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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Worried About India's and China's Booms? So Are They

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The more I cover foreign affairs, the more I wish I had studied education in college, because the more I travel, the more I find that the most heated debates in many countries are around education. And here's what's really funny — every country thinks it's behind.



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times
Thomas L. Friedman.

Tony Blair has been fighting with his own party over permitting more innovative charter schools. Singapore is obsessed with improving its already world-leading math scores before others catch up. And America agonizes that its K-12 public schools badly need improvement in math and science. I was just in Mumbai attending the annual meeting of India's high-tech association, Nasscom, where many speakers worried aloud that Indian education wasn't nurturing enough "innovators."

Both India and China, which have mastered rote learning and have everyone else terrified about their growing armies of engineers, are wondering if too much math and science — unleavened by art, literature, music and humanities — aren't making Indira and Zhou dull kids and not good innovators. Very few global products have been spawned by India or China.

"We have no one going into the liberal arts and everyone going into engineering and M.B.A.'s," said Jerry Rao, chief executive of MphasiS, one of the top Indian outsourcing companies. "We're becoming a nation of aspiring programmers and salespeople. If we don't have enough people with the humanities, we will lose the [next generation of] V. S. Naipauls and Amartya Sens," he added, referring to the Indian author and the Indian economist,

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both Nobel laureates. "That is sad and dangerous."

Innovation is often a synthesis of art and science, and the best innovators often combine the two. The Apple co-founder Steve Jobs, in his compelling Stanford commencement address last year, recalled how he dropped out of college but stuck around campus and took a calligraphy course, where he learned about the artistry of great typography. "None of this had even a hope of any practical application in my life," he recalled. "But 10 years later, when we were designing the first Macintosh computer, it all came back to me. And we designed it all into the Mac. It was the first computer with beautiful typography."

Fifty years ago the Sanskrit scholar was respected in India, Mr. Rao noted, but today it is all about becoming an engineer, a programmer, an M.B.A. or a doctor. "More people will get Ph.D.'s [in the study of] Sanskrit in America this year than in India," Mr. Rao asserted, "and Sanskrit is the root of our culture!"

Why all this ed-anxiety today? Because computers, fiber-optic cable and the Internet have leveled the economic playing field, creating a global platform that more workers anywhere can now plug into and play on. Capital will now flow faster than ever to tap the most productive talent wherever it is located, so every country is scrambling to upgrade its human talent base. When everyone has access to the same technology platform, human talent, as the consultants John Hagel III and John Seely Brown wrote, is the "only sustainable edge."

Hence the concern I found in India that it must move quickly from business process outsourcing (B.P.O.) — running back rooms, answering phones or writing code for U.S. companies — into knowledge process outsourcing (K.P.O.): coming up with more original designs and products.





"We need to encourage more incubation of ideas ... to make innovation a national initiative," said Azim Premji, the chairman of Wipro, one of India's premier technology companies. "Are we as Indians creative? Going by our rich cultural heritage, we have no doubt some of the greatest art and literature. We need to bring the same spirit into our economic and business arena."

But to make that leap, Indian entrepreneurs say, will require a big change in the rigid, never-challenge-the-teacher Indian education system. "If we do not allow our students to ask why, but just keep on telling them how, then we are only going to get the transactional type of outsourcing, not the high-end things that require complex interactions and judgment to understand another person's needs," said Nirmala Sankaran, C.E.O. of HeyMath, an Indian-based education company. "We have a creative problem in this country."

My guess is that we're at the start of a global convergence in education: China and India will try to inspire more creativity in their students. America will get more rigorous in math and science. And this convergence will be a great spur to global growth and innovation. It's a win-win. But some will win more than others — and it will be those who get this balance right the fastest, in the most schools.

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