

Article Title: “Transform, don’t tinker: India is undergoing steep educational decline that must be reversed”

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It was a made for television moment, waiting to happen for years. When an enterprising TV journalist last week cruelly exposed two “toppers” of the Bihar Class XII board exams by asking them basic questions, to which they gave embarrassingly clueless answers, no one should have been surprised. For all the precursors necessary to lead up to this pathetic situation have been on full display for years.

Who can forget the annual scenes of hordes of exam-takers’ relatives clambering several storeys of outer walls in order to hand cheat sheets to their wards? And though most egregious in Bihar, it is far from being the only state where that happens. It is no small mercy that the state’s education minister responded not with brazenness, which has become ever more common, but with some contrition, and announcement of a partial re-examination.

The decline has been evident from India’s appalling education statistics, not to mention the government’s responses to them. The most infamous of these, the PISA debacle, is by now fairly widely known. After India ranked 73rd out of 74 participating countries in the 2009 round of the Program for International Student Assessment Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), the HRD ministry pulled out of any further participation in it.

The excuse given then was that since PISA was conducted by the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), a grouping of developed nations, “there was a socio-cultural disconnect between the questions and Indian students”. But that hardly explains the better performance by students of non-OECD countries who participate in PISA, such as Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, UAE, Uruguay, Tunisia, Jordan and Kazakhstan.

As should only be expected, the PISA scores were not an isolated example. Year after year, credible domestic and international stakeholders expose India’s alarming education scenario, Unesco’s 2012 Education For All index ranks India 102 out of 120 countries. And the well-regarded NGO Pratham, in its 2014 Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), concluded that 60% of Class III students cannot read a Class I text, and 74% of Class V students cannot do division.

In this gloomy scenario, it is only fair to recognise what improvements there have been. In the past 15 years, the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan programme has seen dramatic improvements in the infrastructure of government primary schools. There has been a sea change in the number of school buildings, new classrooms, and even toilets. But

significant inadequacies remain, especially at the secondary level, such as the paucity of science labs in many a school.

In any event, the bricks and mortar part of education is necessary, but not sufficient to deliver results. There are many other challenges to be overcome, not the least of which is teacher absenteeism. A World Bank study concluded that one out of every four teachers is usually absent in India, and only half were teaching. Proposed solutions include daily cash incentives for teachers and attendance monitoring with cameras, while others have said teachers are already well paid but need better work conditions.

The 2009 Right to Education Act (RTE), enacted in the middle of a decade devoted to rights legislations, was well intentioned. Its champions believed making education every child's right would transform the sector in much the same way that the 2005 Right to Information Act (RTI) galvanised activism. The reality has been markedly different.

Some of the RTE's utopian ideas have already fallen victim to the law of unintended consequences, such as the estimated 8,000 private schools shut down according to London University's Geeta Kingdon. While the intention was to impose minimum infrastructure standards on potentially fly-by-night schools, the result has often been to penalise the many poorly equipped private schools that have nevertheless been producing far better results than their well-funded government counterparts.

The RTE provision to no longer hold back underperforming students for an extra year is opposed by many on the ground that it is a cynical way to keep enrollment numbers high, while contributing to the atrocious exam results. A section of RTE opponents are also exercised by the exemptions provided to minority institutions, which they perceive as unfair and harmful to national consensus building. But there seems to be little governmental appetite to reconsider that, especially since a five-judge Supreme Court constitutional bench has upheld it.

Nevertheless, much is sought to be addressed by a new National Education Policy (NEP), though that itself is facing its own share of controversy. The kerfuffle about when a report commissioned by the government ought to be released, immediately or after states have commented on it, is a storm in a teacup. Of far more concern should have been why it was given to mostly retired bureaucrats, rather than academics and experts, to prepare.

Despite all this, it is heartening to see increasing examples of bright students emerging from rural areas, some from government schools, but proportionately many more from schools run by missionaries – the Saraswati Shishu Mandirs are now matching the traditionally successful convent schools – as well as NGOs, and even low cost for-profit schools. All these need to be encouraged, not hindered.

The big challenge remains to fund education adequately, yet keep it free of the red tape that is stifling it. It remains to be seen if this government is looking to tinker or transform.