

The Educational Paradox

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The Global Competitiveness Report prepared by the World Economic Forum, which is best known for its annual meeting in Davos, Switzerland, assesses the competitiveness of 140 economies, providing insight into the drivers of their productivity and prosperity. The Report remains the most comprehensive assessment of national competitiveness worldwide. The Competitiveness Index computed by them is a composite index based on 12 pillars of competitiveness, which are grouped under three dimensions : (1) Basic Requirements based on four pillars - Institutions, Infrastructure, Macroeconomic Environment and Health and Primary Education; (2) Efficiency Enhancers based on six pillars - Higher Education and Training, Goods Market Efficiency, Labour Market Efficiency, Financial Market Development, Technological Readiness and Market Size; and (3) Innovation and Sophistication Factors measured by the twin pillars of Business Sophistication and Innovation.

The 2016-17 report has just been published. India ranked a commendable 39 on overall ranking (China is ranked at 28), as against 55 last year. While India has performed well in respect of other pillars of competitiveness, its overall ranking still remains depressed due to the dismal performance in respect of Health and Primary Education (rank 85 among 140 countries), Higher Education and Training (rank 81), Labour Market Efficiency (rank 84) and Technological Readiness (rank 110). Worse still, there has not been much movement in respect of these pillars compared to the last year except for Labour Market Efficiency (last year's rank – 103). These pillars have to do with the quality of education which we have not been able to improve so far.

The Human Development Index (HDI) measured by the United Nations is another composite index built from indicators pertaining to three key dimensions of human development: Health, Education and Standard of Living., measured respectively by the average life expectancy at birth, mean years of schooling vis-à-vis expected years of schooling and per Capita GNP. In respect of education, which is a major determinant of economic development and quality of life, and which in turn determines whether a country is developed or underdeveloped, India's performance is nothing to be cheerful about.

In 1980, India ranked 105th among all the nations with Education Index of only 0.240 (maximum score 1.0). Its rank in terms of the Education Index has progressively been sliding ever since – dropping to 113 in 1990, 127 in 2000 and 146 in 2010 (index 0.456). As per the 2014 report, India's overall ranking was 135 among 187 nations, but its education ranking had slipped further to 145 (index 0.473), behind Vietnam, Congo, Zimbabwe, Cambodia, Uganda, Rwanda and Angola - countries that were torn by strife and turmoil not very long ago. This should have served as a wake-up call to our political leaders, but they continued to live in their make-believe world of complacency, denial, identity politics and social justice.

As of July 2016, India had as many as 759 Universities which included 47 Central Universities, 350 State Universities, 123 Deemed Universities and 239 Private Universities. These institutions produce more than

50 lakh graduates and postgraduates every year, in all streams. Most of these universities find no place among the first 1000 universities of the World. As per the Times Higher Education Survey, 2016, only 17 of these universities came within the first 800 global rankings, and none featured within the first 250; among them were Indian Institute of Science, seven IITs and nine other Universities.

Our political leaders try to evade responsibility by questioning the ranking methodology which gives higher weightages on the international students and faculties that disfavor the Indian Universities, but that does not cut much ice. Whichever survey one looks into, the results are equally dismal and distressing. As per the widely-used "Webometrics Ranking of World Universities" conducted by Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas (CSIC), a research organisation attached to the Spanish Ministry of Education, only nine Indian Universities were ranked between 500 and 1000. Even within Asia, India is a laggard in higher education: As per the QS World University Rankings for Asia, 2016, only nine Indian Universities (IISc, 7 IITs and Delhi University) could come within the first 100.

The low ranking reflects the low quality of education in the country, the natural result of which is the increasing unemployability of our graduates and postgraduates. According to a study of more than 150,000 engineering students who graduated in 2015 from over 650 colleges (Aspiring Minds National Employability Report, January 2016), 80% were unemployable. Another study by ASSOCHAM in April 2016 found that barring a handful of top business schools like IIMs, most of 5,500 B-schools in the country were producing largely unemployable graduates earning less than Rs 10,000 a month, if at all they could find placements. The vast majority of 93 percent of the 500,000 management graduates turned out by these B-schools annually were not found to possess any employable skills, like basic linguistic and numerical ability, logical reasoning and problem solving ability, besides communication and leadership abilities.

An education system that cannot inculcate these basic employment skills is decrepit and dysfunctional by all measures, and that implies that the entire eco-system of our higher education should be revamped drastically, and urgently; 'Make in India' will otherwise remain a chimera. Ours is a paradoxical ecosystem in which few centres of excellence share space with hundreds of dysfunctional institutions without any quality control. As Lant Pritchett of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government observed, India produces about 100,000 students a year in the global top 10 per cent and simultaneously churns out millions with zero skills. An educational commission chaired by S Radhakrishnan in 1948 declared that "education is a universal right, not a class privilege." Unfortunately, even after 70 years of independence it remains very much the exclusive preserve of the elite and the privileged. Universities that should be places for creativity, debate, dissent and experimentation with ideas exist only as degree-manufacturing-shops that beget no value to the students' lives.

The rot starts with the schools. In 2009, UPA government had enacted a thoughtless piece of legislation that masquerades as the Right to Education (RTE) Act. Section 16 of the Act, considered its backbone, prohibits schools from detaining or expelling any student up to Class VIII, ostensibly because this could demotivate a child to drop out altogether. In the absence of any other mechanism to test the learning of students and correct deficiencies therein, this naturally led to a situation where a class VIII student was unable to read class-V textbooks, and a class VI student was unable to work out Class-II arithmetic.

A Group of Experts at the Niti Aayog, however, has come up with a template for medical education in the country, which if implemented with seriousness, has the potential to change the educational landscape. Both medical education and medical practices in our country have been plagued with endemic corruption, complete opaqueness, unscrupulous extortion and unlimited greed. Now under a Supreme Courts directive, from the next year onwards, there would a single entry examination for admission to all medical colleges in the country, public as well as private. Medical education in India is controlled by the Medical Council of India (MCI), which is an exclusive club of doctors from corporate hospitals and private practices with deeply-entrenched vested interests. Niti Aayog has now recommended replacement of MCI by a National Medical Commission (NMC), to be advised by another parallel body, the Medical Advisory Board, which will have representatives from all states and union territories. Disbanding a corrupt and decaying MCI would be freeing medical education and practices from a Medical Inspector Raj. The NMC will conduct a single national entry examination for all medical colleges and the quality of education imparted by them will be certified by an exit examination, also conducted nationally, without passing which no aspiring doctor can get license.

Entry in higher education, by and large, is still guided by merit, and performance in the entry exam guides who gets admission in which college or university. But the quality control stops here. If there is a single exit examination for all graduate and post-graduate courses in the country, (or to begin with, within a state) taught by whichever institution, this will also measure the learning imparted by these institutions and hence determine their relative rankings. This will make and break these institutions – good ones will prosper and bad ones will be forced either to close or to improve quality. It will usher in a self-regulating educational ecosystem in which the quality of education imparted will become the sole determinant of students' and parents' informed choice. Universities will then only teach, but not be allowed to conduct examinations for awarding degrees, which can be done by a Board represented by all universities and stakeholders including Government.

No system can ever be perfect and this system too will have its own pitfalls which will have to be addressed. But it is time to be obsessed with quality in education over every other consideration.