

Imperatives of Change

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Let me begin with a world perspective that I want to present to you. The three key issues that are before the world are inequity, disharmony and erosion of values. My realization is that to varying degrees, the problems all over the world are fairly similar.

Through our constitution we have committed to a certain kind of society. The preamble of the constitution eloquently describes it:

WE, THE PEOPLE OF INDIA, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a **SOVEREIGN SOCIALIST SECULAR DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC** and to secure to all its citizens:

JUSTICE, social, economic and political;

LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship;

EQUALITY of status and of opportunity;

and to promote among them all

FRATERNITY assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the Nation;

Most of our policy documents, including the education policy, make for beautiful reading. Everything ideal in our mind is present in policy. When we speak to our political and bureaucratic leaders, they appear passionate about creating change and we find them speaking in a similar language about our goals, development and society. But when we look at our educational and general social performance, the reality is far divorced from such high-sounding rhetoric. Key development indicators tell us the real story of our performance.

We as a nation are among top 20% in terms of corruption and among bottom 20% in good governance. 44% of our children under the age of 4 years are under nourished, our literacy level is only 65% against the world average of 80%, only 39% children reach 10th standard and 10% pursue higher education, 56% women are anaemic, 4.5 million people are HIV positive and their number is growing at 10% annually, 130 million people are without basic health care support, 128 million people go without drinking water and 226 without safe drinking water, 48% people have no electricity. I can keep on giving statistics. Our HDI is sliding. 10 years ago, when I entered this field, we were 127th out of the 135 countries that were evaluated. Now we are 134th and many friends tell me jokingly that it is because I have come into this sector.

It is a serious concern for which, as of now, we don't seem to have a solution. We need to invest all our intellect, all our managerial thinking and all our social thinking to find solutions to these issues. We find there are some people in the government who are working very hard. I think there is a need to address some fundamental issues

Consider this - we constitute 16% of world's population but contribute only 5% of the world's GDP. So we can see the magnitude of waste that is happening. It is estimated that the value attached to the talent waste in India is 3 trillion dollars.

We are currently spending about 13.5 billion dollars on education each year. Do we really measure the performance of this entire system? There are almost 6-7 million people who are engaged in delivering education. 80% of the 220 Mln children study in government schools and therefore the government becomes a very important agency to collaborate with.

The middle class, especially the urban middle class like you and me, have actually exited the government system, whether it is the public distribution system, the health system or the education system. Our children don't study in government schools. Even government teachers don't send their children to government schools.

Some time ago, I had a meeting in a block of Rajasthan and we were talking to 25 teachers in a block office. Out of these 25 teachers only one sent his child to a government school because he was teaching there. This situation prevails despite the fact that Government schools are superior in terms of infrastructure, qualifications of teachers, salaries paid to them, training inputs to the teachers etc. Despite all this, the government schools do not have the stature that they ought to enjoy. So there is something going wrong somewhere. Obviously, there is some problem in the system at the delivery level.

In our opinion, the following are the key constituents of a good and effective school:

- i. A School - safe, hygienic and motivating ambiance
- ii. A curriculum - translates national education goals in reality
- iii. A professional teacher - subject matter and pedagogy expert with appropriate social orientation
- iv. An Examination system - capable of testing achievements of curricular goals
- v. An Education Administrator - who has the perspective, competence and motivation
- vi. Community - aware, active, participating, demanding
- vii. Financial resources - that match the country's needs and ambition

After about 8 years of experience, we found that the real lynchpins of the system are the teachers, the education administrators, and the examination system. Because we expect our children to do so well in the examinations, the examination system actually drives a significant part of the behaviour in this country. There are parents who complain that though the child is happy and learning, he/she is not being prepared for the 10th standard examination well. Because that is the gate to further professional growth. 10th and 12th standard results decide the career path of the child in many ways. And they quietly remove the child from that experimental school and put him in the school that is, in reality, a very good rote machine.

A comparison is often made between private schools and government schools. My view is that barring a few government schools and a few private schools, both types of schools are equally bad. The private schools are at best, better rote machines than the government schools. We went to 6 schools in Bangalore city and we asked children in the 5th standard class, 'what travels faster, sound or electricity?' And the answer that

was given everywhere was that electricity travels faster. How do you know? We asked. And the answer in 100% of the cases was “the teacher told us so”. In the interior regions of the city, in the government schools, we had to prod children to answer the same question because they were not responding. One child said, ‘sound travels faster’. We asked, ‘why do you say that’ Again, after lot of prodding he said, ‘sound travels faster because when I put my TV on, the sound comes first’. Now, which child would you consider better? Most educated people would say that the second child was better because, at least, he observed, he thought and he linked something and that is what we want. We want thinking children.

One of the complexities of education system is that the stakeholders have very different views of the purpose of education. The teachers have a different view; children of course have a different view of education and the parents have a different view. Because of the way poverty prevails today, majority of the parents want their children to be economically productive irrespective of what philosophers say, what educationists say and what ideologues say. They want their child to be contributing to the family as early as possible because that is their pressing requirement. Therefore any airy fairy talk about education is not going to work with these parents and therefore it becomes very important to incorporate and establish a linkage between the kind of education we promote and its linkage to economic productivity. Therefore we are talking about the kind of education that is based on life skills that lead to certain competencies among the students. I agree with the suggestion that vocational opportunities should be created as a part of basic education itself and at the end of the 10th standard the student needs to be ready to undertake some vocation seriously.

Our National Education Policy talks about things like empathy, sensitivity, critical thinking, and scientific temper. Our National Curriculum Framework describes the process that should contribute to achieving these policy goals. But today, the education process has lost this connection in the way it is getting transacted in any school - government or private. I am purposely making it a general issue. It is not just in government schools that the problem exists. You as parents see what your children study in private schools. In government schools, of course, the problems are very basic.

Therefore I think if we analyze all the issues, they revolve around the following notions:

1. The need for a “**shared vision**”. Everyone in the education system must understand the objective of education and why they are engaging in this sector.
2. We require a “**strategy**” to achieve these goals. We have examples of nations that have been doing well in education for about 5 to 10 years. Columbia, Brazil and some South American countries seem to be progressing well. The reason is that politically, a consistent vision and agenda is being driven in the country. And that is a big problem with us. Here, changes are so frequent. Private individuals and not-for-profit organisations like us don’t really have any right to meaningfully participate in the education process of the Government. Actually at some point in time, the planning commission was very seriously considering legislation to make such participation mandatory. I don’t know what happened to that subsequently. But the issue is that the inconsistency of the people leading the country including the political masters is so extreme that it is ruining the country. This kind of democracy is really not working for us. We have examples where when very good individuals have continued for 5-10 years, results have been dramatic. We have one example of Madhya Pradesh at a point of time where two individuals were

there for 10 years and it had shown very good results in improving the overall literacy levels of the state.

3. Third is the issue of **“structures”**. If we do not address the fundamentals of the way the government is organized, where the accountability rests, the way performance is reviewed, we are really not going to solve anything. So if we don't address this, anything we do is not really going to work.
4. Then there are **“three P issues”**. The **p**eople, **p**rocess and **p**olicy issues. The issues are what kind of people are holding down what kind of roles? Are they qualified? Are they competent? How have they been trained? Issues of process: Does it promote accountability? And finally, what policies are made? If the norms are specify Rs. 70 per day for training and you wish to conduct high quality training; it is not going to work. You have to be open to revise your norms.

So we often call it S3P3. Shared vision, strategies, structure, people, policy and process! If we are not willing to address these, then we are not going to achieve much.

A fundamental issue that we have faced all along is that we do not have an adequate number of “education professionals” nor do we have a process of preparing / developing them. One of the reasons we have decided to start a university is to focus on this particular need before us. We need well-rounded activists who understand education, who are competent in spreading the message and who are highly motivated and passionate about what they are doing and they in turn create those kinds of ecosystems wherever they go. So it doesn't matter if it is required to start 30 universities; we are willing to start them. We require tens of thousands of people who are missionaries and they should go around preaching, not about religion, but about the kind of society and the kind of education that we want. Secondly, these people must get an opportunity to practice, understand and then feed into theory. Then there should be an ecosystem of organizations with a shared agenda. We are working towards this; they all need to work in tandem. So we need a very solid network of partnerships working towards meaningful issues. And then we require a consistent campaign. How did the campaign to eradicate polio succeed?

We don't have a social change model right now. We need to evolve one. History says that change has happened only when the societies' feel threatened for their existence. India behaved very differently when there was Chinese aggression or Pakistan aggression but only for a certain period. We require a solid change model and a campaign model like what happened with polio and in some countries, with tobacco. So we need a solid and consistent campaign for success.