

Education crisis about excellence, not access

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Every few weeks, India finds itself engulfed in a new educational controversy. One year it is an NEET paper leak. Another year it is allegations surrounding recruitment examinations.

Then come debates about CBSE marking systems, coaching centres, board examinations, employability, university rankings, student suicides, artificial intelligence, or the latest policy reform.

The public outrage is intense. Television studios erupt. Political parties trade accusations. Committees are formed. Investigations are announced. And then the nation moves on. But what if all these crises are merely symptoms? What if the NEET is not the disease but the fever?

What if paper leaks, coaching factories, unemployable graduates, declining government schools, weak research ecosystems and anxious students are all manifestations of a deeper failure in our understanding of education itself?

India today faces not an educational crisis but a crisis of educational purpose.

For decades, we have measured educational success through access. How many children entered school? How many completed Grade 10? How many enrolled in college? How many received degrees? By those metrics, India has achieved something extraordinary.

India is home to the largest youth population in human history. Nearly 25 crore children are enrolled in schools. Another 4.33 crore are enrolled in

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higher education through over 1,100 universities and 42,000 colleges. We produce roughly 15 lakh engineers, hundreds of thousands of doctors, teachers, lawyers and management graduates every year. No democracy has attempted education on this scale.

Yet a disturbing question confronts us: Why does a nation that aspires to become a developed country by 2047 continue to produce educational outcomes that resemble those of a developing one?

The answer is uncomfortable. India's educational crisis is no longer about access. It is about excellence. We have become satisfied with getting children into schools rather than ensuring that those schools are among the best in the world.

The paradox

India spends enormous energy discussing artificial intelligence, semiconductors, deep technology and global competitiveness. Yet according to the latest ASER surveys, significant proportions of children in elementary school continue to struggle with foundational literacy and numeracy. A large percentage of Grade 5 students cannot comfortably read a Grade 2 text or solve basic arithmetic appropriate to their age.

No country has ever become a knowledge superpower while struggling to guarantee foundational learning to all its children. Finland discusses creativity because literacy is universal. Estonia discusses digital citizenship because numeracy is secure. Singapore discusses future skills because basic competencies are already mastered.

India increasingly discusses critical thinking, entrepreneurship, innovation, emotional intelligence, metacognition, empathy and even artificial intelligence, while millions of children are still struggling with reading and arithmetic. The future cannot be built on a weak foundation.

No faith

Perhaps the most revealing



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statistic in Indian education does not appear in any government report. It is this: Most ministers, MPs, MLAs, IAS officers, university professors, judges and policymakers do not send their children to the government schools and universities they govern. No educational reform can succeed when the governing class has exited the system it is responsible for improving.

In Finland, public schools educate children across social classes. In India, public education increasingly serves those who cannot afford alternatives. Government schools still educate nearly half of India's school-going children, yet in many states, thousands of schools have been merged, consolidated or shut down over the past decade.

Instead of asking why parents are leaving government schools, policymakers have often chosen to manage the decline. Imagine if every public servant, from district collector to cabinet minister, was required to educate their children in government institutions. Educational reform would become a national emergency within months!

Not a priority

For decades, education commissions have recommended that India spend at least 6 per cent of its GDP on education. We have never come close. Public expenditure on education remains around

4 or 4.5 per cent of the GDP. Compare this with countries that transformed themselves through education:

■ Finland: Around 5.5 per cent to 6 per cent of GDP

■ Sweden: Approximately 7 per cent

■ Norway: Over 6 per cent

■ The UK: Around 5 per cent

■ OECD average: Roughly 5 per cent

Even more revealing is India's investment in research. India spends approximately 0.65 per cent to 0.7 per cent of its GDP on research and development. China spends around 2.6 per cent. The US spends over 3.4 per cent. South Korea spends nearly 5 per cent. Israel spends over 5 per cent.

Nations do not become innovation leaders by accident. They invest in knowledge creation with the same seriousness they bring to defence or infrastructure. India wants the outcomes without making the investments.

Degrees, not discovery

India's higher education system has expanded dramatically. Yet expansion has not translated into global excellence. In the QS World University Rankings 2025, India has only a handful of institutions in the global top 200. Not a single Indian university consistently occupies the same intellectual space as Stanford, MIT, Oxford, Cambridge, ETH Zurich, Tsinghua or the National University of Singapore.

The problem is not intelligence. Indian students thrive in those very institutions. The problem is institutional culture. Stanford alone produces thousands of patents and disclosures annually while generating companies whose combined economic value exceeds the GDP of many countries.

Several IITs have improved significantly in patent filings, startup incubation and research output. Yet even our best institutions remain far from the innovation ecosystems created by Stanford, MIT or Tsinghua.

India's universities primarily distribute knowledge. The world's best universities create it. That distinction explains much of our developmental gap.

Training job seekers

Perhaps the deepest flaw in Indian education is that it remains disconnected from context. A student can spend 20 years in education without solving a single real problem facing her community.

A student in Ladakh should graduate having worked on glacier retreat, water security, solar energy, sustainable tourism or language preservation. A student in Punjab should understand groundwater depletion. A student in Bengaluru should engage with mobility, waste management and urban design. Instead, students solve examination problems designed to test recall rather than relevance. The result is a generation rich in credentials but poor in agency.

India's graduates know how to answer questions. Far fewer know how to frame them.

The disease

The National Education Policy 2020 deserves praise. It is perhaps the most visionary educational document India has produced in decades. It speaks of multidisciplinary learning, flexibility, creativity, experiential education, vocational integration and critical thinking.

The diagnosis is correct. The implementation remains weak.

A bureaucratic system built for compliance cannot suddenly produce creativity. An examination system built around memorisation cannot suddenly produce innovators. A university culture built around regulation cannot suddenly produce discovery. Policies change faster than institutions. That is India's central challenge.

AI moment

Artificial intelligence has

fundamentally altered the purpose of education. Machines can already retrieve information faster than any student. They can summarise, calculate and generate content in seconds. The educational skills of the future are therefore not memory-based. Purpose. Empathy. Ethical judgement. Creativity. Systems thinking. Metacognition. Intuition.

The ability to integrate knowledge across disciplines. Yet India remains so far from these goals that we are still struggling to secure universal literacy and numeracy. The distance between where the world is heading and where much of Indian education currently stands should alarm every policymaker.

National mission

India does not need another education policy. It needs an educational awakening. First, government schools must become the finest schools in the country, not schools of last resort. Second, public funding for education and research must rise substantially. Third, universities require genuine autonomy from political and bureaucratic interference. Fourth, every degree should require meaningful engagement with real-world problems. Fifth, educational success should be measured not merely by employment statistics but by innovation, citizenship, character and contribution.

The countries that lead the 21st century will not be those with the largest populations. They will be those that best develop human potential. India's demographic dividend is often described as our greatest advantage. It could equally become our greatest missed opportunity.

History will not ask how many students we enrolled. It will ask what kind of human beings we helped them become.