerge for the wishing. Some basic conditions have to be created and with that we come hack to our starting point. The quality of the product depends on the type of educational system we operate at all levels, and the objectives we seek.

Granted that the ultimate purpose of education is the development of every individuals' potentialities, it has, too, the mundane task of equipping each one with the necessary training and skills to earn a living. Not one of the papers have even casually noticed this aspect! What role is technical education going to play? The authors, all drawn from universities, understandably display a nostalgic attachment to the concept of the refined and cultured gentleman of leisure (though they take care to talk of social integration). Of the inescapable burden of education to train men for an industrialising, modernizing society they are significantly silent. Parents, too, certainly admire liberal education, but demand that first their boys get a job which will help them earn their bread!

— M K