

# Ensuring equity with excellence

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EVEN before moving on to the central issue of the provision of education, whatever the mode, i.e., private or public, we must define the criterion by which an educational arrangement is to be judged. This is of the essence as our judgement on the mode of provision is itself moulded by the importance that we attach to perceptibly rivalling criteria.

For it to serve any worthwhile purpose, equity and excellence must hold in equal parts of an educational arrangement. The oft-expressed position that they are incompatible is no more than sentimentality and has cost the people of India much. Such a state of affairs would be disastrous anywhere, but it is particularly so in post-1947 India where much is made of our democratic credentials. Before turning to the consequences of the conspicuous absence of a cool-headed approach to these issues, we need to spend some time grappling with the concepts of equity and excellence in the context of education.

Of the two, and almost counter-intuitively, it is excellence that is likely to prove more difficult to define.

One might say, 'Oh come off it now! We all recognize excellence when we see it, don't we?' Plausible as this may sound, unfortunately it fails as an argument. At least in the social sciences, even before the post-modern turn, it was recognized that the presence of ideology should make us wary of prescribing what we confidently claim to be universal and objective standards. However, this does not imply that no assessment whatsoever is possible.

Instead, we need to hold the Marxist historian to the standards of Marxist scholarship and the neo-classical economist to the standards of neo-classical economics. This will take us closer to defining excellence in education. At a minimum, it would aim for the highest attainable level commensurate with the current state of knowledge. This is an inadequate rule when it comes to research, an activity which may be seen as an extension of the frontiers of current knowledge, but let us ignore the problem for the present.

Outside the populist construction within the Indian political dis-

course, excellence and equity need hardly be divorced from one another. Indeed they must be bound together to make for a credible programme, but before returning to this vital theme we must discuss equity. We may believe that we understand what is entailed by the requirement of equity, but is this really so?

Usually equity is understood as equality of outcomes. But equality of outcome is far less attractive, or even challenging, as a goal than may be imagined. Marx certainly was not enamoured of it as we are reminded by the maxim in his critique of the Gotha Programme: 'From each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs.' Here no equality of outcomes is prescribed. In fact, quite the contrary. It is of course a different matter that an extreme version of the equality of outcomes was pursued, in the name of Marxism, by the ruling classes of the former Soviet Union.

If we were to shift to the terrain of equality of opportunity as the proper interpretation of the goal of equity, it would seem we are on firmer ground but only relatively so. For after Isaiah Berlin and Amartya Sen we are aware that the equality of opportunity, seen as a global absence of coercion, cannot translate into a positive variant of opportunity when capabilities differ. To rescue the idea of equality of opportunity, transplanted in the sphere of education, we might then say that there is such equality when all those with similar potential are endowed with the capabilities for learning.

Having steered toward a working definition of excellence and equity, it is important to emphasize the essential complementarity of these two criteria of an educational arrangement. We can see that the two combine quite naturally as follows. An ideal arrange-

ment for education would provide for its constituents the highest equal chances for attaining excellence. It follows then, given our context, to seek whether this is currently being achieved in India. But before doing so, one must reject outright the sentimental view that excellence is an elitist goal.

Oddly enough, considering that it is championed by self-conscious spokespersons for India's poor, it is fundamentally status quoist. One need not subscribe to Foucault's insight that knowledge is power to recognize that to stoutly resist progress toward excellence for all is actually to ensure that the poor, who are *ipso facto* powerless, remain where they are. Arguably no sentiment has worked more towards keeping the poor of India where they are than the reactionary one that excellence is either beyond their ken if not something hopelessly bourgeois. But worse than both is the delusion that the poor do not aspire for excellence, at least for their offspring.

We can now see fully the implication of viewing of the pair, excellence and equity, as the principal priority of an educational arrangement. Indeed, we can see that equity—even of opportunity—a purely relational concept, is more or less worthless without excellence. Historically, extreme versions of socialism have come close to this kind of arrangement. Equally, the feature of islands of excellence in a sea of squalor would leave condemned, from a macro perspective, educational arrangements that maintain this state of affairs. India, in the sphere of schooling, comes very close to allowing such a state to continue. The twinned criteria emphasized require that all participants be enabled to access the current state of knowledge or to push the frontier, as the case may be. It implies that any arrangement claim-

ing to be egalitarian must attempt to *level up* always.

In the heyday of socialistic fervour among western intellectuals there was the category of 'actually existing socialism'. The role of invoking this was to provide a foil when arguments about the potential of socialism threatened to fly off the handle into thin air. Something similar is required when we discuss public education in India. Despite the spread of education in India since 1947, much of it state directed, educationists are of the view that the quality of this education is often very low. Especially given its central importance, the extent of the deviation from what would be considered acceptable is perhaps greater in the case of public rather than private schooling in the country. This deviation from acceptable standards encompasses the entire infrastructure including buildings, teachers, and norms and procedures in the workplace. An instance of the last is the accepted use of 'para teachers', individuals without any training in pedagogy, on a contractual basis for a very short period, say the school year. The consequences of this for long-term learning ability and the development of cognitive skills of children may be imagined.

But we do have evidence that when it comes to quality it is no longer simply a matter of ownership. In the private sector in India, for instance, we encounter the entire range of quality suitably accounted for by fees. Undoubtedly at the upper-most end students suffer less privation than in the government system but few claim that this is even close to being world class. For one, however, fees in this segment are astronomical and as a factor of per capita income perhaps higher than in most countries. But at the lower end, private schooling does

not always compare favourably with government schooling, especially when the quality is set off against the fees. In an overall comparison between the public and private sectors in India one might say that the Kendriya Vidyalaya are outstanding value, but in the vast ocean that represents the demand for such schooling, given the price, they are almost irrelevant as they are able to offer so few seats.

Actually, the presence of government schooling is far less than usually imagined. It is estimated that two out of three secondary schools in India are under private management. If we agree that the quality of schooling in India falls below our expectations then it is reasonable to conclude that it is not simply a matter of the nature of ownership, though there is very little by way of information on the quality of provision in the private schools. However, experts<sup>1</sup> cite studies which show that teachers in these private schools often lack the requisite academic and professional qualifications.

**A**n insight into the relation between the nature of ownership – whether public or private – and the quality of provision is offered by the findings of a recent study on primary schools in India.<sup>2</sup> In this study of 21 states, three unannounced visits were made to 3,700 selected schools. Though the focus was on government-run primary schools, rural private schools and private aided schools located in villages were also surveyed. The findings concern teacher absenteeism. Before stating the precise finding it would help to be aware of the methodology. The

1. R. Govinda, 'Building and Sustaining a Quality Education System', Annexure 3, in Ministry of Human Resource Development, New Delhi, NIEPA, 2005.

2. V. Jayant, 'The Case of the Missing Teachers', *The Hindu*, 5 April 2006.

data on absenteeism is generated by verifying the teacher's presence rather than through attendance logbooks or interviews with the head teacher. A teacher is considered to be 'absent' if the investigator could not find the teacher in the school during regular working hours.

The main finding is that 25% of the teachers were absent and only about 50% were teaching on any given day. Absenteeism was less where incentives to attend were greater. Thus schools with better infrastructure, close to a paved road, and that had been inspected relatively recently, recorded lower levels of absenteeism. This suggests that working conditions do matter for productivity and employee attitudes more generally. We now come to a finding that has some bearing on the issue of mode of provision. Private school teachers are found to be only 'slightly less' likely to be absent than public school teachers in general, but are 8% less likely to be absent in the same village. This, it is inferred, reflects the greater risk teachers in private schools face in being dismissed from service for unauthorized absence.

**F**inally, the study suggests that local communities could perhaps provide an alternative means of monitoring the situation. It is certainly the case that internationally, the role of local communities in monitoring, leave alone providing, schooling is substantially greater than in India. The issue of teacher absenteeism has a direct bearing on the question of education reform. It signals simultaneously that a part of the Indian state's budget is a sheer waste as salaries are often paid for zero return and that more resources are not the only ingredient of a credible programme of reform.

Much of what has been said so far pertains to school education. This

is of course as it should be, not only in that schooling is the foundation of human capability but also keeping in mind the peculiar situation in India where literacy levels are barely greater than 50% currently. However, the expansion of higher education has been a deliberate policy of the Indian state and public investment in higher education is not only substantial but also spread across disciplines and the subcontinent's geographies. The success of this project not only from the point of view of its own goals – that of developing an advanced knowledge base in India – but also considering the large outlay has other potential uses in this country, not least in schooling.

**I**t is by now widely accepted that the quality of higher education provided by government in India has not kept pace with the quantitative expansion. This may be inferred from the fact that young Indians who are able to finance the move have now begun to leave the country soon after they finish school. One recalls the observation made about contemporary Britain by a British university administrator, that while it matters but little for a country who makes the automobiles, it is crippling when its elites consider that its universities are not good enough for their children.

Especially in the context of the Indian government's entirely laudable objective to promote autonomous centres of knowledge development supported by massive spending, the observation by Indian science writers that the distance in the practice of science between India and the West in the period before 1947 was less than it is today, and that the distance is widening, is worth reflecting upon. As evidence we are given the physicist Stephen Hawking's observation that twenty-something-year-old

'Chandra' on the boat from India to London had solved the problem, the solution of which won S. Chandrashekar the Noble Prize close to 50 years later in 1983. That was well before Chandrashekar had reached Cambridge, having only just finished his undergraduate studies at the Presidency College, Madras. This of course is an egregious example. Anecdotal evidence however, points to a story of wider decline.

I am told by an alumnus that the head of every science department at Delhi University in the early 1970s was a Fellow of the Royal Society. I am yet to verify this. However, I can claim with confidence that at the Madras Christian College in the seventies, when I was an undergraduate, the head of almost every department held a doctorate from a leading international department in their own chosen field. Quite naturally, both the teachers of French had been to the Sorbonne. Interestingly, the Department of English Language and Literature was an exception, and this was well before *post-colonial theory*, suggesting that at least in some central areas of thought the Orient was indeed ahead!

While foreign qualifications are by no means the only criterion by which to judge the distance between Indian science and global practice, it is not clear whether using some more objective standard of comparison, such as publication in international professional journals, would greatly alter the picture of decline. Indeed the exercise is likely to throw up evidence of a large pool of underperforming academics. This was perhaps less the case before the grand expansion of education in India. C.V. Raman's Nobel Prize was won through experiments in the buildings of the Indian Association for the Advancement of

Science on Bow Bazaar Street, Calcutta, in the 1920s. By contrast, barely any of the academics of Indian origin who have won the Nobel Prize since have worked in India, even though they have been educated here.

If it is the case that the practice of science in India leaves much to be desired what, it maybe asked, is the state of the Arts (to use a simple dichotomy)? The reception of the Arts is of course mediated through culture and it would be considered entirely appropriate after colonialism that a certain degree of distancing has taken place. But is what is desirable in philosophy and literature equally applicable to economics, for instance? My answer to this question would be an emphatic 'no'. Nevertheless, apart from a handful of centres in the country, advances in the subject have largely bypassed India's university departments of economics. This is a tragedy, for the subject as it is practiced globally has much to contribute to raising the very low living conditions of millions of Indians. The distance is also ironic, as the Indian case is often taken as a prototype in global discussions of the subject.

It is clear that the dwindling resource base of the Indian university system is unable to cope with the student numbers. This may be handled either by reducing numbers or by better provisioning. Actually, a combination of these methods may be best. Given the need to raise resources, the populist tendency to leave fees unchanged for long periods, even as there is inflation in the system, is destructive of the future of education as it undermines the resource base. Indeed, even apart from matching inflation, to reduce the regressive impact of subsidies, a substantial hike in fees may be absolutely necessary. Higher subsidy for university education implies, given total

expenditure on education, lower subsidy for the school-going poor.

However, while resources are undoubtedly part of the story, they are not the sole ingredients for improvement. It is clear that there is an issue of governance if the Indian university system is to match global standards of instruction and research. While exceptions exist, India's universities have more or less degenerated into degree-awarding bureaucracies. It is not clear how much learning occurs directly via this media. Though student apathy is widespread it is reasonable to assume that at least some part of it is a symptom and not a cause of the deterioration of the system. After all, it must be accepted as axiomatic that the onus of inspiration lies not with the student but with the teacher.

While teacher motivation is abysmally low we must not rush into translating this into a case of failed agency in all cases; at least not fully. It is by now widely accepted via our knowledge of organizational behaviour and psychology that agents respond to the nature of their workplace. In the language of contemporary economics then, teacher performance is *endogenous*, and needs to be explained rather than simply assumed. Rigidly regulated and bureaucratized work environments leave teachers in India with little freedom, sapping self-esteem. Quantitative targets without concern for quality yield poor results with respect to content and delivery.

Putting into practice arrangements and enforcement mechanisms that will provide superior delivery of the subject matter, improve learning capability, and ensure objective assessment of this learning, what is termed 'governance' in the context of (higher) education. Nathan Rosenberg, who has studied the history of technology, argues that what makes Ameri-

can universities world leaders is that they are responsive to the emerging needs of students, the market and society.<sup>3</sup> Surely effective governance of educational institutions has a role in ensuring such responsiveness, and India's hopes of becoming a 'knowledge power' are dim unless this is first recognized.

It is clear that improved governance is at least as important as enhanced resources in any drive to improve the functioning of the education system in India. If conceded this has an immediate implication for expressions of intent to raise the level of public expenditure to six per cent of the gross domestic product.<sup>4</sup> It is clear that increased spending without serious changes in delivery and monitoring cannot bring about the necessary improvement in the quality of education. As resources have alternative uses we need to guard against the proverbial 'throwing good money after bad.'

In the face of such a reading of the situation it might appear ludicrous to suggest that there is a substantial role for the state in education in India. My persistence with such a position, however, is based partly on economic theory and partly on the history of India itself. The argument from economic theory is that in the presence of externalities the concerned good will be undersupplied by a profit-oriented private sector. The historical evidence that the existence of a private sector in education has not ensured the elimi-

nation of illiteracy or the raising of educational standards across the board either in secondary or in higher education can be understood, at least partly, in light of this prediction of economic theory.

Independent of such a reading, the evidence *per se* tells us something of how much more we may reasonably expect of the private sector. For instance, as the level of affluence of the middle classes rises, as it is bound to, private provision of high quality schooling may well be expected. On the other hand, a swift response of the private sector to the need for engineering graduates as an input into the IT sector is already evident, though this is perhaps more noticeable in the southern states. About three decades ago a similar wave was evident in respect of medical education in India. However, what distinguishes the current phase is the generally acceptable quality of engineering education, while the quality of medical education in the private medical schools of southern India has been judged to be disturbingly low in several cases. The play of the profit motive is clearly evident here. It follows that subjects that we may consider as having a high worth as knowledge but much less of a market value such as the arts, the humanities and the social sciences, are less likely to be offered by the private sector.

However, while the disappointment at the realization that future generations of Indians may not be reading Virginia Woolf may be rightly dismissed as 'mediated by culture', the disturbing thought that many of our grandchildren may be left to languish in poor quality schooling if the state remains idle cannot be so easily put out of mind. It bears repetition that the state's role in Indian education goes far beyond throwing money at the

problem. First, it must initiate reform of India's vast network of government institutions, now seriously under performing. This is a direct role for the state. Here we may borrow from some thinking that has already gone into a review of the government machinery as pertaining to the economy. In particular, some of the stasis generated by bureaucratic procedures in the running of our public institutions that contribute to neither equity or excellence in education must be junked forthwith. Second, it needs to act as a regulator of a private sector that has not only long existed in Indian education but is fast expanding without any concern for equity or excellence. This is the indirect role for the state. Both are equally important.

I conclude by pointing to the role of an audit agency for education in India. While valuable independent assessments, such as the The Public Report on Basic Education in India ('PROBE Report') exist, we yet require a statutory body of largely independent persons, including educationists, to review in the form of an annual audit the functioning of the Indian educational system. These reviews must be widely publicized and the reports made available to the public.

Given the guiding role of the profit motive and of vested interests it is clear that the private sector does not have the incentive to reform itself. In a democracy, however, the government can be forced to reform even when its functionaries do not have an incentive to do so. This recognition must tilt our focus, at least marginally, in the direction of drastically reforming the existing public institutions and toward the task of setting up independent bodies to regulate the private ones. No agency other than a state, directed by public action, can effectively achieve this.

3. N. Rosenberg, 'American Universities as Endogenous Institutions', in *Schumpeter and the Endogeneity of Technology*, the Graz Schumpeter Lectures, London: Routledge, 2000.

4. Ministry of Human Resource Development, 'Report of the Committee on National Common Minimum Programme's Commitment of Six Per Cent of GDP to Education', New Delhi: NIEPA, 2005.