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Quality of Education in India

Conceptualizing 'Quality':

'Quality', conveys difference in worth, in relation to what is common. If something has quality, it is perceived as being less accessible than a variant of the same object, which lacks quality. Thus, the notion of quality implies two or more versions of the same thing, arranged in a hierarchical order implying the relative presence of a valued characteristic. Given this implication, it is hardly surprising that in the long history of education, the anxiety to ensure quality has surfaced relatively recently, against the background of universal access. In ancient and medieval systems, education was a privilege which usually went with elites, and by itself conveyed quality or distinction. The legend of Eklavya, which figures in the Indian epic, the Mahabharata, illustrates the association between education and elites with cruel precision. In this story, a tribal boy is openly denied the opportunity to learn archery from a famous teacher who was appointed to train the local princes. Refusing to be discouraged, the tribal boy attains mastery by self-practice, in the symbolic presence of a clay idol of the famous teacher. When this secret self-training is found out one day, the teacher asks the boy to cut off his right thumb and give it as a ritual gift. This way, the teacher reinstates the social order which allowed only the royal sons to receive archery instruction of the highest quality.

Modernity has disturbed the hierarchical principle of the distribution of educational opportunities. The pervasive impact of modernization continues to unfold worldwide; the unfolding has not ended even in the fully industrialized societies where universalization of literacy and basic education started in the 19th century, in response to the needs of industrialization and the socio-political and cultural dynamics it had triggered. One major dimension of the impact is the question of quality: how to conceptualize and maintain it so that it becomes a universal privilege during childhood. Clearly, the question is linked to the ideal of protecting childhood as an experience from the distressful and highly reproductive commonplaces of the human condition, such as the inequalities and injustices of different kinds. For the industrially advanced or, in that sense, developed societies, the quality of education during childhood has presented the challenge of 'social

'Efficiency', a term used by Dewey in his classic, *Democracy and Education* (1916) to convey a high rate of participation and communication. Despite the availability of economic

resources, the developed world can hardly be said to have achieved the goal of nullifying the association between quality and status. In most parts of the late-industrializing world, particularly in the regions affected by the political economy of colonialism, the tension between quality and equality remains a strong obstacle to social and policy change (Dore, 1980).

The late J.P. Naik, the architect of modern educational planning in India, nicely captured this tension in the sub-title of his Tagore lectures delivered in 1975. Referring to the contrary pulls working on educational policy in the shape of demands and resistance, he called equality, quality and quantity an 'elusive triangle' (Naik 1975).

Indian Experience:

India's experience in education over the second half of the 20th century is a useful resource available to us for studying the issue of quality. As a case study of improvement in the quality of education, India is particularly interesting because of the democratic character of its struggle against colonial rule and the sustenance of democratic governance afterward, in the face of bewildering internal and external difficulties. India also offers a unique philosophical resource in this context. The political leadership of Gandhi and the intellectual leadership of Tagore made significant contributions to the success of India's anti-colonial struggle and development.

Both Gandhi and Tagore were deeply interested in educational change, and they launched exciting ventures in educational reform (Sykes, 1987). Discussions of India's educational system tend to focus on its endemic problems and the contradictions it faces in relation to the social structure. This familiar trend is easy to understand, given India's unimpressive achievement in literacy and primary education. The familiar portrayal of India's educational reality arouses no curiosity about the energies put into innovative reform. For this reason, our discussion of India's educational experience starts with two stories of major attempts made to improve the quality of education; namely, the programme of Basic Education (BE) undertaken in the first decade of independence and the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme (HSTP), which started in the early 1970's and closed as recently as 2002.

Introduction of Nai Talim (New Education)

Nai Talim was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's proposal for nai talim (literally, new education), first announced in 1937, a decade before India won its independence from

colonial rule. Adopted as state policy after independence and Gandhi's assassination, BE entered into a full-scale, stringent testing of its key ideas. The most important among these ideas was the incorporation of manual work or hands-on experience of a productive craft in the core curriculum of primary schools. This was a radical idea, not only in pedagogic terms, but, and far more crucially, in social terms too, given the caste framework of Indian society which legitimizes derision for manual work by linking it with the lower castes and others stigmatized by exclusion from the hierarchy of castes. The other important ideas were integration of the knowledge given under different subjects with the learning of handicrafts and the use of the child's mother-tongue as the medium of instruction. All of these ideas contradicted the curriculum and pedagogic practices entrenched since colonial days, some drawing strength from older cultural beliefs about learning (Kumar, 1991). BE challenged rote learning, the dominance of the prescribed textbook as a pedagogic tool, and the practice of examining by asking children to regurgitate memorized facts. It met stiff resistance from not only teachers who were trained in traditional didactics, but also from politicians, bureaucrats and publishers of textbooks. The critics of BE invoked structural issues like parity of basic and non-basic schools, the difficulties of stretching basic education upwards to the secondary grades which were oriented towards a public examination of memorizing and writing skills (Government of India, 1957). A great deal of regional variation was characteristic of Basic Education (BE), and that was perfectly consistent with its philosophy, but India's educational planners failed to foresee a rapid erosion of faith in Gandhi's philosophy even as India entered the turbulent decade of the 1960s in which it faced two wars with its neighbours, two successive years of famine, the death of two prime ministers (one of whom is rightly known as the builder of modern India), and a historic break-up of the Congress Party under whose leadership India had won independence. No single factor can explain why BE was abandoned as a policy. However, its best achievements do underline the importance of political and ideological support for any educational innovation.

In terms of quality and commitment, the implementation of BE varied a great deal, an important factor being the contribution of voluntary or non-government institutions (Patel and Sykes, 1988). BE triggered fresh thinking on curriculum development and teacher training, though the dearth of good 'basic trained' teachers remained a chronic problem. A dent was made, in many regions and institutions, in the old system of 'normal school' training, and attention was paid to the challenge of bridging the gap between intellectual and manual work. The realization that the hands-on experience of making or doing something

serves multiple developmental purposes in children's lives had revolutionary potential in a society accustomed to regarding manual work with upper-caste contempt. This was Gandhi's subtle formula for bringing about a change in attitudes. It worked so long as there was a conducive ethos to uphold its functioning. Such an ethos existed in many parts of India in the decade following independence, apparently as a residue of the headier ethos produced by the struggle for independence under Gandhi's leadership. The state too felt a moral responsibility to keep Gandhi's legacy alive by giving it an ideological support in the face of widespread scepticism and resistance. In the mid-1960s, when the state's positive bias gave way to pressures favouring mechanistic modernization of agricultural productivity, enthusiasm for BE dried up (Kumar, 1995).

In its memory, a slot of 'work experience' was carved into the old-style, textbook-based curriculum of secondary classes. With no responsibility left to provide any hands-on experience, the primary school returned to being what it had been. Bal Vaigyanik (the child scientist) Our second story of innovation, the HSTP was initiated in the early 1970s by two voluntary agencies, namely Kishore Bharati and the Friend's Rural Centre; later on, it became the responsibility of Eklavya. The well-entrenched tradition of voluntary work in India has seldom meddled with state-run schools. Things are changing now, but traditionally voluntary institutions have shown indifference to the state system. HSTP presents the lone instance since independence wherein a voluntary initiative made a radical large-scale intervention in state schools. The scale of this intervention was narrow at the beginning: 8 rural middle schools (with Grades VI to VIII, corresponding roughly to ages 11 to 13) of Hoshangabad district of Madhya Pradesh (MP); but this number rapidly increased from the late 1970s onwards, reaching the figure of 1000 schools spread over several adjoining districts in the course of the next decade.

HSTP had three dimensions:

- i) Preparation of new, experiment-based textbooks with kits, both reflecting the immediate, rural milieu in choice of topics to be studied and the design of equipment and lessons;
- ii) Training of existing government school teachers of science in the new methods which focussed on children's own discovery of ideas, explanation, and new questions; virtually prohibiting old-style teaching without hands-on experience;

iii) Designing of new assessment techniques, replacing the memory-based examination taken at the end of the year.

(Delhi University Science Teaching Group, et al. 1977)

The Larger Picture For a country of India's size and complexity two brief case studies can hardly suffice, in an illustrative sense, to encapsulate what the process of change constitutes. We must remain cautious and prepared to appreciate the scale of the task involved in reforming a vast system so as to equip it better to meet an elusive goal. That goal was enunciated in the Constitution of India as the construction of a liberal society based on democracy and social justice.

The Constitution presented a transformative vision of governance and it named education as an important means of realizing that vision. Universalizing literacy and elementary education was an inevitable responsibility attached to the fulfilment of the vision. When we review the second half of 20th century from the perspective of the Indian Constitution, we are forced to recognize the extraordinary challenges that democracy has had to face, but we are also struck by the formidable difficulties that education, as a means of serving and strengthening democracy, has presented to the state. Any attempt to obtain an overview of India's performance in education is likely to be constrained by the multiplicity of factors affecting our judgement.

In the mid-1970s, J.P. Naik, to whom a reference was made earlier, attempted to present an overview. He was better qualified than anyone else one can think of to undertake such an exercise, given his key role as a participant in decision-making and his socially committed perspective (Kamat, 1994). His assessment of India's educational performance in the first quarter-century of its independence was the following: (T)he pursuit of quality has often linked itself with privilege and become inimical to that of quantity; the pursuit of quantity, in its turn, has often led to a deterioration of standards, and the pursuit of equality, in its turn, has often led to a deterioration of standards, and the pursuit of equality has often found to be inimical to that of quality, and has been frequently hampered by the very inequalities in society which it was intended to remove. We have tried to reconcile the inevitable conflicts with little result. . . Has the pursuit of these goals of equality, quality and quantity in education made any impact on the social structure and rendered it less stratified and

hierarchical or more egalitarian? The answer probably is that the impact of education on the basic features of the social structure has been rather limited. (Naik, 1975, p. 4) The question whether education has served a transformative role in relation to the social order and the values underpinning it has inspired considerable scholarship in the recent decades, but the answer has remained elusive and ambivalent.

Barriers of Education System in Improving Quality of Higher Education

In any field of human activity, quantity and quality are equally important. The same is applicable in the field of education. 504 universities and 25,951 colleges in 2009 do not give an indication of catering to the growing needs of higher education (India, Government of India, Ministry of Human Resource, 2015).

In the 11th Five Year Plan during the period 2007-12, 1500 more Universities are suggested by National Knowledge Commission (NKC). So, numerical growth is taking place with rapid pace, but the quality aspect of education is not yet thought out seriously. Due to lack of adequate infrastructure in terms of faculty, library and equipment in computer laboratories, the quality in the higher education is facing several barriers.

Some of the barriers hampering the improvement of quality in higher education are listed below:

- 1) The students who complete their study of UG and PG programme do not have much employability in job market.
- 2) Present society demands interdisciplinary knowledge which is one of the most missing features in the present higher education system.
- 3) Curriculum remains more or less stagnant for number of years, whereas the changes and trend in the society take place in quick succession.
- 4) Development of quality and visionary approach always begins with top level of management but it is not adequately found in the head of the institute, management of the colleges or University chair persons.
- 5) Single yardstick of experience in the Performance evaluation without any accountability loses the motivation of teachers and eventually the quality of education gradually deteriorates.
- 6) Conventional and not well-organised classroom teaching accompanied by weak presentation skill adversely affect the interest of the students.

- 7) Commercialisation of higher education particularly by self-financed colleges to earn more and more money is the cause of providing fewer infrastructures to the students and inadequate facilities and incentives to teachers.
- 8) Interest and aptitude base selection of career is unfortunately not seen in teaching profession.
- 9) For the new recruiters, fixed pay has largely affected the quality of education imparted to the young minds of the country. This leads to loss of motivation and enthusiasm and keeps them away from teaching profession.
- 10) Research work is one of the factors in knowing the real life happening and problems. This is lacking on account of heavy workload in routine teaching work.
- 11) The hard fact of poor reading habit of the teachers, teachers just go to classes to teach with stereo type teaching pattern, using the same material for years and years. This deprives the students of the basic training to face the real world.
- 12) No autonomy in work or little space of time to work in creative manner, can't give a chance to search for new knowledge. Even competent teachers are deprived of this sort of academic freedom to mould the future career of students.

To get rid of these barriers, the Government of India appointed the National Knowledge Commission with a view to create knowledge based economy with intellectual inputs for the country.

Some observations for improving Quality of Higher Education

After the snap shot of NKC and renovation and rejuvenation committee of two eminent personalities i.e., Prof. Yashpal and Mr. Pitroda, some personal observations are made in order to improve the quality of higher education. They are mentioned here:

- 1) Committees headed by Kothari, Pitroda and Yashpal committee are agreed that autonomous bodies of education should be free from pressure of party and power politics.
- 2) Genuine publicity campaign must be started for hiring better teachers to get rid of the short fall and crisis of good teachers at undergraduate and postgraduate level.
- 3) The selection of the new teachers should not be just on the basis of personal interview and research paper written by them, in addition to that interest and aptitude in teaching profession and presentation skill in selection would give a better slot.

- 4) Fixed-pay system for the new appointees must be stopped urgently by replacing the pay to honour knowledge and motivate the new entrants in teaching profession.
- 5) The role of teacher is something beyond curriculum, so they should also share different life learning experiences with students.
- 6) Teachers should be encouraged to pursue research work because it is the right mode of developing the knowledge about local and world class practices
- 7) Single yard stick of mere experience of teaching for many years should be corrected by proper feedback of peer teachers and principals of college and rating of teachers from several more angles should be introduced to make them competitive.
- 8) It is very essential to train students according to the need of job market. This can be achieved by redesigning the curriculum and syllabus in core areas.
- 9) Entire higher education system should envisage equipping students not only through the specialisation or Super specialisation but with inter-disciplinary knowledge which was earlier offered in ancient Gurukul system at Nalanda or Takshshila, the ancient vibrant educational campuses.
- 10) Colleges and Universities should take initiative to develop rapo with industry on timely basis to increase the employability ratio of trained and professional human resources for society.
- 11) The barrier of financial constraint for reform can be reduced by establishing liaison with the initiative of the corporate people who have ample funds under research and development for the upliftment of the society and country as a whole.

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