

School, Teacher and Society*

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Abstract

The lecture, being a part of the celebrations of the Golden Jubilee of the NCERT, presents a synoptic view of its notable contributions and leadership role it has played in the field of school education. It brings out that during the 50 years of the NCERT, it has been increasingly noticed for its 'good work' and achievements as well as for its inability to perform to expectations by the States, the school community and the public. The expectations from the NCERT's role in school education constitute not only the dream image of NCERT but also its sub-conscious will. The lecture has been titled 'School, Teacher and Society' and dwells upon the symbiotic relationship of these three entities in the life of a nation. School education defines the trajectory of the young from the formative years of their growth and development to their entry into professional engagements with life. The concerns of access, equity and quality and the various ramifications of these concerns have been discussed in the context of the instrumentality of the school system to possibly minimize social inequities. The role of secondary education to produce skilled workforce for local and global requirements, for increasing GER in higher education, for increasing the productivity of both the individuals and the homes and improving the economy of the country are discussed. Quality of secondary education is dependent on the quality of the content offered at this stage of education, the manner in which transacted and evaluated, and the competencies of the teachers to communicate the same to the learners. Vocational education has not seen success as a part of secondary school education. The situation will remain static if some drastically different thinking is not done in this connection. The role of open and distance learning in enhancing the outreach of the secondary education is also discussed as a complementary alternative. Equally important are concerns of the challenges school education poses for the education of the socially deprived sections of the societies, gender disparities and curricular challenges for the physically and mentally challenged. The new responsibilities of the Boards of School Education in the context of public examinations being phased out are an issue for detailed debate. How the Guru ideal and the implications of preparing a professional teacher need to be harmonised calls for a drastic re-look at the whole modality of teacher preparation. A critical progressive ethics for teachers is oriented toward bringing out the best in all students, instead of focussing on what they are doing wrong. Rather than working from a disciplinary position, teachers generate democratic practices, whereby students and teachers collectively construct an ethical modus operandi or modus vivendi. In this humanistic vision, a genuine learning community can flourish as opposed to the market model where standards and competitiveness pit human beings against each other. A drastic overhaul of teacher education requires a serious effort and need to be initiated sooner than later. The triangular implications of School, Teacher and Society provide the framework of the various issues presented in the lecture.

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I am grateful to the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) for inviting me to deliver a lecture in the NCERT Golden Jubilee Lecture Series 2011, organised as a part of Golden Jubilee Celebration of the organisation. I understand that this is the third lecture in the series. I accepted this invitation in all humility as I am conscious that I am only a practitioner in the field of education and not a scholar by any standards. Perhaps, the motivation for this invitation was that I was a member of the NCERT family for almost 25 years of my career. All thoughts in this lecture are, therefore, leaning on my experience and understanding, though limited, of the state of education in general and school education in particular, in our country's context. The centrality of the lecture is the role of the NCERT as it has evolved since its inception and the concerns it has addressed in respect of school and teacher, and their impact on society.

Fifty years in the life of NCERT is a momentous time for taking stock of its achievements and the policy initiatives recommended by it for the improvement of the quality of school education. This should, therefore, be a time for introspection. While such an exercise would definitely provide a sense of pride to those who have been associated with this organisation for the contributions it has made in the past, it will also give an opportunity to reflect on its deficits which could be converted into challenges and opportunities for the future.

NCERT: Past, Present and Future

On an occasion like this, therefore, it is difficult to resist some reminiscences. NCERT is essentially an academic

body of professionals in the field of education, researchers and teachers. The characteristics of its function are 'service', 'advice and assistance', and 'extension' and this has been mandated in its Memorandum of Association (MoA). NCERT does not carry the clout of executive power of a government department, neither it is a grant disbursing agency. It is widely recognised as a national institution playing a leadership role in the field of school education. The birth of NCERT and its role during the 50 years of its existence has to be seen in this background.

NCERT grew and evolved in the midst of a multitude of developments post 1960s, both in experience and expertise. It made notable contributions in many areas concerning education and also found itself at times not sufficiently prepared and sometimes even inadequately equipped. It cannot, however, be denied that during all these years, NCERT has been increasingly noticed for its 'good work' and achievements as well as for its inability to match the expectations by the states, the school community and the public. This is a pointer to the high expectation of the leadership role of NCERT in bringing about significant improvements in the sphere of school education and these expectations constitute not only the dream image of NCERT but also its subconscious will. Such an image has emerged as a result of years of assiduous and dedicated efforts of its academic community for which all those responsible are entitled to a legitimate pride.

The monumental work done by the NCERT during its first decade on the Health Education Work (HEW) related

projects established its credentials as a premier research organisation in the field of school education. Developmental norms of children from 2-1/2 to 6 years sowed the seeds for subsequent work on pre-school education, which for the first time found its reference in the National Policy on Education (NPE), 1986 in the form of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) and now in the amended Article 45 of the Constitution. The focus on Children's Media Laboratory (CML) and the developmental focus on pre-school education find its acceptance in today's thinking of treating ECCE as Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD).

NCERT has been at the forefront of initiating implementation of recommendations of the Commissions on Education set up by the Government of India. The Report of the Secondary Education Commission (1952-53) saw the birth of the Regional Colleges of Education (RCEs) to experiment with the Multipurpose Higher Secondary Education in the Demonstration Multipurpose Schools attached to the RCEs, and the first ever attempt at the development of integrated programmes of teacher education in general and Technology, Agriculture, Commerce, Home Science and Fine Arts related vocational areas in particular. But for a myopic vision on some planners, NCERT would have been a pioneer in laying a solid vision of vocational education.

The implementation of the key recommendations of the Education Commission (1964-66) saw the development of the first Curriculum Frameworks namely — Curriculum for the Ten-Year School (1975),

Higher Secondary Education and its Vocationalisation (1976), followed by a classic Teacher Education Curriculum – A Framework, brought out by the non-statutory National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) then an integral part of NCERT. These historic documents provided major policy reforms in curriculum and became the lifeline of all subsequent attempts in the curriculum frameworks brought out in 1988, 2000, 2005, for school education, and Quality Teacher Education Framework (1998) and the National Curricular Framework for Teacher Education (2009) by the Statutory NCTE.

NCERT's pioneering work on talent search, launched in 1965, was the first attempt in the country visualising the need for identification of talented young who would pursue basic sciences and mathematics to create foundational edifice for developments in engineering and technology. The format of the Science Talent Search examination became a progenitor of the current format of competitive examinations for entry into professional courses.

The first ever attempt at the use of technology into teaching-learning process can be attributed to the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) in the early 1970s and the role played by the Centre of Educational Technology (CET) of the NCERT in determining its content and process. This role ultimately led to the creation of the Central Institute of Educational Technology (CIET).

NCERT can also be credited to be the first organisation to make available to education system a database for policy formulation through institutionalisation

of census-based quintennial All India Education Surveys (AIESs). The data base generated at the behest of the Planning Commission has now taken us to 8th AIES which is currently on.

The NPE, 1986 had recommended a complete overhaul of teacher education, one of the inputs of which was the development of a scheme of restructuring and reorganising teacher education. The conceptual documents on the District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs), Colleges of Teacher Education (CTEs) / Institutes of Advanced Studies in Education (IASEs) were developed by the NCERT and NIEPA.

The NCERT's involvement in the development of textbooks for different curricular areas of the entire school education from classes I to XII is well known. It has won accolades for the quality of the content and the orientation built-in for pedagogy in these textbooks. Documenting the whole technology of text book development which has given to NCERT a great name needs to be properly documented in terms of the processes so that a nation wide capability is developed in each state to design similar quality materials based on their local context and involving local expertise.

The above citation is only some of the significant firsts to the credit of the NCERT.

The multifarious roles of significance to education underscore the need for NCERT to develop and sustain a capability to think ahead, to peep into future. It should not remain satisfied with or overwhelmingly preoccupied with looking into the past and also with attempting analysis and solution of the complex and numerous problems of the

contemporary education scene only. It has to continue to develop capabilities to rejuvenate its role as a national 'think tank' in the area of school education as it is this role which can be the basis for its being able to 'advise and assist' the central and state governments in policy and programmes formulation. NCERT should ever remain conscious to develop with increased vigour the culture and capability to promote and organise purposeful debates and discussions in a professional way about the problems, concerns, issues, etc. which afflict and hamper sound educational development. It must also keep in its active memory that it has also a role to help the states build them into authentic academically sound research-oriented institutions as this would shorten the gestation time for proper growth of the state-level institutions. Introspection by NCERT, therefore, is necessary at this juncture to be sure whether the organisation's efforts have been in the right sense and direction, and to apply mid-course connections, if the situation so demands. However, some items of work have been undertaken by or entrusted to NCERT which did not strictly flow from its training and research function, and over the years these have tended to claim a disproportionate share of its time and energy, without contributing to the enrichment of the professional content of NCERT's basic work. The educational scenario globally is undergoing transformational changes and India is not an exception to these experiences. In order that NCERT remains alert and equipped to perform its roles in the changing dynamics of school education, it cannot remain static in its approach

to the development and solution of the problems.

Before I proceed further, I am venturing to cite some of the areas which may be relevant for a possible futuristic concerns of NCERT.

- (i) The MoA of the NCERT states ... “to assist and advise the Ministry ... in the implementation of its policies and programmes in the field of education, particularly school education”. NCERT should have a role not only in the implementation but also formulation of the policies and programmes and its advice should be available to the Central and State Governments. This can bring out sharply the leadership and pace setting role of the NCERT and enhance the focus of its programmes so that policy formulation initiatives are well grounded in the planning of its work strategy.
- (ii) NCERT is an overarching name for a composite of institutions which comprise eight constituents, namely National Institute of Education (NIE), New Delhi, Regional Institutes of Education (RIEs) at Ajmer, Bhopal, Bhubaneswar, Mysore and Shillong; Central Institute of Educational Technology (CIET), New Delhi, and Pandit Sunderlal Sharma Central Institute of Vocational Education (PSSCIVE), Bhopal (and earlier even Field Advisers’ Offices). NIE and NCERT have become synonymous. While each constituent of NCERT is independently headed by a professional, who heads NIE? NCERT should be an administrative and policy generating secretariat

with a unique identity for each constituent. Isolation of the constituents from mainstreaming with the NCERT need to be bridged.

- (iii) A system of internal deputations to the extent possible and feasible to NCERT’s constituents/ departments, could be evolved as it could enhance the holistic development of faculty resources to provide a wide range of expertise on issues in education.
- (iv) Academic designations in NCERT have to be specific to the areas of expertise required; the present situation could be relooked to bring it in consonance with the character of its Research and Development (R&D), Training and extension function.
- (v) The date line of the All India Education Surveys should synchronise with the Five Year Plan formulation and its data should be available to the Planning Commission. The use of technology could bring about a change in this exercise of generating data base for planning and making it available for timely use.
- (vi) Talent search must have specificity of its domains and mechanism, and nurturance of talent (in fact, nurturance dimension of talent leave much to be desired). Also we have surrendered to an apparently unexplained logic detriment to the original focus of the science talent search. Perhaps we need to specify other contours of talent hunt in other areas as well and design instruments of identification and nurturance.

- (vii) Curriculum development in today's context can be immensely enriched with pedagogical advantage which technology offers. NCERT need to bring a greater synergy between educational and pedagogical work with curriculum practices. This area can lead to a near transformation of pedagogical practices in school education. In this context the role of CIET needs to be highlighted. While production of educational programmes for television and radio can be taken up by it independently, in respect of other audio-visual materials that it develops / produces, the principal objective should be to enrich and support the activities of the NCERT and provide a digital orientation to its various inputs in the field of school education.
- (viii) The lack of offering teaching programmes at the NIE programmes, not necessarily leading to award of degrees could in the long run become brand names for NCERT's contribution to school education.

School Education Scenario

It is relevant at this stage to take a bird's eye view of the school education scenario in the light of future concerns of NCERT. School education defines the trajectory of the young from the formative years of their growth and development to their entry into professional life in the respective chosen areas of their engagement with life. School takes into account the various dimensions of the human individual to be nurtured and sustained through the content and the process of education as these

are the foundations for all subsequent outcomes in the life of an individual. The question of availability of schools to fulfill demand; equal opportunities for all sections of the society to participate in education; and provisions of suitable infrastructure, trained teachers and effective pedagogy in schools, aimed at delivering the desired outcomes are among the concerns which any education system must address. NCERT is looked up to how the issues of access, equity and quality can be properly tackled in practical terms through undertaking research and studies to be closer to understanding the ground realities of the system. NCERT is a unique organisation in having to address the educational concerns of the child in all dimensions of his/her growth and development.

There are other concerns as well. School education in India is characterised by considerable discrimination. Children of the rich and the elite have access to 'good' quality, private and special types of 'public' schools, whereas the children of the vast majority of the poor, including the minorities and marginalised groups, go to government schools, a majority of which are perceived to be of indifferent quality. I do not subscribe to the so-called 'quality' of education offered in the public schools as this aspect needs to be studied scientifically, but the popular public perception as stated persists. Thus the class division in the society is reflected in the division of the school system. The latter has been a major contributory factor to the perpetuation and accentuation of social inequality and is an important concern for school education to be taken note of in any impending educational reforms.

Another related systemic concern which afflicts school education in India is the transformation of the very nature and meaning of school education brought about by the forces of globalisation and liberalisation. The philosophy operating with 'international', 'global', 'world' schools does call for some study and NCERT could generate a discourse on such issues.

The differential between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' should be bridged in as much as the schooling facilities are concerned. Realising the social benefits of the harmonious growth of any society, school education should be based on the foundations of inclusion. Educational exclusion leads to exclusion from livelihood, knowledge, status in society, human dignity, etc. and is cumulative from generation to generation. This is a denial of human rights under Article 21A of the Constitution of India. The phenomenon calls for studies and NCERT could be in the forefront of leading such a discourse. There are two kinds of exclusion prevalent in our schools. The first and the more insidious pattern of exclusion is the social exclusion of children who come from socially and economically deprived backgrounds, namely, scheduled castes (SC), scheduled tribes (ST), minorities, and other communities, girls and children with diverse learning needs. The second is the exclusion of the children with disabilities of different kinds. Inclusive education is the imperative for the nurturance of an egalitarian society we stand for and refers to a philosophical position as well as an arrangement of institutional facilities and processes. The attempts in this direction, though

not as forceful as they ought to be, have been incorporated in the legislation on the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009 and is a welcome initiative.

This RTE Act serves as a building block to ensure that every child has his/her right to get quality elementary education honoured. The state, teachers, families and communities have to fulfill this entitlement together. Few countries of the world have such a national provision to ensure both free and child-friendly education to all children in developing to their fullest potential as possible. The gains in India's education system over the past few decades have been tremendous in increasing childrens', and especially girls' access to school. Yet, inequities persist for many children with an estimated eight million more not completing the full cycle of elementary education. In addition, learning assessments also show that more investments are required to meet the provisions of quality and child-friendly education for the estimated 190 million girls and boys in India who should be in elementary school today. The RTE Act provides a solid platform to reach the unreached with specific provisions for disadvantaged groups such as child labourers, migrant children, children with special needs, or those who suffer disadvantage owing to social, cultural, economic, geographical, linguistic, gender or such other factors. It also strives for participatory school management to ensure quality with equity, for example, by banning corporal punishment to ensure classrooms free of fear and anxiety as well as providing mother tongue instruction, as far as practicable. NCERT has a pile of agenda to convert the issues and concerns

expressed above into a format of studies and research. It is also important to mention that starting a 6 year old may be too late to lay the foundation to be ready for school, so investing in early learning is a key strategy in meeting the goals. In addition, there are millions of out-of-school children to be brought into classes at age-appropriate level with a support to stay in the school. This alone is posing a major challenge necessitating flexible and innovative approaches to provide education. Building on the achievements of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and its harmonisation with the RTE Act has to be made a reality in schools across the country. India thus has to emerge as a global leader in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) of ensuring universal elementary education of all children by 2015. Task is easier said than accomplished, and NCERT has an agenda for further discourse on this subject.

Definition (Age) of the Child and Right to Education

There has been a concern expressed by educationists and civil society that the RTE Act has not done full justice to the age range which defines a child. The definition (age) of the child was decided by confining the Act to Article 21A of the Constitution of India. The government's decision to do so has obviously got parliamentary approval with this Act. The original Article 45 and the Unikrishnan verdict, both include the age group 0-6 years. The Juvenile Justice Act defines a child upto age 18 years. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), to which India is a signatory, also defines a child from 0-18 years. In principle, by referring

to the Juvenile Justice Act, the UNCRC and Article 21 (Right to Life) in the aims and objects of the RTE Act, the age could have been defined from 0-18 years. However, citing economic compulsions, the present Act has been confined to age 6-14 years as contained in Article 21A. A great deal of public pressure would need to be kept up in order to have the Act amended to incorporate 0-18 years as the age of the child. If and when this happens, not only ECCE but also secondary (which includes higher secondary) would be covered towards Universal Secondary Education (USE) as a part of Right to Education.

Towards Universal Secondary Education

The successful implementation of the RTE Act and the SSA has implications for secondary education in terms of access, equity and quality. At present only 50% children qualify for admission to class IX. The situation has to be tackled in the hopeful realisation when 100% children qualify. The concept of general education has also to be viewed afresh. Should the content of general education remain confined upto class X or extended to class XII. Globally, school education is of 12 years' duration. Extending the right of children to 12 years of education will require consideration whether it should be free as well as compulsory. To begin with, it could be free. Can the type of provisions contained in the RTE Act be equally valid for extending it to 12 years of education? What existing provisions will remain valid, what new may have to be added, and so on? NCERT can provide a framework for a futuristic legislation on the subject.

Unlike elementary education, secondary education was not part of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). World Education Report 2000 contains that during drafting the human rights declaration, education above elementary education was referred to as higher education. The first reference to secondary education can be found in the United Nations Convention against Discrimination in Education – “The State parties (undertake to) make secondary education in its different forms generally available and accessible to all. The UNCRC includes general and vocational education as well. These statements are clear indication of global policy shift in case of universal access to secondary education.

The Government of India has spelt out the broad objectives of secondary education as envisioned under the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) in terms of providing a secondary school within a reasonable distance of any habitation which should be 5 km for a secondary school and 7-10 km for a higher secondary school; ensuring universal access to secondary education and universal retention by 2020, and providing access to secondary education with special reference to economically weaker sections of the society, the educationally backward girls and the disabled children residing in rural areas and other marginalised categories like SC, ST, OBCs and educationally backward minorities (EBMs). Thus though there is no legislation for making secondary education universal, the directions to achieve the goal have been demarcated.

The conventional argument that making universal 12 years’ education

is beset with its own problems when universal 8 years of education has remained an elusive dream for more than six decades after independence has to be tackled. It must be understood that it is a necessary utopia and we must channelise our national energy and resources to respond to the challenge rather than whine away and put the nation at risk. No country including India is any more an isolated geographical spot; each one is woven into a pattern that is global. It is no more a choice to be globally competitive; it is a necessity that can be ignored only at the cost of the nation’s peril. Global competitiveness in product, service, business and governance can be met only with globally competitive human resource, and secondary education is the foundation for these goals. Issues need to be brought to the surface and NCERT’s potential to do that is unquestioned.

Besides the pressure of globalisation, universal excess to secondary education has also to be an obligation of the state. Education is a social aspiration; it is seen and perceived as the gateway to good quality of life. Such popular perceptions and aspirations are strongly supported by empirical evidences of direct linkage between the indicators of quality of life and education. The human development index stands testimony to this. The earlier perception of social aspiration about education is taking a new turn. When poor and relatively low educated parents continue to aspire for some education of their children, the educated middle class aspire for quality education. The proliferation of high fee paid secondary education in the private sector is an indication of the preference for ‘better’

quality education and this has to be examined with reference to the quality of education offered in the government schools, and ways and means understood to make the needed correctives.

Achieving universal secondary education through formal and alternative modes of education is a target which India has to strive to achieve by 2020. For this to be achieved, it is assumed that UEE would be achieved, by 2012. It also assumes that internal efficiency of the school education would be increased by 100 per cent and there would be no failure and repetition by 2012 or so. It is only then that the enrolment size would correspond to actual population in the corresponding age group. This framework for achieving Universal Secondary Education (USE) is consistent with SSA strategy of the Government of India. The gap of 8 years between UEE and USE is to provide for (a) capacity creation at secondary stage – the present capacity for secondary education is not only inadequate but is of poor quality and is characterised by vast differentials in access in different regions of the country, (b) to allow for somewhat higher population growth than anticipated in the available statistical data, and (c) to provide for some slippage in the achievement of UEE. Various studies indicate that a possible scenario for achieving UEE in India would be around 2016.

The Government of India now proposes to invest more (₹ 52,000 crore) on Secondary Education under RMSA. It has also proposed to set up 6,000 Model schools. Of them, 3,500 Model schools would be set up on the pattern of Kendriya Vidyalayas (KVs) and 2,500 schools would be set up in Public Private

Partnership (PPP) mode. Education Cess has been increased to 3 per cent to cover secondary and higher education. For the expansion of secondary education, we will have to increase the transition rates at elementary stage and at the same time ensure easy access to secondary education in a nearby place. Besides, we will have to provide quality secondary schooling at an affordable cost. We need to strengthen the existing institutions and also to set up newer institutions for the expansion of secondary education. Unlike elementary education, where we have 1:40 teacher pupil ratio, we will require a large number of specialised teachers. At times, we may have to have a teacher only on 10 students.

School Education: Curricular Aspects

Is there a scope for breaking the rigidity of the present inclusion of curriculum areas? Why not focus on fixing the learning outcomes and draw the content for these from across the curriculum areas. Could the focus of all curricular areas be on developing a spirit of inquiry, courage to question, creativity, objectivity, problem solving skills, decision making skills, and aesthetic sensibility through the content which defines a particular area. It is in this context semesterisation needs to take a more practical meaning, and not just conducting two examinations in a year.

There is also some asymmetry in curricular options by the students. Enrolments in science and mathematics are falling and in social sciences and humanities rising. Such an asymmetry has implications for higher education both in general and in specific areas in particular. If this asymmetry is not

properly rectified at the secondary and higher secondary stages, the status of higher education may feel its implications adversely.

Secondary education actually includes education from classes IX to XII but for the sake of convenience a sub-sector of this stage is named as higher secondary which includes classes XI and XII. Higher secondary education is a crucial and terminal stage of school system. It is a gateway for higher education and also a vital link to the world of work. While the developed world has reached a stage where 12 years of school education has become universal, it is undergoing a transformation in the developing countries, including India. The greatest pressure in the coming years will be to redefine the role of higher secondary education consistent with the long term social and economic strategy of the country. Diversification of education into academic and vocational streams characterises this stage of education. The two streams have very different character and the nature of inputs for running them are different in scope and management. NCERT has brought out a Report of a Focus Group on Work and Education but I am constrained to mention that its implications for curriculum have not been properly elaborated.

School Curriculum: Transactional Modalities

Quality of secondary education is, of course, dependent on the quality of the content which is offered at this stage of education, the manner in which it is transacted, and the competencies of the teachers to communicate the same

to learners. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 has advocated constructivism as a major paradigm for learning which means that learners actively construct their own knowledge by connecting new ideas to existing ideas on the basis of materials/activities presented to them as experience in individual as well as collaborative situations. Active engagements involve enquiry, exploration, questioning, debates, applications and reflection. Lest these concerns should remain rhetoric, NCERT needs to go all out to work out pedagogic interventions in teaching-learning for internalisation and appreciation of the idea by both the students and the teachers. The constructivist paradigm is a welcome feature in many ways as it:

- Puts the learner, the child, at the centre of the educational process,
- Departs from extremely fixed reductionistic norms of learning,
- Emphasises activities/experiments as one of the important ways to facilitate construction of knowledge by children,
- Respects, (not to be equated to accepts) children's knowledge concepts even if they differ from standard concepts of various disciplines,
- Views teacher not as a transmitter but as a facilitator for knowledge.... of the child, and finally
- Aims to build up concepts (atleast partly) through local contextualised knowledge.

There has been much debate on 'local' versus 'global' or standard knowledge. If local knowledge is intended to mean

knowledge in the context of the learner's environment (for example, knowledge of learners in tribal communities about plants) or local technological skills and practices, there is really no issue. If, however, it is supposed to include all manner of local beliefs and myths it can indeed be problematic. Also, constructivism can mean different things to different people. The current debate probably views it as a pedagogic paradigm and that is how it should be looked at. In particular, it should not be equated to relativism which means that knowledge is basically a social construct, there is no absolute criterion by which to judge which one is 'better' or 'truer'.

Aspects related to school education curriculum and evaluation have now become a part of law for the elementary stage of education in the RTE Act. The provisions of Section 29(2) of the RTE Act, although are equally valid for all stages of school education, namely,

- Conformity with the values enshrined in the Constitution,
- All round development of the child,
- Building up child's knowledge, potentiality and talent,
- Development of physical and mental abilities to the fullest extent,
- Learning through activities, discovery and exploration in a child-friendly and child-centered manner,
- Making the child free of fear, trauma and anxiety and helping the child to express views freely,
- Comprehensive and continuous evaluation of child's understanding of knowledge and his or her ability to apply the same.

As a part of Fundamental Right of the child, how will the above provisions

be made justiciable. Although the extent of 'violation' of the provisions may not be possible to be correctly pinpointed, there will be a constant reminder to the teacher and the school that no effort has to be spared to be guided by the implications of the provisions and there has to be constant endeavour to reach the intended goals. A challenge indeed for the NCERT to develop inputs in regard to the above provisions.

Curricular Challenges for the Physically and Mentally Challenged

The National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) projected a population of 9.66 crore children at the secondary and senior secondary levels whereas only 2.70 crore of them were reported to be enrolled (1997-98). This coverage is approximately 25 per cent of the potential population. This low coverage in general education is a serious concern when the country is attempting to transform the population explosion as human resources. In addition to low coverage, dropout of children at the secondary level is also a big wastage in the educational sector. When the meager coverage and high dropout rate are impediments for the growth of general education itself, the field of special education faces further deprivation. In this connection some of the vital factors which require attention include making inclusion as a mass movement of general education; designing curricular adaptations imperative in school education; development of instructional strategy for persons with disabilities; improving affordability of education for children with disability as it is certainly costlier than that of education of non-

disabled children; providing accessible environment as presently institutions which have successfully done so are only a handful in the country; application of information technology

Learner Evaluation: Focus on Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation

While talking about school education, it is not possible to stay away from reference to Boards of School (Secondary) Education which are the examining and certifying bodies of the pass-outs of secondary education. The NPE (1986) made a strong plea for evaluation reform and indicated the need for development of an evaluation framework. In its Programme of Action (PoA), it made recommendations like gradual phasing out of public examinations, to begin with secondary level examination. It de-emphasised rote learning, focused on continuous and comprehensive evaluation and introduction of semester system, including grading, etc. These provisions have been incorporated into a law, the RTE Act, 2009 vide Section 29 (2) of this Act. Since we cannot make even an intelligent guess when the existing Act will be amended to include the age group from 0–18 years thereby extending its applicability upto secondary education, we have to work out a strategy to accelerate the examination reform process through a mechanism of professional interventions.

There is a general mis-conception that if the responsibility of conducting examinations and certification is relegated to the teacher and the school, there may be fall in standards and reduction of instruction time by the teacher and so

on. This does not seem to be a valid argument. One of the cardinal principles is that a teacher who is qualified to teach has all the credentials to evaluate and recommend the certification by the institution where the child is studying. This obviously calls for a greater amount of responsibility and accountability on the part of the teacher and this need not be sided away any longer. Perhaps this has the germ of improving the inter-school quality to be judged in the performance of the students in entrance examinations for admission to higher and professional education.

A related question that has often been raised is that what could be the new responsibilities of the Boards of School (secondary) Education if the conduct of public examinations does not remain their concern. Two suggestions come to my mind and they could be examined by experts for their feasibility, namely, the Boards could focus on designing instruments and strategies for monitoring performance of the schools under their affiliation/jurisdiction; could involve in improving the quality of education through capacity building programme of teacher development; could undertake the task of reviewing quality of textbooks and other instructional materials used in the schools across the country; could be involved in undertaking the conduct of normative examinations for those interested to enter higher professional and technical education institutions.

Secondary Education vis-à-vis Vocational Education

Secondary education would not be complete if vocational education is not

appraised as a part of the formal school. The formal school is most geared for academic education. The profile of its faculty and the head of the administration of the school are not equipped with the philosophy that goes with offering vocational programmes. It would require a transformation of the concept of the formal schooling if vocational education has to fit into the existing structure of thought and action in regard to this area. Some key concerns which have affected the success of this programme in the formal school include the following:

- Vocational education is treated as inferior to academic education
- There is lack of vocational infrastructure for the variety of vocational offerings that are possible in the context of developing knowledge economy
- There is virtual absence of teaching learning material in any regional language, thus creating a very serious handicap for the students of the vocational courses
- There is absolutely no worthwhile programme of preparing vocational teachers. The traditional Colleges of Education are perhaps not equipped both in terms of infrastructure and physical and human resources to offer programmes in vocational teacher preparation. A design will have to be worked out in consultation with professional institutional dealing with engineering and technology, agriculture, health and para medical to undertake the responsibility of not only designing but also offering such courses
- Rigidity of classifying all vocational programmes to the duration of 2 years at +2 stage to enable certification by the Boards of School (Secondary) Education needs to be broken.

It is felt that unless these issues are critically examined and decisions taken for correcting the situation, the vocational programmes will not flourish as a part of the formal school system. The situation will remain static if some drastically different rethinking is not done to address this priority area of higher secondary education.

Open Distance Learning in the Context of School Education

Although the pressures from UEE would impinge upon the formal school, there would still be a large segment of secondary age appropriate population who may not be able to derive the benefit of the formal school. The modality of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) reinforces the need and aspirations of those persons who aspire to enhance their academic and professional qualifications. The RTE Act mandates that all children are to be covered for the first 8 years of education only through a formal school. The ODL modality, therefore, acquires significance for secondary and higher secondary classes. This will have to supplement the formal school to reach the unreached. We need to move towards a stage when the boundaries between formal and ODL modalities will diffuse and supplement each other. It also will require to nurture a symbiotic relationship with semester system and transfer of credits between formal and ODL systems. It must be

emphasised that it will be injustice both to formal and distance education if all inputs which make distance learning substantive and operative, integrating effectively the use of information and communication technology is not effectively utilised to provide inputs into the process of curriculum development, teaching, training and learning.

The 'Guru' or the Professional Teacher (?)

The success of education depends essentially on the quality of the delivery system and a very serious attention is required to be paid in this direction. Amongst many things which form a part of this segment, the teacher is the most critical factor in achieving the goals of education. We have eulogised in our country the role of the teacher and not infrequently nostalgic references are made to the Guru ideal in any discussion on the subject in our national context. How relevant is the Guru concept in the context of democratic secular education? Is the professional teacher concept lacking in any way from the Guru of the ancient yore. Can the two be combined and a synthesis worked out?

One could dismiss straight away the revival of Guru as dreamy, mystical and archaic. The Guru was the institutional answer for a particular socio-philosophic context characterised essentially by an oral tradition in education, non-availability of any other sources of education than the human teacher, and restriction of education to a chosen elite. Ours, on the other hand, is an age guided by the ideals of equality of educational opportunities and life-long learning with the help of multiplicity of

learning resources which technology has made available. One could also point a finger at the kind of education the Guru was concerned with, spiritual wisdom. Education was transmission of such knowledge as would help the individual attain spiritual satisfaction and perfection. It had the backing of an epistemology whose important tenet was that spiritual truths are not realised through the study of books or independent reflection but are the outcome of inherited wisdom handed down from divinely inspired teachers. The Guru was needed under such a system of beliefs as a spiritual preceptor, a deity incarnates without whose grace, and salvation was out of question. These are criticisms whose force can in no way be denied, yet to brashly dismiss the guru ideal as irrelevant to the times and as theological would amount to exhibiting a philatelic insensitivity to the very subtle aesthetic qualities composing the ideal.

The above preamble has a direct concern with our thought in regard to the modalities of teacher preparation in the current context. We know that the 'Guru' was totally dedicated to the transmission of knowledge, a scholar and a person of unimpeachable character and who served the society not for the sake of material gain but for the cause of knowledge. In teaching the student he sought his own spiritual development.

Another lesson on the Guru institution is that respect and status are not something that are added to the teacher by the grace of the community but something that are warranted and earned by the worth of the teacher himself. Such worth in modern times

comes from a sincere and dedicated effort to develop the professional skills and competencies that are required for efficient functioning as a teacher. Every teacher is expected to strive to make himself/herself better both as a person and as a professional whatever be his/her initial circumstances that drew him into teaching. The Guru ideal, therefore, may appear archaic in its outer form; in its essential spirit has the following messages for us as teachers, namely: to constantly strive both as a person and as a teacher; to have a commitment to the growth of the students; to have a commitment to learning and to have a concern for the society.

These are universal principles which time or space does not pale and we as teachers would do well to constantly remind ourselves of them. And this presents a very big challenge for transformation and revitalisation of the present modes in which teacher education is being offered. There is a serious concern to revisit the present teacher education to prepare a person who can come close to the ideal of a teacher mentioned above.

Towards professional preparation of teachers a few pertinent concerns will need to be discussed. Is there a need for focusing on teacher education for preparation of teachers who have a holistic understanding of all stages of school education with possible specialisation of any particular stage? In order to accord status to teacher education, should not preparation of teachers for all stages from early childhood to higher secondary be done under the umbrella of the university system, as was recommended by the Education Commission of 1964 66

but which has not received attention so far? Is higher secondary stage to be treated as a distinct stage for teacher preparation or can be subsumed in a general B.Ed. programme? Should the system take a conscious decision of integrating subject matter and pedagogy and offer integrated models of teacher education? Is it educationally a correct premise that teaching in lower classes can be managed by teachers with lower academic qualifications? What mechanisms could be understood for adherence to a code of professional ethics for teachers? These are amongst several questions which should lead to serious review of the most important factor for quality of school education and the quality of the delivering system namely the teacher.

In Conclusion

Friends, I have made some reflections on school education and teacher education within the constraints of my limited experience. I have touched upon several issues which may require in-house deliberations in the NCERT in carrying their meaning forward. This may give some agenda for reflection of a more serious nature. The cumulative output of 50 years of NCERT's contribution to school education and teacher education should provide the needed stimulus to move ahead. I take this opportunity of wishing the fraternity of NCERT all success and congratulate all those who had the opportunity to serve it. The potential of NCERT is inherent in its original design but if it requires additions, modifications to that design, based on a learned discourse, the Jubilee Year can be a momentous sign post.