

State Education Policy should consider people's opinions too



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The expert committee, led by retired Judge Murugesan, formulating the Tamil Nadu government's State Education Policy, has recently conducted public hearings in eight zones of the state segregated for the purpose. I took part in three of them as a spectator and in the Chennai meeting as a commentator. Besides, I witnessed the people's hectic and enthusiastic discussions on education when I participated in the round-table public hearings conducted separately by the Tamil Nadu Science Forum and three teacher associations.

Way back in 2004-05 when Prof. Yashpal chaired the steering committee on the National Curriculum Framework, open public hearings were conducted at four places in Tamil Nadu. The

Kasturi Rangan Educational Committee heard public opinions online owing to the corona lockdown.

It is a matter of joy that Tamil Nadu is a society that discusses education in an open auditorium freely without fear or favour. Quite unforgettable and notable is the role of the educational committee in facilitating an openly democratic exchange of views on drawbacks in our education system without giving room for religious, casteist, regional and gender differences.

The committee's move to hear opinions of students and children is quite daring. The public hearing venue where children and adults are segregated into two sections gives a new experience. This innovative feature was not found in the times of the Kothari Commission and the Yashpal Committee as well.

Priority to children

At the public hearings priority was given to opinions from the children. How the children differ from the parents and teachers and how they are disappointed over teachers using cell phone in the class, over teachers taking class without doing prior groundwork, over teachers pouring harsh words on the students in a fit of rage instead of mildly pointing out mistakes done by the students and setting them right and over teachers not allowing democratic discussions on doubts... these are the things the children have pointed out smartly and with concern.

The children, in fact, demand an education related to travel. They want to be taken to Keezhadi and Vainu Bappu Observatory which figure in their lessons. They need media education too.

They want media studies to figure in their syllabus – media studies that dissect the right and wrong data. They want an alternative to the system of learning by rote.

A class 4 student from Tiruchi seeks permission to do field studies instead of just doing homework. A Villupuram student demands

libraries and labs. A Coimbatore student wants future job opportunities of the fourth industrial revolution to be part of the curriculum.

College students discuss possibilities of including environmental and climate change education and sex education in the syllabi. It is their point of view that instead of cramming the heads of students with just data after data, an educational system enhancing and honing various skills of the students is the need of the hour.

Adults in a dilemma

On the other end of the spectrum are teachers and parents.

The parents complaining of recalcitrant teens and disobedient minors want teachers to intensify moral classes, assuming that they will instil in their wards' minds the values of obedience and cooperation. 'Spare the rod and spoil the child' is the age-old dictum that has influenced their thinking.

Unfortunately, the teachers for their part have aired their grievances over old pension scheme and paucity of manpower in educational institutions, thereby shrinking the scope of the public hearing on education.

It should be recorded here that even as the university professors were competing with each other to catch hold of the mike to speak, the judge slammed them saying, "If the teachers are like this, how can the students be corrected?"

The public hearing on education in every district has thrown up a wide range of the people's opinions on general education till class 8, separate education from class 9 onwards, semester system, the question of whether the public exam for class 11 should continue, rights of the differently abled and women's education.

Most of the parents have put forward a suggestion that instead of appointing separate psychological counsellors in the schools, the teacher training institutions themselves can teach psychology as part of syllabus to the trainees and make them good psychological guides. Above all, educationists have reiterated the need for retaining the state's rights in the education sector.

Expectations in Tamil Nadu

It is the present times' imperative that the university education must be designed in keeping with the demands and challenges of new jobs in the 21st century's industry. Following suit, the higher secondary education and high school, middle school and primary schools' education systems must be structured in such a way that the students are nurtured and groomed in terms of skills and acumen. Additionally, it is necessary to instill in the students the values of humanism, religious harmony, social thinking, creativity and original thinking ability.

Seeds for scientific approach, reading habit and search for knowledge must also be sown in the minds of the students. This is what most of the people have laid stress on.

An unforgettable incident took part at a programme. An elderly woman participating in the Kulithalai Science Forum's public hearing emphasized the need for including agriculture in the education system, saying, "Include a lesson on our betel leaf for our children." In fact, what she actually demanded was a healthy regional approach to education.

The public hearings on education have thrown three important points: 1. All must have access to education 2. Tamil and English are enough. The third language shall be left to an individual's own choice 3. Primary school education must be taught in Tamil, the mother tongue of Tamil Nadu.

Apart from these three vital points, the people who attended the public hearings want the exam-oriented education to be changed

into creative education that stirs off search for knowledge in the minds of the students; book-oriented education to be transformed into action-oriented education and marks-oriented education to be metamorphosed into education of sublime human values.

Thus, the people have great expectations over the education committee.

Will the government's new education policy measure up to the expectations?

Translated by V.Mariappan