

The Gaping Pit between Education and Employment: The Issue of Vocational Education in India

Ujjal Jeet

Abstract

Although India is constantly improving its education scenario in terms of literacy rate, enrolment ratio, number of educational institutions per state, etc., there remains a sizeable gap between education and employability. Vocational education and skill-based learning have been identified as likely solutions to the problem, but it has been observed that there are very decisive biases among general people against vocational education. The current article is a historical and sociological analysis of various initiatives and efforts undertaken by several governments and visionaries aimed at implementing vocational education and the problems faced henceforth. The article also assesses the challenges ahead for the vocationalisation of higher education as envisioned in the New Educational Policy launched by the government of India in 2020. The research assumption of the study is that the vocationalisation of higher education is the key to development of India and therefore the issue accrues highest socio-economic relevance.

Keywords: New education policy 2020, vocational education, Wardha system of education, manual work, implementation

Introduction

India is a huge country both in terms of size and population where every year a large number of young men and women receive university degrees but not all of them are suitably employed. Already into the third decade of the twenty-first century, it is seen that while in terms of

literacy (74.04 per cent in Census 2011) India has come a long way, the problem of unemployment among the educated young still stands tall and unsurmountable. Currently, this problem demands urgent attention in the wake of massive scale student migrations to western countries particularly in states like Punjab which is a high performer on human development indicators generally. In fact, there remains a sizable gap between the education and the employability in India. According to an NSO report, the unemployment rate in India for people aged 15 years and above in urban areas was 7.6 per cent during April-June 2022 (Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy Pvt. Ltd. [CMIE] n.d.; The Global Statistics, n.d.). The situation may be given the term 'education inflation' as the value of formal education tends to decrease constantly in current times (Express News Service, 2022). The problem is complex and has various causes ranging from purely pedagogical reasons like ineffective curriculum designing across traditionally oriented socio-cultural fabric of India which looks down upon all forms of manual work thus forging a gap between the demands of the work-market and the education imparted (Department of Higher Education, 2020; Tobenkin, 2022). The current article, through a historical and sociological analysis, seeks to analyse and assess the challenges associated with the vocationalisation of higher education in India as envisioned in New Educational Policy 2020 (Aithal & Shubrajyotsna, 2020; Kannan, 2021; Karra, 2020; Kumar et al., 2021; Pathak, 2021). The article is based on the research assumption that higher education is the key to development of India and therefore accrues highest socio-economic relevance (Mukherjee, n.d.).

Vocational Education

Education, in general, comprises imparting human values and social ethics to people and therefore helps in constructing a civilized and cultured society but material living which sustains life and ensures wellbeing of the individual is specifically dealt under vocational education. It chiefly comprises training in the means for earning livelihood and ensuring skill development for productive work. The focus of such education is human resource development in terms of employment potential. Considering the importance of both types of education wherein everyone has equal opportunity to actualise their fullest potential and live a dignified life, 'vocationalisation of education' is sought by the successive policy makers.

The term vocationalisation refers to efforts by schools to include in their curriculum those practical subjects which are likely to generate among students some basic knowledge, skills and dispositions that might prepare them to think of becoming skilled workers or to enter manual operations (Bacchus, 1988). Mead (1974) views vocational training as “a long series of changes which stand between our idea of education and the processes by which members of a homogeneous and relatively static primitive society transmit their standardised habit patterns to their children” (Khullar, 1990, p. 147). Thus, Mead takes a larger sociocultural perspective of education and vocational training, located in the family and community situation of an individual. John Middleton (1993) in his book *Skills for Productivity: Vocational Education and Training in Developing Countries* also discusses the issue from a similar perspective in developing countries including India. Recently, Matthias Pilz and Julia Regel (2021) have discussed the issue in their study “Vocational Education and Training in India: Prospects and Challenges from an Outside Perspective” with a specific focus on India and in the wake of the NEP, 2020.

Vocational Education in India

The idea of vocational education is not new in India. In ancient India, during the Vedic period, there thrived an educational system consisting of *gurukuls* which educated pupils not only in scriptures and texts but also in economic practices of agriculture, animal husbandry, hunting, warfare and even commerce. The education of crafts and skills was imparted at home or in the respective trade guilds. But the problem with this period was that trades and crafts were progressively detained into lower social hierarchy which eventually consolidated into development of a rigid caste system which associates manual work with low birth. The rise of Buddhism was the first major reformist movement against this and embraced the production of crafts, and their commerce was inducted into the mainstream Buddhist way of life. The philosophy of *Charavaka* or *Lokayata* was another alternative way of life which endorsed the material way of living as the highest living. In the mediaeval period, when Muslims arrived in India and later settled and ruled here, the crafts and vocations were taught informally as well as in religious schools termed *madrassas* to Muslim children.

Vocational Education in Colonial India: A Vision

The foundation of the modern period was laid after 17th Century when India was subjugated to colonial rule by the British (Chandra, 2000; Mill, 2016). During this period Mountstuart Elphinstone's minutes (1823), Hunter Commission (1882), Wood and Abbot Report (1937), and Sergeant Plan (1944) raised the issue of vocationalisation of education for tackling unemployment among the youth from time to time. But central to all these efforts, an intricate relation between English language learning and employment opportunities and English developed into an important employability skill. This kind of attitude of the British rulers can particularly be traced in Lord Macauley's *Minutes*, delivered in 1835, widely considered as the watershed in the history of British Indian education. His plan aimed at imparting education with a special focus on eradication of unemployment among the youth while giving English, as medium of instruction, the central emphasis.

This latter clause raised many eyebrows among the nationalistic-minded Indians. Neglecting Indian languages was considered the dismissive attitude of the British towards indigenous knowledge systems. It was understood that education under British rule was incapable of reaching the masses as it just aimed at catering to few urban elite Indians or else for providing the clerical workforce to run British administration in India. Further, India under British rule was failing to keep pace with the rest of the world in terms of literacy also. And even the elite who thrived under this system had a bent towards literariness' thereby producing only unemployable social snobs who lost connection with the real world and showed no interest in the service to the fellow human beings through any productive contribution to society with knowledge and skill. Further, Lord Macauley's speech, inadvertently, also pointed towards the hitherto unknown problem of unemployment which had risen to worrying proportions during the British rule.

Mahatma Gandhi, perturbed at this alarming situation, published an article in the popular magazine *Harijan*, in 1937. His chief concerns were the lack of focus of the British education policy on rural India where eighty percent of the Indians lived and the neglect of the vernacular languages by the British. Speaking on the theoretical nature of education during the period, Gandhi said, "The present system of education obtained in British India, with which there is widespread discontent, is admittedly

far too literary in its nature" (as cited in Sinha, 1939, p. 729). For him, a mere knowledge of letters was not an enough objective of education. Instead, education must incorporate character building and a sense of duty towards one's motherland (Chakrabarty, 1992; Prabhu & Rao, 1946; Pradhan, 1980). He elaborated "our system of (basic) education leads to the development of the mind, body, and soul. The ordinary system cares only for the mind" (Bala, 2005, p. 532).

Following this, the idea of a reformed education system for new India was mooted at All India National Conference on Education on October 22-23, 1937, at Wardha and later that year, a committee under Dr Zakir Hussain presented its report to Gandhiji which came to be known as the Wardha Scheme of Basic National Education, also known as *Vidya Mandir Scheme* or *Nai Taleem*. The scheme focused primarily on the rural population and training in indigenous crafts was an essential and central component of the scheme depending upon the availability of the raw material and the market of the craft. In the syllabus of basic education, the craft chosen was to provide facilities for educational development and appeal to the growing child's sense of making and doing something which, further, would enhance their self-respect since the product of their labour would acquire a market value. Manual work under this system would bring the child in close contact with physical matter. In working with matter, the child was supposed to realise the utility of the various raw materials and the use of tools for manipulating the matter into material. Such knowledge would open his mind to science and economics. This kind of work develops not only the economic capacity of the child, but also the intellect of the pupils as it has been proven that kinesthetic mode of learning is an extremely effective way of learning. Thus, Gandhian conception of education was revolutionary in being job-centred, value-based, and mass-oriented (Bala, 2005; Bharathi, 1992). The scheme had to be deferred due to the outbreak of Second World War in 1939.

Vocational Education in Independent India: Efforts and Challenges

Later, in Independent India, the withstanding question of relevance of education to human life was reconsidered and Kothari Commission (1964-66) re-envisioned Gandhian ideas in the contemporary time. Based on the report (Ministry of Education [MoE], 1966) and recommendations of the Kothari Commission, the first National Policy on Education was launched which called for radical restructuring of education to make

it universal and inclusive. In 1976, the National Council of Education Research and Training (NCERT) document 'Higher Secondary Education and its Vocationalisation' was presented to the country setting a model conceptual framework for implementation. The programme for vocationalisation of higher secondary education was initiated in 1976.

The second National Policy on Education, introduced in 1986, called for a more inclusive approach targeting women and SC-ST communities and focused on rural education, drawing inspiration from Gandhian philosophy to promote economic and social development at the grass root levels in rural India.

The problems faced in implementation of the ideals of vocationalisation during this period have been numerous. But a central concern has been the deep-rooted prejudice of Indian people against manual work. Consequently, vocational schooling creates a sense of 'second class' schooling among the students such that a student pursuing a vocational course is considered weaker in education to those students opting for mainstream higher education avenues (Ahmad, 2020; All India Council for Technical Education [AICTE], n.d.; Boruah, 2022). This social attitude is further enforced by paucity of both human resources and material resources at secondary education level. Most of the general schools have been lacking necessary infrastructure in the form of laboratories, workshops, and other educational aids for running the vocational programmes at the higher secondary level and thus the policy frameworks proceed to become victims of systemic lassitude due to social attitudes. In terms of human resource, the shortage of able, skilled, and trained teachers to run the skill-based courses has also been another significant issue. Apart from infrastructural and human resource development problems, further apathy has been seen in the fact that the courses are not even designed properly. Students are made to expend their time and energy on rote memorisation of theoretical knowledge. They fail to get adequate proficiency in the vocation chosen and, therefore, they are unable to generate any market value for their study and secure any suitable employment. So, either they remain unemployed or under-employed (Middleton, 1993; Pilz & Regel, 2021; Prakash, 2021; Team SPRF, 2020).

Building on the problems faced, after a gap of 34 years, a new educational policy, drafted by the Kasturirangan Committee has been launched in 2020. The Policy, a comprehensive document, distinguished for its focus

on revamping the vocational education in India by skills-gap analysis and mapping of local opportunities, claims to be 'a completely new and far-sighted policy' aiming to change the educational ecosystem of India and prepare its youth for the 'present and future challenges' in a globalised world. It seeks to capitalise India's demographic dividend in terms of young and working population and work in alignment with the United Nations Development Programme.

A National Committee for the Integration of Vocational Education (NCIVE) consisting of experts in vocational education from industry and representatives from various ministries of Government of India to oversee this effort, is planned to be set up by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (now, Ministry of Education). It seeks to set up skill labs in collaboration with polytechnic and local industries. Incubation centres are proposed to be set up in higher education institutes in partnership with industries and envisions that by 2025, at least 50 per cent of learners will be inducted into vocational courses.

The policy also aims to obliterate the separation between arts and sciences, between curricular and extracurricular activities, between vocational and academic streams etc., in order to eliminate harmful hierarchies among different areas of learning. Instead, it aims to make the courses based on Arts also skill and outcome-based. The National Skills Qualifications Framework will be detailed further for each discipline, vocation and profession and the credit-based framework will also facilitate mobility across 'general' and vocational education.

Conclusion

To sum up, it must be said the New Education Policy, 2020, is indeed a visionary document, well-meaning in its intent and content and based on learning from experience with acute foresight for future but some of the formidable challenges like social status hierarchy associated with manual labor, integration of vocational education with general education, laying emphasis on social inclusion and gender equality, allocating and distributing ample financial resources and uprooting the corruptive practices stand huge and demand a multi-pronged approach wherein the demographic, economic, social and cultural aspects of Indian society are considered too, so that the gap between visionary policy formulation and effective policy implementation is filled in the right earnest with innovation and endurance.

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Ujjal Jeet is an Assistant Professor at the Department of English, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar. She teaches linguistics and semiotics and writes poetry and short fiction.

ujjal.eng@gndu.ac.in