

Formal Education, Skill Development and Vocationalisation: The Missing Link in India

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Abstract

The contribution of education depends upon the values it teaches and skills impart. Education will become the foundation stone of a sustainable society only if it succeeds in imparting necessary life skills. Education without such enabling features can get reduced to a ritual. If skill development is defined as vocational education and is separated from formal education, the later is only a means of cultural transmission and often cultural reproduction. Formal education, as the harbinger of mass education, has definitely heralded social transformations through widening its accessibility and affordability contravening the limited reach of the medieval elitist education. The achieved status of being educated is largely appreciated as mobility enabler in traditionally stratified societies like India. But the enhanced social status, if not corresponded with upward economic mobility, has limited implications. Whether education, in its present 'adopted form and content' can achieve the benevolent instrumental goals in India, has been apprehended by many sociologists. This paper critically analyses the prevailing form of formal education in India and depicts its insufficiency in addressing the problems related to human resource development. It suggests that vocationalisation of formal education, as practiced in many western industrial societies, can ensure social and economic development for the masses.

Keywords: right to education, skill development, vocationalisation, employment generation

1. Introduction

The Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009 which came into effect from April 2010 has made the right to demand eight years of quality elementary education a fundamental right of all children (6-14 years) in India (GOI, 2009). The RTE Act is a giant step towards the goal of universal attainment of elementary education. It will further transform the achievements of the primary level to secondary and higher education level. India took more than six decades in developing the political will to take such an important policy decision. However, education is not just a process of making people literate. The aim of education cannot be reduced to appearing in few examinations or awarding few certificates after school attainment. It is much more than it. Collaborative policy shifts are also required which can translate the benefits of 'right to education' to 'right to decent life' and decent life here certainly refers to living conditions free from poverty, hunger, unemployment, ill-health, deprivations and atrocities. Vocationalisation of education system and provision of skill development at all possible levels are other such policy requirements that the nation is urgently in need of.

2. Objectives

Inhabiting more than 1.2 billion people and having more than one third of its population below poverty line, India needs to have a committed, comprehensive and innovative paradigm of education which would be relevant not only for the needs of the globalised world, but also fulfilling for its own population. The contention of the present author is related to the content and consequence of the formal education imparted in Indian education system. The core argument of the author is 'why skill development cannot be a necessary component of formal education system in India?' This paper tries to resolve some of the issues related to skill development, vocational education and vocationalisation of education, focusing on the needs of Indian population and the challenges it is facing.

3. Education

Formal education in India, in structural terms, is largely adopting its form from western models. In cultural terms, it contains the concurrent values of modern western system as well as traditional Indian society, and the concurrence here is not cohesive but reconciliatory (Oommen, 2007). The consequences of this non-cohesive structural adoption are many: growing educational hiatus between various sections of societies, large number of illiterates, non accomplishment of the universalisation of primary education, large scale drop-outs and millions of educated unemployed youths are just few of them. Education has far reaching potentials when it act as an enabling factor for the realisation of other economic, social, and cultural goods, as well as a catalyst for positive societal change (Drèze and Sen: 1995). It acts as a promoter of universal achievement-oriented aspirations in many societies. But the role of education, as a facilitator of human rights, democracy, sustainable development and peace (UNESCO, 1998) is also being questioned in the post-colonial and

going-global world. Often, it creates handicaps in fulfilling the increased aspirations by creating the divides between intelligent and less-intelligent, merit and demerit and more significantly, global and parochial.

Education, in general, refers to any process that shapes the potential of a maturing human mind. For many, education is limited to the work of certain special agencies, such as the tutor and the school, which presumably are devoted exclusively to the twofold task of teaching and learning (Counts, 1959: 403). Education, as the process of learning, finds different theoretical explanations. Sociologists have made great contribution in understanding education as a social process. Emile Durkheim argues that education teaches the skills needed to perform roles in increasingly specialised occupations. Talcott Parsons argues that a central function of education is to instil in pupils the value of individual achievement (Giddens 2009: 835). For the functionalists, education does try to provide individuals with the skills and knowledge needed to participate in societies. Collins (1979), on the other hand, downplays the functionalist argument that schools serve as mobility escalators. He cites evidence that students acquire little technical knowledge in school and that most technical skill are learned on the job. Although more education is needed to obtain most jobs, this situation is not explained by the technical requirements of the jobs. Collins calls these tendencies credentialism. Credentialism, as a term, is used to describe the increase in the lowest level of education needed to enter a field (Schaefer, 1989: 448). Applicants from poor and unprivileged background are more likely to suffer from the escalation of qualifications, since they lack the financial resources needed to obtain degree after degree (see, Akram, 2006). For Collins, a degree never certifies the level of skill development. For Zanden, education functions as a means of class inheritance (Zanden, 1990: 305). There has been a progressive reduction in the occupational and income return for each year of education (Featherman and Hauser, 1978; Jencks et al., 1979). Consequently, education as a social process is dubious: it is both a means of equalisation, and, a perpetuator of inequality.

Bourdieu has seen education in terms of his important concepts of habitus, field and cultural capital. These concepts are based on the idea that objective structures determine individuals' chances, through the mechanism of the habitus, where individuals internalise these structures. The habitus is formed by an individual's position in various fields, the family and everyday experiences. Therefore one's class position does not determine one's life chances, although it does play an important part, alongside other factors. Bourdieu used the idea of cultural capital to explore the differences in outcomes for students from different classes in the French educational system (see, Bourdieu, 1990; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Harker, 1990) Bourdieu's theory is very relevant in terms of looking education in the context of overall and larger environment. The functions of education cannot be same in different politico-economic or socio-cultural set-ups. Hence, an education model which is good for one society is not necessarily good for another society also.

4. Skill Development

The report of the task force on skill development in India (Planning commission, 2007) in its concept paper for setting up of National Mission for Skills says that skills and knowledge are the driving forces of economic growth and social development of any country. The economy becomes more productive, innovative and competitive through the existence of more skilled human potential. The level of employment, its composition and the growth in opportunities is directly associated with the level of technical and skill development. It is also a critical indicator of the process of development in any economy.

As per National Sample Survey conducted by the National Sample Survey Organistaion (NSSO, 2001) during 1999-2000, out of around 406 million people in the labour force around 397 million are working, and the remaining 9 million are openly unemployed. Considering the size of the population of the country, the open unemployment (which means that these persons did not do any work during the last 365 days) is not significant. What is of concern is that a large number of workers (around 125 million) are working poor, i.e. they are working, but are not able to fetch sufficient income to bring their family above the poverty line. The main reason behind such a situation is the low level of productivity and the income earnings from such work. The situation arises because of economic compulsions of the persons, i.e. in order to survive they are forced to work, which actually cannot be termed as quality work at all (NSSO 2001, Planning Commission, 2007). In this context, it is necessary not only to create quality employment but also to equip such quality employment with sufficient skills. Creating quality employment and equipping the labour force with sufficient skills are thus the major challenges before the country.

The report of the task force also acknowledges that the skill development at present is taking place mostly in the informal way, i.e. persons acquire skill at the work-place when they help their parents, relatives and employers etc. Such persons do not have a formal certificate and thus earn lower wages and are exploited by employers. They have come through informal system due to socio-economic circumstances of the family and the compulsions of earning a livelihood rather than attending a formal course. While their productivity is low, their contribution to the national Gross Domestic Product cannot be ignored. If the country can create a system of certification which not only recognizes their skills but also provides education and training in a mode that suits their economic compulsions, it will not only benefit the workforce to earn a decent living but also contribute to the national economy by better productivity of this workforce.

5. Vocational Education and Vocationalisation

Vocational education is an education that prepares trainees for jobs or careers at various levels from a trade to a craft or a position in engineering, accountancy, nursing, medicine, and other healing arts, architecture, pharmacy, law etc. Vocational education may be classified as teaching procedural knowledge. This can be contrasted with declarative knowledge, as used in education in a usually broader scientific field, which might concentrate on theory and abstract conceptual knowledge, characteristic of tertiary education. Vocational education can be at the secondary, post-secondary level, further education level and can interact with the apprenticeship system. Increasingly, vocational education can be recognised in terms of recognition of prior learning and partial academic credit towards tertiary education (e.g., at a university) as credit; however, it is rarely considered in its own form to fall under the traditional definition of higher education (see, Brodhead, 1991; Lauglo and Maclean, 2005; Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia).

Vocationalisation of education is not synonymous to vocational education. Vocationalisation does not refer to providing vocational training to pupils after completion of certain school level courses in a specific stream. Vocationalisation refers to increasing the vocation oriented skills and components of all education for all students. This is what Mahatma Gandhi intended in his 'Nai Talim' (New Education) system; this is what was recommended by the Kothari Commission report through 'work experience' and 'Socially Useful Productive Work' (see, Vigyanashram, nd). The aim of vocationalisation of education is to give the pupil the skills and confidence that he can make and build things, that he can act on his ideas and that he can acquire many more abilities through his own effort. This is the capability to act and propel him forward. Both 'vocational education' and 'vocationalisation of all education' will involve skills development. Whereas in vocationalisation, the skills development is intended to build the capability to act in a variety of real life situations, the vocational education gives skills for a specific vocation under well-defined limitations. Without the general skills development, the specific skill cannot help him to survive in the competition that is life. Therefore vocational education can only be useful on a base of general skills development (see, Vigyanashram, nd). However, the need of formal education cannot be denied while promoting vocational education.

Vocational education needs separate infrastructure and mechanism for the pupils. The total vocational training capacity of the county is 2.5 million while about 12.8 million persons enter the workforce every year. Thus, there is a huge gap of about 10 million. At present, there are only 5% workers vocationally trained between the age of 20-24 years through formal training institutions which is one of the lowest in the world. This percentage varies between 60% - 96% in developed economies of the world. Korea has got as high as 96% trained workforce. Even the developing countries like Mexico at 28% and Peru at 17% are much higher than India. All out efforts, therefore, are needed to increase this number to about 50% in the next 10-15 years (see, Vigyanashram, nd). One possible solution is that all institutions imparting primary or secondary education should also provide some basic vocational training by broadening their existing curriculums.

Theoretically, vocationalisation of education brings a meeting point between the functionalists and the conflict theorist regarding scope of education in contemporary societies. Through vocationalisation, educational institution produces the technical and administrative knowledge necessary for running an industrial economy. Viewed in this manner, education is a part of system of production. It not only produces existing social arrangements, but develops the know-how needed in production processes to fuel the economy and gain competitive advantage in world markets. Such productive role of education can also be harnessed by the developing societies like India in meeting the unmet employment needs for its own masses, a majority of whom is left with no choice but to live a life below the poverty line. The observation made by the UN System Task Team on the Post-2015 UN Development Agenda (UNESCO, 2012) also seems to be a meeting point between formal education and skill development. It conceives education as the transmission, acquisition, creation and adaptation of information, knowledge, skills and values. This is based on a vision of inclusive societies in which all citizens have equitable opportunities to access effective and relevant learning throughout life delivered through multiple formal, non-formal and informal settings. This approach of UN is one step forward towards vocationalisation of the formal education.

6. Employment Scenario in India

India is a growing economy and has the advantage of the demographic dividend thrown up by an increase in the working age population. However, the central paradox for India is that while the country faces a shortage of skilled personnel on the one hand there is widespread unemployment of the educated on the other. Further, about 93% of the workforce is engaged in the un-organised sector in the country and this is the sector where maximum employment potential exists. The report of the task force on skill development (Planning commission, 2007) identifies the specific problems related to employment sector in India, some of which need immediate attention:

6.1. Lower Percentage of Skilled Persons in the Workforce

Only 5% of the Indian labour force in the age group of 20-24 has received vocational training, whereas the percentage in industrialised countries is much higher, varying between 60% and 80%. The illiterate and literate up to primary level of education constitute a very high proportion of the existing work force; the two together account for nearly 67% of the work force. While the level of educational attainment of the existing work force is very low, the educated without professional skills constitute 69% of the total unemployed. A major reason is that the educational system is excessively oriented towards general academic education with little or no vocational honing.

6.2. Need to Focus on the Skills for the Informal Sector

The largest share of new jobs in India is supposed to come from the unorganised sector that employs up to 93 percent of the national workforce and produces 60 percent of GDP. Since small and micro enterprises are supposed to play a central role in the national employment creation strategy, they should be assisted in development of skills. The formal skill training system, because of its educational entry requirements and long duration of courses, is basically not designed to offer skills to the low-educated people.

6.3. Training for Specific and Fit-for-Purpose Skill Sets

It has been viewed that there is a great need for employability and outcome based training courses and delivery. Today, we find that a lot of jobs that are available in the market do not require two-three year courses. For a lot of entry level jobs across industries, the skills required warrant merely focused short duration courses. Modular structure of short courses allows a professional to upgrade his skills without compromising on his earning capacity for undergoing a long duration training programme, and provides him with the flexibility to acquire this at his convenience.

6.4. Skill Upgradation of Existing Workforce

Total labour force in the country is about 400 million. Due to fast technological changes, regular skills upgradation is very essential to ensure their employability. Further, every year 6 to 8 million new persons are added to the labour force. They also require skill development. But the present facilities for skill development are highly inadequate in the country.

7. Education, Skill Development and Vocationalisation in India

The Planning Commission of India in its approach paper to the Twelfth Five Year Plan states that education is the single most important instrument for social and economic transformation. The implications of the approach will depend upon the institutions, strategies and curriculums designed for imparting education at various levels. There is no denial to commission's admission that a concerted effort is needed to strengthen the education system at all levels: elementary education, secondary and higher secondary education and higher education. But it maintains its position of separating vocational and formal education designs. It makes subtle confession that parallel 'vocational education and skill development efforts also need to be strengthened.' It also states that skill formation within the formal education system will be mainstreamed from class X onwards. It proposes other innovative approach for skill creation outside the formal education. One significant implication of the approach is its support to perpetuation of a model in which skill development is not an inbuilt, intrinsic, or embedded component of education and the government needs to manage two parallel streams: one for formal education and the other for skill development and vocational education. Although the government had taken a position to promote vocational education during the ninth Plan, no significant achievement has been made in this regard.

There is an increasing realisation that an education module, without any skill development training, is a thing of past. Such education cannot create the edifice of a knowledge society. Addressing to the deficiencies of modern formal education in India, University Grants Commission (UGC) has observed in document on Development of Higher Education in India (UGC, 1978) and Challenges of Education (UGC, 1985) that if the present system is allowed to continue, the chasms of economic disabilities, regional imbalances and social injustices will widen further resulting in the building up of disintegrative tensions. The observations of UGC definitely points towards some inherent maladies in the formal modern education system opted (and continued) in India after independence (Akram, 2006). Saha (2005:87) in his brief sketch about the history of modern formal education observes that Lord Maucalay envisaged a British India by imparting western education to the natives, who could serve the interests of the colonial rulers. In British India, the boys from the collaborating landlords and noble families were chosen. The scope of education was not only limited, but also was alienated from societal needs. For Singh (2005: 56), in pre-Independent India, in feudal political system, education was the monopoly of the upper castes and classes. Chakraborty (2005) also makes a sharp comment about existing module of education saying that education, contrary to popular expectation and belief, has tended to accentuate rather than diminish economic disparities and a divide between educated haves and have-nots. Keeping in mind the anomalies

of the existing education system, a policy correction was very much required, but that is missing even this time.

8. Way Forward

Education is the foundation stone of the knowledge society. Indian society is at the crossroad. It has tremendous potential as a manufacturing economy. Its population dividend makes it a fertile ground for the service industry also. However, its projected economic supremacy depends upon its capacity to harness the human resource potentials. For human resource development, the educated masses need proper training in productive skills. Right to education Act has definitely raised the expectation of its billion plus masses. India needs to identify the missing link between its potential and actual performance. Vocationalisation of education is one step forward to bridge the gap. Self employment is the other possible alternative. The government is also promoting self employment programmes through different channels. Finance for initiating the self employment programmes is not a handicap as the financial institutions, both government and private, are committed to provide easy and convenient loans to potential clients. However, the unorganised sector worker needs capacity building programmes at initial level, for essential entrepreneurial skills.

Mobility from vocational training to academic education is at present missing in the system. This problem could be addressed by making conversion at various levels possible. Vocationalisation can make the conversion possible because the pupils do have a basic qualification along with the necessary vocational skills. Vocationalisation also addresses a deeper and embedded structural problem related to Indian society: the lack of dignity of labour heralded through the caste system. An exclusive vocational education after elementary or secondary education is regarded as inferior to general formal education. This mindset is the biggest barrier in popularisation of vocational education programmes in India. Vocationalisation bridges the gap between the formal and the vocational education, and hence will be very effective. Vocationalisation will certainly pave the path for social development and empowerment: two much desired and long awaited goals for the masses and especially the deprived and the marginalised categories including the women. It will also increase participation of people in the democratic and nation building processes.

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