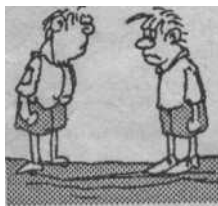


Self-selection in education



Should a bright but very poor slum child go for higher studies, in an engineering college perhaps, and risk becoming one of the educated unem-

ployed? How may its education be funded? To compete on a par with others, it should get coaching for writing entrance examinations, but coaching classes are very, very expensive. Is it worth putting the child in a coaching school?

Here are three basic questions which parents face sometime or the other. But these questions are not squarely faced by Indian society. The governments too brushes them under the carpet. First of all, poverty should never ideally prevent a child from studying as much as it successfully can. Secondly, coaching should *not* matter. Third, the numbers educated should stay within what the economy can absorb. But how to realise these ideals?

On the first issue of educated unemployment, the main problem is the mushroom growth of third-rate colleges. These will exist in any capitalist society for there will always be fond but foolish

Let the poor try for superior education with tuition rich pay their way through sub-standard colleges

parents with money enough to push children far beyond their capacity to learn. They are also likely to have enough political clout to lower academic standards to suit the IQ of their child. What results is an overall decline in standards, and the growth of higher education beyond what the economy can sustain. Such spoiled children also vitiate academic discipline. So the social dilemma goes beyond children of the rich 'studying' for unnecessarily long; they also disturb others.

Attempts to totally change this system would probably fail. But it might be feasible to sequester the serious institutions from the non-serious. Colleges must be allowed to limit admissions to levels they can handle, and which the economy can support. IITs are like that; for, although they can attract many more students, and make lots more money, they desist as a matter of academic discipline. Yet, still there is some amount of artificiality in their way of limiting admissions. To make such decisions more rational, they could go by the rule that the number of

students admitted in any course equals (or is close to) the number of graduates from the previous batch who manage to get 'proper jobs'. That will restrict admissions to what the institution can reach while maintaining standards. 'Proper jobs' may be defined as 'either employed with a status commensurate with the level of education provided, or admitted into further higher education in institutions of quality'.

We will then have two institution types — one that is 'select' and limits admissions strictly in quantity and quality, and a second 'soft' type which adopts relaxed admissions policies.

That is not as elitist as it might at first sight appear. Our concern here is about poor students: to entice the poor to waste precious years of youth in sub-standard colleges is criminal; to let the rich waste theirs is a relatively minor evil compared to many other ways in which their excess wealth may be squandered. To put it in practical terms, assume that government scholarships are only to be made available

in education and training

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able, and charitable contributions made permissible only for 'select' institutions. This will not be illiberal as 'soft' colleges will not be prohibited from functioning, and the rich can patronise them to their heart's content. The poor however are given clear warnings to stay away; in any case, without scholarships 'soft' colleges will be beyond their reach!

This is neither unnatural nor unfair. Rail way travel admits of multiple classes; so why not separate educational institutions, some pandering to the rich? This division in place, there will be little risk of poor students suffering educated unemployment. The latter will only be joining institutions which can offer a guarantee that such a mishap will not occur.

Secondly, all government colleges (where education is virtually free) can also be made into 'select' institutions. Then, the poor will face few, if any, financial barriers to higher education. The number of such institutions will also be small enough for the government to be able to support them in much the same

way that it now supports the IITs. The only catch is that governments, being populist, like to cater to wants, not needs.

The question of coaching remains. That entrance examinations are becoming trainable has been a matter of concern for quite some time. Yet, IITs and their ilk are loath to discontinue this flawed way of admissions. They fear that without such exams the flood gates for political interference will be opened wide.

But what coaching does is it induces candidates to practice. Like *Ekalavya*, any self-disciplined student can do the same on his own. He could see the past several years' question papers and go on to answer them swiftly and accurately. Questions and answers are available; so if he is any good he should be to progress on his own.

What, then, would be reasonable advice for competent but indigent students? He must select only institutions from where students get good jobs, and which hold entrance examinations. He should diligently practise on his own. Then, if he still fails entry, he must avoid sub-standard institutions. Much better by far to elect a vocational course or to enter into employment.