Challenges in Imparting Quality Education in India

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Prologue
Impressive strides have been made by India since independence in providing education access to our youth. It is widely accepted that progress in this century will be driven by knowledge. To meet the challenges of 21st century, India needs to usher in a knowledge revolution that is inclusive and accountable to the Nation's aspirations. Reforms in the education system from primary education to higher and technical are sine qua non for meeting the challenges posed by demography, disparity and development. Reforms in education system are urgent and imperative to harness the potential of our young population. A very thoughtful and relevant Article from someone who has been in the midst of it all.

- Editor

Introduction
Since 1990, there have been significant efforts at the National and State levels to improve access and quality in elementary education in India. Programmes like Operation Black Board, District Primary Education Projects (DPEP) in the nineties and now Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and Mid-Day Meals have increased enrolment and retention of children in elementary schools. The broad picture that emerges is that, educational facilities have increased and the distribution of schooling opportunities have widened. Revision of curriculum, annual in-service training of all elementary school teachers, creation of decentralised resource support through Block Resource Centres and Cluster Resource Centres under SSA are various measures aimed at improving quality of teaching/learning in the elementary schools in the country. There are, however, specific challenges which need to be addressed urgently for ensuring that the youth of our country get knowledge and skills which will enable them to participate in our economic growth effectively.

Present Status
The learning levels of majority of students are very unsatisfactory as is seen from the annual data collected through the District Information System on Education.
(DISE), National University of Educational Planning and Administration (NUEPA) and Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) in 2006-07. In an evaluation conducted by the Education Department of Maharashtra, in 2005, a staggering number of 8 lakh students in 4th Standard could not read or write simple sentences. One of the key reasons for the low achievement of the students is irregularity of teachers and their poor accountability. The World Bank study by Kremer and Murlidharan 2004 showed 23% teacher absenteeism in India. Studies have also shown teacher’s lack of commitment and accountability specially in the remote and tribal areas in the country. The teachers have been supported under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) as never before. However, the 11th Plan’s concern that – teacher attendance, ability and motivation appears to be the weakest link of elementary education programme – remains true.

This needs to be addressed urgently as the entire edifice of quality centres around teachers and classroom learning methods. Under SSA a large number of teachers have been appointed by panchayats and local school Committees. Very often these teachers are local youths who belong to the village and have a good rapport with the community. Reports indicate that they are regular in their attendance and have been able to bring to schools children who have hitherto remained outside the school system. DISE data indicates that the qualification of these para teachers is quite comparable to that of regular teachers. When Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh convened the District Collectors Conference in 2005, many Collectors recommended that teachers should be appointed locally on contract. They are under supervision of the local community and perform better as they have been appointed by them. Another example is of Nagaland where by law, Village Education Committees have been given rights to disburse the pay of the teachers and deduct pay if they remain absent following the “no work no pay” principle. This has brought about greater accountability in teacher’s performance in that State. Recognising the need to improve school management and administration, the draft Right to Education Bill 2006, Section 20 stipulated that every school will have a School Management Committee (SMC), which will monitor the working of the school and ensure that teachers “of the school diligently perform the duties prescribed for them. To ensure accountability, it specified under Section 21, that all teachers in the State and in the fully aided schools shall be appointed for a specific school by the SMC making the teacher cadre to be school based. Existing teachers in such schools shall also be permanently assigned to a specific school in a phased manner. In most of the States teachers are either of the State cadre or are employees of Zila Parishads or Municipal Authorities.

Teachers’ postings remain a major hurdle in rationalisation. The SSA’s Project Board has urged the State Government repeatedly to rationalise teachers postings as per the requirement, especially of the schools in remote areas, but with little success. The entire system encourages the teachers to bring political pressure in getting posted to schools in bigger towns, and villages located on the State Transport routes. This results in schools in remote areas having either no teachers for long periods or teachers posted on paper but not attending. The rampant practice of proxy...
teachers, both in rural and urban areas, thus affects quality of education and only the students suffer. The local community has no responsibility for the activities at the school as the teachers are seldom from amongst them and are not accountable to them. The control on the teachers is distant, in the form of education inspector, who can not keep a watch on what happens in all the schools under his jurisdiction on a day-to-day basis, for obvious reasons. Recognising the lack of teachers’ accountability and the need for increased participation of local community in school's management as essential inputs for quality education, the Drafting Committee for the Bill devoted an entire Chapter on Schools and Teachers, proposing setting up of SMC of parents and locals, their role and responsibilities, duties of teachers and decentralisation of recruitment of teachers at the school level. These provisions have been diluted or deleted in the Bill introduced in the Rajya Sabha. This needs to be reviewed since once the Bill is cleared, an opportunity to bring accountability among teachers through legislation will be lost.

Secondary Education

Secondary education presents a greater challenge as there are huge gaps in access, equity and quality. At the commencement of 11th Plan, i.e., 2007, the population of the secondary school, in the age group 14-18, is estimated to be 9.29 crores in the country. (Report of Working group on Secondary and Vocational Education for 11th Plan). The gross enrolment ratio for Standards IX-X was 51 percent only. The all India average of the number of secondary schools per 100 sq. kilometre area is only four and in states like Bihar, UP, MP, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Rajasthan it is even lower than the national average. The gap between enrolment between boys and girls (of 44% as against 35%), of SC students at 34.55%, ST students of 27%, the lowest for ST girls of 21% shows the mammoth efforts that are required to achieve the 11th Plan goal of providing universal access to education to all children at the secondary stage. The Working Group set up by HRD Ministry for secondary education for the 11th Plan indicated huge shortfalls of schools, classrooms, teachers, ineffective teaching/learning processes, faulty evaluation and lack of monitoring. The Plan, therefore, aims to universalise access at secondary stage, ensure good quality education with focus on Science, Mathematics and English and major reduction in gender, social and regional disparities in enrolment and retention. Thus for the first time universalisation of secondary education has become a national agenda and there is specific Central sector planning and funding of secondary education in the country.

Private Participation in Secondary Education

In this sector private participation has gone up steadily from 15% in 1993 to nearly 60% in 2004-05. There is a general perception that privately managed schools provide better education, the management is effective in running schools efficiently and teachers perform better. The 11th Plan has recognised the role of private providers of quality education in the liberalised global economy by stating that their participation should not only be recognised but also encouraged. The Plan also indicated definite
schemes for opening of 2500 Model Schools with private sector participation. The scheme indicating the manner of the private sectors’ participation should be approved speedily to achieve the goal of opening of 2500 such schools. The private sector needs to be encouraged not only in setting up of new schools but in a host of other activities like teacher’s training, curriculum revision and development, setting up of science, maths, arts and crafts labs, evaluation and MIS. A transparent liberal regime needs to be put in place early to leverage financial and technical resources available in the private sector. While the government has to play the lead role and responsibility in achieving these goals, the private sector needs to be encouraged for not only achieving universal access but also for quality and vibrancy in education at the secondary stage.

**Action**

Parent’s perception about what type of education their wards should get continues to play a key role in enrolment and attendance of students in elementary and secondary schools in our country. Majority of girls drop out from secondary education due to family’s perception of the desirability of education, distance and cultural factors. A large number of them find education “useful” if their wards learn some skills in the schools. The huge popularity of the residential bridge courses started under SSA for upper primary girls had teaching of vocational skills as part of the daily timetable. This was a major attraction as they learnt a number of local crafts during their stay. During a visit to a Government Secondary school in 2004 in Chandigarh, I came across an interesting initiative taken by the school Principal. Her school was situated adjoining the slum basti near the Punjab University. Inspite of her best efforts and talking to parents, the students from the slum basti didn’t join the school. Most of them did begging on the trains during the day from Chandigarh to Kurukshetra, or were rag pickers or indulged in petty thefts. They had dug an opening below the boundary wall of the school and entered the premises along with their goats and pigs after the school was shut, using the ground for playing and grazing the cattle. After a number of unsuccessful attempts the principal decided to do a survey of the occupations followed by their parents. It was found that as the basti was near the university, a large number of them were engaged in making of file covers and book binding. As Himachal had banned use of plastic some of them made paper bags and sold to agencies working in Shimla. The others did usual trades of haircutting, pottery and rearing sheep and goats. The Principal identified the craftsmen from the basti, doing these trades, and invited them to teach their crafts at an honorarium of Rs. 2000 per month each. Then she held meetings with the parents and told them that the school will teach these skills to their children if they sent them to school daily. As the teachers were from amongst them, and as the students were going to learn crafts, they agreed. The school thus started receiving the local children who were taught only these skills for some time. After constant interaction with their parents, who were now convinced that their children were learning something useful, that the regular subjects were gradually started. The introduction to regular education was thus through the vocational route.
In our diverse social cultural situations we have to give adequate flexibility in curriculum and subjects at the secondary level for students to really benefit from schooling. There is a need to recognise that students can be drawn to education using different routes namely, vocational skills, sports, residential schools for girls with high content of vocational skills to draw vulnerable children and groups to learn and complete education up to secondary level. There is a need to introduce demand-driven vocational courses creating a diverse and wide range of skills for our youth. Programmes ranging from farming, artisan’s trades, crafts, service sector, marketing and accounting skills can be introduced at the school level in partnership with employers. There is a need to develop vocational courses of varying duration in partnership with employers who could provide trainers and give advice on curricula and participate in assessment and certification. As secondary education would be the end of formal education for a majority of our youth, a comprehensive, flexible need-based vocational programmes in partnership with local trade and industry should be developed; only then will we be able to create a mass of skilled youths who can help our country reap scientific and demographic dividend.

Reforms

Systemic reforms, both administrative and financial, are necessary. Financial releases for all students and teacher related schemes should be timely and not delayed. Administration should gear up so that provisions of supply of textbooks, writing materials, uniforms to every school should reach within the first week of opening of school session. Strengthening existing administrative and management structure is necessary for timely cadre planning, filling up of vacancies at State, Districts, State Council Educational Research and Training (SCERT), District Institute of Education Training (DIETs), BRCs and CRCs level. Studies need to be conducted to streamline procedures, bring transparency and timeliness in decisions at all levels. A suitable capacity building of all functionaries is urgently required for motivation and sharing with them the goals of decentralization and quality.

Higher & Technical Education

Due to rapid industrialization, the demand for Higher & Technical Education has increased manifold. The Asia Pacific region is witnessing an explosion in the demand for good quality Higher and Technical Education. As economic conditions have improved, people are enjoying better life-styles. There is a growing demand for better education from parents for children’s education, specially for University and Professional education. It is no longer simply a case of attending a University but taking degree from a reputed institution that assures a better career. In the past, such families built up savings in order to pass on the wealth to their children. Now they are increasingly using their resources to invest in children’s education.

In India, in 1951, there were only 32 Universities, 370 Colleges and the number of students going for higher education was 17 lakhs. There are now 335 Universities
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(215 State Universities, 20 Central and 100 Deemed Universities) with 17,625 colleges. The total number of students enrolled in the formal education system in these is 104.81 lakhs. India has one of the largest education systems and students from Higher and Technical Education have made valuable professional contribution in diverse areas of arts, commerce, science, engineering, medicine, IT and management. The Indian education system is fairly well coordinated and regulated. It is well spread and has many centers of excellence.

Foreign Cooperation in Higher Technical Education

Despite the impressive growth in the number of institutions of Higher and Technical Education after independence, the coverage is only 10% of youth in the age group 18 to 23. This is grossly inadequate compared to 50% in OECD countries. A substantial increase in this number is necessary. A large number of students from Asia and India study abroad resulting in spending of huge foreign exchange and resource outflow. To meet this challenge, many such developing countries are putting policies in place, governing entry of foreign education providers so that quality education is available within their own countries, which will also improve the domestic standard of education through competition. At the same time they are cautious that their traditional core education system is not subverted altogether.

From 1996 the Malaysian Government opened up its Higher Education sector for private participation. On account of this policy there are many private Universities as well as branch campuses of foreign Universities operating in Malaysia. Due to these initiatives the Higher Education sector has not only provided access to the local Malaysians but is also getting recognised internationally. As of December 2003 there were nearly 40,000 foreign students, mainly from developing countries, studying in Malaysian private institutions. In China, a formal legislation was promulgated in March 2003, to regulate and promote collaboration between Chinese Universities and their foreign counterparts; known as ‘Regulation of the People’s Republic of China, on Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools’. Foreign education providers are allowed only if they partner with Chinese institution with no less than half the members of the governing body being Chinese and the post of President to be mandatorily given to a Chinese citizen residing in China. The foreign partners have to use Chinese as language of instructions and to fix the tuition fees with the approval of the competent authority. These joint collaborations must not seek profit as their objective. The Chinese government, under its policy “To Support Learning Abroad, to Encourage Coming Back, Free Coming and Leaving,” encourages its students to study abroad. In 2003, nearly 117.3 thousand Chinese students were studying abroad, 93% among them on self-financed basis.

In India, the rising aspirations of the burgeoning middle class families for good quality education, is a major driver for sending students abroad. The competition is intensified because there are few reputed institutions and Universities in India with world class teaching and research facilities. In the 1981-90 decade, 3.6% of the total emigration to the United States was Indian; 13.4% of professional highly skilled migrants
were Indians. In 1990 there was a significant movement of Indian software professionals to the US, UK, Canada, Germany, Australia, Singapore and some Western European Nations.

The Indian Government encourages education exchange programmes with a number of countries in the form of student and faculty exchange, research collaboration and opening of Centres of Studies or University Chairs. FDI is allowed without ceiling in Education. 131 foreign institutions have so far entered into collaboration with Indian counterparts. The AICTE have also formulated guidelines laying down procedures for such participation. UGC is also engaged in drafting an appropriate legislation for regulation of foreign institutions. The availability of a potent instrument like the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) for international trade in educational services can only accentuate this trend. Traditionally, Indians consider acquisition of knowledge a noble goal. The changing world scenario, with the century being described as a knowledge century, countries with the largest human capital will be the leaders of nations. The developing countries in this region are also opening this sector to provide greater access and education of international quality to students in their own countries. We can take advantage of GATS negotiations on trade in educational-services consistent with our values and policies.

**Financial Health**

The financial health of a Higher & Technical system is a cause of great concern. As far back as 1964, the Kothari Commission had recommended increase in provision for education to at least 6% of the GDP. But 40 years later, India still spends only 3.58% of its GDP on education sector. Out of this, hardly 0.4% is spent on Higher Education and 0.1% on Technical Education.

India spends much less ‘per student’ than other countries. Our expenditure per student is $ 406, as compared to that of China’s – $ 2728, Brazil’s – $ 3986, Indonesia’s – $ 666 and Malaysia’s – $ 625.

Paucity of adequate financial resources has severely impacted the physical infrastructure. There is a great shortage of buildings, classrooms, libraries, laboratories and also of funds to meet the recurring maintenance costs. Lack of funds has also compelled many States to impose ban on teachers’ recruitment. Ad-hoc contractual appointment of critical staff has had a very adverse effect on the quality of learning. An incidental benefit of the falling quality of Government institutions has been the increased participation by the private sector, especially in the Technical, Medical and Professional education. There is a strong case for increased Government spending in this sector.

**Equity**

As regards equity, there has been some improvement in the enrolment of students belonging to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Women. During the
period 1990-91 to 2002-03 this has increased from 8.6% to 11.3%, 2.1% to 3.6%, and 33.8% to 40.1% respectively. There is a need for concerted efforts to increase the enrolment of Scheduled caste and Scheduled Tribes students as their participation ratios are below the corresponding ratios of SC and ST population in the total population of our country. The proportion of population with Higher Education rises sharply in households with higher economic status both in rural and urban areas. Only 16 out of every 1,000 persons in rural areas are college graduates or post graduates in contrast to 112 out of every 1000 population in urban areas. It is disconcerting to note that there is a steep decline in the budgets for scholarships in Higher Education; from 0.49% and 0.45% in 1990-91 to 0.18% and 0.28% in Higher and Technical Education respectively. Pro-active measures are necessary to attract students from the disadvantaged groups into the main stream of Higher Education by developing well-designed and consistent remedial support both at academic and financial levels. The UGC scheme of remedial coaching for students belonging to SC/ST should be up-scaled. Its present coverage to 5 Universities and 113 colleges is far from adequate.

Quality

The UGC has been entrusted with the task of maintaining standards in Higher Education. In keeping with these objectives, it has formulated guidelines and regulations prescribing essential qualifications for the appointment of lecturers, readers and professors. It has also developed Model curricula through Curriculum Development Centres and established 51 academic Staff Colleges in various Universities for faculty up-gradation. It has also stipulated the passing of National Eligibility Test as the essential qualification for being a lecturer in any College/University in the country. However, there are a large number of teachers and lecturers who do not possess the qualifications prescribed by the UGC. In the emerging technology areas and in the Technical and Professional institutions there is a serious shortage of qualified teachers. There is also a problem faced by the Universities in attracting the best talent in teaching on account of relative low social esteem for the teaching profession in relation to other lucrative positions in industry or civil services. In short, the eligibility conditions laid down by the UGC for teachers must be strictly adhered to, despite the administrative inconvenience and unpopularity of enforcing the corrective measures. This will improve the quality of teaching as also the esteem for the profession.

The assessment and evaluation system in our country suffers from serious ailments, especially at the under-graduate level. Cases of mass copying, paper leakages, nexus of coaching classes with examination boards have become common. In most Indian Universities, evaluations are done on the basis of an annual essay-type examination, which encourages learning by rote with little scope for enquiry and analysis. Semester system and continuous evaluation was introduced. However, it has largely been rejected by most Universities, giving a set-back to reform. For improving acceptance of our students globally, this area requires immediate attention and reforms.
By and large, our Higher and Technical Education is rigid and the course content out of date. While the developed countries have long back taken to multi-disciplinary options for courses and subjects, in India its merits are still being debated. In most Universities student’s options are restricted to pre-defined group of subjects. The syllabus often reflects what teachers can teach, rather than what is required. Urgent reforms are needed to enable the domestic sector to compete effectively in a competitive environment. The cafeteria type credit system must be introduced with the facility of transfer of credit from one University to another. Universities should be opened to establish equivalence of different subjects and standards so that students have the facility of transfer from one University to another. This will allow the students to choose the best available relevant courses at different institutions and Universities. UGC, AICTE, Medical Council and State Universities will have to play a pro-active time-bound role to effect these reforms.

Students unions have multiplied and flourished in University campuses. The worst examples are in the northern Universities where elections bring academic activity to a stand still for long periods. Some Universities function for hardly 120 days in a year. Campuses have become hotbeds of politics, crime and corruption. Multiplicity of Unions for different categories like students, teachers, non teaching staff, technical staff and the like have made them a full fledged careers and occupation for student leaders with links to local District, State and sometimes National political parties. There is a quid-pro-quo in this, where the Student union provides the local politician manpower during his election, in return for money and political backing for the student union leader for his activities. Many students find this a rewarding career. Strikes are resorted to, for the flimsiest reasons. Sympathetic strikes are common. Student politicians continue to be on the roles of Universities for many years.

**Road Map**

Development of Higher and Technical Education accelerates economic development. In a population of one million only 10% of India’s population in the relevant age group of 18-23 has access to Higher and Technical Education institutions. There is a need to open more colleges and institutions. In Higher and technical Education, our country’s top priority should be to achieve the highest standards in the world. There should be no compromise on this. The State should support this with as high a budgetary allocation as feasible for a developing country with competing demands on scarce resources. The balance of resources must then, come from the private sector or from foreign institutions and service providers. The competition it will generate will improve standards all round. Government can devise appropriate liberal schemes of loan and scholarship for the economically and socially disadvantaged students so that they can participate in the institutions set up by foreign education providers and private sector to get their fair share in development.
It is widely accepted that progress in this century will be driven by knowledge. To meet the challenges of the 21st century, India needs to usher in a knowledge-revolution that is inclusive and accountable to the Nation’s aspirations. Reforms in the education system from primary education to higher and technical are sine qua non for meeting the challenges posed by demography, disparity and development.

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