

Time to fix the school-to-work transition

A number of educated Indians are frustrated with either the lack of formal employment or jobs that fall short of expectations

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INDIA IN TRANSITION

Over the last 30 years, India has done a remarkable job ensuring its citizens have access to education. Beginning with State-level policies such as the Andhra Pradesh Primary Education Programme and Shiksha Karmi in Rajasthan in 1984 and 1987, respectively, and culminating in the Centre's Right to Education Act in 2009, the legislative and programmatic attention to education has been tremendous. And with that, there has been a genuine expansion in access and provision at the primary level.

In the chart, historical data from the District Information System on Education (DISE) on the year a school was built have been used to show how the number of government schools across the country has increased relative to three major Central Government education policies, the National Policy on Education in 1986, the District Primary Education Programme in 1994, and the aforementioned Right to Education Act.

Given that it has now been approximately 16 years since the passage of *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*, the first central level effort, what has this flurry of activity brought? Encouragingly, there have been real wins over time. India has nearly universalised access to education and is now educating more people, including girls, for longer than it ever has before. The programmes have built schools, gotten children into schools, and had them stay in school for longer.

Additionally, it seems like this is also increasing employment and wages. A paper by Gaurav Khanna

at the University of California, San Diego, finds that an additional year of schooling has high returns in the labour market, and that large-scale policies to expand education, such as the District Primary Education Programme, redistribute income from high-skilled to low-skilled workers. These are real achievements to celebrate. But this is about where the cheer ends.

On the learning front, the picture is far less rosy. Year after year of results from the Annual State of Education Report (ASER), released by the NGO ASER, has shown that student learning at the primary level is low and not getting better. In 2017, ASER shifted its focus from children at the primary level to ask what is happening with older children in the ages 14-18. Here, the news was no better. Math and reading ability for students in this age group were poor and well below what the government's own standards suggested they should be.

While the government's own National Achievement Survey is more encouraging, it is not by much. India's performance in the 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment (more commonly known as PISA) tests was so controversial that India did not re-enter PISA again (although

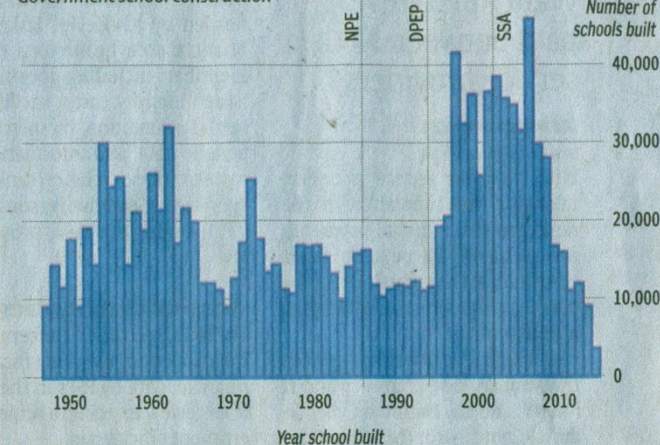
India has decided to re-enter for 2021). This story of low learning levels is well known to many.

Contradictory findings What should we make of these two contradictory findings? On the

one hand, access to education has increased, and this is showing real returns on the labour market, and redistribution skills towards low-skilled workers. On the other hand, learning is low for young and older children; it is not improving, and is poor even in comparison to other countries. A new concern is beginning to emerge

On expansion mode

Government school construction



with the growing demographic bulge of large numbers of young adults exiting the school system and entering the workforce. The promises of the education system are failing on more than just quality, and this could have dire consequences for those promised the world.

A new genre of non-fiction has emerged over the last couple of years tracing the gap between the aspirations and realities for India's youth. Journalists Somini Sengupta and Snigdha Poonam have both written books profiling this new young aspirational class, and many of their dashed aspirations. In both, we find a number of young Indians struggling to find their place in the world. Promised much by their educational attainment, they find their hopes dashed when they emerge into the adult world, with jobs that either fall short of expectations, or a lack of formal employment altogether.

My own work suggests a similar concern — those that have gone to school for longer are less likely to be trusting of a wide number of public institutions in India.

Using the Indian Human Development Survey, I find that those children that gained access to edu-

cation as a result of the DPEP then live in households that are less trusting of public institutions. More concerning, those "DPEP children" are adults today with their political preferences and economic aspirations.

Why is this happening? The data suggest that while these individuals are earning more money, they are also doing this in different parts of the labour market: the unorganised and short-term contractual labour. Again, the gap between aspirations and reality has led to resentment.

Latin America has seen the rise of a cohort of youth called "Los NiNis," meaning "They neither study or work."

The way ahead

So what can India and other countries, do? There are two solutions: fix schools or fix the school-to-work transition. While fixing schools is clearly important and there is much to be done here, placing undue faith in schools as the sole panacea for this cohort will likely not solve the larger problem of a large number of youth who enter a labour market not as rewarding as promised and cause further distrust in the education

system. Schools cannot be blamed for both their own failings and the failings of the outside world.

That leaves us with fixing the school-to-work transition. And here, most solutions lie with the state. Public sector employment — the much desired *sarkari naukri* — has not grown apace with the growth in India's population. According to Devesh Kapur, public sector employment has actually decreased over the last decade.

So an expansion of the public sector is clearly in order. While this will not absorb all of those looking for employment, it will help absorb some as well as address some of India's public management issues.

Next, some combination of general training, labour market matching, and support for employers in hiring young adults is required. Here, the results for middle- and low-income countries are encouraging.

It is clear that the question of how to integrate youth into a larger society is a universal one that spans more regions than just India. The solution, however, likely does not lie with education.

While there are many shortcomings of the education system in India and elsewhere, the question for society is about how to best integrate the young when they have left compulsory schooling but have yet to find work.

It is here that further progression through the education system will run headlong into frustrated expectations as a result of poor integration into labour markets and larger society. To paraphrase WEB DuBois, the problem of the 21st century is the problem of youth employment.

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