Exploring the mentality towards education in Surat, India

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Supported by:

The Rotary Club of Surat

November 26, 2018

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1 Abstract

India's school education system is one of the largest and most complex in the world. This complexity stems from the conflict between providing the youth population with an affordable education, without compromising the standards and uniformity across all institutes. This paper explores the mentality that surrounds the subject of education in Surat, Gujarat. It investigates how India's history has shaped the current education system, and how the country's traditions have influenced the mentality held by students towards their education within government, private-aided, and private-unaided schools. This study finds that wealth is still a prominent determinant of the quality of education, whilst the change in the education system towards a more guided syllabus has restricted the scope of students. It also demonstrates how female attitudes towards education are different due to the gender inequality that is present in India.

2 Introduction

"Such wealth I have seen in the country, such high moral values, people of such calibre, that I do not think we would conquer this country, unless we break the very backbone of this nation, which is her spiritual and cultural heritage, and therefore, I propose that we replace her old and ancient education system (1)" – Macaulay, 1835.

This controversial statement was supposedly declared by Macaulay during his infamous "Minute upon Indian Education" speech in British Parliament in 1835. Macaulay was a British historian and politician who served on the Supreme Council of India between 1834 to 1838 (2). He played a significant role in the introduction of English and western educational reforms to the existing system in India. His new methods led to 'Macaulayism' in India. This is defined as the systematic elimination of traditional culture and ancient teachings by educating the masses using alternative methods. These are tailored towards the preferences of the colonising power, in this case the British.

When the East India Company initiated its political career in India there was no struc-

tured education system that was supported by the state. However, a network of indigenous schools called Maktabs and Pathshalas existed where Muslim students predominantly attended Maktabs and Hindus, Pathshalas (3). These schools taught a broad range of subjects from philosophy, literature, and law to arithmetic, medicine, and astrology. However, both remained deeply rooted to religion and ancient traditions and were mostly outdoor community schools. Gandhi famously described India's indigenous education system like a 'beautiful tree' due to the holistic nature of the education students received.

The British interest in educating natives was not heavily transmitted as an act of generosity, yet rather a tool to create a stronger and more familiar bond between 'the rulers and the ruled' (4). The British were neither interested in the education of masses, so therefore concentrated on the education of the Indian elite or upper classes in hope that this learning would trickle down to the remaining population (4). Due to the segregation inflicted by the Indian caste system, this unfortunately was not the case.

The syllabus introduced by the British was restricted to subjects considered as 'modern' such as science and mathematics, and subjects such as metaphysics and philosophy were disregarded. There was also an emphasis on excessive examinations throughout high school and university which fostered a 'cramming and parrot-like learning' (4). Lessons were delivered in an almost indoctrinated manner which as a result failed to cultivate an inquisitive and critical frame of mind. Due to the lack of trained and qualified teachers, the quality of teaching within both primary and secondary schools also suffered.

The British were able to initiate the widespread of educational institutions across India, increasing the number of official institutions by 145 893, and the number of students enrolled within these institutions by 16.8 million during 1856 to 1947 (4). Despite this phenomenal growth, the quality of education was not able to simultaneously increase. Many institutions were inefficient, over-crowded, ill-equipped and had a poor infrastructure. Ultimately these schools had admitted too many students creating an environment which in fact made learning very difficult.

Since India's independence, The Central Government of India has introduced several policies and schemes within the education sector. For example, The Right to Education Act (RTE)

which was passed in 2009 ensures that every child between the ages of 6 and 14 years old is provided with elementary education. The National Scheme for Incentive to Girls for Secondary Education (NSIGSE) was also introduced in order to reduce the number of dropouts of girls in secondary schools. This scheme provides a sum of Rs.3000 for those that are unmarried and are eligible for the scheme, from which they can withdraw money after they turn 18 years of age and pass the 10th standard (5). A combination of these schemes has enabled the nation to make significant progress in the field of education, whilst reducing the educational gender inequality gap, and improving the national literacy rate to 74% from 16% after the British rule (6).

Although the RTE has provided accessible education 96% of India's young population, statistics show that only 9.5% of government schools are RTE compliant as the nation has just begun to focus on aspects of quality (7). There are many contributing factors to this problem one being the teaching methods used. Memorisation is still the main teaching method used in schools promoting a 'mindless rat race' amongst students. The quality of teaching within some schools is also very low due to the lack of professionally trained teachers present (8).

Whilst there exists evidence that Macaulay's quote had been slightly misinterpreted, in reality many Indian educators hold the belief that the inadequacies present within the Indian education system have stemmed from the British rule. This is for the fact that many problems that are still currently inherent within the system are similar to the downfalls of the methods introduced by the British.

With the knowledge acquired of how Britains rule had historically shaped India's education system to what it is at present and knowledge of some of the weaknesses within the system, I chose to explore the differences in mentality and attitudes that students hold towards their education amongst both government and private schools. As this research project existed in collaboration with The Rotary Club of Surat, one of the goals was to also gather student opinions from local schools in order to help them to improve their future educational service projects.

3   Methodology

'Obstacles to opportunity for students in Surat' was the initial title for this research. Before starting my research a cause and effect analysis map was created to investigate possible roots of the problem.
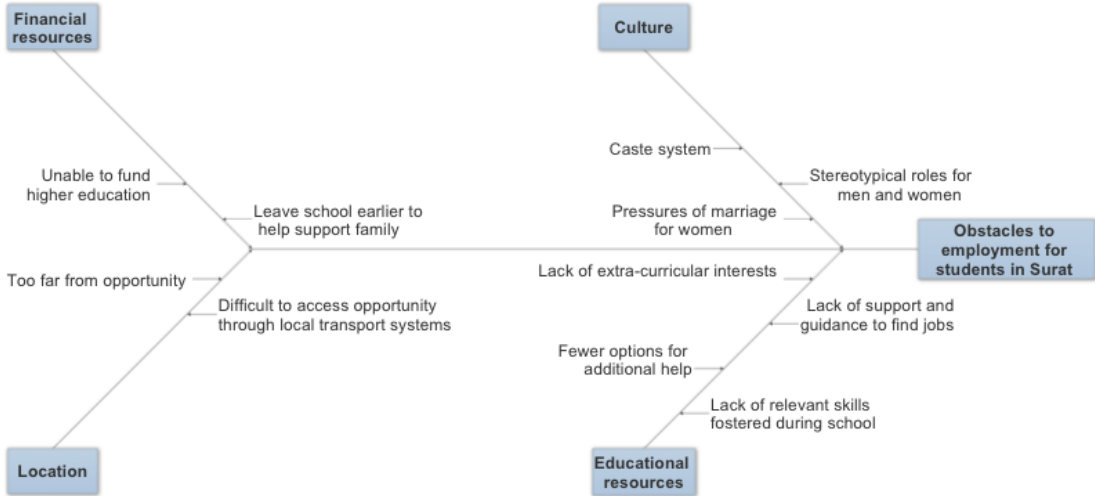

Figure 1: Cause and effect analysis map created from prior research to explore what barriers students may face to gain employment in Surat

Initially I had planned to explore all four roots of the cause and effect analysis graph. However, after arriving and speaking to educators it became apparent how prominent the problem of education was in India. I therefore tailored my research question in order to focus it on this theme. Alongside this I had to adapt my research methods slightly due to the timetables of schools and The Rotary Clubs preferred methods of working.

The methods of research that were used were primarily surveys alongside group and individual interviews with students and educators. The design of the survey was an iterative process as some questions were adapted to either create a better understanding for students or to extract more appropriate information. Using surveys within schools was the most appropriate method to collect a significant amount of data as class sizes ranged from 50-60 students. Overall, data was collected from a total of 251 students.

This study was carried out within four different schools, Sanskar Jeevan, Bai. P.M. Patel, Sanskar Bharti Vidhyalaya (SBV), and Swaminarayan Gurukul. These schools were all

based in Surat and data was collected from students ranging from the 9th-12th standard. Sanskar Jeevan provided an example of a private-aided institution. Therefore, it's managed privately but receives regular maintenance grants from the government. Majority of students from this school come from weaker economic backgrounds. Bai. P.M. Patel offered an example of a government educational institution where all expenses are wholly financed by the government. SBV and Swaminarayan Gurukul are both examples of private unaided institutions where students pay fees to attend and are admitted according to certain criteria. Students that attend these schools provide examples of India's middle-class (5). Having a spread of data from students with different economic backgrounds enabled me to get a better understanding of how each group is distinctively influenced by the education system.

4 Results

4.1 The Fashion of Tuition

In India there is a tradition of private tuition. Previously it was used as a method for teachers to earn some additional money by creating a makeshift classroom within their homes and teaching ten to fifteen students after school (9). However, in recent years the demand and importance of private tuition has increased immensely, and now almost acts as a shadow of the formal education system (10). When asked for the reasons for attending private tuition, student participants stated that 'school knowledge was not sufficient to pass exams' and they 'find it easier to learn from methods used at tuition'. Several students from SBV even quoted that 'they are not capable without tuition'. From responses it was clear to see that students were attending tuition to overcome the inadequacies within their schools.

Whilst 99% and 72% of students from SBV and Sanskar Jeevan attended tuition respectively, interestingly only 3% of students from Bai. P.M. Patel had extra tuition. (As Swaminarayan Gurukul is a boarding school students don't attend private tuition but receive additional help from their school teachers). However, when students assessed the quality of teaching at their schools, 94% of students from Bai. P.M. Patel rated the quality as 'excellent'. On the other hand, only 28% of students from SBV held the same opinion which has as a result caused

them to seek further tuition.

This finding was very contradictory to the common held mentality that the higher school fees are, the higher the quality of education a child will receive. Despite this Bai. P.M. Patel out of all schools had the highest proportion of students that rated the quality of teaching as 'excellent'. Although this result only represents a small proportion of government schools in Surat, it is often the case that these institutes are underestimated due to their status. In many cases government schools offer a better education as recruited teachers must meet all state-mandated requirements. As private schools are able to choose their own recruitment process, this in some cases leads to under qualified teachers being hired.

Despite the majority of students from both SBV and Sanskar Jeevan opting for extra tuition, there were significant differences in the effectiveness of this private education.
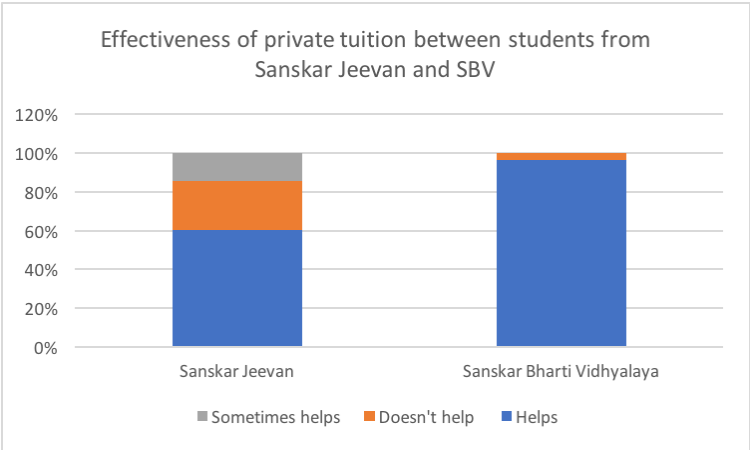

Figure 2: Whilst 97% of students from SBV stated that going to extra tuition improves their performance at school and in exams, only 60% of students from Sanskar Jeevan felt the same way, whilst a quarter said that the extra tuition they receive was ineffective.

From figure 2 it is clear to see the difference between the quality of private tuition that students from middle class and lower class backgrounds are receiving. Whilst the majority of middle class families can afford to spend a significant proportion of their household income on the most qualified tutors, the inability of families from the lower-income population to spend much on tutoring creates disparities between a students progression and academic competitiveness. This reflected in students descriptions of the current challenges they are facing. Whilst many students from SBV stated that they were facing difficulties to become toppers (refers to the best student in a class or school) of the class, many individuals from

Sanskar Jeevan said their biggest challenge was to simply pass the year, whilst some also suffered from family financial problems. Overall the responses of students from SBV showed more drive and ambition towards future career goals than those from Sanskar Jeevan. The fact that wealth correlates to a student's aspirations demonstrates one of the flaws within the private education system.

4.2   The Beautiful Tree

During a group interview students discussed the mainstream trends that were present within the education system as well as career paths. In India after a student completes 10th standard they are able to choose one stream out of four for which they would like to continue their education in. These streams consist of two science streams, one more focused on engineering whilst the other medicine, a commerce stream focusing on business and finance, and lastly liberal arts. However, out of these four streams they explained that only science and commerce streams are encouraged. The extent of this fact became apparent when some students were even unaware that a liberal arts stream was available. One quoted that 'everyone in India follows the mainstream which is engineering, science, or commerce as it's become so embedded within families and communities.'

Two interviewees which both held strong passions and talents for music and journalism and wanted to pursue these interests further, still continued down the commerce stream partly because their older siblings had chosen to do so and also from parental pressures. The mentality behind this common occurrence in India is that science and commerce are considered as safe options as you're guaranteed a job after graduation, whereas for liberal arts and social science students there isn't as much career opportunity.

The cause of this mindset can be traced back to the 1970s when India experienced a period of economic inactivity. During this time there was a demand for engineers as the government was focused on the construction of factories to enhance economic activity. Engineering was therefore one profession which guaranteed a job whilst there were barely any opportunities for humanities students. However, after India's economy progressed, the job market expanded alongside creating job opportunities within media, journalism, finance, and IT. Despite this

expansion there is still a common held misconception amongst many parents and students that an engineering degree will secure employment, when in reality there are now too many engineering graduates for the sector to capacitate.

Some of these professions are also encouraged for economic purposes. For example, the dowry system (the act of a brides family giving cash, goods or property to the groom and his family) is still inherent in some parts of India. In some cases the bride's parents will pay the partner family a greater sum if he possesses a highly regarded profession such as a doctor or engineer.

In order to investigate what student prospects might look like outside of academia, I included some questions related to extra-curricular activities in both surveys and interviews.
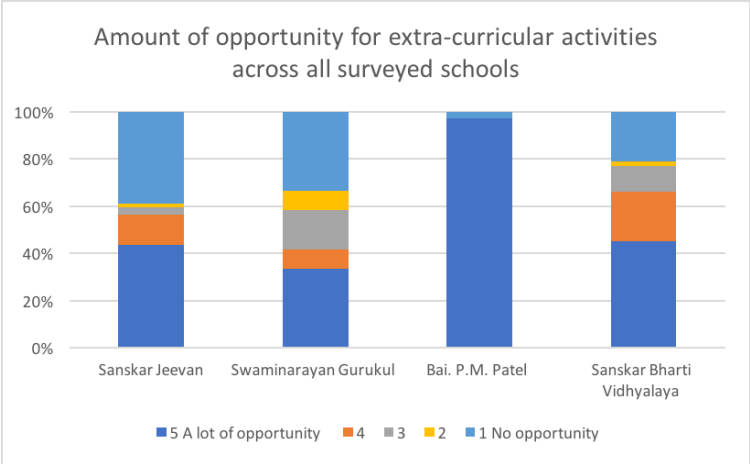

Figure 3: Whilst 97% of students from Bai P.M. Patel stated that there was a high level of opportunity for extra-curricular activities at their school, 39% of students from Sanskar Jeevan, 33% from Swaminarayan Gurukul, and 21% from SBV said there were no opportunities at their respective schools

The results shown in figure 3 demonstrate that the poor rating of extra-curricular activities is in fact not an infrastructural issue. It is evident that students from Bai. P.M. Patel are highly satisfied with the opportunities of different activities they are receiving, whilst a significant proportion of students from Swaminarayan Gurukul are not. The difference in infrastructure between these two schools is vast due to the amount of income both schools receive. Swaminarayan Gurukul holds large grounds, great classroom facilities and almost hosts 5000 students, whilst Bai. P.M. Patel is located on a side street of a busy town restricting its space and capacity of students to 900 students. In reality it is the mentality

held towards non-academic activities and subjects that restricts these opportunities.

As the importance and focus on public examinations have increased over recent years, there is less regard to the inclusion of extra-curricular activities, and the education that is delivered in schools is less universal. This attitude was reflected within students survey responses. When asked what activities they enjoyed doing outside of their studies many students from SBV, Bai P.M. Patel, and Sanskar Jeevan continued to speak of academic related activities. This contrasted with the responses from Bai. P.M. Patel as students had an extensive list of clubs and activities such as music, dance, and art to mention. This in turn made them more able to give specific answers as to what their proudest achievement was as many quoted, 'winner of sports/drama/dance competitions'. On the other hand, students from other schools struggled to find any achievement to write of and so in many cases left a blank response. However, when the question was answered students again made academic references with 'high marks on an exam' being a common response. From all student responses it was clear to see that those who had participated in external activities in general, had a greater ability to provide more insightful and well-rounded answers for all questions. This highlighted the importance of the integration of extra-curricular activities within education.

Despite both students and educators ideally wanting a more holistic educational system, one that may resonate with Gandhi's idea of a 'beautiful tree' for example, there are many social restrictions which have developed in India that prevent this. For example, the competitive culture that exists between relatives and peers with regards to education is a common social feature of middle-class Indian society. In many cases a parents social obsession of getting their children into the finest institutes is a cause of social prestige and exclusivity. As a result this restricts the time and freedom of a child to explore their external interests.

4.3   Gender Attitudes

Although there have been several government initiatives to encourage the enrollment and retention of girls in school, there is still a significant gender gap present where the average female literacy rate sits at 65% lagging behind the male literacy rate at 82% (11). Historically this has been due to the dogma surrounding young girls that educating them is a waste of

financial resources as their main purpose is to manage household duties. As a result many leave school at an early age to get married and to fulfill this role.

Out of all schools, Sanskar Jeevan portrayed the biggest contrast between genders with regards to behaviour and attitudes towards education. Through observing student cooperation with the survey and interview questions, female students displayed a greater amount of enthusiasm and interest in activities. This was demonstrated by several students raising questions about the questions listed on the survey and the purposes behind the project. In comparison, male students were not as engaged and often didn't take activities as seriously.

From analysing survey responses the female students at Sanskar Jeevan were also more optimistic about the quality of teaching and learning at the school.
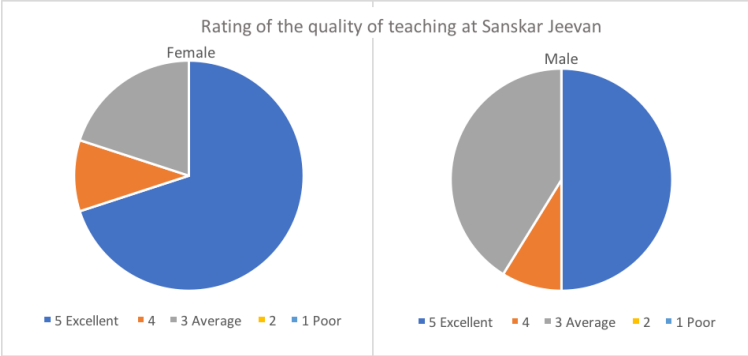

Figure 4: 80% of female students rated the quality of teaching within their class between 4-5 whereas only 59% of males rated it of the same quality

Despite the female students' high ratings of the quality of teaching at school, many entries were contradicted by their responses to remaining survey questions. For example, when asked why they choose to attend private tuition, 25% of those that rated teaching quality as a 4 or 5 simultaneously stated that they go for private tuition as school knowledge is not sufficient, whilst 75% of those that rated teaching quality as a 4 or 5 said they choose to go as they learn better at tuition than at school. These findings were further explained through survey responses as several girls wrote that they feel motivated to study because they have had the opportunity to attend school, whereas they know of other children that haven't had the chance. The female students' commitment to their education was demonstrated when analysing the amount of independent study they were completing on a weekly basis.
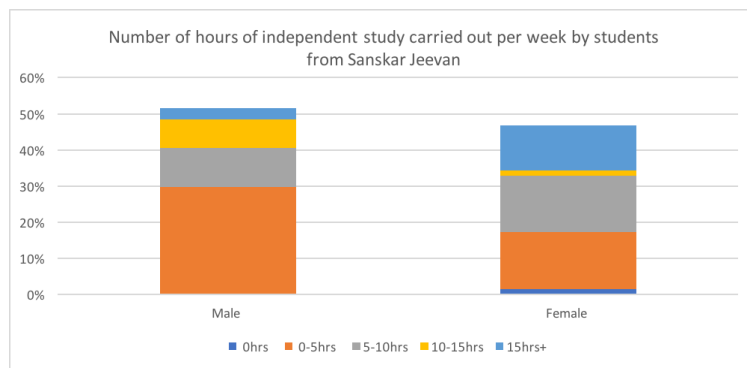
Figure 5: Majority of male students undertake 0-5hrs of independent study per week, with only 3% carrying out 15 hours or more in comparison to 13% of female students

From the graph shown in figure 5 it is clear to see the distinct contrast between the amount of extra study that girls are doing in comparison to their male counterparts. This exemplifies the engagement, pride, and positive attitude female students have towards their education. These set of results also portray how certain notions that are rooted in India's past still affects much of the mentality that is held today.

5   Conclusion

From the data collected across all four schools it is clear to see that there is an inconsistency in the quality of education and opportunity that is being provided to students. Where the trends of private tuition and gender attitudes towards education have developed due to the differences in economic backgrounds of students and families, other major gaps within the system such as a lack of extra-curricular activities have no correlation to the wealth of a school or student. Rather these correspond to the mentality and stigmas that surround them. Although this research only focused on a small number of schools within the Surat district, trends between government, private-aided, and private-unaided schools can be expected to continue across the state in a similar manner due to the shared culture, tradition, and mentality in Gujarat.

Although it can be argued that the many challenges that the Indian education system currently face were in some respect created during the British rule, simultaneously a lot of problems have stemmed from the mentality held by the Indian population over a series of

generations. This illustrates that the weaknesses within the system are divided, and are a matter of both structural and social issues. As discussed in previous sections, the state has developed initiatives to benefit India's educational structural model. Non-governmental organisations and social businesses have also become a prominent driving mechanism to improve the quality of education for the mass youth population in India. Despite these efforts to enhance the educational infrastructure, it is the social issues that provide more resistance to positive change.

At present over half of India's population are under the age of 25. With regards to the future, this places India either on the verge of a thriving and prosperous workforce, or contrarily an unskilled and demotivated population. The outcome is heavily dependent on how India's education system shapes the next generation, and its quality is therefore crucial to the development of the nation.

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