

The Changing Face of Education: From India to Maine

Host Intro:

The system of education from New Delhi to Maine is in a state of flux as the balance of economics shifts and changes across the world. Here in Maine enrollments at the university level are declining, yet the community college system is growing. In India, the changing demands of the market are forcing a shift in education as well. Are we heading in the right direction? Charu Saxena, a native of India, who has now lived in Maine for more than a decade, takes a look at the issue from the viewpoints of people involved in the higher education system at the two ends.

Saxena:

Students at the Hansraj College of Delhi University are lined up in front of a spinning roulette wheel set up as the recruitment promotion for a local bank. It provides four options: Wealth, Glamour, Fame and Money; and each of these students is hopeful of landing if not all the pieces than at least one piece of this pie.

The focus of the education system in India is undergoing an overhaul. Yes, students giving their senior board exams still go jittery with nerves at the prospect of the monster ahead of them, which has determined the future prospects and career streams of generations before them. And a few even commit suicide from the pressure every year. And yet, much has changed within the last few years. Saiyam is a student at the college. Parents, she says, want to make sure that their children have a secure career, but are caught in their old traditional thoughts that the only options are: Medicine, Engineering or Chartered Accountancy.

Saiyam:

So they wanted me to do those, but I know that other sectors are opening up. What has changed today is that our parents really lived a chalked out life- they did what their parents wanted them to do. But today we do what we want to do. What we find happiness in. I think my Mom didn't know that she could even think this way. That this life even existed for her.

Saxena:

But her friend Vasudev says that his parents are more aware of the current trend, and are willing to let him find his way.

Vasudev:

Today in this age of globalization, liberalization, with new ideas coming from outside, it's no more limited to one field of study. There are so many new avenues open for you. My parents are cool about it. They know sometime or another I will figure out my way. They never pressurize me.

Saxena:

That is a major shift in the sensibilities of parents, who have always felt compelled to pressurize their children into studying harder as soon as they could walk, knowing that

the avenues of success in India were limited. Today, that has changed in an IT fueled economy that is quickly running short of qualified manpower, to the extent that students from all disciplines are getting streamlined into information technology with the guarantee of a job. At the same time however vocational education in Indian schools is also beginning to take off, providing alternative venues for many of today's youth.

There is a boom in many sectors other than just IT, however, and a few of the other top sectors are beginning to suffer, and not least the engineering or the pure Sciences. Dr. Vikram Kumar, head of India's National Physical Laboratory laments that increasingly there is a serious dearth of scientists. Dr. Sindhu, a professor of Chemistry at the college concurs. He says that his pure science degree previously used to attract top scoring students, but is now quickly falling from demand.

Siddhu:

Lesser and lesser number of students are coming for science and I feel bad about it.

Saxena:

The students who do enter the sciences, he says, then begin to regret their choice because they do not see jobs in front of them. As a curriculum developer for the department, he has suggested to the University system that Applied Science courses be offered, so students would have a choice. If somebody wants to go to the pure science, he says, let him go for the pure science, else they can go for the Applied science.

Sindhu:

Both streams are open. Everything will remain alright, and science will remain popular.

Saxena:

The University does not agree. It is not ignorance, he insists. It is hard headedness. Only 10 percent of the 180 students that pass out of the Masters program in Chemistry go for a Phd, and the rest even after doing a masters, have to look for something else.

Sindhu:

13:13 Those students should be told" look here, you have come for the pure science , do these applied courses, and you will be benefiting", but university does not want to do that.

Saxena:

He cites the case of the Department of Technology, in Matunga, Mumbai, where students who pass out after BSc are admitted into that institute and are given BE degrees within three years. It's not essential, says Dr. Sindhu, that if someone has missed the bus after 12th grade, or even after a BSc, he should not be allowed to go for the applied sciences and the possibility of a good job. There is no flexibility, he says, for students in this system.

But would the Applied Sciences, or the engineering students of today, who are part of the elite man power of India, actually provide fuel to the engineering sector? Prof. M.R.

Ravi, a professor at India's prestigious IIT institution says No. The students go he says where the money is.

Ravi:

Very small percentage of these kids actually take to engineering as a profession. Actually, the demand in the market right now is for managers and people in financial forecasting- so IIT engineering graduates are a good picking ground for Investment banks, etc. Core Engineering jobs unfortunately are still not as well paid, even in the best of employments- Its a straight question of money- Aspirations have completely changed.

Saxena:

His students agree. They say the top choice in IIT today is Computer Science and fresh IIT graduates can land packages upwards of eighty thousand dollars a year. When I ask one of them if he had always wanted to be an engineer, he counters by saying that he had always wanted to be in IIT. He would stay in India with a good paying job, even if it is not in his core discipline, but his friend says that if she could get a package that rewards her core job she would go abroad to do it. However,;

Girl:

Even if I get a core job in my discipline that I like but it's not paid well, I won't take it. That's the problem: Civil Engineering jobs are not paid well.

Saxena:

More than the discipline itself, it's a straight question of money and packages today, and the middle class of India, deprived of financial security for a long time, is euphorically heading for it. But here even in Maine, says Lenny Shedletsky, a professor of communication at USM in Portland, we have turned education like everything else into a commodity. Its for sale.

Lenny:

It used to be that words about economy sometime entered the rhetoric, now its advertised that you come here and you get a good job.

Saxena:

He understands that people need to get a job, make a living, and pay their bills, but that has taken over education. People sit around openly, he says, figuring out how much money they would be making with their degree.

Lenny:

It's almost like the time we're spending here, is the time we need to put in to get this ticket for a job. So, this is not real thinking. There are underlying motives that get in the way of honest engagement with their journey.

Saxena:

And yet, a prosperous nation like America has always allowed its youth the luxury of choice and exploration in their careers. And today, even with a short sighted federal government under funding science sectors that it doesn't deem critical and losing scientists such as those who work on Tsunami early warning systems, there is still much else that American youth can choose to do. That journey is beginning in India only now, as it starts to open itself to the world.

I'm Charu Saxena reporting from Maine.