

The Hobbesian trap in contemporary India and Korea: Implications for education in the 21st century

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In this commentary to Ambrose's focus chapter on "21st Century Contextual Influences on the Life Trajectories of the Gifted, Talented and Creative", we examine the socio-economic, cultural and ideological constraints to development in education and society in India and Korea, with a particular focus on issues that fall through the cracks and segments of society that get left behind. In spite of the phenomenal economic growth in these countries and advances at the frontiers of technology (e.g the success of the 2014 India's Mars mission; the information technology sector in Korea), educational opportunities are still mired within a socio-economic and cultural context that hinders opportunities for young people. Ideology and social Darwinism in the 21st century play a role in both countries, to a lesser extent in Korea where a homogeneous society and a smaller albeit dense population has been able to reap some of the benefits of socio economic and technological advances. In this commentary to Ambrose's chapter, the Darwinian nature and constraints of educational opportunities in these countries is examined framed within the macro-context of historical forces that shaped the structure of society in these countries, particularly cultural ideology that creates a Hobbesian trap.

Introduction

Indian and Korean societies have a very long tradition of learning historically steeped in religious traditions. Religious texts like the Vedas and Upanishads laid the foundation of an oral tradition of knowledge transmission in India (Kosambi, 1966; Sriraman & Benesch, 2004).

Similarly in Korea, Confucian and Buddhist texts played a major role in the foundations of society. In both societies learning was revered and the role of a “teacher” in the passing of knowledge was central. Colonialism played a major role in both societies in the transmutation of traditional learning centers into institutions of learning (namely schools) that mimicked the educational system in England and China respectively, more so in the case of India as seen in the use of English in higher education since independence in 1947 after 250 years of British rule. In the case of Korea, the influence of Chinese culture for more than 1600 years (since the 4th century AD) affected the structure of society and to a lesser extent the Japanese who colonized it after the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars in the period 1894-1910. Korea was a Japanese colony until 1945. Korean society is steeped in Confucianism- i.e., a philosophy that underlies behavioral norms in human relationships, considered as “good” for the proper functioning of society. Confucianism originated in China and permeated both Japanese and Korean societies and ways of thinking. The writings of Confucius (551-479 BCE), were a system of morals and ethics in order to create a citizenry that were moral and worked for the general good of society. Confucianism also influenced the educational systems with competitive exams forming the basis for selection of the best people for administrative positions in the existing bureaucratic and governance structures. Confucianism when viewed through the lens of the west can seem paradoxical. For instance a Korean student, who might seem self-assertive in front of their peers, would appear demure among their elderly relatives. In comparison to Japan, where Confucianism trickled into imperial circles in the early 1600’s and subsequently tweaked to suit nationalistic purposes, Korean society adopted it much earlier, as the very basis of the philosophy of the Yi dynasty (1392-1910). The Yi dynasty developed it as a basis of morality, emphasized filial piety and ensured that it permeated all levels of society (Paik, 2001).

Regardless of colonialism, both Indian and Korean societies were historically anchored in a teacher-student tradition of learning, with students from the higher castes in India and higher societal standing (aristocracy) in the case of Korea benefitting from the imparted knowledge. In the former case, schooling perpetuated the existing caste based status quo of learners from higher castes replicating and filling societal positions that required knowledge of the scriptures or skills required for governance. In the latter case (Korea), the Confucian model provided access to those with higher socio-economic standing to allow their children to benefit from reading, writing and the skills required for bureaucratic positions in the system in place. In both cases, exams played a major role in the selection of the “best” students for existing positions in society, namely administrative positions. Thus institutionalized learning historically had an exchange-value in both these societies- in ancient times it was viewed by the elite as a necessary means to preserve the structure and order of society, and in modern times in the access that exams provide to educational opportunities in economically profitable sectors.

We will now examine the quantum leap that has occurred in both India and Korea and then examine the Hobbesian trap that has resulted within their respective historical and cultural frameworks. In other words have macro opportunities arising from globalization resulted in the advancement of these societies or only perpetuated the historical status quo in new garb?

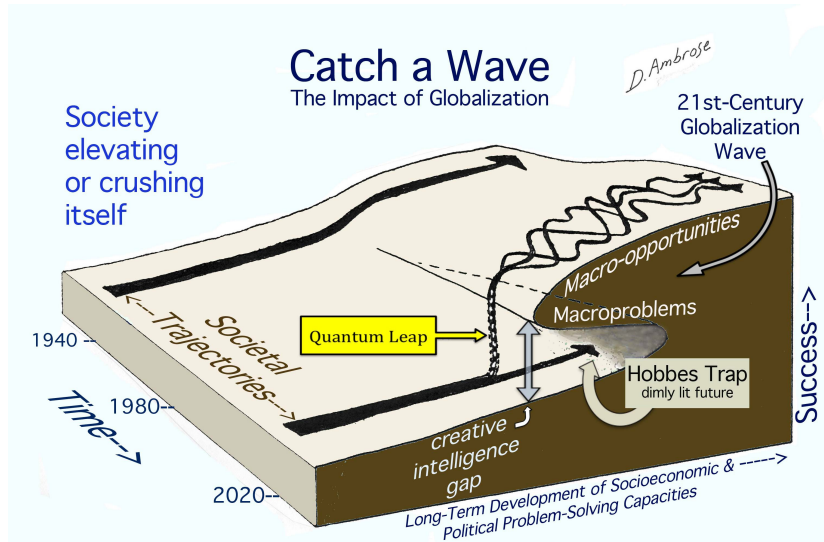


Figure 1: The Ambrosian “Catch a Wave” model

The nature of the Quantum leap

The Indian milieu: According to the Ambrosian model, societies that successfully catch the 21st century globalization wave are those that pay heed to long-term socio-economic and political problems that can arise when major changes occur within existing structures. India, a country with more than 1.3 billion people provides us an extreme case to highlight the salient features of the model.

Since its independence from British rule in 1947, India was besieged by 5 year long term development plans partly based on the socialist model of the Soviet Union. Under the Congress political party rule for majority of its existence since 1947, bureaucratic governmental structures hindered free market competition, entrepreneurship and conferred benefits to a few industrial families under whom monopolies prevailed (Khilnani, 1999; Sen, 2005). This resulted in a mass brain-drain from the 1970’s onwards of Indian students moving to the west for post graduate opportunities and never returning to their home country. Two decades later, there was an unexpected and tremendous surge in the Indian economy. In the early 1990’s the Central

(federal) government moved to privatize the industrial and economic structure resulting in the model of the market economy replacing the neo-Socialistic bureaucratic structure that was in place. The appearance of a freer market and relaxed governmental restrictions on private initiatives resulted in a surge of entrepreneurship and rapid economic growth especially in the urban areas of India. A corresponding “surge” occurred in the educational sector where numerous private colleges and universities were set up to meet the demands of the growing middle class. Formerly the “wards” of the middle class and even the gentry who could not make the stringent cut-offs for government subsidized universities in the competitive fields of medicine, engineering and computer science, now had access to newly accredited institutions for a price. A university degree from a lesser institution also provided the exchange value of a job and in many cases access to higher education in the West, particularly having benefited from an English medium instruction. In other words competition in a Darwinian sense had been replaced by wealth as a commodity of exchange for economic success through education.

The Ambrosian “quantum” leap suggested in figure 1 occurred for a particular segment of society that was able to benefit from changes to the socio-economic structure in place.

Unfortunately the segment that benefited was already poised for the leap in a generational sense, namely parents that somehow had the benefits of an education and/or access to wealth being able to take advantage for opportunities that arose for their children. On a more positive note, the privatization of the economy and the educational sector that started in the 1990’s in India, and the increased wealth of the middle class had the “trickle-down effect” of the importance of education as a means of upward mobility. In the ensuing two decades, globalization and information technology brought an unparalleled awareness to the masses in the rural landscapes of India of the inequities in place, and resulted in grassroots political and social movements to

protect interests of small farmers from exploitation by middle men who engaged in price fixing on behalf of larger firms. Initiatives such as biometric identification of individuals including those that were disenfranchised in rural areas have reduced instances of voting fraud and rigged elections. Digital media has made it more difficult for corrupt politicians to continue their practices because of the likelihood of being caught on the record. Unfortunately the prevailing dogma of caste and religion versus the advances in technology and science has left in its Hobbesian trap a very large segment of society that needed to be uplifted in the form of access to basic infrastructure like shelter, food and sanitation (Gupta, 2000). The paradox of India is evident to any visitor that visits its cities who finds a juxtaposition of state of the art technology and high-rise corporate life with the mortar-brick and slum like existence of nearly 90% of the masses.

The Korean milieu: Korea offers an interesting contrast to India for consideration in the Ambrosian model. Korea industrialized rapidly in the last four decades to become an economic powerhouse in the areas of ship building, information technology and the automobile industry. To get a better sense of the phenomenal economic growth of Korea, a key benchmark to note around 1970 was the \$200 annual per capita income, with inadequate infrastructure to train teachers and support schools (Sorensen, 1994). At that point in time agrarian communities still relied on children as a source of support for work on farms and other small scale industries. The “quantum” leap for Korea occurred in the ensuing forty years and is evident in the fact that its GDP rose to \$32,000, membership in the OECD and the G-20 economies, and more importantly its students were amongst the highest achievers in the OECD administered Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in reading, mathematics and science. What can explain

such a turn around? According to Shin (2012) a distinguishing feature of Korean higher education “is that its growth has been closely related to economic development. Government policy has promoted this relationship... [i]n 1961, it established a long-term plan with economic development as its primary focus” (p.68). Further Shin posits distinctive attributes of the Korean quantum leap are (1) the Confucian tradition, (2) western university ideas, and economic development (p.69). More importantly the strategic vision of the government foresaw the changing needs of the globalized world by developing key sectors of industry such as shipping, automobiles and information technology that are an integral part of today’s knowledge economy. What remained unsaid in the Korean success story were the sacrifices made by the previous generations for today’s prosperity, and the consequences in terms of changes in the structure of society that have occurred. This is examined in the next section.

Overview of 21st century problems and progress in India and Korea

Hobbes trap in modern India: In the context of education, as alluded to earlier, the system in place has undergone numerous changes over the last two centuries. The modern system of education is a byproduct of English colonization that has more or less preserved caste based status quos. According to Naik (1977) formal systems of education in place have more or less ignored informal or vocational or apprentice-based systems in place. The latter includes those that engage in trades and crafts such as woodwork, pottery, spinning and weaving, metal work etc which have traditionally been the purview of the lower castes. Some estimates from the Indian ministry of labor, place 420 million out of 450 million people being employed in this informal knowledge based system (MOLE, 2009). The number is particularly staggering when it implies that 1 in 3 people are educated in an informal knowledge based system that relies on an

apprenticeship (and very often indentured) based mode of education. While the rest of the world makes assumptions about the caliber of Indian university education based on notable scientists, information technologists and entrepreneurs that have benefitted from the formal systems in place, the Hobbesian trap contains nearly one third of the population who do not benefit from the leap because their system has been left largely unacknowledged! In developed countries such a large labor force typically has the protection of vocational accreditation institutions and labor laws to stipulate working conditions and ensure minimum wage to prevent exploitation.

However in India this huge segment of the population consisting of the lower castes has again fallen victim to the historical caste based system in place. Naik's (1975) writings have elements of Paolo Freire's notion of emancipatory education as a means of liberating the masses from the cycles of oppression. In this sense education is conferred a political status. The present day situation in India reveals a post-colonial landscape where the educated elite impose western ideals and western notions of formal education that does not adequately work for the informally educated masses. However what it does is preserve age-old caste based structures in place. The flaw in the educational system is that it does not allow individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds an entry into it because the system is more or less linear and assumes everyone has the access and resources to be in school for a fixed period of time to procure the necessary certificates to advance to the next stage. In many ways it is reminiscent of the prevalent middle-class myth in the United States that education provides upward social mobility and is a means of liberation from poverty, when in fact the children of those living in conditions of poverty very often are victims of broken public schools and neighborhood conditions that perpetuate crime, addiction and other social problems. Analogously Ambrose's chapter uses the phrase

“educational apartheid” to point to the creative intelligence gap occurring in the American education system.

Globalization resulted in an unprecedented scale of urbanization in India due to job opportunities created via outsourcing call centers, information technology campuses and conglomerates.

Unchecked urbanization also resulted in congestion, slums and an extremely competitive work environment. This in turn has led to increased suicide rates in both males and females, in addition to crimes against women. Andres et al (2014) report that in India over 100,000 people commit suicide each year, thus contributing to 10% of global suicide deaths with no national legislation to address this problem.

Hobbes' trap in modern Korea: In comparison to India which has a very large segment of its population in the Hobbesian trap, Korea caught the 21st century globalization wave and been successful in improving the socio-economic and educational status as evident in its G-20 economic standing and success in the OECD administered PISA respectively. Unlike India, Korea is relatively homogenous culturally and linguistically with governance that has taken into account long-term development. The question then is: Has the success dimension nevertheless created a Hobbesian trap due to unanticipated societal problems? We examine this issue in this section.

The Confucian heritage of Korean society places a very high emphasis on education and conforming to the rules. In fact the exchange value of higher education at the top universities in Korea is placed at such a premium that it has created an obsession of garnering perfect scores on college entrance examinations (the CSAT). Private after-school programs cater to this national obsession starting from the elementary years. Burn out of students by the time they reach college

is revealed in morbid statistics such as increased suicides. An article appearing in the Asia Times in 2005 stated that more than 1,000 student deaths occurred from 2000 to 2003 (Card, 2005). The modern day legacy for education in Korea is the obsession of students to perform well on the highly competitive college entrance exams for the limited number of seats in the science and engineering tracks at the top universities in the country. Entry into one of the top three universities is synonymous with setting a life trajectory that ensures upward social mobility. The tension and contradiction within this system is apparent in the fact that although Korean society values education, the examination system is highly constrictive, inhibits creativity and invariably used to stratify society in general. Political analysts question whether the economic growth in Korea has come at the expense of democracy (Im, 2011). For instance the basic democratic tenet “rule of law” underwent a Confucian interpretation by the post 1987 Lee Myung Bak government to mean “strict application of laws without exception, firm enforcement, and voluntary obeisance to laws...[n]othing about protecting citizens’ rights through law or about protecting human rights” (Im, 2011,p.581). For a country that claims to be fully democratic Im (2011) further points out to lack of accountability in elected officials, the presence of corruption, curtailment of civil liberties, and lack of the freedom of press. More worryingly the East Asian financial crisis of 1997 triggered a polarization of the economy with disintegration of the middle class to create an hour glass shaped economic demographic analogous to the United States. Im (2011) further argues that economic polarization in turn leads to educational polarization with the elite benefitting most from access to the right resources. In a country where private educational services starting from the elementary school level shapes the educational futures of students, an extreme economic cost is exacted on families. The term “sea gull” dads is used to denote the phenomenon of one parent (typically the mother) living with the student in an English

speaking country to help them adjust to their transition, while the father provides all the financial support to them (Lee, 2011). In an article in the Washington Post Ly (2005) reported on the devastation that occurs in families which includes marital strife, drug abuse and even suicide when education abroad is made a priority over everything else. As of 2006 there were over 28000 younger students (elementary, middle and high school) abroad and an estimated 10,000 sea-gull dads (Oh, 2008)

In spite of the rose colored glasses through which the world views the Korean success story, the Hobbesian trap has left in its wake expedient and undemocratic interpretation of Confucianism, a vanishing middle class, increased suicide rates among adolescents, and family structures with one absent parent (“sea-gull” Dads). Thus the quantum leap that occurred for the present generation of Korean university students has come at a tremendous sacrifice made by the previous generation.

Concluding Remarks

In this commentary we used the Ambrosian “Catch a Wave” model to macroscopically analyze the impact of globalization in India and Korea in relation to changes in education and society. Our analysis relied on situating globalization in these countries within their historical and cultural past. Even though these two countries are quite different in forces that shaped their quantum leap, India with its sub-continental landmass, British neo-colonial past, and a heterogeneous population and Korea with its Sino-Japanese colonial past and a homogeneous Confucian heritage, in both countries education has held an exchange value (as a commodity) for social mobility. In addition in both countries the “westernization” of the educational system served to preserve the status quo of the elite, in the case of India it served higher castes and

industrial elite and in the case of Korea it served traditional aristocracy and the industrial elite, both poised for changes in society. Even though the wave of globalization created educational opportunities for the middle class in both countries, it has left in its Hobbesian wake segments of the population and societal issues that need to be confronted despite the cosmetic success seen by the world. In this commentary we have brought to light some of these major issues within their respective historical and cultural frameworks. In doing so, we have paid particular attention to historical forces and cultural ideologies that shape Hobbes' trap for these countries caught up in the wave of success that inadvertently extracts a cost on segments of its population. Education in both these countries needs to be re-examined with respect to their "societal health" to prevent disenfranchisement of segments of its population that will contribute to long term major societal problems. Socio-economic gains for any country cannot come at the expense of disenfranchisement since history has shown us repeatedly that it results in societal or civilizational collapse (Sen, 2005).

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