

Illiteracy By Schooling Neglecting Children's Learning Skills

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More than 90% of the nation's primary schools are run by government bodies, and most of them are non-performing institutions. This is one of the main reasons why 25% of the children in the primary school-going age group 6-10 years, estimated at 20 million children, are not in school. Non-performance of our government schools is the primary reason why the majority of their students complete four or five years of education, and do not acquire the literacy and numeracy skills expected after the first two years of schooling. Many are unable to read or write at all.

What is the impact of our non-performing primary schools on our students, the educational system and the country as a whole? On the literacy front, we will be adding millions of illiterates, or virtual illiterates, from these primary schools every year. Since 40% of our population is illiterate, illiteracy will remain with us well into the decades of the next century.

About 80% of our middle schools, Stds. V-VII or Stds. VI-VIII, are run by government bodies. These schools are as likely to be as unaccountable and non-performing as their primary counterparts. Remedial work is rarely done to strengthen the weak learning levels of new entrants. The recent study of Prof. B.K. Chandrasekhar on learning levels of more than 2,500 students studying in Std. VII (13 year olds) in 55 Kannada medium schools in Bangalore, mainly government institutions, is instructive.

The startling revelation was that less than one-third of the students could correctly write the Kannada alphabet. Less than 10% could write 20 simple words in Kannada. This lack of basic Kannada linguistic skills probably accounted for another shocker that fewer than 5% of the Std. VII students tested distinguished correctly between living and non-living things in their environment. Less than one-third of the

students could do the following subtraction, 702-625, a skill expected to be mastered in Std. III. Only a few more knew the English alphabet letters, which is learnt in Std. IV when English instruction is started.

This neglect of fundamental learning skills continues in high school. Many do not complete high school, spending dreary years in classrooms without purpose and enjoyment dimly comprehending a fraction of what is taught. Consequently, it should not be too surprising that about half our students fail in the secondary school board examinations. Those joining college find, in addition to their extremely inadequate linguistic skills in their regional language, that they are further handicapped by their weaker knowledge of English. Failure rates at all levels are quite high, and entry into professional courses and others requiring English are limited.

Most of our students failed by our schools and colleges are predominantly from the poorer strata of Indian society. Their parent's limited educational backgrounds and incomes cannot substitute or compensate for the educational system's gross neglect of their children.

The cumulative educational experiences of the minority of middle and upper class students are entirely different. They begin with a significant educational headstart well before they join school. There are many deficiencies in the private regional and English medium schools they attend. But in terms of teaching the skills required for external examinations, they do a far better job than their government counterparts. Any deficiencies in their examination-oriented learning at any stage of school or college education invites the immediate attention of parents, tutors and coaching classes. They are not concerned about merely getting passing marks in the examinations. They and their parents are

fraught with anxiety about whether they will perform brilliantly.

The examination performance of our middle class students should not obscure the fact that our gargantuan educational system is ill equipped to meet the challenges of the 21st century. The continuing liberation and globalisation of the Indian economy will result in far greater competitiveness in the agricultural, industrial and services sectors. Consequently producing, applying, accessing and communicating knowledge will become critical. Private higher education institutions are being established, and some of our better schools, undergraduate and postgraduate institutions are gearing to meet this challenge. The principal beneficiaries of these new opportunities will be the minority who can afford or be accepted by them.

On the other hand a large majority of students, mainly from disadvantaged backgrounds are passing out from schools and colleges with extremely limited job-related skills. Their tragedy is that the educational system neither prepares them for self employment, nor for job opportunities in an emerging society, where knowledge and skills and not degrees will be demanded. This growing trend of devaluing of school certification will be reinforced as mass copying and faking of degrees continue unabated. Concurrently, traditional areas of employment like the agricultural and government sectors are shrinking. Consequently current high rates of educated unemployment will worsen, though aspirations for material possessions will continue to increase in all strata of urban and rural Indian society. Crime rates are therefore bound to zoom as more legitimate avenues of meeting these aspirations shrink.

For over a century, the historic mission of our educational system has been to be an important avenue of economic and social mobility for disadvantaged groups. The non-performance of our contemporary government schools is undermining this role. Increasingly the middle classes and ambitious poor are opting for private schooling, from the primary level onwards. This growing de facto, mainly class

based, segregation of our educational system will make it even more difficult to improve learning in our government schools. Parental support for reform in these mainstream schools will be progressively weakened as the more educated, articulate and powerful continue to withdraw their children for private schooling.

Tinkering with our mainstream schools, as we have done in the past, will not do. The way they are managed and run needs to be radically changed. Only a coalition of the reform minded public with considerable organised grassroots parental support can catalyse the political and educational establishment to make the necessary changes.

Mere technical and technological fixes will not suffice. For example, there are some who think that will once the Internet is widely diffused in urban and rural India, it will compensate by radically improving access to knowledge for the poor as well as disadvantaged students. Actual access will be limited by the fact that less than 20% of the Indian population claim to know English. English will remain for some time the dominant language of the Web. People in India and all over the world who do not know English are handicapped in accessing its growing body of knowledge.

This handicap will be partially compensated for by the increasing availability of original materials in various regional languages and on-line translations. However, 40% of our population that is illiterate will not be able to access this information directly. Neither will a significant proportion of our youth educated in our non-performing government schools. Their tragedy is that they will not be able to comprehend what will be offered in their regional languages, leave alone profit from the larger body of knowledge available in English.

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