



Where is the strategy for dealing with learning loss during Covid?

At a time when extra resources were urgently needed to bring children safely back to school, the education budget was reduced by 10 per cent or so, even as the Union budget as a whole increased by more than 15 per cent.

One of the longest lockout in the world:

Indian children have been “locked out” of school for almost a year and a half. This lockout, one of the longest in the world, has played havoc with their lives and the country’s fragile schooling system. As primary and upper-primary schools finally begin to reopen, it is important to wake up to the damage and think about how to repair it.



The School Children’s Online and Offline Learning (SCHOOL) survey

1. The School Children’s Online and Offline Learning (SCHOOL) survey, as we call it, found that online education had a very limited reach: The proportion of sample children who were studying online regularly was just 24 per cent in urban areas and 8 per cent in rural areas.
2. This is all the more striking as three-fourths of urban households and half of the rural households in the sample had a smartphone. Aside from smartphone ownership, the multiple challenges of online study include smartphone access, adequate connectivity, recharge money, intelligible material and a conducive environment.
3. Among parents of “online children” (those who were studying online, regularly or occasionally), only a small minority were satisfied with their child’s study material.
4. More than two-thirds felt that their child’s reading and writing abilities were higher before the lockout than they are today — a severe indictment of online education.
5. If online children had a hard time staying afloat, the rest (“offline children”) were mostly left to drift away or sink. In rural areas, nearly half of offline children were not studying at all at the time of the survey.



Child literacy is in freefall

1. A simple reading test confirmed that child literacy rates have sunk well below ordinary levels. In the age group of 8-12 years, for instance, only half of the rural children were able to read a simple sentence.
2. Among those currently enrolled in Grade 3, only one-fourth could read more than a few words. Comparisons with the last population census, the National Family Health Surveys and the ASER surveys, all suggest that child literacy is in freefall.
3. Literacy is a basic tool of self-defence in modern society. Without it, children are exposed not only to economic hardship but also to lifelong powerlessness and exploitation.
4. Literacy is also a springboard for further study. A resurgence of mass illiteracy among children, if it is allowed to happen, could have dire and lasting consequences.
5. Instead of helping disadvantaged children, however, the schooling system is simply catapulting them two grades ahead of the class they were enrolled in before the lockout. Children who have forgotten the Hindi alphabet are now saddled with thick English textbooks.
6. The disconnect between the school curriculum and the learning levels of disadvantaged children is a chronic problem in India's stratified education system, but it is now taking absurd proportions. Without radical changes in curriculum and pedagogy, these children have no chance.

Wide-ranging benefits of school participation

1. Alienation from the curriculum is just one part of the price children are likely to pay for this extended lockout.
2. For almost a year and a half, they have been deprived of the wide-ranging benefits of school participation — peer learning, new ideas, a safe environment, nutritional support, among others.
3. The central government, alas, seems to be in denial of the schooling crisis. This year, when extra resources were urgently needed to renovate schools, train teachers, prepare new learning material and initiate health-related precautions, the Finance Minister blissfully reduced the budget of the Department of School Education by 10 per cent or so, even as the Union Budget as a whole increased by more than 15 per cent.
4. To this day, the central government persists with its delusional faith in online education.

16.09.2021

Thursday



<http://www.sriramsias.com>

An enlightened strategy to deal with the schooling crisis is nowhere in sight. All eyes are on the country's educationists — thinkers and practitioners — for a way forward. As things stand, the system seems to be heading for business as usual (with the odd "bridge course" thrown in) as and when schools reopen. This is a recipe for disaster.

There finally seems to be a path forward for GST. Centre and states must strike a bargain

States should give up their demand for an extension of the GST compensation mechanism, while the Centre should offer resources during an economic downturn.

GST REVENUE PERFORMANCE



Three key changes are necessary:

Re-casting compensation, simplifying the rate structure and improving governance.



A new counter-cyclical buffer

1. First, the principle of compensation must be re-cast, because the original needs have vanished and new ones have taken their place.
2. The last few years have exposed the vulnerability of the states to shocks. When Covid arrived, states' revenues collapsed, eviscerating their ability to spend on health and welfare precisely at the time when such spending was needed most and when states found their fiscal space constricted.
3. To prevent this situation from recurring, the authorities should create a revenue buffer that could be tapped in a time of need. And the most obvious source of funding is the GST, which accounts for over 40 per cent of the states' own revenues.
4. In sum, there is a bargain waiting to be struck: The states give up their demand for an extension of the compensation mechanism, while the Centre offers a new counter-cyclical buffer.
5. Put another way, the compensation guarantee should be converted into revenue insurance. As the figure shows, in good economic times, GST revenues will be robust but it is against downturns that states need protection.

Simplifying the rate structure

1. Second, the GST structure needs to be simplified and rationalised, as recommended by the Fifteenth Finance Commission and the Revenue Neutral Rate report.
2. To achieve the promised Good and Simple Tax, a new structure should have one low rate (between 8 and 10 per cent), one standard rate (between 16 and 18 per cent) and one rate for all demerit goods.

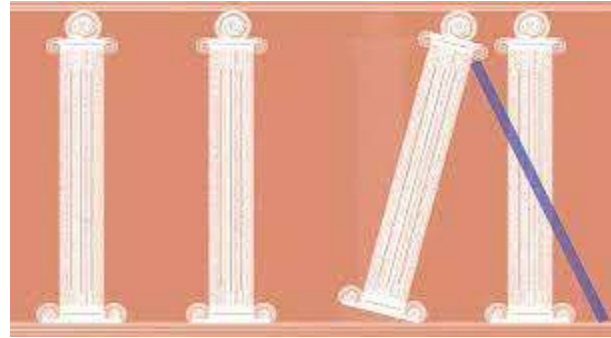
Improving governance

1. Finally, the GST Council's work needs tweaking.
2. In sum, after one and a half years of dispute, and with the economy showing signs of recovery, a path forward for the GST finally seems visible. This opportunity needs to be seized — and not just because of the inherent importance of the GST. India will fly or falter on the stake of cooperative federalism.
3. And cooperative federalism is not a gesture or one-off outcome. It is, above all, a disposition, resulting from quotidian democratic practice. By rehabilitating cooperative federalism's finest achievement — the GST — the Centre and states can help restore India's broader economic prospects.



Real democratic freedom is impossible without economic equality

There is no gainsaying that India has an accommodative democracy. It accommodates socio-economic inequalities, regional and sectoral imbalances.



Democracy means discussion, debate and dissent

1. Democracy is quintessentially about freedom. Rosa Luxemburg famously opined that real freedom is the freedom to disagree. In a functional sense, democracy means discussion, debate and dissent.
2. But in India, these are fast disappearing. There is a deliberative deficit. Public space is shrinking.
3. In India's case, inequality is the very base of our culture, an unquestioning acceptance of a "culture of inequality." Democracy is not an end in itself; it is a means to an end that should be socially defined and determined.
4. For instance, development, in a democratic sense, must be inclusive, equitable and sustainable. People should be the primary agents in the formulation, implementation, overseeing and evaluation of programmes and projects.

Power decentralization:

1. Under the much-acclaimed democratic decentralisation, what really happened was the devolution of certain centrally determined functions, responsibilities and resources to lower tiers of administration, without changing the power structures — social, economic, political, and religious.
2. Power, whether at the national, regional, local, corporate or family level, always tends towards centralisation. In this sense, power cannot be decentralised.
3. In other words, centralisation of power is not the problem and its decentralisation is not the solution. Power itself is the problem, as it is always used by the powerful against the powerless, by the strong against the weak, by the rich against the poor.

16.09.2021

Thursday



<http://www.sriramsias.com>

4. History testifies that in a class-divided society, the state, which epitomises power, protects the rich and powerful from or against the poor and the oppressed. Thus, the state is an instrument of oppression.
5. The more unequal a society, the more authoritarian the state. Ideally, in an egalitarian system, state power has no place. Marx had said that in a classless society, state would wither away.
6. In India, because economic inequalities are egregious and increasing, the state is becoming more and more authoritarian. It is even argued that India is becoming a democracy without freedom. Rulers fear freedom. Always and everywhere, rulers are enemies of freedom.

Economic democracy:

1. Real democracy is economic democracy, as Ambedkar stressed. A starting point is ensuring economic security to all, not through an income transfer programme (universal basic income), but through the provision of universal property rights.
2. The poor should be treated not as welfare scroungers, but as consumers, active producers, and potential entrepreneurs. This should be ensured by the new economic package being put in place by the Modi government.
3. MGNREGA allocation must be utilised not for creating wage-employment but for building the asset base of the poor, developing entrepreneurship (business as well as social) among them, building idea/incubation centres and helping undertake production/business units, individually or on a group basis.
4. Let them pursue and explore the fortunes on the margins, like C K Prahalad's exhortation to explore the "fortune at the bottom of the pyramid". The founder of Bangladesh's Grameen Bank Muhammad Yunus describes the poor as "natural entrepreneurs".