

The state of education in rural India

An amazing transformation has occurred in the course of a generation. Young men and women in rural India are far surpassing their parents' levels of education. Two generations ago, people in remote villages were largely unlettered: there were hardly any schools in remote areas. And it is still common to find low educational levels among village residents who are 40 years old and older. But the early-morning image of a rugged but illiterate peasant pulling a plow fades before the newer reality of village children walking to schools in the hundreds. As late as 2001, only a little over 25% of all rural 18-year-olds were attending schools, the rest having dropped out earlier. By 2016, the share of 18-year-olds in schools and colleges had gone up to 70%. There is a rapidly rising trend of education in rural India.

The latest annual report of the Aser Center, released on 16 January, presents these results. Derived from an innovative survey of more than 30,000 youth, in the age group of 14-18, that was conducted in 1,641 villages of 24 states in India, this survey is important because more than 125 million individuals are in this age group, of whom more than two-thirds, roughly 85 million live in rural India, a population the size of Germany or the UK. They are the ones on whom their families' hopes are vested, the future of the nation.

The fact that larger and larger numbers of individuals in this age group are opting to remain in the educational system is heartening, therefore. There are other optimistic findings. Girls have closed the gap with boys in rural areas: at age 14, 94% of girls and 95% of boys are enrolled in school; by age 18, 68% of girls and 72% of boys are still in school, a wholesale improvement on the proportions of a generation earlier.

That is the good side of the story. It is very welcome. Modern economic growth has little room for people with rudimentary skills and low education levels. The age of assembly-line production has given way to newer technologies, with complex processes, requiring a better trained workforce. And that's where things don't look so good.

The quality of education in rural schools is dismal, on average. Among 14-18-year-olds surveyed by the Aser teams, only 43% could solve a class IV mathematics problem. This proportion was roughly the same among 14-year-olds as among 18-year-olds, showing that the problem of low learning outcomes was not resolved by remaining in school. Only 40% of 18-year-olds could take 10% off a given number. More than that percentage could not locate their state on a map of India. Twenty-seven percent of 14-year-olds, and 21% of 18-year-olds could not read a class II textbook in the regional language, and more than 40% in each age group could not read a simple sentence in English (such as "What is the time?").

When it comes time to look for employment, what are young people trained in this shabby manner going to find? How are they going to cover the learning deficits that have accumulated from years of attending low-quality rural schools?

With the secular decline of the rural economy, the belief has gained ground that education will be the road out of a scrimped and precarious livelihood on the farm. Inspired by this hope, rural children have flocked to schools. Most of them are first-generation learners. It's a huge social experiment in which rural parents across the land have invested heavily, letting their children study well beyond the age when they had themselves joined the workforce.

Soon, however, this younger generation will be graduating from high schools and colleges—and then they will find that there are very few good jobs. It's a calamity waiting to happen, a cliff from which many will fall.

A reaction against education is around the corner. "When my first-born was unable to make much of his 16 years of education," a parent might argue, "why should I waste time and money on the education of my second-born?" With mass disappointment looming on the horizon, the rising trend of education is going to fall.

Raising the quality of education in rural schools is essential, and a nationwide dialogue is necessary for charting the way ahead. Business-as-usual will not fix the problem. Privatizing the government system is not a viable solution, either. The market for education performs poorly in situations where information flows are sparse and competition is limited or non-existent. Rural private schools perform no better than rural public schools in terms of learning outcomes.

The essential problem is one of a broken governance system. There are few rewards for being a good teacher and few punishments for being a careless one. That is because of faulty designs which need to be repaired or replaced with more effective and accountable governance systems.

What is currently a highly regimented and top-down system in India needs to give way to another in which teachers are innovative in the classroom and parents are involved as co-decision-makers. Noteworthy smaller-scale innovations developed by state governments and non-government organizations provide indication of the larger potential of societal innovation. These reform efforts should serve as the starting points for a broader and increasingly essential public conversation.

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