



THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

# Disruptive change in education could help us tackle joblessness

Skills depend on primary education which now has hope for change in a policy shift and its rising potential as a vote-getter



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Updating Ajit Ghosh's earlier estimates of employment and unemployment (*Employment in India*, Oxford University Press, 2019), Ashoka Mody has estimated that India will need to create about 200 million jobs in the next decade to fully absorb the backlog of unemployment (and underemployment), i.e., about an additional 20 million jobs per year. But there has been little growth of employment in recent years (Ghosh's estimates show that employment actually declined between 2012 and 2018). Hence, the idea of absorbing the massive unemployment backlog in a decade or even two in any 'business as usual' scenario appears to be a pipe dream. This awesome crisis of unemployment lies at the core of Mody's grim narrative in his just-published book, *India is Broken* (Juggernaut Books, 2023).

The slow growth of employment, the very low employment intensity of GDP growth and the astonishingly low labour force participation rate, especially among women, make India an exceptional case in Asia, if not the entire developing world. What accounts for this? In a 2017 paper, I had argued that the employment challenge in India is a man-made problem attributable to two types of policy distortions, i.e., industrial regulation and education policy (Sudipto Mundle, 'Employment, Education and the State', *Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, 2017, Vol. 60, No. 1). In this column, I discuss only education policy.

Only a small fraction of the Indian workforce has the educational foundation required for highly skilled, high-productivity jobs. The education levels of most Indian workers enable them to acquire only low skills suitable for low-productivity jobs. Barely 5% of the workforce have any skill training and only 2% have any formal skill certificate as compared to over 70% in advanced European countries like the UK or Germany and as much as 80% in East Asian countries like Japan or South Korea. To address this deficit, the government launched an ambitious skill development programme, but, not surprisingly, the results have been disappointing. Skill development cannot succeed without an underlying foundation of sound basic education. But India's long-standing neglect of primary and secondary education has limited the access to quality basic education.

This elitist bias comes through not in the lofty goals of various policy statements, but in the actual funding and implementation of policies and their outcomes. The share of public expenditure on education in India, around 14%, is about the same as the Asian-country average. But its allocation has a sharp bias. The per student expenditure on tertiary education is about the same as on primary education in Thailand and Korea, about double the primary per student outlay in Indonesia, and close to four times in Malaysia. In India, it is over nine times! Universal



primary education (~90% net primary enrolment) was only achieved in India during the past decade, about 100 years after the original demand for free, compulsory primary education in the Gokhale Bill of 1913 and 70 years after Indian independence. Most countries in East and Southeast Asia had already achieved this goal over 50 years ago.

Though this goal has finally been achieved, largely thanks to the Right to Education Act of 2009, the Annual State of Education (Rural) reports (ASER) show that learning outcomes remain abysmal. Thus, in 2018, before the pandemic, nearly half the children in grade 5 could not read a simple grade-2 text and over 72% of them could not do a simple division. As was expected, with children away from school for two years on account of covid, there has been a decline in learning outcomes. But the dip is mercifully quite moderate. The latest ASER report just released on 18 January shows that now 57% of grade-5 students cannot read a simple grade-2 text and 74% of them cannot do a simple division. Indian students have also performed very poorly in international learning proficiency tests like PISA and TIMMs on the few occasions they have participated in these tests, ranking near the bottom. But students from other Asian countries like Singapore, South Korea, Japan and even China routinely rank at the top in these tests.

Clearly, India still has a long way to go in catching up with its best-performing Asian neighbours. This requires disruptive change. Many of the required changes are embodied in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. It emphasizes universal foundational literacy and numeracy, which entails a radical shift in goal-setting from inputs and spending to learning outcomes; pre-school education; enhancing teacher capabilities and linking teacher rewards to performance and the size and management systems of schools. Since the pandemic struck soon after the policy was launched, its impact is yet to be seen, but the changes it envisages could well be a turning point.

Education being primarily a state subject, much will depend on how the NEP is implemented by state governments. Unlike welfare schemes and other popular issues with immediate pay-off, education programmes take time to show results and have not been a high priority for political leaders with short time horizons. However, some states have begun showcasing their performance on education and other public goods, and voters have been rewarding them. If this catches on and political parties start competing on the basis of service-delivery performance, not just welfare schemes and other popular issues, that will be a great boon for citizens.

These are the author's personal views.

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India's long neglect of primary education has left us with a deficiency of basic skills that needs to be addressed for a chance at solving a massive problem of unemployment.

While the pandemic resulted in learning losses, as survey results show, hopes are pinned on the National Education Policy of 2020 and political responses to make the recovery we need.

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# India's car market should use a hybrid lane for a green pick-up

Electric cars are gaining share too slowly and hybrids could help



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This year's India Auto Expo seemed more dreamy than realistic about EVs

India is now among the world's top three auto markets. A feat indeed, but it's being driven by internal combustion-engine cars even as global pressures force a pivot to cleaner electric vehicles (EVs). Over 4 million four-wheel vehicles were sold in India last year, surpassing Japan and coming in behind China and the US. That's a stunning reversal from almost eight months ago, when sales tanked to a decade-low and capacity lay idle. Now, with the economy growing at a fast clip, car buyers are back. While the broader market is largely made up of mopeds, sport utility vehicles (SUVs) are now a larger portion of the whole mix.

Automakers released a slate of glitzy EVs at the India Auto Expo, with promising announcements from BYD, Kia and others. Trouble is, four-wheeler EVs are luring prospective buyers to showrooms, but once they get there, cost concerns pop up. India's electric success has been limited to its two-wheeler (2W) market. The economics of 2W electrics work well in India: Their power-packs are smaller and cheaper, battery-swapping promises to cut out range anxiety and charging points are increasingly available. Petrol prices not being able to impact household bills is a plus. The government's incentives are also helping.

The rise of 2W electrics is akin to that of CNG cars in India. Cost savings and regulation pushed drivers to adopt these; cabs, especially, were willing to wait in long lines for refills. Such economic calculations, though, are why four-wheeler EVs are likely to have a bumpy ride. Despite a host of options, electric cars are too expensive for what they offer drivers. Power systems can't support charging networks, even if firms are incentivized to set up infrastructure and we get enough stations. Electricity supply isn't consistent in many parts of the country, and charging larger batteries requires higher capacity and voltage. The existential EV problems of range and anxiety overrunning out of charge persist, especially given the distances across India and its notoriously bad traffic. Stack that up against the price of an EV, and it's clearly a luxury purchase.

Until it's more economically viable for the market's bulge, imminent mass adoption is wishful thinking. Meanwhile, the costs for most manufacturers are also rising. Battery supply is hard to come by and as of today, unreliable. Anecdotally, the quality of powerpacks coming into India is also low.

That poses a problem for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government, which has ferociously pushed a greening mission, along with all the big companies that came along for the ride. At Auto Expo, the likes of

Ashok Leyland and Tata Motors had all sorts of alternative fuel vehicles on display: hydrogen, ethanol, flex fuels (which work on ethanol blends), electric, you name it.

There's a more realistic solution: Go hybrid. Before dismissing it as a transitory idea, it's worth remembering that's what we need—a means to an end. They can help lower emissions so Delhi and other parts of India can come out from under the cloud of smog that threatens the health of millions of citizens. Buyers have the option to test out the electric side while releasing fewer emissions and getting through their day without worrying about charging. Meanwhile, hybrids also use a fifth to a quarter of the batteries needed for EVs, meaning they are less affected by the rising price of power-packs (that account for almost 50% of the cost in electrics). The car ends up being cheaper and more efficient. Throw in bigger subsidies and they could become an attractive value proposition for Indians. Policies in the US and China already indirectly incentivize purchasing these vehicles.

No wonder, then, that savvy BYD, one of China's top-selling automakers, announced its intention to corner 40% of India's EV market by the end of this decade. However, it hasn't committed to setting up huge production operations yet, preferring to gauge demand first. The firm assembles cars from imported semi-knocked down kits and will continue to import batteries that it manufactures in China. The world's largest automaker and staunch-believer in hybrids, Toyota Motor, launched a second model in India late last year—a cleaner version of the already popular Innova.

Sure, the issue with hybrids tends to hover around how drivers use them. Studies have shown they end up being driven less on electric and more on fuel. Fair enough, but as energy costs and emissions become front and centre, they provide a better option than gas guzzlers.

Further incentivizing players like BYD to first bring in hybrid offerings could help jumpstart India's transition to lower carbon emissions. Automakers, too, may want to focus on realistic solutions that work right away for India's planned energy transition, not just on a distant future. For Indians, electrification will happen—at the right price, though. Hybrid technology is a useful step in that direction.

GUEST VIEW

# A detached approach is crucial for a uniform civil code

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The rekindled debate over a uniform civil code (UCC) in India has ushered in a slew of concerns that need to be addressed before it is taken up for final consideration. Since independence, this debate has underscored the complex and sensitive nature of the relationship between religion and law in the country.

The Constitution of India under Article 44 provides for directive action as an endeavour of the state to secure a UCC. The apex court, while pronouncing its verdict in the *Sarla Mudgal* case (1995), directed the Union government to reflect upon steps taken by it towards securing a UCC.

Presently, all communities are governed by their own personal laws on a range of civil matters. Hindus are governed by the Hindu Marriage Act, Hindu Succession Act, Minority and Guardianship Act, and Adoption and Maintenance Act. On the other hand, Shariah law governs Muslims, the Christian Marriage Act governs Christians and the Special Marriage Act, 1972, can govern all

marriages in India regardless of religion.

A UCC envisions an exhaustive and comprehensive statute of personal laws that will govern Indian society uniformly on issues relating to marriage, maintenance, succession, guardianship, adoption and other related matters. It would encourage joint proprietorship over all benefits obtained by spouses and aim to protect vulnerable sections of society as envisaged by Ambedkar. The Supreme Court, in the *Shah Bano Begum* case (1985), had observed that a UCC shall help the cause of national integration by removing disparate loyalties to laws which have conflicting ideologies. It is pertinent to mention that the need for a UCC flows from the very definition of secularism, which in English refers to the separation of church and state. This implies separation of religion and state in the Indian context. Currently, Goa is the only state to have successfully implemented a common code.

The state of Uttarakhand had constituted a five-member committee to prepare a draft proposal in May 2022. More recently, Gujarat followed suit and announced a UCC panel. The Supreme Court has dismissed public-interest litigation challenging the Constitutional validity of UCC panels in these two states. Earlier, in December 2022,

the Kerala high court had suggested that the Centre must seriously consider framing a uniform marriage code in order to promote common welfare.

As for Parliament, a private member's bill introduced in the Rajya Sabha that seeks a UCC proposes the constitution of a national inspection and investigation committee for its preparation and enforcement. However, the choices to be made between legislating common ethics and offering individual religious liberty are fraught with tension.

The apex court, while delivering its judgment in the *John Vallamattom* case (2003), expressed regret on the lax implementation of a UCC. It noted that a common civil code shall aid national integration by removing contradictions based on ideologies and reiterated the need for a UCC in its triple talaq ruling of 2017.

A peek into the past: The Constituent Assembly was also divided over a UCC. Those who believed that the state

and religion were of no concern to each other called for the inclusion of a UCC under fundamental rights. They argued that different personal laws drawn from religious belief would split the state into watertight compartments and result in multiplicity of laws, with the common national good being trumped by narrower community interests. At that time, there were also those who vehemently argued that the individual right to choice of a personal code should be a fundamental one.

Finally, the fundamental rights sub-committee categorized a UCC as a directive principle. They followed Ambedkar's equal-respect idea of secularism, granting religious liberty to all communities. The expectation was that diverse personal laws would be done away with in due course and a UCC would later be legislated into being with the consent of all stakeholders.

The apprehension of a UCC being a threat to the rich cultural tapestry of

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The merits of a uniform civil code are undeniable and it has the backing of India's judiciary as well as founding figures who expected one to be adopted once people were ready for it.

It remains unclear, however, if all stakeholders are prepared for a UCC, given the trade-offs of its benefits with religious liberty, and so any roll-out would have to be both gradual and neutral.

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