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From Kothari Commission to Contemporary System of School Education

Challenges in Attaining Parental Involvement in Children's Education

Abstract

The parent-teacher relationship has emerged as a topic of deliberation in the contemporary scholarship on education in India. Although latest policy documents indicate parental involvement as a necessary strategy for educational development, the inclusion of parents in schools' affair is relatively recent development in education practices. The delay in perceiving parents as a crucial participant in schooling experience of a child makes it imperative to get to the root of education planning and its development. This paper, based on a discourse analysis of Kothari commission's report, reviews how the home-school relationship or parent-teacher interaction were construed in one of the foundation documents in the history of modern education in India. Through attempting to understand commission's views on the role of parents in children's schooling and relating those perspectives with prevalent and contemporary education practices of education, the paper argues that there is a dire need for creating space for parents in order to achieve active engagement of parents in children's schooling experience.

Background

The contemporary Education system in India is characterized by unequal access and diverse schooling experience across variables of social stratification, such as gender, caste, class and so on. Amidst the evident diversity within and across various types of the schooling system within same education context, the emphasis of research in Social Sciences, and particularly in the field of sociology of Education, has been on the increasing, and arguably irreconcilable, inequality in the processes and functioning of the school system. Evidence provided in these studies suggests continued insufficiency and poor quality of infrastructure and services available to a large proportion of pupils (Ramachandran & Sharma, 2009). Although parents' involvement is recognised as crucial, the scholarly engagement in this topic remains largely obscured.

Amidst the persisting concern of building quality infrastructure and managerial issues for mass education, recent education policies acknowledge parental involvement in their children's education as irreplaceable and crucial strategy for educational development. However, this shift in educational planning has taken place relatively recently. It is curious, in this context, how modern education for independent India was envisaged, with specific reference to parents' engagement in schooling, by the policy makers of education. As this report laid the foundation for educational planning and development by providing a

comprehensive assessment of all levels of education in independent India, the text of analysis in this exercise is the report of Kothari Commission. I hope that this analysis would assist in making sense of contemporary challenges to attaining active participation of parents in their children's education.

This Paper is structured into three sections. The first section provides a brief background to the constitution of Kothari Commission and its primary contribution to envisioning the future system of school education in India. The second section reviews commission's views on parents and their positioning in education landscape. The third section provides commission's understanding of occasions of parent-teacher interaction and parental role within schools and schooling processes. The final section links the perspective of the commission to the contemporary education policies of Indian schooling system. The final remark is a snapshot of key observations of the paper and states the need for devising mechanisms for ensuring effective involvement and active engagement of parents in children's schooling.

Kothari Commission: an Introduction

Kothari Commission was not the first commission set up for discussing the educational planning of the newly independent India. Previously two commissions—University Education Commission (1948-49) and the Secondary Education Commission (1952-53)—were formulated to discuss the possible trajectory of educational development for the newly formed nation-state. On the 14th of July 1964, the government of India appointed a commission comprising seventeen members under the chairmanship of Professor D. S. Kothari—a trained physicist and Chairman of University Grant Commission—with a mandate "to advise the Government on the national pattern of education and on the general principles and policies for the development of education at all stages and in all aspects" (Government of India [henceforth, GoI], 1966, p. vii). The members of the commission were renowned academicians from India, United Kingdom, France, United States of America, Japan, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and the representatives of United Nations.

The report was a result of two years of discussion and deliberations. It was titled "Education and National Development: Report of the Education Commission 1964-66", through which the Commission claims to have provided a "comprehensive review of the educational system with a view to initiating a fresh and more determined effort at educational reconstruction" (GoI, 1966, p. xii). Amidst varied issues such as economic deprivation, poverty, insufficiency of food supply, and unemployment, the commission viewed education as an "instrument of change" (GoI, 1966, p.6) that needed reforming such that it meets the requirement of developing country, i.e. to "increase productivity, develop social and national unity, consolidate democracy, modernize the country and develop social, moral and spiritual values" (note in Lall, 2005, p. 2). The commission's views are widely noted for advocating primacy to Science-based curriculum, the establishment of the common education system and suggesting three-language formulae.

Similar to other education commissions, KOTHARI COMMISSION reaffirms the Nehruvian idea of development through the implementation of the Science-based curriculum. The commission suggests nurturing academic talent through establishing and promoting agricultural

and industrial development based education. Science-based education, the commission views, "provide(s) the foundation as also the instrument for the nation's progress, security and welfare" (GoI, 1966, p. iii). In the culturally diversified and deeply socially stratified nation-state, the commission recommends the establishment of the common education system. This proposition implies that despite inherent hierarchies, education should be the same to all and equally accessible to everyone, especially to females, tribals, persons with disability, and to the socio-economically disadvantaged group (GoI, 1966, p. xiii-xiv). And finally, the three language formulae suggests the provisioning of learning a modern Indian language preferably one of the southern languages apart from Hindi and English in the Hindi-speaking States and Hindi along with the regional language and English in the non-Hindi speaking States.

Apparently, the above suggestions, along with many others, envisaged a sea change in not only in the system and contents of learning, but also in society in general. These changes would not have been possible without tremendous support from and plan on the part of the community in general and the parents of school going children in particular. In the following sectional, I try understanding how the commission viewed community and parents and their role in education planning and development.

Community and the parents: their roles and involvement

There is an uncanny resemblance between the critique of Kothari Commission and subsequent educational policies on the participation of community in education. While the commission discusses the importance of community in the building of a new nation, it recommends the provisioning of involvement of the community should be through "donations and contributions voluntarily made by the parents and local community from time to time" (GoI, 1966, p. 465). These funds, along with regular aid, were advised to be used for the maintenance of school property, school park, midday meal, purchasing of prizes, uniform, books and so on (see, p. 939). Hence, though the role of community was to provide requisite resources to school authorities from time to time, their presence remain external to school affairs.

Despite multiple forms of stratification based on the social positioning of the family—class, caste, religion, and so on—the commission categorizes parents into two overarching and simplistic categories: "privilege" and "average". KOTHARI COMMISSION maintains that British rule left India with an unequal system of modern education, which is supported by "privileged parents" in independent India. The British private schools functioned as a token of imperialism and worked with the specific curriculum for the children belonging to elite classes. Post-independence, these private schools were affordable to only a small proportion of Indian parents, whereas public schools catered to a vast majority of school-going children. The commission views fee of attending private schools as "anti-egalitarian" and "regressive form of taxation" (GoI, 1966, p. 186) and criticizes "privileged parents" for being gatekeepers of the class-based education system.

> …the economically *privileged parents* are able to 'buy' good education for their children…by segregating their children, such privileged parents prevent them from sharing the life and experiences of the children of the poor and coming into contact

with the realities of life (GoI, 1966, p. 15, emphasis added).

Thus, the Commission declares that privileged parents render the education of their children "anemic and incomplete" and weaken the "social cohesion" by meeting their class inspired aspirations through widening the gulf "between the classes and the masses" (GoI, 1966, p.14). On the other hand, kothari Commission does not hold a favorable opinion of the "average parents". The report condemns a majority of Indian parents for being apathetic towards their children's schooling. While explaining the reasons for unmet requirement of Article 45, the Commission upholds that the progress in educational development has been dismal, primarily because of "lack of adequate resources, tremendous increase in population, resistance to the education of girls, large numbers of children of the backward classes, general poverty of the people and the illiteracy and apathy of parents" (GoI, 1966, p. 298). While indicating parents' inability to send their children to school and a need for altering parents' attitude about education, the commission fails to suggest mechanisms to include both the categories of parents into the system of education.

As a remedy to the disparate system of education, the report recommends the establishment of Common School system (CSS). The concept of CSS, inspired by the schooling system in USSR, entailed availability and accessibility to free of cost education to all, irrespective of their positioning in social stratification. The goal of the education system, as envisioned by the Commission, is to maintain "adequate level of quality and efficiency so that no parent would ordinarily feel any need to send his child to the institutions outside the system, such as independent or unrecognized schools" (GoI, 1966, p. 463). This system, the commission argues, would cater to the need of average parent for their children may avail quality of education without having them spend a fortune on children's schooling.

The report maintains that "Gross inequalities (to avail educational opportunity) arise from differences in home environments", for instance," a child from a rural household or an urban slum having non-literate parents, does not have the same opportunity which a child from an upper-class home with highly educated parents has" (GoI, 1966, p. 181-182). The suggestion to this "problem" provided in the report is the "general improvement in the standard of living of the population" (ibid, p. 182). Hence, the commission blames the rural mass and urban slum dwellers, being backward and ignorant, for failing to create ambience for studying at home. The Commission does not allude to the home environment in its specificity, i.e. whether it is about the academic support, household arrangement, locality of stay, provisioning of resources, or general engagement with the teachers? Furthermore, the Commission does not recommend any forms of parental engagement with the education system and, therefore, excludes the parents—the key decision makers—from the system of education.

Summarily, without delving into the categorical specificities of the middle class and economically poor parents and devising any particular mechanism to include them in the everydayness of schooling experience, the Commission seem to instruct the parents what to do and what not to do. Hence, the Commission approaches parents rather condescendingly rather than providing them the status of a participant. While the parents and their categories are not rigorously defined and identified,

the commission clearly puts the efforts made by parents and the teachers in two different areas. Parents were suggested to build conducive home environment and take responsibility for sending their children to school and submit to the newly developed mass system of schooling. The report does not acknowledge that the community must be engaged in the process of creating such revolutionary form of learning in the modern system of school education.

Teachers and their role in building home-school relationship

Parents, as appears quite evidently in the previous section, were viewed largely as a recipient, and the Commission views with somewhat superiority. Normative supremacy of the teachers was "mainly framed under a foreign regime when control of the political views of teachers was a major objective of official policy" (GoI, 1966, p. 97). The report suggests the need "to frame separate and new conduct and discipline rules for teachers in government service, which would ensure them the freedom required for professional efficiency and advancement" (ibid). This efficiency, the commission suggests, is not only limited to the four walls of classroom teaching and learning, but also requires an irreplaceable and precious efforts for motivating parents to send their children to schools.

While suggesting the improvement in the infrastructural facilities, the Commission pointed out that since not every school has the infrastructure available for the teachers to live in the area where they teach, "proper" contact with the parents is not developed (GoI, 1966, p. 98). Since the relationship between school and home is largely determined and practiced through the communication between parents and teachers within schooling hours, living in the same place was requires in order to develop that connection.

Commission limits the function parent-teacher communication to improving attendance rate in school, i.e. "simple act such as a sympathetic enquiry made by a teacher of the parents whenever a child ceases to attend school" (GoI, 1966, p. 309) may enhance the rate of attendance and motivation among children and parents towards going to school. Another occasion of stressing parent-teacher relationship was in the case of "under-achievers" (GoI, 1966, p. 444), i.e. for the children who do not perform very well academically. Commission suggested, "parent-teacher associations should be mobilized for enlisting the cooperation of parents in dealing with special case" (GoI, 1966, p. 444, also see, p. 457). The relationship between parents and teachers was not recognized by the commission as a tool for attaining social cohesion between the two actors as a mechanism for maintaining teachers' accountability in the school. Rather, the inclusion of parents in the education system was deemed educative to the parents. Besides, the practice of parental involvement in schools was not discussed, leaving the scope of parents' participation ambiguous and unclear.

Commission suggests that parents "should be helped in the selection of courses for further education" (ibid, p. 438), but does not indicate any manner of informing the parents or the process of consulting with them the possible career paths for their children. The commission views families and parents as a hindering factor in the development of talented children and argues, "in a large majority of the homes, the environment is, deprivatory on account of the illiteracy of the parents and poverty, and does not allow the

available native talent to develop itself fully" (ibid, p. 440).

The inclusion of tribes in the formal education system was considered a challenge and the suggestion of the commission is the "intensive programme of parental education" (ibid, p. 228). Similarly, along with the proposal for conducting training for the teachers in pre-primary schools, the commission suggests to "provide education to parents regarding child care" (ibid, p. 292). Besides blaming the parents and their non-progressive ideas about education and development, lack of adequate infrastructure was considered as a fundamental problem in meeting universalization of primary education. This includes,

> (...) existence of incomplete schools which do not teach the full courses; the large prevalence of stagnation which discourages children from staying longer at school; the dull character of most of the schools and their poor capacity to attract students and retain them; the absence of ancillary services like school meals and school health (ibid, p. 308)

Other factors on the part of parents such as, "reluctance of parents either to educate their daughters further or to send them to mixed higher primary schools" (ibid p. 299), and "failure of the average parent or child to see the advantage of attendance at school" (ibid, p. 308) were also considered equally crucial. While developing infrastructures and improving teachers' attendance were recommended, the commission proposed "an intensive programme of parental education" (ibid, p. 308, 343) with an objective to "persuading the parents to accept the inevitability of mixed schools for boys and girls" (ibid, p. 299). In other words, the efforts were directed to "convince" (ibid, p. 420) parents, instead of discussing with them, that the changes made in the education system were inevitable and should be welcomed.

Contemporary relevance of Kothari Commission's report and challenges ahead: a discussion

Many observations in Kothari Commission's report are relevant to the scenario of contemporary education. This section summarizes the key observations made in this paper and how those are still pertinent to the contemporary discussion of the home-school relationship.

It's imperative to understand and acknowledge the institutional difference in existing hierarchical social order of Indian society and relatively egalitarian establishments of the common education system. Failure to assess these differences resulted in a ***variously stratified***, more complex system of contemporary education in India. Put differently, democratic thoughts of Kothari Commission were indeed welcoming. However, the commission did not think through the ways and processes of bridging the gap between the hierarchically stratified society of India and principles of common education system.

The Commission views two ***categories of parents***: one who are wealthy and other who are poor. Such simplistic division fails to capture the positionality of individuals amidst the prevailing intersectionality posited through the interplay of class, caste, religion, region, language, and so on. Disadvantaged in India is not a homogeneous group; it varies across states--one community which is in the minority in one state may be a majority and dominant in the other. In the report, while privileged parents were marked as consumers, socio-economically deprived—especially urban poor, rural, tribal parents—were seen as backward, apathetic, passive, beneficiaries of the education.

Later, with policy interventions, various platforms such as Village Education Committee, School Betterment Committee, and Parent Teacher Association were provided to the community members and exclusively to the parents for observing and becoming a part of aspired education development. Similar to the issue with Kothari Commission, the failure in attaining expected goals for parental involvement in education lies in defining "Community" as a simplistic category with homogenous groups. The suggested, "complex, diverse, dynamic, and the mythical notion of community cohesion actually glosses over differences and divisions while privileging the voices of people who have more power" (Guijit & Kaul Shal, 1998, mentioned in Saihjee, 2004, p. 231). Also, the stronger emphasis on the community without specifying the participation of parents is problematic, because "strengthening mechanisms for community participation without ensuring the participation of parents is often counterproductive" (Ramchandran, 2004, p. 84) for attaining focused relationship between teachers and parents.

Furthermore, although Kothari Commission mentions the role and importance of ***Community participation***, it remains largely exclusionary to the processes of schooling. Also, the suggested ways of participating in the schooling process--through providing resources to the school--is possible to the socially and economically affluent families. Following up on the same principle, the contemporary practice of representation of the dominant group in school management committee in school processes reproduces the power structures of society. Such practices also hinder the correcting mechanism when children from disadvantaged families are subjected to social biases, discrimination, and negligence by the teachers at school. Probe (2011) notes the discrimination based on the caste of pupils and its repercussion on a parental decision about selection of schools. The Probe team observes that since most of the teachers in government schools were upper caste, neglect of the children from Schedule Caste (ibid p. 64) turned out to be the primary reason of selecting the low-fee private schools, even though parents could barely afford the costs of education. In contexts where parental participation has transcended the structural barriers, trends of increasing enrolment; reducing dropout rate has been noted (Rathnam, 2004).

Although recent education policies tend to focus on community participation, community per se is not viewed as a stakeholder in making decisions regarding either school policies or managing everydayness of schooling arrangements (see Govinda & Bandyopadhyay, 2011; Govinda, 2002). Since "primary education as the invention is bound by the predestined purpose" (Kumar, Priyam, & Saxena, 2001), communities do not have a space to voice their opinions. With the limited scope of participation in the schooling system, it is assumed that the importance of education would be realised from within the community. This assumption does not necessarily imply, for instance, that "community contributes towards a reasonable space for the school and identify a suitable teacher" (Ghosh, 2004, p. 129).

Instead of suggesting ways to overcome class and caste barriers and develop a functional relationship between home and schools, the commission blames "average parents" for not sending their children to schools and keeping the talented ones away from the mainstream society--KOTHARI

COMMISSION equates illiteracy with uneducatedness. Today, socially and economically disadvantaged parents struggle in deciding between schooling and employment for their children (Jain, Mathur, Rajgopal & Shah, 2002). Among working class in rural areas, parental involvement in everyday schoolings—through participating in the parent-teacher association, volunteering, or helping with homework—is rather limited, but parents are the key decision makers in school-related decisions such as selection of schools, a continuation of education for sons and daughters, and so on (Maertens, 2011). Limited ways of parental engagement fail to acknowledge that for the majority of people living below poverty line in India, attitude of the parents towards schooling is the primary "driver of children's educational outcomes" (Probe, 1999, p. 45).

The modern education, which British introduced in India, did not see Indian parents as perhaps useful resources within the Western framework of teaching and learning. KOTHARI COMMISSION reinforces this ideology to the proposed education practices through accommodating parents only in a capacity to provide the suitable home environment. Hence, through reinforcing colonial practices of social sanction, KOTHARI COMMISSION's recommendations tend to disjoint and widen the area of work between parents and the schools. While the Commission acknowledges the difference between teachers' role in independent India, as compared to their responsibilities during colonialism, indicating that teachers are no more the servant of the government, rather they should build the network within the community. The ways of bridging the gap between the teachers and parents were not duly brainstormed or sufficiently laid out. Its noteworthy that while the commission does not discuss the parental role in the contribution to making the new system of education, it maintains that schools and schoolteachers are solely responsible for educating the child.

The Kothari Commission notes that with the provisioning of the common education system, "the average parent would not ordinarily feel the need to send his children to expensive schools outside the system" (GoI, 1966, p.15). Though mass education was introduced in India, the government schools did not work sufficiently well and failed to provide quality of education, simultaneously, the number of private schools that offered competitive fee structures increased in number. Generally, across different regionals in the country, families, including socially and economically disadvantaged, "often prefer to incur additional expenditure and send their children to private rather than government schools" (Sedwal & Kamat, 2011, p. 105; also see Probe, 2011).

Final remarks

Division of these two institutions—family and school—and two stakeholders—parents and teachers—result from the lack of mutual effort in the construction and sustainment of education. In other words, the discussion on the parent-teacher relationship does not extend to the level of active participation of the parents; it also implies that parents need not to be actively participating in the educational attainment of their children. This conceptualization of home-school relationship did not give a chance to generating a discussion at the local level about the establishment of schools and the need for education.

Hence, schools were perceived not as a local institution but an outside body regulated by the state.

The only two occasions at which the teachers and parents were suggested to get in touch with each other were absenteeism of teachers and discussing the causes of under-achievement of the student. Hence, education appears to be an imposition of state's ideology onto the people, especially to the rural inhabitants and tribes who were never a mainstream concern of the British and, therefore, were less acquitted with the 'modern education system'. The approach to incorporate parents into educational institution was largely top-to-bottom, quite opposite to the ideological establishment of the democratic nation state. In today's context, in light of the above discussion, it is imperative for teachers to step forward and make space for parents to share their concerns and issues so that the education system would have an added, and perhaps more effective, form of governance that would monitor the quality of education closely and effectively.

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