

**Notes on "Issues in school education in contemporary
Kerala" after May 2001**

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This note briefly examines the progress of reforms in Kerala's school educational sector in the period following the submission of our earlier paper (April 2001). It may be apt to start this postscript with the last sentence of our earlier paper. It said:

"Kerala once led India in universalising school education; today it has taken the lead in attempting to improve the quality of mass school education. The social and economic policies of the Central and State governments and the mass movements in Kerala will determine the success of this effort in the years to come".

We wrote these words in April 2001, the last month of the Left Democratic Front (LDF) government in Kerala. In May 2001, the United Democratic Front (UDF) government led by A. K. Antony took over. Over the period of UDF rule, it is becoming clear that policies of the new government are beginning to undo five years of efforts by the previous government in the field of school education. The new government has decided to withdraw new textbooks, bring back old systems of pedagogy and re-introduce examinations as the main evaluation system in primary schools.

The contrasting visions of the LDF and the UDF on the state of school education were clearly evident during the run-up to the assembly elections in May 2001. Skimming through these viewpoints may be a good starting point to assess the

nature of reforms that the UDF government has undertaken since then.

The LDF vision on education

The LDF faced the electorate with a record of achievement in the school educational sector during its five-year tenure. When it came to power in 1996, there were a number of serious issues at the school level that required immediate attention. First was the issue of low retention rates - and high drop-out rates - at the higher levels of schooling, an issue that was more acute among socially and economically deprived groups. Secondly, the pass percentages at the SSLC examination stage were very low and regionally imbalanced, where a 100 per cent pass record of some elite urban schools co-existed with a below 40 per cent pass percentage for schools in rural areas. Third, there were widespread complaints about the quality of school education at all levels; many thought that poor-quality schooling was the main cause behind the above-mentioned problems.

These issues were addressed by the LDF government in two ways. One was, of course, through the People's Planning Programme, where untied funds made available to the local bodies were spent to upgrade school facilities. Secondly, the LDF made use of the District Primary Educational Programme (DPEP) commissioned in 1994 by the then UDF Government led by K. Karunakaran, and later A. K. Antony. The implementation of this programme in Kerala was, however, significantly different from other States.

The major feature of LDF government's policy with respect to school education was the involvement of the People's Campaign for Decentralised Development in local-level school issues. Among the many uses to which funds allocated to local bodies were put was the improvement of infrastructural facilities in schools. Another innovative change was the establishment of Parent-Teacher and Mother-Teacher associations in primary schools, organisations in which parents and teachers participated enthusiastically.

The major activity under DPEP was a project initiated in 1996 to revise school textbooks, last revised during early 1980s. This was undertaken by the State Council for Educational Research and Training (SCERT). This was not part of the original project, but the State Government, to finance the larger programme, used the resources available under 'Curriculum Development' projects under DPEP for this purpose (Interestingly, the only other State that undertook textbook revision through DPEP was the Congress-ruled Madhya Pradesh). Although DPEP was originally intended to be implemented in only six districts, the textbooks prepared through DPEP were prescribed for schools in all districts. Again, although DPEP focused on primary education, the curriculum revision undertaken by DPEP covered grades till Class 12.

This was followed by a project on changes in pedagogy. The evaluation systems were also modified. Evaluations based completely based on written examinations gave way to an integrated approach consisting of examinations, projects, assignments and group discussions, which came to be called as Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE). Before

taking these steps, the Government organised wide-ranging discussions with educationalists, activists, teachers and parents. Though the debate on the exact nature of these reforms continued, the consensus that emerged was largely in their favour.

The LDF declared in its manifesto that it would build on the State's historical achievements in school education and the accomplishments during its tenure, and promised that all measures would be preceded by transparent public discussions.

UDF policy on school education

On the other side, the UDF faced the elections attacking these reforms, despite the fact that that DPEP was a child of its own earlier tenure (1991-96). In April 2001, T. M. Jacob (former education minister and leader of the influential Kerala Congress (Jacob) group in the UDF) declared that DPEP would be abolished in the event of UDF returning to power. This declaration itself was mistaken, as the programme was to automatically end by September 2001. The UDF manifesto was silent on any reform in school education, an omission that suggested a lack of vision in that camp on such an important issue.

Once the new government came to power in May 2001, the implications of it not having any clear school education policy began to take serious dimensions. It was silent on the promises of its own constituents on the abolition of DPEP. However, it set up a committee consisting of former UDF ministers of Education and the current incumbent, Mr.

Nalakathu Soopy, to examine this issue. This committee recommended the retention of the new curriculum till Class 7, but a return to the old curriculum from Class 8. This meant that students who studied under the new curriculum till Class 7 would have to suddenly return to a completely different curriculum from Class 8, one that was prepared two decades ago. It became clear that the intention of this step was not so much related to an improvement of school educational standards as it was an attempt to find fault with the LDF Government and show that the new government had "redressed" the "problems".

In taking such a step, the government sidestepped a number of important academic conventions. The Textbook Reform Committee, consisting of experts in school education (such as Prof. S. Guptan Nair, Prof. B. Hridayakumari, Dr. M. P. Parameswaran, Dr. R. V. G. Menon and P. Govinda Pillai) was not even consulted. This was a serious issue, as it was this committee that had recommended the new textbooks. Secondly, the tradition of wide-ranging and transparent public discussions that preceded earlier changes in curriculum was overlooked. These meant that curriculum revisions undertaken till Class 12 through years of discussion and deliberations were to go waste.

The introduction of these reforms was also ridden with confusion, coming at a time when schools had already reopened. The Chief Minister and the Education Minister offered different versions of the proposed policy. While the Chief Minister maintained that the issue was left to the committee to decide, the Education Minister declared the policy and gave directions to schools to follow the old

textbooks from Class 8. Replying to a query on the question of students facing problems in adjusting to the old curriculum, the Minister replied that students and teachers would be provided with "special training". Later he retracted the statement and announced that instead, some chapters would be added midway to the Class 8 textbooks to ensure "continuity" for the students. These statements, a *Frontline* correspondent wrote, "smacked of political one-upmanship and lack of understanding about the reforms, just as a new school year was beginning" (see R. Krishnakumar, "Abandoning a Reform measure", *Frontline*, July 21-August 3, 2001). No thought appeared to have been given to whether adequate copies of old textbooks were available for the students. The textbooks prepared under the new curriculum had already reached the schools for distribution by then.

In the following months, the government announced its decision to bring back the examination system as the major form of evaluation in primary schools. This again was made a political decision, without discussions in any academic forum or with educational experts.

When there was widespread opposition to these efforts from Left-led political parties and democratic organizations, the government decided to constitute a commission to examine its own decisions. However, this only amounted to a trial after the judgement. As C. Ramakrishnan, teacher and activist, told a *Frontline* correspondent in an interview, "what the new government did was to decide unilaterally and autocratically to revert to the old curriculum and textbooks in Standard 8 and perhaps suggest the direction

its Expert Committee should take regarding its conclusions" (*Frontline*, July 21-August 3, 2001).

This committee was packed with people who were staunch opponents of the school educational policies of the previous government. The committee report was submitted to the government very recently, and we have not been able to refer to it. However, press reports suggest that even this committee could not arrive at a consensus on an alternative reform to be undertaken.

With less than two years over with a new Government, Kerala's school system is facing a potential crisis. Resistance from teacher-student organisations and parents to these policies, which many fear will undo Kerala's recent achievements in school education, is beginning in the State. It remains to be seen how the new Government will address these concerns.