

Education: An Evaluation

Universalising Elementary Education in India: Uncaging the 'Tiger' Economy

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The strength of the government lies in the people's ignorance, and the government knows this, and will therefore always oppose true enlightenment." It was exactly a hundred years ago that the absolute neglect of mass education by the colonial government inspired Rabindranath Tagore to borrow the above words from Leo Tolstoy to articulate his thoughts on mass education. And he went much further, to appeal to his countrymen and women, "We will be utterly devastated in all respects if we do not, by ourselves, strive to invent and initiate the proper means for educating the masses of the country from their childhood."

The country and its people have been witness to several changes in the past hundred years – paramount among them being the shift in the notion of "we". The "we" in Tagore's mind obviously did not include the alien government; his appeal was made only to the Indian citizens. But has there been any change in the attitude of the government that has been "ours" since 1947? True, it has not openly opposed "true enlightenment" among the masses. Rather, it has made many fabulous declarations as regards the spreading of education among them. Universalisation of elementary education has become a constitutional guarantee. The state has time and again set for itself several goals pertaining to enlightenment. And, after all these glorious announcements, the achievements in the field of education make us ask the question, "Has the government favoured enlightenment?" Not favouring enlightenment can well be synonymous to opposing it, particularly in this case where the state is chiefly responsible for universalising elementary education.

Low Priority

Why should the state be responsible for ensuring elementary education for all?

Although this question (fashionable rhetoric for some people) has been addressed at depth in several works, this book reinforces the cause based on finely drawn international comparisons. Important in itself, the comparisons add to the rationale of social sector investment, "to step in a long process of human development". Experiences of countries, particularly the east Asian "tigers", show us how important it is to achieve the goal of universal elementary education (UEE) for equitable growth. At a time when "growth" is seemingly the only mantra across the development world – right and left alike – this book could be a timely intervention rather than being a mere epistemological search.

The dismal state of elementary education in most parts of the country amply demonstrates the gap between promises and achievements. The blights in the elementary education scenario are as conspicuous as the holes in a sieve. Low levels of literacy, particularly among the men and women of backward social groups, high rates of never enrolment and drop-out, high levels of non-attendance of children, poor levels of learning achievement and myriad other shortcomings are seemingly acceptable phenomena in the educational scenario of our society. Parts of this book, based on a survey with a large sample size (1,20,000 households in Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal) are devoted to drawing an objective picture of the delivery of elementary education in the country that reinforces the findings of some other important studies.

There are several lacunae in our educational policy. However, the major constraint, hardly can one doubt, is the prioritisation (or the lack thereof) in our public investment. Being on the concurrent list, education is a joint responsibility of the central and state governments. But most of the responsibilities have devolved on the state governments. Through a rigorous time-series analysis of data on total funding of education, this book shows us how the central and state governments' "inability to devote a large proportion of GDP to education" has resulted in a feeble educational infrastructure. Lack of schools and poor facilities in the existing schools (from shortage of classrooms and teaching-learning materials, to non-availability of drinking water and toilet facilities) are only a small part of the story. The bigger

part is the failure in appointing teachers – the present number is nowhere near the declared 1:40 teacher-pupil ratio, let alone the desirable low proportion found in educationally advanced countries, or even in some of the educationally advanced states in India itself (namely, Kerala). The total share of central and state spending on education in India has been much lower (between 2.4 per cent in the mid-1970s to 3.1 per cent in 1997-98; with some increase in 1989-90 to 1990-91 – 3.4 per cent) than the desired level. Also, since the states account for most of the expenditure on education the levels of achievement and educational performance vary, quite significantly, across states. This book painstakingly analyses the pattern of expenditure on education across the states and finds, "with some exceptions, per student and per capita spending is smaller in the educationally poor states, reflecting an overall resource constraint with possible implications for the quality of education infrastructure and access".

Class Bias in Public Policy

While the general constraint on educational resources is alarming in itself, particularly because an overwhelmingly large part of the public expenditure on education (97 per cent to be exact) is spent on teachers' salaries, leaving a pittance for the other important heads of accounts, the very structure of public education spending in India leads one to doubt whether it can ever be seen as part of a pro-poor agenda. Drawing from international experience this book shows how the poor have been excluded from public policy on education. The history of universalisation of elementary education in the advanced countries is, as this book shows, drawing a comparative picture going back to 1900, inalienably related with that of the pattern of distribution of education expenditure. "By 1900 most of the countries in North America and Europe, as well as in Australia and New Zealand, had full primary enrolment and considerably expanded secondary education, just as literacy rates were approaching 90 per cent." Yet, most of these countries have been allocating more than three-fourths of their education spending on elementary education, which is "higher than the allocation to the elementary level in India over the entire 50 years since independence".

In India, the priority has been on secondary and higher education. "In most Indian states the share of secondary education is higher than that in Latin American

middle-income countries although they have secondary enrolments higher than those in most Indian states.” Who actually gains from this “public subsidisation” of secondary and higher education? Certainly not the children coming from poor socio-economic backgrounds, who constitute the bulk of illiterates in India. Obviously they are in no position to gain anything from the public spending on secondary and higher education. It is also appalling to see some of the states with a poor record of educational achievement among the masses (for example, UP and West Bengal) allocating a very high proportion of their education budget to secondary education, neglecting the primary task of universalising elementary education. West Bengal can be seen as a dialectical case: there has been an uninterrupted left rule for nearly three decades and the state government is generally seen to have been pro-poor in their policies. But, in the field of education the policies, particularly related with educational funding, have been strikingly tilted towards the middle class or other non-poor.

Neglect of Elementary Education

It is not only the low priority given to education, particularly at the elementary level, but also the poor organisational delivery, that has contributed to the dismal state of elementary education in the country. And the price for the poor delivery of education is often paid by the deprived sections of the society, as the rich can afford to take options other than those offered by the state. In fact, it is the neglect of the public delivery of education at the elementary level that has added to the burgeoning of a private sector (which, according to the discussion in this book – and also some other studies – “gives no indication that cognitive achievement in private schools is better than that in public ones”). There has been a growing tendency among relatively better off parents to rely upon the private sector. While in many states this is in the form of private schools, in some states it is in the form of private tuition. The latter, according to Amartya Sen a “regrettable necessity”, is as divisive as the private schools are – since socially and economically powerful parents can make out-of-school teaching arrangements for their children, who are officially enrolled in government schools. But the poor cannot do so and are thus excluded from both the public arrangement for education – because of its poor delivery – and private coaching arrangements. The availability

of private arrangements has another major implication – parents who can make themselves heard, thanks to their socio-economic background, and who could play a major supervisory role in the functioning of government schools, no longer have any incentive for doing so. The book under review deals with the private school scenario in considerable detail, although there was scope for discussion on the issue of private tuition (which is particularly conspicuous in West Bengal – a study state).

Need for Public Action

Citing historical evidence, the book powerfully argues for public intervention in elementary education. Every country which has achieved universal elementary education has done so through public intervention; the experiences of the developed and high-achieving developing countries were “markedly similar; and the private sector’s role was limited at the elementary level”. In addition, based on a rigorous exercise, the book shows that household expenditure on elementary education (on stationery, books, extra-coaching, uniforms, etc) is an important component, which “might be one of the crucial and formidable roadblocks in the realisation of UEE in India”. The situation calls for the state’s taking over of the total cost of schooling.

Arguing strongly for a much needed “intersectoral restructuring of education expenditure at the margin”, implying that additional public spending should concentrate mainly on “elementary rather than secondary education and should go to government schools”, the book goes on to draw an outline of extra resource mobilisation for education. Drawing heavily on international experiences, particularly from the developing countries, the authors argue for “earmarking funds for elementary education”. The book suggests some other measures of reform, including some organisational issues (like ensuring peoples’ participation in its essence), though the discussion on these aspects may be felt to be somewhat inadequate.

How successful this book proves to be in “uncaging the ‘tiger’ economy” lies in the future, but the authors have certainly proved successful in uncaging their language from the typicality of so-called “social science English”. Written in a very accessible language and style this book should be on the must read list not only of practitioners of education but also the public at large. **EPW**

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