On The Learning Curve

(This editorial is based on the article 'On The Learning Curve' which appeared in 'The Hindu' on 20th March, 2019. The article talks about the challenges faced by the educational sector and the ways in which education outcomes can be changed in India.)

Among the lakhs of employees on the payrolls of State governments in India, the education department, unarguably, has the largest share of employees. Besides frontline service providers (teachers), there are a number of other officials and administrators who form an important part of the educational set-up.

However India even after the concerted efforts in the 70 years of independence has not been able to reap out the desired result in the educational field which is affected by institutional problems.

The Challenges Affecting India's Education Dynamic

The blatant politicisation of academia has resulted in universities becoming monoliths of political correctness instead of spaces where diverse ideas and genuine contestation can flourish.

Education transformation programmes by States run the risk of falling flat, as they are often unaccompanied by a single transformation change road map and all stakeholders are not taken into consideration while formulating a policy.

The marginalisation of merit has had its own set of consequences where quest for excellence has given way to catering to the lowest common denominator and has bred nepotism in the education sector.

Quality remains a huge challenge in higher education in India. Very few Indian institutions feature in the top 200 world rankings.

Bulk of the enrolment in higher education is handled by state universities and their affiliated colleges. However, these state universities receive very small amounts of grants in comparison. Nearly 65% of the University Grants Commission (UGC) budget is utilised by the central universities and their colleges while state universities and their affiliated colleges get only the remaining 35%.

Education sector suffers from shortage of resources in form of teachers; professors etc. According to UGC, out of the total sanctioned teaching posts, 35% professor posts, 46% associate professor posts and 26% assistant professor posts are vacant.

At present, there is no mechanism for ensuring the accountability and performance of professors in universities and colleges. This is unlike foreign universities where the performance of college faculty is evaluated by their peers and students.

The education sector also suffers from lack of employable skills in students of technical education, has also been observed. Outdated curriculum results in a mismatch between education and job market requirements, dampens students' creativity and hampers the development of their analytical abilities.

Accreditation of higher educational institutions needs to be at the core of the regulatory arrangement in higher education. Further, quality assurance agencies should guarantee basic minimum standards of technical education to meet the industry demand for quality manpower. The National Board of Accreditation should act as a catalyst towards quality enhancement and quality assurance of higher technical education.

The Path To Universal Education

Any effort to introduce education reforms must ensure that the incentives of all stakeholders are aligned throughout the system to ensure their participation.

Inducing competition among administrative units helps invigorate key stakeholders to work in synchronisation in order to achieve intended outcomes. Competition also makes abstract goals such as 'learning outcomes' more real by defining exact 'actionable' metrics on which improvement is desired.

Political commitment to improving the quality of education backed by strong review and monitoring mechanisms can spur meaningful activity in States.

Most importantly, there should be constant focus on recognising and disseminating best practices of States, which not only act as a reward for well-performing local administrations but also provides impetus to other districts to adopt similar measures.

Most of the state universities suffer from lack of funding and remain in need of resources and therefore mobilisation of funds in state universities should be explored through other means such as endowments, contributions from industry, alumni, etc.

System of performance audit of professors based on the feedback given by their students and colleagues should be set up. Other inputs like research papers, publications by teachers should be added in the performance audit in due course of time.

Novel Steps Towards Realising The Dream

Saksham Scheme

- The scheme is a novel step taken by Haryana government.
- State officials nominate their block for the 'Saksham Ghoshna' once they are reasonably confident that their block has achieved the 80% target — as a result of remedial programmes, teacher training and internal assessments.
- Self-nomination is then followed by rigorous rounds of third party assessments to vet their claims.
- If a block is found to be 'Saksham', the block officials are recognised by no less than the Chief Minister.
- When all blocks in a district are declared as 'Saksham', the entire district is also accorded 'Saksham' status.

'School Education Quality Index' (SEQI)

- NITI Ayog has created a state-level **'School Education Quality Index' (SEQI),** which seeks to make improvements in learning outcomes a focal point of governance.
- It gives scores to States based on their educational performance and puts this data out in the public domain.
- The ranking not only encourages competition among States but also rewards and motivates other States to consistently improve.

Way Forward

States need to induce competition and give a boost to put all key actors in education in the driver's seat to improve their learning levels. Right incentive structures for stakeholders lead to administrative efficiency, which then improves the quality of service delivery.

Improvement in learning outcomes remains an immediate goal for India to fulfil its aspirations of playing a greater role in the global economy and a systemic transformation is the best solution towards achieving it.