

Our weak educational outcomes have a wide set of societal causes

: 3/16/2022



Photo: ANI

4 min read . Updated: 16 Mar 2022, 09:56 PM IST [Anurag Behar](#)

The education sector suffers such neglect that we may need to recalibrate our expectations from it

In my last three columns, I asked, 'Why are children not learning what they should in school?' and explored the basics: the reasons relating to children, teachers, and then to the education system. This week, we similarly explore the range of causes that are societal. Needless to say, many of these causes are intertwined in complex ways.

Let's start with the overall governance and administrative culture in India, which is embedded in and shaped by our overall social and political culture. First, education does not get the importance that it deserves. Quick-fire welfare measures or high-visibility infrastructure projects are favoured over education, perhaps in the belief that this is what gets votes or plaudits. This low prioritization of education manifests itself in budget allocations, human resources and more.

TRENDING STORIES [See All](#)



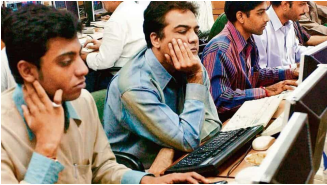
Premium

['Do not repost any leaked video': Leaders appeal on Cha ...](#)



Premium

New rules for debit, credit card holders from next month



Premium

Markets week ahead: US Fed meeting, and will Indian mar ...



Premium

Indian government issues advisory for smartphone users: ...

Second, there is a widespread failure to recognize that education is a matter of deep expertise, even more so than economics. But unlike the economic realm, too often key decisions on education are taken by people who have almost no background in the field. These are some of our top officials and politicians. The advice of professional educators is undervalued, or worse, ignored. There have been (and are) high-level officers and politicians with deep education sensibilities, but largely as exceptions.

Third, improvement in education requires continuity of direction and action. Most educational interventions would take 10 -15 years before they show any sign of real success. However, our governance culture is such that the priorities and directions are changed rapidly. Education, which is a matter of inter-generational change, just can't improve with this kind of instability.

Now let's consider a broad set of socio-political trends that have pulled back progress in education.

First, from the early 1990s, the notion that the private sector will solve all our problems took hold of our public imagination. This is plainly false. Now that over 30% of India's children in the past 20 odd years have started going to private schools and learning levels have continued to drop, at least that fixation has eased. However, we have lost two decades at the altar of market fanaticism.

Second, the notion that technology will somehow cure all our ills has infected us. With tragic learning losses during the pandemic, even the most enthusiastic votaries of technology and online learning have quietened down. Decades of global experience and research has demonstrated the cul-de-sac that technoholism leads to. But still, too much of our limited resources and energy has got diverted and distracted.

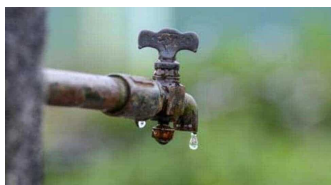
Third, the effect of sharp and deep inequalities in India over everything cannot be overestimated. In education, it has a very direct and simple implication. The children of the well-to-do attend elite well-resourced schools, with access to more than enough support at home. They have no problems in learning. But the vast majority of children in our unequal country go to schools that might as well be on a different planet. Thus, the well-off, who control or influence the levers of power, have no personal stake in nor any exposure to the reality of most Indian lives. It is this mental landscape of those in power that informs decision making and prioritization. This is a very serious limitation.

MORE FROM THIS SECTION [See All](#)



[Premium](#) [Premium](#)

Indian brands are big fish in a small pond



[Premium](#) [Premium](#)

Rethinking the use of water for economic growth



[Premium](#) [Premium](#)

Seven million mission? Maybe not



[Premium](#) [Premium](#)

Mint Explainer: Can Biden bring hi-tech manufacturing b ...

And lastly, there is no escape from poverty in our country. It shackles and limits learning in many ways. Let me just point out three.

First, poverty means poor nutrition for children. Not only does it undermine their physical and social development, including their neurological responses, it also has day-to-day implications. Hungry children, which is unfortunately the state of too many, cannot concentrate in the classroom. A malnourished child falls ill frequently and can't attend school. Education is not the only casualty of this tragic phenomenon.

One has to just observe the wasting of our children because of poor nutrition. We are truly wasting the future of our nation.

Second, poverty ensures that children do not have the same kind of adult support and care at home as in middle-class families. Not because their parents and grandparents love them any less, but simply because the adults are struggling to make a livelihood. Such adult care and contact are critical for learning.

Third, homes in poverty do not have resources that support and create an environment for learning. Their adults themselves are often inadequately educated and they are short of books, other learning material and time.

The list of such societal factors is much longer—mores that force girls out of school, caste-based discrimination, and so on. But let me stop here by mentioning something that is profoundly ironical. We have become a society where we think that the path to all progress and development is through education. Both of individuals and of overall society. Education has become our panacea. Despite such expectations, we continue to treat education and educators poorly. Without a fundamental transformation of our societal treatment of education, it simply cannot serve even a fraction of the role we expect it to.

We need to re-calibrate our expectations from education. Good education is foundational to a strong economy, good society and vibrant democracy. Yet, while good education is a necessary condition for all this, it's not a sufficient one.

Anurag Behar is CEO of Azim Premji Foundation

Catch all the [Business News](#), [Market News](#), [Breaking News](#) Events and [Latest News](#) Updates on Live Mint. Download The [Mint News App](#) to get Daily Market Updates.

[More](#) [Less](#)

Subscribe to **Mint Newsletters**

* Enter a valid email

* Thank you for subscribing to our newsletter.

[Post your comment](#)