

Importance of Quality Education for the Development of the Nation
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For sure, there needs to be millions of actions and factors on the ground for this scenario of economic transformation to become reality. Infrastructure development, geopolitical stability, fiscal discipline, health care, access to water are just a few of these factors. But the one factor that will crucially determine whether we seize this moment in history as our own or fritter it away is how we deal with the education of our children.

It is not that the importance of education is underestimated in our country; public discourse keeps it very much a part of everyone's agenda. However, this consciousness revolves mainly around "access" to education—issues like enrollment, attendance, dropout rates, discrimination, physical condition, facilities, all of which doubtlessly merit high attention. But equally deserving of urgent attention is the Quality of Learning, which usually gets perfunctory treatment.

It is true that Quality of Learning can't be addressed in a vacuum caused by the absence of schools or teachers, or basic facilities. Nor can it be addressed divorced from the socio-economic

context of the child. Indeed, Quality and Access and therefore equity are inextricably entwined. But it is critical to appreciate that in our complex socio-economic system, as much as Access impacts Quality, so does Quality impact Access. It's like the double helix of the DNA, the two strands are never complete in themselves, but are together. The DNA of education runs on the two strands of Quality and Access.

Equally important in this discourse and debate is that accompanying good intentions translate to action on the ground—on both Quality and Access. I don't think funds are a constraint—successive governments have committed generous funds to education. The need really is to get execution done at the level where it really makes an impact on the life of each child.

Every child in a school, and learning joyfully, should become the topmost priority in the national action agenda. This will be the most important factor in fulfilling the potential and promise that the vast productive population of India holds. *[Excerpts from his article on "Writing is on the wall: get the a,b,c right" Outlook, 12/1/04]*

NEWS IN BRIEF

U.P. revokes order on half-day school on Friday

The Uttar Pradesh Government has withdrawn the order of closure of educational institutions on Friday after 12 noon, the Chief Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav told the Assembly today. The Government has, however, issued a "directive authorising the District Magistrates to apply their discretion in consultation with the District Inspector of Schools and Basic Shiksha Adhikari concerned to take decisions at the local level to close schools for Friday prayers. The directive would be applicable wherever necessary, especially in areas having a substantial Muslim population. The Bharatiya Janata

Party had threatened to launch an agitation seeking the withdrawal of the order, which said that schools under the Government control would function for half a day on Fridays. As the Assembly began its sitting today, the BJP members demanded that the order be withdrawn. They entered the well of the House, raising slogans, and the Speaker, Kesrinath Tripathi, adjourned the House till the end of question hour. As the House assembled again, the Chief Minister said it was not proper to issue the directive and promised to make a statement on the issue later in the day. He announced the withdrawal of the order at the conclusion of his two-hour reply to the debate on the State budget. *[Hindu, 21.2.04]*

'Her' replaces 'Him' in new education bill

The new version of the Compulsory Education Bill is serious about political correctness, at least while referring to young persons. In the old version, the draft-writers resolved the old dilemma of referring to a child as him or her by resorting to the slightly awkward phrase "him or her." So the first draft made clear that skipping school was okay for a child if there was no approved school "within the prescribed distance from his or her residence." In the new draft, there is no "him or her" stuff. It does away with the "him," and almost uses just the feminine pronoun for a child. For example: "No child shall be denied admission in an approved school located in such vicinity of 'her' place of residence as may be prescribed." The modern usage is intentional. In the section on definitions of the terms used in the Bill, it is made clear: "the female gender, wherever used in pronouns in relation to a child, includes the male." This marks an inversion of the usual way the Government of India writes - it is the masculine pronoun which is meant to

include the feminine. Perhaps the human resource development ministry needs to make the point. [AA, 16.1.04]

Private schools must take poor students: HC

The Delhi High Court on Tuesday (January 20) came down heavily on recognised private schools, asking them to honour their undertaking to admit poor students against 25 per cent of seats. The schools had agreed to do so while receiving land at concessional rates from the Delhi Development Authority (DDA). A division Bench comprising Justices B C Patel and B D Ahmed directed the Delhi government to find out whether the schools were complying with the undertaking. The court was disposing a public interest litigation filed by Social Jurist, a group of lawyers, in May, 2002. Directing the government to file a compliance report within four months, the Bench asked the directorate of education to hand over to the DDA a list of erring schools. The DDA will then take action against them. Some of the prominent schools that are now under the scanner include Modern School (Vasant Vihar), Delhi Public School (Vasant Vihar, Vasant Kunj, East of Kailash), Blue Bells (Kailash Colony), Apeejay (Sheikh Sarai), Cambridge (Rajouri Garden), Cyan Bharti (Saket),

Laxman Public School (Hauz Khas), J D Tytler School (Munirka) and Green Field Public School (Vasant Vihar). The PIL, filed by Ashok Aggarwal on behalf of Social Jurist, said there are 1,500 unaided recognised schools in Delhi. More than 1,200 of them were allotted public land at throw away prices. The reason was, the PIL said, to help the schools in discharging their social obligation by providing free education to children from the weaker sections of society. [TO/, 21.1.04]

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SC upholds Joshi's IIM fee slash

Sticking to its stand that institutes of excellence should not be the exclusive domain of the elite, the Supreme Court has upheld the Centre's decision to drastically reduce the admission fees of six Indian Institute of Management (IIMs) from Rs. 15 lakh to Rs. 30,000a year.

The apex court passed the order only after the government promised not to interfere in the running of these business schools. Additional solicitor-general Mukul Rohtagi also assured the court that the government would grant additional funds to make good the deficit arising from the reduction in fees.

A bench of Chief Justice V.N. Khare, Justices S.B. Sinha and S.H. Kapadia noted Mr. Rohtagi's statement that the government's decision would in no way lead to interference in the running of these institutions. Thus, the bench disposed of a public interest litigation filed by three IIM alumni challenging the February 4 decision of HRD minister Murli Manohar Joshi.

Petitioners' counsel Harish Salve said that the fee cut was not a major issue as long as the government did not intend to tinker with the management of these institutions of global repute. During the February 16 hearing, the bench had questioned the locus standi (right) of the petitioners. "Who are you? what is your locus?" it had asked, adding: "If the IIMS were satisfied with the decision of the government, who are you to challenge it?"

The petitioners had apprehended that the fee reduction would make these institutions completely dependent on the government for funds. They had also feared that the government might interfere in the functioning of the IIMS. the Centre had said that it gives Rs 12 crore as annual subsidy to the society running the IIMS and subsidises the fee to the tune of Rs. 2.5 lakh per student at present. [TOI, 28/2/04]