

The Education Mess



If you care to look at it, the messiest national sector is education. This can be blamed on no particular, this or that, government. A whole 40 years (since 1947) with the governments that have been in and out of power witnessed more politicking and less seriousness about one grassroots problem that is literacy and education. This happened against the background of the two-pronged rhetoric on poverty and illiteracy. The more the former figured in public addresses or state harangues the worse have been the results down the years.

But exactly when and where things should have taken a radical turn (as they have done in some Asian countries going through the revolution hoops e.g. Japan, China, S. Korea or Taiwan) the great slide began instead, in our case. Things done in the name of reform and renovation practically ended up deforming the whole system, and loose and unimaginative policy measures largely account for it.

Loading the S.S.C. syllabus with practically the whole range of subjects from history to theology to sociology to science marks the first road-block to a young generation's mental or intellectual growth. Education for children and teen-agers is designed principally to help achieve two things of long term interest: (1) Skill in language, or the development of a child's ability to express himself independently in language, i.e. organising his ideas in coherent sentences and paragraphs in a piece of writing. This is the most important first academic discipline through which a young boy or girl is to be processed. (2) Imaginatively planned and well-written textbook and tests on them designed more to spur the creativity of a young mind.

Methods of teaching books written on most subjects or tests held on them are no longer a test of merit or stimulus to creativity. He or she has come to depend almost wholly on cramming or rigging examinations or results by all conceivable means. (In an earlier Leader we mentioned some of them).

Amid such conditions the reported move by the education authorities to introduce what they call objective types of question looks rather like an anti-climax. The system as a whole needs looking into, particularly the way it is run, and how far the pupils are really benefiting both by the syllabus and the way they are taught.

The syllabus is based on the national curriculum prepared years ago. No assessment of the efficacy of it has yet been made. And no reconstruction or reform will yield the desired result unless the faults of an existing system are pin-pointed in a periodical review. It is a general complaint made both by students and guardians that (1) the syllabus is too overloaded with too many subjects; (2) the language of the books are too stiff for the beginners in a given subject; (3) with too much time given to learning the subjects, mostly by cramming or through copious help from private tutors a student is left with little time to develop his skill in language.

The crux of the problem is two-fold: too many subjects introduced too early for too young children, — such as social science, theoretical science including difficult arithmetical problems, theology with no simplification of the style of communication, or consideration for the taste and receptivity of young learners. The whole thing argues a marked lack of imagination on the part both of syllabus framers and text-book writers. Subjects in the humanities or the science group are taught as well at graduate and post-graduate levels. But you can't have about the same language or style of communication.

The phenomenon of private tutors (in some case almost one for each subject) for a boy or girl, while it shows that some parents are very rich, also points to the problem that secondary education has become for the students. So the answer is: reassess the whole thing, recast the curriculum, streamline the syllabus, simplify the language (and presentation) of subjects, reduce their number, and do all this under guidance from experts of established credentials, local or foreign.