

EDUCATION, EQUITY, AND SECURITY

Summary Commentary Revised

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Hotel Taj Bengal, Kolkata
January 2-4, 2002

INTRODUCTION

Our workshop has benefited from 35 distinguished participants -- mostly economists joined by educationists, academics, policy-makers, and staff of the UN and non-governmental organizations. Among us, we were pleased to welcome the Honorable Asim Dasgupta, West Bengal's Minister of Finance, and Tapas Majumdar, chairman of the Central Government's Expert Group on the financing of elementary education. We are grateful to our guests and to the four sponsoring organizations -- Commission on Human Security, UNICEF/India, Pratichi Trust, and Harvard University.

Over two days, we packed in eight intensive sessions -- moving from concepts, to field innovations, to policies and programs. Our focus was primary education in India in general, and in Bengal (both West Bengal and Bangladesh) and the nearby state of Madhya Pradesh in particular.

The theme of education and human security is timely. As vividly recounted by Tapas Majumdar, India's Parliament in November passed unanimously the 93rd constitutional amendment ensuring all Indian children of the basic right to elementary education (until 14 years and up to the 8th level). Recently, the Supreme Court mandated all Indian schools to provide free cooked mid-day meals. More than 50 years after independence, India has enshrined free and compulsory education into the country's constitutional fabric, but the gap between legal entitlements and on-the-ground realities is vast.

EQUITY, RIGHTS, AND SECURITY

We began by seeking clarity of the "seamless web" between education, equity, rights, and security. Alaka Basu cited the enormous benefits of primary education -- knowledge, information, skills, modernization, socialization, the opening of young minds to "new worlds." Sabina Alkire presented the Commission's working definition of human security -- protecting the "vital core" from "critical and pervasive threats" in a manner consistent with "human fulfillment." Amartya Sen argued that the underpinning of human security must include a focus on the individual, the role of social arrangements, and the strengthening of human development and human rights.

We reached consensus quickly that primary education advances human security by enhancing political participation, economic opportunity, and human capabilities. Drawing upon history, Emma Rothschild reminded us that education also generates self-confidence, reduces fear, enables risk-taking, and supports an orientation towards the

future. Good education endows people with better coping capabilities to grapple with crises. Amartya Sen described multiple linkages between education and human security - illiteracy is itself a human insecurity; education provides greater employment security; education enables people to exercise their rights; education empowers the underdog, especially women; and finally, education can socialize children towards tolerance and respect among diverse communities of people. Education, thus, strengthens the multiple dimensions of freedom from fear and freedom from want.

Amartya Sen explicated some of the relationships among human security, human rights, and human development. Whereas human development focuses on equity during economic growth, human security is concerned with protection against “downside risks.” It is insufficient to move upward together if we fall downward divided. Human security is a basic human right. In contrast to the first generation of civil and political rights, Arjun Sengupta argued that the inclusion of the second generation of economic and social development, such as education, raises questions about accountability and culpability. Amartya Sen described how the concept of “imperfect obligations” to ensure economic and social rights may be contrasted by the more “perfect obligations” of governments to desist from violations of civil and political rights.

Rehman Sobhan warned against linear thinking that more money, more teachers, and more schools would lead automatically to educated children and the realization of schooling’s social benefits. Structural barriers in access and quality threaten to polarize society, exacerbating social injustice. He called for the “democratization” of educational access, retention, learning, and opportunity. Educational performance also cannot be delinked from development. Jean Dreze pointed out that Himachal Pradesh’s superior performance may be due in part to the egalitarianism of earlier land reforms. Education is only one of many competing demands of people for development, such as clean water, roads, and electricity. Cultural development also shapes human security, such as gender-based insecurities associated with dowry in India, as noted by Yashodhara Bagchi.

INDIA’S EXPERIENCES

More than 50 years after independence, India has an estimated 50 million children out of school, about a third of the world’s total. This deplorable situation is well documented in the PROBE report (1999) that found serious weaknesses in public schooling, disturbing trends toward privatization and commercialization, and consequent fragmentation of educational systems.

Our review of innovative field experiences was encouraging. R. Gopalakrishnan described the Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS) of Madhya Pradesh, based on partnership between the state government and local communities. Any community beyond one mile of a formal school can demand state support for a community-based school simply by contributing space and supervising the local teacher. The state is obligated to provide a new school within 90 days. Between 1997 and 1998, more than 26,000 schools were established, now covering 1.2 million children. Strong political leadership backed by decentralization to local Panchayats forms the core of this

partnership. Another success story is Kerala State, where social mobilization in historical and contemporary times has helped to achieve near universal literacy, as described by Shiva Kumar. Himachal Pradesh also has demonstrated remarkable progress, due in part to governmental commitment and parental involvement.

Mustaque Chowdhury and Mansur Ahmed described Bangladesh experiences. Although coverage has improved, student achievement was disappointing. BRAC, a non-governmental organization, has developed “informal” schools for children that now service about 1.1 million children at \$19 per student per year. This vast NGO school system complements governmental provisioning by focusing on drop-outs from the formal system, who are mostly girls. Noteworthy is that FH Abed, the founding director, will receive this year’s Olaf Palme Prize for BRAC’s outstanding achievements.

Endowed with Nobel Prize funds awarded to Amartya Sen, the Pritichi Trust was recently established, and a team of Pritichi researchers (Kumar Rana, Abdur Rafique, and Amrita Sengupta) reported on their village surveys in West Bengal. Sugata Bose cited the deteriorating trend of educational performance in West Bengal. The Pratichi study confirmed the problems with teacher performance (absenteeism, social distance from students, unionism, and “economism”), weak parental participation, and rapid growth of private tutors. The recent establishment of less formal system called Sishu Siksha Kendras (SSK) seems constructive, but the consequent dual systems threaten to polarize academic achievement among the rich and poor. Private tutors help children whose families can afford the extra cost, but the practice also reduces reform pressures on the public sector. The consequent disparities between class, caste, and gender are significant and perhaps growing.

PROGRAMS, POLICIES AND FINANCE

Throughout the workshop, our exchanges inevitably revolved around how to generate solutions to these daunting challenges. Three clusters of strategies were discussed: (1) efficiency, quality, and effectiveness; (2) innovations of parallel systems; and (3) political will and resource mobilization.

Efficiency, Quality, and Effectiveness

The Pratichi presentation sparked commentaries by Pranab Bardhan and Kaushik Basu on institutional mechanisms to enhance efficiency and effectiveness among teachers. Incentive structures need realignment. In West Bengal, once under-paid teachers have witnessed significant compensation adjustments, to monthly levels of Rs. 5,000 to 10,000. Teachers, however, lack support systems -- refresher training, curricular revitalization, and teacher-parent committees. School performance is largely a local endeavor dependent on community participation. Teachers also have formed powerful trade unions to protect their interests (especially emoluments and transfers), and educational experts like John Kurrien and Anita Rampal suggested that more attention must be devoted to teacher motivation, capabilities, and performance. Kalpana Bardhan concluded that rather than adversarial or confrontational approaches, the strategy should

be cooperative and harmonious. She suggested “three Cs” – complementarity through cooperation, and competition.

The Pratichi and BRAC surveys both underscored worries about educational quality, curricular content, and child learning. Of grade 3 and 4 students who did not obtain private tutoring, only 7 percent could write their names in West Bengal. In Bangladesh, only 6 percent of surveyed children achieved satisfactory levels of all core competencies defined by the government. BRAC has developed rapid appraisal methodologies for assessing student achievement that warrant adaptation for India. Citizen action has also been promoted through an independent “Education Watch” that monitors and informs the public. Emma Rothschild reminded us that issues related to textbook content, including the deployment of new information technologies, deserve attention. Poonam Muttreja, for example, pointed out the importance of youth education in reproductive health and HIV/AIDS prevention. Especially contentious are the issues of “multiculturalism” and faith-based education. Amiya Bagchi noted that child socialization is the right of parents, but public education should open rather than narrow young minds. Amartya Sen echoed this concern by applauding the work of some schools systems that provides broad socialization, both public and faith-based. The issue is not affiliation but rather the quality of the educational experience.

Strong consensus was achieved of the positive benefits of the Supreme Court decision to provide free cooked mid-day meals – to enhance child nutrition, school attendance, and cognitive learning. As more than 60 million tons of food stocks sit idle, India can well afford to invest food surpluses into learning by hungry children.

Innovations of Parallel Systems

Innovative parallel systems are being established, such as West Bengal’s SSK, Madhya Pradesh’s EGS, and BRAC’s “informal” schools. All three parallel systems seem to enjoy wider coverage, better performance, lower cost, and closer social distance between teachers and students. For example, SSK teachers are mostly female, appointed and supervised by the community, and paid about Rs. 1,000 monthly, many-fold less than formal teachers. While not perfect, these parallel systems have helped close the coverage gap.

Two challenges of these parallel systems are operational effectiveness and systems sustainability. Less formal systems have introduced innovations that can be tapped to reform the formal system -- pre-service training, monthly teacher workshops, regular backup and inspection, and new curriculum. Community participation can be enhanced by contribution of space, teacher-parent committees, and accountability to local councils. For the longer-term, there are issues of sustainability in the evolution of the formal and informal systems as well as the public and private systems. Public programs must be invigorated to provide supportive conditions for effecting teaching and student learning. Informal systems, over time, will have to address the severe disparity in teacher salaries. Experiences of other countries may help guide this evolution in India.

Political Will and Resource Mobilization

Increasing the efficiency of existing resources should be supplemented by more resources. The Majumdar Committee laid out the macro-level financing picture, recommending that investments in education be increased from the current 3.8 to 6.0 percent of GDP. The Committee also noted that this increase is both affordable and would not impose harsh budgetary sacrifices. With nearly all state governments running up huge debt burdens (and most of the educational budgets going to teacher salaries), finding the extra funds will not be easy. Yet, an expansion of public budgets for education, even modest levels for critical inputs, is essential.

Regarding resources at the micro-level, Siddiqur Osmani noted that hidden or opportunity cost of children's education may be larger than anticipated. The PROBE and Pratiche studies, however, found high levels of family demand for schooling of both boys and girls, and Marty Chen countered that the opportunity benefits of education for the child and family may compensate for cost constraints.

In moving the agenda forward, the strategic choice appears to be incrementalism versus radical reform. While systems overhaul may be required, sustained constructive steps can add up to major improvements. Amartya Sen warned against making "the best an enemy of the good." He also recognized the importance of political will, citing education "as a political and moral commitment." Political leadership clearly made a big difference in Madhya Pradesh, and earlier in Kerala. Indeed, R. Gopalakrishnan's proposal to monitor educational data by parliamentary constituencies in Madhya Pradesh could strengthen public accountability in the democratization of education.

NEXT STEPS

Universal, high quality primary education deserves more than episodic treatment. That is why we have agreed to repeat this workshop in one year's time. Towards that revisit, we will begin today with an immediate press conference, prepared by Sumana Raychaudhuri. Vivien Taylor and Ellen Seidensticker will prepare a workshop summary for submission to the Commission on Human Security and the governments of West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh. As suggested by Kul Gautam and Maria Calivis, a concise summary will be developed for advocacy work by UNICEF in India and for leveraging education into next year's G8 meeting in Canada.

Over this coming year, work will be pursued to advance the goal of universalizing quality education – in India in general and in Bengal (West and Bangladesh) and Madhya Pradesh in particular. How this group can best contribute requires some thinking through. Capitalizing upon the partnerships formed here, the work is likely to involve information and research, documentation of operational innovations, independent assessments, and advocacy especially of financing. The research agenda is very practical as well as, in some cases, highly sophisticated, as described by Sudhir Anand in the measurement of educational inequalities.

Thanks are due to participants, mostly of who paid their own airfares and all of whom donated their valuable time. Special thanks are due to Shiva Kumar of UNICEF who took command organizing this gathering at late notice. Staff of the commission, Pratiche, and Harvard also contributed. This workshop was “hand-crafted” by Amartya Sen, and we are all indebted for his leadership. Thank you.