

The Perils of the Indian Education System¹

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One of the most basic human need at the present age is without a doubt education. By education, we do not mean a literacy certificate but a tangible and usable degree or a vocation. This, in itself is not what education as a broad term entails and neither is it enough for the progress of a state and an individual. A proper education system is the backbone of any developed society and it is an indisputable fact that lacking such a system brings in perils for everyone involved - including, the state and the society.

History is testimony to the heights that the Indian education system in antiquity and medieval periods had reached. However, a close look at the present system brings to the forefront many of the drawbacks and obstacles that are present in the system. It is always easy to point out flaws, but it is always difficult to bring forth a robust ecosystem in which the cocoon of an idea can take shape into a beautiful butterfly. The present aim is to highlight some of the flaws that are present and put forth a personal perspective on some of these and giving suggestions on how one might try to circumnavigate them in the future.

Let us start with the school education system. It is the authors' belief that most of the books written for school students are just for the sake of writing and not for the benefit of the students. As a small example, we could pick up a school science textbook and see how many of the experiments suggested in the books are being actually performed in the laboratory at the school. A decent survey of this would no doubt give shocking results. When we were school students, we saw the school laboratory only on a few occasions. And that too, not for doing experiments but for lack of space, to accommodate some program, the laboratory was used as a buffer.

The situation is even dire in some of the smaller public schools run by the government where the whole school is essentially one long hall, with flimsy cardboard layers in between to demarcate the end of one class and the start of another. This situation can be rectified quite easily if the

¹ The views expressed in this article are the authors' personal views and they do not represent those of the organizations they work for.

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government instead of spending just a mere 3.8% of its GDP on education, increased it to double of that. Most of the European countries spend more than 5% of their GDP on education ³, but it is not a fair comparison because there are more tax payers in these countries than in India. A cursory glance at some data from 2014 ⁴, shows that even countries with major financial crisis like Zimbabwe spends a much more percentage of its GDP on education than India.

However, the fact remains that this lack can be somewhat bypassed with an increase in spending. As a concrete example to the problem of laboratories posed earlier, let us give the following suggestion. A small kit of essential scientific instruments for doing school experiments can be made and distributed among the school students for a nominal fee. Such a thing existed when we were young, the Assam Science Society had devised such a kit and one could purchase it from a local government school, we are however not sure if the practise still exists. If it does, then this could be a government initiative in itself.

Another aspect of school education system is the ever increasing gap between the performance of public and private schools in every state across India. Let us take the example of Assam, for instance in 2018, 21 govt. schools altogether has zero pass percentage in Class 10 boards and only 57 Govt schools achieved 100% pass percentage out of the hundreds of schools across the state. Empty and unhygienic class rooms lacking basic infrastructure and nearly vacant staff rooms are a common site in most of the state government run schools across the state. Consecutive reports in the media regarding the same and highlighting the lack of higher class students to properly read and write the elementary things is common but hardly paid heed to. The recent strong action taken by Education Minister of Assam Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma on teachers in under performing government schools is welcome but not particularly the best one. Rather than taking a sudden harsh action on the teachers, there should be a system of continuous evaluation for both the teachers and students including mid-term teachers training, special outreach programmes for students for an all round development of them etc. (This will be discussed in the context of higher education later in the article.)

On the contrary, the same doesn't apply to KV's and JNV's as they have continuously outperformed many good private schools across the country. Several reasons might be attributed to the same such as compulsory B.Ed for teachers at all levels, a national level competitive exam for recruitment of teachers, handsome salary, attracting good and motivated talent, concise and well balanced syllabus with proper directive on how to handle each course, accountability of teachers on a continuous basis, amidst many. If a similar model can be applied in the state government schools, along with the recent welcome step of TET we can definitely expect better results.

Another main drawback impacting the overall educational standard of the country is the established standard of the country in the process of the rote learning to merely clear exams, right from school. It is through this process that students clear 10th board exams, which forms the deciding factor under societal norms for opting Humanities, Commerce or Science in 10+2 depending on the increasing order of percentage scored rather than interest. Again, through Class 12 to final year of graduation or post graduation the idea of rote learning takes centre stage. This is reflected in the huge gap between educated and employable quality figures of freshly passed out students across the country. The recent proposal of the government to scrap the *No Detention policy till class 8* is a welcome step as it would put a certain screening criteria for students to get promoted to a higher class. However, in this as well we have the obsolete policy of passing students onward with the Sarva Sikhsha Abhiyan, which would be a laughable matter in any developed country. With every pro, there seems to be some con associated which

³ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.XPD.TOTL.GD.ZS>; the GDP is for India as a whole, different states have different data-sets, which in itself would be another article.

⁴ https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/rankings/Education_spending/

makes us wonder if a serious re-evaluation of the entire system is the need of the hour?

It has been nearly a decade since the passing of Right to Education Act in 2009. But unfortunately the Act has still not being implemented completely, in states across India because of several factors ranging from government apathy to larksidal attitude of parents, poverty, social misconstructions against the girl child etc. This is not a matter of light scrutiny, as socio-economic factors can have a great impact on any government scheme. India's literacy rate was not even 20% when we got independence from the British rule, and it is highly unlikely that it was ever at the present rate in all of India's recorded history. There can be several reasons behind this, but there are two that we feel are quite important, and any policy that is being made at the government level needs to keep these in mind. First, the people with a low income might not be too amenable towards giving an education to their wards because for them any extra money that can be earned would be better than nothing. They would not be in a position to do a cost-effect analysis for their long term gains with a proper education. Second, the age old tradition of caste system also plays a significant role in many parts of India for a child to get an education. These two are in itself worthy of separate very lengthy debates which we do not feel qualified to take up at the moment. But, the reader should not wear a honey-coloured glass while reading this article, and instead also keep in mind that several factors impede India in this discussion, but we have tried to balance it out as far as possible. The factors mentioned above are more observed in the primary education, but in no way can they be said to be absent from higher education as well.

If we move to the college level education, the problems increases even more. Here, there is not a lack of colleges or satisfactory infrastructure, but a lack of good quality teachers in most of the colleges. Even a cursory glance at the colleges in Assam would show one the scene that is prevalent in almost every department. There are many rules imposed by the University Grants Commission which does not distinguish between a good or a bad teacher. In Assam, the entire interview process for recruitment has become just a chore. No doubt, the intentions were good, but the output has not been satisfactory. The culture of recruiting ad-hoc teachers to teach is also a bad practice, and one which is highly unlikely to bring in good people because of the very low salaries. The college administrators must come forward as a whole and should be vociferous in their demands for better quality teachers and more number of teachers. This has never been in the mainstream list of demands.

The main body which oversees implementation of directives for higher education in India is the University Grants Commission (UGC), this is streamlined into universities which then direct it's affiliating colleges, in most of the cases. The directives of UGC in terms of recruitment is based on various criteria, like academic aptitude, research aptitude, etc. In case of the first level of recruitment at colleges for teaching, which is the post of an Assistant Professor, the UGC mandate says that either the candidate must have cleared the National Eligibility Test (NET) for Lectureship or should hold a PhD degree. The NET for science disciplines only test a candidate on their subject knowledge, it does not test their eligibility in teaching of any sorts. This is a serious drawback in the recruitment of good teachers, specially in Assam, where we have already mentioned in the last paragraph that the situation is not so good.

The problem, however does not end there. Once, the teacher is recruited, the next level of promotion only occurs when the person has been able to improve what is called their Academic Performance Index (API). There are several criteria which can increase one's API score ⁵, several of which are subjective in nature. However, one objective criteria is the research output of a

⁵ http://www.du.ac.in/du/uploads/20102014_CAS.1.pdf

candidate every year, which can increase the score upto 40 per year. This, and also the UGC mandate that each PhD candidate must publish at least one research paper in some *real* journal before he or she can submit his or her thesis, has given rise to an entire publishing sub-industry in India. A recent survey and investigation by a group of reputed newspapers and magazines have seriously questioned the UGC's criteria in furthering this illicit business of publishing *fake* journals.⁶ One of the recent consequence in the North-East for this policy was the case of several PhDs being declared null and void by the UGC which had been granted by CMJ University, Shillong.

In this case, there is a serious gap in the thought process of making a policy and then willy-nilly implementing it without proper verification. The processes should be made more transparent as well as less time consuming for the administrators and teachers in the colleges. It has been observed, that our teachers are already overloaded and tired with all the government imposed schemes. They have a tendency show *no attitude* towards anything new beyond the scheduled routine. So instead of a direct *you can do it* approach, an indirect approach would be more effective. This is up-to the administrators of a college to figure out based on their strength in numbers and motivation. A single formula will not work with the same level of efficiency.

An aspect of higher education that is missed by almost everyone is the basic need of counselling for a student to choose a streamlined path of education. It has been already observed before, that the major criteria for a student in selecting their courses at the 10+2 level is their 10th board marks and not their knowledge or willingness for a specific subject. This is a matter of serious concern, as for instance a person who would have made a good accountant becomes a mediocre physicist. This is perhaps too extreme an example, but we would not say that this cannot happen. Students should be made aware of the various fields of study that exists, sometimes they do not even know about the various things that they can study at their local college. A pro-active approach to this problem must stem from the teachers in local colleges, with a strong support from the administration of the college. This is something which we feel can be easily implemented by any college in Assam.

The blame, however is not on the administrators solely, the parents and the various student and regional bodies are also at fault. If only, the so-called student unions would actually have thought of the students then this situation would not have arisen. Their *raison d'arte* in the present times has been to just give away certificates to the toppers in the school examinations and play politics to win a college council seat. It has been observed many a times that in the award distribution ceremonies organized by various student bodies in Assam, the chief guest of the program is usually a politician or a bureaucrat. This is very strange for us, because first this expresses a lack of interest in the cause of the students by the organization and second, it seems to us that this indirectly says that a suitable educationist was not available to lead the program. The second reason is of course, absurd. There are plenty of good and able academics, sports persons, journalists, etc. in our society with whom the students, if they interact can learn much more. Sometimes, having a role model whom the students can see and talk to is much more efficient than just reading about someone or watching someone on TV. This also helps in clearing up a bit of the psychological barrier of students, with the attitude *if they can, so can I*.

The impetus given on education most of time seems to be at the primary school level. However, if a good and solid education at the college level cannot be guaranteed then the skill sets of the graduates would be lacking, and this would effect not only them, but the society as a whole. There will be more joblessness and a significant lacklustre workforce which would push back one and all. Several developed countries in the world⁷ have a high level of higher education, which is in turn translated into a highly skilled workforce, which then contributes

⁶ <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/inside-indias-fake-research-paper-shops-pay-publish-profit-5265402/>

⁷ most notably Germany

not only to the economy but to the overall well being of the state. This fact, is somehow lost in transition from time to time, when we are discussing education in India.

There is however some sort of solace in the knowledge that the university education system is a bit more robust, because of obvious levels of autonomy and higher funding from the government agencies. This is not a matter of great joy, as usually the idea is to plant a seed and watch it grow into a tree to give more fruit, but not to have a tree already there and no one who knows how to plant a seed. A top down approach is not going to work in India, what we need is a bottoms up approach and more innovation in the lowest strata of education. In the present day, some state governments like the Delhi government have provisions which follow this principle.

The above paragraph might seem to be too optimistic if one looks at the condition of the state universities in the not so rich states, like Assam for instance. The status of the state university when compared with a centrally funded one becomes clear as crystal. Most of the state universities are not well funded. There can be a case made against the establishment of newer universities, when the old ones are barely surviving. This case is best illustrated with the Tezpur Medical College, which is now in operation. There was no doubt that a medical college was necessary in Tezpur or a nearby area, but the decision to start three new medical colleges at the same time was too taxing for the government, and only after it's counterparts at Barpeta and Jorhat, did Tezpur Medical College start functioning very recently. The politics of education seems to us, to be a vote earning goal. A strict education policy is most often missing before making the decisions.

The problems with recruitment mentioned with respect to the college level education also exists at the university level, in some cases. Sometimes, the situation is even more dire. The recent duress of everyone involved with the Assam Women's University is surely not forgotten by the readers. At one point, it appeared that the teachers were not sure of their fate, this was because most of them had ad-hoc positions, where neither the university nor the government had any liability towards them with respect to their job security. It seems quite strange that most of the teachers of a government institute should be ad-hoc. This begs asking the important question, what are the graduates of the university learning, if the government thinks that no qualified person is available to teach them? The paradox lies in the simple reasoning that a university is supposed to train students to get jobs, and one possibility might be to be recruited back into the same university, if everyone is ad-hoc then what does that make the level of instruction of that university?

The reasons for a situation of the sort described in the previous paragraph is not very hard to find. There has been a trend of lowering of the budget for Higher Education and research in the past few years starting from the 2014-15 budget, where it was reduced to the tune of around 4000 crores compared to the previous year. This was succeeded by the latest budget reduction in funds of IIT's and Central Universities. This is a disturbing trend as the higher institutes of learning forms the backbone of the country's job-pool and research man-power; a lack of funding adversely impacts the attraction of talent and consecutive production of ample researchers and academicians, let alone able technicians or accountants.

The government has however, brought in various schemes whose beneficiaries are usually quite select. Several government schemes are first introduced for institutes offering technical education, and this limits the funding for universities which offer several different branches of study. A major deterrent in the policy making of India is the wrong impression that excellent technology is good science ⁸, or a radical thought is bad politics. This makes some institutes

⁸ <https://theprint.in/opinion/modis-space-dream-india-still-doesnt-know-the-difference-between-tech-science/99254/>

which offer more traditional branches of study lose out. This should not be the case. Many a times, corrupt politicians or fake nationalists steer away the debate from important issues and marginalize or trivialize entire discussions based on their whims and fancies. When this happens, ultimately the loss is for the whole nation, a solid education system might bring in some respite from all these.

As we have seen, so far; there are several issues that are at work in this whole discussion. Along with socio-economic aspects, the other major aspect is politics. There is a distinct disadvantage from the point of political planning to invest in education. Most of the people can see the investment in building infrastructure as it is happening, but an investment in education is not likely to payoff in one or two years, and might even take a decade before one can actually see the benefits. In this sense, a particular political party might be unwilling to indulge in such an investment if they are not ascertained of their return to power. Merely announcing various schools, colleges and universities on paper seems to be the trend, at least in Assam now. It is a very difficult job to build up a fully functioning institute of eminence, and if not enough trained people are produced then the system will not be able to function properly.

The first author has been to several different educational institutes in Europe and North America in the past four years and he has seen how different the system in these countries are to the one we have in India. In the European Union (EU), public education is free until the university level degree, even a doctorate degree. He has paid less fees in Vienna than he paid in his studies at Tezpur University. This in itself is surprising but what is even more surprising is that there are almost no private universities. The ratio of public to private would be too negligible and yet there are enough places for anyone willing to study to have a chance at it. The main reason for this is a significant cultural heritage, of education, from the past and a sense of paying one's dues to the society, in terms of taxes. Various factors prevent this from happening in India, to discuss which is not the aim of the present article.

Although, such a system cannot be put into place in India as is, but there are several aspects of it that can be followed in India. For instance, in the EU, in case of recruitment of faculty members at any level, be it school or a university, the person who is being interviewed has to also give a demonstration class, where student representatives will be present, and who will judge the candidates based on their teaching ability. This could be easily introduced in India, in the colleges specially, which mainly focuses on teaching at the moment.

Another aspect which can be borrowed from these places is the degree of academic freedom that a student enjoys at the university level. A student is free to take as many courses as he or she wants, that are being offered, provided they keep a minimum number from their major subject. There is also no limitation to the minimum time, one can take to earn a degree. In India, as far as we know, barring a few select higher education institutes that can be counted on our fingers, all the other institutes have a very strict code of conduct which sometimes borders on to torture, for the student. This should be relaxed now, and we should at least shed some of these handicaps of a colonial system of education.⁹

India is presently in a growing stage, being the fastest growing economy and gifted with the highest demographic dividend in the world. So if we have to make the perfect utilization of this huge young population in the coming years, the right education, along with adequate skill training is a must for them. This human resource, if unrealized in the right way will turn it into a bane for the country. This is not a serious difficulty in the present age, for someone

⁹ This should not be taken amiss, the first author's full views on this matter can be found here: <https://thewire.in/education/debate-case-intellectual-colonialism>

who is willing to take up the matter. Recently with the development of ICT techniques, across the world and newer digital forms of learning emerging, the government of India has already taken up certain initiatives under the banner of Digital India, to incorporate digital classrooms in many schools across the country which is appreciated. But the lack of adequately trained teachers has made it a futile exercise. And this in itself, brings us full circle to the discussion presented here. A more careful planning of the education system is the need of the hour.

It is never too late to change something, and for a country that has a tremendous amount of rich educational heritage, if India really wants to do something about its flaws in the education system then it can really make a difference. After all, the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, so said Confucius.

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