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Education is Key to Human Dignity and Economic Development

We need to bring about an urgent reform in the education system as a huge number of unemployed as well as unemployable youth could jeopardise India's economic development, warns DR. MOHAMMAD MANZOOR ALAM

Editor [Send an email](#) July 26, 2023



By Dr Mohammad Manzoor Alam

I have always believed that education is the key to economic growth and human development. Good quality education is a necessary precondition for advances in social sciences and humanities, science and technology, as well as agriculture and healthcare sectors. It ensures efficient public administration as well as private sector growth. Above all, education guarantees an individual's right to a dignified life.

This is why we see that *ilm* (knowledge) recurs as a theme throughout the Qur'an and the Prophetic Traditions. That knowledge is an absolute value is evident from the very first Qur'anic revelation being about it. Knowledge is so valuable in Islam that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said, "Acquisition of knowledge is incumbent on every Muslim."

Alarming Report

As I am going through *The Economist* (1st July), I am startled to read a report on the state of education in India. The report says India's economic dreams are in danger because of the country's unskilled, jobless youths. Interestingly, there's a story on education in Vietnam titled "Best in class" where the report on education in India ends. And I am surprised that Vietnamese children "go through one of the best schooling systems in the world, a status reflected in outstanding performances in international assessments of reading, maths and science."

Now the question that comes to my mind is: "**Why Indian education system paints a bleak picture, and what is behind the success story of Vietnam's education system.**"

The report has the answer. First, it appreciates the economic potentials India has and the strides it has made in education.

It says, "India is expanding at an annual rate of 6% and its GDP ranks fifth in the global pecking order. Its tech industry is flourishing and green firms are laying solar panels like carpets. Many multinationals are drawn here ... India's huge youth bulge—some 500m of its people are under 20—should be an additional propellant."

Then, the report says, "...although India's brainy elite hovers up qualifications, education for most Indians is still a bust. Unskilled jobless youngsters risk bringing India's economic development to a premature stop."

India has done a commendable job as far as building infrastructure is concerned. "A decade ago only a third of government schools had hand washing facilities and only about half had electricity; now around 90% have both. In the last decade, nearly 400 universities have been established in India. Enrolment in higher education has risen by a fifth."

However, the country is still doing "a terrible job" of making sure that those who go to schools learn essential skills. Alarming, less than half of the country's 10-year-olds— prior to the pandemic— were able to read a simple story despite going to schools regularly. The pandemic has made the situation worse.

What Gives Vietnam an Edge?

Education in Vietnam is a national priority. "Provinces are required to spend 20% of their budgets on education, which has helped regional equity."

Parents' commitment to education and a conducive environment fosters children's propensity to learn. These children "learn more at school, especially in the early years".

However, the biggest reason that gives a competitive edge to the Vietnamese students is "the calibre of its teachers". Most of these teachers are "not necessarily better qualified; they are simply more effective at teaching". They get frequent training and are free to use their discretion to make classes more engaging.

It is interesting to note that the teachers who are posted to remote areas are paid more. Above all, teachers are evaluated on the basis of pupil performance.

Causes of Educational Malaise

The Economist has enumerated a few causes of the educational problems in India, which include jam-packed curriculums with "too little time for basic lessons in maths and literacy", "poorly trained" and "badly supervised" teachers.

It has also noted that harnessing teachers in unrelated duties, such as administering elections and policing social-distancing rules during the pandemic, has a detrimental effect on education. This is why a large number of families send their wards to private schools, which educate "about 50% of all India's children".

How to Fix It?

The magazine rightly suggested that we need to spend more on education. "Last year the outlays were just 2.9% of India's GDP, low by international standards." Education system needs to be reformed by taking inspiration from models in other Asian countries such as Vietnam.

The Economist recommends collecting data about "how much students are learning". It urges politicians to "stop disputing data that do not show their policies in a good light". And it also asks politicians to stop meddling with textbooks.

Quality of Education Matters

When India enacted the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, I had appreciated the government's move and written about it. In my article I had expressed some of the concerns that *The Economist* is raising today.

In my article I wrote that it was a significant legislation that would ensure free and compulsory education to children between the age of six and fourteen. And it would enable people to develop skills, capacity and confidence to strive for realisation of other rights.

However, I wrote, we should also keep in mind that this fundamental right to education does not mean that any education would be sufficient to fulfil our aspirations. I quoted former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, Katariana Tomasevski, who said: "education could be meaningful when it was available, accessible, acceptable and adaptable."

4 A's in the Indian Context

I described these 4 A's in the Indian context. **Availability** means that education is government-funded, free, and there are adequate numbers of schools and trained teachers who may ensure quality education to children in their neighbourhood.

Accessibility means that the education system is accessible to all without any discrimination, but ensures positive steps for the marginalised sections of the society.

Acceptability means that the education curriculum is relevant and of good quality with cultural acceptability for all, especially the minorities.

Adaptability means that the education serves needs of the society and it is suitable to specific contexts like religious education, etc.

Equality of Opportunity

Equality of opportunity to have good quality education must be made available for all and sundry. There must not be any discrimination on the basis of caste, class, region or religion. However, affirmative action and inclusive education should always be part of our educational policy. Education must benefit all, not just small elite.

Therefore, we should pay special attention to students who belong to marginalised and underprivileged sections of the society as well as those with disabilities or special needs. To achieve this end, we have the idea of reservations, which is an Indian version of Affirmative Action.

Empowering women, minorities, Dalits and Tribals through reservations can go a long way in building a peaceful society and powerful economy. Therefore, politicians should rise above party politics and implement the idea more vigorously.

Dealing with Moral Chaos

We always need to remember the purpose of education, which is to equip students with technical skills so that they could have decent income and livelihood. It is also the purpose of education to inculcate students with moral values and socially acceptable habits.

A good grounding in moral values and social skills has to be part of the beginning stages of school as well as home training in order to deal with the present moral chaos.

A Healthy Mind in a Healthy Body

Besides focusing on imparting good quality education and moral training, we should also be concerned about our children's physical and psychological wellbeing.

Parents and teachers must encourage children to eat healthy food and have a daily regimen of exercise. Parents should also focus on raising emotionally healthy kids.

Challenges of AI

In a previous article I have already highlighted the prospects and dangers of Artificial Intelligence and Machine learning. However, I would like to reiterate that we have to prepare ourselves for the challenges posed by AI.

A large number of people are going to be rendered jobless as AI takes over jobs done by people. Western countries are expected to sustain all the early causality. Thus, they are relentlessly preparing to face the challenges.

We'll have to make sure that AI does not destroy our society by making rich more richer and poor more poorer and rendering marginalised sections of society further vulnerable.

We have to meet the present-day challenges of unemployed and unemployable youth, economic and social inequality, issues with psychological wellbeing and physical health of our children, moral chaos, and Artificial Intelligence. And there is one answer to all these problems: good quality education and teaching of moral values!

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