

<i>People Power</i>

Crisis in Education

In the debate on employment guarantee in recent months, the real issues of skill promotion, empowerment and education were largely relegated to the background. We need to recognize that the well-intentioned employment guarantee is at best a short-term palliative to help combat the pangs of hunger and starvation of the desperately poor. But these palliatives mask a harsher reality. The state has spectacularly failed in skill promotion to make our people fulfil even a part of their potential. A vast majority of Indians have not been given a decent chance to be productive partners in a modern economy. In this day and age, it is absurd to think in terms of unskilled manual labour providing productive employment to the bulk of the people. While a small part of India is forging ahead with visions and dreams of 21st century technology and prosperity, the rest of the nation is relegated to perpetual penury and driven to despair.

The Indian state stubbornly failed to address the issue of education over the past six decades. Even in primary education, which is now recognized as a fundamental right, we continue to focus only on enrollment and retention of children in schools. There is hardly any effort to provide quality education which guarantees at least minimal levels of learning after a few years of schooling – fluent reading, ability to write, and simple arithmetic. Even these basic tools of literacy are unavailable to the majority of products of primary education in India, let alone the capacity to logically analyse issues and apply knowledge to real life problems.

When primary education suffers such neglect and the goals set are so unambitious (mere enrollment and retention), it is no surprise that secondary education has been all but ignored in our scheme of things. Only now there are some very feeble, belated signs of recognition that we cannot be a nation of primary school graduates, if we are to compete in modern world. An equivalent of Sarva Siksha Abhiyan is now being considered for secondary education. Even here, the emphasis is on building minimal school infrastructure (building class rooms) and hiring school teachers, and not on ensuring outcomes in terms of quality of education and preparing school graduates for productive and skilled work in modern economy, or for university education.

The appalling state of our school education is a surprise to many well-educated, highly skilled Indians. There was a time when our state schools, though few in number, were helping the youngsters who could access them realize their potential. That is how a whole generation benefited in the quarter century after freedom. But as the state's attention shifted to short-term populism and a doles culture, real nation-building and basic services suffered. Education and healthcare along with public order, justice, basic infrastructure and natural

resource development were the inevitable casualties. This failure of state, coupled with the attraction of English as medium of instruction, led to the flight of middle classes to private education. Much of this private education is of indifferent quality, and often incompetent teachers taught ignorant kids in a language they did not understand. Despite this, many parents feel empowered because their patronage sustains the school, and there is some degree of accountability.

The more enlightened parents ensured better education to their children either by spending more, or by working hard to give their kids a head start. It is no accident that the bright products of technology often are children of school teachers themselves. But in most private schools, the quality of education is as appalling as in state schools. The poor domestic workers and rikshaw pullers who are willing to sacrifice a great deal to pay tuition for their children are getting a raw deal most of the time. Simultaneously, as the middle classes avoided state schools, there is no pressure to improve quality of education. Even teachers rarely send their children to state schools where they teach! Stakeholders of state schools have generally no voice or knowledge, and those with voice and power have no stakes in schools. A vicious cycle has thus set in.

This crisis is further compounded by the failure of higher education. The few IITS and IIMS often mask the abject failure of our universities. In terms of numbers, our output is impressive: 330 university-level institutions, 16,000 colleges, 10 million students, 350,000 teachers, 25 million graduates and post graduates in liberal arts, and finally our USP – 6 million scientists, engineers, physicians and technologists. But the real tragedy is most graduates lack basic knowledge and skills. There was a time when many public-spirited Indians and intellectuals used to argue that the state should focus on school education, and higher education is not a priority. Increasingly, the synergies between school and university education are evident. We now do not have university graduates of reasonable quality to supply good school teachers. And schooling is so inadequate that most university students lack the basic skills and knowledge needed to benefit from higher education. The vicious cycle is complete.

There is a silver lining in this extremely distressing scenario. Our kids are ambitious and hard-working; parents are willing to sacrifice a great deal for education; society values learning; we have a civilizational ethos of scholarship, and there is at least the basic educational infrastructure. A few simple, practical innovations can dramatically transform this bleak scenario. But our politics and public discourse should learn one simple mantra first: education, education, education.

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