

## A staggering crisis of education confronts the country

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We went from one ruin to another. One, magnificent and resonant with the wonder that it once was. A centre of learning with over 10,000 students, 1,500 years ago. The other, a centre of learning today, with 300 students. The classrooms surrounded by rubble, overgrown with thorny bushes. Locked up for most of the past 21 months because of the pandemic. The one room that was clear of bushes and rubble was being used as a vaccination centre. That is what I had gone to see. But in the fading light of the winter evening, it was three boys playing cricket near the boundary wall that captured my attention.

I asked for the bat; I do this often in the many cricket games that I encounter in the villages and kasbas that I visit, and have never been refused. We talked as we played. "Which classes are you in?" Fifth, 6th and 7th. In three different schools. "So, you were in 3rd when the schools shut, and you were in 4th; what do you remember from those classes?" Two of the children just smiled. "Do you understand the material you are being taught in the current class?" The two kept smiling. "*Darte ho kyaa, bolte kyon nahin?*" Are you afraid, why don't you speak? I asked. The conversation was all in Hindi in that 'interior village'.

"We must have the courage to speak the truth. Always," the eldest said. "We are not able to understand anything in class, sir. We have lost almost 2 years of school." He said it exactly like this, in English. The boy's firm, clear voice and his conviction and language were incongruous with the ruins we stood amid; the ruins, an apt metaphor for the state of much around in that part of the country.

The child's simple principle of truth is hard to live by. But let's try, if only momentarily, at the beginning of 2022. Not for everything, or even where it is perhaps needed more, but only for education.

Our education system is a mess. Children are not learning what they should. And there are deep inequities of access, resources and outcomes—often rooted in geographic, social and economic disadvantages.

Learning in India lags on every dimension of capacities and values that we want education to develop: Basic literacy and math, any real understanding of the subjects, deeper capacities such as critical thinking and creativity, core human values, and more. Higher education, unfortunately, is in even worse shape than school education.

So, our education system is failing in all its roles. Inadequate in helping develop the individual for a good life. Inadequate in its contribution to a changing society, which must become more equitable, humane and just. Inadequate as the foundation of a constitutional republic.

Without doubt, there have been improvements in the past decades: on access, on enrolment, on equity, and more. But we will short-change the potential of our nation and perpetuate injustice on hundreds of millions if we take this progress to be enough. Our nation's children, our nation's future, deserve much better.

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The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP) is a comprehensive road-map for improving Indian education. I suspect that those who oppose it most vehemently have not read it. I run into many such individuals. Or,

do so only because it has been developed by the current Union government. Constructive critiques would help the NEP's implementation. This is really the key now—and will require sustained effort, with the states and the Union acting in tandem for the next 10 years.

The messy reality of our politics, governance and culture will present obstacles to the NEP's implementation. Inspired leadership within state institutions and citizen engagement can help. There is a tumultuous path ahead. But given where we are today, the best chance that education has would be in the NEP's implementation in its true spirit.

We must not forget the lessons of the past 15 years. The abject failure of three things that were touted as solutions to India's (and others') education problems must be put in the corner they belong. Proliferation of private schools does not help; they do not provide better education than public schools. The massive increase in private-school enrolment in the past 15 years in India has not improved Indian education a wee bit. Technology is not effective in the core process of teaching-learning; imagining that it will cure the ills of education is delusional. The covid pandemic has hammered this point home tragically. Testing and then more testing doesn't help; that is like measuring someone's temperature repeatedly in the hope that it will cure a fever, and when it does not, punishing the person for not getting cured.

A staggering crisis in education confronts us today, one that is unprecedented in India's education history. Over 200 million children have lost two years of learning and more. If the states—which run our schools—do not address this adequately, as they must, we will have a learning-lost generation.

In those ruins in the nowhere of India, that most incongruous of theatres for a performance of moral clarity, I asked the child, "How, where did you learn all this?" "My teacher, sir," he said. "He says that we must learn everything, including English, and even more importantly must become a good Indian. Even when the school has been shut, he has been teaching us."

And so, the last truth. There is hope, because there are remarkable people. Unseen, uncounted, unnamed, but holding the world together, and moving it on.

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