Whither Education?

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It must not be forgotten that even after fifty years of independence, we have not even been able to tackle the problem of literacy, let alone the bigger challenges. Tokenism and a few isolated examples of excellence (largely because intelligence and motivation is statistically distributed and with almost the size of one hundred million, there will be some achievers) but the question is are they inspite of the system or because of the support from the system?

The big challenges that we face in the educational arena are:

- The challenge of numbers
- The challenge of access
- The challenge of relevance
- The challenge of credibility
- The challenge of quality.

There are of course a number of obvious implicit extensions of these challenges, such as the challenges of financial and availability of intellectual resources, etc. But even if they are overcome, for what purposes do we deploy them and how?

In a recent informal conversation when one of our groups criticized the power sector by referring to the almost astronomical sums which are estimated as the losses due to power thefts and which are passed onto the honest bill-paying customers, someone did a quick back of the envelope estimate of the huge loss in the higher-education sector alone in terms of under-utilized or non-utilized resources in terms of land, buildings and equipment which are utilized but for a small fraction of the time. In a way the regulatory agencies have directly squandered and plundered huge amounts of public funds, with added insult of not actually providing any meaningful quality education to any meaningful proportion of the population. Look at any figure for the cascading drop-out rate from elementary school onwards, till at higher education we have about 5% having access, and of its quality, the less said the better. Meaningful respectable education is available to less than 1% of the population, with the result that we have the new 'Quit India' movement under which almost 100,000 students went abroad in pursuit of higher education. The sums that they would pay to other countries could easily have been deployed here for the good of larger numbers.

In order to see what needs to be done let me refer to the example of a tree-frog somewhere deep in the Amazon rain forest, sitting on a log watching a fly. The frog is similar to all others of its kind, except that by a genetic fluke, the frog is now settled with a brain that perceives its surroundings as they were a second ago. (With our process of planning, and the execution by the

bureaucracy our vision has a time lag of about 7 to 10 years). So what happens to the frog? When the frog sees a fly within its range, it lunges out. But with its out of date information it misses.

Eventually weakened by a rarely sated hunger, the frog falls off the log and dies. The lesson learnt is that a frog that calculates the trajectory from the most recent data eats; the one that doesn't starves. It is that simple. Humans are information gathering and utilizing systems, and they need to process much more complex environments than mere trajectories of flies, but the lesson is equally applicable.

Which amongst our planning and educational bodies, do you think has a meaningful articulation of how it would bring about an innovative solution to the impending paradox of needing a massive reasonably well-educated world-class workforce to flourish and thrive in the knowledge economy, and the appalling and pathetic condition of our educational enterprise, with the many challenges stated in the beginning of this article? It is not of much consequence that (other than building some degree of self-confidence that we can do it) a few Indians have done very well and are symbols of excellence in almost all walks of life all over the globe. What I wish to emphasize here is the scaling up of it, so that a very large number, if not possibly all Indians should do well, and at least significantly better than before. We have a huge number of people in the 15 to 25 years range and this can be huge engine of economic growth if we prepare them for the knowledge economy and surely we will be a super-

power. But surely we cannot achieve that goal by dwelling on the past and making changes which take us further behind in times. Rather we need to think forward and prepare our youth in the new skills, attributes and knowledge that will make them world-class in every sense of the term.

The answers are actually quite simple and we only have to look at what we did (or did not do) in the recent past in the IT and IT enabled sector. It is to replace the license-quota and inspector raj and the 'I object' approach to development with a norms and standards based facilitating and enabling framework managed by independent professionals like Gandhi's and Tilak's demand for freedom and Pantji's demand for home rule. I think the students and teachers of this country need to take responsibility for their actions rather than depending upon the time-lagged and warped visions that have led us so far.

In the USA for example, for becoming an accrediting body in higher education, the first and foremost condition is that it should not be a Government body, whereas in India all such bodies are Government bodies for all intents and purposes. Little wonder that we are at the bottom of the league.