

The hostile education system and future of children in the northeast India



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Dr Aniruddha Babar 12 November 2019 Updated 12 Nov 39088 views

An article published on 6th April 2018 in *Northeast Today Magazine*, which flashed a determination of 73 year old man from Mizoram to complete his school education made me happy as well as thoughtful.

While reading the story I recalled my solo travels through the remotest regions of Nagaland, Assam and Meghalaya where my curious eyes observed everything. I have lived in jungles, climbed mountains, met people, experienced their love, shared not only their household but food, sorrows, hopes and dreams too.

“The object of Primary Education is to see that every child that enters the portals of a primary school does leave it only at a stage when it becomes literate and continues to be literate throughout the rest of his life”. ~ Dr. B.R. Ambedkar

However, my personal experience in different states of the northeast region brought a serious problem to my notice which revolves around the ‘education system’. The failure to ensure quality education in government schools in remote villages has evidently compelled many parents, sometimes many belonging to the BPL, to send their children to private schools in the capital cities. This has a direct impact on the economy of the family, often leading to poverty. Parents today send their children to private schools with great difficulty, where one parent has to work in the village while the other parent has to move to town to look after their children pursuing education in towns. Many a times such children are even look after by their relatives who are living (where kids, more often are also required to provide ‘unconditional’ help (service?) in household work) in cities and the towns.

Government Schools are not functioning properly since the people responsible for them are not functioning with their fullest potential, abilities and ethical standards, moreover, the seriousness to maintain the quality of education at the grass root level is somewhat missing. The evil of proxy teaching, nepotism, corruption and other malpractices has been openly mushrooming. Owing to this paradoxical situation, many students are compelled to leave their education halfway only to be continued in inescapable abyss of poverty, suffering, humiliation, injustice and eternal darkness. Many end up in losing hopes in the system. However, in spite of all the odds, there are some who made torch of their own soul to light up their path. They refuse to surrender before the challenges. They disallow their dreams to be disappeared into thin air. Mr. Lalringthara is one of them.

In the context of hopeless education system of northeast region of India it is pertinent to give due weightage to an inspiring story of Mr. Lalringthara of Hruaikawn village of champhai district in Mizoram who has enrolled in 5th class in the only school in village in 2018. Mr. Lalringthara could not complete his school education due to the hardships he had to face in his childhood. With the death of his father and second marriage of Mother Mr. Lalringthara who was then raised by a distant relative had no other option but to leave his schooling to work in the rice field. Poverty stricken, hard-working Lalringthara could not accomplish his dream to finish his school education. The unfinished dream to finish his schooling inspire him to join village school once again at the ripen age of 73.

This event is very important in a time when many students are giving up their studies by succumbing themselves to the hardships of life, certain uncontrollable circumstances as well apathy from teaching fraternity (barring exceptional exceptions). Let us take an example of the state of Nagaland which has a literacy rate of 80.11%, being 83.29% for males and 76.69% for females as per Census 2011 where, on the other side, a dropout rate of students is very high in concurrence with high rate of prevalence of HIV infection and Alcohol as well as psychotropic substance abuse related disorders. The problem of children leaving their schools before finishing their studies is a biggest challenge before the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan scheme. The implementation of the scheme needs proper monitoring and review by the competent authorities to establish the accountability. The seven sister states of North East India which consists of Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Sikkim have been sharing a kind of bond of being different than the rest of India in terms of their culture, language, cuisine, lifestyle and of course the 'education'. It has been observed that in spite of having good literacy rate in the northeast states, the statistics of students aspiring to take higher education is very low in comparison with the rest of India.

However, there are many factors like poverty that influence the parents' decision to send child to study further. The major obstacle is non-availability of quality schools and colleges in the vicinity, this fact I personally experienced when I visited Pungro, Dist. Kiphire which is in close proximity to the international border with Myanmar. While interacting with respected elders and other dignitaries of Pungro village I learnt about grass root realities of the status of 'education' in the region. Many students have been exposed to extremely hostile education environment where teachers are devoid of any accountability to students and profession.

It has also been observed that the village school kids end up getting good marks in their tests and other assessment activities however on the contrary they also exhibited lack of basic knowledge and understanding of the subject in which they scored well,. The positive correlation between ignorance and marks is worrisome. The type of practices where students are given 'blind' numbers by their teachers to show 'false positive growth trajectory of school, students and teachers' inevitably take students to the complex mental state of illusion and false positive conviction about their academic abilities and subject knowledge which has extremely dangerous future implications. These are some of the most common problems that the students from northeast states have been facing. However, situation as of now has seen to be improving with the setup of some private schools and colleges, however, those institutions are still beyond the reach of a common person whose livelihood depends on meagre income from agriculture and daily wages. Another important factor that needs to be considered is the absence of quality teaching in village schools. This is a commonly identified problem all over India, however, much visible in the states like Nagaland, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh. The inability of a teacher to teach the subject in the school is also a major factor which is responsible for the dropout of students. It has also been observed that the large number of offspring in the family also makes it difficult for parents to provide their children the quality education which has now become a very expensive affair. It looks like *quality* and *money* goes hand in hand in education sector (Really?).

Almost an year ago Government of Maharashtra announced that it would shut down 1314 village schools due to lack of enrolment and attendance of students. The Right to Education Act has a provision that empowers the state to close down the schools having less than 20 students. Now the question arises as to who is responsible for the low enrolment/attendance of students in the classroom of a village school? is it a teacher, students themselves, their parents or the state? The problem will not be solved with closing down the schools. On one hand Nagaland has village schools with good initial enrolment rate and on the other Maharashtra has village schools with no or less enrolment. One state is struggling for its existence with the aid from the centre under the shadow of AFSPA and suffocating corruption and the other is one of the most prosperous, internationally recognized, self-sufficient states in India that blessed to have Mumbai as its capital. The problem of Education brings these two states which are pole apart on the single platform. It is not that children of 21st century are not aware about the importance of education, but they need *means* to reach and *assurance of future* to stay in the school. People correlate education with the secure financial future which is not a wrong or unreasonable expectation, however, could students studying in village schools where quality of teaching is neither monitored nor accountability is established, imagine a better future for themselves? A nation where rapid corporatization has been taking place, Air conditioned offices, Applied intelligence, Practical Knowledge, European accented English and polished manners becoming a passport to prosperity, how will kids studying in a village school in extremely backward states like Nagaland or Manipur could ever dream of the better future? It is not that the village schools have failed the nation; great people that shaped this great nation have also been produced by these schools which are now largely ignored by the government.

World is changing rapidly. In this day and age, when petabytes of information is at our disposal, teachers need to prepare the students for the upcoming Machine Revolution. They need to nurture their creativity, curiosity, critical thinking, management techniques and collaborative skills. Teachers also need to prepare their students for the challenges that the future will present. In the context of rising societies like that of in the northeast regions 'education system' and 'teachers' has multiple responsibilities to shoulder.

The meaning of education in the tribal societies of northeast India must not be kept limited as to make students able to get a job that feed them and the dependents, however, education system and the educators will have to play far bigger role in facilitating as well as helping students to visualize the greater responsibility they require to shoulder; a divine responsibility to construct a 'New world', a 'New society' and also an 'evolved culture & civilization', therefore, it is a primary task before Education system, Teachers, Policy Makers in 'our' world of northeast India to see that the students remain in the system and DO NOT give up their path of education for any reasons. If teachers play a role of a leader, role-model, friend, philosopher, guide and counsellor, if teachers keeps on pushing their students towards intellectual excellence by putting extra efforts in helping them in their academics, if teachers introduce the students to the world of knowledge than just text-book information I sincerely believe that the students would definitely be motivated enough to stay in the education system in spite of all the hardships and odds.

Educators and teachers from the northeast Tribal regions must necessarily understand the responsibility that is entrusted upon them. They are the ones who are the first generation or at the most second generation educated people who are required to academically engage as teachers with the students who are also either first generation or second generation learners. Teachers are intellectuals of the society as well as the custodian of knowledge and consciousness who not only have a responsibility to give intellectual direction to the masses but also to sacrifice their individual interests, pleasures and selfish desires to carve out the destiny of the people out of 'void'; and this noble task must be accomplished by them in partnership with their students. These efforts will make students understand the greater purpose of education in broader spectrum.

It is not easy and fair to expect student to independently understand and shoulder his responsibility towards himself, his family, nation and walk the lonely path through the hostile schooling system and therefore, to correct the damage which has caused serious injury to the 'Right To Education' of a Child which the Constitution of India guarantees, the Ground work needs to be prepared by the state government. It is also important to see that the thatching, muddling and tented huts should not be constructed in the name of school buildings. There are government teachers who never go to school to teach. There are schools that remain functional but only in paper, there have been instances wherein grass root realities have either been attempted to be kept hidden or grossly misrepresented in media and official reports. There have been instances where teachers who got a government job to teach in schools have found to be roaming in big cities enjoying themselves, some take up additional job or enrol themselves in some career oriented courses. These teachers rented out their teaching job to some needy people who would attend school on 50/50 salary sharing basis and retire with pension benefits. How should one address such problem which is absolutely visible and known in almost every state of the northeast India?

The time has come to take concrete, constructive and corrective steps to make students studying in village schools feels secure about their future, and for that the state has to come forward with constructive changes in its education as well as Human Resource policies which would enable the authorities to keep good checks on the growth trajectories of the schools as well as performance of teachers and students. No matter what, teachers must be made accountable for their actions. Moreover, a fact that needs to be acknowledged that on average thousands of drop-outs have been produced by the north-east states every year. It is a general fact that drop outs contribute to a major part of anti-social activities in any society due to frustration and severe depression which consequently makes them as social liability. The education system that facilitates drop outs needs serious scrutiny and people (including teachers) responsible for such a disaster must be made individually and collectively accountable for their failures.

At the end, I as an academician associated with one of the most reputed colleges in Nagaland unquestionably believe and affirm that the Teachers in the lands of rising world must be willing to sacrifice their present for the glorious tomorrow of the future generations. Let us understand that the needs of our society, our world where people were introduced to the modern idea of 'education and schooling' few decades ago are different. Therefore, approach to the 'teaching methodology', 'students' and 'education' should be innovative and different and for that 'attitude' of teachers should be different too. Whether one may like it or not; our academicians, teachers cannot afford to escape from the divine responsibility that they are entrusted upon by the 'lord almighty'. God gives life to Man, but it is a teacher who should shape it and make a man fit to serve the mankind as a divine vessel of almighty. I believe, that it is only a teacher who can inspire student to undertake relentless struggle. It is only a teacher who can inspire student to study not only for his own better future, but the transformation of the 'tomorrow' of a world he is part of. A student of today can change the world of tomorrow provided his MASTER is willing to write his destiny with his own 'Blood', 'Sweat', 'Wisdom' and 'Selfless Sacrifices'.

THERE IS NO RESTING DAY FOR AN ACADEMICIAN BECAUSE TEACHING IS A MISSION MORE THAN JUST A PROFESSION.

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