

Educating India: Matter of money or the mindset?

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The activists demand that the government of India must spend at least 6% of GDP on education. They claim that this is the minimum money required to assure quality education to all.

There are four specific problems with this mantra of 6%:

1. It emphasizes **how much** money is spent and not **how** it is spent. It puts quantity over the quality of spending.
2. It focuses only on government spending and belittles the money spent by parents, rich and poor.
3. It implies that the money must be spent on government schools. The schools become the centre of focus, not the education of children.
4. It mandates equal subsidy for all, so the parents who spent say Rs 4 lac in the final year of the school, have to spend only Rs 4000 when the child enters the college. The subsidy goes to those who don't really need it.

Let me elaborate on these four points and indirectly suggest where the government money would be better spent to achieve quality education for all.

How much and how?

Given the mantra of 6%, after every government budget, the discussion immediately steers towards how little money has been allocated to education. The sighs, breast-beating, dharnas and wada na todo abhiyan's take over! We fail to ask what education did we get from what the government spent last year? Since the government did not spend 6% of GDP last year, the argument goes, it is obvious that we couldn't have gotten much of education. We can ask about education only after government actually spends 6%, until then only the votaries of school choice would raise that issue as they want to shrink government spending and incite privatization of education. The critical distinction between outlays and outcomes becomes moot, or is turned into an ideological battle between those who favour and oppose government schooling. The focus on **how much**, which is an easy glib slogan that goes well with emotional stories from the 'field', undermines the more relevant question of **how**, which requires less moralizing but more nuanced discussion and stronger empirical evidence.

Private spending be damned!

The ASER 2012 report points out that there has been a significant rise in private schooling; the enrollment went from 18.7% in 2010 to 28.3% in 2012. These figures are based on a study of schools in rural areas, the numbers in urban areas much higher, up to 70% private enrollment in states like Punjab and Haryana. The numbers tell us a great deal about how

much parents are spending on education. Majority of these private schools are not the elite, high fee schools but budget schools with fees often less than Rs 200 a month. The rich may spend more per student but there are more poor children in private schools; the spending by poor parents constitutes a sizable proportion of the overall private education spending. The poor parents' choice of budget private schools—I call them budget performing schools—is casually dismissed with the suggestion that they are illiterate and unable to discern quality of education and are gullible and swayed by the sleek marketing campaigns. The irony is that most of those who belittle the choice of poor parents think they are the real champions of the poor!

Recently there has seen a number of protests in Delhi, Haryana and Punjab—private school owners and parents of students enrolled in these schools, taking to the streets to protest the closure of budget private schools in the face of RTE norms. The question these parents ask: Why is government taking away my option without **first** improving the schools that it funds and runs? The day government schools begin to perform, would I (the poor parent) not rush to them and save the money I spend on private schools?

If we add up all the private education spending on schools and colleges, tuitions and coaching classes of all types, vocational training, and also the money spent abroad for education, though we don't have exact numbers, a guesstimate would be about 2 to 2.5% of GDP. If you then add the government spending of 3.5 to 3.8%, you get pretty close to 6% of GDP. However the mantra that the government must spend 6% of GDP must denigrate any private spending that may dilute the cherished claim.

Government system must expand at any cost!

Often during discussions with education ministers and officials, they remark, "Our schools are not as bad as people think." The statement is very revealing; they think that the only government schools are their schools. Their attachment and responsibility are to government schools, not to the education of India's all children. With this division of our schools versus their schools, their attitude towards private schools, at an instinctual level at the least, becomes antagonistic. On seeing the immediate facial reaction, the remark is usually withdrawn with the assurance that they look after every child, not just those who go to government schools.

When you add the mantra of 6% to this outlook, the inexorable momentum is to expand government schooling—build more schools, hire more teachers, spend more, even more. The self-interest of the government also dovetails well with this expansion—who doesn't want a bigger ministry, a bigger budget, a larger number of people to hire.

Despite the strong evidence (see PAISA reports) that the government has not been able to spend what was allocated last year, the 6% wallas are relentless—allocate more, even more, the government will somehow find a way to spend all of it **this** year. Under the constant pressure to spend more, if government officials start thinking about some new ideas than

just building more schools, like scholarships, public-private partnerships, school vouchers, cash transfers or charter schools, then they are instantly denounced as saboteurs. So the only correct and legitimate way to spend higher budgetary allocation is to expand government schooling. And all learned people know that reform ideas like school choice and school vouchers come from Chile's Pinochet, or religious right Reaganites in the US or the anti-people Thatcherites in the UK, or take your pick of a 'right-wing dictator' that you despise.

At government committee meetings dominated by 6%wallas, after the first couple of hours of discussion, when we break for lunch, I often find myself standing all alone, no one daring even to make an eye contact. Having questioned the efficiency of government spending and accountability of teachers in government schools, and suggesting that Bangladesh's cash transfer program has led to more girls than boys in schools, I apparently have completely lost my humanity.

The government therefore must allocate more and expand only government schooling, no matter whether it leads to better education or not.

Subsidise all, money is just a printing press away!

To keep the government schools and colleges accessible to all, the fees are kept very low or close to zero, certainly far lower than what it costs the government. This leads to bizarre situation where a student who spent several lacs on a private school and several coaching classes, pays a few thousand rupees on entering, say, the Miranda House. Or a student enrolled in a Master's program at JNU with hostel facility pays a few thousand rupees but spends several lacs on an UPSC coaching class. Solidarity requires that all must be subsidized.

The fact is that even with zero college fees, the poor won't be able to go to the college because she still needs money for room and board and for notebooks and textbooks. The higher education subsidy goes primarily to middle and upper classes. Why not charge them higher fees and use that money to subsidise the poor through scholarships? They would then be less beholden to the public system and their support may wane, jeopardising the larger goal of keeping the state system expanding. Moreover they are already abandoning government schools, so low fee colleges is the only way left to keep the flock together.

The mantra that the government must spend 6% of GDP on education is in reality a noose on the overall education system by making the survival of the government education as the principal goal, and by chocking off alternative methods of funding, innovations and diversity necessary for an engaging and adaptive system of learning relevant for the challenges of the 21st century. Please abandon the mantra; start reading the shastra.

- Parth J Shah
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