

UNCOVERING BLIND SPOTS IN EDUCATIONAL REFORMS IN KERALA THE CAMPAIGN FOR PROTECTING GENERAL EDUCATION---A REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

The paper critically analyses the objectives of the campaign for “Protecting General Education in Kerala” to which teaching community of three educational districts of Thrissur, (Kerala) were briefed about on 25th January 2017. The study critically analyses the previous attempts made to gauge the standard of education among school going students of Kerala. It uncovers loop-holes ingrained in the way of implementation of the measures proposed for reforming Kerala education system. This narrative will serve as an eye opener for all well-wishers including teachers, parents, educationists, policy makers etc in the field of education of Kerala state

Key word: Education, Teaching, General education, Standard of education, Teacher training , Smart class

INTRODUCTION

It was a one day programme. Teachers from three educational districts of Kerala state gathered at St Claire’s higher secondary school Thrissur. The purpose of the meeting was not clear to anybody though they were hinted that all teachers will be briefed about evaluating their students in a novel way. “You have to change your ways” said the principal who inaugurated the camp. Teachers were exhorted to refine their intentions behind monitoring and continuous evaluation (CE) of students as a part of a mission for protecting the general education sector in Kerala which is on the verge of being perished by untoward practices of nobody in particular one can point one’s finger for accusing. The intangible, invisible but seemingly invincible perpetrators taking away the vitality of educational system of Kerala were neither students, nor teachers not the government either. Then who?. The system?. The system constituting all of them?

Teachers were recommended to participate actively in the campaign of “Protecting General Education Sector of Kerala”. They were inducted mainly to four objectives coming under the rubric of campaign namey,

1. Raising the Standard of Education
2. Introducing smart classes
3. Rendering the school environment into a text book for learning
4. Providing quality teacher training to the teacher community

All teachers diagnosed with the same eye and they agreed unanimously with the major objective of fifty paged agenda for reformation -- “Protection of General Education System”. Education system needs “protection” and nobody doubted the propriety of the word “protection” or tried to suggest a better expressions like “improvement”, “upliftment” ...or something like that. All were convinced that system must be “protected”. That means the system is feeling insecure. It needs to be cordoned off from the influence of some elements that is likely to scotch it in the long run. Its fundamentals are in peril. The impending catastrophe likely to befall the system can be vividly imagined. So teachers were given a set of objectives to meet with all their professional might in order to protect the educational system. The first objective was “Raise the standard of the education to international level”. And all teachers appreciated this objective with same eyes, ears and brains. Like thinking minds strengthens any organized movements

RAISING THE STANDARD OF EDUCATION FOR PROTECTING THE SYSTEM

Preliminary step for protecting any system which is on the verge of collapsing must be the identification harmful elements that precipitate its slow but sure demolition. Any attempt for the revival of a system must be backed by accurate identification and articulation of harmful forces gnawing its smooth functioning. Absence of any authentic attempt to search for and eliminate negative forces will nullify all developmental efforts invested within the system.

For raising the “standard” of the system scientific studies conducted in the scenario of education must be able to pronounce and expound on the current “standard” in scientific terms. So far no scientific research attempt has made to assess the educational standard objectively in terms of standardized criteria which commensurate well with predetermined educational objectives. Of the meager studies orchestrated mainly by news paper (media) survey research, no study adheres to the established criteria of a scientific research. None of them claims evidence based methodical rigor in their investigations and they are indifferent in the act of pin pointing the factors which contribute to downward course of educational standards in Kerala. Viewing from a macro level, evaluation of educational standards was never mandatory as far as the policies or laws meant to protect and guide education system of the state is concerned. Educationists want to stretch “Right to education” so as to introduce the element of “standard” into it and make it “Right to standard education”. But a lofty dream for international standard without footing oneself in a scientific terra firma is irrational.

Let us have a bird’s eye view of some recent studies conducted not by any authorized research organizations but by media personnel with the tools of their choice (not standardized ones).

Table-1 Studies on Educational Standards of Kerala

“Once the most literate state in India Kerala faces a serious crisis in education” by T K Devasia published in Scroll.in September 27 (2015). Updated in 2017 January 3 (<https://scroll.in/article/757052/once-the-most-literate-state-in-india-kerala-faces-a-serious-crisis-in-education>)

The study was conducted among 4,800 students of class IV and VII in Kasargod, Thrissur, Ernakulam, Pathanamthitta and Thiruvananthapuram districts. The students were tested in language, maths and basic science.

Highlights

- * 5% of the students in class VII cannot identify alphabets, 35% of them can’t read or write their mother tongue, while 85% students are poor in basic science and 73% in mathematics.
- * Class IV students – 47% students can’t write in Malayalam and 25% in English. The case with maths and science was even worse: while 63% students are poor in mathematics, 73% do not have even basic

knowledge in science.

This study exposes the hollowness behind the pass percentage (97.5%) in SSLC exam declared in the year. They claim that the impressive figure—97.5-- can be indicative falling standard of education in kerala. They substantiate it by chalking out the performance of the students in further stages of their education.

Excerpts from the study

“More than 50% students have been failing in BTech examinations conducted by universities in the state. An analysis of the results of BTech examination conducted by the Kerala University in March 2014 showed that the pass percentage in two colleges was less than 10%, in seven colleges it was less than 20%, and in another 13 colleges, it was less than 30%. GPC. Nayar, president of National Federation of Associations of Private Unaided Professional Colleges, blamed this low pass percentage on the steady fall in the standards of education in the state, linking it directly to the no failures policy which results in the almost 100% pass percentage till the secondary school level.”

“Last year’s results of the MBBS examination showed more than 30% failure in government and self-financing medical colleges in the state. The failure rate in some colleges was more than 90%”.

“The pass percentage of the BSc Nursing examination conducted by the the university in 90 colleges during the academic year 2010-11 was 28.2%, B Pharm 5% and Physiotherapy 6%. In the live registers of unemployed the number of unemployed stood three times the all India average”.

“Government schools imparting poor quality education” Jitendra[2] (a report in Down to Earth) January 17th 2014
(<http://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/government-schools-imparting-poor-quality-education-43292>)

Highlights

*in Manipur and Kerala more than two-thirds of all children in the 6 to 14 age group are enrolled in private schools. And 2012-2013 Keral showed the highest percentage point increase in private school enrollment rates.

“Quality of education on decline in Kerala” by G.K.Nair[3] (2003 december) published in The Hindu Business line
(<http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/2003/12/27/stories/2003122700511700.htm>)

Highlights

*A study by NCRT shows Kerala ranked very low among other staes in terms of learning achievement of primary school children.

*About 30% of the children who complete primary schools do not reach necessary achievement levels in literacy and numeracy Dr. K K George and Dr. K K Krishnakumar of CSES (Centre for Socio Economic and Environmental Studies)

*average marks for various subjects in 10th standard exam shows poor quality of Kerala’s secondary education system. Malayalam - 26 per cent, Mathematics 18 per cent, English 15 per cent, Hindi 22 per cent, General Science 26.5 per cent, Social Science 20.5 per cent.

* 44% of students in 9th standard get less than 40% in Malayalam. More than 70% get less than 40% for

mathematics and English.

At the same time several reports in Times of India and similar news papers based on survey across India claims that Private school students are in no way better than their counterparts in government institutions.

1) Private schools are not adding value: Study by Shreya Roy Chowdhury [4] Feb 27, 2015

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/education/news/Private-schools-are-not-adding-value-Study/articleshow/46392725.cms>

2) Students of private aided schools no better than BMC counterparts: Study by Bhavika Jain & Hemali Chhopia[5] May 23, 2013

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/education/news/Students-of-private-aided-schools-no-better-than-BMC-counterparts-Study/articleshow/20219129.cms>

3) Government schools performing better than private institutions :study by IANS[6] December 4, 2015

http://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/government-schools-perform-better-than-private-minister-115120400808_1.html

4) Performance of government schools better than private: ASER. by PTI [7] updated January 2017

<http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/services/education/performance-of-government-schools-better-than-private-aser/articleshow/56647369.cms>

Reliability and authenticity of these reports is ambiguous as these studies do not reveal the modus operandi or the measurement tools they relied for the collection of data. Scarcity of standardized, objective assessments cripples the very process of diagnosis. Well intended reformative trends based on observed symptoms can not cure the malaise. An approach that addresses the causes of dwindling educational standards of Kerala can integrate attempts from various angles and eliminate chances of anomalies. It will guarantee a “flow” or “coherence” in the onward course of reforming education sector and minimize possibilities of stagnation or relapsing.

SMART CLASSES A CONSEQUENCE OF SMART TEACHERS

The objective of introducing smart classes envisions a society of teachers keeping pace with new trends in technology. Marrying technology into teaching is like sharing teacher’s space in the class room with a machine. Machines appear with enhanced skills which a teacher can not claim to have. At the same time, to share her space with a machine the teacher has to tame the machine so as to exploit its possibilities for executing the tasks instrumental in meeting learning objectives.

In the process of taming one must comprehend the set preferences and pre-determined ways of functioning of the thing or being to be tamed. In other words one must study the thing in detail before thinking how to make use of it. It’s a special challenge to a teacher as she is asked to walk some steps backward and call back the student in her. She must come into a learning mode. Some teachers might have lost touch with the student in themselves since they stepped into the profession and re-aligning with a forgotten motivation to study will be hazardous task for many. Moreover, Kerala educational system does not exhort learning of teachers through any mandatory demands neither for acquiring new skills nor for research attempts in teaching. And a good percentage of teaching population

has walked past their middle age and the proposal of creating new synaptic connections in their under-motivated brains for embracing technology based teaching, need not commensurate well with the scientific concept of neuroplasticity of brain. A second initiation into learning in their middle age might prove too tiresome to be persistent learners. It is a dirty truth that to make the teachers comply with the requirement of updating themselves technologically they will have to be energized by the promise of some incentives (financial). Though too bitter to admit about a sublime profession like teaching this (dirty) truth can not be ignored if government want to overcome resistance or inertia of teaching population to come up to the expectations of modern technology based educational demands.

SCHOOL AS THE LEAVES OF A TEXT BOOK

The third objective of rendering the entire school campus into a text book for learning envisages a comprehensive change in the entire climate of school. According to this, each incident in the school, each nook and corner of school must keep on stimulating learning sensibilities of the learner from dawn to dusk. It must enthrall his instinct for curiosity and feed the fire of creativity intermittently. A school climate enriched with a capacity to inculcate irresistible need for discovery and invention is the mission. By this the student is always in a spirit to identify the prototypes of various lessons taught inside the classroom in the world outside the classroom. He develops the habit of searching for the “real life counterpart” of various facts learned inside the classroom. It is a lofty ideal way of learning and teaching. Learning will be the most enjoyable thing for the student who experiences this kind of climate in the school.

But each academic year Kerala schools commences with a stinging sense of inadequacy. Students, parents and teachers complain the scarcity of prescribed text books. Some schools cry for basic requirements like decent (if not luxurious) class rooms, toilet facilities, adequate qualified teachers, teacher absenteeism etc. Mismatch between the allotted study hours and syllabus always stand in the way of implementing plans carefully chalked out for progress—whatever it may be. Teachers try to strike a balance between “allotted time” and the “syllabus” by confining students inside the class room from dawn to dusk at the cost of their need for engaging in other activities. In the process, teaching gives way to exam oriented teaching.

All stake holders --teachers, students and parents—know well that nobody is going to assess the “method” through which students have been taught the matter inside the syllabus. Only the final outcome--- grade/mark scored in the exam—will come to spotlight in the end. How’s and whys of teaching/learning become queries without enough pitch to be heard. Whether the school presented itself as a textbook is out of question when examination system focuses only on what student regurgitated into the answer sheets. Whether student experienced the learned facts outside the text book---in real life situations or he is equipped with all those skills essential to translate his theoretical expertise whenever called for application in newer settings is not a real concern even for schools with essential know-how to transform themselves into interesting text books. Never ending struggle to strike a balance among manifold requirements of curriculum is the reason. Year after year anomalies in the agenda for various reformative purposes put educational institutions of Kerala in dilemma. They find it difficult to conform to the objectives of newer projects put forward by respective governments. Usually a huge liability on the exchequer is the end result.

TRAINING AND TESTING OF TEACHERS---CAN’T THEY GO TOGETHER?

With regard to “quality teacher training” as the objective of ‘protecting general education’ one has to think about the ways to ascertain quality. One can determine the quality of a thing, process or product only by weighing it against some set standards. The “practice of evaluating” ,when it comes to learning, is meant to check whether the learner has assimilated some pre-designed “change” (objective of learning) into his personality. In learning, counseling/therapy or in some other training, in the end, the person should undergo some sort of evaluation to make

sure that change has taken place. Then, why the government is afraid to evaluate the teachers who has undergone training?.

It is a silent truth that after each teacher training programme intended for the teachers in service a sizable number of participants relapse into his/her old habitual ways of performing with little or no change. Not that the teachers are in disagreement with the things learned during training. But rewiring old ways and persisting in the process of change requires conscious effort and teacher's conscience and willingness for a change are the sole evaluators in the change process. Nobody questions whether a particular teacher has improved or not. Government has blind faith in the professional qualities of teachers and firm conviction that a teacher can never neglect the lessons taught to her. Government's respect for teachers is too exemplary. It seems government is afraid to evaluate the teacher group after a particular training session may be because the act of testing pushes teachers into students' mold at least for some time.

For the teacher training programmes to be effective and to bear fruit at the end of the programme teachers should undergo a comprehensive process of evaluation in terms of indicators designed to meet the objective of the programme. As per the outcomes of evaluation teachers should be given certificates indicating his/her level of improvement and graded accordingly. A healthy competition in teaching performance will verily act as stimulant for professional excellence.

Actually, the acute problem nagging in-service training of teachers of Kerala is not the lack of funds or other facilities but it is absence of resource persons. Nobody seems to be ready to teach teachers. Government seems to have no idea about who should teach teachers. At present teachers are teaching teachers after giving nominal short term training for some among themselves depending on the sole criterion of "willingness to teach teachers". Thus some teachers teach all other teachers of teaching community. Wise persons say, a person outside the system can view the system from a better perspective than a person inside it. Biased views dominate the teachers who teach their own community. They fail to see real glitches that ail the system. Let somebody outside the system but above it in wisdom and knowledge guide the system.

(All objectives of "Protecting general education system in Kerala" are not discussed here. Only those objectives which the teaching group gathered at St Claire's higher Secondary school explored, have been discussed here. The writer hasnt any affiliation to any political parties and the opinions written here are personal views of the writer.)

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