

Is the education system in India really liberal?

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Abstract

*Liberalization refers to relaxing certain reforms and policies in India. These reforms can be termed as relaxation of previous government's restrictions usually in areas of social or economic policy. Usually the term is used in reference to Economic Liberalization. Though India is Economically Liberal, **Is the Education System Liberal? Large no. of edupreneurs are encouraged to open more schools to spread education across the country. Are they providing the highest quality of education at an affordable cost?** While India has made some progress in its aim of achieving education for all, there is still a long way to go before India can be counted amongst a developed nation as far as education is concerned. There are many reasons, one of them is that the national education industry does not want competitiveness and Government does not want to give away its control.*

Schooling System

Though the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) scheme announced in 2001 has made some progress bringing into its fold a large no. of children there is still a long way to go before India can join the developed nations, as far as education is concerned. For some years now we are witnessing a disturbing trend- the disparity in education between the private and the Govt. schools. When compared with the private schools on the three basic indices **reading, writing and arithmetic** govt. schools barely educated the children. The 2012 Annual Status of Education Report for rural India shows that 96.7% of the children in the 6-14 age group enroll in school. While 73% of these children go to govt. schools, most of them cannot read even simple sentences or perform basic math skills like subtraction and division. Moreover, the number of out-of-school children increases with age, from 4% for ages 6-14 to over 17% for ages 15-16. Clearly, there is something wrong with the Govt. schools that not only fail in motivating the students to learn but also fall short in checking the dropouts.

The Higher Education System

The higher education system in India suffers from lack of autonomy and burden of affiliation. It is characterized by extreme rigidity and lack of flexibility. The real weakness of the higher education is in the structure itself, and there is a need for introspection and reflection. Also the public mind-set is for short cut and easy going. Our policy in terms of education is focussed more on only expanding the system with no focus on for quality education. One of the basic problem today is the inability of the university system to provide higher education to all who aspire for it. Also there is no political commitment of public funds. Lack of research oriented education devalues the quality of education to a large extent. There are very few institutes and companies that really carry out research work which is useful for the masses. According to a study, India ranks 25th in the world when it comes to quality of research and the scientific impact. With a country with an academic system comprising of about 2.5 million graduates each year, this statistic indicates a clear inability for the system to sustain itself. India's literacy rate of around 60 percent places it in the company of countries such as Uganda, Rwanda, Malawi, Sudan,

Burundi and Ghana. Broadly speaking, India accounts for 50 percent of the world's illiterates even though India accounts for around 17 percent of the world's population.

While the reasons for this sorry state are also quite well known and well talked about, it's worth taking a quick look at them to understand how the Indian Youth can make an attempt to break down the vicious cycle.

Drawbacks: Public Schooling System

- **Lack of infrastructure: This is the major drawback which is hampering the development of the public schooling system.** Most government run schools barely have sufficient classrooms, lack of essential educational aids like blackboards, books, etc. add to the infrastructure problem. The reason isn't just insufficient fund allocation from the government, but more significantly the massive leakage in the system due to rampant corruption. As of January 2008, about 30% of schools in India are without permanent structures, about 14% have no drinking water facility and about 60% have no separate toilets for girls. It is obvious lack of infrastructure affects quality of education.
- **Lack of committed and quality teachers:** Teacher absenteeism has been one of the major problems in public schooling system. There is a problem with teacher absenteeism in many parts of the country (Mehrotra, 2006; PROBE Team, 1999) Up to 25% teachers are absent on any given day. In spite of a good pay, due to lack of accountability to the community especially in rural and semi-urban areas, the teachers have no incentive to perform. The poor infrastructure further deters teachers from performing well.
- **Lack of relevant curriculum: Irrelevant curriculum is also one of the major problems of schools.** Even as more and more parents in India are realizing the importance of education, the schools barely offer anything more relevant to their children than the basic ones (reading, writing and arithmetic). There's no connection with the local conditions and reality of the curriculum that offers children. In a recent survey conducted by ASER across India, 1 out of every 5 students studying in 5th standard in a rural government school is either unable to read a second standard level paragraph.

Drawbacks: Private Schooling System

- **Demand-supply issues:** There is undoubtedly a huge demand for a limited number of "good" schools across India. But there just aren't enough good English medium schools coming up. The main reason for that there is a dearth of good edupreneurs (Educational Entrepreneur).
- **Badly-designed and inflexible curriculum:** Almost all middle-class Indians claim that the Indian Education system, particularly the massive burden placed on the children must be reviewed. This has come about due to the excessive emphasis on rote learning and stuffing children with information rather than knowledge, wisdom and gaining occupational and life skills (such as a positive self-concept & emotional development). Real learning is about encouraging and nurturing the child's natural curiosity and not stifling it. *Dr. Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences states that there aren't just logical & mathematical intelligences, but also verbal, musical, naturalist, visual/spatial, inter-personal, intra-personal and bodily intelligences. All these eight intelligences must be developed.*

- **Undue importance to marks:** With increasing competitions and an uncountable number of entrance exams cropping up, excessive emphasis is being placed on marks by both parents and schools on children which leads to rote memorization rather than understanding the subject. This has put a lot of pressure on the children and schools to perform and led to a downfall in the standards of learning. But my question is..... When will young people stop taking exams and do something worthwhile?
- **Poor quality of Teachers:** Teachers in most Indian schools are not well trained to handle children. The B.Ed. requirement too is not sufficient as the course is not up to mark. But the biggest problem is that teaching is often looked at as the last career option by the educated class, as it doesn't pay well (due to the unaccountability of private schools despite the fifth pay commission) and teaching as a profession is not much respected either.
- **Tuitions:** According to the education report 2011 by ASER, more families are relying on private schools or rather paid private tutors for their child's education (44.6% in 2010 to 47% in 2011). The lack of accountability of teachers and schools due to the lack of choices of schools, combined with the extreme need to score in exams, has led to a system where the school and their teachers are just an official stamp, whereas the real "teaching" happens in private tuitions, often taken by the very same teachers. Tuitions have become a complete parallel teaching industry. However, they are not the cause of the problems of the Indian Education systems – they are only the results of the unhappy state.

Drawbacks: Higher Education System

- The international higher education is largely an unregulated market. While no doubt that there are prestigious universities hoping to build links overseas, recruit top students to their home campuses and strengthen their brand abroad. But there is no dearth of mere sub-prime and low-end private institutions which are seeking to stave off bankruptcy through the export market and there are even a few respectable universities which have been forced by government funding cutbacks to raise cash elsewhere.
- Students and local institutions in developing countries are also similarly unregulated. At many times ill-informed and often naïve students tend to avail such services without much information or understanding. A foreign label in degree is tempting enough to make them drop their wisdom. Uninformed or simply dubious institutions in developing countries may form partnerships with low-quality colleges and universities in India
- There is also the risk of fake institutes which are looking to stuff their pockets whenever the opportunity arises.
- Corruption is rampant in India. There is little left to the imagination as to what might be the outcome of such a policy in terms of bribes, false degrees, partial marking etc. There may be unforeseen outcomes which come to light only after the outcome occurs.

- Local institutes which have limited capital will not be able to survive, rendering many jobless. Even the reputed one's will face competition as their national certificates will be less valued as compared to the world avouring certificates.

Possible solutions

The problems of the Indian Education system are well known and documented and a number of solutions have been suggested. Some believe that NGOs and other not for profit organizations like trusts, temples and societies can meet the shortfall in the standards of Indian education. Indeed some NGOs and organizations are doing excellent work at all levels in this regard. But the sheer magnitude of the problem is such that unless the Government steps in seriously with all its muscle, India will lag behind by miles in the race to become an educated country. **This means that Government must take an active part – but it does not mean that government must do everything.**

Solutions suggested at school level

- **The Voucher System:** Even today, according to various estimates, the Government is allocating a sum funds per child for the approximate 250 million children in the 6 to 14 age group. Can the government not just give redeemable vouchers to all Indians of a certain economic background that can be redeemed at any school, not just government-run but also any private school run by an entrepreneur? A free market will ensure that schools will have to fight for the children by giving the best quality teaching, teachers and infrastructure. Schools will automatically become accountable directly to the parents and the community, as parents will simply shift their children out of a school that's not performing well. And if you are wondering if a good quality education can be provided for an annual fee of Rs. 3000 to 5000, then the answer to that question is an emphatic yes.
- **One teacher-entrepreneur, one assistant school:** In rural and sparsely populated regions, there may not be enough students for an entrepreneur to set up a school under the voucher system and the locals may not have enough money to set up the infrastructure. In such cases, the government can build the basic infrastructure, two classrooms, the basic amenities and a small playground. The local panchayat will then lease out the two classrooms to two teacher-entrepreneurs. The teacher that teaches better maintains a reasonable classroom size, employs a good assistant teacher, and provides good quality mid day meals will get more students. Even a small fees such as Rs. 120/month per child (funded by the government) can be reasonable income for the teacher-entrepreneur (for 40 children, around Rs. 4000/month excluding costs). A yearly review can lead to a change in the teacher-entrepreneur depending on his performance. Such a flexible and accountable system which uses local teachers can revolutionize education in our villages.
- **Home Schooling, Open Schooling:** In fact with tuitions anyway doing the job that schools were supposed to do, there seems no reason to be running the schools. Any decently educated person can teach young children the three basic ones reading, writing & arithmetic out of his/her home. Make home schooling popular and let all these children be able to take up the National Open Schooling exams that will certify their standing in comparison with other children out of schools.
- **Need for relevant curriculum and revision of curriculum:** Children tend to spend more time in school than at any place; so it becomes an important factor in shaping the character and the thought process of the child. For achieving this, **time to time revision of curriculum is the most important need of the hour.** As mentioned

earlier, what must accompany all the above changes is a phenomenal shift in the curriculum at all levels and in all kinds of schools and universities. Schooling must start focusing on all the eight intelligences and must develop the child's curiosity. Local concepts and ideas must be included such as: local weather, calendars and festivals, natural phenomenon, man-made phenomenon, how computers and the internet can improve trading of farm products or weather prediction, farming and horticulture methods and techniques, cleanliness, fitness and nutrition – in fact all the skills and knowledge that children in different places will use in their lives around them, rather than stuffing them with loads of information and tidbits, which are of no use. But by using modern affordable techniques like the phonetic way of teaching English, using IT in the classroom, distance learning through satellite and various techniques. The range of such new innovative ideas available across the world, and even being used in some Indian schools is just mind-boggling and must be employed in schools all across India.

- **Overhauling teacher Training institutes:** While the syllabus has to be improved, the teachers who impart the training also need to be trained thoroughly. The standards of training institutes which train the teachers have to be increased meteorically .A large number of training institutes are needed across the country to train our teachers in the latest and best methods to teach children. Teaching also needs to become a coveted career, and for that their pay-scales need to be commensurate with the quality of work that they do. A corporate incentive system for achieving more must be put in place to extract the best out of teachers.

Solutions suggested at university level

- **Liberalisation:** Liberalisation will bring a constant stream of funding which will also facilitate a research-based career and make it a viable option for the future of Indian teachers and students.
- **Increase in the supply of Education:** It will expand the supply which is in shortage and the competition among educational institutions will ensure that they do not charge excessive premium for education. Increase in the supply of education will automatically result in the fall of education expenditure. The Indian economy which is majorly fuelled by the service industry will get a boost with education sector becoming a large chunk of economic source.
- Hundreds of thousands of Indian students study abroad at an annual estimated cost of around US\$ 1 billion and it can even stem the exodus of thousands of students who left the country to study abroad. This will save India immense capital.
- Allowing corporate would ensure the development of better industry oriented graduates with specific skill sets.
- Increased in educated population implies rapid developments in technology and communications. It also implies the shift of society from industrialization based towards information based society.
- Liberalisation offers students an option of studying close to home with the added benefit of a degree which will be valid worldwide. It also curbs brain drain which is also a nation's loss.

- A possible solution to this policy is that the government should be kept out of the education business, partially if not fully. Its role should be restricted to regulating the sector. Just like in other markets, the educational market might have its share of market failures. Rectifying these should be the responsibility of the regulator and it must be independent of the government.
- To ensure that national interests are served and the students do not receive a inferior service from unscrupulous providers, there needs to be transparency. It can be done by the government authority. This will also help universities think about their motivations for entering the market.
- An effective educational regulator in India like SEBI, the RBI or TRAI is also needed which will regulate the capital markets, the banking sector and the telecom sector respectively.
- Certain independent rating agencies like CRISIL, ICRA or CARE are also required to rate the institutes and these ratings need to be made public as well
- Another possible solution can be that no less than half the members of the governing body of the institution must be Indian citizens and the post of president or the equivalent must be an Indian citizen residing in India.
- Another way to protect fleecing of the candidates is that tuition fees will not be raised without approval of local concerned authorities.
- Priority should be given to those institutes which have been accredited in their country of origin. The institution will also be expected to submit the latest audit report of the accreditation agency. To avoid a kind of monopoly, the system will be made transparent and quick.
- Effective registration and certification systems are also needed. Such a regulation should prevent unapproved institutions from partnering, protects and informs the consumers, enables good quality foreign institutions to enter the Indian market and which create a level playing field between domestic and foreign institutions so that the former can compete effectively in a avouring i environment. This way the benefit from the avouring ion of higher education services will be unilaterally and multilateral, on the import as well as export fronts. Furthermore, this will ensure that students are fully informed about the educational institutions.

Conclusion

Since Independence, primary education in our country has been grossly neglected; instead the focus was completely on higher education. This part of it was not done properly thereby weakening the system of education in our country right from its roots. The above mentioned solutions cannot help if applied individually and without the help of the govt. They should essentially be applied together as part of a single plan for them to work properly. Each level of education has to be addressed separately (primary, secondary and higher education) for all the involved parties to be benefitted by the change. Edupreneurs need to be encouraged to open more schools and spread education across our country.

India needs to improve the availability, affordability and quality of primary, secondary and higher education. This can be achieved through Effective Liberalization of the education system, encouraging the migration of students from one state to another and providing

more scholarships and loans to students from the poor and middle class. Only then Indian Education system will become a sound one and one which will be the foundation of sustained growth.

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