

Will we ever come out of job-centric fix of education?

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Primepost, Nov. 24, 2021

Two developments in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh last fortnight signal a change in the outlook of parents. Both are to do with formal educational system and remind urgency of a re-look of our priorities. The Telangana one is silent, the other in Andhra is vocal and out on road. Both remind and revive a basic issue to do with education. Nearly three lac students that is almost half of those who passed out of high school in Telangana in 2021 preferred not to continue with college education. This is despite that government reimburses a major portion of tuition fees. This trend cannot be a result of Covid. Why then they preferred to stay away? This is against the background that so many new colleges have come up recently. Is that they do not find any course attractive enough? Or is it that parents consider that pursuing education is no more a guarantee for a better future or for employment? The general perception is that the higher the education the less the chances of getting a job. And that so many graduates, particularly of engineering, are viewed as misfits for recruitment. This trend is causing many colleges become unviable to improve quality of teaching and infrastructure.

Teachers, parents and children of aided-schools in Visakhapatnam, Kakinada and Anantpur took to streets last week to demonstrate against the government compelling them close down for not able to pay salaries of teachers regularly. The Government wanted these aided schools be handed over to government. The apprehension was that government was trying to acquire prime land of these schools. Significant was slogans the demonstrators had raised – we want our school back, please subsidise teacher's salary, we rather forgo money the government is doling out to mothers for sending their children to school. They were demanding quality of teaching in these schools. Never before parents showed such concern about their public school and quality of teaching. It was also first time that teachers and parents realised the implication of lure of doles that Government offers.

These two developments signal a shift in the outlook about going for graduation, job aspiration, and perceptions about governments doles and fees exemptions. This also indicate a realisation in parents that quality in education is far more important than getting a degree certificate. On the other, despite over 10,000 vacancies of teachers, increasing drop out rate going to as high as 25 percent and declining performance in schools, no serious initiatives is evident.

These trends compel us take a macro view of not only education, but employment, skills, self-employment and wisdom and worldly view of youth. These reminds me two insights I gained early in my career. The first one was in 1960 when I first visited New Delhi. In a chance meet, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru remarked that “on completion of degree, I should not look for a government job, but work for the country”. It took me a few years to understand what Nehru’s advise was all about. He meant that on completing college education one should not look for a job, but serve the country (in so many different ways). My next Insight was also from a chance meet in 1962 with the great Philosopher and President of India Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishna in Mughal Garden, Rashtrapati Bhavan, when on finding from my attire that I was from Andhra, he asked me to recite anything from *Vemana Satakam*, on my not able to utter a word, he asked me whether I could do from *Sumati Satakam*, to which also I could not recite. Annoyed, he made a passing comment on the futility of educational degrees without wisdom and worldly view.

Putting together these I am now convinced that a real breakthrough in the country’s move towards a knowledge society, becoming a country of innovations and *atmanirbharta* and path breaking is not possible with education continuing as for job or employment. Although Prime Minister Modi too had said, some time ago, that India must generate job creators, not job seekers, we continue to be unconcerned and keep promising youth more jobs and even more government jobs.

The reality is different and mind-set of people continues to be in search of job. This is even when half of earners today are self-employed. Leaders continue to promise more jobs and even more on the eve of elections. Whereas the reality is jobs per se are on decline. The information technologies are facilitating decline further. And with more and more privatisation of public services, the jobs in government too will decline further. The skills mission recently has not made a dent so far. And already the number of unemployed graduates is on rise and multiplying. And those with academic degrees are found as "not up to mark". Yet we made only marginal adjustments in the educational system. All this is not helping majority children to come up or catch up and unleash their potential. On the contrary, majority are deprived or denigrated as misfits or disqualified and their potential remain suppressed. That is how, over all, only a couple of percent are showcased as qualified or successful. Is privatisation of education a way out of this dilemma?

Such a situation of increase in unemployment has apparently compelled the governments to delay or defer release of data or redefine measuring methodology itself or make independent institutes as allies of political masters. The new education policy has not considered this dilemma and missed to prompt a shift needed in the paradigm. Mere change in the levels of education, accreditations or system of pass-fail is not enough. Without disconnecting education as a precondition for jobs, much needed turning point cannot be expected. The recent national mission for Skills viewed more as a relief or rehabilitation option, not yet has become a movement for empowerment of our youth.

For years it is being talked of taking the budget for Education beyond six percent of GDP. This is not in sight. Without protecting education away from party politics with regards appointments, syllabus, contents of class books, and functioning of educational institutes at different levels we cannot expect a shift. Primary and secondary level education requires support of independent research, like the ASER. Such reports should be taken far more seriously. Independence of various educational institutions, like UGC, NCERT, etc., should not come under political spell.

I am reminded of several initiatives taken over the years to enliven education and employment. I would recall four as example. Jiddu Krishnamurty's (Rishi Valley School) in Madanapalle stands out over hundred years as for value based education for happier living. Why public schools could not emulate the holistic approach which is even more relevant today. **Second**, lesson from *Lijjat papad* experiment of more than fifty years in Surat had evoked entrepreneurship, productivity and self-motivation among women by taking to *papad* making from wherever they are and irrespective of formal education. **Third**, B V Rao founded Venkateswara Hatcheries which has become a phenomena, a national movement of empowerment and self-employment with pride. It even bettered nutrition levels. All that by a self-educated poultry caretaker on hardly a hundred per month salary who had put India on competitive global market. The number of people B V Rao had motivated country wide irrespective of their education and socio economic status is un parallel. **Fourth** is Anand Kumar of Super-30 fame in Patna. He demonstrated how those deprived of educational competence could as well be unleashed of their potential. His model is now being sought after by other states. The insights from these four example should force a relook at jobs centric educational system.

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