

A modern story of Ekalavya

The education system continues to exclude many people's histories, world views and cultures



SUNDAR SARUKKAI

It is difficult being a teacher these days. The dismantling of institutions, which seems to be the prime concern of this government, began with education. The attack on premier public universities through motivated hiring, questioning reservation, and creating a climate of fear and intimidation has continued. This is a time when many teachers are forced to rethink the meaning of teaching.

The place of the teacher
This has also led to a climate of suspicion about teachers in general, in schools, colleges and universities. Teachers are constantly under attack by systems which want to protect students (especially because students are nowadays seen as paying ‘consumers’), by parents who decide what and how a teacher should teach, by a government which humiliates and uses teachers, and by private managements which see teachers as a necessary ‘evil’ to put up with. Our colleges and schools even today are places of feudal authority and oppressive labour conditions. In such a climate, for the first time in my life, I am beginning to ask whether it is worth teaching at all.

It was not easy being a teacher earlier too. The pay was quite abysmal and the work that it entailed, particularly the grading of hundreds of exam papers, was not necessarily enjoyable. But there was something different; there was a sense of service and commitment to the act of teaching, somewhat similar to the medical profession then. There was an underlying notion of respect for teachers, even from students.

In India, there are many stories of teachers who sacrificed much in order to teach. Teaching meant inspiring students, making them better human beings, and enabling them to go up in life. A good mathematics teacher always taught more than mathematics. What students learnt with every good teacher was not just subject matter but ways of being in the world.

The first disintegration of this



“Our society is filled with committed teachers, but they are all silenced by the powers that run education as a handmaiden for their personal and political ambitions.” A classroom in Mandawa, Rajasthan. • GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK PHOTO

world of teaching came when teaching became equivalent to ‘giving tuition’. And then came other major problems that have contributed to this suspicion of teaching. In a digital world, the role of a teacher is more and more unclear. There is a lack of clarity on what exactly a teacher is supposed to teach: the content, or diverse ways of thinking, or learning together with others?

Related to this issue is the continued lack of equal access to education. We have spent more money and effort keeping people out of the education system than trying to bring them in – much of this is done through dubious concepts called intelligence and merit, operationalised by examinations. It is not a surprise then that our gross enrolment ratios for all levels of education are quite low, because the aim of the system right from the beginning was to find ways to control who would enter the portals of education. This is a continuation of the Ekalavya complex, and it is possible because we have created a system in which the excluded find little representation of their lives, their world views and their articulations in what is taught.

A story of caste and learning
In the midst of this existential crisis, I watched a new Tamil movie called *Sarvam Thaala Mayam*. It is a movie which has been criticised for its avoidance of caste issues even though it is primarily about Carnatic music’s

relation with caste. While that may be true, here I am more interested in what it says about the nature of teaching and learning. It is a modern Ekalavya story in a Tamil mainstream idiom and, like Ekalavya’s story, which is about caste and privilege, at its core it is about the processes of teaching and learning.

The story of Ekalavya is well known and has been used as a powerful metaphor to highlight problems of exclusion in education – about how the privileged monopolise learning even though others may be far better. This movie makes us ask: What would Ekalavya do today if Drona refuses to teach him?

The modern Ekalavya, Peter Johnson, is the son of a mridangam maker. He is very talented. When he accidentally listens to a mridangam vidwan, Vembu Iyer, he is mesmerised. But this Chennai Ekalavya cannot easily become a student of this vidwan and much of the obstacle is related to their caste differences. These differences are most tellingly articulated by the boy’s father who creates these instruments but also seems resigned to the fact that he will not be allowed to play them.

However, the modern Ekalavya does not give up when Vembu Iyer refuses to take him as his student. He persists and is finally taken as Iyer’s student because Iyer sees Peter’s passion and genuine commitment. Peter is like Ekalavya in his complete devotion to his guru, but due to a misun-

derstanding, the teacher banishes Peter for no fault of his. Their reconciliation is really the heart of the story, for it is not just a negotiation between people of different caste hierarchies but also between the hierarchy of teacher and student.

If Arjuna was the counterpart to Ekalavya in the original story, there is an equally powerful counterpart in this modern version. This is in the form of a fair-skinned, Tamil Brahmin NRI, who has been admitted to a PhD programme at Harvard University. He comes with more privilege than Arjuna! But Peter is unfazed. He takes on the traditionalists in their own game. In the climax of the movie, his strength is shown to lie in his own historical and cultural consciousness. Peter changes due to his encounter with his guru but he also changes the instrument and the classical music tradition which uses it.

Vembu Iyer epitomises all the struggles of a teacher, one who belongs to an exclusive tradition but with an ideal of learning that transcends that exclusion. A teacher is one who is able to go beyond his or her tradition and comfort zone for the sake of a true seeker. The film reminds us that a teacher is incomplete without good students, but good is not intellectual competence alone; it is something more. The last scene of the film, when the teacher accepts the student as someone who can not only carry on the tradition but also bring his own modifications to it, captures one of the central ethical principles of teaching.

Need for an inclusive system
What this movie reminds us is that the present-day education system is based on the qualities, attributes and desires of a dominant community. It is not inclusive, since it does not have space for truth, knowledge and the qualities of learning based on the diverse strengths of different cultures and histories like those of Peter. But Peter’s struggle should remind teachers that teaching is a service, not a transaction. Our society is filled with countless such committed teachers, but they are all silenced by the powers that run education as a handmaiden for their personal and political ambitions.

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Splurging in the time of debt

Andhra Pradesh’s government continues to launch populist schemes despite its poor financial situation



K. VENKATESHWARLU

It is puzzling that Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu is busy announcing a spree of sops, given the State’s poor financial situation. A recently released White Paper on State finances and economic growth details how the unscientific and unjust bifurcation of undivided Andhra Pradesh, as well as the unwillingness of the Central government to implement several provisions of the Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation Act, left Andhra Pradesh with a revenue deficit of ₹16,078 crore in 2014-15.

Several problems
The paper argues that 46% of the estimated revenue was granted to Andhra Pradesh against a population of 58%; assets were allocated on location basis (most locations were in Hyderabad and hence left behind), while debts and liabilities were divided on the basis of population; the pension liability of the combined State was divided on the basis of population; power allocation was done on the basis of consumption; and refund of taxes, a liability, was allocated on the basis of population, whereas deferred tax collections, an asset, were given on the basis of location, causing a loss of ₹3,820 crore.

Further, the State lost Hyderabad, that in 2014 was estimated to generate about ₹60,000 crore of revenue, besides the manufacturing and service sector hubs. It inherited drought and cyclone-prone areas. Though the Central government had acknowledged that the fiscal, economic and social conditions of Andhra Pradesh would be adversely affected by bifurcation, the support lent to the State in the last four and half years has been abysmal, the State claims.

Andhra Pradesh’s economy continues to be predominantly agrarian. This is evident from the fact that the contribution of the agriculture sector, which was 23% in undivided Andhra Pradesh, shot up to 30.2% at the time of bifurcation in 2014, and to 34.4% in 2017-18. Consequently, the per capita income was ₹82,870 in 2014, compared to Telangana’s per capita income of ₹1,12,162. Telangana is powered by the industry and services sector. The per capita income of Andhra Pradesh is the lowest among the five southern States.

The Socio Economic Survey of 2017-18 says the State’s public debt has gone up to ₹2,25,234 crore. Market loans are a lion’s

share in the debt, accounting for 60%. The outstanding debt includes the un-apportioned amount of ₹23,483 crore between Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

The debt accounts for 28.79% of the State GDP and the government says it is forced to raise loans as no special funds are flowing from the Centre beyond the Centrally Sponsored Schemes.

Dealing with the financial crisis
Yet the government insists that it has “converted the crisis into an opportunity”. Despite structural challenges, the Budget boasts that the State is counted among the best economic performers with an average growth of 10.66% compared to the all-India growth rate of 7.3% (June 2014-December 2018).

How is the State overcoming the problems of a low tax base, deficit rainfall, an “un-cooperative” Central government, and the hurdles mounted by bifurcation and a predominantly agriculture economy? Government officials say the State is not only controlling revenue expenditure by cutting administrative costs, plugging revenue leakages, minimising transaction costs and rationalising the tax structure, but also using more technology across the board.

Presenting the vote-on-budget in the Andhra Pradesh Assembly, Finance Minister Y. Ramakrishnudu said the government had successfully launched the Comprehensive Financial Management System, which is in operation now. This, he said, not only improved “effectiveness of budget, expenditure and cash management”, but also brought about a sea change in government transactions. The government, he said, saved ₹2,585 crore through Aadhaar seeding in the Public Distribution System by using technology to plug leakages. And it has managed to increase tax revenue from ₹38,038 crore in 2014-15 to ₹75,438 crore in 2018-19.

Although it claims to have done well in managing the available resources, the government seems unable to resist the temptation to launch more populist schemes in total disregard for the State’s fragile financial condition. After spending over ₹22,000 crore on crop loan waivers, it announced ₹5,000 crore in the Interim Budget for Anna-datha Sukhimbhava, an economic support scheme for farmers; doubled social security pensions; and increased the unemployment allowance. It also increased the pay scales of employees, the wages of Anganwadi workers and village revenue assistants, and the allocation for various welfare schemes.

How can a government indulge in financial profligacy while alleging a virtual funds freeze by the Centre?

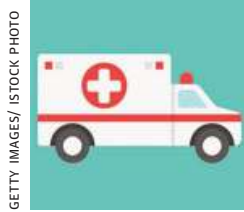
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SINGLE FILE

The private sector in public health

It can provide services and capital

RUHA SHADAB



The healthcare panel at the recent India Conference hosted by students of the Harvard Kennedy School and the Harvard Business School discussed the role of the private sector in augmenting public healthcare services. Goal 3 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) is to “ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages”. India has a mammoth role in helping the world attain SDG-3 as global health indicators cannot improve without India making giant strides. In providing healthcare, the Indian government has led the way, as it should, given that India is a welfare state.

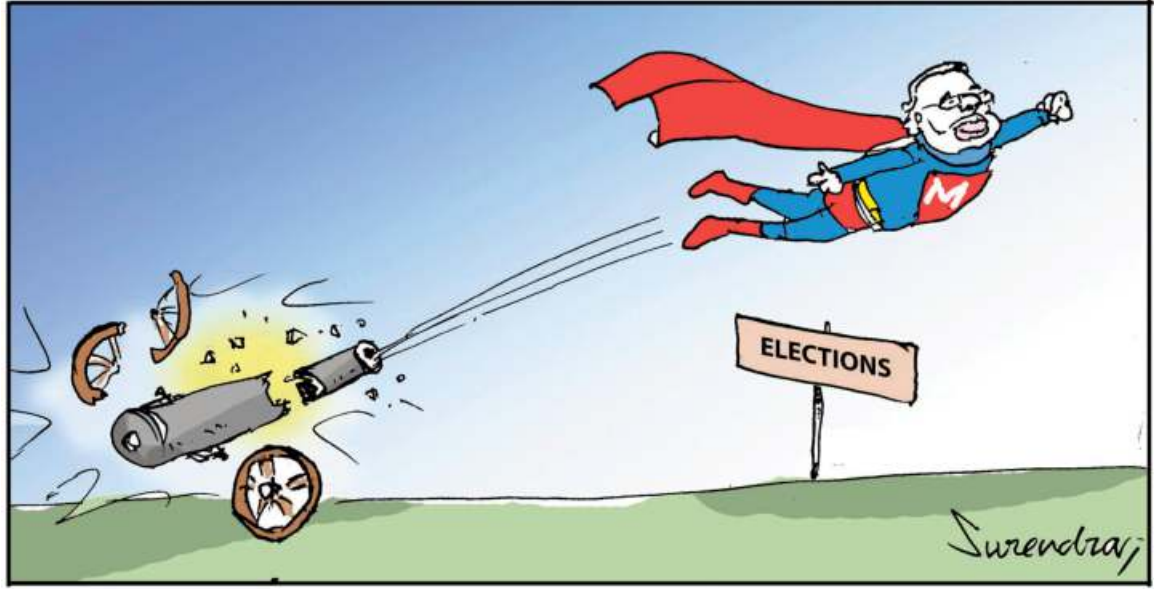
Over the past decade, courtesy changing demographics and lifestyles, India has been witnessing shifting disease prevalence in terms of the largest causes of morbidity and mortality. This requires that we give our health delivery system a re-look. The Harvard panel dove in to how the private sector can be leveraged for this purpose. The precondition is to create an ecosystem where partnerships between the private and the public sector can thrive. This must start with trust and stated common objectives. Once the ecosystem is more conducive, complementary needs to be identified.

While one may not foresee a great presence of the private sector in providing primary healthcare services, areas such as ambulance services and value-based care delivery can be promoted through this sector. Ayushman Bharat seeks to improve the network of the government’s first-point-of-contact health centres. For higher levels of services, the private sector can be incorporated by creating linkages between public health infrastructure and private providers through a hub-and-spokes model.

Besides services, the private sector is also a source of capital. A legally mandated way to provide this is through Corporate Social Responsibility. Companies above a certain annual turnover (₹1,000 crore), net worth (₹500 crores) or annual net profits (₹5 crore) have to earmark 2% of their net profits of the past three years to CSR projects, which may include healthcare projects. CSR has not yet reached its full potential. However, it is encouraging to see the merging of initiatives. This is seen in the government directing companies, albeit public sector ones, to the focus districts of the Aspirational Districts programme, which was started in 2018 to improve governance and service delivery across six sectors including health and nutrition.

At the end of the day the lesson was clear: as India strives to ensure availability, affordability and accessibility to quality healthcare for its people, both private and public stakeholders need to come together.

The writer is a doctor pursuing a Master’s degree in Public Policy at Harvard University



FAQ

Inflation pressure eases

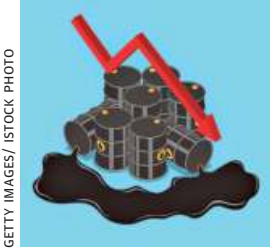
The Indian economy benefits from the fall in global oil prices

T.C.A. SHARAD RAGHAVAN

Why has inflation been falling?

Inflation at both the retail and wholesale levels has been falling for the last 4-5 consecutive months. Inflation as measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI), which captures retail inflation, and the Wholesale Price Index (WPI) has been falling in general for the last year or so. The CPI, for example, was as high as 5.21% in December 2017, following which it fell quite steadily (except for a mid-year blip in 2018) till it reached 2.05% in January 2019, the lowest it has been in 19 months. The WPI has similarly seen an overall decline, but has been more volatile than the CPI.

The main reason why inflation has been falling is the drop in global oil prices. After rising in the middle of 2018 to average \$80 a barrel in October, the Indian basket of crude oil prices fell to \$57 a barrel in December 2018. It was \$59



in January 2019. Prices in February have been slightly higher than that, but the increase is not much.

What does this mean for the economy?
The nature of the Indian economy is such that a change in oil prices has knock-on effects on almost every sector such as food, manufacturing, transport and infrastructure. Any sector that uses fuel or energy as an input is affected by global oil prices because India is still overwhelmingly dependent on imported oil to meet its needs.

When global oil prices fall, inflation falls across the board, most notably in energy-intensive sectors.

And within this, falling prices in each of these sectors have an impact on the other sectors dependent on them. For example, falling inflation in the transport sector means that every sector that needs to transport goods will also benefit.

Another aspect of falling inflation is that the Reserve Bank of India has more leeway to go easy on interest rates, one of its key inflation targeting tools. In its last Monetary Policy Review, the central bank cut the benchmark interest rate by 25 basis points. Some experts feel there is scope for even more cuts. Politically, low and falling inflation is always to the benefit of the government. This is especially noteworthy in the run-up to the general election. In contrast, the CPI inflation averaged about 7.6% in the three months leading up to the 2014 elections.

Why do WPI and CPI inflation diverge?

FROM The Hindu. ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 21, 1969

Mujibur Rahman let out on parole

The prospects of political talks between President Ayub Khan and the Opposition brightened today [February 20, New Delhi] with the release on parole of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, principal accused in the Dacca Conspiracy Case. There were rumours that the Government might be willing to drop the conspiracy case, but there was no official statement on the circumstances under which Mr. Rahman, who had earlier refused to meet Mr. Ayub Khan except as a free man, was persuaded to accept parole. As word of Mr. Rahman’s release reached Rawalpindi, the eight-party Central Democratic Action Committee resumed discussions on Mr. Ayub Khan’s invitation for talks to resolve the political crisis. The D.A.C. convener, Nawabzada Nasrullah Khan, told newsmen in Rawalpindi that Mr. Rahman would reach there from Dacca to participate in the D.A.C. discussions.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 21, 1919

Affray in a Train.

The murderous affray in a compartment of the Quetta Mail train which left Karachi on Tuesday morning [Feb. 18] has resulted in the death of two persons. A Punjabi Mohammadan named Haji Almadin belonging to Lahore, who for the last five years has been a sweetmeat seller in Karachi, entered a third class compartment of the train at Jumnshahi. Fourteen passengers were already in the compartment. He asked one seated near the window to surrender his seat, but the man refused whereupon the Punjabi drew a large knife and stabbed him in several places finally throwing him out of the window. Another man interfered and was also attacked, but took refuge in a lavatory where he smashed the window and jumped from the train... The Punjabi continued his attacks on other passengers and altogether one man was killed on the spot and eight severely injured.

CONCEPTUAL Acid test ratio

FINANCE

This refers to a financial metric that is used to measure the ability of a firm to meet its various short-term obligations. It is calculated by dividing the sum of a firm’s most liquid assets like cash and short-term receivables by its short-term liabilities. Other short-term assets like inventory, which are not readily convertible into cash, are usually not included in the calculation of this ratio. The acid-test ratio is used by analysts as an important measure of a firm’s liquidity position. There is considerable leeway involved in the calculation of the ratio since analysts may differ in their opinion about the actual liquidity of a firm’s various assets.

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