

On Education and School Teachers in Assam

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The importance of education in our personal and social lives can not be emphasized enough. In the twenty-first century, it has become more important than ever before. This relates to two basic features of modern life. The physical environment in which we live requires skills and knowledge that can be imparted efficiently only through education. The nature of most goods and services used today is such that it requires the producers and consumers to use a substantial amount of information. Beyond this physical environment, there is this world of ideas that seems to determine the dynamics and ultimately the progress of a society. For a large part of the globe that includes developing countries like India, however, the basic needs of the physical environment are so overwhelming that this world of ideas appears to be out of reach for most people living in those countries. Yet, technology has created an environment in which the paths for progress for both individuals and societies are no longer linear and these two features have been almost inextricably intertwined. It highlights the importance of education in every society. Thus, it is imperative that societies everywhere strive for quality education that can rise up to the challenges of modern times.

In this flat world (*a la* Thomas L. Friedman) where competition is global, India has been purported to thrive by augmenting its stock of human capital through a world-class education.¹ A higher education system that produced a highly skilled labor force at a time when unprecedented progress in information and communication technologies (ICT) created opportunities at home and abroad, fuelled much of this speculation. No wonder that there have been substantial investments in education (particularly higher education) in both public and private sector. The changing image of India from being a poverty-stricken to a technology savvy country, however, camouflages the fact that more than one-third of India's over a billion people are illiterate. Achieving higher literacy rate is one thing, but improving the quality of primary and secondary education is crucial even for ensuring the quality of higher education. As other developing countries in Asia, Europe, and Latin America have realized the importance of education and have implemented educational reforms to cope with the challenges, India may lose its comparative advantage. Therefore, a carefully designed forward-looking comprehensive education policy covering all levels of education is of utmost importance.

In this article, I will narrowly focus on some of the challenges faced by the primary and secondary level education in Assam. In a previous article, I have argued that Assam can be a home to world-class higher education institutions. It extended the basic premise of what we

¹ See Friedman, Thomas L. *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux (2005)

have observed in the field of higher education in India since the 1990s. I discussed the short-term economic gains and the potentials for long-term benefits to the society as a whole.² However, to realize the long-run potentials, there is a need for a comprehensive approach to education at all levels.

According to the 2001 Census, Assam has a literacy rate of 64.3 percent, which is slightly below the national average of 65.4 percent. As far as I know, various government policies have been underway to primarily increase the literacy rate. The curricula at the primary and secondary level have undergone extensive changes. In recent years, the success rate in the High School Leaving Certificate (HSLC) Examination has gone up, which has been interpreted in some quarters as a sign of improvement in the quality of education. But statistics could often be deceptive. Some of the complaints that I hear particularly about high school level education when I visit Assam these days are worrisome. Our public schools (Government, Government-Aided, Schools waiting to be recognized and aided by the government) have experienced constant deterioration in quality. Understaffing, nonpayment of teachers' salaries for months, corruption in teachers' appointment etc. are usual grievances. One consequence of this degradation of the public school system is that there has been a mushroom growth of private schools. The middle class families living in urban and semi-urban areas are sending their children to private schools where the quality of education is arguably better. Whether primary and secondary level education should be provided by the free market or by the government is in the sphere of public policy debate and I do not intend to indulge myself in that discourse. Nor my intention is to give a complete list of problems that have plagued the public school system in Assam. Here I would like to emphasize the importance of some of the issues related to teachers that the education policy makers should keep in mind while formulating education policies. The implicit assumption underlying this discussion is that the public schools have a crucial role to play at the primary and secondary level of education in Assam.

The primary and secondary level education lays the foundation for future academic endeavors. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to make sure that the students receive the best quality education imparted by well-qualified, competent, and dedicated teachers. But under the current system there are formidable problems related to teachers' quality and efforts. *First*, there is no proper evaluation of qualifications in recruitment of teachers. Rampant corruption in teachers' appointment has been an open secret. As a result, the quality has suffered. Furthermore, there is no periodic assessment of the teachers' performance. There is no accountability or punishment for not performing nor there is any reward for good performance. There was a time when there was almost an entire generation of dedicated teachers who were driven by ideals and principles that were ingrained in the social value system. The number of such teachers has substantially declined. One can argue that this has to do with the corruption involved in teachers' recruitment. In general, however, it is important to recognize that time has changed and it is pertinent to design an incentive mechanism that will be consistent with

² See Nath, Hiranya K. "A few thoughts on higher education in Assam." Luitor pora Thames (2009). Also available at http://www.shsu.edu/~eco_hkn/highereducationinassam.pdf

the current value system and will reward and punish the teachers appropriately for their performance.

Second, the teacher's salary is one of the lowest whereas he/she is expected to do one of the most important and difficult jobs in the world. Interestingly, this is a universal problem: even in developed countries like the United States this has been recognized as a problem with the education system. This adversely affects the quality in several ways. *First*, few with excellent credentials and qualifications would apply for teaching jobs. Consequently, the probability of hiring well-qualified and good quality teachers is low. *Second*, given the costs of living and increasing materialistic needs even for average households often compel the teachers to look for alternative sources of income. For example, many school teachers give private tuitions to students in Assam. That reduces the probability that those teachers will put good efforts in teaching at schools. *Finally*, the problem of low salary is further exacerbated by irregularity in payments. In Assam (and, I am sure, in other parts of India as well), there are instances in which teachers teach months after months, sometimes even years, without any compensation in the hope that one day they will get paid by the government. Such incidents demoralize the teachers and adversely affect their productivity.

Third, the teachers have very little say over the curricula and it is mostly imposed upon them from above. These curricula are often based on systems developed in other countries, mostly of the west. The British system of education that was implemented during the colonial period has been dragged into the new millennium. Of course, new elements – often borrowed from other countries – have been added but I doubt that there has been any fundamental changes. Neither carefully conducted research nor practical aspects of school teaching experienced by the teachers go into preparing the curricula. It is important to recognize that although the goals of education may be the same, the operational details of a system put in place to achieve those goals may be quite different in different societies. Since the teachers have direct experiences with the students, their active participation in designing the curriculum improves its quality and effectiveness. This, however, requires that the teachers are constantly updated in their subject areas introducing them to different techniques through regular training programs. Evidently, such programs are conducted once in a while in Assam. Anecdotal evidence suggests that these programs are not very effective in engaging the teachers to come up with innovative teaching ideas that can handle the challenges of a dynamic curriculum in the classroom. Such engagement, by making the teachers feel important, provide an incentive to enhance their involvement in teaching and, thereby, its quality.

It appears that the school teachers are often a neglected constituency while formulating public policy in education. However, by paying attention to the issues involving teachers, we can hope to achieve substantial progress in ensuring quality education at the primary and secondary level.