

Waiting for India's Education Revolution

Manu Sundaram suggests some definitive policy changes that will bolster education in India

The past decade has witnessed policy initiatives and political interest that have rejuvenated the education sector in India. Lofty rhetoric of earlier politicians being replaced with action plans; and hollow promises substituted with time-bound strategies. In many ways, the new year will be an indication of the long-term development inclinations of the present political establishment.

Now is the opportune moment to pause and reflect on the ground covered by policies of the past, and deliberate on the directions for the future. However, this alone will not suffice. Like the Green Revolution and White Revolutions soon after independence, the country needs to urgently review its approach to education if it wants to satisfy the growing demands of a literate population competing in the global market. Innovative, far-sighted and bold approaches that will revolutionise Indian education are the need of the hour.

This article hopes to explore innovative mechanisms and path-breaking practices that could usher in an education revolution. It also attempts to take stock of major challenges to India's education and identify definitive policies that will bolster education on the pillars of accountability, access, and quality. For the sake of simplicity, the entire education sector is divided into three: Primary (up to Class 5), Secondary Education (Class 6 to Class 12), and Tertiary (Diplomas and Degrees after Class 12).

Primary education

The country's primary education

Run a nationwide information awareness campaign for illiterate parents on what the minimum learning levels should be for different class levels, so they can demand better education for their children



policies are largely determined by the Constitution of India and the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDG). The Eighty-sixth Constitutional Amendment (2002) directs the governments - both, union and state - to provide free and compulsory education to all children between ages 6 and 14 years. Clause 2 of MDG (2000) requires nations to "ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling". Keeping this in mind, past Indian governments have conceived programmes and schemes such as Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (SSA) with the aim of achieving universal primary education. The recently passed Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (Right to Education) Act, which is currently awaiting notification by the union government, promises to go

one step further and make primary education the fundamental right of every child.

Every year, the union government allocates nearly Rs 30,000 crore for SSA and these funds are matched by the state governments. In spite of such vast resources being coordinated by both governments, there are still very low levels of learning in primary schools across the country. The Annual Status of Education Report, published by Pratham (an NGO that works to provide quality education to underprivileged children), reveals that more than 50 per cent of students in Class 5 are unable to perform reading and arithmetic tasks that are expected of children at the Class 2 level. While traditional government policies have responded by mandating the building of more government schools, hiking teacher salaries, and raising minimum teacher qualifications, they have failed to come up with innovative means to ensure student learning. Here are two policy ideas that will bring 'learning achievements' to the centre of the discourse on Primary Education:

- Run a nationwide information awareness campaign on what the minimum learning levels should be for different class levels. A major hurdle for illiterate parents in holding schools accountable for what their children's education should include is their lack of knowledge of what minimum learning achievements need to be. A targeted awareness campaign will inform unschooled parents of the levels of learning in reading, writing, and arithmetic that their children should achieve in each year of school. This will make it easier for parents

to demand minimum standards of education from their neighbourhood schools.

● **Review regulations** in the education sector to encourage more private schools to serve the poor. The present legislation requires, among other things, an area of 1000 square metres for a primary school, stipulated spaces for playgrounds, and pay parity between private and government teachers. Despite such unreasonable regulations, many private schools catering exclusively to poor children have come up in slums and economically weaker regions. Such schools do not gain recognition status from local government authorities, but continue to function at the mercy of corrupt education officials. The Right to Education Act, instead of finding ways to include unrecognised schools and universalise education, threatens harsh penalties for such schools. The students benefiting from such schools are from the most disadvantaged sections of the society and their parents have exited the government school in search of better education. Keeping this in mind, all outdated regulations must be reviewed and replaced to incentivise more 'edupreneurs' to open schools in underserved areas in the country.

Secondary education

In India, the highest number of dropouts of school children occurs in the transition from the primary to the secondary level of education. While the major concern in Primary Education is that of accountability, Secondary Education suffers from low access. In other words, there are not enough secondary schools to accommodate students. Two significant policy directions have been noticed to rectify this situation: First, the government is considering the Rashtriya Madhyamik Siksha Abhiyan (RMSA) along the lines of SSA, and second, the Union Minister for Human Resource Development Kapil Sibal's 100-day agenda included the setting up of 6,000 model schools across the country. Unfortunately, financial constraints and stakeholder disagreements have resulted in resigning both these ini-

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tiatives to the drawing board for the moment.

Here are two policy reforms that are suggested for the government to move forward from its self-inflicted stalemate:

● **Incentivise investment and allow for-profit schools.** The government must make education an attractive investment for the private sector. For long, the education sector has been heavily regulated and schools can only be run by charities and non-profit trusts. As a consequence, the education sector faces severe restrictions in investing and transferring finances. By providing education with an industry status, the government will be able to attract investment and allow private organisations to set up schools. Moreover, a 'for-profit model' incentivises schools to develop their educational services and sell these services to other schools and the government. Such a system is in place in Sweden, which has one of the most highly developed education systems in the world.

● **Design a policy framework for Corporate Involvement.** The corporate sector has immense resources and expertise which may be tapped to improve teaching and learning standards of government schools. In order to encourage such Corporate Social Responsibility efforts, the government must set up a framework that will enable private organisations to participate in, and enhance, government education provided to disadvantaged

students. The role of the local government authorities will then be to identify the requirements (such as teacher trainings, infrastructural needs, and educational tours are some of them) of the schools in their respective neighbourhoods. These requirements could then be publicised to interested private organisations that may assist the school in these areas.

Tertiary education

Tertiary Education has been the most neglected of all the education spheres in India. Tertiary education includes vocational training diplomas, college / undergraduate degrees, and research doctorates. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER, which indicates the proportion of young people enrolled in education) for Tertiary Education in the country is around 12. In comparison, advanced countries (such as members of the European Union) have a GER of 70; whereas China has a GER of 30; and the average for developing countries is 25. Further, none of the Indian universities (including the Indian Institutes of Technology and the Indian Institutes of Management) feature in the Top 50 of global university rankings, such as the renowned Times Supplement Survey, indicating that there is a problem of quality over that of access.

Two key objectives must be satisfied in the coming year for any noticeable change in this sector:

● The Ministry of Human Resource Development must act upon and implement recommendations of the Yash Pal Committee and the National Knowledge Commission. Some of the suggestions include provisions of greater autonomy to universities, expansion of universities, independent accreditation, and the creation of a National Commission for Higher Education and Research to streamline regulatory processes. The Yash Pal Committee report written by a panel of eminent educationists identifies some major weaknesses in the current system. These include disciplinary proliferation of single-discipline institutes, lack of autonomy, unattractiveness of careers in education for the youth, excessive commercialisation,

uneven accessibility, poor financing, governance and management, and inappropriate regulation of colleges and universities. The recommendations made by the National Knowledge Commission, headed by Sam Pitroda, address the aspects of access, quality, and equity individually in its submission. All recommendations must be considered by the respective line ministries and implemented without any further delay.

● Next, there is a great deal of tertiary education legislation that has been awaiting Parliamentary action. They include a law for mandatory assessment and accreditation in higher education through an independent regulatory authority; a bill to prevent, prohibit, and punish educational malpractices; legislation to allow foreign universities to open campuses in India; and to set up a tribunal to deal with higher education-related disputes.

Though mere legislation is no panacea, it provides a starting point for schemes and policies. Legislative inaction, however, has prevented progress in this sector. For instance,

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allowing foreign universities to come into India will revolutionise the tertiary education sector by bringing world-class faculty and international expertise to our doorstep. But, the Foreign Universities Bill became a casualty to a political tug-of-war between the United Progressive Alliance and the Left parties during the 14th Lok Sabha. Similarly, even after the National Knowledge Com-

mission and the Yash Pal Committee recommended the setting up of an independent regulator, the corresponding legislation has still not been tabled in Parliament.

Conclusion

For India to stay competitive in a global economy, urgent and wholesale reform initiatives are required. The suggestions made here constitute just one part of a larger roadmap for reforms in education. Unfortunately, Mr Sibal has been preoccupied with waging battles against the Class 10 board exams and technical glitches in the computer-based CAT (Common Admissions Test) examinations. However, if the war is to be won, the Minister must now re-focus his political capital to push through substantial policy reforms. Only then, will he be



remembered as the architect of India's education revolution. ■

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