

Educational Imbalance in India

Transition from School to College

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In India, education at the secondary level is not seen as an autonomous activity, but merely as preparation for college. Those who stop studying after school are not equipped to work in the rural or the urban sectors. Too high a proportion goes on to college and add to the numbers of the educated employed. Vocational training, which has been neglected in India, could prepare students for work in the large unorganised sector of the economy. This would also reverse deterioration in the quality of higher education.

THE transition from school to college can be understood in terms of the overall process of growing up and the linkage with different levels of education. School education is generally split into three levels – primary, upper primary and secondary. Each level of education is geared to a particular stage of a child's physical and mental growth. Owing to the systematic neglect of elementary education in our country, there has been and continues to be a good deal of discussion but little concrete action, on this subject. An unintended consequence of the legitimate concern with primary education is that secondary education does not receive as much attention as it ought to. I hope to bring out the importance of secondary education in the overall scheme of things.

The secondary level is subdivided into lower secondary and higher secondary. While being enrolled at the upper primary level is a constitutional directive, it will be quite some years before this mandate is actually carried out. If it is assumed that mandatory education from the age of 6 to 14 will become a practical reality in another few years, its academic meaning is that, within the next few years, almost every child will be enrolled both at the primary and then at the upper primary level. To put it another way, going on to the secondary level will become a matter of choice for a much larger number of children than is happening today.

Wherever the parents can afford to keep the child at school, they will presumably do so. In most advanced countries, and India aspires to be one, education till the age of 16 (even 17) is compulsory. In our Constitution, the cut-off age is 14 though it is not being actually enforced. But it is not too much to hope that, after a decade

or more, a much larger number of children will be able to pursue secondary education than is happening today. And this brings me to what I wish to enlarge upon.

I

Experience of other Countries

Till the beginning of the second world war, even in the most advanced of them, the US for example, the rate of enrolment at college was not more than 5 to 10 per cent. Joining a university was something of an exception. The situation started changing in the US after the passage of the veterans act in 1946. A large number of young people who had joined the armed forces were demobilised when the war ended. In order to enable them to pursue their studies which had been interrupted, new enabling legislation was passed and financial support was extended to these students. This phenomenon soon picked momentum.

The growth of the US economy during those years was phenomenal whereas Europe was prostrate after the ravages of the war. The US economy was so strong however that, even after billions of dollars were made available to west European countries, it was still possible for the American economy to keep growing. By the 1960s or so, the phenomenon of mass higher education had become noticeable, enough to be identified and written about. For more than a quarter century now, that country has had approximately half the population opting for higher education.

It is necessary at this stage to take note of the structural changes which accompanied this development in higher education. Till the 1940s, higher education was imparted either in the universities or what were called four-year colleges. In the

changing situation, two crucial changes were made. One was to establish a large number of two-year colleges. They existed either as independent units or were combined with four-year colleges. Much more significant, however was the second innovation which was introduced. These colleges did not impart what is called liberal arts education. A substantial proportion of what was done at the two-year college level was vocational in character and focus.

As a result of these changes, two things happened. The first was that, despite the growing size of the student body, the character of the universities did not undergo any change for the worse as happened in another country. Their mandate was higher education and that mandate did not have to be diluted; the new channel of education provided the necessary safety valve, so to speak. Universities too were of two kinds. There were private universities and state-run universities. The former, almost without exception, had maintained high standards of instruction of research. The state universities also began to emphasise high standards of performance and research. In several cases, the distinction between them and the private universities narrowed to nothing. In the case of four-year colleges, they started to caste themselves in the image of the universities and a number of them did so successfully. Though they continued to be known as colleges, began to resemble the universities in almost all crucial matters.

The two-year colleges, even when they were a part of the four-year college programme, maintained their focus on vocational education. Over the years, their number has grown. Today, the number of universities and colleges in the US is around 3,000.

Having described the American experience in some detail, it is equally important to say something about the experience of a few other countries. To take up Canada first, the educational system in that country is more or less modelled after the American system. The numbers involved were small but the kind of academic stratification which had taken place in the US came to be introduced in Canada also. Today, the percentage of those who go in for higher education in that country is approximately one-third of the total as against one-half in the US. As should be evident, it is the gross domestic product (GDP) of a country which eventually determines these variations.

Japan is the second strongest economy in the world. The curve of development in that country followed the American model and even the proportion of young people who go in for higher education is nearer the American than the Canadian figure.

The proportion of students opting for higher education is below 30 per cent in the UK; and in Germany and France, it is nearer 25 than 30. Italy too is moving in that direction. Nothing is being said here about the former USSR because developments that were taking place in that country were interrupted a decade ago and the situation is so fluid today that a trend cannot be seen in current date.

The experience of these advanced countries makes two things clear. The first one is that secondary education, broadly speaking, is so rigorous particularly in the UK and western Europe, that even if students do not go on for higher education, they are capable enough to cope with the demand of the market. In the US, for historical reasons, secondary education has not been as exacting as in Europe or as, for instance, it was in the erstwhile USSR. The American system however makes up for it at the college level and the country can afford to do so.

The second feature of this experience is seen best in the case of the UK. The term used for post-secondary education in that country is 'further education'. In essential, further education is vocational in character and is provided to young people after the age of 16. Education at the school level is mandatory till the age of 16. Those who pass out have two options at the stage. One is to join the world of work. Approximately half the young population do that. The other half however take up further education – wholtime or part-time. But what is more significant is that even though the university system has expanded a great deal in the UK during the past few decades, expansion in respect of further education has been higher in terms of scale as well as coverage than at the university level. Even in respect of outlay, more and more funding is being made available for further education.

The emphasis on further education did not mean that the higher reaches of knowledges and advanced research were diluted in any way. If anything, the decades at the end of the war are known for having thrown up and defined a certain number of universities in the US as 'research universities'. In India which boasted of at least a few good universities not so long ago, things have been deteriorating over the years. One important contributory

factor has been the thoughtless multiplication of undergraduate colleges. In certain cases, colleges overshadow, if not determine, how the universities function.

II Education in India

While education at all levels was more or less systematically ignored right from the middle of the 19th century, what

happened at high school and college level concerns us specifically and may be referred to in some detail.

Instead of the high school becoming an independent entity, as should have been happened, a curious kind of parasitical relationship grew up between the college and the school. Education at the secondary school level was not seen as an autonomous or self-contained activity. Instead,

APPENDIX: AVERAGE EXPENDITURE PER STUDENT OF AGE 5-24 YEARS
PURSUING GENERAL EDUCATION (RURAL + URBAN)

(Rs)

State/Union Territory	Broad Level of Education				All	Number of Students	
	Primay	Middle	Secondary/ Higher Secondary	Above Higher Secondary		Estd	Sample
Andhra Pradesh	430	820	1541	3081	825	130470	6034
Arunachal Pradesh	631	977	1498	1455	821	1116	794
Assam	251	498	998	2261	594	47783	3142
Bihar	330	579	1153	2327	631	126785	6715
Goa	631	968	1459	2899	1225	2714	357
Gujarat	423	700	1498	2352	815	77492	3809
Haryana	953	1502	2391	3409	1395	44810	1672
Himachal Pradesh	573	1058	1777	2966	1058	13279	1815
Jammu and Kashmir	952	1305	2127	4874	1538	14531	2272
Karnataka	294	602	1130	2886	686	87223	3743
Kerala	725	849	1259	3102	1066	54367	3280
Madhya Pradesh	333	666	1274	2000	592	128003	6413
Maharashtra	540	819	1483	3518	996	179876	7422
Manipur	769	1161	1679	2517	1199	3470	1177
Meghalaya	890	1239	2233	2070	1232	3337	1056
Mizoram	756	1033	1402	1718	1011	1082	1104
Nagaland	1556	1932	2816	4480	2087	2096	1344
Orissa	284	682	1233	2150	657	55329	2967
Punjab	1162	1780	3241	4307	1853	44581	3552
Rajasthan	518	831	1400	2016	778	72467	4098
Sikkim	762	697	1189	1998	814	1141	1277
Tamil Nadu	464	827	1502	3465	872	106691	5601
Tripura	494	1039	2234	2142	952	7349	1041
Uttar Pradesh	507	947	1535	2407	808	260977	11707
West Bengal	433	1298	2653	3914	1056	121517	6332
Andaman and Nicobar Islands	715	1258	1907	1796	1179	555	811
Chandigarh	2287	2546	3228	3876	2757	1674	190
Dadra and Nagar Haveli	1820	555	3413	1823	2158	328	106
Daman and Diu	1566	1041	1614	3503	1496	188	133
Delhi	2335	2710	3952	3298	2878	24367	1067
Lakshadweep	248	302	413	-	287	243	130
Pondicherry	652	609	761	2724	732	1677	158
Fractile Group							
00-20	197	426	768	1353	300	241264	12370
20-40	306	575	961	1645	472	301629	16568
40-60	419	726	1096	1810	647	332887	19011
60-80	598	900	1424	2220	923	361325	21084
80-100	1150	1547	2322	3694	1836	380411	22886
Type of Institution							
Government	257	622	1236	2559	580	1029835	58523
Local body	338	726	1349	2415	628	125153	6323
Private aided	1181	1346	1861	3143	1615	287418	17222
Private unaided	1424	2156	3061	5296	1904	167782	9428
Not recorded	181	417	702	1044	406	7329	423
All	501	915	1577	2923	904	1617517	91919
Total expenditure (Rs crore)	4292.74	35448.20	4852.35	1930.54	14620.70	-	-
Estd students (00)	856198	387402	307766	66055	1617517	-	-
sample students	39907	26988	20911	4105	91919	-	-

Source: 'Attending Educational Institutions in India: Its Level, Nature and Costs', National Sample Survey (52nd Report), October 1998, Table 12C.

secondary education became a kind of preparation for admission to college. The number of colleges was around 700 in 1947. A large number of students therefore dropped out after school and started to work. But those who managed to get admission to college found the transition somewhat easy because, for decades together, it was the requirements of instruction at the college level which had determined, if it may be said, the curriculum at the school level.

This client-patron kind of relationship between the two sectors of education was noted by the Sadler Commission which reported in 1917. One of its *suo motu* recommendations was that it would be desirable to establish intermediate colleges. Students at the age of 15 or so are not ripe enough in intellectual terms to profit from the kind of curriculum prescribed at the college level. As a result of this recommendation, two-year intermediate colleges were established in the province of Bengal and, interestingly enough, in UP. Elsewhere too, they were established but they were around up after the report of the Secondary Education Commission was made in 1953.

As a result of its recommendations, the duration of schooling was extended by one year. UP continued to maintain intermediate colleges. Some 20 years later, in the wake up of the report of the education commission, the duration of school education was extended by yet another year so as to make it 12 years. UP felt vindicated that the intermediate colleges were not disbanded as in other states, and these colleges came to be seen as a legitimate and useful stage of education.

These two experiments with the duration of schooling in the 1950s and the 1970s underlined one fact which has a direct bearing on secondary education today. Till the early 1950s, students who passed out from high schools were generally around 15 years of age. They were not mature enough, physically or intellectually, to start to work. Since then the situation has changed. When the duration of schooling was extended first by one year and then by two years, this problem had been partly solved.

At this stage, the experience of UK might be referred to again. Till the 1950s, the school leaving age in that country was 15. Then it was decided to raise it by one year. Once it became 16, the need to have another parallel stage of education was felt. While a small proportion of students (around 5 or 6 per cent) could go on to the university, the vast majority could not.

It was to meet that particular need that the concept of further education was evolved and promoted in the 1950s and the 1960s.

In the 1980s and the 1990s however, the system was defined much more clearly. The division between full-time and part-time courses also came to be formalised around that time. As young people joined further education in larger and larger numbers and qualified themselves in various specialisations, the system began to pick up strength. Today, approximately 500 different courses are available both on a whole-time and part-time basis. There is hardly any mode of economic activity which has not been identified and provision made for training in it. Perhaps it needs to be underlined here that most of the training is at the vocational and not at the professional level.

Those who opted for training in further education, acquired considerable capability and a few of them went on to acquire professional training as well. This led to a boom in enrolment in the further education sector; and it has emerged as perhaps even more vigorous than the university sector. If, in terms of economic growth, UK has performed rather well during recent years, a considerable contribution has been made by the growth and diversification of the further education sector or education.

In contrast India did not choose to alter or modify what began to be done in colleges from the mid-19th century onwards. The duration of schooling was certainly extended but the kind of restructuring required to be undertaken at the college level was neglected. Our colleges have been multiplying in numbers in order to take care of the growing student population but their academic thrust has remained more or less unchanged. By now, approximately, 8 million students are enrolled in these colleges. Another couple of million are registered either as private candidates or with correspondence courses or open universities. Altogether, we have something like 10 million students studying at the college.

Given our population which is close to 100 crore by now, this is not an unduly large number. Two things however need to be noted in this connection. One is the fact that even though the duration of schooling has been extended by two years, the quality of education at the school level has not improved significantly. Students spend much more time at school than they did before; an additional two years, to be precise. But when they finish, they are only marginally better than their predecessors some decades earlier.

Secondly, when students come to college, a curious kind of situation prevails. Co-ordination between school education boards and the universities is weak as well as faulty. Instances are not unknown where what was covered at school is sometimes repeated at college. At one level, almost half of what they do in college should have been done in school. At another level, the range of courses is so narrow that, in the ultimate analysis, it means the spread of liberal arts education. The number of colleges engaged in this job now is around 10,000. Out of them, only about 20 per cent of students take up science courses. Of late, a considerable proportion began to opt for commerce instead of the humanities. Nonetheless, it is the liberal arts tradition which has been growing apace. This has created a severe imbalance in the training of the right kind of manpower required by the economy.

III Structural Flaws in Education

Had we done something similar to what had been done in the UK in respect of further education, the situation would have been markedly different. Several factors have contributed to the neglect of what in popular parlance is called vocational education. One is the uncommonly low economic growth of the country during the last five decades. For almost four decades, the rate of economic growth was a little over 3 per cent per year and no more. For the last decade or so, it has picked up somewhat but, on the whole, the situation has been downright unsatisfactory. That is why one gets the curious spectacle of about 40 million students registered for jobs with employment exchanges around the country.

The second factor is the sheer inertia of the academic community. Most teachers in position were educated in terms of the liberal arts curriculum. Even when they were asked to promote vocational courses, they did not respond as they should have. This mode of education is totally alien to them. Therefore, they are reluctant to undertake any new experiment or relearn their academic digits. Nor has there been any shift at the policy-making level. Therefore, a policy of drift has been followed, so much so that students are content to get enrolled in colleges and study in a casual and half-hearted way and clear their examinations which are not all that rigorous. Somehow this seems to suit everybody, including the students and the teachers.

Thirdly, the decision in 1973 to upgrade the scales of pay of university and college

teachers acted as a negative factor and created fresh tensions. When this was done, teachers at the secondary level remained untouched. Till 1973, teachers at every level were ignored and underpaid. Then it was decided to give a boost but only to those at the tertiary level. Apart from the obvious injustice of it, two mistakes were made.

One was to create a significant gap between those at the secondary and the tertiary level and not bring the former within a measurable reach of the latter. It took almost a decade to do something to retrieve the situation. By the time this was done in the early 1980s, there was a fresh round of scale revision for university and college teachers in the mid-1980s. Thus the wide gap between the two categories of teachers has never been bridged.

The second mistake was to give the same scales of pay both to university and college teachers even though the level and nature of work was not exactly the same. This led to further complications. Since the number of students at the undergraduate level is 88 per cent, the number of teachers at that level could not be several times larger than those engaged in post-graduate teaching and research. That was not the only complication. At the college level, post-graduate teaching has been expanding over the years. Currently, more than 55 per cent of the post-graduate students are enrolled in colleges. The distinction between the two types of teachers is therefore difficult to establish or maintain. Since decision-making in our institutions is largely bureaucratic in character, all kinds of misjudgments continue to be made.

Over the years, it has become difficult to undo the decision taken in 1973. Any decision which goes against the overwhelming majority of teachers is bound to be resisted and that is precisely what has been happening. In the bargain, the interests of teachers at the post-graduate level and research have suffered.

Worse than that, as a result of the 1973 decision, vested interests have grown. Nobody at any stage stopped to raise the question of what was happening at the secondary level. In UK, they did not make that mistake. Teachers working in the sector of further education were distinctly different from those working in the universities. In India, these distinctions were blurred with the result that the universities became victims of policies which, though well-intentioned in concept and sympathy, led to consequences which had not been anticipated.

This was one dimension of the problem. The second dimension was that secondary school teaching got unduly devalued. As it has taken a couple of decades to devalue teaching at the secondary level, it will take us quite some time to improve it again. This is said on the assumption that it will soon be decided to recast the existing system.

If the existing system of education be recast, we must analyse the difficulties which will be encountered. For instance, due importance will have to be given to diversification at the school level as also at the college level. At both levels, the ability to work with one's hand and learn certain trades and crafts will have to be emphasised. In certain areas, computers for instance, private initiative has recognised the needs of the market and moved into it in a substantial way. This is an area which need not have been neglected to such an extent had both secondary and college education been seen as performing distinct though supportive roles for two separate categories of students.

College teachers having once got a privileged position are not prepared to surrender it. Therefore, they are fighting in favour of the status quo. Instead of becoming a force in favour of progress, they have become a barrier to progress. Their numbers are large and they are so well organised that none of the policy-makers has, so far, found it feasible to redetermine the priorities in education in a manner which will lead to progress and not simply perpetuate the status quo.

Above all, in sociological terms, no one is assumed to have completed his education unless he has managed to obtain a college degree. What is done at the school level is neither academically satisfactory nor socially acceptable. In consequence, we witness this craze for college degrees. According to the partial data collected by the department of education, something like 60 per cent of those who complete their higher secondary education go on to college. What happened in some of the states is truly enlightening.

In UP 51 per cent of the students join college. The proportion in Kerala and Maharashtra is 68 and 78 per cent, respectively. The cake however goes to Chandigarh, a small city state, so to speak. Every single student who passes out from a higher secondary school goes on to join college. Can any other city in the world equal this record.

The large backlog of educated unemployment should have to some extent cured us of this obsession with degrees by now. It appears however that, that stage is yet to

be reached. Today the situation is that almost anyone who can afford it and has access to a college would like to be enrolled in one.

All this is having a strongly negative impact at the university level. University departments which constitute the core of a university are pale and anaemic copies of what they should be. On their handling of the colleges, the less said the better. Today, something like 150 universities are affiliating in character which by implication means that, by and large, their performance both at the undergraduate and post-graduate levels is unsatisfactory. The number of students in colleges is so large and university leadership is so weak (and so highly politicised) that almost everyone is content to survive from day-to-day and no more.

To hark back to the role of the academics, it is their anxiety to get a higher remuneration which blinds them to what they are doing and what is happening to the educational system. A stage has now been reached where most states are finding it difficult to cope with the financial burden of the revised scales of pay. Even though some states have accepted the new scales, others are resisting it. Whatever be the eventual outcome, it should be clearly recognised that a certain number of states will not find it possible to accept the revised scales. Whether their proportion

is one-third or one-half of the total is a matter of detail.

IV Education and Economy

Our agriculture was never given the importance due to it. Everyone who joins the school system by implication opts out of the rural sector and aspires to join the urban sector. But there are limits to the growth of the urban sector as has become evident of late. The neglect of agriculture is therefore creating new problems. Even in those states where agricultural education was introduced as one of the options at the higher secondary level, it has received almost the lowest priority. No wonder, our agriculture has remained more or less stagnant and failed to keep pace with changing technology and the growth of commercialisation in agriculture.

No more needs to be said about this serious imbalance except to underscore the point that our system of education cannot be delinked from the kind of planning which is undertaken for the country. In every society, education is a subsector of what happens on the wider economic front. Most of our problems in the field of education today arise from the fact that there is a lack of clarity about our planning objectives. As far as education is concerned, its structure and focus have remained more or less what they were till 1947. A stage has now been reached where the educational system has become more or less dysfunctional and there are acute imbalances.

What do we do in this situation? To some extent, the manner in which some of the questions have been posed imply an answer. In order to be more specific however, let a few things be restated clearly and concisely.

The problem of widespread poverty will never be solved unless something is done on the agricultural front. For a century and a half, the modus operandi of development has been to displace people from the rural areas and help them to shift to urban areas. Life in urban areas is pretty unappealing in almost every respect. In any case, the pace of urbanisation, even though fairly high, has not been high enough to match the social and economic expectations of people in the countryside. Therefore, we get the odd spectacle of more and more people moving out from the countryside. But this process cannot be continued indefinitely. Most people will therefore have no choice except to stay where they are and whatever improvement is to be made will have to be made in the countryside.

If this is so, the character of education will have to undergo a fundamental change. The present system of education prepares children only for entry into the modernised sector. That sector is not growing fast enough with the result that there are problems of congestion and mismanagement apart from lack of employment.

To the extent that the informal sector of the economy could have grown, we have not utilised our system of education to act as a facilitator and a lever to progress. Had we vocationalised our system of education so as to keep in step with what was happening on the economic front, things would have been certainly better. It requires to be added here that diversification is necessary not only in the urban sector, it is equally necessary in the rural sector. Such a step alone will ensure progress in the countryside.

Even this step cannot be taken without some local and regional modifications. In the UK, agriculture and industry co-exist in a balanced way and the transition from one sector to another is smooth and not all that difficult. That is why the academic syllabus at the school level does not make all that much of a distinction between agriculture and industry. In our situation, that model will not work. We will have to evolve our own model. But hardly any steps are being taken in this direction.

It needs to be recognised that while a certain proportion of students will enter the world of work after school, it also needs to be recognised that they are not really equipped for work either in the rural or in the urban sector.

Every level of education has to be aligned and attuned to the stage of physical growth and intellectual development at which children happen to find themselves and the needs of the economy. It is only after young people have crossed the age of 20 or so that they are mature enough to do things on their own. Therefore, a system which looks after and trains the 16 to 19-year old youth will have to be devised and maintained.

V Conclusions

It is time to express the foregoing argument in more concrete terms. Fortunately, the National Sample Survey (52nd Report) published 'Attending Educational Institutions in India: Its Level, Nature and Costs' in October 1998 which provides up to date information (Appendix). This report analyses the annual cost per student in respect of each level of

education. While the figures given here cannot be very precise in the nature of things, this data is helpful as well as representative. But is it reliable in every case? Perhaps not. That this data is not all that reliable should be clear from one minor example. In Delhi, college education is shown as costing Rs 3,298 per student. In actual fact, it is closer to Rs 10,000, almost three times the reported figure. Also the new scales of pay could not have been taken into account in arriving at this data. The data given here is indicative and brings out the broad trends of development as far as education is concerned.

It is clear that the per capita cost of secondary education in India is less than 50 per cent of what it costs to provide college education. Perhaps it is even less than that. In this situation, what would make better sense? Should the states continue to subsidise college education as they are doing at present or should they improve the quality of secondary education which costs half as much? The answer is self-evident.

To put it briefly, what is required is: (a) a significantly diversified and enriched system of secondary education; (b) a sharp reduction in the number of those enrolled in colleges; and (c) A noticeable shift of emphasis both at the higher secondary level and at the college level in favour of vocationalisation.

As and when this is done, it would, among other things, dramatically improve the performance of universities at the post-graduate level and research. Another consequence of such a shift in policy will be those teachers at the college level who today do not wish to lose the benefit of the higher scales of pay and therefore insist upon the status quo will begin to think differently. More than that, the prolonged resistance to the establishment of autonomous colleges which is partly linked with the higher scales of pay to college teachers will also begin to weaken. This, in turn, would ease the working of the universities in their day-to-day functioning and permit them to concentrate more on advanced work than they can do at present.

Apart from whatever needs to be done to promote and strengthen elementary education, the other key problem in this area of work is to ensure that the transition from school to college takes place not in the traditional way. Instead, it has to conform to the changing realities.

[Revised version of foundation day address delivered at the Assam Higher Education Council, June 1, 1999.]