

Education Agenda for New India: RSTV – The Big Picture

Anchor - Frank Rausan Pereira

Prof. Saroj Sharma, Former Member, Ministry of Human Resource Development, HRD Ministry; Anita Rampal, Professor, Department of Education, Delhi University; Dr. Manisha Priyam, Senior Academician; Aditi Tandon, Special Correspondent, The Tribune.

Larger Background:

- There is a dire need for revolutionary changes in India's education system, there is no doubt about that.
- The cut-offs at some of the top universities is over 99% if not 100%. Students are pushed to the brink to try and further their educational ambitions.
- Several aspects need to be addressed if we have to achieve the desired results and head in the right direction. India has one of the youngest populations in an aging world.
- By 2020, the median age in India will be just 28, compared to 37 in China and the US, 45 in Western Europe, and 49 in Japan.
- But for us to reap the benefit of this demographic dividend we need to ensure that we see an overhaul in our education system.
- Recently, the Finance Minister, Mr. Arun Jaitley, in an exclusive interview said that education will be one of the key focus areas if his government comes back to power.
- On this edition of the big picture we will analyse the education agenda for a new and changing India.

Analysis by the Experts:

Let's first try to segregate the discussion into three segments- we will focus on primary education first, then we shall move on to higher education and then we will look at tertiary education. What is the state with primary education as it stands currently? And what needs to be done if anything to change it?

Anita Rampal, Professor, Department of Education, Delhi University, weighed in with her arguments here.

Much needs to be done, and I am glad that you have asked that question. I am glad that you are bringing this up before elections because I feel that it is important that political parties do try to understand what the issues are and what has not happened in the last few years. We need to understand what has gone wrong and what was being attempted some years back in terms of the Right to Education, which the Parliament has revoked unfortunately without realizing the implications. Unfortunately, what is more worrying is that education is becoming a ground which is filtering out children even in the lower classes. For example, in class 3, in Delhi, the Delhi Government is essentially sorting out children and saying that a certain group of children in classrooms are no good- that they are non-readers and the others are talented, which is against the right of a child, it is against the democratic right that any individual has. Thus, we need a humanist paradigm, a humanist perspective which brings people together instead of this divisive kind of a way wherein not just caste, gender, class and religion are impacting society, but, even schools are creating hierarchies. The important question that arises is: How does one break these hierarchies? How does the system become inclusive in the true spirit? And something which gives you a sense of empathy- which allows one to understand people from different backgrounds and how one can make a much more inclusive country.

What are the biggest challenges as far as primary education is concerned?

Dr. Manisha Priyam, Senior Academician, weighed in here with her arguments.

It is important to point out that Mr. Jaitley said that primary education would be the priority of the next government but even the current government is trying to do a few things in the area of school education. One of the most important things it did was to announce, albeit, a bit late, its new implementation policy, not necessarily the New Education Policy, but its implementation policy with respect to school education. This was the **Samagra Shiksha**, where it said that it would merge the entire spectrum of school education into one, and bring the issue of schools close to where the schools are. Now, however good these things may have been in intention, I think that the implementation scenario was not looked at. What happened was that nobody understood that in the area of school education, you do need to look at the ICDS or the younger children with a slightly different lens of care than those in higher education where you require greater inputs in terms of the labs that will be there- sufficient inputs into language learning, mathematics learning, etc. Thus, neither was the care regimen looked at carefully, nor was the subject oriented intensive quotients looked at carefully. These things could have been done easily, and five years was a long time to get these things done. However, these things remain the mandate of the future. The other important issue that remains to be looked at seriously is the area of teacher education.

India has achieved great milestones in terms of the numbers of children who are coming to schools. So, children have been drawn and attracted to the schools. But the larger question remains, which is: What do you give to the children in public schools? Now, Indian public schools need to be world leaders in terms of what we would be giving to them in the school. A good school gives:

1. Good textbooks
2. Good libraries
3. Good extra-curricular activities
4. Good teaching in Science, Mathematics, and language learning

The present government when it came in, during the first 6 months itself, it put together, the Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya National Mission on Teachers and Teaching (PMMMNTT). This was a very well intentioned programme. However, the momentum that was required with respect to teacher training is not in place. The momentum as far as school education is concerned is two-fold:

1. A very heavy investment in what teaching and learning is: One must note that this is about knowledge, it is about a regime of care for your own children; it is about focusing on the teacher. You can't have officers teaching in schools, you have to have teachers who teach in schools. Thus, one would have to invest in good teacher training. There is no substitute for having good science labs.
2. Further, politics would have to be put on the slow back-burner and teaching would have to be given a priority. This should be the priority if schools have to be transformed to deliver what they should.

The education system as we see it today, has it worked or not for you?

Aditi Tandon, Special Correspondent, The Tribune, weighed in with her arguments here.

This can't be answered in a simple yes or a no. It has worked at some levels. It hasn't worked at other levels. What concerns me is the quality of school education. Although the case made for investing money into teachers training is well received, but how are you going to encourage people and youngsters to actually take up teaching as a career? And as a profession of choice?

It remains to be seen whether teaching in India is lucrative enough. Secondly, the issue is about increasing privatization, of not just school education but cutting across education sectors- primary, secondary as well as

higher education. We know that many of the colleges in our country as well as the schools are in the private sector. The Delhi government has set a very good example by investing very heavily in public education, and government schools are turning around. It has been shown that these models are possible. However, to encourage youngsters and graduates to come into the teaching profession is the biggest challenge of this government. This is because until the time you have quality teachers, you will not have quality students, and then across sectors, up to the higher education level, the quality of the graduate- the output of the education system, will remain compromised.

Also, are we as a society placing enough premium on the teaching profession? I don't think we are. It is a holistic, societal issue for which we all have to take responsibility. For example, when we look at our own routine middle-class homes, where do parents want to send their children? They are not sending their children to government schools even if government schools are good. The first priority of every parent are swanky schools. Also we need to take into account changes in society as well- where are parents giving time to their children these days? Thus, I don't see the primary education challenge as only a government challenge, or a teacher's or student's challenge. It is a societal issue. Unless and until we all come together, and place a collective premium on this whole sector, we cannot move forward.

Should our schools also change? We have this concept now called alternative schooling. Is that the way forward? Is this something that we need to focus on?

Prof. Saroj Sharma, Former Member, Ministry of Human Resource Development, HRD Ministry, weighed in with her arguments here.

Before coming to alternative schooling, I would like to focus on the points which you raised initially, which was on education and development of education in all three sectors- elementary, secondary and tertiary. If we look at education as a whole, then the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) caters to elementary education, Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) caters to secondary education, Rashtriya Uchchar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA) caters to tertiary education. Thus, access, equity, and quality, this is one aspect of education. The second aspect of education is skill development. Thus, I believe that skill development, access, equity and quality, these pillars are equally needed in all the three sectors.

Further, alternative schooling has a different concept- it caters to the needs of society- for example, students who are differently abled, or who have different skills. If a student is good in arts (fine arts), or is a student is very good in music, then those kind of skills should be nurtured. The concept of alternative schooling is coming up well and the government should encourage this development. By this method, one can bridge the gap between government and private schools.

How would you look at how higher education stands today?

Anita Rampal, Professor, Department of Education, Delhi University, weighed in with her arguments here.

When you look at the unreasonable amount of marks that students are expected to score to secure entry into colleges, then the issue of having 'assessment reforms' get highlighted. As a matter of fact, we have not had major assessment reforms. As a matter of fact, whatever a child does in school, even if this is done in a creative manner, ultimately the examination system and the entire rigmarole around these marks, dilutes whatever effort a singular teacher may have given. A country can only claim that its education system is good when its public system is working well, and when the middle class also endorses that.

In the domain of higher education, the most important aspect that I see is teacher education. This is something which is extremely weak. Unfortunately, we have not had meaningful change and meaningful investments. 90% of teacher education is in the private sector and very often, a substandard quality. Thus, this is something which hasn't been worked on well. Also, in higher education what is happening today is that there is so much pressure on what is called 'self-financed-courses'. Thus, anything that the university

does or is trying to think of in a new way, are often charged as governments seldom come out in support of them. Many private universities are coming out with fees which even middle class students cannot afford.

Prof. Saroj Sharma, Former Member, Ministry of Human Resource Development, HRD Ministry, weighed in with her arguments here.

NITI Aayog has recently said that investment in education as a whole should be raised from 26% to 36% (until 2022), i.e. by 2022, the investment should be raised to 36%. Thus, an agenda is very much there, whether it is in private schools, or PPP model, or in government schools. The government has also worked in the field of autonomy as well. As a result, universities have been able to start different kinds of courses that are beneficial to the society and has also stressed on community participation.

Your thoughts on higher education and how do we ensure that higher education in our country goes to the next level?

Dr. Manisha Priyam, Senior Academician, weighed in with her arguments here.

I believe that higher education is extremely critical. However, I do feel that there has been a paucity of both ideas and implementation. The ground level situation that we find in colleges today tell us about problems that need to be sorted out if the schemes granting it autonomy are to make any headway. So what are the problems? Well, many of the universities are not willing to let go of the control that they had over colleges. There is little clarity with respect to examination procedures. If once upon a time, a pass-out student had the certificate from a university, viz-a-viz, now which they will have from a college, how does the labour market recognize this or that? Many of the colleges that have gained autonomy for example, rather than having great courses on offer, have gone on to have courses that are clearly substandard. There needs to be a hand-holding arrangement and stakeholder management. We need to hand-hold until we see that the ultimate objectives are being achieved. Further, there needs to be far greater and sincere thought about post-school transitions, and pathways. In the areas around the slums in Delhi, the demand is for shorter courses, that can take the children to jobs immediately. Therefore, shorter courses being run as certificate programmes, are high in demand. What stops our high level universities to offer shorter courses? Also, the bigger universities need to look at their distance learning programmes very seriously. Enough synergies need to be built in about online learning, etc.

Thus, having a physical-assets based increase in higher education Vs. diversification of the model and greater reach with respect to the levels of demands would be the need of the hour. Further, the community college model which allows students to transition at a lower pathway would be a step in the right direction. The community college model can also be linked to a higher pathway if students want to come back and study in the higher echelons. Thus, greater diversification within the formal system is the need of the hour. We also have the unfortunate example where, on the one hand we have spoken of autonomy, while on the other hand, we have had centrally devised curriculum systems, that have to be enforced by autonomous colleges. So, we have colleges in Kerala, that have been looking at syllabi that have been devised in Delhi. Thus, on the one hand, we have spoken about autonomy, while on the other hand, we have taken it away. What the government should think about is ordinary, average but good public universities for the middle and poorer classes of India, which are desirous of higher education in large numbers today.

As far as higher education is concerned, what more needs to be done?

Aditi Tandon, Special Correspondent, The Tribune, weighed in with her arguments here.

I believe that the major problem with the education sector lies with the higher education sector. As we see the higher education structure in the country today, we are producing degree holders after degree holders. There appears to be an absolute emphasis on graduates who have degrees, that will not make them employable. The crisis in India is that a lot of graduates are getting produced, who are then either unable or

are not skilled enough to enter the workforce. Thus, the primary challenge for India's higher education sector is the skilling issue. Attempts have been made in the past of building vocational skills at the schooling level itself, but unfortunately, such plans have not worked out. The present administration had set up a Ministry of Skill Development And Entrepreneurship. The National Skills Development Council had setup for the first time various sector-skill councils. Now there are 41 sector-skill councils in this country. These councils typically address a particular niche. For example, there is a council that addresses, "Wellness and Beauty", another one for "Media and Entertainment", etc. These sector-skill councils will offer short-term courses to graduates who are not interested in traditional education. Thus, increasingly, I see a positive sign which must go on into the future. A lot of top universities in the country, for example,

1. The Punjab University (Chandigarh) is offering a welding course, for experimental physics and chemistry students. This is because; hands-on training is required for hard skills. One would never know what welding is unless one actually does it oneself. This has been made possible through the initiative taken up by the Ministry of Skill Development And Entrepreneurship.
2. Also, Delhi University which has about 80 colleges affiliated to it, has now a system wherein they are training 60,000 graduates, annually in some or the other skills. What the universities do is that they sign Memoranda of Understanding with the sector-skill councils, in which they are interested and short term courses are devised. The best part of this scheme is that sector-skill council is headed by the industry expert. For example, Kamal Haasan heads the entertainment center. The jobs of the future lie in real estate and construction, they lie in wellness, and they lie in retail, banking and finance. Thus, one needs courses to train graduates to handle these sectors.

Concluding Remarks:

- A complete paradigm shift is needed as far as our education system is concerned. However, one has reason to believe that there are some positive signs too. For example, in schools itself, we are talking about Programme for International Students Assessment (PISA)- these are definitely encouraging signs.
- Skilling has to improve across higher education sectors and it has to be diverse. Let's not forget that only about 5% of the Indian workforce is trained in any sort of skills today; we are staring in the face of a demographic disaster if skill development is not undertaken.

