

What Ails Primary Education in India? A Critique of Public policy

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Expanded Abstract

Human capital is as important as the physical capital for growth of the economy and therefore economies require spending not only on the acquisition of capital goods like machines, tools, buildings etc they also require necessary human skill to make use of these productive assets. The returns on investments that are offered by these components of capital greatly differ in terms of time element as the gestation period for the human capital is fairly longer. It is this characteristic of latter that calls for the government's intervention in sharing the expenditure on human capital formation, especially in low income and overpopulated economies. India certainly belongs to this category.

Imbalances of vast magnitude can be observed in India's educational system. These imbalances are in terms of primary versus higher education, private versus public provided education and even Centre versus State government funded educational institutions. The latter brings into debate certain issues of federal polity also which is barely touched in this paper. Currently the most focused issue in India is the state of primary education. The paper is a critique of the way it is currently promoted.

A lot of activities could be observed in recent years to improve primary education in the country. This includes the enactment of Right to Education Act in 2009, imposition of specific tax – education cess. Therefore in terms of resource allocation there has been a manifold increase especially for primary education. But the big question being asked is if these resources are being spent judiciously? In other words as Lant Pritchett puts it that fragile States usually suffer from what he termed as 'capability trap' as the State implicitly assumes (erroneously) the creation of apparatus would necessarily result in the functional efficiency

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also. If the approach does not work it amounts to a huge waste. Unfortunately the Annual Status of Educational Report (ASER) – 2010 point to very poor outcome in terms of quality as far as the primary education is concerned.

Present paper seeks to find explanation as to what went wrong in this sector and what could possibly be the way out from this 'big stuck'. The data we analyzed point to the fact there has occurred gradual decline in the social monitoring of this sector, resulting in near disappearance of accountability of those who are entrusted with the task of manning the system – educators and administrators. Inability of democratic institutions to stem the rot has also been observed.

The data we have used for the study are both primary – though a small but representative sample, and secondary obtained from government and non-government organization. Certain comparisons have also been done with the private schools that have mushroomed over the last ten to fifteen years.

The above referred surveys were conducted at six different localities with sample size ranging from 67 to 79 from a population size of three to four thousand to ascertain peoples' preferences about school education. Respondents were chosen on the basis that they have school going children. While another one conducted in university community was to track the changes in the schooling pattern of the educated and educationally motivated section of the society. It consisted of 56 teachers and 192 students from a prestigious university with the total students' strength of over 25000 thousand and the faculty strength a little over 1500. Although respondents were selected randomly they happened to be, barring a couple of exceptions, from the middle income segment of society.

Since information have been gathered about peoples' preferences from very small sample and that too from one state it may not be statistically correct to draw the inference about the whole economy. But given the facts contained in ASER-2010, there could be no confusion about the outcome from public policy. Only about a quarter of children in class V standard are able to read sentence in English. Worse still, more than 50 percent children of class IV standard are unable to read English language words. In mathematics situation is not very good either. More than 60 percent children of class V can't do division; more than 40 percent children of Class IV standard can't do subtraction; about 45 percent children of class II can't recognize numbers 11-99. Further, there exist large scale variations across states where the figure for certain states is bad enough to conclude the schools are virtually doing nothing.

What went wrong with elementary education has been the result of policy dilemma. Faced with the resource paucity simultaneous expansion of education at all levels was proving to be difficult so a major policy shift was effected in 1972 when on the recommendation of Higher Education Commission government decided to encourage private sector's participation in elementary education through fiscal concessions. This had resulted in virtually relieving the government of its responsibilities of improving and expanding elementary education. Wider implications of such development were to be felt latter when the existing structure of public education was freed from social monitoring as the class that used to keep some social control had almost withdrawn from these school as it found private schools to be delivering better product.

Thus the task of reviving public education was not easy as it faced challenges from the poor quality inputs (the students) as they were thoroughly unmotivated and the system that was already in place seriously lacked capabilities. The resources spent to create structure that delivers would confront the capability constraints and as consequence the functionality is likely to remain elusive. Capability, that comes through evolutionary process, requires that the preferences are accurately (or nearly accurately) are aggregated and resources are efficiently allocated. Then if certain task is attempted resources are made available in commensurate measure and utilized in efficient manner. Thus a perfect coordination is required amongst economy, polity and administration.

Public policy remained focused making the resources available not only to improve existing structure but also to motivate, through monetary incentives, poor population to send their children to school. In the process what could be achieved the increase in only enrollments but not the actual attendance. As far as the delivery mechanism is concerned it did not improve. Some improvement seems to have occurred in creating form but functionality could not be brought about. The real cause of poor children's staying away from school - the opportunity cost - has not been addressed. The fact that skill formation involves certain amount of indivisibilities has not been appreciated. No effort has been made to integrate the elementary education with some vocational training programmes so as to utilizing the skill locally.

As a result we can find that of the following possible benefits the efforts should have brought in, none seems to have been realized.

1. To create skilled man power for economy's future needs.
2. To enable poor population to earn more.
3. To raise the literacy level in the economy.
4. To discourage rural to urban migration.

The analysis bring us to conclusion that in the absence of honest and efficient delivery system at the lower level of administration entire effort in universalizing school education is not likely to be materialized. To make the policy effective uniformity in the quality of school would have to be brought about so as not only to make it a meaningful skill formation exercise but also to convince the population about it. This first step would attract that segment population first that migrate to towns for the purpose. Since this segment is supposedly influential section of rural population its joining the system would put pressure on the delivery system by bringing the accountability into the system.

Simultaneously, introducing in the education curriculum some kind of training in the vocations that could be utilized in rural sector itself should serve the purpose in good measure. Some budgetary allocations would also be required along with certain initiatives by the government for creation of such opportunities in rural sector.