

Lakpa's future

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FOURTEEN year old Lakpa has rosy cheeks, short spiky hair and a shy smile. He is studying in Std VIII. His face lights up when asked what he wants to become in the future. 'Engineer!', he says proudly, without a moment's hesitation.

For a moment we are happy to hear it. Lakpa lives in a village in Bishnupur district of Manipur, about an hour's drive from Imphal; he has never been further than the district headquarters, a 15 minute drive away. At first glance, it sounds like a good thing, the fact that in rural settings far away from the IITs and other name-

brand institutions of India, there are young people who dream of becoming engineers. Could it be that Lakpa's confident statement reflects the impact of Skill India, Digital India, Make in India, and all the other policies and schemes intended to make India's much talked about demographic dividend a reality on the ground?

Unfortunately, we very quickly realize that this is not the case. The reality is far more worrisome.

We're sitting with Lakpa and his mother in a circle of plastic chairs in their home. What we can see of it is a single very large room of the kind

categorized as ‘semi-pukka’ – cement floor and walls, thatched roof – divided by the strategic placement of furniture into sections for sleeping, cooking, watching TV. A group of adults sits on mattresses in front of the TV set, engrossed in a serial and entirely oblivious to our interaction with Lakpa.

Given his instant response to the question and his mother’s approving nod, it seems that the notion of Lakpa becoming an engineer is not new to either of them. This is probably not the first time that the subject has come up. But as we continue to talk, it becomes evident that neither one has any idea of what an engineer actually does, nor of what Lakpa needs to do to become one. Lakpa knows that ‘there’s a man who lives in our village who is an engineer’, but ‘Engineer’, to him, seems to be a label that denotes a certain status, rather than a type of task to be done or a set of skills to be acquired.

It is true that Lakpa is only 14, and his parents have had little exposure to schooling. Perhaps it is unreasonable to expect him to have a clear picture of how he envisages his future unfolding. But elsewhere in Lakpa’s village, and in many other villages across the country, a similar story emerges.¹ Like many of his peers, neither Lakpa nor his mother are thinking about acquiring or using skills or even simply doing something that they find interesting. They are thinking about the status and security that a certain type of job confers, like ‘*koi bhi sarkari naukri*’ (any government job) – another common response among the youth that we spoke with. The pathways and connections between the future our young

people aspire to and what they are doing today are difficult to see.

And yet, young people in India today are spending more years in school than ever before. According to official figures, across the country, close to 22 million young people like Lakpa were enrolled in Std VIII in 2014-15, double the number from just one decade earlier.² This enormous expansion in elementary school enrolment is sometimes attributed to the success of the Right to Education Act (RTE), under which the first eight years of schooling became free and compulsory for all children from 2010 onwards. Certainly the largest single jump in Std VIII enrolment was seen in 2011-12, the year following the implementation of the RTE Act, during which more than two million students were added to the Std VIII rolls. But the upward trend was visible long before RTE came into effect. This is clear evidence of the success of the Government of India’s drive of many years to ensure universal enrolment at the elementary school stage.

This unquestionably enormous achievement is worth pondering for a moment. India’s 22 million students in Std VIII is a number that represents four times the entire population of Finland, a country whose education system is often touted as a model for the rest of the world. It is almost four times the population of Singapore, the country that topped the rankings in the latest (2015) round of PISA, the international learning assessment administered to 15 year olds – children one year older than Lakpa – that is often used as a benchmark to measure the performance of a country’s education system.

2. All enrolment data is based on figures from the Unified District Information System for Education (UDISE), available online at <http://udise.in/index.htm>

PISA seeks to measure students’ conceptual understanding and ability to apply it to everyday situations. It is worth recalling what a few years ago came as shocking news to many: in India’s only attempt to participate in PISA, back in 2009, the two states that took part – Himachal Pradesh and Tamil Nadu – were ranked second last among 73 participating countries, ahead only of Kyrgyzstan.³ This is not to argue that PISA is necessarily a good measure of what children in rural India know and can do, or that only countries with small populations can construct world-class education systems. But India’s successful decades-long focus on enrolment has come at a cost. It has surely contributed to some key perceptions shared by Lakpa and his mother, his peers and his teachers: school completion is important. Getting that piece of paper as evidence of completion is fundamental. But for the most part, what young people learn along the way and how that knowledge relates to their future is not even a subject that comes up. In this context, India’s dismal PISA results are not surprising.

All across the country, the idea that more education is better has become a fundamental part of the way in which families think about young people’s life trajectories. As a village elder in Bihar put it not long ago: ‘*Aaj ke zamaane mein bachhon ko minimum graduate tak padhana jaroori hai.*’ But what do the extra years of schooling actually contribute to the millions of youth who complete the mandatory eight years of elementary schooling each year?

For more than a decade now, data from the Annual Status of Edu-

3. See <https://www.acer.org/about-us/media/media-releases/acer-releases-results-of-pisa-2009-participant-economies> for a summary of PISA 2009+ results

1. During 2016 and 2017, staff from ASER Centre interacted with well over 1,000 youth in the age group 14-18 from most states of the country as part of the process of designing the ASER 2017 survey, which focuses on this age group.

cation Report (ASER) has shown that as many as a quarter of all children in Std VIII in rural India are unable to read a simple text at a Std II level of difficulty, and even fewer are able to solve three-by-one-digit division sums. Both these figures have fallen steadily since 2010.⁴ Manipur's students typically do much better on acquisition of basic reading and arithmetic skills than the rest of the country, and young Lakpa breezes through the reading assessment. He is able to do subtraction as well, but then stumbles over and eventually abandons the division sum—one that he should have been taught how to solve at least four years earlier.

This inability to handle basic arithmetic may have serious repercussions in his life very soon. If he continues to secondary school as he intends, Lakpa will most likely have a great deal of trouble understanding the content of his textbooks, and he will no longer be shielded from the consequences by the automatic promotion policy that ends at Std VIII. The description of just one topic of one unit of the CBSE math curriculum for Std IX, for example, begins as follows:

Definition of a polynomial in one variable, with examples and counterexamples. Coefficients of a polynomial, terms of a polynomial and zero polynomial. Degree of a polynomial. Constant, linear, quadratic and cubic polynomials. Monomials, binomials, trinomials. Factors and multiples. Zeros of a polynomial. Motivate and State the Remainder Theorem with examples. Statement and proof of the Factor Theorem. Factorization of $ax^2 + bx + c$, $a \neq 0$ where a , b and c are real numbers, and of cubic polynomials using the Factor Theorem.⁵

4. ASER data from 2005 to 2016 is available at <http://www.asercentre.org/p/289.html>

Not able to compute a simple division, without access to supplemental help, it is difficult to imagine how Lakpa will negotiate this content, or the rest of the demanding Std IX syllabus, with any kind of understanding. In 2016, well over half of all students in Std VIII in rural India—that's more students than there are people in Finland—were in the same situation as Lakpa with respect to their basic arithmetic abilities. Although not conducted in Manipur, a longitudinal study of transition from elementary to secondary school shows quite clearly that children's learning levels in Std VIII are a good predictor of their continuation into secondary school.⁶

But the consequences of poor foundational skills are not limited to children's school trajectories. They also translate into the absence of tools that will help them successfully negotiate the world outside school. For example, when Lakpa is shown a picture of a shop window with a Rs 300 T-shirt that is on sale with a 10% discount, he can't calculate how much he should pay for it. Nor can he tell how much money he would have to pay back if he took a Rs 20,000 loan from a bank for one year at 11% rate of interest. Like the subtraction and division sums, these kinds of problems have been in his math textbooks in previous years, but the possibility that one day he will be cheated out of large sums of money by unscrupulous people is as much of a threat as being unable to pass an exam. And it is worth noting that it isn't only Lakpa and his peers who don't know how to calculate simple interest; very recently we learned that neither could the vast

5. See <https://www.cbse syllabus.in/class-9/mathematics-class-9-syllabus>

6. ASER Centre and the Kusuma Trust UK, *A Study of Access, Provisioning and Learning in Secondary Schools. Research and Policy Brief*, 2017. Available online at www.asercentre.org

majority of the 2,000 or so ASER 2017 volunteers, most of whom are post-graduate students in institutions of higher education across the country.

So what will happen to Lakpa? He will soon finish Std VIII in the only school in his village, a government upper primary school offering grades from Std I through Std VIII. He says that he wants to study 'until graduation'. His village is just a five minute walk from the well maintained main highway to Imphal, and as one approaches the city from his village, both sides of the highway are dotted with an enormous number of schools, coaching centres, and hostels for both girls and boys. Education is clearly a booming business in these parts. ASER data shows that in 2016, almost all children in the 6-14 age group in rural Manipur were enrolled in school, and more than 7 out of every 10 of them attended private schools. This is the highest proportion of private school participation in the country, well over twice the national average of 30.5% across rural India.

The push to achieve universal secondary education was initiated in 2009 with the launching of the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan, or RMSA. But the path to achieving it seems to rely heavily on the private sector. Official statistics for 2015-2016 tell us, for example, that although there were 2,897 government schools in rural Manipur that offered lower primary grades (Std I to V), only 692 offered upper primary grades (Std VI to VIII). Lakpa's current school is one of them. Well under 300 government schools offered secondary grades—Std IX and X. In other words, rural Manipur has roughly one government secondary school for every 10 government lower primary schools.⁷

It is perhaps not a commonly known fact that private schools help

fill the enormous gap in provisioning of schools at the post-elementary stage, not only in Manipur but all across the country. On average, at the elementary education stage, less than two out of every ten schools listed in the official statistics is a private unaided school. But the picture is quite different at the post elementary level, where almost four out of every ten schools offering secondary grades in India is a private, unaided institution. States vary enormously with respect to their reliance on private sector provisioning: private unaided schools constitute just 7% of all secondary schools in West Bengal, 34% in Tamil Nadu, and an enormous 71% in Uttar Pradesh.

In Manipur, reliance on the private sector at the secondary level is only a little more acute than the national average, with just over half of all secondary schools being private unaided schools. Lakpa is fortunate, in that his family appears to have some resources and is supportive of his desire to continue studying. And so he may end up living in one of the hostels that dot the highway closer to Imphal, studying in one of the schools that look from the highway to be little more than a small room with a huge board outside. Almost certainly, his teachers will concern themselves with completing the curriculum, and neither his school exams nor the National Achievement Survey – the Government of India’s periodic assessment of student learning outcomes – nor indeed, the Std X Board exams, should he get that far, will ever pick up on the fact that Lakpa needs help with division.

His future as an engineer seems, at this point, almost an impossibility.

Perhaps Lakpa and others like him are right to look at us with doubt when we ask questions that attempt to link their educational choices to their future aspirations. Through no fault of their own, we are pushing millions of our youth into situations where meaningful learning – the acquisition of knowledge, abilities, skills – is not only difficult to achieve, it is not even the goal. At every step we have mandated curricula with content that is so far beyond the reach of most students that even the most motivated of them struggle to do more than try to memorize it all. And we are leaving it more and more to the private sector to determine what kinds of inputs and experiences to offer them and at what cost.

The consequences of not attending to either the scale or seriousness of the problem are enormous. Today India has about 100 million people in the 14-18 age group – beyond the scope of the provisions of the RTE Act, but not yet adults with all the attendant expectations and responsibilities. It is these young people who we are relying on to build a better future not only for themselves and their families, but also for the country – the famous demographic dividend that has so far not materialized. Something like 90% of them will eventually work in the unorganized sector.

Many of India’s current policies aim to expand their access to digital, financial, educational, and skilling opportunities among others. But unless these policies examine the pathways and connections between where our young people are today and where we want them to be a few years from now, it is difficult to see how they will succeed. Establishing more IITs will not help young Lakpa become an engineer, but making sure that he understands both the formula and the concept behind long division will surely be one step in the right direction.

7. See [http://udise.in/Downloads/Publications/Documents/Flash_Statistics-2015-16_\(Elementary\).pdf](http://udise.in/Downloads/Publications/Documents/Flash_Statistics-2015-16_(Elementary).pdf) and http://udise.in/Downloads/Publications/Documents/Secondary_Flash_Statistics-2015-16.pdf