

Education is not just an instrument for employment

Reducing education to a means for employment is inadequate, wrong and unjust

He was a quiet man. He was also a good and disciplined driver. Fast, when needed, without taking risks, and mindful of the comfort of his passengers. Despite three days of arguments swirling around him on topics from politics to corporal punishment, he never offered an opinion. In that early winter day, we were driving towards another meeting of teachers. The argument was about why people send their children to school. Is it mostly about getting them better livelihood and jobs, or are there other motivations?

It takes an unusually fair and open-minded person to seek validation or otherwise from someone who has not spoken for three days. I would not have done it. The question was directly to him, "*aap apne bachchon ko school kyon bhejte hain?* (why do you send your children to school?)". His response was in character, precise and brief. "*Is duniya me shiksha ke bina izzat kahan hai?* (There is no respect in this world without education)". All of us knew that one person's view is not the final word. But the clarity of his response put a pause to the argument. My sense of vindication was tempered by my admiration for the act of asking that question and accepting the answer with equanimity.

Before that conversation, I would ask that very question once in a while, when I met parents of students in the schools that I was visiting. After that conversation I started asking it systematically, across the scores of schools that I get to visit in the country. In parallel, some of my colleagues, who are especially good at researching difficult issues in the complex reality of real India, got interested in the same question. The result is the recently-published field study *Educational Expectations, Aspirations, And Structural Constraints* (Azim Premji University). Here are some key points paraphrased from the study.

Expectations of parents from education for their children were explored through rigorous interviews in the study. More than 96% of the parents said education was important for both boys and girls. Over 30% gave reasons related to employability as the main usefulness of education. However, over 25% of the parents had mainly reasons that conveyed the importance of education for broader social objectives other than employment.

These reasons were quite distinct from their expectation that school education would help their children have better livelihood or jobs. The study has labelled these reasons as "social purposes", which are of three kinds—reasons that underscored self-worth, reasons that emphasized respect in society, and reasons that underlined empowerment. The wide prevalence of the importance of these "social purposes" is even clearer, when the "top three" reasons cited by parents are considered. As much as 84% of the parents cited "social purposes" among their top three reasons, for both girls and boys. Whereas employability-related reasons were cited among the top three by 71% for boys and by 52% for girls.

The study mirrors the experiences and intuitions of many of us who work in education—that parents expect a lot more from education than only better livelihood and employment. These expectations are even sharper for the socially disadvantaged. Asking that question systematically now for some time, I have seen multiple layers of human feelings on this matter.

On a dark monsoon afternoon, in a small village somewhere in Chhattisgarh, we were sitting inside a school classroom constructed in 1915. There were about 20 people there, all of whose children were studying in the school. I speak Chhattisgarhi reasonably fluently, which they clearly did not expect from someone from Bengaluru. Perhaps that is a reason we had such a conversation about my question. Here is the gist of what they said.

First, the school is a visible marker of equality and freedom. It had been standing there since 1915, but most of their families had not been able to send children to the school, and some were not allowed to, till a generation ago. The simple act of all children from the village going to the same school is emancipating. Second, caste is a reality that they live with. And they know that education can empower them to loosen the tight grip of caste over their lives. Third, the rules by which this world works are loaded in favour of the educated. They cannot protect their rights, demand their dues, and prevent (or reduce) their exploitation unless they are educated. Fourth, how can anyone struggle for a better world, even if they want to, if they are not educated? B.R. Ambedkar was what he was because of education.

Such expectations from education should not surprise us. Reducing education to an instrument for employment, or basic literacy and numeracy, which much of our intellectual and policy discourse tends to, is inadequate, wrong and unjust. That the disadvantaged expect much more from education, should be even less of a surprise. The promise of education is empowerment, equality and dignity. So, when education fails, which it does too often in this country, it fails the deepest of aspirations and hopes of our people. If we have to redeem the pledge of our nation, not even substantially, but in some measure, education has to succeed.

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