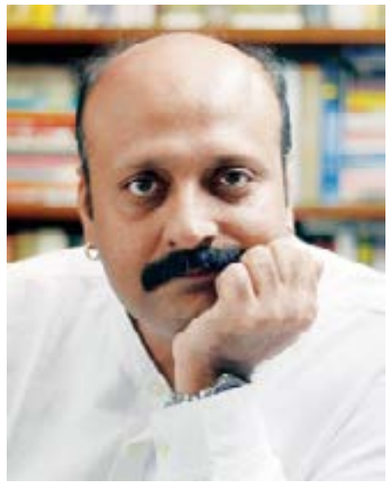
INDIA'S EDUCATION CHALLENGE:

Low Learning Outcomes & Underperforming Higher Education



Clockwise from the left :
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*"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." —**Nelson Mandela***

INDIA, HOME TO 20 per cent of the world's youth population, stands at the cusp of a demographic dividend set to peak in 2041. This demographic advantage can only transform India's growth if the country's youth population is equipped with the requisite skills to enhance the country's productivity on the global stage. To empower the younger population with a high level of requisite skills, a robust and efficient education system is essential, particularly at the higher education level. In recent years, India has made significant strides in improving its access to basic education, but considerable gaps persist at the higher education level that must be addressed to fully harness this potential.

Two key factors determine an education system's effectiveness in improving a country's human capital. The first is widespread access and high enrolment across all levels of education, from primary school to tertiary institutions. The second crucial factor is the quality of education, which is measured by the level of learning outcomes for the country's students.

Regarding the first factor of Access to Education, at the Primary and Upper Primary levels, India has been able to bring the majority of the students under the formal education system, with the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) reaching 100.13 per cent at the elementary level, i.e. class one to the eight, an improvement from 97.4 per cent in the year 2011-12. The transition rate to the secondary level stood at 88.81 per cent in 2021-22, resulting in a GER of 79.56 per cent at the Secondary level of Education, i.e. Class IX-X. However, enrolment steadily declines as students progress to higher levels of education.

Only 78.41 per cent of the children transition from Secondary to Higher Secondary Education, resulting in a GER at the higher secondary level dropping to a mere 57.76 per cent. This low GER at the higher secondary level further contributes to fewer people enrolling in undergraduate and post-postgraduate programmes, causing the GER at the higher education level to fall to just 28.40 per cent. This worrying trend is underscored by Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) data, which reveals that less than 10 per cent of the population has completed a graduate degree or above. In contrast, 52.4 per cent of the Indian workforce has only primary education, and 37.8 per cent have secondary education. The low attainment of higher-level education consequently leads to most of the population being employed at low-level occupations and less high-skilled activities in the country.

The second key factor is the quality of learning outcomes, representing one of the most significant challenges facing the Indian education system. This challenge is particularly pronounced at the school education level, as evidenced by findings from the National Assessment Survey (NAS). The findings of the NAS conducted for children studying in classes three, five, eight and ten, highlight the lack of basic foundational skills of numeracy and proficiency among Indian students. In the assessments conducted as part of the survey, the students attempt tests based on various subjects and are awarded scores out of 500 for each subject.

Photograph by Tribhuwan Sharma

As India undergoes structural transformation toward highly sophisticated industries, immediate action is essential to foster high-level skills across the majority of its population

At the Class three level, Indian students, on average, scored 323 and 306 in language and mathematics, respectively. However, as the classes progressed, a decline in the average score of students in both subjects was observed. Class five students scored 309 in language, falling to 302 in Class eight and 277 in Class 10. In mathematical proficiency, class five students scored 284 marks, falling further to 255 in class eight and ultimately reaching 220 in class ten, i.e. less than 50 per cent of the maximum. This lack of a strong foundational education creates a growing deficit in essential skills as students progress through the grades, becoming particularly pronounced at the higher education level.

The trend of poor outcomes evident in school education continues into higher education, reflected in low graduation rates among degree-seeking students. According to the All India Survey for Higher Education (AISHE), only 23.4 per cent of students enrolled at the undergraduate level in the country complete their degrees. However, the decline of out-turn rate from 32.71 per cent in 2011-12, a drop of almost nine percentage points in over a decade, presents an even more concerning picture. At the discipline level, out-turn rates in medical sciences have halved, dropping from 35.29 per cent to 17.20 per cent. Among the undergraduate degrees, out-turn of the science courses declined by seven percentage points, whereas arts saw a greater decline by 13 percentage points. The worst fall was witnessed by medical sciences where out-turn rates have halved, dropping from 35.29 per cent to 17.20 per cent.

The steepest fall in rate was witnessed in the education sector, with the passing rate falling from 75.47 per cent in 2011-12 to a mere 40.30 per cent in 2021-22. At the postgraduate level, the pass rate among the courses at PhD level also dropped significantly from 26.78 per cent to 15.34 per cent in a decade. These low out-turn rates significantly contribute to the low number of highly skilled workers entering the workforce, suggesting a need to improve higher education's capacity to produce graduates with the necessary expertise. This scarcity of highly skilled individuals consequently limits the workforce's ability to perform complex, high-skilled activities crucial for innovation and economic growth.

India has made significant strides in expanding access to education for every potential student. At the primary education level, initiatives such as the Midday Meal, National Education Policy, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, the Right to Education Act, 2009 and the most recent National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy (NIPUN Bharat) played a crucial role in enrolling students into the formal school education system. At the higher education level, the growing number of educational institutions further reiterates the increased accessibility to all levels of education in the country. However, the persistent low learning outcomes at the school level and the low transition rates to higher education significantly impede India's progress towards realising its full potential. At this pivotal moment, as India undergoes structural transformation toward highly sophisticated industries, immediate action is essential to foster high-level skills across the majority of its population. BW

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