

Higher Education in India: Will 'Six Per Cent' Do It?

Higher education in India can hardly be called equitable or excellent, despite recent efforts to improve it. What will it take to improve the quality of higher education in the country?

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Viewed historically and from a global perspective, the exaggerated concern for the mode of provision of education, i.e., the state or market that we find today would seem surprising. In most countries, with the possible exception of China, where public institutions dominate – and this is datum to be reflected upon by the global cohort obsessed with the rapid economic strides that it is making today – we find a mix of these two principal modes. In India too we find this mixture but there is no real parity. In higher education, which in India disproportionately serves the middle classes, there appears to be a pattern entirely contrary to the widely held predilection within this class for all things privately supplied. That is, we find that it is the government institutions that are pre-eminent. Take the disciplines of engineering, medicine, management and the social sciences. I believe that it would be correct to say that between the Indian Institutes of Technology, All-India Institute of Medical Sciences, Indian Institutes of Management, and Jawaharlal Nehru University, we would have more or less covered the best institutions in each of the four categories. There are also outstanding private institutions in these areas. However, even before I name these I must emphasise that the term “private”, used routinely in India to describe non-government institutions, does not correctly reflect the wide-ranging divergence of motivation among these bodies. They are variously driven by profit, religious intent, and cultural self-preservation among other motives. I can name one each in each of the disciplines I had mentioned earlier – the Birla Institute of Technology and Science at Pilani, Christian Medical College at Vellore, the very recent Indian School of Business at Hyderabad and the

very old Madras Christian College in Chennai. This is not an exclusive list of private institutions of some standing but it does serve to make my point that the private sector is made up of more than just for-profit institutions. Interestingly, the American story appears to be more or less the exact opposite of the Indian with the best universities being private – though there is of course the University of California at Berkeley – and traditionally by far the overwhelming part of schooling being public (and provided by a local authority). As I shall be pointing out later on in this essay, schooling in India is overwhelmingly private. Historically, Manhattan had shared with Moscow the rare feature of its largely public schools being referred to by numbers rather than (the bourgeois?) the practice of names! And many of the United States' leading intellectuals, especially from New York, have gone to these schools. This is insufficiently recognised in India, where today, a tendency is rife among the ruling classes to substitute their fantasies for a truer picture of America.

Equity and Excellence

Even before moving on to the central issue of the provision of education, whatever the mode, i.e., private or public, we must define the criterion by which the educational arrangement in a country is to be judged. In fact, this is of the essence, I shall argue, as our judgment on the mode of provision itself is moulded by the importance that we attach to perceptibly rivalling criteria.

For it to serve any worthwhile purpose, equity and excellence must hold in equal parts of an educational arrangement. The position often heard expressed in India that they are incompatible is no more than sentimentality. It has cost the people of India dear that this has been inadequately

grasped by those responsible for education in independent India. Such a state of affairs would be disastrous anywhere but it is particularly so in post-1947 India where much is made of our democratic credentials. Before I turn to the consequences of the conspicuous absence of a cool-headed approach to these issues, I spend some time grappling with the concepts of equity and excellence in the context of education. Of the two, and almost counter-intuitively, it is excellence that is likely to prove more difficult to define. One might say, “Oh come off it now! We all recognise excellence when we see it, don't we?” Plausible as this may sound, unfortunately it will not do as an argument. At least in the social sciences, even before the post-modern turn, it was recognised that the presence of ideology should make us vary of prescribing to what we would confidently claim to be universal and objective standards. However, this does not imply that no assessment whatsoever is ever possible. What we need only to do is to hold the Marxist historian to the standards of Marxist scholarship and the neoclassical economist to the standards of neoclassical economics. This then takes us closer to defining excellence in education. At a minimum, it would be to aim for the highest attainable level commensurate with the current state of knowledge. This is yet an inadequate rule when it comes to research, which as an activity may be seen as the extension of the frontiers of current knowledge but I ignore the problem for the present.

Outside the populist construction within the Indian political discourse, excellence and equity need hardly be divorced from one another. Indeed they must be bound together to make for a credible programme but before I return to this vital theme I must discuss equity. We may believe that we have well understood what is entailed by the requirement of equity but is this really so? At least we understand the interpretation of equity as equality of outcomes. But equality of outcome is far less attractive or even challenging as a goal than may be imagined. Marx certainly was not enamoured of this as we are reminded by the maxim in his critique of the Gotha programme, “From each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs”. Here, no equality of outcomes is prescribed. In

fact, quite the contrary. It is, of course, a different matter altogether that an extreme version of the equality of outcomes was pursued, in the name of Marxism, by the ruling classes of the former Soviet Union. Suppose now that we were to shift to the terrain of the equality of opportunity as the proper interpretation of the goal of equity, we are on firmer ground, it would seem, but only relatively so. For after Isaiah Berlin and Amartya Sen we are aware that the equality of opportunity seen as a global absence of coercion cannot translate into a positive variant – being the only oneworth pursuing – of opportunity when capabilities differ. To rescue the idea of equality of opportunity, transplanted in the sphere of education, we might then say that there is such equality when all those with similar potential are endowed with capabilities for learning.

Having steered toward what is at least a working definition of excellence and equity, I move to emphasise the essential complementarity of these two criteria in an educational arrangement. We can see that the two combine quite naturally as follows. An ideal arrangement for education would provide for its constituents the highest equal chances for attaining excellence. It follows, then given our context, to seek whether this is currently being achieved in India. But before doing so, it is my task to reject outright the sentimental view that excellence is an elitist goal. Oddly enough, considering that it is championed by self-conscious spokespersons for India's poor, it is fundamentally status quoist. One need not subscribe, as I do nevertheless, to Foucault's insight that knowledge is power to recognise that to stoutly resist a progress toward excellence for all is actually to ensure that the poor, who are ipso facto powerless, remain where they are. Arguably no sentiment has worked more towards keeping the poor of India where they are than the reactionary one that excellence is at best beyond their ken or at worst something hopelessly bourgeois. But worse than both is the delusion that the poor do not aspire for it or at least for their offspring.

We can now fully see the implication of viewing the pair excellence and equity as the principle priority of an educational arrangement. Indeed, we can see that equity – even of opportunity – a purely relational concept, is more or less worthless without excellence. Historically extreme versions of socialism have come close to this kind of arrangement. Equally, the feature of islands of excellence in a sea of squalor would, from a macro

perspective, leave condemned educational arrangements that maintains this state of affairs. India, in the sphere of schooling, comes very close to allowing such a state to continue. The twinned criteria I have emphasised requires that all participants be able to access the current state of knowledge or push the frontier, as the case may be. It implies that any arrangement claiming to be egalitarian must attempt to always level up. The scenes of levelling down in David Lean's lavishly constructed Zhivago is grist for the naive and sentimental alone.

Lessons from History

There has certainly been a spread of education in the country since 1947. For instance, the number of universities in 1947 was in the 1920s. By now it is more than 100. Such a clear enumeration is perhaps a little more difficult to maintain when it comes to recording the spread of schooling but here too the increase – in schools and in enrollment – is substantial. This expansion of education in India has been very largely state driven, at least in higher education, having been directed by the deliberate policy of the newly independent Indian state. Despite the apparent progress, the policy can hardly be termed a grand success. An early intimation of failure is the fact of barely 50 per cent female literacy. Indeed male literacy is not at an acceptable level either. Once we recognise the instrumental role of female literacy we also see the socio-economic consequences of neglect. Some crucial indicators of socio-economic development register a lower value in India when compared to sub-Saharan Africa [Dreze and Sen 1995].

In hindsight, the poor literacy figures, which in any case do not even begin to convey the backwardness of such educational arrangements that exist in the country, are not difficult to explain. It is now clear that no serious effort has been made to eliminate illiteracy in India. In particular, the claim that faster progress in this direction was held back as India was poor is seen to hold no water once the Indian experience is studied in a comparative framework. Amartya Sen has repeatedly pointed out that the countries of east Asia were investing a larger share of their GDP in schooling at a time when they were no richer, in terms of per capita income, than India. We may take the 1960s as another example when Korea was about at par with India in terms of per capita income. Indeed, it is astounding

that the unusual high-mindedness that had characterised so much of policymaking in the Nehru era did not extend to primary education. Of course, there is the historical feature that education was then a state responsibility, as opposed to a central one, subject to the constitutional division of powers in India (it is now on the concurrent list). But this recognition can only lead to a shift of our gaze to a lower, being the sub-national, level of the Indian state and only deepens the mystery of such a callous neglect. In light of the east Asian experience, clearly a non-economic explanation is needed. Again, Amartya Sen has proposed one. He suggests that the elitist nature of Hinduism and its pyramidal social structure has come in the way of the wider spread of education. Surely, it is egregious to find such educational squalor, as we do in India, a society of highly-educated elites with one among the world's oldest traditions of learning. The suggestion appears to come into its own when we recognise that Buddhism, with its egalitarian ideology, had cut a swathe through most of the East extending from Sri Lanka to Japan. While Sen's argument goes some distance alright, we are yet left to account for the fact that in India, literacy levels are perhaps lowest and inequality is quite high among its Muslim citizens despite the strict egalitarianism demanded by canonical Islam.

Insight from Economic Theory

Much as one might point to the global experience of finding a diverse set of arrangements in the provision of education, there is undoubtedly a veering of opinion in favour of the market in India today. The reasons for this are not far to seek. Public education in India is not an uplifting spectacle. The confused student, demoralised teacher, rampant bureaucratisation, and decaying physical infrastructure all combine to present a picture of great distress and even less hope. But even as we recognise this, we need to ask two questions. First, has this always been the state of public education in India? And, second, is the situation markedly superior in the private sector? The sweeping tide of ideology reversal globally has meant that these questions are never really raised, leave alone addressed satisfactorily. But it is important for future generations of Indians that they are.

As the current ideological shift in favour of private education really considers only the economic motive of private suppliers

– recall that I have stated that there are others – I start by revisiting the economic approach to the provision of education. This approach is guided by the recognition of externalities in the supply of education. What are these “externalities”? An externality is said to exist when the supply of a good produces an additional benefit or cost, as the case may be, over and above the value of the good itself. This value is external to the firm, or supplier in a sense that make clear with the standard example. Originally conceived of by the Cambridge economist Arthur Pigou, externalities have been the touchstone by which much of the theoretical discourse on public policy is conducted among economists. The example of an external benefit – a positive externality – is that of a bee-keeper’s unintended provision of pollination services to the neighbouring farmer whose orchard now yields more apples. The example of an external cost – a negative externality – is that of soot from a factory chimney blackening the washing of the neighbouring laundry. From an economic point of view a “problem” exists in that neither the benefit nor the cost accrues to the supplier of the product, in our case the bee-keeper and the factory owner, respectively. It is easy to see from this example that a private producer – assumed to be motivated by profit – would underprovide, in relation to the social optimum, a good with a positive externality and oversupply, again in relation to the social optimum, the good with the negative externality.

It is widely considered that education is a good with a positive externality. To borrow from the contemporary theory of economic growth, as knowledge is produced, there are (positive) knowledge spillovers. Typically, we think of how expertise developed in a firm or a known innovation undertaken there spills over into the rest of the economy when it is copied. More generally, an educated individual transfers some of the skills and knowledge she has learnt to those she comes into contact with. Mostly, the provider of education cannot internalise the value of this transfer as greater revenues and there is, in such situations, no incentive to supply more than the private optimum (which is less than the social optimum whenever there is a positive externality). This is the standard argument for the public provision of education, and it is a sound one. There is another argument for public provision of education. The argument would go like this: profit-oriented private education is provided for a fee,

and this will effectively exclude the poor who will now remain uneducated. In the presence of externalities this is no longer a merely moral argument but also an economic one. The votaries of the market dispense this with ease. The riposte to this argument for public provision is that with well-functioning capital markets, the poor should be easily able to borrow – to pay for their education – against the stream of future income that their education will generate. Now, it appears that the market is back in business – certainly in principle. However, where future income is not easily collateralised, lenders may be reluctant to lend. Courts can now take care of this problem of possible non-repayment. But this would only shift the onus of preventing the original market failure to the legal system. As we cannot expect markets – inherently profit-motivated as they are – to run a legal system based on individual rights, we are back to needing a form of public provisioning to ensure education for all. And as I have just argued, the case for widespread education need not be confined to the moral.

Public Education in India Today

In the heyday of socialistic fervour among western intellectuals, there existed the category “actually existing socialism”. The role of invoking this case was to provide a foil when arguments about the potential of socialism threatened to fly off the handle into thin air, as Marx would have had it. Something similar is actually required when we discuss public education in India. It is vital to the consideration that despite the spread of education since 1947 in India, much of it state directed, educationists are of the view that the quality of this education is often very low. Given its central importance, the extent of the deviation from what would be considered acceptable is perhaps greater in the case of public rather than private schooling in the country. Thus, deviation from acceptable standards encompasses the entire infrastructure including buildings, teachers and also, crucially, norms and procedures in the workplace. An instance of the last is the accepted use of “para teachers”, being teachers without any training in pedagogy, on a contractual basis for a very short period, say the school year. The consequences of this for long-term learning ability and the development of cognitive skills of children may be imagined.

But we do have evidence that when it comes to quality, it is no longer simply

a matter of ownership. In the private sector in India, we encounter the entire range of quality suitably accounted for by fees. Undoubtedly at the upper most end, students suffer less privation than in the government system but I have nothing to go by to be able to conclude that is even close to being world class. For one, however, fees in this segment are astronomical and as a factor of per capita income perhaps higher than in most countries. But at the lower end, private schooling does not always compare favourably with government schooling, especially, when the quality is set off against the fees. In an overall comparison between the public and private sectors in India, one might say that the Kendriya Vidyalaya are outstanding value but in the vast ocean that represents the demand for such schooling, given the price, they are almost irrelevant as they are able to offer very few seats. Actually, the presence of the government in schooling is far less than usually imagined. It is estimated that two out of three secondary schools in India are under private management. If we agree that the quality of schooling in India falls below our expectation, then we may conclude from this information that it is not simply a matter of the nature of ownership. There is very little by way of information on the quality of provision in private schools. However, area experts speak of studies that show that teachers in these private schools often lack the requisite academic and professional qualifications [Govinda 2005].

An insight into the relationship between the nature of ownership – whether public or private – and the quality of provision is offered by the finding of a recent study¹ of primary schools in India. In this study of 21 states, three unannounced visits were made to 3,700 selected schools. Though the focus was on government-run primary schools, rural private schools and private aided schools located in villages were also surveyed. The findings I have referred to concerns teacher absenteeism. Before stating the precise findings it would help to be aware of the methodology. The data on absenteeism is generated by verifying the teacher’s presence, rather than through attendance logbooks or interviews with the head teacher. A teacher is considered to be “absent” if the investigator could not find the teacher in the school during regular working hours. The main finding is that 25 per cent of the teachers were absent and only about 50 per cent would be teaching on any given day. Absenteeism was less where incentives to attend were greater. Thus, schools with better infrastructure,

close to a paved road and those that have been inspected relatively recently recorded lower levels of absenteeism. This suggests that working conditions do matter for productivity and employee attitudes more generally. We now come to a finding of this study that has some bearing on the issue of mode of provision. Private school teachers are found to be only "slightly less" likely to be absent than public school teachers in general, but are 8 per cent less likely to be absent in the same village. This, it is inferred, reflects the greater risk teachers in private schools face in being dismissed from service for absence. Finally, the study suggests that local communities could perhaps provide an alternative means of monitoring the situation. It is certainly the case that internationally the role of local communities in monitoring, leave alone providing, schooling is substantially greater than in India. The issue of teacher absenteeism has a direct bearing on the question of education reform. It simultaneously signals that a part of the Indian state's budget is a sheer waste as salaries are often paid for zero return and that more resources are not the only ingredient of a credible programme of reform.

Much of what I have said so far pertains to school education. This is of course as it should be, not only in that schooling is the foundation of human capability but also keeping in mind the peculiar situation in India where literacy levels are barely greater than 50 per cent currently. However, the expansion of higher education has been a deliberate policy of the Indian state and public investment in higher education is not only substantial but also spread across disciplines and the sub-continent's geographies. The success of this project not only from the point of view of its own goals – that of developing an advanced knowledge base in India – but also considering the large outlay has other potential uses in this country, not least in schooling.

It is widely accepted by now that the quality of higher education provided by the government in India has not kept pace with the quantitative expansion. This may be inferred from the fact that young Indians who are able to finance the move have now begun to leave the country soon after they finish school. One recalls the observation, about contemporary Britain by a British university administrator that while it does not matter for a country who makes the automobiles but when its elites consider that its universities are not good enough for their children, it matters

to a great extent. Especially in the context of the Indian government's entirely laudable objective to promote autonomous centres of knowledge development – supported by massive spending – in the country, the observation by Indian science writers that the distance in the practice of science between India and the West in the period before 1947 was less than it is today – and that that distance is widening – is worth reflecting upon. As evidence we are given the physicist Stephen Hawking's observation that the problem the solution to which won S Chandrashekar the Nobel Prize close to 50 years later in 1983 had been solved by the 20 something-year-old "Chandra" on the boat from Madras to London. That was well before Chandrashekar had reached Cambridge, having only just finished his undergraduate studies at the Presidency College, Madras. This of course is an egregious example. Anecdotal evidence is, however, available to bolster it.

I am told that the head of every science department at Delhi University in the early 1970s was a Fellow of the Royal Society. I have not been able to verify this. However, I can say with confidence that at the Madras Christian College in the 1970s, when I was an undergraduate, the head of almost every department held a doctorate from a leading international department in their own chosen field. Quite naturally, both the teachers of French had been to the Sorbonne. Interestingly, English language and literature were exceptions, and this was well before post-colonial theory suggesting that at least in some areas, we were ahead of the west! While, of course foreign qualifications are not by any account the only criterion by which one can judge the distance between Indian science and global practice, it is not clear whether using some more objective standards of comparison, such as publications in international professional journals, would alter the picture of decline greatly.

Indeed the exercise is very likely to throw up evidence of a large pool of underperforming academics. This was perhaps less the case before the grand expansion of education in India. C V Raman's Nobel Prize was won through experiments in the buildings of the Indian Association for the advancement of science on Bow Bazaar Street, Calcutta in the 1920s. By contrast, none of the academics of Indian origin who have won the Nobel Prize since then have worked in India even though they have been educated here.

If it is the case that the practice of science in India leaves something to be desired what, it may be asked, is the state of the Arts (to use a simple dichotomy)? The reception of the Arts is, of course, mediated through culture and it would be considered entirely appropriate that after colonialism, a certain degree of distancing has taken place. But is what is desirable in philosophy and literature equally applicable to economics, for instance? My answer to this question would be an emphatic "no". Nevertheless, apart from a handful of centres in the country, advances in the subject have largely bypassed India's university departments of economics. This is a tragedy, for the subject, as it is practiced globally, has much to contribute towards raising the very low living conditions of millions of Indians. The distance is also ironic as the Indian case is often taken as a prototype in global discussions of the subject.

Will Six Per Cent Do It?

It is clear that the dwindling resource base of the Indian university system is unable to cope with the student numbers. This may be handled either by reducing numbers or by better provisioning. Actually, a combination of these methods may be best. Given the need to raise resources, the populist tendency to leave fees unchanged for long periods even as there is inflation in the system is destructive of the future of education as it undermines the resource base. Indeed, even apart from matching inflation, to reduce the regressive impact of subsidies, a substantial hike in fees may be absolutely necessary. Higher subsidy for university education implies, given total expenditure on education, lower subsidy for the school-going poor.

However, while resources are undoubtedly a part of the story, they are not the sole ingredient for improvement. It is clear that there is an issue of governance involved if the Indian university system is to match global standards of instruction and research. While exceptions exist, India's universities have more or less degenerated into degree-awarding bureaucracies. It is not clear how much learning occurs directly via this media. Though student apathy is widespread, it is reasonable to assume that at least some part of it is a symptom and not a cause of the deterioration of the system. After all, it must be accepted as axiomatic that the onus of inspiration lies not with the student but with the teacher. While teacher motivation is abysmally low we must not rush into translating this into a

case of failed agency in all cases. At least not fully. It is by now widely accepted via our knowledge of organisational behaviour and psychology that agents respond to the nature of their workplace. In the language of contemporary economics, then teacher performance is endogenous, and needs to be explained even before it is simply assumed. Rigidly regulated and bureaucratised work environments leave teachers in India with little freedom, sapping self-esteem. Quantitative targets without concern for quality yield poor results with respect to content and delivery. Putting into practice arrangements and enforcement mechanisms that will provide superior delivery of the subject matter, improve learning capability, and ensure objective assessment of this learning I term “governance” in the context of (higher) education. Nathan Rosenberg (2000), who has studied the history of technology, argues that what makes American universities world leaders is that they are responsive to the emerging needs of students, markets and society. Surely effective governance of educational institutions has a role in ensuring such responsiveness, and India’s hopes of becoming a “knowledge power” are dim unless this is first recognised.

It is clear that improved governance is at least as important as more resources in any drive to improve the functioning of the education system in India. If this is conceded, it has immediate implications for expressions of intent to raise the level of public expenditure to 6 per cent of the gross domestic product.² It is clear that increasing spending without serious changes to delivery and monitoring cannot bring about the necessary improvement in the quality of education. As resources have alternative uses we need to guard against the proverbial “throwing good money after bad”. In the face of such a reading of the situation, it might appear ludicrous to suggest that there is a substantial role for the state in education in India. My persistence with such a position, however, is based partly on what economic theory tells us and partly on the history of India itself. The argument from economic theory I have already discussed. It is that in the presence of externalities the good concerned will be undersupplied by the profit-oriented private sector.

The historical evidence that the existence of a private sector in education has not ensured the elimination of illiteracy or the raising of educational standards across the board either in secondary or in higher education can be understood, at least

partly, in light of this prediction of economic theory. Independently of such a reading of the evidence, the evidence *per se* tells us something of how much more we may reasonably expect of the private sector. For instance, as the level of affluence of the middle classes rises, as it is bound to, private provision of high quality schooling may well be expected.

On the other hand, a swift response of the private sector to the need for engineering graduates as an input into the information technology sector is already evident, though this is perhaps more noticeable in the southern states. About three decades ago, a similar wave was evident with respect to medical education in India. However, what distinguishes the current phase is the generally acceptable quality of engineering education, while the quality of medical education in the private medical schools of southern India has been judged to be disturbingly low in several cases. The play of the profit motive is clearly evident here. It follows that subjects that we may consider as having a high worth as knowledge but much less of a market value such as the arts, humanities and social sciences are less likely to be offered by the private sector. However, while the disappointment at the realisation that future generations of Indians may not be reading Virginia Woolf may be rightly dismissed as “mediated by culture”, the disturbing thought that many of the future children of India may be left to languish in poor quality schooling, if the state remains idle, cannot be so easily put out of mind.

It bears repeating that the state’s role in Indian education goes far beyond throwing money at the problem. First, it must initiate a reform of India’s vast network of government institutions that are now seriously underperforming. This is a direct role for the state. Here, we may borrow from some of the thinking that has already gone into a review of the government machinery pertaining to the economy. In particular, some of the stasis generated by bureaucratic procedures in the running of our public institutions that contribute to neither equity or excellence in education must be junked forthwith. Secondly, it needs to act as a regulator of a private sector that has not only long existed in Indian education but is fast expanding without any concern for equity or excellence. This is the indirect role for the state. Both are equally important.

I conclude by pointing to the role of an audit agency for education in India. While valuable independent assessments,

such as the *The Public Report on Basic Education in India* exist, we yet require a statutory body of largely independent persons including educationists – including ones selected globally – to review, in the form of an annual audit, the functioning of the Indian educational system. These reviews must be widely publicised and the reports made available to the public. Given the guiding role of the profit motive and of vested interests – note my early observation that “private” is a broad category encompassing interests ranging from corporate to religious – it is clear that the private sector does not have the incentive to reform itself. In a democracy the government can be forced to reform even when its functionaries do not have an incentive to do so. This recognition must tilt our focus, at least marginally, in the direction of drastically reforming existing public institutions and towards the task of setting up independent bodies to regulate the private ones. No agency other than the state can do this. **PW**

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Notes

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- 1 See Jayant (2006) for a report of the study, a joint project of the World Bank and Harvard University.
- 2 See Ministry of Human Resource Development (2005).

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