

Developing human capital through education: Challenges and Solutions

As India moves towards being a world economic power, despite the economic slowdown, the low standards of education raise a legitimate concern about the means through which India will manage to sustain this growth without developing its human capital. With its 357 million illiterates[1], India is home of a third of the total number of illiterates in the world. This is a statistic in which not many Indian would take pride.

The investment in human capital, through quality education, holds the key to inclusive development in the burgeoning Indian economy. The education system, despite its considerable achievements in the last 60 years, is still marred by shortcomings, both at the elementary and higher levels, which inhibit the country from becoming a knowledge society. Converting India into a knowledge society shall require, inter alia, addressing the issue of expansion, excellence and inclusion in education while formulating policies for achieving the same.

Before discussing the challenges before the Indian education system it is imperative to be cognizant of the fact that expansion, excellence and inclusion cannot be pursued independent of each other if a meaningful shift is to be made in the system. The overall impact that education can make in the Indian society depends on the dialectics operating between these three factors. The validity of this assertion can be appreciated from the fact that a unilateral focus on any three shall leave the others unaddressed, thereby affecting the state of education and hence human capital in the country. With this caution in hindsight, I explore below the challenges before the Indian education system.

EXPANSION

With its 771082 primary and 288199 middle schools[2], India has a prodigious infrastructure already in place for education. This infrastructural base at the elementary level is paralleled by 6680 colleges[3] and 382 universities[4] – state, deemed and private – for higher education that provide specialized manpower to the economy. However, the educational infrastructure that looks profoundly impressive on paper has failed to meet the expectations for building a large base of appropriately trained human capital. Hence, there is a rightly felt need for expansion of the system. The path that this expansion must tread has been described below.

While conceiving the idea of expansion of the education system, focus must be set on

- a) expanding, in the existing schools, other complementary infrastructures that promote education
- b) expanding the reach of the schools and colleges

The investment for expansion should be directed towards increasing the efficacy of the already existing structures. The inadequacy of the present infrastructure in providing standard education is one factor that has a heavy bearing in keeping several children away from schools. To illustrate, girl students might not be willing to continue their education into the middle school if a basic amenity like washroom is not provided in the school. Also, availability of transportation facility to the school is a must. Providing such supportive structures to the pre-existing infrastructure for education is imperative to ensure that the drop-out rate is less. The supportive structures for education, mentioned above, are the incentives which, like the mid-day meal scheme, can be crucial in expanding the numerical base of the education system.

In policy making, it is crucial to dispel the belief that the high drop-out rate is an outcome of the compulsion of the poor families to include the child in the work force. As an undergraduate student I have been working with the National Service Scheme (NSS) cell at my institute. My interactions with the disadvantaged through NSS have led me to believe that poor equally realize the importance of education and they are willing to send their children to school. However, the lack of various supportive structures prevents them from doing so. Hence, it is the supportive structures that we need to target through the expansionary programs in education.

The second issue in expansion concerns increasing the reach of the schools. This refers to a coordinated policy to ensure that the schools enrol students from communities which have largely remained excluded and the youth who have dropped out from the education system. A greater number of students must be enrolled and sustained till at least their matriculation. This expansion will require, inter alia, a fundamental change in the methodology of teaching which I have discussed later in the essay. Here, it would suffice to say that this expansion can be achieved through involving the the panchayats actively in expanding the base for the education system.

For expansion, it is also necessary to increase public expenditure on education. In 2006-07, such expenditure stood at 3.7 per cent of the GDP[5] which is quite low when compared with the other developing countries like Brazil, Cuba, Bolivia and Namibia that have achieved literacy rates comparable to those of developed nations[6]. Raising the education budget to about 6% of the GDP is important to empower the Indian masses to increase their productivity through skill development. A consensus needs to be developed, among the policy makers, in favour of viewing expenditure on education as an investment and not something which acquires a secondary or probably a 'luxury' status.

EXCELLENCE

An oft raised criticism against the Indian education system is its focus on numerical indicators and not quality. The concern, valid as it is, is furthered not only by the abysmal state of elementary education but also through the pedagogy and dated syllabus used in higher education. The fact that none of the Indian universities figure in the list of the top 100 universities of the world bears a testimony to the falling standards of education in a country which, in ancient times, was widely proclaimed as the major centre of learning.

Excellence in education, no doubt, is a challenge that stands in our way to developing a credible pool of human capital. The fundamentals of the Indian education system smell of weariness and incapability to create a knowledge economy where the fruits of globalization could be made accessible to all. The examination oriented focus of the education system is particularly detrimental to the quality of education that the students receive. It not only makes students study only for exams but rather unfortunately discourages them from learning anything outside of the syllabus. 'This was out of syllabus' – is a common complain we hear after school examinations. The aim of education at the elementary level is not to make students learn few terms or dates which have little relevance to them but to help them develop a scientific and analytical temper.

The much required shift in focus from learning for examination to learning for knowledge can be achieved when an eclectic mix of activities, field trips and discussions is included in the syllabus. For the students from the urban areas, visits to villages can be included as a part of the syllabus. During these visits the students can teach a group of students in the village. The students can be evaluated on the basis of their performance in

this task. This method shall not only benefit both the rural and urban students but also break the monotony of classroom study.

Further, there cannot be a quality education if there is a communication gap between the learner and the teacher. The communication gap can be bridged if the teacher has a proper assessment of the 'previous knowledge' of the student. Any new concept requires certain other concepts as prerequisites. Hence, before teaching a new concept the previous knowledge must not be taken for granted. An assessment of the class must be made and then the concepts must be pitched at an appropriate level. I, personally, have found this method very effective in teaching maths and science to a group of students at a slum in Chennai. Needless to say that for this system to work the teacher herself must be well trained and competent.

INCLUSION

The Indian education system has hitherto constantly strived to become inclusive in the broadest sense of the term. It has tried to include within its ambit rural and urban poor, cut across caste divisions, strived to overcome gender bias and provide equitable opportunities for the physically challenged. India, by ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, has agreed to be bound to provide for inclusive education.

However, there remains a lot more to be done in this sphere. The education system needs to be reformed further to meet the needs of all students regardless of their gender, class or disability.

One prominent aspect of inclusive education, as conceived by the ministry of Human Resource Development[7] (MoHRD), is the inclusion of the people with disabilities into the education system through a common curricula and study space. There are about 30 million children in India suffering from disability[8]. Their educational needs are not any less than any of the mainstream children. However, the gross enrolment ratio amongst this group is less than five percent as against 90% for the nation[9]. The monumental challenge before India is to include these excluded masses into the education system. However, the programs launched hitherto have had little impact in this sphere.

The 'Action Plan on Inclusive Education' of the MoHRD is indeed a commendable step towards the objective of inclusion. Speculations have, however, surfaced at times about the financial viability and manpower investment practicability in the sector. Nevertheless,

the success of Mali, a poor country in Africa, in providing inclusive education undermines all claims to such an impediment[10]. The action plan for inclusive education must be implemented with vigour by taking an inspiration from Mali in this arena.

Further, the syllabus must be made available in the form which is accessible and convenient to the physically challenged. This task has already been taken up by various NGOs[11] in the country. However, there is an earnest need for the government to get involved in these efforts in a larger way to boost the enrolment ratio of the excluded groups.

Apart from addressing the needs of the special and physically challenged students, the term inclusive education has acquired a wider meaning in a developing country like India. Inclusion has to be achieved also for the girls, the socially excluded and the marginalized. The drop-out rate for students from scheduled caste and scheduled tribes is as high as 70.57 and 78.52 percent respectively at the secondary level as against a national average of 61.62 percent[12]. An important step towards total inclusion of the marginalized communities is to modify the syllabus so as to teach things that increase their employability due to the knowledge acquired and not merely due to a certificate or degree. Students must not be made to wait till college to specialize in a field. The school syllabus must provide an opportunity for the students to specialize after their middle school examinations. This will make sure that students get to pursue their interests pretty early in their school lives. Such a change is must towards ensuring inclusion of every strata of the society.

We Shall Triumph

The challenges before the Indian education system are grave indeed. A part of the solution to the problem lies in realizing that the numerous children who fail to receive quality education or education in general might not be able to live up to their potential in the future. This is a cost that will retard not only our economic and social growth but also take away a large chunk from the fruits produced by the economic growth.

India's education reforms present a vivid drama, the final act of which will culminate into India's entry into the developed world. The only way forward for us in the 21st century is to convert India into a knowledge society which is capable of utilizing its human potential to its fullest. This requires reinforcing the education sector by addressing the

issues of expansion, excellence and inclusion as mentioned above. It is only then that links can be developed between various areas of the society which will work towards improving the social and economic indicators of the country. That day might seem to be hidden in the vagaries of the future. However, by debating and adopting appropriate policies – like the ones mentioned in the essay – we can ascertain that sooner or later that day will witness a dawn.