Education in India

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1. Introduction

After WW II, the great clash between the concepts of a largely private market based world, and a world of centrist socialism seemed to have been won by the forces of State Socialism in a variety of forms from the total absolute centrist dictatorship in the Soviet Union and China to more moderate versions such as those in Sweden, France, Italy or India.

The leadership in both China and India both believed that centrist authority and control was vital in managing their vast, chaotic countries, and both felt that this centrist control should be exercised by a small self chosen elite. In China, that elite took the form of a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) dictatorship under Mao Zedong, who could only see the world in terms of enormous revolutionary conflict.

In India, the elite were more benign and not as militant. Power was held as a matter of "right" by a combination of Socialist theorists and economists and high caste Brahmins who never doubted their own correctness. [1] This elitism led to a set of negative attitudes about the education of the masses, some of which still persist. First, starting with the period of British rule, education of any kind was simply not seen as a role of governments, except possibly at the lowest levels, and this attitude was shared by the British themselves and by the senior figures in Indian government and society.

This attitude manifested itself in the design of the national education system that emerged after independence. To begin with, India operates the biggest education system in the world with 740,000 schools, five million teachers and over 200 million children aged 6-14, most of whom live in rural/village areas. But the fundamental reality is that the government's indifference and neglect represents a major failure of governance in modern day India. The political leadership at the national government level was skilled at avoiding its responsibility, handing it off to local governments knowing full well that these governments were not able to handle it. The national government starved the system of funds, played destructive politics, and tolerated bumbling incompetent school management, and inferior performance in the classroom. Most positions of power and influence were held by upper caste Brahmins who strongly felt that even elementary education for "lower castes" was a waste; that education was a privilege to be reserved for certain elite groups; that even mid level castes needed only very basic education; that education for girls was outrageous; and that the possibility of lower castes learning to read sacred texts was sacrilegious.

One of the most significant policy decisions made by Nehru was to delegate responsibility for elementary and secondary education to India's 28 States and 7 Union territories. There is nothing really wrong with such a delegation, but the decision was largely based on some perverse motives. First, it appears that the national government was really signaling its complete indifference to primary education; the delegation to the States was with the full recognition that almost all were relatively poor and could ill afford, without central government help, the costs of educating what is now over 200 million children. It was also certain that this devolution of authority was bound to result in wide disparities in the quality of education. But the national government really did not care. A second motive exactly parallels the decisions made in China: by delegating responsibility for education and other vital social services, the central government avoided huge costs, which allowed it to concentrate available money on economic development, and the military.

The two giants of post-independence India – Gandhi and Nehru –opposed widespread formal education, but for different reasons. Gandhi felt that educating the people's children was a good thing, but that it should be confined to basic things such as crafts and practical skills for the boys and child rearing and household skills for girls. Nehru typified the elitist, class biased interpretation of the government's responsibilities for education, which meant that formal education would be largely reserved for a relatively small elite, mostly the sons (but not the daughters) of senior government officials, military officers, high caste Brahmins, and influential political figures.

For this elite group, nothing was too good. Their elementary/secondary schools were first class, with handsome buildings and often amenities including swimming pools, tennis courts and cricket fields. Meanwhile, within walking distance were crowded slums where schools for the urban poor were conducted in rickety buildings lacking toilets, running water and even books and blackboards. The children of the elite were often sent away at government expense to Great Britain and elsewhere for advanced degrees in economics, political science, science and engineering, and military training, all very much in the patterns employed by the British in the Victorian era and up to WW II.

As with China and the Soviet Union, state socialism was the perfect justification for elite centrist control; the masses would be wisely led, and all they needed to understand that they were to do as they were told. India's political leadership were high caste Brahmins, and they drew their political support largely from the higher caste large land owners, merchants and the military. This caste elitism was especially strong in rural/village areas where it was linked with the landed gentry, most of whom sought preferment for their own children, but were not about to pay for the education of the children of the poor. [2]

This Brahmin elitism was blended in with several other prejudices, the strongest of which was and is against the

education of girls. It seems simply never to have been accepted by the ruling elite that girls were capable of serious intellectual attainment, or that almost half of the talent base of the country was being neglected. Despite repeated earnest and pompous policy utterances to the contrary, even in periods when India had a woman Prime Minister, it was still true that less than one third of Indian girls ever got into any kind of school.

India remains an absolutely incomprehensible puzzle of religious, cultural, regional, social, economic, and language differences, posing formidable barriers to acceptable progress in the reform of an adequate education system. For example, classes may be taught and books provided in local languages rather than English or Hindi. This may satisfy some narrow cultural or political need, but it leaves children who are unable to connect with the greater world outside of their own region.

What has finally emerged from this pattern of neglect and indifference is a school system that has the following major components:

1. Public schools
2. Private schools: but publicly aided
3. Private schools: recognized, but not aided
4. Private schools: unrecognized.

The abdications of the Indian government are never clearer than in this arena of primary education. The government is famous for its skill at issuing pompous, overblown plans and policy pronouncements which never seem to be taken seriously, and lead to little action. Time after time, the central government has issued national "Plans" to achieve universal elementary education. The first such scheme was issued at the time of the new Constitution in 1950. The Constitution did not mandate universal education but merely "urged" it. Initial Plans targeted the achievement of universal education by 1959. No comprehensive government policy was even published until 1984, and again it was merely rhetoric. Another National Policy on Education was drafted in 1986, along with "Operation Blackboard" which was supposed to be an implementation plan. The National Policy was revised in 1992, again stating goals for free mandatory elementary education, but none of this had any real impact. In 1998, the National Council of Education Research and Training issued another "National Policy on Education" which appeared to make elementary and secondary education a shared responsibility between the national government and the States, but in fact officially got the national government out from under this responsibility except for "plans". Again, in 2000 the government issued its "Education for All" program, but it simply repeated the rhetoric of earlier pronouncements. In 2001, the government again emphasized its intent to "universalize primary education by 2007", and also supposedly mandated a hot lunch for every Indian school child, but 2007 has obviously come and gone and neither of these goals is even close to achievement, and almost nowhere in India is universal primary education a reality.

In 2005, the government again issued a directive requiring States to implement the "Right to Free Compulsory Education". Finally, as recently as 2009, a new law was enacted mandating compulsory, universal free education. But this civil rights approach is political rhetoric covering 60 years of hypocritical inaction. In India, elementary/secondary education is definitely not universal, certainly not free, and many doubt that much of it is even education. When this litany of political posturing and abdication is understood, one begins to recognize the profound failure of primary education in India. Consider that, of those children who reach the 5th grade, an unbelievable 1/3 of them are still unable to read or write. In rural areas, only about 5% of parents can even read their children's report cards. [3]

But here were the roles which the national government assigned itself:

1. To develop a national policy (supposedly compulsory, but largely ignored)
2. To provide consultation about education
3. To establish necessary commissions, committees and working groups
4. To stimulate and promote public debate and discussion

This is the perfect expression of the Indian education elite; highly sophisticated and intellectual, lots of discussion, but no money, no action, and little actual help. The national level of funding for primary/secondary education at all levels of government is just 3.9% of GDP, although some estimates are lower. Funds for secondary education are a disturbing .94%. These are very low by world standards even for poor developing countries. At least 25% of secondary schools are private, and all too many are really one room operations, and many are not very effective either.

2. Local government shortcomings

Local governments deserve some sympathy because the national government has abdicated any responsibility and left local governments holding the bag, but in truth, elementary/secondary education is most logically a responsibility of local governments. They simply have had great difficulty bearing this burden, and they have not done it well. Primary education, for whatever reason, is perennially under funded. Despite the existence of 740,000 schools, there are constant complaints that they are too few and poorly distributed. The national government "promises" to raise the expenditure on primary education from the current 3.3% to 6%, but nobody at the local government levels expects the central government to come up with the money, and they have no idea how local funding can be generated. In fact, local governments get by only because they charge heavy fees and related expenses. Many rural/village families are so poor that they can't afford to pay for these fees, and the slum population in cities is more than 60 million and mostly extremely poor. [4]

The rise of private school education is a powerful reflection of the universal failure of pubic schools, which are so bad that even the poorest of parents give up on them and somehow find the money to send their children to the more expensive private schools. Even recognizing that India has been and remains a poor developing country, had there been the will, the funding for adequate schools could have

been found. The national government need not have abdicated its responsibilities and dumped the full costs of elementary and secondary education on the States as huge unfunded mandates, and this includes the serious failure of the seven thousand vocational education institutions which are nearly all part of the public sector system.

Local governments must also cope with heavy cultural bias. Upper castes tend to think that it is perfectly acceptable for the very yound children of the poor to work, and that it is equally acceptable for the privileged classes to design for themselves a rich and highly subsidized system of education. While child labor is now, finally, officially illegal, huge exceptions are allowed for work in agriculture, family households, restaurants, and so called cottage industries. In other cases, the laws mandating compulsory elementary and secondary education are simply ignored. This helps to explain why, despite such laws, almost 50% of all children are not in school. There is a big slippage between "student enrollment" and "student attendance."

Another serious problem relates to the power of teacher unions in India. The Indian Constitution provides for a special representation of teachers in the upper houses of Indian State legislatures. The unions take great advantage of this preferment and have exerted what seems to be an unwarranted degree of leverage on laws and policies. No local politician or school administrator can afford to cross these unions. If teachers want to be truant, their absence is "excused". Teacher strikes and agitations over pay, benefits and working conditions are almost always successful. Many teachers are absent from classes, but can be found offering "special tutoring" after hours to their students – for an extra fee.

Finally, while political leaders in New Delhi call for reform, most of the forces in and around local governments and school systems oppose reform. The unions are implacably opposed to any reform anywhere in the whole miserable system, and their political sponsors enforce that opposition. Other local politicians sit on the sidelines, fearing conflict. School administrators oppose reform because they profit from the present system which is notorious for its corruption and venality. Only local parents and concerned citizens support reform, but they are generally ignored. "General condemnation of the school system supports two generally accepted assessments of what is wrong. First, surveys of actual parent attitudes reflect widespread recognition of the need for education, even for girls, rather than indifference or opposition. Second, work is not a barrier; most children may help with the crops at times, but they have plenty of time for education. [5] But a World Bank study states that, in 60 years there has been almost no change in the demographics of rich vs. poor, urban vs. rural, or minority vs. non-minority rates. According to Nussbaum, general opinions of Indian public education are that it is an unrelieved disaster. [6]

In short, local governments have been overwhelmed by the complex problems of primary education, and have not performed well. The usual reason is quite legitimately a shortage of money, but many places have succeeded in making more progress in their economic development, showing that failure to improve primary education stems not from lack of money, but from the failures of public management. The official and almost unanimous opinion of government leaders is that the problems of elementary education are financial. Almost every outside analysis disagrees with this view and sees it as a feeble excuse for government failure. A lot could be accomplished relatively cheaply by better management – and being smart!

3. The failures of school administration

There are about 740 thousand schools and five million teachers, and generally their reputation is unbelievably bad. Administration in public schools suffers from gross inefficiency, an intensely bureaucratic mind set, timidity, cowardice and corruption. There are too many administrators and two few actual teachers. Local politicians and school administrators have never been able to generate adequate funds for school systems. While the Constitution supposedly makes free education a right, poor families must pay fees that are a real drain on their resources. For the average agricultural laborer, sending two children to primary school would cost the equal of 2-3 months wages. And outrageously, a lot of the money that is provided is squandered, stolen or misappropriated. Teacher appointments are sold to the highest bidder with little regard for qualifications. Politicians intercept funds destined for schools and reallocate them or cause them to disappear. Administrators supposedly hire contractors to make badly needed school repairs, but the work is never done and the money vanishes. Everybody knows what is going on, but nobody official seems to care.

Money for basic education actually began to increase in the mid 80s, but most of the money has gone for higher teacher salaries and benefits. Yet the numbers of teachers in classrooms has declined, classes are larger, and performance remains drastically bad. Today, almost 90% of school budgets go for teacher/administrator salaries and benefits, so that even if more money is provided it simply enriches the people who make the system so bad. And still, repeated surveys and opinion polls say the same thing: most classes are practically useless. And still, overall, 50% of children are not in school, and after more than 60 years of independence, only 17% of the current adult population has any secondary education. Whole large segments of student population are almost completely ignored including girls, members of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, remote rural areas, and urban slums filled with "invisible" children A UNESCO index recently ranked India 102 out of 129 countries on the extent, gender balance, and quality of its primary education and adult literacy. [7]

Teachers have been known to collect their salaries and then pay some local substitute to show up in their place, so that they can be marked "present". The rate of teacher absenteeism and truancy is absolutely astounding. Repeated school samplings, even by school administrators themselves, have shown that, on any given day, as many as from 25% to 65% of the teachers were absent. This level of truancy, according to the UN, is the highest measured anywhere in the world. It is inconceivable how any school ad-

ministration could be so pitifully incompetent as to allow this truancy to persist year after year. School inspectors, who cannot fail to know about these problems, are famous for their ability to solicit bribes. How is this appalling mismanagement even possible? Does no one ever check why teachers are truants? Are none of them ever held to account? Is anybody ever fired?

Administrators often lie about the numbers of children enrolled because some funds are based on the size of that number. But in reality, there is a big difference between "enrollment" and "attendance". Many children have really dropped out and are studying in some local private school, but remain illegally carried on public school roles. Administrators even managed to foul up the good idea of free lunches, which was introduced with much bragging in 1995, but allowed to wither. In most districts, cooked meals never happened, and even the substitute of food grain rations never materialized. As one official put it "a good example of how a well-intentioned program degenerates into a farce due to bureaucratic apathy and corruption."

In an article in India Today [8] another government phony policy was lambasted. Operation Blackboard (1986) officially abolished single teacher schools. But in a recent survey, 12% of all primary schools still had a single teacher appointed. In another 21%, more than one teacher had been appointed, but only one was present and teaching. Thus, 1/3 of schools effectively were still one teacher, and 80% of all schools offer only primary grades. Nor is there much teaching actually going on in the majority of schools. The favored technique seems to be rote learning, achieved by student copying of written or blackboard material. But the survey team found "notebook after notebook filled with meaningless scribble."

More forms of incompetence can be found in course content. [9] Classes are often judged to be so simplistic and obsolete that they are all but useless. More than 70% of students live in India's 680,000 villages, and many children cannot even reach a school. Books are old, poorly written or non-existent, and many are in regional languages of limited usefulness. They are supposedly selected by professional standards groups, but they are widely regarded as inferior: dull, inaccurate, obsolete, full of mistakes and of no practical value. Even where better texts are available, often the money to buy them is not. Teachers lack subject matter knowledge, and are weak on teaching technique. In a survey in one State, only 30% of children ages 6-14 could read textual material easily, nor could they do basic simple arithmetic. According to Panagaria, "only 6.6% of students in the first grade can read at level one (short paragraphs with small sentences and simple words). 8.3% of second grade students can read at level 2 ("story" text with some long sentences, still simple words). At the 5th grade level, just 53% can read at level 2 and a further 28.1% can read at level 1. But this means that 19% of students really cannot read at all! If it is recognized that level one is still seen as illiteracy, then 47.1% of children in the 5th grade are functional illiterates. In fact, surveys, even those conducted by school administrations, show that, in primary schools, 40 million children can't even recognize or explain the alphabet, and 30 million students at the 5th grade level cannot read. [10]

In sum, the elementary/secondary school system is a national disgrace, and has been forever. The elite leadership of the country badly underestimated the number of reasonably educated people needed to run a modern economy, so for 60 years they felt that basic education could be safely ignored. While illiteracy has been greatly reduced, somehow it seems never to have sunk in that to be "literate" is not the same as to be educated. India's new laws still aim merely at universal primary education, and still, most children can't make it through the 5th grade. Even less is being done for secondary education, which is the portal to higher education. While India targets for education through the 8th grade, most of the developed world is thinking in terms of master's degrees. Other developing countries, many in the Far East like Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines have achieved universal primary education, and China is very close.

The first and most valuable substitute for bad public schools has become private schools, and they have been taking students away from public schools in large numbers. But less than 30% of rural students have access to private schools, even if their parents have the money. In general, private schools pay their teachers much less (maybe 1/5), but their teacher/student ratios are smaller, and absenteeism is much less. When unannounced visits are conducted, 70% of teachers in private schools were teaching, compared to 38% in public schools. "On average, students in unrecognized private schools scored 72% higher than their counterparts in government schools in mathematics, 83% higher in Hindi, and 246% higher in English. Students in recognized private schools did even better. Private schools tend to replace public schools in rural and poor urban areas. In richer city areas, public schools are better, and private schools usually can't compete financially.

A lot of hope for an educational resurrection is being placed on two tides running in the country. The first is the obvious high degree of success that has followed the retreat of the government from state socialist economics and the license Raj. The political leadership is finally realizing that the surge of economic expansion demands a far broader base of young people educated at least through 12 grades. One of the real success patterns for the government has been that they have produced some really outstanding enhancements in higher education. India is no longer trying to duplicate Oxford or Cambridge, or even the London School of Economics. Instead, they want to replicate MIT or Cal Tech, or the Imperial Institute in London. The twelve Indian Institutes of Technology, the seven Institutes of Management, the four Institutes of Information Technology and the Institute of Science produce outstanding graduates, and these institutions were initiated and nurtured by the government. Clearly, the national government, while ignoring primary education, wants to be seen as the patron of higher education.

The second hopeful tide that is running is that, as the private sector becomes more broadly based, sophisticated

and technological, it tends to do two things: to pressure governments at all levels to reform education; and to provide their own support for education. Education in India now often means private sources providing a broad range of technical and managerial training, and a lot of "how to do it" training programs for everything from computers and office management to motivational sales programs. In many cases, parents have filled the gap toward eligibility for university with years of private tutoring, often by the same teachers in the public school system who can't be bothered to show up for their regular jobs. India's new middle class is well educated and is expected to force change on the laggard government. Both caste and gender prejudices have been carried over into the new private sector world, where high caste males have an edge, but these prejudices are much weaker there. The Indian Administrative Service and the state owned enterprises are no longer the favored path to success. Where do the smartest kids want to work? In private sector jobs with large international corporations.

4. Indian higher education

According to Nilekani, "At first, Indian universities were designed to create a small pool of aristocratic, English educated people who were destined for the civil service and state owned enterprises. The education was based on the classics of English, Greek, Latin, Euro-centric history, and the ratification of the mores of the ruling class. There was very little interest in training people to think; there was an undesirable emphasis on conformity which led to crammers and "swotting". Indian universities were intended to be free of politics, but a landmark decision in 1990 established caste reservations and quotas in universities and in government. This precipitated a highly politicized clash about the role of universities and sensitized whole new types of politicians to university issues so that now political intervention ranges across all university activities. Two key questions are being debated: first, to what extent should universities be expected to reflect or even represent the agenda of the government? And second, what is the top priority: social justice as defined by the government or merit and independence of choice?" [11]

India in 2006 had 17,625 colleges and 335 universities, with 10.5 million students, but all of these numbers are misleading. India has many outstanding universities and colleges – but the great bulk of institutions are inferior and poorly regarded. India produces many brilliant students, they are the product of a limited number or really high quality institutions, and the great bulk of degrees from all other schools are of little value. (Apparently, most colleges are the sub elements of universities, and few are free standing institutions.). Essentially, the market ignores the vast majority of the graduates that the system produces. It knows that students who are in the top quarter of the class can excel. But the degree has very little value for the bottom half of the students. [12]

The controlling body in the country is the University Grants Commission (UGC) established formally by law in 1956, and exercising almost total control over all schools of higher education. But in the early 50s, India had just 578 colleges and 28 universities, with perhaps 200,000 students. At that time, a single central control commission may have made good sense, but the system is now so huge that centrist control is wrong. If a school is not approved by the UGC, it can't grant a degree; this includes the prestigious Indian Institutes of Technology, Management, and Information Technology, and many other very competent management institutes of other kinds. The UGC is seen as unable to keep up with rapid changes in subject matter or innovations in teaching, especially in IT. It is also seen as bureaucratically slow paced. Therefore, the quality of education in far too many schools is seen as "rapidly deteriorating", with high teacher and student absenteeism. Students never know whether the professor will bother to show up; faculty never know how many students will attend.

"There are currently 150,000 Indian students studying in the United States, Canada, the UK and Australia, spending close to $2 billion. In comparison, the entire annual expense of the central and state governments on higher education in India in 2003-04 was $3.7 billion. This is a damning statement about the perceived value found in Indian classrooms.

The government continues to want all universities to be State institutions, and recently it adopted the "centers of excellence" idea to upgrade a limited number of universities – while ignoring the rest. In other words, by concentrating on a few schools, the government could claim success and avoid facing up to a serious reexamination of the whole higher education system.

The UGC can "deem" some private schools to be universities for the purpose of granting degrees, but it seldom does so, and it regulates private universities as stringently as it does public. No school of any kind had autonomy until the passage of the National Education Policy (NEP) in 1986 and revised in 1991. At that time 8 were granted autonomy. By 2006, there were still only 214 autonomous colleges, as part of 47 universities. The UGC was also supposed to exercise a "quality control" function, but it was not until 1994 that an accreditation body, The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) was established. By 2005, it had accredited only 105 universities and 2311 colleges. But the UGC decided that accreditation would have no value for funding priorities, salaries, or other recognitions, so it is essentially meaningless.

The single most important positive feature of the higher education sector in recent years has been the rapid growth of private colleges and non degree postsecondary educational institutions. More universities are also being chartered by States and even municipalities. These schools are divided between "aided" and "unaided". The aided schools receive financial aid from governments, but this makes them subject to regulatory control. The unaided schools are completely independent, and they now attract more than 30% of all students, and it is argued that in fact, India really has de facto privatization. The children of the new middle class now have the money to vote with their feet and they have been moving away from government schools

to private schools, especially in science, engineering, business and the other skills of the new economy. But a big fear is that these private schools have, to date, been too often developed by people who are after the fast buck. Two thirds of them have been evaluated as below par, and one third cannot achieve accreditation. Meanwhile, more than 150,000 students still study abroad.

The whole issue of privatization of universities is still serious. Political leadership continues staunchly to defend socialist ideals for public education, but the emergence of private universities/colleges is very much a reflection of the failure of this socialist policy. India has yet to figure out how to match the record of the US, where there are top quality schools in both the public and the private sector. India needs a major change in philosophy; it must finally shed the vestiges of its socialist past and embrace the concept that private institutions are a good thing and that the government should encourage them by liberating them. The Chinese second revolution has involved the abandonment of many policies that were considered sacred theology under the Communists. Why can't India make the same kind of change? The answer seems to be the implacable resistance of vested interests. Political leadership continues staunchly to defend socialist ideals. But no Indian university can be found in the top 400 of the world. One study found that 75% of graduates were unemployable for the work for which they were supposedly trained, and there is a related serious failure of the seven thousand vocational education institutions, which are nearly all part of the public sector system.

Money need not be such a fatal problem. While it will take lots of time, private universities in the US and elsewhere have augmented their revenues beyond what governments provide by higher fees, the development of large endowments, and the proceeds of research and contracting. Nor is it necessary that all 348 universities and 12,296 colleges survive. If they are of low quality, they should go under, and the students moved to augment the attendance and revenues of the survivors. Other income might come from charitable contributions, grants from industry, sales of publications, or rents. In fact, public universities in India are suffering from the same syndrome that influences universities elsewhere: governments have proven politically unreliable sources of long term funding. They demand control, but won't pay the tab.

Footnotes

1. Das, Gurcheran, "India Unbound", p. 98. New York, Anchor Books, 2002.
2. World Policy Journal, Spring, 2007.
3. Panagariya, Arvind, "India the Emerging Giant", pp. 432-441. Oxford University Press, 2008. See also Nilekani, Nandan, "Imagining India", pp. 172-194. New York, Penguin Press, 2009.
4. Nussbaum , Martha, C., "The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence, and India's Future", Harvard University Press, 2007.
5. India Today, October 13, 1997.
6. See references in #3 above.
7. UNESCO, Institute for Statistics, 2008.
8. India Today, October 13, 1997.
9. . Nussbaum , Martha, C., "The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence, and India's Future", pp. 264-272. Harvard University Press, 2007.
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