

People Power**IT IS THE SCHOOL EDUCATION, STUPID!**

Economists are rightly concerned about the slowing down of our growth. But they are wrong when they link our slow growth with global recessionary trends. And lately, 11th September has become the excuse to explain away our own sluggish economy. The problems of our economy are far more fundamental, and have little to do with global cycles.

Take education. For long, we have limited educational opportunities to the privileged few. Roughly 10% of our children have access to quality school education. In effect, 90% of the gene pool is wasted, as the potential of these children remains unfulfilled, and therefore untapped. It is not merely a social issue, but has serious economic consequences.

In the medieval era, all our production was based on traditional agriculture, and a few related occupations to service agriculture. Human labour, and not application of mind, was the source of most production. Literacy levels did not matter then. But in the age of machines, much of the arduous physical work is done mechanically. Productivity increase depends on a worker's capacity to acquire skills, and his state of fitness. Most of our unemployed workers have no real skills, and are unemployable. We cannot have productivity gains if most workers have the capacity to only dig the earth or fill the pits. Education is the key.

Even now our levels of literacy are only slightly above 50%. And most of these literates would be classified as illiterates if we judge them by minimal standards of reading, writing and arithmetic. Our functional literacy levels are probably closer to 20%. At least four years of good quality schooling is the critical requirement to make a youngster a productive member of modern economy. And that is what we failed to achieve.

Real education needs hard work, planning and commitment. When we don't deploy our energies and resources, we make laws. There is no dearth of laws to banish poverty, promote equality and guarantee justice. We are now adding one more law – in fact a constitutional provision, through

the 93rd amendment – making school education between 6 and 14 years of age a fundamental right. Chances are, once the amendment is enacted our politicians and bureaucrats will indulge in self-congratulation and move on to other great goals.

But education cannot be improved by legislation alone. Most schools have only one or two teachers. Many teachers themselves are semi-literate. A classic vicious cycle has set in. Decades of poor schooling undermined higher education. Poor quality higher education is now leading to school education failure. There are millions of university graduates who want to be teachers. But most of them are hopelessly ill-equipped.

We need to focus on five areas – resources, physical infrastructure, teachers, accountability and standards. Adequate resources are critical, and adhoc and token measures to provide make-shift schools with make-believe teachers will not do. We must summon the will to deploy the required additional resources – about a week's public expenditure every year, or 0.5% of GDP. With resources; buildings and furnishings are easy to provide. But teachers are another matter. A massive programme of training teachers should be designed and implemented. The present teacher training institutes have largely failed. Any objective study of private schools funded by tuition fee will prove how poor the quality of teaching is. When economic incentive also fails to produce quality, then there is a deeper crisis which cannot be addressed by market forces alone. In the medium term we need to comprehensively restructure our higher educational edifice. But in the short term crash courses for teachers are vital.

Availability of teachers does not guarantee education in government schools. We need to empower parents and improve inspections and quality controls. At present inspections have lost relevance, and have become a source of corruption. We have to design and operate instruments of accountability. And there should be clear standards based on minimum levels of learning, and effective evaluation to measure the output.

Parents are not fools. They care for their children. They do not bother to send their children to school because they know that the present schooling doesn't make their children productive. Many poor families pay hefty tuition and send their children to private schools, but to no avail.

Compulsion has a limited role. But universal school education will become a reality only when the school serves its purpose. And only when the school produces productive citizens can the economy begin to show real vitality and enduring growth.

All this requires political will and administrative skill. Where and when in India did the quality of school education become the election issue at any level? George Bush was elected largely on the strength of his efforts to improve standards in Texas schools. If we realize that school education is vital enough to at least affect the outcome of local elections, then universal literacy and productive workforce will become a reality.

Jayaprakash Narayan

(The author, a former Civil Servant, is the Campaign Coordinator of Lok Satta movement.

E-mail: loksatta@satyam.net.in ; url: loksatta.org)

* * *