

Education – Promise vs Fulfilment

One of the great myths prevalent in today's India is that we are home to the third-largest technological manpower pool in the world. Many enthusiastic and well-meaning advocates of India as a 'world hub for value-added services' are building their hopes on this belief that we have a vast pool of technically competent manpower.

True, Indians treasure education. Millions of middle-class families are willing to pay around Rs 10,000 per annum to provide hopefully decent school education to a child. This expense of Rs 20,000 per year for two children's schooling in a country with annual per capita income of about Rs 25,000 at current prices is quite extraordinary. Thanks to this willingness to pay, education has become a money-spinning industry. Even the US, the Mecca of free-market, does not treat education as a profitable enterprise the way we do in India. Thousands of 'convent' schools dot our urban and even rural landscape. Even poor families feel obliged to send their kids to these schools of indifferent quality, spending Rs 100-200 per kid per month in the hope that somehow such 'education' will secure the children's future.

Undoubtedly, an educated population is the precondition for economic prosperity. Even Kenya (with 83 percent literacy) and Tanzania (95 percent) do much better than India in school education. What is more, every literate person in those countries can read, write and speak Swahili and English fluently. Our literacy figures are dubious at best. Judging by the three 'R's (reading, writing and arithmetic), one suspects that no more than 40 percent of our people are literate. True, the last decade saw added emphasis to school education in government programmes. But conversion of single-teacher schools to two-teacher schools, appointment of para-teachers, and redefining the school, under Education Guarantee Schemes are at best acceptable first-steps in promoting literacy. But if these are taken as policy goals, it will be a cruel hoax at the expense of the poor and long-suffering people. We need quality school education accessible to every child as a foundation for our economy and nation-building.

The situation is not too different in higher education. We churn out about 400,000 engineers every year from over 1100 professional colleges. Millions more graduate from the universities annually. The students do their best – they are studious and disciplined, they cram, clear entrance tests, pass examinations and obtain degrees. And yet, most of the university products do not have even rudimentary knowledge, or conceptual understanding, or problem-solving skills in their own disciplines and subjects. The simple truth is, our university education is in a perilous state of disrepair. Distinguished educationists like Dr. Aurik Singh and Prof. Yashpal have for years been lamenting the collapse of our educational edifice.

More investment and better infrastructure and equipment are necessary, no doubt. However, the real issue is not money. There are many non-monetary inputs, which can make a vital difference. Selection of competent teachers and prohibition of educational

incest (recruiting graduates from the same university); comprehensive review of syllabus; overhaul of the mindless examinations in order to test real conceptual understanding, application of knowledge and problem-solving skills; exposure to the real world as part of higher education through internships; meaningful research relevant to our real problems; verifiable standards for teacher-promotion or continuance – these and other reforms cost no money.

Perverse status-quoism and the game of blame-throwing on our campuses have cost the nation dearly. A vicious cycle is in operation, with poor-quality schooling creating a weak foundation for higher education, and poor university education not being able to produce quality teachers who can help improve schools! Even tiny Eritrea in East Africa boasts of a better university than most of ours! The net result is, most of our graduates and technocrats are unsuited to creation of wealth or generation of value-added services. Lacking basic skills in handling tools, they certainly are not competent factory workers.

Yes, India has the potential to be a great source of technological manpower. Our youngsters have ambition and our tradition worships knowledge. Nevertheless, as always, a lot of hard work and common sense are needed to bridge the gulf between promise and fulfilment. Some critics say education is not necessary for prosperity. They point to Tanzania and Kenya, and Eastern Europe and Cuba to prove that high levels of education do not guarantee prosperity. But that is a disingenuous argument. Education is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for high growth. Infrastructure, free enterprise and rule of law are the other conditions that guarantee prosperity. The first step remains setting our education right. The people are ready and willing. Are governments and 'educationists' prepared to accept the challenge?

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