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“The India Education Boondoggle” by S L Rao

I went to a good middle class school in Bombay over 70 years ago. School fees were Rs 5 per month. Teachers were dedicated and good. I safely walked the two miles each way everyday, by myself. My parents had no cause for anxiety. My College fees were not much more and the regime of walking 2 miles each way continued for four years. The teachers were dedicated and very professional. My postgraduate fees were higher but not by much more. Again the attendance and teaching quality of teachers were very good.

So when I hear that even for small children in a moderate school the fees can go to as much as Rs 1 lakh and much more for the higher classes, I wonder how a middle class family manages. Of course there are now many more two income families and salaries are many times bigger. If one wonders about the middle class, what of the poor? Almost everyone in India, urban or rural, rich or poor, recognizes the difference education and proficiency in English makes to lives. For the poor, there are supposed to be free government schools. But as the annual Pratham reports show, they are inadequately and poorly staffed, with teachers perennially absent. Household expenditure survey data shows that the use of private schools by the poor is soaring. Indeed the highest percentage expenditure of a poor family's budget is on education and health. These expenditures on private schools are in addition to the attendance of children at government schools. I remember that in the Aga Khan Foundation when I visited Bhabha (a particularly poor district), many of the mothers I met who sent their children to the Learning Centres that the Foundation was running, said: “We send our children to the government school because they get a free meals, but they really learn in your Learning Centres! The big challenge in school education for the poor and in rural areas is to find teachers, improve teacher attendance, and their quality. In addition is the need for English proficiency.

It is not as if things are better in higher education. Let us take the most popular areas. There are perhaps 4000 business schools in India. They charge very high fees. Many are without qualified teachers, have poor Libraries and poor computer facilities. Parents have coughed up a few lakhs for a two year MBA or equivalent. And the graduate has got very little knowledge. These youth get poor and low paying jobs. Companies are now switching away from management graduates from many such schools.

It was announced recently that the All India Council for Technical Education is shutting down many hundreds of engineering colleges because the demand for seats had fallen so much. Many of these colleges were weak on faculty, facilities and equipment. There are assessments that only about 25% of our engineering graduates are really capable of doing an engineering job without much further training.

Yet Indian governments seem to think that all education is about buildings. Nobody in government is bothered about the imperative need to develop more teachers for every possible type of education. To attract bright youngsters into teaching, teachers' relative salaries must rise considerably. There must be a large programme of teacher training both for new entrants and updating for older ones. There are few such programmes.

Recent data shows that IITs are short by about 35% of required faculty. That shows that the quality of teachers in other engineering colleges must be abysmal. This can be said about management schools and even the prestigious IIMs.

Government is now planning to have one IIM and IIT in each state. The faculty will obviously be taken from other existing institutions, thus reducing the number and quality in already depleted institutions.

In addition there is also urgent need to train our rural youth in skills that they can use in other areas including agriculture. This again needs teachers, institutions and good quality. Where are they to come from. One way might be to require all employers to engage apprentices. Here our labor laws requiring minimum wages and guarantee of employment to such people is a constraint. We have to break out of this limitations and allow apprentices to be paid nominally while they are learning, and engage them only if found necessary and suitable. Otherwise they have to find jobs elsewhere. The culture of guaranteed employment must go at least for apprentices.

On top of all this is the attempt to change what will be taught. Bringing in religious concepts, changing text books to introduce perceived Indian achievements in the past, the pressure from politicians to impose local vernacular languages in place of English, and many other fads and foibles, are placing limitations on any improvement.

Is privatization the answer? Absolutely not. Government must play a major role in educating its people, It must ensure that what is taught is up to date. Pedagogic training must ensure that teachers help their wards to think and not just commit to memory. We need thousands of teacher training and skills development institutions in addition to apprentice training. We must significantly improve remunerations to all teachers, We need to ensure that all students get some English proficiency. Government must introduce schemes that enable all poor and bright people to get free or heavily subsidized quality education.

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