

The Great Number Race and Challenge of Education

The emphasis on enrolment of children into schools in order to meet global norms has led to total neglect of the kind of education that is available to India's poor. While education must be the great equaliser it must be reconstructed to accommodate the varying needs and aspirations of different strata of society.

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Mahatma Gandhi had dreamed about a school system that was rooted in the social and cultural context while at the same time ensuring good quality secular education accessible to all children in the country. But as the first government assumed office, "education for all" was quickly forgotten. We carried on with the colonial system, partly because there were more pressing economic and political issues to tackle. Gandhiji's plea for 'nai taleem' (a fresh approach) in education was lost in the din of building a command economy.

It is not that education was neglected. State governments across the country established primary schools in rural and urban areas across the country. These schools were basic – catering to the vast majority of the poor. At the same time the central government set up a chain of "central schools", that were well endowed and competent. However the real attention was reserved for higher education as the ruling elite committed itself to build quality institutions for professional and technical education. National institutes of technology, science, medicine and management are turning out graduates, who arguably compare with the best in the world. No surprise that India has managed to ride the current global information technology wave with confidence. In this rarefied world, excellence and quality are key words.

In 2005 and 2006 an independent non-governmental organisation (NGO), Pratham facilitated a nationwide sample survey on learning outcomes of children. The results were shocking. In 2005 close to 35 per cent of children in the 7-14 age group could not read a simple paragraph (standard 1 level) and almost 60 per cent of children could not read a simple story

(standard 2 level), 65.5 per cent of children in the 7-14 age group could not tackle simple arithmetic problems and 47 per cent of children in the 11-14 age group could not solve standard 2 level arithmetic problems. In 2006 the survey found that the situation was not very different. Almost half of the standard five children could not read a standard two text. Educationist Suman Bhattacharjea points out "this early inability to ensure that children gain grade-appropriate reading skills obviously intensifies the subsequent burden on both children and teachers... ASER 2006 data conforms that this is (sic) losing battle: in standard VI, after having completed the recommended minimum of five years of education fully, one-third of all students cannot read at the level established for Standard II." It is therefore not surprising that (according to the government of India) 52.8 per cent of children who enter standard 1 drop out before they reach standard 8, with children from the most deprived communities and from rural and remote areas constituting an overwhelming majority of drop outs. Education has meant little to these children – they acquire few skills and little confidence. For all the official claims, close to half of all children in the appropriate age group receive less than the constitutionally mandated eight years of schooling even if we disregard quality.

Numbers over Quality

How can two entirely different systems coexist in the same space? Is this an area of concern for the government and the larger civil society?

In the early 1950s, education and quality were seen as coterminous, in part because education was a privilege of the few who could afford it. And most children studied in government schools. With modernisation and escalated demand for education came

pressure for rapid expansion in the public education system. By the mid-1960s, as increasing numbers of children started enrolling in school, the country also witnessed a gradual increase in the number of privately-aided and unaided schools. As the 1960s rolled by, people with means moved out of government schools and a feeling developed that quality was, perhaps, better pursued in private schools. This movement of the economically better off from government schools to private schools has continued to gain momentum through subsequent decades, resulting in most government schools today becoming the preserve of the poor, those with little voice in society.

With growing pressure to meet globally accepted levels of school enrolment India joined the great numbers race. Issues of access and quality were analytically separated and the focus shifted to somehow getting children into schools with the belief that the government could worry about quality later. Statistics acquired an unprecedented status and we started searching for simple measures like enrolment, transition and completion rates to show progress. Coupled with a no-detention policy that mechanically promoted children from one level to the next, the system was happy to generate numbers.

This is a warped system. Official numbers told us that all was well with education while our eyes and ears told a different story. India created parallel structures of education governed by different norms and playing by different rules. The education system got more differentiated, i.e. public, aided and private; formal and alternative; permanent, transitional, pedestrian coexisting with institutions of excellence. The poorer and the more disadvantaged were pushed into schools with poor facilities, teachers and overall learning environment. This gave rise to a new trend of "hierarchies of access", whereby, paradoxically, the democratisation of access to schools was accompanied by a reaffirmation of a child's caste, community and gender in defining which school she or he attends. Having pushed the socially excluded into educational ghettos, the government today wants to neutralise the inequalities of the past centuries through affirmative action in the form of reservation of a certain percentage of admissions to specific social groups in higher and technical education institutions. It is indeed ironic that on the one hand children from poor and

socially underprivileged group do not get quality education and on the other hand the government reserves seats for them in higher educational institutions.

The economic cake is expanding fast for some people in India. New opportunities are available to those who have been able to access quality education. There is a clamour for better schools, English education and new technologies. Gradually more and more families with economic means have started sending their children to private schools. ASER 2006 data reveal that 20.2 per cent boys and 16.7 per cent of girls in the 7-10 age are attending private schools. The most recent National Sample Survey (NSS) (61st round, 2004-05) data reveals that 28 per cent children go to private (aided and unaided) schools. Research scholar Deepa Shankar points out that there is a marked gender as well as rural-urban division: "In 1986-87, 75 per cent of the boys and 74 per cent of the girls (6-11 age) were attending government schools. By 2004-05, share of boys attending government schools has reduced to less than 73 per cent while that of girls has increased to 75 per cent... In rural areas 83 per cent attended government schools in the mid-1980s and it has remained 82 per cent in 2004-05. In urban areas, the share of government came down from 52 per cent to 45 per cent during the same period... The share of government among those attending schools from the lowest expenditure quintile groups of the population is high and growing (from 85 per cent in the mid-1980s to 90 per cent in 2004-05) as more and more children who were not attending are now attending. On the other hand, among the richest/highest expenditure quintile groups, the government sector only accounts for less than half of the total attending children, and that too were declining (55 per cent in mid-1980s to 42 per cent in 2004-05)." Quality has become a new battleground as it has exacerbated existing social and economic differences.

Lofty Goals and Poor Quality

Yet we are at a loss to define what we mean by "quality". At the heart of this concern are questions related to the goal of education. Is it to enhance the capabilities of people to negotiate an increasingly unequal, divisive and polarised world from a position of strength? Is it to enable people to reflect critically on their life

situation and understand the world they live in so as to make informed choices? Good quality education, in essence, involves creating a system that enables children to learn to know, learn to do, learn to live with others and appreciate interdependence and diversity, and above all learn to "act with ever greater autonomy, judgment and personal responsibility" [Delors et al 1996].

The segregation in education with different social classes enjoying differential access to different kinds of schools cuts at the root of and poses a real threat to democracy. An inability to address the fundamental goals of education does not augur well for democracy. In an increasingly polarised society, caste, religion and language identities are reinforced in politics and political parties mobilise along caste and community lines – pitting one group against the other to capture votes. Government schools no longer provide a common shared space for children of different backgrounds and communities: children today grow up without getting an opportunity to mix with children from other social groups. While children from middle class and affluent families with greater access to the world media may potentially be exposed to different view points, the majority of poor children not only attend school where they mix with their own kind but have little access to the media (print and visual). They are thus doubly disadvantaged – by poverty and by poor quality education.

Given the segregation and given that those who can access reasonable quality education opt for higher-end careers, teaching as a career is increasingly becoming a last resort. The last two decades have witnessed a sharp decline in the quality of teachers. The further one moves away from the metropolis and well-endowed schools, the greater the decline in educational level, skills and confidence of teachers. With the base of the educational pyramid remaining poor and the ability of the system to attract competent teachers declining, we only reinforce the quality divide.

As we peel away the layers of the education system more contradictions reveal themselves. Larger governance issues like corruption, rent seeking and a patronage network make an already difficult situation even more resistant to reform; even well-meaning reformers are at a loss about where to begin. Lofty goals

are set every few years, the most recent being the nationwide effort to draft a national curriculum framework [NCERT 2005]. Yet institutions that are expected to set standards and provide academic leadership at different levels (national, state and district) have been reduced to petty fiefdoms that are least concerned about larger issues, such as the purpose of education. And unfortunately, the larger political debate on education continues to centre primarily on writing and rewriting history and peculiar manifestations of affirmative action that only reinforce social divisions and existing inequalities.

The crisis faced by Indian education reflects a global concern. Be it rioting youth of migrant communities in Europe, the exasperated students in south and south-east Asia, or the palpable unrest in Americas and Africa – all these are telling us something. An education system that emerged in the early industrial period is no longer able to meet the growing aspirations and needs of people across the world. The "best" are happy with the Ivy League, Oxbridge, Sorbonne, the Indian Institutes of Technology and the Indian Institutes of Management, their stepping-stone to money, fame and power. Simultaneously, the media has equalised aspirations and raised hope that education could indeed be the great equaliser. Yet the education that the poor receive adds little real value. The real world is harsh – those on the margins are being pushed further out into the wild.

Overhauling the System

At the heart of all this is the content of education. Who gets to learn what and how much? What confidence and capabilities does it endow? Who decides what is taught in school? What accountability systems are in place to make sure that children who come to school are taught with love and care, in a non-discriminatory environment and in a manner that enables them to realise their potential? Who ensures that caste, gender, race and community prejudices are not reinforced in school? Is anyone monitoring to see if a level playing field is being created in schools?

All these questions are about quality – of learning, of environment, of relationships and of experience. Quality is the heart of the struggle for equality and justice. The unwillingness or inability to

define what we really mean by quality and institutional mechanisms necessary to realise standards of quality is ultimately a political question. Unfortunately, the communist parties, the social democrats, the centrist liberals and the rightwing ideologues are all on the same side in the education quagmire, together contributing to the growing schism between the rhetoric and reality.

The situation may seem grim. But as we look closer and listen carefully, young people across the world are not in a mood to take this lying down. There is an urgent need to re-imagine education, overhaul the system and link education to life, livelihood, peace and social justice. While striving for equality, the education system should respond to aspirations and opportunities while enhancing choices. A farmer should be able to enhance her productivity, weigh the pros and cons of traditional and modern technologies, and make informed choices. Children living in a multicultural environment should have an opportunity to learn about each other while creating bonds of shared experiences – at the same time learning from the catastrophic consequences of racism, parochialism and communism on humanity. Skilled and unskilled workers should be able to negotiate just wages and resist gender and age inequalities. The education system should have the depth as well as the range to span different worlds that people live in and also create bridges. A child born into a community that is rooted in a traditional occupation must have the opportunity to move out if she so wishes or infuse modern technologies or marketing opportunities into a traditional occupation. This has implications for the education system. We may have to reconstruct education in such a way that it provides multiple points of entry and exit, accommodates the varying paces of learning and enables people to stand tall where they are and reach out to the world with confidence. Young people who do not want to pursue formal schooling after standard 8 or 10 should have an opportunity to pursue learning in a different stream. Equally, a young person who may have dropped out when she was just 14 years old should be able to pick up the threads at a later stage – if she so desires. There is a need to rethink the value of linear progression from primary through higher education.

This overhaul of the system can happen only if people who are committed to an

alternative vision have the courage to put an end to the mindless pursuit of numbers and call the bluff. This is the only way we can strengthen the voices clamouring for meaningful education. ¶¶¶

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