

Reaching the Unreached: A Challenge for Rural Development

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Abstract

Even in the beginning of the 21st Century the most important stumbling block in the way to rapid socio-economic development in the developing countries like India, is undoubtedly the illiteracy in general and the adult-illiteracy in particular. Almost 18 to 20 per cent children are never enrolled, and among those enrolled the proportion of children not reaching the secondary school certificate level is more than 80 per cent. At the higher education level, the situation is no better, either. Not more than 7 per cent of the relevant age-group attend the tertiary level of education. The problem is further aggravated by population explosion witnessed in the latter half of the 20th century.

It is imperative that certain strategies are devised to tackle the problem of such a vast magnitude. It would be necessary that well-conceived but different strategies are devised for educating the babies born in the 21st century, and the illiterate children and adults carried over from the outgoing century. Unfortunately, most of the children needing a special strategy may belong to the under-privileged sections and may have illiterate parents. There is hardly any motivation for these children to pursue education.

Many children born in the last one to two decades of the outgoing century are either non-enrollees or drop-outs. It is futile to expect them to enroll in regular schools. The best strategy to educate them will be to bring them under the fold of Non-formal Education (NFE) or the Open and Distance Learning. However the ODL at school-level needs to be strengthened for providing quality education.

I. INTRODUCTION

Even in the beginning of the 21st Century the most important stumbling block in the way to rapid socio-economic development in the developing countries of the South Asian region, especially India, is undoubtedly the illiteracy in general and the adult-illiteracy in particular. In spite of a tremendous growth in number of educational institutions in India in the last five decades, the problem has remained unresolved. Almost 18 to 20 per cent children are never enrolled, and among those enrolled the proportion of children not reaching the secondary school certificate level is more than 80 per cent, which is indicative of the fact that there is very heavy drop-out on the way. At the higher education level, the situation is no better, either. Not more than 7 per cent of the relevant age-group attend the tertiary level of education. The problem is further aggravated by population explosion witnessed in the latter half of the 20th century. The rate of growth of population has obviously outstripped the rate of growth of literacy. According to one estimate, there are almost 300 million adults (age-group 15-59) mostly from the rural area, who are illiterate and hence, per force, doomed to lowly paid agricultural wage employment and continual spells of unemployment. The stupendity of the problem will be realized when we consider that 74 per cent of India's population (well over a billion) is comprised of rural dwellers.

II. THE PROBLEM

Literacy, skill development, and education of the teeming masses of rural India is the real problem of India's rural development. In sum and substance, these under-privileged masses are

that section of Indian population which suffers from several social, economic religious and other barriers, and whose per capita income is so low that there is not only no scope for savings but the energies consumed in physical labour are often not recouped fully. I believe that the greatest resource of social and economic development of a vast and highly populated country like India is its teeming masses. In other words, human resource development is the key factor for socio-economic development of India. Unfortunately, India's performance in the matter of education and skill development of the under-privileged masses cannot be considered satisfactory. If at all, we have succeeded in only accentuating the educational inequalities in the country. The gulf between the privileged and the under-privileged has only widened.

III. THE GREAT PARADOX

India today presents a seemingly great paradox in its educational scenario. On the one hand, India can claim to possess the second largest educational infrastructure in world, next only to the U.S.A. It has several pockets of excellence in education, especially at the tertiary level. Over the last four decades India has supplied highly qualified and well-trained manpower all over the world, representing almost all the disciplines of human activity. On the other hand, it is an acknowledged fact that India has the largest number of illiterates: almost 40% of the world's illiterates are housed in this country. What is more worrying is the fact that inspite of a steady rise in the literacy rate, the actual number of illiterates is simultaneously increasing.

IV. THE EXPLOSIONS

The last six decades have witnessed certain explosions. There was the explosion of expectations which the newly liberated people experienced, but was effectively articulated only by the urban elite, the industrial rich and the political heavy-weight. Result was, despite lofty ideas and well meaning intentions, the cake of development was taken away by the privileged sections of the Indian society. Unfortunately, higher education in India has always been the prerogative of the elite. This "growth" has only accentuated the imbalance that has always existed in the educational status of urban elite and the rural masses in India.

The population explosion, which has mainly taken place in the rural areas, has affected spread of literacy and education in the rural areas where almost 74 per cent of India's population lives. The school atmosphere in the villages is most uninviting if not repulsive with the result that drop out rates are high. Wastage and stagnation are rampant. The illiterate rural parents cannot provide models worth emulation by their children.

V. INDIAN HUMAN RESOURCES & EDUCATION

India is amongst the most thickly populated areas of the world. Numerically this country can be considered rich in human resource but the quality of labour-force and the per capita productivity are so low that this resource has become a burden rather than an advantage. The main occupation in the rural areas being agriculture the rural labour is per force engaged in this sector. On account of the most inequitable distribution of land-resources and vagaries of monsoon on which agricultural productivity is heavily dependent, a large part of the rural labour-force belongs to the category of "landless rural labour." Among the working age group population a large section is unemployed mostly for want of adequate work. The concept of free and compulsory primary education has remained on paper only in many parts of rural-India. The labour not only lacks in the skills necessary for the available jobs but, being illiterate, also the capacity to acquire new knowledge and skills for better jobs. The problem thus is to make this human mass a much

better producer of economic goods and services. Education is a *sine qua non* for raising labour-efficiency.

Education of women has a special relevance for economic development in India. For various reasons woman has been the most neglected in this part of the world. The woman's role as a mother, who can mould the character of the new generation and make it far stronger physically and mentally, is generally overlooked. Even though almost half of the human population is made up of the females, their work participation ratio is very low, and amongst the working women an overwhelming majority is engaged as agricultural labour which is not only physically exacting but also poorly remunerated.

In the case of female education the tradition bound society has various limitations. As a consequence the girl's education is generally terminated if there is no school in the close vicinity. The need to spend on daughter's wedding or dowry often forces the parents to save money by denying them higher education. This sort of thinking cannot be easily erased particularly from the rural mind.

VI. STRATEGIES OF EDUCATING THE UNDERPRIVILEGED

Having assessed the magnitude of the problem, it is imperative that certain strategies are devised to tackle the problem of such vast magnitude. It would be necessary that well-conceived but different strategies are devised for educating the babies born in the 21st century and the illiterate children and adults carried over from the outgoing century.

(a) Strategy for babies born in the 21st Century.

Children of 6 – 14 years of age have to be compulsorily given elementary education so that they will be in a position to acquire further education or professional or vocational skills. Unfortunately, most of the children needing a special strategy may belong to the under-privileged sections and may have illiterate parents or other elders in the family. Thus to expect an atmosphere congenial to education, or any guidance to the school-going children in the house, would be unrealistic. There is hardly any motivation for these children to pursue education. Face to face or classroom type teaching by fulltime teachers is the best mode of educating these children. It has not been possible for the country to invest more than 3.5 per cent of its GDP on education as a whole. The least that can be said is that it has to be the prime concern and the responsibility of the democratic government in India to provide atleast 6 to 7 percent of GDP for education in the first decade of the new century with the lion's share going to primary and elementary education.

However, funds alone will not solve the problem. Some definite strategies will have to be adopted. These strategies are briefly presented hereunder:

- State acceptance of the premise that it is its responsibility to provide free primary and elementary level education to all children belonging to the under-privileged sections. This is easier said than done. The element of food insecurity in the rural homes must be removed first by special and persistent efforts.
- Larger allocation of funds for the elementary schools which may include incentives to the parents of school-going children for the loss of income from child-labour needs to be seriously considered.
- Free supply of schooling kits.
- Incentives to the families in the form of financial assistance, wage-employment, provision of land for farming, subsidized supply of basic necessities of life, soft or interest free loans.
- Mid-day meals to all children/monthly supply of cereals to children attending schools.

- Summer and winter clothings.
- Scholarships for children in higher classes.
- Free or highly subsidized hostels for scheduled castes children, and residential schools for the tribal children where meals are supplied free of cost.
- Appointment of teachers belonging to the scheduled caste communities in areas where untouchability is still predominant.
- Appointment of tribal teachers knowing their own (tribal) languages and dialects.
- Setting up Tribal Research Institutes for developing materials and curricula in the tribal languages or dialects.
- Location of schools very close to their habitats. If the settlements are very small, locating schools at the central points within working distances.
- Specialised training of teachers to take up these relatively hard assignments.
- Use of scientific media methods including IT/ICT, to convince the parents and guardians of the importance to education.
- Heavy concentration on rural female literacy/education, for only educated mothers will beget educated children.
- Setting up specialized and well equipped residential schools in rural areas for educating the handicapped and mentally retarded children.

(b) Strategy for the illiterate children and adults carried over from the last century (Pros and Cons of ODL)

Many children and adults born in the last one to two decades of the outgoing century are either school non-enrollees or drop-outs. It is futile to expect them to enroll in regular schools even if special efforts are made or incentives provided. The best strategy to educate them will be to bring them under the fold of Non-formal Education (NFE) or the Open and Distance Learning. The National Literacy Mission (NLM) has been implementing the NFE scheme over the past two decades. The scheme has met with mixed success; has done well in some states but not so well in others. As a strategy, implementation of the scheme needs to be toned up.

Unfortunately ODL has not been fully exploited for literacy and basic education. The tendency has been to think of ODL in the first place as an option for tertiary education. Only recently, importance of ODL as a useful tool for combating illiteracy, (especially the adult illiteracy) has been realized. Various national policy documents have reflected the major role that open and distance learning has to play in this regard. Linkages may have to be developed between adult education and formal and non-formal education including open learning. The open and distance learning system needs to be strengthened for providing education with assured institutional learning in terms of certificates, degrees etc.

The literacy campaigns have created a new awaking amongst the neo-literates as well as their voluntary instructors. Since most of the neo-literates cannot go back to the formal school being over-aged or economically underprivileged, the open and distance education programmes have assumed great importance as a means of furthering and strengthening the continuing education programme. For the neo-literates this could be kind of educational bonanza. In order that the ODL effectively serves the fast increasing number of seekers of non-formal distance education it is essential that it is backed by a strong and efficient educational organisation well provided financially, administratively and academically. Even if supported financially by the national/provincial government, it must be a fully autonomous organisation.

(c) Special Features of the ODL

The special features of ODL given below make it aptly suitable for reaching the adult illiterates

- Use of modern communication and information technologies
- Wide choice of subjects, satisfying individual learner's needs, interests and Abilities
- No upper age restrictions
- Longer time-range (5 to 8 yrs.) to complete certain courses of study –with credit accumulation facilities.
- Continuous Assessment System through TMA (Tutor Marked Assignments) or CMA (Computer-Marked Assignments)
- Personal Contact Programmes (PCP)
- A multi-channel delivery approach is the special feature of the ODL system.
- Printed self-learning materials
- Personal Contact Programme – tutors and academic counselors
- Interactive periodical magazines
- Audio-video Programmes
- Telecast-Broadcast
- Tele-conferencing (one way video – two and audio or two way video)
- Internet and websites- for student information

(d) Vocational Education

The large and bulging section of rural school drop-outs needs to be covered under the vocational education program. These adults are not concentrated in one place but scattered in small numbers in tiny villages where farming is the only occupation. The type of vocational training must therefore relate to agriculture and allied occupations. Best way would to train the village primary school teacher in vocational aspects of agriculture through the distance mode and as a part of in-service training who in turn can impart such training to the rural adults. Such a primary teacher will be better accepted in the village.

(e) Long-term strategy

The long term strategy will however be to open up the rural area/economy by making heavy investment in the basic infrastructure like all-weather roads, water supply and power. Without all-weather surface roads, adequate water and electric power, the villages located at the disadvantaged points will always remain backward, the population there illiterate and unskilled. This is of course a long term strategy to be well conceived and efficiently executed over the next two to three decades. The moot question is, is there political will necessary for such a strategy in the democratic set up?

VII. CONCLUSION

It can be said by way of conclusion that if India were to emerge as a civilized and benevolent democracy in the 21st century, the democratic government must accept the challenge of wiping off illiteracy from its surface. The backlog from the outgoing century will have to be dealt with separately while a new strategy of compulsory primary and elementary education for every baby born in the 21st century must be devised and forcefully implemented. While the formal type of

primary schooling is the best suited vehicle for educating the new-born, faith and confidence will have to be reposed in the non-formal and open and distance learning modes for tackling the problem of the backlog of illiterate children and adults. I would not like to share the view sometimes expressed that let the bygone be bygone, and there is no need to fritter away resources on clearing the backlog. The magnitude of the carry over problem is too stupendous to neglect. If neglected, its burden will loom large on us for the major part of the 21st century.

Several research studies have brought out the deficiencies of the formal schooling system. Several inquiries have also brought to fore the shortcomings of the non-formal or distant learning modes of literacy and education. These deficiencies or shortcomings are not insurmountable. With determination and given the political will, the formal and non-formal modes can certainly be improved and made far more efficient. The most important problem is that of a general parental indifference and their need to employ child-labour for supplementing family incomes to ward off hunger and food-insecurity. There is no easy solution to this problem, though concentration on female education may reduce it in the coming one to two decades. Considerable stepping up of public investment in primary education is called for. Urgent measures to increase the quantum of national savings are called for which could be gainfully invested in primary and elementary education in the country-side.

In the final analysis, population control is the key factor. If the country succeeds in reducing the rate of growth of population by at least 50% in the next one to two decades, there would be a substantial reduction in the consumption of essential goods and services (food, clothing, transport etc.) leading to corresponding increase in the per capita availability of investible resources. Moreover the demand for social consumption in the fields of education and health will come down which may enable the planners and administrators to raise efficiency of these social service sectors.

Supportive Readings.

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