

Strengthening the foundation of education

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Coorg is beautiful. It is a 5-hour drive from Bengaluru. A friend bought land there to build a house. A getaway for long weekends, and perhaps their retirement home. A year after he started building, he wanted advise on solar panels. We talked a bit before I realized that the house was far from complete. The foundation was still being worked upon. One part of the land they had run into soggy soil and another part into large boulders—a couple of meters deep. He said he was using this time to plan other things for the house.

About a year later he introduced me to a building management system (BMS) start-up. They were using his house as a show-site for a mini-BMS, and he was very impressed by their approach. When I met these people, I realized that they had spent a considerable amount of time with him planning the BMS. Since it was to be a show-site, they were ready to install free-of-charge, as soon as the house was ready. This seemed some time away, since the foundation was being worked upon.

Over the next year, I heard of his wife's painstaking efforts on selecting the right source for the Mangalore tiles. That was only one of the multiple things that they seemed to be thinking through in great detail. The matters ranged from water-proofing for Coorg's weather to material for the doors. Aside from the BMS start-up, they had the help and advice of many people. He is such a nice guy, and helps everyone so selflessly, that people were merely reciprocating.

We bumped into each other a couple of months ago. He was excited about how a GIS (geographic information system) based system will help design a precision-blasting protocol for the boulders. He was also very happy with the progress that he had made in sorting out every detail of the house, with help from many good people. "It will be a great place," he said and added, "You must go and spend a few weekends there". It seems some time away, since the foundation is still being worked upon. It has now been five years.

The bane of analogies is that if stretched, they break down. So we will use my friend's house as a limited analogy. What we do with education is much like what my friend has been doing with his house. He should have blasted the boulders or built a deep-pile foundation. Instead he has worked on everything else—often helped by well-intentioned experts, who have offered help. And he has not had the mental discipline to focus on the foundation, despite its obvious importance. The soggy soil and the boulders are still there, while he has designed the system to measure the heat balance of the house.

There will be no house or good education without a sound foundation. We ignore this, likewise, in education. Often distracted by other matters or misled by our prejudices and lack of understanding or deterred by the enormity of the task at the foundation.

The foundation of good education is a good teacher. A sound curriculum and empowering culture enable the teacher. Instead of working on making this a reality, a large part of the work done in education is on other matters. Some that is merely distracting and some that is counterproductive. Here is a partial list of such things: transfer of teachers and officials; more and more assessment of children, using ICT (information and communication technology) as a solve-all; using RCT (randomized control trials) to discover the obvious and advocate the myopic; "accountability" of teachers and schools; overbearing regulation and its data requirements; advocating privatization of delivery; and mechanical formulistic pedagogical approaches. Many more could be added to the list—instead let us consider why such things capture those working in education, pulling effort away from the foundational issues.

First, some do not even think of teacher as foundational to good education. They would do their best to reduce and eliminate the role of the teacher. Second, some find the matter of the teacher so complex and daunting that they would rather not attempt anything on it, but work on things that are easier. Third, credible experts from various fields advise and help them to work on matters and methods important to these experts, but peripheral to education. The experts have their own hammer, and so education is another nail. Fourth, there is desire for quick and visible results. Working with and for teachers is too long-cycle an effort for them. Fifth, there is inadequate understanding of the teacher's role and capacities required, and so a misunderstanding of what it takes to develop these capacities and enable the role. Sixth, there is a deep blindness to the social-human nature of education, with a tendency to reduce it to a mechanical and/or industrial system. Often it is a combination of these factors and some more.

The situation in education is worse than my friend's house. There are very good teachers. But as a system we have not invested in the capacity of our teachers, have undermined their role and importance, and vilified them continually, leading to their disengagement and demotivation.

If we really want to improve the education system, we cannot merely tweak the superficial. Preparing, developing and empowering our teachers is foundational. Soggy soil or massive boulders notwithstanding, unless we build a solid foundation undistracted and unfazed, our education is going nowhere.

Anurag Behar is the chief executive officer of Azim Premji Foundation and leads the sustainability initiatives for Wipro Ltd. He writes every fortnight on issues of ecology and education.

Comments are welcome at othersphere@livemint.com. Read Anurag's previous Mint columns at www.livemint.com/othersphere

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