

# Recrafting Indian education

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*Something very right seemed to have been happening in education 400 years ago. What can we reclaim now?*

Brazil's beautiful, fun and free football style is characterised by ... creativity, swing, various rhythms and choreographies.

*The combination of those elements is called 'ginga'.*

*The path to hell and damnation is paved with the most pious intentions! And rules made by men are often flawed.*

Either we already have the best ideas, and so we pursue them. Or we are looking for improvement, reassessment. We can improve the present through some small tweaks or a set of many adjustments. Three features of the present direction of education in India need to be questioned for the present and the emerging future. Is the centralised nature of education answering the needs of the present? What are the urgent and necessary changes needed to be made in the aims of education? Should education lean heavily on technology?

Not so long ago, about 200 years ago, the British rulers were said to have found that in Indian villages every man, woman and child knew how to read, write and do arithmetic. There are British records from that period that show this. Shri Dharampal explains in *The Beautiful Tree*,

**“The most well-known and controversial point which emerged from the educational surveys lies in an observation made by William Adam. In his first report, he observed that there exist about 1,00,000 village schools in Bengal and Bihar around the 1830s.”**

[This statement appears to have been founded on the impressions of various high British officials and others who had known the different areas rather intimately and over long periods of time; it had no known backing of official records. Similar statements had been made, much before W. Adam, for areas of the Madras Presidency. Men like Thomas Munro had observed that 'every village had a school'. For areas of the newly extended Presidency of Bombay around 1820, senior officials like G.L. Prendergast noted that 'there is hardly a village, great or small, throughout our territories, in which there is not at least one school, and in larger villages more.' Observations made by Dr. G.W. Leitner in 1882 show that the spread of education in the Punjab around 1850 was of a similar extent. These surveys, based not on mere impressions but on hard data, reveal a great deal: the nature of Indian education; its content; the duration for which it ordinarily lasted; the numbers actually receiving institutional education in particular areas; and, most importantly, detailed information on the background of those benefiting from these institutions.]

The Beautiful Tree further stated:

“The idea of a school existing in every village, dramatic and picturesque in itself, attracted great notice and eclipsed the equally important details. The more detailed and hard facts have received hardly any notice or analysis. This is both natural and unfortunate. For these latter facts provide an insight into the nature of Indian society at that time. Deeper analysis of this data and adequate reflection on the results followed by required further research may help solve even the riddle of what has been termed 'the legend of the 1,00,000 schools.’”

*“According to this hard data, in terms of the content, and the proportion of those attending institutional school education, the situation in India in 1800 is certainly not inferior to what obtained in England then; and in many respects Indian schooling seems to have been much more extensive (and, it should be remembered, that it is a greatly damaged and disorganised India that one is referring to). The content of studies was better than what was then studied in England. The duration of study was more prolonged. The method of school teaching was superior and it is this very method which is said to have greatly helped the introduction of popular education in England but which had prevailed in India for centuries. School attendance, especially in the districts of the Madras Presidency, even in the decayed state of the period 1822-25, was proportionately far higher than the numbers in all variety of schools in England in 1800. The conditions under which teaching took place in the Indian schools were less dingy and more natural; and, it was observed, the teachers in the Indian schools were generally more dedicated and sober than in the English versions. The only aspect, and certainly a very important one, where Indian institutional education seems to have lagged behind was with regard to the education of girls.”*

*“It is, however, the Madras Presidency and Bengal-Bihar data which presents a kind of revelation. The data reveals the background of the teachers and the taught. It presents a picture which is in sharp contrast to the various scholarly pronouncements of the past 100 years or more, in which it had been assumed that education of any sort in India, till very recent decades, was mostly limited to the twice-born amongst the Hindoos, and amongst the Muslims to those from the ruling elite. The actual situation which is revealed was different, if not quite contrary, for at least amongst the Hindoos, in the districts of the Madras Presidency (and dramatically so in the Tamil speaking areas) as well as the two districts of Bihar. It was the groups termed Soodras, and the castes considered below them who predominated in the thousands of the then still-existing schools in practically each of these areas.”*

We have three facts staring at us in the face: the rich getting richer, unemployability being on the rise and the technological revolution leading to artificial intelligence. All add up to the fact that while many get educated few are finding access to quality jobs.

The present educational system must also be seen in the light India's role in the world. India accounted for 27% of world GDP. The prevalent educational practices were supporting this remarkable position in the global order. India's modern education, state control and a proliferation of boards and certificates, is able to support but 2% of global GDP, with 17% global population.

The modern school system with same-age classes from kindergarten to Class 12 replaced the multi-age small schools that existed everywhere in this land. A recognised school offered government jobs while the others were useful only for jobs outside of the government. With one wave the British government delegitimised a 5000-year-old system of education, one that had seen India evolve to a position it had 27% of the global GDP. But then, Britain had conquest and subjugation of the natives as its aim.

In post-Independence India, well into the 21st century, what vision do we have for our children and grandchildren. We have the legacy of a 5000-year-old history, older than most civilisations of the world, and it teaches us about the transience of the present. Certainly the revisioning of school education in India must be practical, and necessarily carry a vision beyond the immediate. We may ask how relevant for today and for tomorrow, is the current model of education? Are trained teachers serving the nation better than the teacher-entrepreneurs we had earlier in our history? Do we need a 'wiser' structure?

[Less and Less people have more and more wealth](#)

India is a signatory to the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT), where education is included. The governments in the States and at the Centre are trying to adjust the insides so that the [status quo](#) can continue. The state is rapidly vacating the educational space with the government-run schools running out of students except in Delhi. While the market asks for greater openness and less regulation, the politics of education has been towards increased centralization and heavier regulation.

A report in Business India (January 23, 2018) explains, “India is no stranger to income inequality, but the gap is widening further. Last year's survey showed that India's richest 1% held 58% of the country's total wealth, higher than the global figure of about 50%. According to the latest survey, the wealth of this elite group

increased by over Rs. 20.9 lakh crore during the period under review — an amount close to the total expenditure estimated in Union Budget 2017. India's top 1% of the population now holds 73% of the wealth while 67 crore citizens, comprising the country's poorest half, saw their wealth rise by just 1%."

In fact, according to Oxfam, India's richest 1% got richer by 39% in 2018; just 3% rise for the bottom-half.

The needs of education and praxis have moved beyond the mother tongue, the local culture and rituals of patriotism. The urban and semi-urban populations are in hot pursuit of global employability. Nothing short of employment and livelihood for the youth will answer this survival anxiety. Doles and philanthropy are not going to dent this picture. E.F. Schumacher pointed out that Small is Beautiful, not only aesthetically but economically too, and that people matter. He pointed this out in the 1960s when nations were chasing economies of scale... and the mounting problems were visible to all. Unfortunately, the excitement about the large-scale project is located in the rapacious heart of the economic system. Individuals aspire after the larger, and capital looks for ways of making the large work.

Livelihood and Employability - Elephant in the Room

Employment is different from jobs! You have a job when you work for someone. You can be employed as a subsistence farmer, a carpenter, a blacksmith, an app producer, a printer, a seller, without having a salaried job. The Artificial Intelligence revolution, and computerisation, are reducing jobs. More and more organisations buy services rather than offer jobs. Not only does it save of office space and make the bottom line better, it offers agility. And the tech universe has veered to Artificial Intelligence, where the phone knows which is your best way home, cars are self-driven, and machines know what to do, needing humans to fix them only when there is a problem. J. Krishnamurti asked in 1983, rather prophetically: "What is going to happen to our brains when the computer and robot take over, when industry invents ultra-intelligent machines?"

Uncertainty affects the large organisations as well as the individual. India's education trains people for jobs. India, before the British, had entrepreneurs at every turn, including the teacher-entrepreneur, if one may use this term with no pejorative connotation. A completely different set of skills and attitudes are needed for the serial entrepreneur.

India needs to choose again. Will our children need to look only to the monolithic huge corporations for jobs? Or will they experience their beings as independent thinkers and viable entrepreneurs? Will they see options, or only see monolithic control? What can we learn about education from the monumental work of Dharampal and the India that had a 27% of the global GDP? Something very right seemed to have been happening in education 400 years ago. What can we reclaim, and what do we need to learn from the world around? What made decentralised, loosely structured education better than the centralised large edifices of our nation?

The metaphor of Finland is appealing and attractive, and we can draw principles from this experience. The scale of Finland, with a population just five million, makes it at best a pilot project for India where each State has 50 million citizens or more. However, Finland's approach is pointing to an older principle that worked.

*Change and Alternatives*

Parallel to the failure of the centralised education endeavour, is the mushrooming of alternative, unregulated or un-regulatable niche offerings — soft skills, tuitions, special computer skills, crafts education. They point to the fact that schooling as we see it does not answer the needs as it used to. At the turn of the century people reading the future said that "75% of the work of organisations will be learning in the 21st century". This perception seems reasonable seeing the pace of change around us. Change demands learning and realignment, and doing things differently. It is said by experts that it does not matter what one learns, but that which allows one to be a learner is a critical ingredient. Being open to learning is an attitude and not just a skill. And attitudes are built, not trained!

Some 150 years ago the form of education changed in India to same-age classes with uniforms and fixed subjects, examinations and certification. Colonial centralisation and rapaciousness reduced global GDP contribution from 27% to 2 % today. Now we seem to be embracing another form, tech-driven consumption, and think that this will lead to relevant contemporary education. We are making the same mistake again. Beyond creating e-waste and screen-addicted citizens who all repeat the phrases of modernity, will this yield anything substantial? The first mirage was foisted on India by the British who only sought control and profit. The markets, tech companies and novelty are creating the second mirage.

We must ask if life begins and ends with Google, Apple, Microsoft, Facebook and Amazon. Are these the gods we have to worship? Tech is unavoidable. But having asked myself, again and again, over the past two decades if tech is connected to learning, I find it has little to do with fresh thinking and learning. However, it has a great deal to do with addiction, both subtle and obvious. The tech world is the modern opium den, luring individuals and casting their minds into a submissive oxytocin state. Digital natives, our children are called, affirming the conquest of their minds and hearts by the tech universe. Should education further addiction or set contexts where the mind is free, at least freer?

Can the picture of a sunset teach what a real sunset is? Just as words remove one from the experience of life, images, animation, movies do it better. Possibly the greatest danger to fresh thinking is that tech drives us to reinforce our own constructions, rather than provoke an examination of our assumptions. Learning demands the latter, which tech cannot provide. The education system in India is not geared to unleashing the learner, removing shackles of the mind to learn. There are always those who cannot be stopped. Schooling is not needed for those.

Schooling is an enabler for those who cannot find the natural urge to learn and meant to create enabling conditions.

Alternatives and multiple solutions for everything, footwear to cell phones, stare us daily in the face. The lack of alternatives in education, by contrast, is stark. Indian pusillanimity in the face of this challenge is bewildering. On the one hand we crow over our past and its wonders. On the other we resolutely worship the suit and tie as business dress, within India as much as outside, signalling that we have fallen in line, capitulated. There is no genius left. No new idea, but an enslaved nation. Much can be laid at the door of the British, but 'little change' must be at our door. Seventy-plus years of Independence was enough space for us to have moved ahead.

Why is it assumed that getting a group of students to learn is like a factory job and needs training before, rather than learning on the job with training? India annually selects individuals for the Indian Administrative Service. The aspirants do not have administrative experience or administrative training. They start with a basic degree, and are trained after selection. IAS officers hold many positions in their tenure. They become Chief Secretaries, Secretaries in various departments, District Collectors, managing directors of government corporations and so on.

Teachers - Trained and Untrained - Learning to Teach by Teaching

Why is it assumed that getting a group of students to learn is like a factory job and needs training before, rather than learning on the job with training support? India annually selects individuals for the Indian Administrative Services, IAS. Aspirants do not have administrative experience or administrative training. [They start with a basic degree, and are trained after selection.](#) IAS officers hold many positions in their tenure - Chief Secretaries to Chief Ministers, Secretaries in various departments, Collectors of Districts, Education Secretaries, MDs of Govt corporations, Fisheries, Animal husbandry, Handicrafts, Industry and Commerce.

One wonders why a similar approach cannot be applied for teachers. Is it possible that an untrained but motivated person will make a good teacher given the brief that the young must be learners, life-long learners? No one knows exactly how to do this: there is no formula for this work. And a B.Ed, or for that matter any degree, can only be a starting point. Setting the right atmosphere, with the right inputs and relationships, is the role of the teacher. While much documentation exists about learning organisations, a teacher sets the atmosphere and there is no training for this. Who trained the teachers in India's 100,000 schools before the

British were here?

Today India's teachers are being trained in hordes, like industrial workers. The assumption is that the B.Ed-certified teacher will raise the quality of teaching, and this in turn will improve children's education. Unfortunately, the assumptions don't add up. Being trained keeps one away from much-needed contact with the ground and accentuates the anxiety to get a certificate, and then a job. The certificate becomes more important than what you do, and thus what you do matters little. Orwellian workers, going through the motions, cannot build a living, fear free, celebrative system. They can only go through the motions and sap the energy of the young, while somehow staying out of their superior's bad books. Unfortunate, exploitative movement in the name of education, that preys on the future. But there are individuals who are willing to try something that has not been tried. This hopeful group is shut out by the board, 'qualified teachers only'. The certificate matters more than the human being who is willing to learn on the job. No one knows where to take this ship, and the B.Ed certificate retains the *status quo*.

How can a country of 120 crores depend on a small centralised bureaucracy for directions for change? The governance structure, we must not forget, preserves the form of colonial rule. If changes are made now, the results will show in five years, 10 years. If we do the things right, results could show in two years.

Status quo

only appears safe, pleasing to the masters! Or is it really so?

Hedgehog Principles

In a rapidly changing world, when the ground can shift suddenly, the parable of the fox and the hedgehog acquires significance. The fox uses all manner of clever devices to catch the hedgehog, at every turn of the road, on flat ground and on the slope, by day and by night, by strategy and deceit. And the hedgehog, the lowly creature who has no speed, no strategy, knows only one thing. He curls up into a ball in the face of danger of any kind. And the fox is foiled in all theatres of war. What could be some possible hedgehog principles India can embrace? The world today worships creativity, lateral solutions and disruption. In that lies an opportunity to sensibly disrupt the narrative in education. Here are a few suggestions to dramatically alter the course of school education India:

1 Resetting the aims of school education

Could the broad aim of school education be 'to offer students an atmosphere and processes to become life-long learners, to value themselves and others and to take charge of their learning and decisions' where they absorb and learn?

**Respectful, ethical conduct with peers and others, particularly the economically less privileged; The art of questioning carefully; Careful listening and comprehension in multiple contexts, with reasonable clarity; Collaboration with peers and others over a task; Problem-solving or discussion around long-range issues of a moral and ethical nature; To keep oneself and also others around safe; To read, write and listen as part of the educational process; Spoken English and the fundamentals of science, social studies, mathematics, and awareness of our world; Exposure to music, art, dance and other forms of expression; Participating in tasks such as cleaning, serving and rearranging, and finding new ways of doing the same; Graciousness and decency.**

2 Reduction in regulation

More and more regulation is not serving the purpose of better education and employment generation. It is obvious that all regulation cannot be done away with. However, some things can be done easily enough to ease the situation and make way for improvement in the quality of learning for the young.

- Anyone should be able to write an exam and qualify for the job of a teacher after a basic degree. Ongoing training should be mandatory. Enough people will be available for teaching from a wide range of disciplines to boost the approaches in education. Teachers can have a 'manual' for entry into teaching, including fundamentals regarding the requirements of interacting with the young. Role clarity, classroom hygiene, introduction to CSA, supporting student independence and so on.

- No transfer certificate is needed for admission into a school. The TC is made redundant by the Educational Management Information System, or EMIS.

3 Guidelines for regulatory clearances

As in the industrial sector, the norms and conditions are skewed in favour of very large institutions. As complexity increases with scale, so do the checks and balances. It is vital that the principle that 'small is beautiful', viable and economically important, be recognised and supportive norms prepared for smaller institutions as well, without assuming higher levels of complexity. Small schools could be supported by reducing regulation. The State and Centre need not exert control over affiliations. Boards of examination can be seen as franchising bodies who have their own standards and requirements. Delhi State schools have proved that the State can 'compete' well in the 'market'.

Is the second challenge of modernity too difficult to meet? Will our children thank us for equipping them well for a future that is unclear, or will they be left sorry, confused and resourceless, abandoned by our generation?

After serving The School KFI Chennai as its Principal for 18 years, the author was instrumental in setting up a new Krishnamurti residential school called Pathashaala. Serving as Director Secretary of this centre since 2012, he finds dialogue and enquiry as potent dimensions in the pedagogic process where an atmosphere of learning is co-created by educators and learners.

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