

## Primary concerns

Devesh Kapur & Sunil Khilnani

April 23, 2006

No aspect of India's developmental experience has been so marked by disparities between rhetorical ambitions and actual achievement as our educational system.

The importance of developing our human capital — not just for the intrinsic benefits it brings to our individual citizen, but also for our collective economic development — has been long and widely recognised. And yet, we have been unable to realise this national imperative. While the reasons are multiple, a very large share of responsibility must lie with those responsible for managing our educational policy.

Advertisement  
0.gif" width="1" height="3">



**Bad Credit Refinance for July 14, 2006**

Get matched for **Free...up to 4 lenders in 60 seconds**

[Click here](#)

**NexTag**<sup>®</sup>

© 2005 NexTag, Inc.

Since Independence, the Ministry of Education has been one of the weakest ministries: for the simple reason that the opportunity for rents was limited compared to other ministries — railways, industries, agriculture. The ministry's weakness has been reflected in the poor quality of its leaders. With the notable exception of Maulana Azad, our education ministers have been non-entities or party hacks, lacking any vision or understanding of the vitally important charge they hold.

Only in the Nineties, with the advent of the NDA government and the appointment of Murlī Manohar Joshi, was the ministry given real teeth — because Hindu nationalist ideologues well understood the political pay-offs which the ministry could deliver.

Some within the current Congress-led coalition have, it seems, now taken lessons from their opponents. The present holder of the education portfolio has proclaimed his intention to use the ministry as a political banner, and to wave it about to muster support for the party — thereby hoping to elbow himself forward in the party hierarchy. The controversy last year over NCERT textbooks, the gratuitous case involving Aligarh Muslim University's minority status, and now the move to extend reservations for OBCs to those few educational institutions that do function — all are a crude and dismaying mirroring of the tactics used by Hindu nationalists: the use of education to further partisan rather than national ends.

In what is otherwise a dismal scene — dilapidated school houses, dysfunctional universities, declining morale — the few oases of success have attracted disproportionate attention: celebrated, coveted, and now about to be coerced by the very people responsible for our children's futures.

Set aside the politics for a moment: it is vital to see the much larger stakes in the current proposal about reservations.

Few would dispute the goal of furthering social justice in our society, where not only outcome but also access to opportunity is horribly skewed. But can we seriously hope to further this goal by politicising our few functioning educational institutions in this way?

Today, tens of millions of children do not get the minimum education and healthcare that is their right as citizens. Were Arjun Singh's proposal to be enacted, roughly 1,000 seats in all IITs and IIMs combined would — at most

— accrue annually to OBCs. It seems we can somehow convince ourselves that this represents a significant blow for social justice — on behalf of a social group that is nearly half-a-billion strong, and one that has emerged as the dominant caste in many parts of rural India. If ever there was a symbolic — and delusive — politics, it is this.

Consider some of the facts about how we have been trying actually to improve access. Take educational expenditures. If we look at the figures provided by the Department of Secondary and Higher Education, the budgeted expenditures for IITs is Rs 648 crore, for IIMs Rs 64 crore and the overall budget for the University Grants Commission is Rs 1,927 crore. The latter supports more than 100 times the number of students that enter the IITs — yet, proportionally it receives less than three times the funds.

Look next at the funds allocated for the National Scholarship scheme, meant for talented children in rural areas — a munificent sum of Rs 2.24 crore. Now check funds for 'Access and Equity': a princely Rs 10 crore. Together, these monies — which should provide a powerful instrument for targeted assistance to those who really do need opportunities to realise their talents — add up to less than a fifth of what is channelled to institutions like the IIMs, which are already flush with funds.

Take again the fact that the vast majority of India's college students — over two-thirds — go to arts, commerce and science colleges: places with poor facilities, abysmal teaching, no accountability, which deliver a caricatural education. Or the fact that the vast majority of young adults (more than 90 per cent) will never have access to tertiary education.

One might think that if we had the slightest concern for India's underprivileged, we would focus on providing facilities and programmes to equip them with critical livelihood skills — be it construction skills for the large number of ST women forced to carry physical headloads, or the many Muslims excluded from formal labour markets and engaged in petty entrepreneurship such as auto mechanics or mistries.

But the barely 3 per cent of the higher education budget that goes for IITs, is a grim reminder of who we really care for. Indeed, today we can't even get highly paid government teachers to even show up to teach at school — an extraordinary betrayal of the most vulnerable members of society. A recent national study by Karthik Muralidharan and colleagues has shown data that a quarter of government school teachers were absent from school at any given time and that less than half the teachers were engaged in teaching activity during unannounced visits to the schools.

It doesn't take a graduate of an IIT or IIM to see that something is seriously wrong in how we are allocating resources to further our priorities.

A moment's reflection might led one to think that treating the IITs and IIMs as navratnas — insisting that they become self-financing, and thus re-allocating the resulting annual savings of nearly Rs 700 crore towards funding those schools and colleges where tens of thousands of depressed classes are today getting a pathetic education, as well as offering more targeted scholarships and funding other access routes — may actually serve social justice more effectively than simply indulging in a politics of symbols.

To remind ourselves of this is to see just where the real problems in our educational system lie — and to see also that while our education policy handlers have been high on rhetoric, their record as public servants is appalling. Yet, it is not only the honourable ministers who have failed us: as a society, we have badly failed in improving the human opportunities — and so the human capital — available to India's citizens.

The Indian leadership in the Fifties and Sixties did precious little with regard to basic education. The new lower caste leadership that has emerged over the past two decades has also shown an astonishing lack of interest in educating its own core supporters — as the cases of UP and Bihar testify.

The media are obsessed with the salaries received by IIM graduates — a minuscule fraction of the country's youth — even while the bleak prospects of hundreds of government college graduates receive scant attention. The courts have intervened in the minutiae of higher education, yet they ignore the travesty that passes for primary education for most of India's children.

*Devesh Kapur is Professor at the University of Texas, Austin; Sunil Khilnani is the author of The Idea of India*

**(To be concluded)**

Printed From **HindustanTimes.com**