Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry (TOJQI)
Volume 12, Issue 7, July 2021: 2839-2847

Career choice for Medical education in India: Social and Economic Expectations versus Reality

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Abstract

Present paper is an attempt to entangle the choice of medical education as a professional career among Indian students. The choice of career is associated not only with the higher aspirations for better economic opportunities but also seen as one of the important parameters for happiness and realisation of long term social goals. Elaborating upon the reference of world happiness report and data on higher education enrolment in India, the paper provides pecuniary and non-pecuniary aspects with special reference to medical education not only in terms of labour market but also for the gap between expectation and reality.

Key Words: Choice, Medical Education, Behavioural Economics, Human Capital, Psychology

1. Introduction

Introduction

As per the latest NCRB data (National Crime Records Bureau in India) around 8934 students have committed suicide in 2015 across the India (NCRB, 2016-17). In an overview, approximately 39,775 students killed themselves during the time period of 2010-2015. These figures are devoid of those attempted ones, which go unnoticed every year. This is an alarming picture in terms of the changing psychological perspective of youth in India. Lancet in its 2012 report observed that India had the highest rate for suicides among the age group of 15-29, which constitutes the core of the demographic dividend of which everyone talks about (Patel et al. 2012). This data from the official records of India presents an aggregate picture of young suicides without unearthing the cause and effect phenomenon.

Reasons for taking such extreme step are generally attributed to unemployment conditions among Indian students, especially in richer and economically growth driven states like Sikkim, Tamilnadu and Maharashtra. Sikkim is India's third richest state in terms of per capita income and seventh highest in terms of literacy rate but only second in terms of highest unemployment rate in India (Saha 2017). It further states that about 27% of the state's suicides were related to unemployment and found to be most common among those between 21 and 30 years of age.

The second scenario is not related with the unemployment *per se*, but more of the distortion between reality and expectation among students. Here we talk about the suicidal tendency

among those who choose a particular stream of higher or professional education and opt for coaching to get into that. Medical and Engineering (getting into the AIIMS, IITs and other public institutions of good repute) are top two streams for which students aspire after the completion of their 12th level studies. The tough competition for a handful of these institutions have led to the distortions between high expectation and reality among students which further turns into severe disappointment leading into self-destructive tendencies.

Seventeen students committed suicides in Kota, Rajasthan in 2017 for not getting selected in Medical entrance examinations. This is mere one of the expositions of the above mentioned sequence of events for diversion between expectation and reality among aspiring students for a particular career choice.

Career choices in India are very complex phenomenon. Many psychological and economical factor interweave the decision making process. This forms the basis of determining their choice while selecting a particular career. Among all the opted choices for a student, selection of medical education has emerged as one of the most discussed one because of the various complexities involved in it. The contemporary issue of suicidal tendencies among the aspiring students in medical coaching institutions in Rajasthan (specifically Kota) have in fact, raised this new problematic dimension to a new discourse over choice.

Neo-classical Economics observes choice as an outcome of the investment made in skills of an individual with expected socio-economic benefit in future through the lens of human capital approach. However, revival of institutional economics after 1970s, have questioned the concepts of human capital theory. Researchers argued that axiom of rational utility maximisation, a position on which much of the classical economics rest, is in fact, a consequence of social arrangement. Questions were also raised from the behavioural perspectives, which have its roots in psychology. This is because of the fact that a massive psychological investment is involved as one's thoughts mechanism; hopes, aspirations and sense of self-worth come into active play.

Behavioural approach tends to attack the basic premise of rationality of human being while making economic or social decisions. Premises of behavioural economics follow different or precisely inverse route from the classical *homo economicus*, who is considered self-interested and rational economic agent. Introduction of behavioural economics to conventional domain of neo-classical theory of labour market have in fact provided important insight to not only the wages and job characteristics but to the attributes like motivation and incentives, social preferences, family and social life, technical change, prestige, career upgradation, risk preferences etc. While choosing for a particular career option, a person makes substantial amount of analysis which has a foremost effect on all dimensions of his or her life. Students who resolve the conflicts of career choices seek a better life perspectives and happiness.

Higher Education: A General Pattern of Choice

Data from higher education points out that pass percentage of Arts/Humanities / Social Sciences are high in comparison to other disciplines. In Medical Science it is just 3 percent,

which shows the complexity as well as sophistication of this programme as compared to other technical disciplines like Engineering and Technology, where the turnover is around 10 percent.Perhaps, the reason being stringent entry to this specialised discipline as well as lesser availability of government funded colleges.

Many factors shape the choice of subject at higher level of education in India. All India Survey on Higher Education (2020) database presents an insightful picture about higher education in India. The GER in higher education is 27 percent as per the latest data. Higher education in India starts from undergraduate programme. Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences account for 40.8 % of all students enrolled in higher education. Females are 52.3 %, while males were 47.7 % of the total students in these streams. The second comes to engineering and technology, where 17.3 % of total students are enrolled in which 71.2 % are males. But when it comes to Medical Science, females account for 60.6% while males are only 39.4%. Although, total students enrolled in medical science is below 3 percent of the total students as per the Figure.

For medical and engineering the societal pressure is very prominent for students especially from family. The demand for medical education has in fact catalysed a major change in Indian education. Education in India was primarily public and driven by the government. The first private initiative in higher education was basically driven by lack of seats in medical education. This initiative, by Dr. T.M.A Pai, led to the creation of first private medical school at a small place called Manipal. It was initially met with great scepticism but has now grown to become one of the premier private universities in the country. This trend continued later on. In terms of Social and community preferences are concerned, doctors are in much demand as compared to engineers. Doctors often got enormous dowries in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Bihar and UP because of the social prestige associated with it. The amount of dowry is said to subsidize the post graduate degree cost in medicine of that individual (Sarukkai, 2015).

Career Choice in Medical Education: Economic and Non-Economic Rationale

Now the question arises as how to explain these two consequences in which one is related with the issue of unemployment among students arising out of labour market imperfections. And another one is about choosing a particular career and then not realizing the goal to achieve it. The former can be attributed to the consequence of uneven growth, inequality and mismatch of demand and supply in labour market, while the later can be explained under the ambit of reality versus expectation domain, which is more of a socio-psychological construct. In this backdrop, we argue that both the situations are interrelated in terms of their process of arriving at the decision for opting a particular choice. This process can be better explained with the help of theoretical insights from economics as well as psychology.

Theoretical Perspective

Education, as a vector for human capital, plays a central role in preparing individuals to enter the labour force, as well as equipping them with the skills to engage in lifelong learning experiences. There are, however, numerous dimensions of education– labour market linkages.

The most emphatic one is standard human capital model which is based on the assumption that through the optimal level of education, an individual tries to equalize marginal cost and marginal return (Becker 1964). However, it has been a complex econometric process to estimate the returns through the labour and education market linkage, but still remains the most widely used approach to determine the benefits that an individual gets out of investing in education.

Economic theory models the career choice in terms of life time earnings. Earnings have been considered as an important motivation to enter into labour market, thereby affecting the choice of a student to adopt medicine as a career. However, studies like Ausman et al., (2013) presented their observation through students of post-secondary level at UAE, who opted for career in medicine and concluded that both familial and non-familial factors are responsible for entering into this field. the same can be argued for Indian scenario whereby there exists a strong public support for it both at the family and at the government level. As Sarukkai (2015) in his study argues that for medical and engineering streams, the societal pressure is very prominent for students especially from family. The demand for medical education has in fact catalysed a major change in Indian education (Sarukkai, 2015). It has been observed that amount of dowry is said to subsidize the post graduate degree cost in medicine of that individual (Sarukkai, 2015). These factors turned medical education into a social prestige and an effective medium for the parents to secure the future of their children as well.

Another aspect of the problem is linked with to the capitalist economy. Speaking of choice in this context would be irrelevant if the market driven forces marked by ‘competition’ are not highlighted. Student selection and admissions in higher education through entrance exams are of particular concern today in the context rising aspirations of young students. With an increase in academic competition where each one is driven to excel each other, most of the college entrance examinations have been notorious for their high stakes and high pressure nature. Entrance examination has been one of the most pressing problems for the youth. The basic feature surrounding the exams is that of intense competition, pressure and urgency. The neoliberal agenda in higher education has provided private providers a distinct edge over the public institutions. This has been observed in the phenomenal rise in private medical institutions across Indian states. The constrained intake capacity of public medical institutions along with their shrinking number have ushered the era of high competition and tougher entrance examinations. College entrance tests and related test preparation activities have contributed to what has been called the “educational arms race” – the ferocious competition for admission at highly selective institutions (Atkinson, 2009).

It is interesting to point out that despite the sudden increase in the number of private institutions especially in the field of engineering; the problem has taken a new shape. While the issue of accessibility to education has been addressed with a sense of urgency, it is recognized that the rapid increase and multiplication of opportunities also has an impact on the ‘career choice’ of the students. There is a law of economics called Say’s law which states that supply creates its own demand and it can be applied superficially to explain the career

choice patterns of increasing preference of students towards the field of engineering with the widespread mushrooming of engineering colleges.

Behavioural Perspective

Scientifically situating, most of the research considers choice as a distinct and complex economic phenomenon. The process of selecting a career involves preferences along with the available choices in the higher education market. The last decade of economics of education has in fact embarked upon the knowledge of human behavior informed by the sociology and psychology. The concept of cognitive skills which is measured through achievement tests and other related personality traits governed by sociological attributes of the corresponding society has driven the economic output of an individual. During the fifties, the boundaries between economics and psychology had been an interesting explorative process among the researchers. This exploration has led to the determinants of economic behavior in terms of psychological factors and thereby establishing the cause of behavioral economics. Development of experimental psychology has in fact inscribed a question mark on rational choice validation along the lines of classical theory of economics (Simon, 1959). As Schiliro argues " On the one hand, Simon's approach, developed on bounded rationality and problem solving, criticized – on the basis of analysis conducted on the field – the lack of realism of the neoclassical economic theory based on the assumption of full rationality" (Schiliro 2011). Behavioral economists follow Herbert Simon's broad usage of the concept of bounded rationality. The latter is often contrasted with the neoclassical economic approach to rational choice behavior, which is in turn built on the (expected) utility maximization hypothesis. The basic tenets of bounded rationality are derived from the irrational behaviour which is again an outcome of an individual's cognitive capabilities and the compounding nature of his social and natural environment along with the maximisation of utility under constraints. (Muramatsu & Fonseca 2012).

The paper argues about the conjecture based on the modelling of basic economic theories informed by socio-psychological premises, have actually been changing the domain of contemporary economics. Social identity can provide reasons for the behavioural differences while opting for the career choices of same economic payoffs. Caste or different social background may influence the way an individual decides for his career. Zhan (2015) argued that people opt for a particular field of education out of its future expected income and also for the social image which can be more rewarding.

As Tapas Majumdar (1983) discussed the two domains of investment in education –the individual and the institutional or societal-the same can be applied to a student who aspires for investing his career in medical education. These two domains of investment in education as mentioned by Majumdar, have two different sets of objectives, time horizons and purposes. In this regard, the rate of return approach obscures some of the essential distinction between the choice situation in the normal capital market and that in education, therefore remains inadequate to apply. The choice is in fact a question of social choice which is based on collective choice of these two domains which further get constituted by micro and macro-economic arguments. The same logic can be applied to the choice in medical education. A

student, which decides to invest his time and money to get medical education, situates himself in microeconomic framework. On the other hand, decision by his family and influence of society and further investment by government on him for making him a doctor, are situated in macroeconomic framework.

Individuals' decisions to choose or not to choose a particular career might be caused by their cultural values. Whereas people's negative perceptions of any occupational choice could lead to a shortage of professional supply (Majid et al 2014). Frankl (1985) elaborated that "the striving to find meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force in man". Every human being is curious to search the pathway of their existence. It is an inevitable fact that economic means are required for survival. However, the career is also providing the meaning of existence. For adolescents in India, career is one of the paths for finding existential connotation. If the proposition is accepted that many people today are trying to derive a sense of existential worth from their work, the next question to report is why they choose any career for economic motive only? Does the collective choice precede over the individual choice? Why does one person achieve a sense of meaning by being a choosing a career as professor in higher education and, another by being an engineer or doctor? Or choosing a career is correlated with life satisfaction and quality of life? These are some of the propositions which require insight not only from one particular discipline but other related ones. To quote the philosophy of Sartre, each human being is abandoned and free. Humans create and recreate the essence in every moment through the choices and actions. One of the important arguments he made is that, there are always alternatives to anything that count as a human action as it is even true when we feel that there are no alternatives. He further argued that the concept of self is absurd and we find an absent self in consciousness. It is only through the 'choice' of our acts that we define our self. Also, this choice gets mediated in the presence of others with whom this are marked with conflict.

Happiness, Choice and Education

The recent world happiness report statistically presents the global view of happiness. Many paradigms elaborate the mechanism of choices, and regulation of Happiness. Education is investment and public good which is correlated with the life satisfaction. In Global Happiness Report one of the indicators was the life choices that further can be determined by the choices made by any person through the right selection of career. So, the role of higher education is very prominent to define the quality of life which increases the productivity and innovation in labour market.

Dockery (2003) finds that persons who are employed and those who are unemployed are less satisfied with their life overall than those who are not in the labour market. Further, those working full-time are less satisfied than those working part time. As expected, it is the unemployed who are least satisfied with their life overall.

As Throor mentioned in his TED talk that there is need to fill up the gap between the well-formed mind and educated mind in Indian Education. Labor organization has worked out 2020, and estimate that we'll have 160 million people in the age group of starting work — 20

to 24 is what they calculate — and China will only have 94 million, at the same time. (Tharoor; 2013) So we really do care for this huge human capital, which is more dynamic, productive or more senses. The task of education becomes more rigorous in the digital world. In India, the public, private model is the crux of many debates in Indian education.

Privatization increases the different labour force and market in Indian education. Private education does not only increase the quality of education but change the educational scenario of India. As a consequence of the extension of education, private coaching institutions is growing day by day throughout India. Finland sets the standard of education in all over the world. Finnish education is not only one criterion in which Finland has gained good quality, but in happiness report 2018 Finland secured top rank. The Finnish National Board 2016 revealed that "Compulsory education lasts ten years. It starts at the age of six and ends at the age of fifteen. Almost all schools are public, there are very few private schools in Finland. Most pupils go to a municipal school near their homes. Education from pre-primary to higher education is free in Finland"(FNBE;2016). The case of Finnish education opens many doors for research. Private education does not trend in Finnish education but despite this fact, they set the standard of education for all over the world. On the other hand, the privatization of education intermingled with many realities in India. The kind of knowledge capital is producing through this private education and how students construct the meaning of achievement through their belief system remain to be explored further. The huge human capital of youth has been investing their efforts in private education in various coaching centres. Parents bear the double sword responsibility of education. At the part of the student, the reflective issue is what motivating force behind to achieving challenging goals. As Tajfal and Turner argued that we categorize our self as personal and social identity (Tajfal & Turner;1986). But as Kitayama suggested that the conception of self is very different in collectivistic culture (Markus & Kitayama;1991) so in India, the self is collectivistic and relational. Therefore, identity plays a significant role in the construction of self-worth and goals.

It is interesting to point out that despite the sudden increase in the number of private institutions especially in the field of engineering, the problem has taken a new shape. While the issue of accessibility to education has been addressed with a sense of urgency, it is recognized that the rapid increase and multiplication of opportunities also has an impact on the 'career choice' of the students. There is a law of economics called Say's law which states that supply creates its own demand and it can be applied superficially to explain the career choice patterns of increasing preference of students towards the field of engineering with the widespread mushrooming of engineering colleges.

Conclusion

India strives for a better ranking in many of the Global indexes and reports like Human Development Index, Social Progress Index, Global Happiness Report, Global Competitiveness Report, Ease of Doing Business Report to name a few among the many. However, the increasing unemployment and related socio-psychological anomaly like suicides among youth is wiping off the demographic dividend of India.

Looking through all these reports and their basic parameters, education and health are the ones, which form the backbone of all the development indices used for gauging a nation's development. Role of higher education which starts after passing the higher secondary exam in India, define the quality of life through the social and economic upliftment. The explicit linkage between higher education, labour market and productivity of an individual not only defines the economic dimension but also the socio-psychological position of an individual in his or her respective society.

In the economic line of argument this has been argued by the critics of human capital theorists, who observed that the individual actor is not responsible for making his or her choices especially for choosing field of his career. The individual, institutional and social domains are the determining factors for opting a particular field. In case of medical education, the choice of a student is determined through these factors. Eventually, the non-fulfilment sometime leads to such magnitudes in the gap of expectations and returns which lead to self-destructive suicidal tendencies. It can be argued that individual discipline like economics or psychology may not be able to problematize the choice of career among students in a singular concept. Instead a behavioural perspective with the fusion of economics and psycho-social constructs may provide further insights for its conceptualisation.

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