

Pragati

The Indian
National Interest
Review

No 22 | Jan 2009



Ideas for India's future

NANDAN NILEKANI ON THE NATIONAL AGENDA
THE VERDICT IN JAMMU & KASHMIR
GEOLOGY AND AGRARIAN DISTRESS
WHEN KEYNES IS INVOKED
ON CANTEENS AND TEXTBOOKS

www.nationalinterest.in

ISSN 0973-8460



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Note: We recommend that you print this magazine for the optimum reading experience. For best results set the paper size to A3 and print in booklet mode.

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The Indian National Interest Review

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Published by **The Indian National Interest**—an independent community of individuals committed to increasing public awareness and education on strategic affairs, economic policy and governance.

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EDUCATION

Discarding ideological blinkers

India's schools need an intellectual liberalisation

RENU POKHARNA

EDUCATION IS a liberating process—oft repeated, but seldom true unless education is defined clearly. In India the formal education that is provided by schools and colleges actually imprisons the young mind. It makes the youth closed to ideas of freedom and of a liberal society.

Whatever openness or support there is today for liberal ideas has come more from the process of economic liberalisation, which made people realise the benefits of open markets, and increased social freedoms, than from education.

The curriculum in our educational institutions is strictly socialism-oriented. New Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), for example, is considered a top university in the country, and is also a hotbed of student activism. But one visit to the canteen is revealing of the kind of activism that is espoused by the students. It presents a striking paradox—bold colourful posters pasted on its walls with slogans like 'Down with Capitalism' and 'March against Globalisation' but many a global brand, from Coca-Cola to Cadbury's, is available for sale from its counters. JNU has a history of Marxist student parties winning elections every year on the very same slogans. A look at its textbooks yields explanations. Like many other Indian universities that offer the subject, JNU's social work course promotes the state as the sole saviour of the poor in the country.

The curriculum of the 'development studies' and 'social work' programmes that are offered in the universities across India contains just one or two courses on basic economics. Surely develop-



Still lurking in the canteen

ment and poverty eradication are more than about short term action plans of helping poor by charity and other government programmes? The greatest impact on poverty from Sweden to Vietnam has been due to easing government controls on markets within the country and free trade with other countries. Unless students understand this economic aspect of policy-making, no amount of 'development studies' courses can help. Unfortunately, the psyche of students is being shaped differently, which is why when events like World Social Forum or Asian Social Forum are held in India, they receive a large numbers of their participants from among students of these courses

The impact of a flawed education though is just not restricted to peaceful marches and campus elections for communism; it also manifests itself in violent rebellions, most famously in the Naxalite movement. The movement, spearheaded by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in the 1960s started off as a peasants' uprising and then following the ideals of Che Guevara and Mao Zedong, decided to launch guerrilla warfare against the state itself.

Today Naxalism directly threatens the security of as many as 160 out of India's 604 districts. Initially, it was the romanticism of rebellion that made many educated youngsters become a part of it. As H. Balakrishnan remarks, "Presidency College was the hub of student activism, the *jhola* being a trademark. Beards *a la* Che Guevara had arrived." India cannot afford to help indoctrinate its young minds towards sympathising with, and providing recruiting grounds for, what Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has called the "gravest threat to India's internal security."

Consider the following statement: "(Socialism) emerged as a reaction to the rise and development of capitalism. *Laissez faire* doctrine led to great difficulties in society....But at the end of the nineteenth century, the fallacies of the doctrine became evident."

This is an excerpt from a Class XII textbook of Political Science prescribed by the National Council of Education Research and Training (NCERT) that designs the syllabus that is set as a benchmark for central board schools across India. The book has chapters on both Liberalism and Socialism under the heading of 'Major Political Theories', but it glorifies socialism with statements like "It protests against the harsh materialism and individualism of classical liberals. A capitalist society produces ugly conditions."

On the other hand, the chapter on Liberalism gives a very misconstrued idea of what liberal means. For example, it says that liberals widely believe that "free people are not equal, and equal people are not free". But it is given as "They did not believe in economic equality. Certain sections indeed believed that economic inequality was not only inevitable, but positively good for all concerned." Nowhere is 'rule of law' talked about despite it being a pillar of liberalism. Further, the textbook talks about Liberalism as if it were a defunct ideology, and doesn't connect it to the prosperity and growth enjoyed by economies around the world, first in the West and now in China and India. To complete the demonisation, the chapter concludes that "the concept of market swallows up the concept of justice and equality."

Ironically, the chapter on Socialism concludes with a mention of the opening of economies in the 1990s and laments at the loss of socialistic ideas. A student, who is influenced by all this at an age where opinions strengthen easily, would obviously be perverse to the ideas of a free market economy and markets providing public goods.

The issue here is not only of textbooks, it is also of the extent to which the teaching faculty influences the students. At the Tata Institute of Social

Sciences (TISS), it is ironic that an educational institution funded by one of India's biggest corporate companies should actually be anti-capitalist. Recently, in response to corporate interest in rural health care, a very senior member of its faculty argued in a newspaper that it was not a plausible idea "as it depends on the business house's charity quotient rather than on a sustainable module."

Thousands of students in India pass out from colleges dominated by teachers who still believe in a Red Revolution. The teaching faculty has a right to their opinions of course, but when an institution is filled with the same kind of people espousing the same kind of ideology, convincing the students about liberal ideas after they have been so indoctrinated becomes a difficult task.

Post-independence India saw the adoption of a mixed economic planning which leaned more to-

Teachers have a right to their opinions, but when an institution is filled with the same kind of people espousing the same kind of ideology, convincing students about liberal ideas after they have been indoctrinated becomes difficult.

wards socialism due to Nehru's admiration for the Soviet Union. That initial fascination explains why the education system emphasised the benefits of a socialised economy. Times have changed and India's democratic and economic development requires its youth to a better understanding of Liberalism.

At the very least, it cannot afford to put ideological blinkers at a time when it stands at the verge of exploiting the demographic dividend. One positive trend has been the emergence of private schools and colleges many of them experimenting with the syllabus. Yet a majority still adhere to the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) or the local State Boards where the textbooks and the ideas in them have not been updated over time. It is abundantly clear that unshackling the education system by introducing competition and empowering the students is the way forward. Liberating minds by transforming the curriculum must be part of India's education reform project.

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