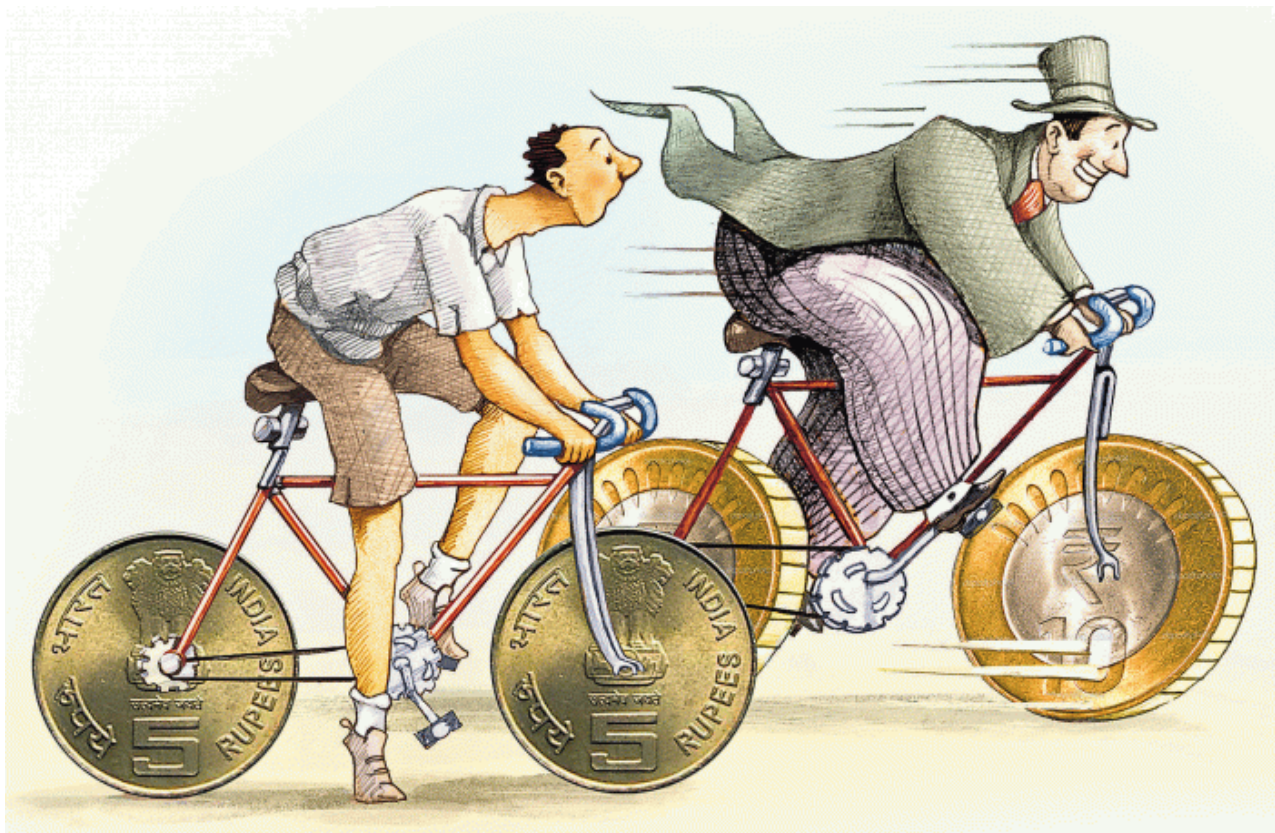


Margins to mainstream

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A friend posted an update about a milkman's daughter getting 93 per cent marks in Class 12 board exams and someone responded by saying, "What does the parents' profession have to do with their children's marks?"

A great deal, really.

The country was still not done lauding the amazing feat of the brothers, Raju (18) and Brajesh (19), sons of a daily wage worker, who made it to the prestigious IITs with ranks 167 and 410 respectively, when the details of how they were continually harassed for going to school and college, and dreaming of more, began appearing in the media. Belonging to a lower class, the boys faced blatant discrimination, not unknown in this country, but prevailed. Such stories of those who defy the odds of social alienation and economic deprivation are few and far between. Thousands of first-generation learners, that is, those whose parents have received little or no formal education, still sieve through the harsh social realities and retreat to the margins.

For generations we have seen children from families with limited means and the repressed follow their parents' profession naturally. As naturally as slipping into their shoes, as it were. I don't seem to have registered with much surprise in my childhood when the little boys who tagged along with their father, the dhobi, to collect clothes for washing, started coming in his place, or when the grocer in the 8x12 shop, the burly Uncle who seemed to have been permanently installed behind the big jars of boiled sugar treats,

made way for his son; or when I opened the door for the old, bent sweeper and in walked her daughter to wash the toilets? These children too must've wished for a different future, but when the daily struggle is to feed and clothe the body, how much further could they have gone?

But the proverbial winds of change are a-blowing. There is more public acceptance and sensitisation towards equality in society; role models and success stories for these children to emulate are real and believable; and many more of the generation that did not get education themselves realise its importance and are keen to have their kids educated.

Of courage

Our house-help's children study in the same private college that our daughter attended. This is the story of every urban household. She, like thousands of her generation — maids, drivers, dhobis, security guards — work hard to provide the best they can to their children so the children do not get sucked into a life of manual work like them. These hardworking men and women take on extra work so they may be able to afford a private school/ college education, tuitions, transportation, good clothes and shoes, mobile phones and computers for their children.

The obstacles these children face are not something we cannot guess. A large percentage of the very poor are unable to complete even the first five years of primary education. The cost of putting kids into school is high. Poverty pulls them back continually so they can do something 'useful'. When a child as young as nine can earn, how easy is it to let them to not contribute to a meagre family income?

What happens when the academic achievement is low? The reason may be uninspired teaching. The Right to Education does not guarantee good education. In towns and cities, parents forgo the 'free' education in favour of unregulated, arbitrarily steep-priced private English medium schools not just because these are a symbol of upward mobility, but also because parents want nothing to stall their kids' career prospects.

What about higher education? How are these kids helped to deal with the bureaucratic operations of higher education about which the other kids learn from family and their networks? More than five lakh students appear for the IIT-JEE each year. Most of them begin preparations as early as 12 years of age. That's a preparation of six years. This is true for other entrance exams for admission into professional courses too. Where do these kids get the resources, help and guidance for such preparations?

In higher education, the medium of instruction is almost always English, a jump that many find daunting. Gandhi shared his experience of shifting from the vernacular to English. "Everything had to be learnt through English — Geometry, Algebra, Chemistry, Astronomy, History, Geography. ...If any boy spoke in the class in Gujarati, he was punished. It did not matter to the teacher if a boy spoke bad English which he could neither pronounce correctly nor understand fully... His own (the teacher's) English was by no means without blemish... The result was chaos. We the boys had to learn many things by heart, though we could not understand them fully... I took four years to learn

Arithmetic, Geometry, Algebra, Chemistry and Astronomy, (that) I should have learnt easily in one year, if I had not to learn them through English but Gujarati. My grasp of the subjects would have been easier and clearer... What happened to me ...was common to the majority.”

Parents with little or no formal education fail to provide educational, vocational or personal guidance to their children. As part of the company’s CSR, we were conducting a career workshop for girls at an orphanage — introducing a wide-range of careers to teenagers. We began by asking them of their career goals. Most girls were attending regular school and many were very bright. Some wrote beautiful poems and stories and some were remarkable artists. But when it came to careers, they chose teaching or becoming a nun, the only two professions they had seen at close quarters. A couple of them, drawn to what they saw at a beauty parlour on the way to school, said they wanted to work there. Who bridges this information gap and provides them career guidance?

There is also the issue of environment and peers. Many first-generation learners live in environments that do not encourage them to continue their education. With economic hardship comes the need to help with domestic chores. Tai ma, who cleans homes, was deserted along with her three sons by her husband. She worked hard to put them through school. While two of her boys managed high school and found respectable jobs, one dropped out as he could not shake off the company of boys given to drinking and gambling in the slums they live. The absence of role models and influencers within the family and neighbourhood is an immense disadvantage. Raju and Brajesh’s success will inspire many youngsters in their neighbourhood and community. But most of these children do not have a believable idol to identify with or emulate.

Besides, there is the matter of social adjustments. This takes more courage and determination than we care to admit. My friend Kempanna, who comes from a very humble background and is currently a visual designer with an Indian multinational, tells me that he never hides the reality of his modest beginnings; the tough life of his mother who worked in homes; and the humiliation the family faced — everything that made him resolve to change it for the better for himself and his family, because he believes it gives others like him the courage to aspire big.

Of discrimination

Workplace discrimination is just as much a reality today as it was at the time of Independence, 68 years ago. But in today’s fast-paced, continually evolving, performance-based work culture, it is the non-performers, the misfits alone that can be discriminated against. A world obsessed with quick-turnarounds cannot be bothered with the social and economic backgrounds of a ‘valuable resource’.

This brings up the debatable issue of reservations. We may not have got rid of our caste discriminations completely, but modern India has come a long way from when the Communal Award was instituted in 1932 by the British Prime Minister, Ramsay McDonald. Among other caste-based divisions it created, which not just Gandhi but

Ambedkar too opposed, there was a provision for 'reserved' constituencies for the untouchables to contest from and for them alone to vote. Political representation is important, but the manner in which these have manifested into the clichéd 'vote-bank' politics to render much of our democratic process as well as reform and equality ineffectual, is shameful. Eight decades and much reservation reforms later, if reservations still need to be increased, there is something terribly wrong with this as a reform to uplift the repressed.

The need is for a level playing field for all; for extending financial support and quality education at the foundation level not based on caste but on economic condition. The 'free and compulsory' education under the RTE, envisaged to lead to a democratic and egalitarian society, is up to middle school. How far can a child go with middle school education? Also, when has the right to education guaranteed good education? We know the condition of government-run primary and middle schools. Much time and effort went into standardising the 'Minimum Levels of Learning' for each class at the primary level. But in the current system of uninspired teaching, who is going to implement and monitor this? Mid-day meals bring the kids to school, but are the schools good enough to ensure a different future for them? Does this education annul the opportunity cost? In the private sector where there is no reservation, people from humble backgrounds have risen exceptionally because reward and recognition is the motivation.

Of patrons & incentives

Indians, cutting across regional, caste and religious lines, have contributed generously towards the admission fee of the four boys from poor families who made it to the IITs this year. All four were coached at Anand Kumar's Super 30 in Bihar. Anand Kumar, the man on a mission, runs Super 30 that selects 30 kids from very poor families and coaches them free for the prestigious IIT entrance exam. The Pratapgarh brothers' (Raju and Brajesh) fee has been waived off; help and contributions from many including politicians, social workers and film stars have been promised. Not just the wealthy, but middle class Indians too contribute and help poor students in need. Sadly, patronage comes rarely to the average student who too must have a go at a better life.

Amit Shukla from Mumbai tells me that his house-help is forgetful, hard of hearing and slow, but they let it slide because in spite of a drunk and abusive husband, she has put her daughter through one of the best colleges in Mumbai and the daughter now works as ground staff for an airline.

These kids need guidance and mentoring as much as financial help. The wealthy couple who supported Kempanna asked him what he wanted to do after school. Kempanna being a brilliant artist, said he wanted to learn painting. He did not know what career options he had except that he could be a drawing teacher.

Shanti, the daughter of construction worker, grew up in my parents' home. She was bright and willing, but there was continual societal resistance my parents faced to enable her to study through school and college, earn a vocational degree and find a job. When she was

married off to a less educated boy according to her parents' wishes, she ended up supporting him and her two children. But as a Special Educator, Shanti is a shining example of the power of perseverance.

I still remember how her old, illiterate father would sit by the dim light in their jhuggi at night and ask her to read from her English textbook. Often, not knowing much herself, she would repeat the same words in different sequences till the old man, warm in the thought of his little daughter speaking the sahib log's tongue, fell asleep.

Will is the way

Radheshyam Panwariya is an assistant professor of Hindi in the Raisen district of Madhya Pradesh. At the age of eight, he was sent to a government-run hostel for the blind by parents both of who were illiterate. It was among peers that he realised that to gain independence, he would need to educate himself. After completing high school, he hit a dead end and did not know how and what to do with his life. He tells me he had Rs 600 left of his scholarship and nowhere to go. For almost three months, there was little to eat. When an NGO offered him help, he took it for his personal needs, but refused to latch on to them entirely and instead took up a job as a Shiksha Karmi. He studied in the mornings and worked in the afternoon to complete his studies. Many people he met motivated him. The lady who read lessons to him would know when he came hungry and offered food and milk. Whenever he lost sight of his dream of becoming a professor, she reminded him.

Radheshyam is a firm believer of the dictum that one must want to help oneself because he has a brother who too is blind and all his efforts to make the brother realise the value of educating himself and becoming independent, have failed. Kempanna echoes the same sentiment. He says a lot of kids from backgrounds such as his get opportunities but not everyone can go for the 'kill' that it requires.

Professor Prabodh Kumar recognised the writer in his domestic help. He encouraged her, and today she's known as the author, Baby Halder. Bigoted minds can cling to their insecurities, but the wise will give a hand where it is needed. I have just answered the door. It was the raddiwala who collects old newspapers from house to house. He has ignored my calls for the last two days. He smiles as I register displeasure and tells me in his broken Hindi, English and Tamil that his son has got admission into a medical college.