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# Quality of education at the beginning of the 21st century: lessons from India

Krishna Kumar  
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## Quality of Education at the Beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Lessons from India

Krishna Kumar  
Central Institute of Education  
University of Delhi

'Quality', conveys difference in worth, in relation to what is common. If something has quality, it is perceived as being less accessible than a variant of the same object, which lacks quality. Thus, the notion of quality implies two or more versions of the same thing, arranged in a hierarchical order implying the relative presence of a valued characteristic. Given this implication, it is hardly surprising that in the long history of education, the anxiety to ensure quality has surfaced relatively recently, against the background of universal access. In ancient and medieval systems, education was a privilege which usually went with elites, and by itself conveyed quality or distinction. The legend of Eklavya, which figures in the Indian epic, the Mahabharata, illustrates the association between education and elites with cruel precision. In this story, a tribal boy is openly denied the opportunity to learn archery from a famous teacher who was appointed to train the local princes. Refusing to be discouraged, the tribal boy attains mastery by self-practice, in the symbolic presence of a clay idol of the famous teacher. When this secret self-training is found out one day, the teacher asks the boy to cut off his right thumb and give it as a ritual gift. This way, the teacher reinstates the social order which allowed only the royal sons to receive archery instruction of the highest quality.

Modernity has disturbed the hierarchical principle of the distribution of educational opportunities. The pervasive impact of modernization continues to unfold worldwide; the unfolding has not ended even in the fully industrialized societies where universalization of literacy and basic education started in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in response to the needs of industrialization and the socio-political and cultural dynamics it had triggered. One major dimension of the impact is the question of quality: how to conceptualize and maintain it so that it becomes a *universal privilege* during childhood. Clearly, the question is linked to the ideal of protecting childhood as an experience from the distressful and highly reproductive commonplaces of the human condition, such as the inequalities and injustices of different kinds. For the industrially advanced or, in that sense, developed societies, the quality of education during childhood has presented the challenge of 'social

efficiency', a term used by Dewey in his classic, *Democracy and Education* (1916) to convey a high rate of participation and communication. Despite the availability of economic resources, the developed world can hardly be said to have achieved the goal of nullifying the association between quality and status. In most parts of the late-industrializing world, particularly in the regions affected by the political economy of colonialism, the tension between quality and equality remains a strong obstacle to social and policy change (Dore, 1980). The late J.P. Naik, the architect of modern educational planning in India, nicely captured this tension in the sub-title of his Tagore lectures delivered in 1975. Referring to the contrary pulls working on educational policy in the shape of demands and resistance, he called equality, quality and quantity an 'elusive triangle' (Naik 1975).

### **Conceptualizing Quality**

Concern for quality has remained vague and poorly anchored in social theory. The processes and imperatives associated with global competitiveness in the face of rapid technological change and financial uncertainty have taken their toll on children's right to grow up and be educated in a protective ethos. The problems are not entirely new, but seem greatly compounded by the use of the market as the sole reference point for judging the worth of an idea or policy. Since knowledge and training are so critical as factors in the current political economy, education at every level is being called upon to be market-oriented and market-worthy. This situation has created the apprehension that the concept of education itself may be in a state of crisis. The late Basil Bernstein, one of the most influential sociologists of education in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, explained the crisis by referring to the lengthening shadow of marketing managers:

The principles of the market and its managers are more and more the managers of the policy and practices of education. Market relevance is becoming the key orientating criterion for the selection of discourses, their relation to each other, their forms and their research. This movement has profound implications from the primary school to the university. This can be seen in the stress on basic measurable skills at the primary level, vocational courses and specialisations at the secondary level, spurious decentralization, and the new instruments of state control over higher education and research.

(Bernstein, 1996, p87)

Bernstein's concerns give us a quick sense of the scale at which we need to worry about quality in the context of education, and to warn us how wrong it would be to limit our concerns and discussion to the developing countries alone.

The current concern for quality has its immediate origins in the idea of globalization, particularly in the uncertainties associated with it. There is no consensus on what globalization constitutes, what it implies for education, and what its future might be.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the discourse of globalization has been changing with unexpected speed. The bold, often romantic pronouncements made in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union have been replaced by more cautious remarks. The competition among nation-states for resources, both natural and human, has exacerbated, along with an increase in aggression and violence. The relationship between economic growth, employment and well being, between knowledge and opportunities, and between prosperity and security has become vague if not inscrutable. More disturbingly, it has become unclear whether modernity—with its emphasis on reason, individuality and democracy—is a viable ideal for more than a small fraction of humanity (Gray, 2001).

The uncertainties, the volatility, and the stress of competitiveness associated with globalization are reflected in the manner in which quality is being defined and applied in the context of education. Commoditization of knowledge and the perception of the student as a product are not new: these were implied in the linking of institutionalized education with the industrial economy. Similarly, the idea of education as a means of human resource development is not new. These perceptions of the role of education are integral aspects of modernization under capitalism. What is new is the extreme pressure under which the value-system of modernity has come under advanced capitalism (Heilbroner, 1992). The role of education as an aspect of the culture of modernity—with its emphasis on equality, dignity of the individual, and room for social justice—has faced unprecedented stress during the recent phase of global history. The concept of 'globalization' does not offer much help to make sense of this recent history; at best, it highlights the issues we need to study hard and attend to in the real world. Some of the issues have a direct relevance to education, especially to distinguishing education of a certain quality from one which signifies no more than token access to a service provided by the state or a non-government agency.

Perhaps the two most important issues we need to probe are the relationship between *education and work*, and between *education and culture*. The first deserves our concern because the new processes of production and economic management do not warrant the customary linking of education with a stable opportunity to work for a career and self –development. As Smith (1999) discusses, the idea of work as a source of satisfaction and dignity is not relevant to the emerging corporate culture of production. Franklin (1999) perceives the roots of this development in the social formations of technology. A renowned physicist, Franklin makes a strong plea for

revisiting the debates on the social character of technological choices as a way to overcome the economic and moral dilemmas of our times. She also distinguishes between 'growth' and 'product' models of learning, and finds the former to be of higher value.

The second key issue that globalization has brought to the fore is the relationship between education and culture. In theoretical terms, it is a subset of the relationship between modernization and culture. As Dube (1988) points out, early theorists and planners of modernization neglected culture, with the consequence that assertion of ethnic identities grew under the nose of modern institutions. Localism, in this sense, is as manifest today as globalism, and modernity seems rather inadequate for making an appeal for reason in either sphere. As a means of disseminating the skills of reasoning, education continues to offer the promise of modernity, but on the condition that sustained security will be available. Education signifies for many a desperate means of coping with the intensely competitive, highly insecure global situation.

### *Recent Trends*

That, precisely, is the core of many current attempts to define and apply the idea of 'quality' in the context of education. Cross-national comparative studies of student achievement are not a recent phenomena, but the purpose of such exercises has changed, from academic to practical. The most ambitious exercise of this kind currently underway is the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) started in 1997 by the OECD on the basis of shared, policy-driven interests of member countries and a few others. The PISA studies aim at enabling national policy-makers to compare the performance of their education systems with that of other countries. This explicitly practical orientation of PISA studies, which distinguishes them from earlier and ongoing work of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), can be seen as a response to the association discussed above between globalization and the inevitability of intense economic competition among nation-states. The PISA framework defines 'quality' in terms of students' academic achievement at age 15 and the factors which explain achievement scores. Three broad curricular spheres are the focus of assessment: reading, mathematics and science. However, problem-solving skills which have cross-disciplinary origins and application are also covered and some attention is being paid to student background and home environment.

'Quality' is also the concern of the Latin American Laboratory set up in 1994 as a network of national systems. The largest study undertaken by it so far focused

on grade 3 and 4 children of primary schools in Latin America and the Caribbean, Home-related factors and pedagogical process were also taken into account in this study which attempted to conceptualize an 'ideal' school by analyzing teachers' perception of their profession and earnings, the involvement of parents in school-related matters, and the classroom ethos. The Latin American Laboratory, thus, takes a wider view of quality, linking it not merely with outcomes or student performance, but to some extent, with the values reflected in the school environment. Taken together, PISA and Latin America Laboratory studies encourage us to characterize quality as an attribute reflected in the learner as a product of an educational system. These studies add a few to the parameters developed earlier under the IEA studies.

One of the latest IEA concerns is the assessment of children's achievement in civic education, an area related to the cultural anxieties aroused by globalization. The issue of culture-sensitivity has also been raised in the context of language-testing at the primary level in French-speaking African countries under a post-Jomtien initiative (Naumann and Wolf, 2001). The post-Jomtien discourse of quality uses it as a criterion for judging the depth of access-related claims made by governments. Bloom and Cohen (2002; p85) claim that 'in many areas, official statistics disguise fundamental flaws and...reveal little about the quality of education.' School effectiveness and a holistic framework of education have been presented as alternatives to measurable-outcome view of quality (e.g. Heneveld and Craig, 1996; Dhankar and Smith, 2002). This usage of quality often carries a moral overtone, reminding us that the expansion of access refers to the children, especially girls, of marginalized and oppressed groups. The system's ability to educate them depends on the new strategies it adopts. Several reports perceive this exigency in terms of 'inclusion'—a term that directly suggests a responsibility to reshape a system which has so far functioned as an instrument of exclusion (e.g. Unesco, 2000; Balagopalan and Subrahmanian, 2003), in an economic as well as cultural sense.

The association of 'quality' with the inclusive capacity of a system becomes all the more relevant when we notice the parallel growth of privatization. The policies followed in many developing as well as developed countries since the early 1980s have encouraged privatization of education at all levels. Privately run institutions thrive on the popular assumption that whatever is not under state control must be of some quality. The popularity and power of this assumption can be estimated from the endorsement it has received from India's Supreme Court in an important judgment concerning minority rights (Raju, 2002). Sadly, we have hardly any studies comparing state schools with privately managed schools in matters like

quality of infrastructure, the performance and capacities of teachers, and the involvements of parents. This is surprising in view of the awareness of the possibility that unrecognized private schools may be siphoning off the children, especially boys, of the marginally better-off strata of rural society in many parts of India (Aggarwal, 2000).

### *Theoretical Caution*

This brief discussion of recent studies suggests that 'globalization'-- with its paradoxes, contradictions and insecurities—may have provided us with a valuable opportunity for addressing an elusive concept. The need to think about it has been there for a long time, but the circumstances pushing us to do so were less universal earlier. The temptation to judge the quality of education as we might judge the quality of, say, a factory, a hotel or a car, is strong. Not only is the market discourse of quality currently in high fashion; it is also compelling, to the extent that it relates to the images of the good life pervading all spheres of what we might call the global civilization of modernity. The overwhelming presence of market metaphors in our times requires what Taylor (1987) calls 'epistemological precautions' in the use of quality-control as a metaphor for educational reform. Without such precautions, we can easily miss the consequences that outcome-testing may have for classroom teaching and curriculum development. The view of teaching as an outcome-oriented activity could squander the hard work done over decades in certain countries to popularize the constructivist paradigm of education which is derived from Piaget's theory of knowledge.<sup>2</sup> The culture of management has also weakened the humanistic models of curriculum design, and has led to behaviourist revivalism (Lawton, 1984).

The point is not so much to challenge the claim that the market represents the modern reality—perhaps it would be futile to refute such a claim—but rather to expand the scope of quality-related concerns. In an attempt to do this, Malkova (1989) points out that the anxieties triggered by the competitive environment of today's technocratic society ought to include certain concerns which cannot be allayed within a technocratic paradigm of educational reform, which focuses on children's achievement in science and mathematics. These other concerns refer to the wider context of childhood, mental health and peace. The definition of quality proposed by her refers quality as "a system of socially determined parameters of the level of knowledge, skills, habits and values that must be reached by school leavers" (p37).

We can derive a similar perspective from the Indian philosopher J. Krishnamurti (1992). In a dialogue on education and world peace, he perceives the

competitive, highly individualistic and nationalistic education given today as a threat to peace at all levels—personal, social and global. Peace may be an important precondition for the reform of education in view of the contradiction Stephens (1991) underlines in his analysis of the quality of primary education in developing countries:

The situation of primary education in most developing countries is not good. In many countries poverty, child malnutrition and ill-health are advancing again after decades of steady retreat. And, although the reasons are many and complex, overshadowing all is the stark fact that the governments of the developing world as a whole have now reached the point of devoting *half of their total annual expenditures* to the maintenance of the military and the servicing of debt...

(Stephens, 1991; p223)

In this paper, Stephens links quality in education with the quality of decision-making and reminds us, following Bowles (1968), that decision making in the educational system is 'a sensitive barometer of power relations in society.'

This kind of awareness of the social foundations of education may well be the main missing element in the current research and debates on quality. The senior American educator Seymour B. Sarason (1998) draws upon Dewey's presidential address to the American Psychological Association a century ago where he made two points: one, education and its problems must be conceptualized and embedded in the social sciences, or else the inadequacies of education will not be understood; and two, the fruits of research and theory-building must be made known to teachers and other practitioners. Applied as criteria, Dewey's points reveal the roots of the confusion we see in the contemporary literature on quality improvement and in the efforts to transform the grim reality. Sarason also makes the plea that we should learn to view the system of education as a whole, not in terms of its specialized parts, but as a structure of interrelated parts. The analysis of education in the late-industrializing countries by Dore (1976; 1980) offers fine evidence of the advantage of taking such a systemic view. By juxtaposing the relative role of the school and higher level institutions with economic growth and employment data, Dore has been able to put forward the powerful thesis that the quality of school education cannot be improved unless the urge for qualification-gathering relents.

### *A Framework for Quality*

As we attempt to develop an encompassing framework of quality, we should remember that the issue of quality is as old as education itself. As a tool of

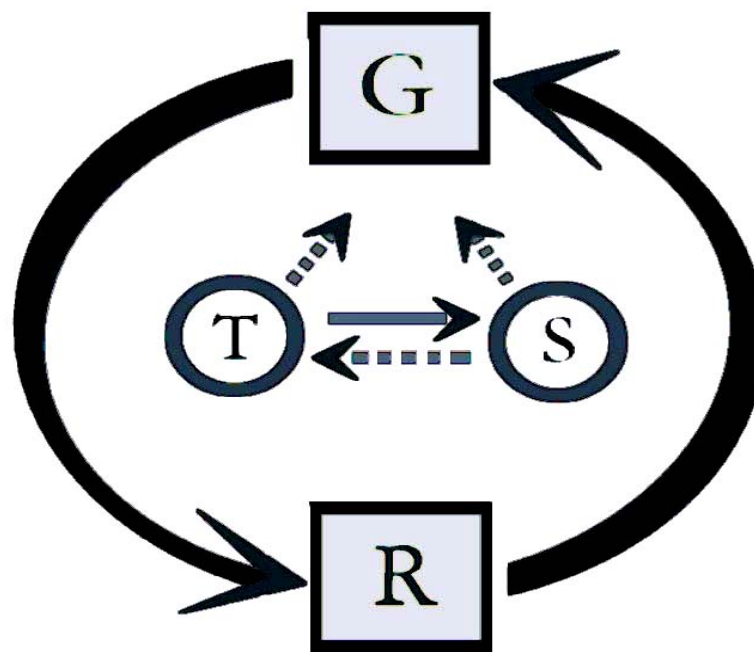


comparison, it was always available to those concerned about the ways in which education might be given or used. In the *Republic*, Plato uses the phrase 'better and more complete education', suggesting that there is education of different levels of quality, not merely different kinds of education (Hamilton and Cairns, 1961; p 752). Similarly, the Buddha's discourse indicates the significance of correctness in the choice of knowledge and ways of teaching it, for an incorrect choice could be dangerous (Hanh, 1996). This idea impels us to include aims and assumption in our framework for conceptualizing quality in education. In his classic work on curriculum research and development, the late Lawrence Stenhouse located the central problem of education in the appreciation of its relation to culture. As a means of widening the scope of our communicational universe, Stenhouse (1975) argues, education directly affects human relations, both in terms of individuals and groups. Education enhances our freedom and creativity inasmuch as it ushers us into culture—our own as well as others'—as a *system to think with*. Distinguishing three processes in school education—namely, training, instruction, and induction—Stenhouse says that "education as induction into knowledge is successful to the extent that it makes the behavioural outcomes of the student unpredictable" (p82). Stenhouse argues that the outcomes-approach to the assessment of quality weakens our appreciation of the teacher's role and capacities as a judge of quality; it also forces us to take an instrumental, and necessarily trivializing, view of knowledge. At a time when we see people frantically assembling indicators of quality in order to carry out large-scale achievement surveys, we can hope to profit greatly, both in terms of direction and ideas, by revisiting Stenhouse.

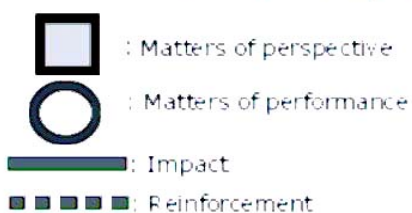
The key choice to be made in the context of the relation between education and reality is between these two formulations: (a) Is education a means of transforming reality? or (b) Is it a means of coping with it? Our answer to this question is likely to determine what kind of agency we assign to education. If we choose answer (b), we cannot expect to reform education with reference to any intrinsic value of its own. Only answer (a) permits us to harbour such a hope. Assuming this compulsion, the design proposed below (Figure 1) places the goals of education in a direct and dynamic linkage with the capacity of a system of education to reform itself by means of innovation. This design draws attention to two distinct time-horizons. One is the longer horizon, which calls for a *perspective* in the shaping of goals and means of reform; the other is the horizon of immediacy which allows us to notice the *performance*—in the efforts and growth of the two key players, namely teachers and students. Figure 1 also enables us to distinguish impact from reinforcement. In the teacher-student dyad, the former makes an impact on the latter's *growth* while the latter reinforces the former's *awareness* of

what works and what does not. It is important to notice that the G-R dyad forms an embedding context for the T-S dyad; the two are linked with dotted lines symbolizing the reinforcing role both teachers and students will perform in a system which lives, or can only be conceptualized, in a perpetual dynamic of reform. By placing the T-S dyad inside the G-R dyad, Figure 1 attempts to signify the centrality of both teachers and students in imparting to the system its energy to reform itself. Representing goals, assumptions underlying the choice of these goals, and the values they reflect, G is visualized as a continuously unfolding reality. It unfolds in terms of, or as a result of the energy provided by reforms. The presence of R in a system, thus, represents the *awareness* at all levels of decision-making, starting from the classroom where the immediate decision-maker is the teacher, that the system needs reform through changes in existing assumptions, values and practices.

**Figure 1**



G: Goals, assumptions and values  
 R: Reform through innovation  
 T: Teacher: effort and growth  
 S: Student: effort and growth



Using this design to organize our perception of quality, we can say that while the *efforts* and *gains* made by students and teachers over time are essential components of any assessment, a system's *capacity to reform itself by encouraging new practices* must also figure in any comprehensive framework of the assessment of quality. While applying the design proposed here, we must pay attention to contextual details, such as the historical legacies of a system, the characteristics of the social structure, and the conditions shaping the school's everyday reality. These external considerations must not only sensitize us to what we might see in schools, teacher training institutes, and offices of administrators, they should also tell us what to notice while assessing growth or change in both teachers and children. The point is to depart from the 'outcomes' approach in terms of its ideology as well as its tools. Systemic evaluation of the kind proposed here will call for multiple levels of analysis, addressing the different paces and styles of change that we might expect in the important components of an educational system.

### **Lessons from India**

India's experience in education over the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is a useful resource available to us for studying the issue of quality. As a case study of improvement in the quality of education, India is particularly interesting because of the democratic character of its struggle against colonial rule and the sustenance of democratic governance afterward, in the face of bewildering internal and external difficulties. India also offers a unique philosophical resource in this context. The political leadership of Gandhi and the intellectual leadership of Tagore made significant contributions to the success of India's anti-colonial struggle and development.<sup>3</sup> Both Gandhi and Tagore were deeply interested in educational change, and they launched exciting ventures in educational reform (Sykes, 1987). Discussions of India's educational system tend to focus on its endemic problems and the contradictions it faces in relation to the social structure. This familiar trend is easy to understand, given India's unimpressive achievement in literacy and primary education. The familiar portrayal of India's educational reality arouses no curiosity about the energies put into innovative reform. For this reason, our discussion of India's educational experience starts with two stories of major attempts made to improve the quality of education; namely, the programme of Basic Education (BE) undertaken in the first decade of independence and the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme (HSTP), which started in the early 1970's and closed as recently as 2002.

### *Nai Talim (New Education)*

BE was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's proposal for *nai talim* (literally, new education), first announced in 1937, a decade before India won its independence from colonial rule. Adopted as state policy after independence and Gandhi's assassination, BE entered into a full-scale, stringent testing of its key ideas. The most important among these ideas was the incorporation of manual work or hands-on experience of a productive craft in the core curriculum of primary schools. This was a radical idea, not only in pedagogic terms, but, and far more crucially, in social terms too, given the caste framework of Indian society which legitimizes derision for manual work by linking it with the lower castes and others stigmatized by exclusion from the hierarchy of castes. The other important ideas were integration of the knowledge given under different subjects with the learning of handicrafts and the use of the child's mother-tongue as the medium of instruction. All of these ideas contradicted the curriculum and pedagogic practices entrenched since colonial days, some drawing strength from older cultural beliefs about learning (Kumar, 1991).

BE challenged rote learning, the dominance of the prescribed textbook as a pedagogic tool, and the practice of examining by asking children to regurgitate memorized facts. It met stiff resistance from not only teachers who were trained in traditional didactics, but also from politicians, bureaucrats and publishers of textbooks. The critics of BE invoked structural issues like parity of basic and non-basic schools, the difficulties of stretching basic education upwards to the secondary grades which were oriented towards a public examination of memorizing and writing skills (Government of India, 1957). A great deal of regional variation was characteristic of BE, and that was perfectly consistent with its philosophy, but India's educational planners failed to foresee a rapid erosion of faith in Gandhi's philosophy even as India entered the turbulent decade of the 1960s in which it faced two wars with its neighbours, two successive years of famine, the death of two prime ministers (one of whom is rightly known as the builder of modern India), and a historic break-up of the Congress Party under whose leadership India had won independence.

No single factor can explain why BE was abandoned as a policy. However, its best achievements do underline the importance of political and ideological support for any educational innovation. In terms of quality and commitment, the implementation of BE varied a great deal, an important factor being the contribution of voluntary or non-government institutions (Patel and Sykes, 1988). BE triggered fresh thinking on curriculum development and teacher training, though the dearth of good 'basic trained' teachers remained a chronic problem. A dent was made, in many regions and institutions, in the old system of 'normal school' training, and

attention was paid to the challenge of bridging the gap between intellectual and manual work. The realization that the hands-on experience of making or doing something serves multiple developmental purposes in children's lives had revolutionary potential in a society accustomed to regarding manual work with upper-caste contempt. This was Gandhi's subtle formula for bringing about a change in attitudes. It worked so long as there was a conducive ethos to uphold its functioning. Such an ethos existed in many parts of India in the decade following independence, apparently as a residue of the headier ethos produced by the struggle for independence under Gandhi's leadership. The state too felt a moral responsibility to keep Gandhi's legacy alive by giving it an ideological support in the face of widespread scepticism and resistance. In the mid-1960s, when the state's positive bias gave way to pressures favouring mechanistic modernization of agricultural productivity, enthusiasm for BE dried up (Kumar, 1995). In its memory, a slot of 'work experience' was carved into the old-style, textbook-based curriculum of secondary classes. With no responsibility left to provide any hands-on experience, the primary school returned to being what it had been.

#### *Bal Vaigyanik (the child scientist)*

Our second story of innovation, the HSTP was initiated in the early 1970s by two voluntary agencies, namely *Kishore Bharati* and the *Friend's Rural Centre*; later on, it became the responsibility of *Eklavya*. The well-entrenched tradition of voluntary work in India has seldom meddled with state-run schools. Things are changing now, but traditionally voluntary institutions have shown indifference to the state system. HSTP presents the lone instance since independence wherein a voluntary initiative made a radical large-scale intervention in state schools. The scale of this intervention was narrow at the beginning: 8 rural middle schools (with Grades VI to VIII, corresponding roughly to ages 11 to 13) of Hoshangabad district of Madhya Pradesh (MP); but this number rapidly increased from the late 1970s onwards, reaching the figure of 1000 schools spread over several adjoining districts in the course of the next decade. HSTP had three dimensions:

- i) Preparation of new, experiment-based textbooks with kits, both reflecting the immediate, rural milieu in choice of topics to be studied and the design of equipment and lessons;
- ii) Training of existing government school teachers of science in the new methods which focussed on children's own discovery of ideas, explanation, and new questions; virtually prohibiting old-style teaching without hands-on experience;

- iii) Designing of new assessment techniques, replacing the memory-based examination taken at the end of the year.

(Delhi University Science Teaching Group, et al. 1977)

Undertaking these tasks in collaboration with the government was the key challenge. The HSTP pulled off this unique feat in India's educational history with exemplary liaison-management, but also because its legitimacy was impressively tied to the status of some of India's best known institutions of higher learning in science and technology. In all aspects of decision-making and execution, HSTP was closely assisted by members of the faculty of prestigious national institutions like Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, Indian Institute of Technology, and a core group of the Departments of Physics and Chemistry at the University of Delhi, apart from several individual teachers of the colleges and universities based in MP. The mobilization of institutional support with the help of the University Grants Commission (UGC) was also unique. It was a dream come true, exactly as it had been envisaged by India's most ambitious document on educational reform, i.e. the report of the Kothari commission (1964-66) entitled *Education and National Development* (NCERT, 1971). HSTP demonstrated that university faculty and school teachers could work together for improvement in the quality of children's classroom experience.

We can recognize three broad lessons in the innovative attempts we have briefly studied; *one*, the socio-political ethos has a decisive role in sustaining innovative effort; *two*, institutions of higher learning can play a major part in the reform of school education; and *three*, voluntary or non-government institutions are an important resource for new ideas and methods. Both stories of innovation remind us how tenacious a challenge the 'system' or the status quo presents. BE and HSTP were aimed at changing the social character of school learning and thereby improving the quality-of education available to rural children. Social barriers of caste, class and gender have long been known to impede the progress of education in rural India. These barriers act in complex ways, affecting curriculum policy as well as the daily life of the school. BE and HSTP attempted to transcend the interplay of such negative forces, one by anchoring a new curriculum in the radical perspective of Gandhi, and the other by insisting that a theoretical understanding of the epistemology of science must guide the teaching of school science (Sadgopal, 1981).

### *The Larger Picture*

For a country of India's size and complexity two brief case studies can hardly suffice, in an illustrative sense, to encapsulate what the process of change constitutes. We must remain cautious and prepared to appreciate the scale of the task involved in reforming a vast system so as to equip it better to meet an elusive goal. That goal was enunciated in the Constitution of India as the construction of a liberal society based on democracy and social justice. The Constitution presented a transformative vision of governance and it named education as an important means of realizing that vision. Universalizing literacy and elementary education was an inevitable responsibility attached to the fulfillment of the vision. When we review the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> century from the perspective of the Indian Constitution, we are forced to recognize the extraordinary challenges that democracy has had to face, but we are also struck by the formidable difficulties that education, as a means of serving and strengthening democracy, has presented to the state.

Any attempt to obtain an overview of India's performance in education is likely to be constrained by the multiplicity of factors affecting our judgement. In the mid-1970s, J.P. Naik, to whom a reference was made earlier, attempted to present an overview. He was better qualified than anyone else one can think of to undertake such an exercise, given his key role as a participant in decision-making and his socially committed perspective (Kamat, 1994). His assessment of India's educational performance in the first quarter-century of its independence was the following:

(T)he pursuit of quality has often linked itself with privilege and become inimical to that of quantity; the pursuit of quantity, in its turn, has often led to a deterioration of standards, and the pursuit of equality, in its turn, has often led to a deterioration of standards, and the pursuit of equality has often found to be inimical to that of quality, and has been frequently hampered by the very inequalities in society which it was intended to remove. We have tried to reconcile the inevitable conflicts with little result. . .

Has the pursuit of these goals of equality, quality and quantity in education made any impact on the social structure and rendered it less stratified and hierarchical or more egalitarian? The answer probably is that the impact of education on the basic features of the social structure has been rather limited.

(Naik, 1975, p. 4)

The question whether education has served a transformative role in relation to the social order and the values underpinning it has inspired considerable scholarship in the recent decades, but the answer has remained elusive and ambivalent.

In the mid-1980s, the government initiated a national debate on education by releasing a document titled *The Challenge of Education*. This document (Government of India, 1985) portrayed a picture of stagnation in elementary education, both in terms of the system's reach and quality. Indeed, the slowing down of the growth of enrolment is perceived as a consequence of poor quality, and both these tendencies are discussed in the context of the widening of economic and social divide between the poor and the elites. The 1986 National Policy of Education (NPE) (Government of India, 1986) promised the upgradation of school facilities and the application of child-centred methods among the steps to be taken for enhancing retention and improving quality. The policy continues to be in operation—having survived a period of considerable political and cultural anxiety—but many significant changes have occurred in the arrangements through which the system works. At the beginning of the 1990s a newly elected central government decided to overcome an acute fiscal crisis by opting for structural adjustment and social safety net policies which brought external financial resources—both loan and aid—for improving the quality of elementary education and universalizing its reach. New approaches and procedures were developed in successive, rapidly covered stages. These included administrative decentralization, creation of local-level structures for planning, decision making and monitoring, and the involvement of non-government organizations. A massive drive to improve school buildings, reorganize the curriculum and recruit and train teachers at the local level was launched.

### *New Reality*

The outcomes of these strategies are not yet fully understood, and many of them are being currently debated even as the effort to conserve the visible gains made in the first phase of externally-supported District Primary Education Programme (DPEP). Measures like para-teachers have permitted certain states to increase the number of schools (or alternative structures) quite radically during a period of financial crunch. Para-teachers are locally recruited; they receive a far lower salary than regular teachers, their training is short, and their services are vulnerable. School teaching is regarded in India as a low-status occupation (Government of India, 1985; Kumar, 1991); its status has now plummeted further. The efficacy of new arrangements like para-teachers and monitoring by the community need to be debated and researched. In curricular debates, an ideological thrust, favouring religio-cultural nationalism, has surfaced and, this development too has been all but ignored in quality-related discussions, which have focused mainly on the learner achievement under the new arrangements associated with DPEP. As far as the government is concerned, it has assumed the legitimacy of



these arrangements, taking advantage of the recent amendment made in the constitution which confers on all children of 6-14 years a fundamental right to receive education through a school or its alternative. In any case, the NPE had already equated non-formal education with formal schooling as a valid instrument of universalization of elementary education.

Traditionally, the Indian system has depended on the use of public or centralized examination as a means to evaluate students and to select the ones who can proceed further. The examinations taken at the end of grade X and XII are characterized by high rates of failure, which is seen as a sign of rigour and quality. The national average of success rates in these two examinations are less than 50% for grade X, and less than 60% for grade XII. In many states, children appear for district-level centralized examination at grade V and VIII levels, but there is no national-level database about the results of these examinations. An important feature of the 1990s is the conduct of large-scale surveys of children's learning achievement made under the auspices of DPEP. These surveys have been carried out mostly in accordance with a curricular document which outlines *minimum levels of learning* (NCERT, 1990) in each subject. The minimalist idea is consistent with, and to a great extent constitutes a response to, the demand for accountability made over the recent years in projects funded by external agencies. Such a demand has inadvertently promoted the outcome-oriented approach in teacher training and the preparation of curriculum material like textbooks. Under the rudimentary conditions of most Indian schools, such an approach tends to showcase and prioritize attendance figures and test-scores, often at the expense of the teacher's commitment to children and confidence to be honest.

**Table 1**  
**Drop-out Rates (in %) from Classes I to V**

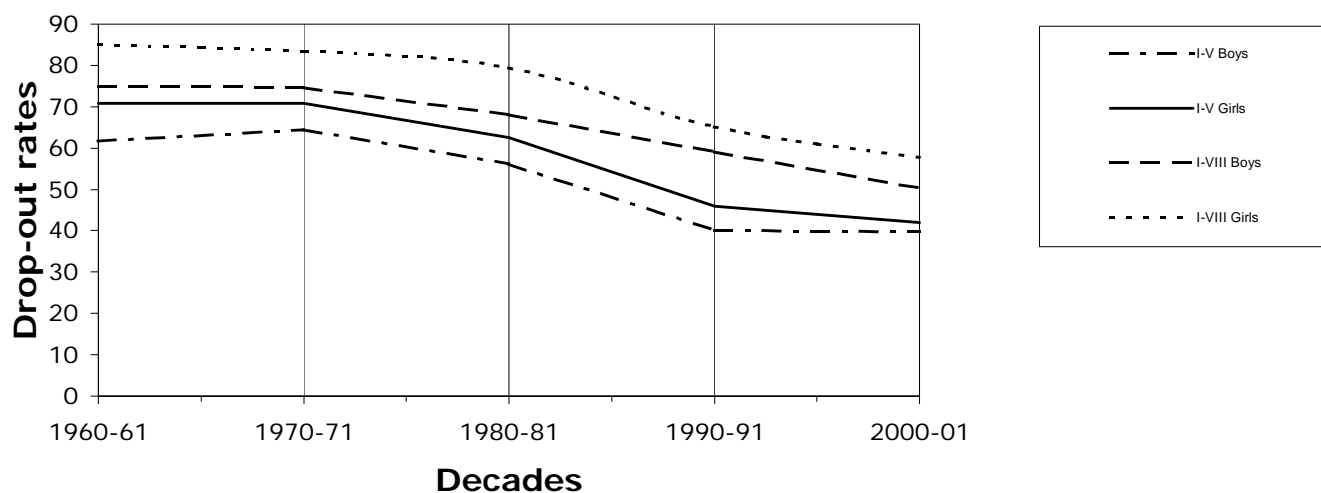
	1960-61	1970-71	1980-81	1990-91	2000-01*
Boys	61.7	64.35	56.2	40.1	39.7
Girls	70.9	70.9	62.5	46.0	41.9
Total	64.9	67.0	58.7	42.6	40.7

**Table 2**  
**Drop-out Rates (in %) from Classes I to VIII**

	1960-61	1970-71	1980-81	1990-91	2000-01*
Boys	75.0	74.6	68.0	59.1	50.3
Girls	85.0	83.4	79.4	65.1	57.7
Total	78.3	77.9	72.7	60.9	53.7

Source: *Selected Educational Statistics (2000-2001)*, Planning, Monitoring and Statistics Division, Department of Secondary and Higher Education, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, 2002.

**Figure 2**  
**Decline in Drop-out Rates (1960-2000)**



### *Attendance and Poverty*

Enrolment and retention continue to be the only reliable data to judge the efficiency of the system of elementary education. Despite the considerable progress made since the early 1980s, the overall picture continues to be rather grim and ambiguous. Table 1 provides us with an overview of national drop-out rates for the primary years (grades I to V) and Table 2 presents the drop-out rates for grades I

to VIII. A number of interesting observations can be made on the basis of these tables. One observation can be made about the relatively greater progress made in the 1980s than in the 1990s. This may be seen as an indication of the impact that general economic policies, particularly those directly concerned with poverty-alleviation, made on primary education. The 1990s were a time of greater hardship for the poor who were marginalized by the neo-liberal thrust of the economy (Patnaik and Vasudevan, 2003). The difference between the declining drop-out rates for these two decades is specially striking in the case of girls. The overall decline, taking boys and girls together, has evidently stagnated. An important study of the DPEP conducted by Aggarwal (2000) for the World Bank ponders on these question and indicates worthwhile dimensions for future research. Aggarwal says:

The formal education system in India is going through a critical phase of transformation, especially in DPEP districts. Various innovative models to improve access have been tried across districts. Despite greater commitment for the cause of elementary education, the enrolment at the national level is showing signs of stagnation for the last three/four years. . .

A pertinent question at this stage is, where are the children going? Are they going to other type of schools or there is a move away from school education as was witnessed in some of the Sub-Sahara African countries during the eighties... In view of the serious nature of these trends and their likely impact on the universalization of elementary education, special studies need to be conducted at the earliest.

(Aggarwal, 2000; p54-56)

If we turn to the recent surveys of learning achievement, we notice that improvement has occurred mainly in the first two grades; it has proved far tougher in the case of upper primary grades (Gautam, 2003). An important study by Leclercq (2003) presents a micro-picture of the system's inadequacies and the gap between claims and reality. Apparently, the vast numbers of para-teachers recruited to expand the system are able to deliver only in the first two grades. There is now a great demand for access to education in rural areas (PROBE, 1999) and for quality too, as one can gather from the mushrooming of private schools in the countryside as well as in cities and towns. Though its systematic study has just begun (E. G. Kingdon, 1996), privatization at all levels has revived some interest in the question of reconciling equality with quality. Eminent sociologist Andre Beteille (2001; p3625) feels quite certain that 'even after elementary education has become universal, inequalities will remain in the quality of what is available to children from the different strata of society. Even at the level of elementary education, universality does not mean equality.'

The need to re-examine structural constraints is being felt, and at least one study, by Jha and Jhingran, (2002) of children's achievement in rural schools has clearly mentioned the urgency of fulfilling 'prerequisites for quality', implying attention to poverty-related issues like hunger, malnutrition and sustained earning. As a result of the pressure created by the Supreme Court, the school's responsibility to provide a mid-day meal is currently receiving attention in several Indian states, but as the survey by Dreze et al (2003) shows, sustainable progress may take quite some time. Related issues like early childhood care—an important component of the Dakar framework—poverty-induced conditions like child labour and withdrawal from school have received scant attention in recent policy documents which define quality mainly in terms of school facilities, curriculum and pedagogy (Government of India, 2003).

## Conclusion

There are three main lessons we can learn from India's experience over the last half-century. *One* is the challenge of mainstreaming innovative practices. The two experiments discussed earlier in this paper remind us the potential the system has for reforming itself. These projects also highlight the significance of the clarity of aims and assumptions as guiding principles for any quality-improvement programme. Apparently, policy-level learning from innovative experiences, and the mainstreaming of new ideas and practices have been neglected; and India may not be unique in this respect. The *second* lesson is that the issue of quality cannot be seen in isolation from the socio-cultural context of education. Any attempt to reform education, whether in a developed or a developing society, ultimately addresses our perspective on modernity, more specifically, on how the project of modernization is doing in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, where it is heading, and what correctives it requires. Ever since the idea of mass education became an assumed goal of state policy, the role of the school has been to spread the culture of reason. Such a culture necessarily carries a transformative responsibility towards the milieu, and it is in the fulfilling of that responsibility that the system has performed less than satisfactorily. A recently published study by Sarangapani (2003) on how knowledge is constructed in a rural elementary school in India makes a seminal observation in this regard. She says that 'in the school there are normative, structural hierarchies and value congruences not all of which can be derived from the framework provided by the school as a 'modern' institution' (Sarangapani, 2003; p247).

It will take a careful and sensitive embedding of the recommended, progressive practices, which are associated with the constructivist movement in curriculum development and pedagogy, in the school's socio-cultural milieu to make

a difference in the system's efficiency and competence. Child-centredness can hardly be disseminated as a slogan, nor can joyful learning take place unless teachers are given a theoretical understanding and self confidence to sustain the recommended pedagogy, and not merely exhorted or pressurized to follow it for the sake of certain outcomes. The tendency to link quality with visible indicators and accountability can only exacerbate the problem that the discourse of quality is attempting to address. If our goal is to make systems of education more efficient, we cannot do better than by recalling Dewey's idea of efficiency as a measure of communication. This conception invokes the need to look in two directions for our search of 'quality' parameters capable of being used for the comparative study of education and for theory building. In one direction, we should be looking for ways to build teacher confidence by ensuring communication between them and policy makers, curriculum designers and non-government organizations. In the other direction, we should look for greater historic awareness at all levels regarding the role of education in promoting a culture based on reason and peace, which might replace the culture of competitive aggressiveness which has been gaining legitimacy.

### Notes

1. A vast amount of writing is now available on globalization, but its effects on education are just beginning to be studied. Three educational journals which have published special issues on this subject are *Assessment in Education* (7: 3, 2000), *Interchange* (30: 1, 1999), and *Educational Theory* (50: 4, 2000). The first carries a useful bibliography and a listing of worthwhile areas for research. For inquiries into globalization as a pervasive process, see *International Social Science Journal* (51: 160, 1999) and *Seminar* (503, July, 2001)
2. 'Constructivism' was the special theme of *Prospects* (31: 2, 2001). The question whether constructivism is derived from Piaget or has older roots is a matter of debate. The resonance of constructivism can be found in many earlier, even ancient, sources, but in its modern form, the ideas underlying constructivism have undoubtedly been inspired by Piaget although many of his own views and experiments have been challenged and are being debated.
3. Sunil Khilnani's *The Idea of India* (1997) is an excellent introduction to India, its achievements and its struggles. It also carries a thoughtfully prepared list of recommended readings. For recent political and economic changes, see Corbridge and Harris (2001).

Literature on Gandhi continues to grow but no commentary conveys as much as Anthony J. Parel's introduction to Gandhi's lone political tract, *Hind Swaraj* (Gandhi, 1997). For introduction to Tagore, see Elmhirst (1961).

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