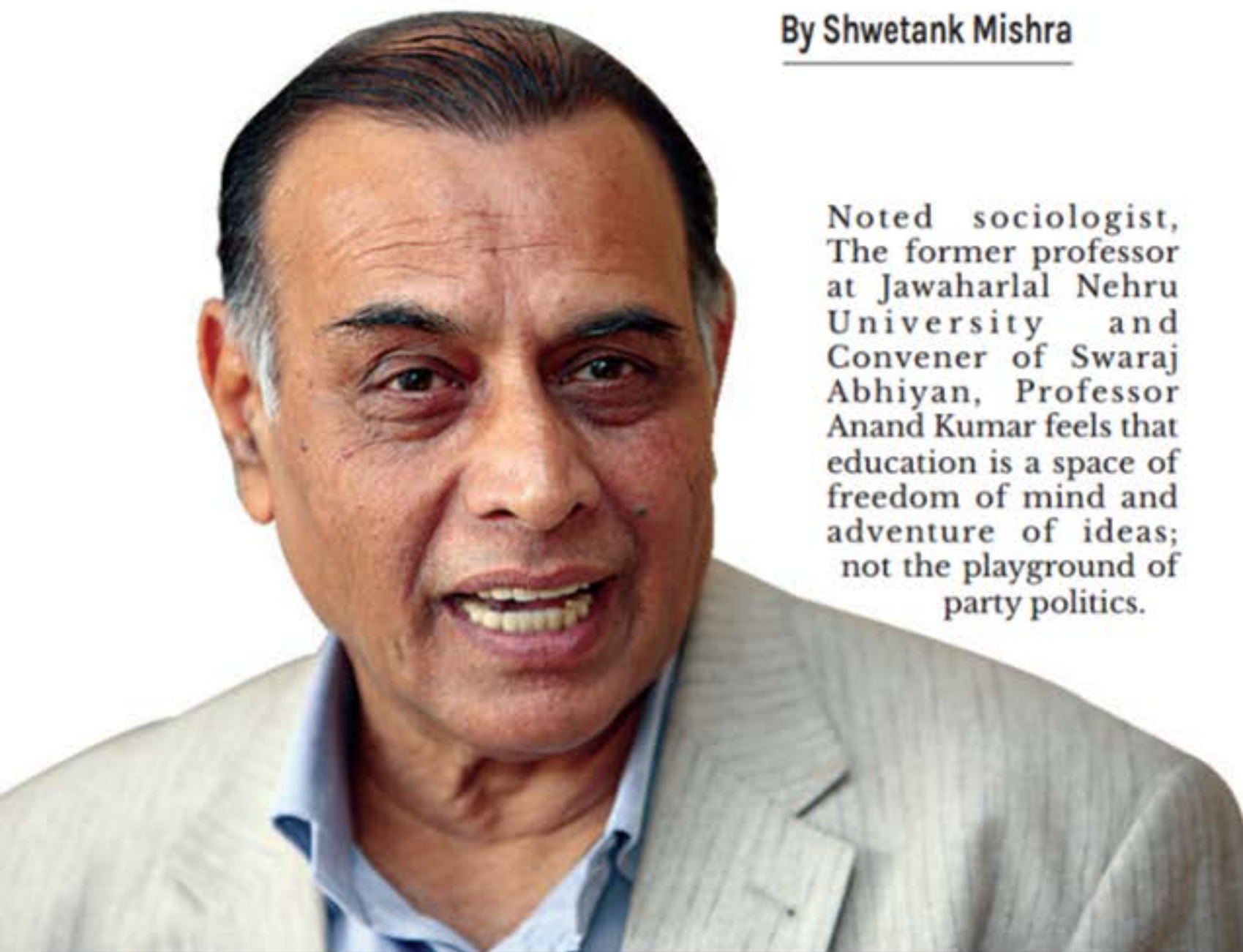


EDUCATION NEEDS

HEALTHY REFORM

By Shwetank Mishra

Noted sociologist, The former professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University and Convener of Swaraj Abhiyan, Professor Anand Kumar feels that education is a space of freedom of mind and adventure of ideas; not the playground of party politics.



A: Politics is life line of all democratic societies as it is the essential process of democratic nation-building and citizenship. It is Nagarik Dharma (People's duty). All citizens above 18 years of age must engage in politics as a calling and duty. It includes students also. But there is a need to be cautious that it does not get distorted into selfishness, moneymaking, and corruption. Politics of principles promote peoples' well being and all round happiness. But unprincipled politics with an arrogance of power is self-destructive as politicians get perverted from servants of society to megalomaniac power seekers. Students and all others must not get infected with the virus of power for its own sake or 'Paise se Satta aur Satta se Paisa'. This is the essence of 'good politics' which is the basis of alternative initiatives of Swaraj Abhiyan and several other citizen platforms in our country.

Q: Opposition parties often blame on union government that they have the only agenda to saffronize education system? What's your opinion?

A: NDA Government has been without an educational strategy between 2014 and 2015 except trying to capture the institutions of higher studies and research. There is an open drive to 'clean' the educational system from the Nehruvian and Marxian influences. It is an anti-intellectual approach which did not work with the Left Front Governments in West Bengal for 35 years where there was patronizing of party intellectuals in the educational institutions. It created flight of talent and migration of students. Now the NDA has presented their own blueprint of educational reforms through T.S.R. Subramanyam Committee Report. It does not look like a roadmap for saffronisation. But we cannot predict about what next as there is a strong lobby which wants to create a process of sanitization of education in the name of cultural values and Hindu hegemony. There is need of decolonization and democratization of education,

not Saffronisation.

Q: Are there some things that reforms can't accomplish that policymakers should be aware of?

A: The quest for knowledge and respect for scientific orientation are essential ingredients of a healthy educational system. Furthermore, there is need to pay attention to philosophy, economics, sociology, politics and science of education to overcome the consequences of inefficiencies and missed opportunities of the last 70 years in our country. We have to make education a space of freedom of mind and adventure of ideas, not playground of party politics similarly; there is need to pay attention to putting an end to resource-crunch which has been an unfortunate legacy of Congress Raj. More bureaucratisation and commercialization in the name of 'educational reforms' is going to create strong resistance as the world has entered an age of knowledge and India will not permit its politicians to keep our children behind.

Q: How can educators distinguish between promising reforms and reforms that may only sound promising?

A: There is a big difference between 'promising reforms' and 'reform promises.' Today, the promising reforms have to include 1. Universalisation of education for all children up to 12th Standard, 2. Expansion and autonomy of avenues of quality higher education and relevant research, 3. Investment in training good teachers and preventing wastage and corruption, 4. Bridging the divides of language, gender, class, region and nations through special programmes of capacity building and talent harnessing., and 5. Making educational institutions as training ground for citizenship and cultivation of goodness.



Q: How you rate contemporary higher education?

A: Any education system is expected to contribute towards

a) making of a proper personality and capability building of students through imparting values and knowledge,
b) nation-building,
c) humane world order. Indian educational setting is going through rapid expansion without expected contribution in these three contexts. At the same time, any evaluation of the education system of India today will lead us to three conclusions: 1. Growing hunger for good education in all Indian households irrespective of caste, tribe, class, gender, region, religion. It is a positive factor for creating a healthy and democratic educational setting. 2. A disturbing trend of unchecked commercialization of education from nursery to university levels without any accountability. It is being promoted by a nexus of profit-seeking businessmen, powerful politicians, and bureaucrats. 3. Increasingly declining commitment of central and state governments in promoting the universal availability of good education to children and youth. It is combined with increasing interference of bureaucracy and politicians in the matters of education leading to corruption and devaluation of standards in government-run educational institutions.

Q: What is wrong with the idea of an education marketplace, where the best ideas, best teachers, and best schools are rewarded? Doesn't this spur innovation and compel best practices?

A: There is a global education market where anyone can get education for a price. Indian elite is making use of it for several decades. But any education market is based upon commodification of education and knowledge. Like all markets, it will have the limit of money power where only wealthy people will be able to provide education for their children as is the case with the Indian elite who are paying a large amount for schooling and college degrees for their children all over the country. Let us not ignore that it is proving to be counter-productive and anti-social in advanced capitalist countries like the US and the UK. Certainly, we cannot afford it at present as we need a system of education which is not only available but also affordable. Our social formation needs education to function as a bridge to overcome the present divides of i. men-women, ii. Rural-Urban, iii. The Dominant castes and the depressed sections, iv. The affluent and the impoverished, and v. the forward and backward regions and states.

In a country like India, there are five problems with

the idea of 'education market.' We are a country where a) 77% working people have purchasing power of Rs. 20 per day (Sengupta Committee Report), b) most of the rural girls drop out between standard 6th and 10th, and rural boys fail to enter graduate studies due to poverty (Survey report by Pratham), c) Muslim children have very insignificant presence beyond standard 10th, (Sachar Committee Report), d) children of MBCs, SCs, STs and De-notified Tribes have problem of access to quality education even at the basic level, and e) there are minimum facilities for children with disabilities, So making a system of market of education will be a guarantee of perpetuation of elite power and deepening of disparities.

Q: Recently, you have raised the Siksha-Swaraj wing in your newly form political outfit. How are you working on Siksha Swaraj Model and what makes this model different from others?

A: Shiksha Swaraj is an initiative of patriotic Indians to underline the need of rapid reforms in education to make it an instrument of nation-building through economic advancement, social harmony and deepening of democratic values. Shiksha Swaraj believes that India needs the education to promote economic empowerment, social justice and political power for all, including the deprived sections of our society. It includes the rural poor, urban marginals and all citizens belonging to the weaker sections including the women, SCs, STs, the OBCs, and MBCs. Education and nation-building have grown together in the modern world system. There is no evidence to support the claim that conversion of education from the public good and an essential ingredient of the duties of the welfare state into a private good and market-mediated resource has been helpful in creating excellence in the field of knowledge or better rewards for the best students, best teaches, and best institutions. In the Euro-American countries, education process has gone through secularization and democratization, and not unethical commercialisation. Right to education from primary to post-graduate levels is the agenda of Shiksha Swaraj with emphasis upon Saman (equal) – Sulabh (accessible)-Sarthak (useful) Shiksha.

Q: As you have been raising the need for new politics since your student life, and the experiment continued with Aam Aadmi Party and now with Swaraj Abhiyan, how you see the need for politics in student's life and what is the primary qualities that student should possess before indulging themselves in active politics?