National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration
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Fourteenth Foundation Day Lecture

Education and Social Opportunity
Bridging the Gap

by

Professor A. K. Shiva Kumar
Development Economist and Policy Advisor

August 20, 2020

National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration

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Education and Social Opportunity

Bridging the Gap

A. K. Shiva Kumar

I feel very privileged to have been invited to deliver the Foundation Day Lecture of the National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA). COVID-19 has made this an unusual event in the history of this eminent institution. It would have been so much better if we were able to see each other and have face-to-face interactions.

The loss suffered by people due to the pandemic is immeasurable. I only hope that the worst is over and that people in India and across the world can begin to rebuild their lives.

I shall be speaking on education and social opportunities. I use the term 'social opportunity' in much the same way that Jean *Drèze* and Amartya Sen use it in the title of their book *India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity*, published in 1995.[1] The term 'social' in the expression 'social opportunity' is to emphasise that individuals and their opportunities should not be viewed in

[1] Sen, A. and *Drèze* J. 1995: *India: Economic development and Social Opportunity*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

isolation. What an individual can achieve through education or health will depend upon a number of factors shaping the social context including relations with others, effectiveness of institutions, and what the state provides and does. Also, the use of the term 'social' is not intended to contrast it with 'economic.' This is because many complementarities and inter-connections between social and economic opportunities make the distinction blurred especially when it comes to education.

I would like to situate the discussion on education and social opportunity against the backdrop of viewing development as an expansion of freedoms and an enhancement of capabilities – ideas articulated by Professor Amartya Sen. According to Sen, freedom implies not just to do something, but the capabilities to make it happen. "What people can positively achieve is influenced by economic opportunities, political liberties, social powers, and the enabling condition of good health, basic education, and the encouragement and cultivation of initiatives."[2] In this context, Sen lists five types of interrelated freedoms, namely, political freedom, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency, and security.[3]

[2] Sen A. Development as Freedom. Introduction: page 5. New York: Alfred Knopf; 1999.

[3] Ibid.

Before evaluating the role of education in expanding social opportunities, let me briefly recapitulate the many distinct ways in which education can be valuable to the freedom of an individual. Education is intrinsically important regardless of whether education enables an individual to earn an income or not (for example, many educated women in India do not earn an income). Education also has instrumental significance. It helps individuals acquire productive skills, get a job, and earn a decent income. This in turn adds to a person's freedom to do the many things he or she values. Similarly, education contributes to health and wealth. The more educated a person is, the healthier and wealthier she is likely to be.

Education also brings with it collective benefits as it is valuable for society. It develops civic skills, makes for meaningful participation in political and public life, and strengthens democratic citizenship. *Drèze* and Sen point to the empowerment and distributive roles of education, namely the ability to resist oppression, to organise politically, and being able to negotiate a better deal even within families.

The significance of education is articulated in India's New Education Policy 2020[4] which opens with the following two sentences:

> Education is fundamental for achieving full human potential, developing an equitable and just society, and promoting national development. Providing universal access to quality education is the key to India's continued ascent, and leadership on the global stage in terms of economic growth, social justice and equality, scientific advancement, national integration, and cultural preservation.

Against this backdrop, in this lecture, I shall evaluate the extent to which education has been instrumental in expanding social opportunities. Two qualifications. One, I shall limit my observations to school education. Two, I want to acknowledge upfront the enormous heterogeneity in terms of the contribution of school education in India. I shall still draw some broad conclusions – knowing that these may not be entirely applicable to all states and regions of India.

I have divided my lecture into three parts. In the first section, I shall flag some of education's

[4] *New Education Policy 2020*, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India (Available at https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0. pdf)

significant instrumental contributions to India's overall development. In the second section, I shall discuss why education's contribution to enhancing individual freedoms has been limited. In the concluding section, I shall list some actions that are needed for education to amplify, in future, the benefits from an expansion in social opportunities.

Education and Instrumental Benefits

Education has brought with it many instrumental benefits to Indian society. Let me list three of them.

First of all, expansion of educational opportunities has been an important factor, among many others, that has contributed to increasing productivity and expanding incomes in India. India, as we know, has experienced an exponential rise in GDP and GDP per capita, post liberalisation, starting in the early 1990s. Some part of this can be attributed to the educational expansion in India over the past 25 years. In 1991, barely half of India's population was literate. By 2011, close to 75 per cent of the population could read and write.

Since 2005-06, there has been a substantial increase in the percentage of women and men, aged 15-49, attending school and completing higher levels of education, and the gap between

women and men has narrowed. According to the National Family Health Survey-4, in 2015-16, close to 85 per cent of children 6-17 years were attending school.[5]

The combination of an expansion in educational opportunities and economic growth has contributed to rising incomes, better standards of living, and improved access to a range of goods and services that was quite unimaginable some 25 years ago. It has also contributed to a reduction in poverty. For instance, over the ten years between 2005-06 and 2015-16, the incidence of multidimensional poverty (MPI)[6] has halved – from 55 per cent in 2005-06 to 28 per cent in 2015-16. Close to 271 million people moved out of multidimensional poverty between 2005-06 and 2015-16.[7] One can only speculate how much

[5] International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and ICF. 2017. National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4), 2015-16: India. Mumbai: IIPS.

[6] The MPI looks beyond income to understand how people experience poverty in multiple and simultaneous ways. It identifies how people are being left behind across three key dimensions: Health (measured by nutrition and child mortality); Education (measured by years of schooling and school attendance); and Living standards (captured by sanitation, cooking fuel, drinking water, electricity, housing and assets).

[7] Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI). *Global MPI 2018 Report*, chapter 2: MPI in India, A Case Study. Accessed https://ophi.org.uk/multidimensional-poverty-index/global-mpi-2018/#t1

more India's income would have grown and multidimensional poverty come down had the country been able to assure good quality education to all children across the country.

Second, educational expansion has contributed to a significant improvement in child survival. In 1992-93, the under-five mortality rate (U5MR) in India was 109 per 1000 live births. By 2015-16, it had been halved to 50 per 1000 live births.[8] Child survival is closely associated with educational levels of mothers. For instance, the U5MR among mothers who have completed 12 or more years of schooling is half the U5MR among mothers with no schooling. Of course, it is not education alone but the interaction of education with many other factors that influences child survival. These include the incomes of parents, the prevalence of malnutrition and disease, the availability of clean drinking water, the reach and efficacy of health services, and the health and position of women – all of which have also seen improvements over the past decade or more.

Third, educational expansion has brought with it a reduction in India's fertility rates. According to the National Family Health Surveys, in 1992-93, India's Total Fertility Rate (TFR) was 3.4. By 2015-16, it had fallen to 2.18 – close to the

[8] National Family Health Survey-4

replacement fertility rate of 2.1. The decline in fertility rates over the past 25 years has been accompanied by improvements in female literacy and the schooling of mothers.

Several explanations are posited to explain the negative association between educational attainment levels and fertility rates. The economic explanation has to do with the incentive effect. More educated women, especially if they are in paid employment, have higher opportunity costs of bearing children in terms of lost income. The household bargaining model suggests that women's education shifts the intra-household balance of power in favour of women. More educated women are better able to support themselves and have more bargaining power. They also have greater say on matters including family size. According to the ideation theory, more educated women learn different ideas of desired family size through school, community, and exposure to global communication networks. Finally, more educated women know more about prenatal care and child health, and hence might have fewer children because of greater confidence that their children will survive.[9]

[9] Thomas J. Pfaff. How strong is the relationship between women's education and fertility? September 7, 2017. Accessed at https://sustainabilitymath.org/2017/09/07/ how-strong-is-the-relationship-between-womens-education-and-fertility/

It is important to note, however, that in all the three cases of rising incomes, improving child survival, and declining fertility, it is not education *per se* but education in conjunction with a number of other factors that contributes to improving societal outcomes.

Educational Expansion and Inequality

Let me move on to address briefly the question of educational expansion and inequality.

Until a few months before the COVID-19 pandemic struck India, much of the policy discourse centred around India's economic growth. Government of India had set out a vision to become a 5 trillion-dollar economy by 2024-25. This would have required a further acceleration in economic growth. Amartya Sen has pointed out that it is often common to think of development as an expansion of a country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). However, GDP or its expansion cannot be valued for its own sake. Income has only an instrumental significance. Higher incomes alone cannot constitute the ends of development. It is an expansion of freedoms that matters. According to Sen: "Growth of GNP or of individual incomes can, of course, be very important as means to expanding the freedoms enjoyed by the members of the society. But freedoms depend also on other determinants, such as social and economic

arrangements (for example, facilities for education and health care) as well as political and civil rights (for example, the liberty to participate in public discussion and scrutiny)."[10]

More education, increased awareness, improved communication, and higher incomes have contributed to visible improvements in the access that even the poor have to a wide range of goods and services. Today, many families living in 'slums' have televisions, smart phones, and motorcycles which they did not own some two decades ago. Young men in Delhi's slums wear the same type of T-shirts and blue jeans which children of middle class or rich families wear. So much so that if you line up young men in a row, it will be difficult to say who is from a rich household and who from a poor household. Your guess as to who comes from a poor household might be totally wrong because the young man wearing the torn or ripped blue jeans might actually belong to a rich family!

Similarly, better awareness and income expansion have made it possible for young women in slums to use the same shampoo and other cosmetics that are advertised by film actors. A relatively poor mother in a slum can afford to feed her children Maggi noodles that cost around

[10] Sen, A. *Development as Freedom*, Introduction: page 3. New York: Alfred Knopf; 1999.

Rs 10-12 a packet, just like a well-to-do mother on television does. This is partly because, with people's incomes rising considerably over the past 25 years, many more can afford to buy such goods. It is also because corporations have begun to market shampoo in affordable sachets or noodles in small packets to those at the 'bottom of the pyramid.'

These so-called improvements in living standards and consumption patterns have created an illusion of equality. Educational expansion and economic growth have led to a convergence in the space of consumption of commodities, but to a divergence in the space of capabilities and opportunities. The poor simply do not enjoy the same freedoms or have access to the same opportunities that children in the rapidly growing middle class families have – the opportunity to eat nutritious food, the opportunity to go to good schools, the opportunity to access decent health care, and so on.

Something more than basic education is needed for people to enjoy social benefits. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the precariousness in the lives of millions of schooled workers who come to cities in search of jobs. For example, migrant and other informal sector workers may be more 'educated' today than they were some three decades ago. But it is difficult

for society to reap the benefits of educational expansion unless there are sufficient policies in place to create decent jobs and provide social security to workers.

Similarly, while higher levels of literacy and more years of schooling may have contributed to increasing incomes, these do not seem to have necessarily bridged the income gaps. Quite the contrary. Many recent reports suggest that income or wealth inequalities in India are widening. A recent Oxfam Report[11] spotlights the dramatic inequalities in wealth in India. The top 10 per cent of the Indian population holds 77 per cent of the total national wealth. Also, 73 per cent of the wealth generated in 2017 went to the richest one per cent, while 670 million Indians who comprise the poorest half of the population saw only a 1 per cent increase in their wealth. Again, Lucas Chancel and Thomas Piketty have argued, using tax data, that income inequality in India today is higher than at any time since 1922 when income tax was first introduced.[12]

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[11] Oxfam International, *India: Extreme Inequality in Numbers*, Accessed at https://www.oxfam.org/en/india-extreme-inequality -numbers

[12] Lucas Chancel and Thomas Piketty. Indian Income Inequality, 1922-2015: *From British Raj to Billionaire Raj?*, March 27, 2018. World Inequality Lab. Accessed at https://wid.world/document/chancelpiketty2017wid world/

Part of the unequal expansion of income within Indian states can be attributed to persistent inequalities in educational attainments. Bihar and Kerala represent two contrasting profiles of literacy. In 2015-16, Bihar had the lowest literacy of 50 per cent among women and 78 per cent among men, while literacy was almost universal among women and men in Kerala. This is one of the factors that explains why Bihar's per capita income is roughly 20 per cent that of Kerala's.

While educational inequalities can lead to income inequalities, it is equally important to recognise that educational inequalities tend to sustain social disparities in society. I recall attending a meeting in the early 1990s with the late Prof. Myron Weiner, an American political scientist and scholar of India, who was addressing the issue of why India had failed to provide free and compulsory education for children. Prof. Weiner, a frequent visitor to India, would often remark that the living standards of the middle class in India, then a low-income country, was the envy of the richest families in high-income countries of Europe and North America. He would point out that the average middle-class family could afford to hire a cook, a maid to look after the children, a gardener, a driver, someone to wash and iron clothes – something that even rich families in North America could not afford.

He urged people in the audience to join him in a thought experiment. Imagine, Prof. Weiner said, we are in 1950, the Constitution of India has been adopted, and Prime Minister Nehru has convened all of us for a meeting as members of his Cabinet. Nehru asks his Cabinet: what is the one decision India needs to take today (that is, in 1950) so that 50 years later (by the year 2000), India will become the envy of all rich nations – in the sense that even the average middle-class family can afford to hire so many staff members to make their lives so comfortable? Prof. Weiner noticed the silence around the table and went on to answer the question: "Deny half the population access to basic schooling and decent education." "This way," Professor Weiner said, "the average middle class Indian family will be able to support an extraordinary lifestyle which is the envy of most Americans for another 50 years at least." There is so much truth to this statement. It is unfortunate that persistent educational inequalities have continued to perpetuate such social inequalities in society, especially when there are no social protection measures in place for domestic workers.

Education and the Flourishing of Human Lives

Let me move to the next segment of my lecture.

The conversion of education into social opportunities is mediated by a number of factors

that could inhibit the flourishing of human lives. Let me give three examples.

Take the case of education and employment. Conventional wisdom tells us that education enables individuals to acquire more skills, become more productive, get better jobs, and earn higher incomes. While this is true for Indian men, it is not the case with a large majority of Indian women. While educational levels of Indian women have gone up, women's labour force participation rate has fallen from around 43 per cent in 2004–05 to 23 per cent in 2017–18. India ranks among the bottom 10 countries in the world in terms of women's workforce participation. The only countries that rank lower than India on female labour force participation rates are Egypt, Morocco, Somalia, Iran, Algeria, Jordan, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. The trend in India's female labour force participation rates contrasts sharply with Bangladesh where the country's GDP grew at an average rate of 5.6 per cent between 1991 and 2017, and women's participation in the labour force increased from 24 per cent to 36 per cent.[13]

[13] Deepa Krishnan. As India Advances, Women's Workforce Participation Plummets, *World View*, May 15, 2020. Accessed at https://www.strategy-business.com/blog/As-India-advances-womens-workforce-participation-plummets?gko=762f7

India has not been able to create sufficient jobs for women, especially in labour-intensive manufacturing sectors, unlike Bangladesh.

One would not be concerned with the declining female labour force participation rates despite more education if women were free to decide whether to work or not. Clearly this does not appear to be the case.

Several explanations have been posted for the low and declining female labour force participation rates in India.[14] Some are not necessarily indicative of the restrictions on the

[14] Several recent articles have examined the reasons for the declining female labour force participation rates in India. See, for example, Sonalde Desai and Omkar Joshi, 2019. "The Paradox of Declining Female Work Participation in an Era of Economic Growth," *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, Springer; The Indian Society of Labour Economics (ISLE), vol. 62(1), pages 55-71, March; Erin K. Fletcher, Rohini Pande, and Charity Troyer Moore, *Women and Work in India: Descriptive Evidence and a Review of Potential Policies*, Centre for International Development (CID) Faculty Working Paper No. 339 December 2017. Accessed at https://www.hks.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/centers/cid/files/publications/facultyworkingpapers/women_work_india_cid wp339 .pdf; and Luis A. Andres, Basab Dasgupta, George Joseph, Vinoj Abraham, and Maria Correia, *Precarious Drop: Reassessing Patterns of Female Labour Force Participation in India*, Policy Research Working Paper 8024. The World Bank Group. South Asia Region Social Development Unit April 2017. Accessed at http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/559511491319990632/ pdf/WPS8024.pdf

freedoms of women to pursue work. For example, it is pointed out that more women in both rural and urban areas are staying longer in education and not entering the labour market at an early age. Also, more educated women are likely to marry more educated men with higher incomes. If family income is high, women would have less incentive to work and might be willingly opting out of the labour market

On the other hand, several other factors limit the freedoms that Indian women have to pursue opportunities for paid employment even if they wish to Caste and class may be restricting women's freedoms. The decline in labour force participation with more education could be due to the higher concentrations of forward castes among moderately educated women. This is because while it is socially more acceptable for women of lower castes to work, women belonging to higher castes tend to face greater restrictions on their mobility. Women from relatively better-off families with improved social standing may prefer to stay at home. This is because the greater the seclusion for woman, the greater is the prestige for the family. Cultural expectations are that married women should not work and that they should prioritise housework and care work; and women may be discouraged from seeking paid employment outside their homes because of the problem of sexual harassment and violence against

women --- on the way to work and at the place of work.

While there may be elements of truth in all of these explanations, the fact remains that for men, greater education leads to higher participation in the labour force. This is not the case with women. Even with more education, several structural and socio-economic as well as cultural factors limit the freedoms that women have to enter the labour market; and this thwarts the potential benefits of education.

The second example has to do with marriage – an institution that comes in the way of educated women pursuing a working career even if they wish to. Many young Indian women in middle class families are 'allowed' to work before they get married. This expression 'allowed' itself is problematic – in the sense that young women do not have the freedom to choose on their whether or not they can work. But soon after marriage, as we have seen earlier, they stop working for a variety of reasons.

Even more disturbing is the limited role that education plays even today in enabling women to exercise freedoms relating to their marriage decisions. Though it is true that more educated girls tend to have a greater say in marriage decisions, this is not automatic or the norm. The

exercise of freedoms by young educated girls and women is mediated by restrictive socio-cultural norms and traditions that govern marriage decisions. In 2006-07, the International Institute of Population Studies and Population Council conducted the first ever study of youth in India[15] in which they interviewed married and unmarried young women and unmarried young men aged 15–24 and, married men aged 15–29, in both rural and urban settings across six states. Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu represented 39 per cent of the country's population and were purposively selected to represent the different geographic and socio-cultural regions within the country.

The findings of the Youth Survey of 2006-07 were quite shocking.

- 35 per cent of girls got married below the legal age of 18,
- 54 per cent of parents did not even ask for their daughter's opinion about when to get married,
- 64 per cent of young women were meeting their spouse for the first time on the day of the wedding,

[15] International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and Population Council, 2010, *Youth in India: Situation and Needs, 2006–2007,* Mumbai: IIPS.

- 81 per cent of young women did not get a chance to meet or speak to their fiancée alone before the marriage.

The situation should have improved since then. But progress despite increasing levels of education appears to be slow in many parts of the country. A similar youth survey conducted in Bihar in 2015-16[16] reveals that the exercise by adolescents of choice and freedoms in marriage-related decisions remains severely limited even though access to school enrolment is nearly universal among adolescents.

- As many as 61 per cent of girls reported that their parents had not sought their approval at all,
- 94 per cent of girls had married a partner chosen by their parents,
- 77 per cent of married girls had met their husbands for the first time on the wedding day.

Let me give one more example of the seeming disconnect between education and the flourishing of human lives. This has to do with attitudes towards wife-beating and violence against women. The National Family Health Surveys

[16] Population Council India. UDAYA, Adolescent Survey, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, 2018–19. Accessed at https://www.popcouncil.org/research/udaya-adolescent-survey-bihar-and-uttar-pradesh-201819

asked women and men 15-49 years if they agree that a husband is justified in hitting or beating his wife under each of the following seven circumstances: she goes out without telling him, she neglects the house or the children, she argues with him, she refuses to have sex with him, she doesn't cook food properly, he suspects her of being unfaithful, and she shows disrespect for her in-laws.

In 2015-16, 52 per cent of women agreed that a husband is justified in beating or hitting his wife.[17] What is even more disturbing is that the proportion of women who agree that a husband is justified in beating or hitting his wife is higher than the proportion of men (42 per cent) who agree with this statement.

Levels of education do not seem to matter that much when it comes to attitudes towards wife beating. The proportion of women who admitted that a husband is justified in beating his wife varied from 50 per cent among those who have completed 12 or more years of schooling to 59 per cent among women who had no schooling.

Sikkim reported the lowest proportion of women – 8 per cent – who admitted that a husband

[17] International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and ICF. 2017. National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4), 2015-16: India. Mumbai: IIPS.

is justified in beating his wife. On the other hand, Kerala, where schooling is almost universal, reports among the highest proportions of women (69 per cent as against the national average of 52 per cent) who admitted that husbands are justified in beating or hitting his wife. Levels of education in Kerala also do not seem to make such a noticeable difference. More than two-thirds (67 per cent) of women who had completed 10 to 12 years of schooling admitted that a husband was justified in beating or hitting his wife. The Kerala data on attitudes towards wife beating are particularly puzzling given the efforts made by the State to advance health and education as well as promote gender equality.

The third point I wish to highlight is the link between education and citizenship.

The National Policy on Education 1986[18] underscored the broader goals of education.

> Education has an acculturating role. It refines sensitivities and perceptions that contribute to national cohesion, a scientific temper, and independence of mind and spirit – thus furthering the goals of socialism, secularism and democracy enshrined in our Constitution.

[18] Accessed at http://psscive.ac.in/assets/documents/Policy_ 1986_ eng.pdf

> In our culturally plural society, education should foster universal and eternal values oriented towards the unity and integration of our people.

Some of these ideas are reiterated in the National Education Policy 2020:

> The purpose of the education system is to develop good human beings capable of rational thought and action, possessing compassion and empathy, courage and resilience, scientific temper and creative imagination, with sound ethical moorings and values. It aims at producing engaged, productive, and contributing citizens for building an equitable, inclusive, and plural society as envisaged by our Constitution.

To what extent has our education system contributed to promoting equality, compassion, and sympathy? My intention here is not to examine whether we, as a society, are more polarised or less today than we were some 25 years ago. I merely want to point out that education, as it is imparted through our institutions, might not be effectively contributing to the equity and social justice agenda.

Let me give some examples.

One would expect that better education and more education will contribute to a reduction in gender biases against girls. However, this does not appear to be the case in India. For example, the child (below six years) sex ratio in rural India and among communities belonging to Scheduled Tribes is better than in urban areas across almost all states. This suggests that son-preference and daughter aversion are stronger among families living in urban areas than among families residing in rural India. Clearly, higher educational achievements in cities and urban areas have not been able to adequately reduce the grip of adverse social norms that discriminate against the girl child.

Similarly, the COVID pandemic has exposed how minimally interested the average middle-class resident and the rich in cities are in embracing notions of social equality and justice. Gated housing societies in New Delhi were never porous, but when the lockdowns started, many Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) began acting as 'vigilantes' and barred the services of domestic workers, drivers, plumbers, electricians and others from entering the colonies. They destroyed the livelihoods of these people in one stroke. Protecting oneself became the paramount concern, trumping any consideration of

how most of these workers, often migrants, would be able to survive. Some housing societies even banned the entry and exit of doctors and medical workers, citing the risk of spreading the virus. Equally disturbing has been the attitude of businesses in cities that simply shut down operations rendering millions of migrant and daily workers jobless and without a penny in their pockets. Very few employers even thought of providing these helpless workers shelter and food within their factory compounds until travel arrangements could be made. Such selfish and harsh behaviour of urban families contrasts sharply with the large-heartedness of many of the less educated poor rural families that open their homes to people like us when we go there for our field studies.

These examples suggest that higher levels of education in urban areas have not necessarily met the demands of social justice.

Let me sum up. Three factors have held India back India from converting the spread of education into a rapid and equitable expansion of social opportunities. One, it is not education *per se* but the socio-cultural, economic and political contexts in which education is delivered that matter for the transformation of society. Several adverse norms and attitudes continue to limit the potential of education in India to expand social,

cultural and economic opportunities. Two, efforts at strengthening the linkages between education and the labour market especially for women have been limited and unsuccessful. Three, India has not done well to promote the overall purpose of education, especially when it comes to civic education and meeting the demands of social justice. It is no doubt important to pay attention to factors within educational systems such as the content of textbooks, pedagogy, teaching and learning outcomes, and how education is delivered. However, such a focus is too narrow. It may have fulfilled – and that too only to an extent – the short-term goal of reducing educational backwardness, but it has not sufficiently met the long-term goal of strengthening democratic citizenship.

Three Areas for Public Action

In the concluding segment of this lecture, I shall list three areas where clarity of thought and concerted public action could help advance the education and social transformation agenda.

One, it is critical to clarify the role of the public sector in the future provisioning of school education in India. An obvious corollary: it is critical to clarify the role of the private sector in the provisioning of school education.

The National Education Policy 2020 acknowledges that public education system is the foundation of a vibrant democratic society, and the way it is run must be transformed and invigorated in order to achieve the highest levels of educational outcomes for the nation. At the same time, the private and philanthropic school sector must also be encouraged and enabled to play a significant and beneficial role. The policy states that best practices of private schools will be documented, shared, and institutionalised in public schools.

India has a large private sector in school education. A recent report on the State of Private Schools in India[19] points out that the elephant in the classroom is really the private school. Nearly 50 per cent of all students in India are enrolled in 4,50,000 privately managed schools all over the country. Nearly three out of four children in urban areas attend private schools.

This is certainly not the case in most other countries of the world.[20] In 2016, more than half (51 per cent) of India's children in secondary education were enrolled in private schools.

[19] Central Square Foundation. 2020. State of the Sector Report on Private Schools in India. Accessed at https://centralsquarefoundation.org/State-of-the-Sector-Report -on-Private-Schools-in-India.pdf

[20] UNESCO Databases of Resources on Education. Accessed at https://en.unesco.org/themes/ education/databases

Contrast this with only 20 per cent of children in high income countries who are enrolled in private secondary schools. The proportion is around 4 per cent in Singapore, 9 per cent in the USA, 10 per cent in China and 11 per cent in Thailand. In fact, there were only 10 countries where the proportion of children enrolled in private secondary schools was higher than in India.

Can India achieve universal schooling without a dominant public sector in education? A basic textbook in microeconomics will point to serious market failures when it comes to private schooling. Private markets will tend to ignore the positive external benefits of schooling and this will lead to under-provisioning of school education. How India plans to achieve universal good quality education with the support of such a dominant private sector in schooling needs to be debated and discussed. This becomes even more critical against the backdrop of a diminishing role of the welfare state in enhancing security in the lives of ordinary people.

Two, considerations of equity should remain in the forefront of discussions on education. Despite the growing access to private schools among the middle class and even the poor, equity remains a matter of concern.

The private sector in education is as heterogeneous as it is in health. In the private health sector, there are quacks on one side and high-end hospitals offering world class services on the other. Similarly, in schooling too, we have some setups that can hardly qualify as schools in villages that could be charging less than Rs.100 a month as fees, and at the other end, we have fancy 'international' schools charging even Rs.75,000 a month as fees. Even so, features of private schools suggest that they are perpetuating inequities. We find that a majority of private schools end up serving lower proportions of the poor, girls, and children belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. While children in India's private schools perform better than their government counterparts at reading and maths, reading levels in India's rural private schools over the last 10 years, have stayed the same, while arithmetic skills have worsened. And private school students in less developed villages have the worst outcomes. This could be because private schools working in lower resource settings may face an additional burden due to challenges to learning based on student background.

Equity concerns have become even more serious because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying loss of livelihoods and incomes which has exposed the fragility of an education system that is heavily dependent on the private

sector. At least in the short run, the private sector is likely to shrink, and this will affect the learning of a large majority of children attending private schools. Many private schools are likely to close down given the inability of parents to pay fees. Other schools that have low liquidity and financial reserves are also likely to close down. Parents will try to move their children to more affordable schools, including government schools. But government schools may not be prepared.

The United Nations and others have warned that the Covid-19 pandemic has caused an "unprecedented education emergency" and many children may never return to school. A majority of parents of private school students are unlikely to be able to support their children with digital learning. As a result, learning gaps between low- and high-fee private schools are likely to further widen, and exacerbate other forms of social and economic inequalities.

Not long ago, there used to be intense discussions on the need for a common school system. Now no one hears about this expression. We are resigned to a highly fragmented, unregulated and expanding private educational delivery system that continues to perpetuate and amplify social inequalities. This is very worrying.

Three, a strong political will is needed to fulfil the commitment to invest in education. India's low and stagnant public spending on education is a cause of and an exacerbating factor in the challenges of educational inequity, inadequate availability and reach, unequal access, low levels of learning, and poor quality of education.

The NEP 2020 underscores the importance of significantly raising educational investment, as there is no better investment towards a society's future than the high-quality education of our young people. The policy unequivocally endorses and envisions a substantial increase in public investment in education by both the Central Government and all State Governments. The Centre and the States, the policy states, will work together to increase the public investment in education sector to reach six per cent of GDP at the earliest. This is considered extremely critical for "achieving the high-quality and equitable public education system that is truly needed for India's future economic, social, cultural, intellectual, and technological progress and growth."

Unfortunately, as stated in the NEP, public expenditure on education in India has not come close to the recommended level of 6 per cent of GDP, as envisaged by the 1968 policy, reiterated

in the policy of 1986, and further reaffirmed in the 1992 review of the policy. The current public (Government – Centre and States) expenditure on education in India has been around 4.4 per cent of GDP and only around 10 per cent of the total government spending goes for education. These numbers are far smaller than most developed and developing countries.

Where will the additional financial resources for education come from? The potential for levying education sector-specific central taxes is small. The education sector has already got the benefit of specific cesses – a two per cent education cess introduced in 2004 to finance the universal midday meal in public schools; a one per cent secondary and higher education cess was introduced in 2007-08; and, in 2018-19, the education cess and the secondary and higher education cess were merged into a health and education cess at four per cent. The education sector also receives part of the proceeds of a social welfare surcharge of 10 per cent on import duties.

How will State Governments, which contribute to over 75 per cent of public spending on education, generate the additional fiscal resources? Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the fiscal health of most State Governments was in a precarious situation.

Let us not forget that Government of India has also promised to increase the government expenditure on health from around 1.2 per cent to 2.5 per cent of GDP. If public spending on both education and health increases, then of course the synergistic benefits are likely to be substantial. But these increases in public spending on education and health do not seem possible in the short run or even over the next 4 or 5 years. This is because the government will have to rely primarily on future economic growth to meet the growing financing needs of the education sector. Public expenditure on education can increase only to the extent that GDP expands – unless the State realises that there is an educational crisis and an emergency.

Concluding Remarks

Let me conclude by reiterating that India needs better and more 'education' today than ever before. There are many benefits still to reap from educational expansion.

The social transformation of Indian society (for the better) depends critically on expanding education opportunities. Education can and should contribute even more to the flourishing of human lives and to developing an equitable and just society. It can be a major factor contributing to the ending of anti-female biases and systematic discrimination against girls and women. Education can prepare young people for life, citizenship,

effective participation in our democracy, and meeting the demands of social justice. The emphasis of education, however, should not be only on imparting skills that are appropriate for the job market. We need fresh thinking, new public policies and additional investments in education to expand freedoms and bring about transformational changes in society.

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