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Youth, education and employment in South Asia-II

Ela Dutt Luithui

EDUCATED unemployment has spilled into higher, specialized and technical education. Its incidence among the technically educated is the consequence of the sudden expansion of this cadre in the mid-sixties, in the hope of boosting development. Unlike other spheres, certain tentative projections of manpower needs were projected for this category but they were obviously over-estimations in the light of economic growth. The waiting period before jobs for such categories as scientists, engineers and even medical personnel has increased. There is also the prevailing phenomenon of inappropriate placement of educated personnel.

A report on Bangladesh based on sample surveys says about unemployment among technical personnel:

While no one who graduated in 1963 or 1964 was unemployed for more than 9 months, more than 30 per cent of those who graduated in 1968 and more than half of those who graduated in 1969 were unemployed for more than 9 months ... and another report says that:

" substantial unemployment exists among such manpower, though the degree revealed (39%) may be higher than the actual and that the intensity is highest among those qualifying in 1977.

The Pakistan Fourth Five Year Plan stated:

... many areas of specialised education, e.g. technology and commerce at second level, have also increased in excess of estimated manpower requirements.

The Asian Regional Team for Employment Promotion (1974), in its study of Nepal's manpower requirements, in fact warned against the over-emphasis on the need for middle-level technical personnel.

Among the graduates and post-graduates, unemployment is highest in the humanities group, at least in numerial proportions. The open-admission policy in this field, together with the absence of projected manpower needs, have contributed to this situation. It is also connected with the limited availability of white-collar jobs as also the unreal content of the education received. Furthermore, mobility to secure employment commensurate with qualifications outside the white-collar sphere is lowest in this group. Initially it had been possible for these governments to expand or open up unproductive white-collar jobs in a large way. The consequence is a saturation point beyond which this policy has become impossible to follow, so that the bureaucracy engaged only a minute section of the overwhelming number which graduate annually.

Unemployment is highest among youth. In Sri Lanka the age-group 15-29 constitutes 93 per cent of the unemployed. In Bangladesh the 15-34 age-group constitutes 71.43 per cent of the 'looking for work' category in the urban areas and 77.75 per cent in the rural areas. India presents a similar case. in the total unemployed labour force for the years 1961-63/64, the 15-19 age-group forms a high percentage with the highest (35 per cent) in the 20-24, a fall in the 25-29 group and progressive reduction with age. In Nepal the 16-30 age-group forms 79.2 per cent of the total.

Despite all this, education is still undertaken in a big way, for even if the waiting period before employment may prove long, the social dividends outweigh the predicament of the uneducated-unemployed. Educated unemployment is to a large extent connected with the waiting period before acquiring a job. Those with lesser education may take longer to gain employment and more so if it is the first job they are trying for, the reasons being (a) stipulation of previous experience, and (b) the rising demand for better educational qualifications. This second factor is explained by the flooding of the employment market by higher educated youth who generally usurp positions for which they may be overqualified, thus raising the qualification requirements for the general population in the matter of applications for jobs. Education has in the past and to this day catered predominantly to the public sector, which underlines the nature of the education itself.

In the absence of a dynamic economy, the chances of piece-meal reforms both in the spheres of education and employment will hardly prove successful. As a UN report on Youth in the Second Development Decade states:

Unemployment is the result of fundamental social, economic and political imbalances and cannot be dealt with in isolation from these factors. Special youth employment and training schemes for development purposes can be useful but they are expensive reach a limited number of young persons and so far have been more successful in preparing some young people for work than in providing them with jobs.

The foregoing survey reveals that the phenomenon of educated unemployment is the consequence of expanding educational facilities without correlating them to the demands of economic growth. Basically, it would appear that economic growth has not kept pace with the increase in population and the expectation aroused in an ever-increasing number of youth which led itself to believe that formal education was the key to social advancement and economic betterment. Hence the sense of deprivation among the educated unemployed. This articulates itself in varying degrees from time to time, ranging from agitations for redressal of particular grievances to an identification of their disabilities with the wider social inequalities which become conspicuous in the context of their personal experience of frustration.

Obviously, there cannot be an undimensional prescription to this complex problem. However, in the field of educational reform, the imperative appears to be that the system be restructured on the premise that it serves as an input in the productive capacity of the community. This would impart a sense of purpose to education and eliminate to an extent the sense of alienation from a constructive role which the educated could play in society.

Certain short-term and partial solutions to the problem of educated unemployment are possible, and are in fact being tried in all the countries of South Asia to ameliorate it and check its expansion. Rural development works, compulsory service tenures, vocational 'retraining', improvement in manpower planning, and even experimental educational projects are some of the partial solutions that lie to hand.

All the countries of South Asia have accepted certain basic tenets in the sphere of education:

(a) human labour forms an inseparable part of the educational process,

(b) rural development and education are interlinked. In the 1930's Mahatma Gandhi had outlined his system of Basic Education to make productive labour part of education. While (latter day) Chinese education emphasizes technologically advanced stages with every level of education. Gandhian education worked basically on a programme of de-industrialization, and stuck to obsolete technology and low productivity. An argument in support of the Gandhian scheme is that it was framed to suit the needs of the time when Indian industry had not developed and the colonial government was not willing to finance mass education.

Non-formal education has been suggested as a solution to the gaps in formal education in these countries. But it has not spread to the degree of diminishing the importance of the latter. The financial outlay on non-formal education is little and it has not become a widespread phenomenon. Furthermore it tends to accentuate the differences between those able to pay for a full-time education and those who have to work for it.

An integrated concept of non-formal education is yet to emerge; many non-governmental and international agencies have come forward to finance it. But experimental projects financed by them must be treated with extreme caution. Their success or failure should not be taken as the yardstick for universal application because (a) financial investment may be quite high, in which case dependence on outside funds may increase, (b) local initiative may be dampened, (c) those working on the project may become dependent on the financial kickbacks and any withdrawal of funds may lead to failure of the project at a later stage, and (d) the sphere of education is the most sensitive area of public policy and should usually be fashioned by the country concerned. It is essential that sequential rigidity of the education provided, as well as the distinction between formal and non-formal, be abolished. Age-limit considerations should not impinge upon students so that persons from diverse backgrounds can avail of whatever education is available.

The persistence of the public school system, colonial in concept, restricts both the efforts at spreading and equalizing educational opportunity and eventually equalizing economic and employment opportunities. At present the difference between the public and government schools is blatant enough to make government schools appear as 'poor cousins' and instill a sense of inferiority in their students.

While rural development schemes of education in modern methods, literacy, etc are carried out in all these countries, efforts are being made at aligning seasonal/regional cropping cycles and school courses. Extreme flexibility in curriculum and timing should be maintained so that others than purely students can avail of it. Local schools run by factories and village cooperatives should be attempted on a wider scale.

An extreme example in the attempt to reduce the number of educated unemployed is being carried out in Nepal by restricting opportunities at various levels through terminal examinations. it would be well to remember that similar attempts were made twice in Sri Lanka (1951 and 1967) without success because of public opposition to the discriminating scheme. The National Education Plan of Nepal provides for lower secondary education to only 40 per cent of the primary school students. Only 50 per cent of the lower secondary and 20 per cent of the primary school students would get secondary school facilities. At the other end, a ten-month internship in the remote areas is compulsory for all master-level students. Following an orientation in teaching and other simple skills, these students have to go to the rural areas to educate others. This two-pronged strategy limits the number of educated youth and simultaneously compels them to acclimatize themselves to the realities of the rural situation. However, it does not outline any specific method of securing a drastic reduction in the number of students. It can only be assumed that a mass rejection of students will be attempted. The National Development Service (of which the 10-month stint is a part) is a high-cost scheme, a factor which places limits to its expansion. To finance one student it costs approximately 776 dollars. For a poor country with a negative growth rate, it appears a formidable task, inevitably leading to dependence on foreign aid.

But a comprehensive and integrated approach is possible only if the problem is traced to its roots. The educated are educated the way they are because of the existence and perpetuation of an educational system unsuitable to the needs of these societies. They are few in number because of the selectivity inherent in this system. The unemployed are so because of the existence and perpetuation of socio-economic incongruities. There is no gainsaying that unless economic development and educational changes are correlated, not only will a larger number of formally educated remain unemployed, but even the present backlog will remain unabsorbed.

Consequently, efforts to tackle the problem must be comprehensive - education being regarded as part of the process of socio-economic change. It is seen that successful revolutionary upheavals have transformed education while they have changed the social and economic life-styles of the people. The Industrial Revolution in the West followed by improved living conditions triggered the spread of education. The Chinese Revolution broke all traditional norms in establishing a new educational framework.

Paulo Freire's educational model draws much from the Maoist dictum "From the Masses to the Masses." The recognition of the principle that the educational process is never neutral and the 'paternalistic' teacher a hindrance to proper development; the "culture of silence" which was the lot of the oppressed can be transformed to a new awareness of self and a new dignity and hope; that the myth of the ignorance of the people means essentially to doubt the people: are all essential and basic to revolutionary social action. They are especially relevant to poor countries of South Asia and more so to the oppressed sections in their struggle for a more human existence.

The masses have obviously worded their desire for education in terms of 'schools," "teachers" and other accouterments associated with formal education. In actually this has been an imposition upon them arising from the needs outlined by lopsided media and society's imbalanced recognition of education per se.

A complete decentralization and localization of education should be effected. The South Asian countries, on the other hand, have taken measures which leave them no flexibility for innovation. An educational bureaucracy with the teaching community as its extension are the developing features here.

Policy-makers and 'educationists' in this subcontinent must change their basic attitude to the concept of education. Educated youth must also question themselves in this context. The entire (formally) educated population of this area suffers from a conscious or unconscious misconception of their role as educators of the people. In fact most of them have developed vested interests in the existing systems. The thing to be seen is not whether the so-called educated in these countries can change the people, but rather whether they can change with the people. The people can no longer be treated as objects of education.

Politicization is possible only through participatory learning and the exchange of ideas - a dialogue. Where the three R's are learnt through the identification of the social forces operating in a community, an educator must learn about the pressures and pulls of these social forces from it.

Therefore the spread of education needs a political underpinning. This should be secured through education, formally as educational policies, and more importantly and more effectively through mass movements.