

Address of Azim Premji
At
The Third National Learning Conference
Bangalore, May 24, 2007

Mr. Champak Chatterji, Prof. Andre Beteille, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,
It is a privilege to have you all with us at the Third National Learning Conference. I thank you for making it to this conference, sparing your valuable time to debate and discuss on the important subject of "equitable education for an equitable society".

Universal quality education is now the fundamental right of every child in this country. But we as a nation are far from the goal of quality. If quality is elusive, equity seems to be even more so.

To me the need to ensure that the most marginalized and disadvantaged receive the same quality of education as their fellow citizens is perhaps the most urgent priority.

I view the issue not as an intellectual or an expert in education, but as a concerned fellow citizen.

Let me share some views that I have.

The first point I want to make is that today we live in two different worlds. On the one hand, our constitution makes a commitment to a just, humane and equitable society. On the other hand, we see a world of disparities and a less than satisfactory implementation of legislations, including most importantly, several aspects of the National Education Policy which have still not been implemented. We have the commitment to abolish child labour. We have a commitment to provide education for all, yet millions of our children, including Dalits, tribals and those from economically backward homes are deprived of the most basic school education.

The education statistics speaks volumes. On almost every parameter, educational access and performance is at least 20 percentage point lower for the disadvantaged groups – whether it is girls vs. boys, rural vs. urban, or socially forward vs. socially backward.

I find it schizophrenic that we commit ourselves to something in policy and do something different in reality. Mere lip-service or tokenism, such as reserving 25% seats in some elite schools in Delhi is hardly the answer to the enormous problem we face.

Despite commitments towards the concept of Common Schooling from the time of Kothari Commission report, we have failed to provide quality education to all in the country. The path is not an easy one, but we need Innovative solutions to meet our commitments, and we need them now.

The second point I want to emphasize is the very critical role education has in building the foundation for equity in society.

If we accept that education is the process of social change, we must use the education process to achieve the sense of equality among all human beings. I do believe that this can be achieved by the processes that we follow in our schools and in our classrooms. If we were to ensure effective affirmative action at the school education stage, we may well be able to dispense with the need for it both in higher education and later life.

The third point I want to highlight is that today's education system itself is creating a different kind of a caste system.

The process of education for the disadvantaged in our country is entirely different from the process of education for the children of the privileged. This includes the quality of infrastructure, facilities for sports and arts, the teaching - learning material, the motivational level of teachers, the treatment they receive etc. Tell me, how then can we evaluate or judge the children from both the groups by the same criteria at the board and entrance examinations? There is frequently further disparity between the disadvantaged and the privileged - in terms of their social background, parental literacy, pre-schooling, economic support and the education process.

It is in this sense that education itself is creating its own caste system by knowingly or unknowingly, accentuating, aiding and abetting inequities. This 'caste' system is evident from the products churned out by our different educational systems and the kind of opportunities that are available to them.

This leads me to my fourth point of the economic choices that are as important as the social or the political choices. One of the questions that needs to be addressed is – how can we expand the economic choices for the disadvantaged through education? Both Indian urban and rural masses are undergoing a huge metamorphosis. There is an explosion of opportunities even in the rural areas. Can we address the needs arising out of such expansions of economic opportunities, at the high school level? Can we envision an education which builds basic abilities and

sensitivities in the child, and simultaneously provides the child the skills which can gain her / him employment in the rapidly changing economic scenario?

The poor and the disadvantaged do not have the time or the means to invest in more than 10 years of education to expand their economic choices. Not being an educationist, I may sound simplistic when I express enthusiasm about the vocationalization of education. I believe that it would considerably expand the economic horizons of our children.

It is possible for experts to forecast the demands of the employment market and to guide and prepare our young talent to meet them. To cite you the example of China, at the secondary stage, almost 50% of the children are pursuing vocational education in more than 4,000 trades. Data also shows that almost 95% of them get employment. The Indian context is not very different from the Chinese in terms of employment opportunities moving away from agriculture to new industries and services.

I mention this within the context of a need to expand the economic choices of our disadvantaged. I do not want us to lose sight of the fact that education has a far broader responsibility of building basic abilities, such as critical thinking and problem solving, and of developing values of empathy, fairness and essential humanity. Most of this has been well articulated in the National Policy of Education as well as in the recent National Curriculum Framework, and therefore it is important to remind ourselves that we must strive to achieve both.

My fifth and final point is – How serious are we about providing an empowering education for all our children. Where is the exemplary political will, imperative in making our constitution a reality? Where are the resources which should be poured in? Where are the action plans focusing on bringing in an equitable education in the country? Where is the sense of urgency that should drive something as crucial as the future of our children, of our country?

About 85 % of India's schooling happens in government schools. The 15% who are able to afford fees – this includes many of us here – have already, or are increasingly, moving to private schools, irrespective of their quality. What this means is we have abandoned our stake in Government schools leaving them to the most deprived and the voiceless, to all those, infact, who are most in need of an equitable education.

This is where our role as civil society members and organisations is critical. The more we remain passive or neutral, the more disservice we do to the cause.

I believe that the time for mere formal and legal action is over. What we need to focus on now, is on transforming it into a reality at the ground level in every school, in every village in our great country.

Let me end by expressing the hope that this Conference will enable the participants to reflect, discuss and debate several critical issues related to “Equitable Education for Equitable Society” to throw up many innovative ideas on the way forward.

I wish all of you an exciting next three days.