

<i><b>People Power</b></i>
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**Rhetorical Flourishes as Substitutes to Resolute Action**

With the nation's attention riveted on the dastardly terrorist attack on Parliament on 13th December, the recent talk of universal literacy has receded to the background. For every failure of ours we have two easy alibis – global recession and cross-border terrorism. An occasional rhetorical flourish is taken as an adequate substitute for resolute action in respect of all our long-standing domestic problems. The cumulative effect of gross negligence of issues like school education, primary health care, infrastructure, natural resources development, rule of law and corruption is dismal under-development and sluggish economic growth. The ruling classes and the chatteratti are more than happy to pay lip sympathy to these issues, even as they desperately cling to their unearned privileges and create fortresses for themselves, hoping that they will be insulated from the deeper social malaise and governance crisis enveloping the nation. After all, the children have the option of green cards.

Once in a while a Kargil or an attack on Parliament offers us glorious opportunities to wear our badges of patriotism. If constables and soldiers die, we can offer suitable condolences and give cash compensation. Life goes on with our parties and carnivals until the television focuses on the next live coverage of another dramatic event – say a carnage in a village, or slaughter of innocents for the sin of belonging to Dalit Castes, or yet another bribery scandal. We can then start the cycle all over again – feigned horror, endless shibboleths, pyrotechnics in parliament, a few sops of tokenism, glorious inaction to secure the future, and eventually the slumber.

A nation cannot be built with the vast majority kept ignorant and illiterate. An economy cannot thrive with the productive potential of the bulk of the people unfulfilled. A society cannot enjoy peace and order if the multitudes of poor and dispossessed do not have a

realistic opportunity for vertical mobility, do not enjoy dignity as human beings, and do not get a modicum of justice when their rights are violated. 'We' cannot be safe, if 'they' wallow in misery.

The plight of school education is an excellent illustration of the misplaced priorities of our ruling classes and callous disregard of our society. About 20% of the population, or 200 million children are of school going age (between ages 6 and 14). This is almost double the ratio of population of the same age group in the OECD countries. And yet, public expenditure on education in India as a proportion of GNP is well below the global average. We spend 3.2% of GNP on education.

Despite a large percentage of school-going children, this percentage is lower than Norway(7.7), Sweden(8.), Denmark(8.1), New Zealand(7.3), Israel(7.6), Poland(7.5), Estonia(7.5), Saudi Arabia(7.5), Jamaica(7.5), South Africa(7.6) Moldavia(10.6), Barbados(7.2), Uzbek(7.7), Malaysia(4.9), Ukraine(5.6), Maldives(6.4), Jordan(7.9), Tunisia(7.7), Algeria(5.1), Botswana(8.6), Egypt(4.8), Namibia(9.1). All these countries have higher human development (HDI) ranking than India. Even countries with lower HDI ranking spend more than us on education, and are fast improving. Mongolia(5.7), Zimbabwe(7.1), Ghana(4.2), Lesto(8.4), Kenya(6.5), Congo(6.1),Togo(4.5),Yemen(7), Mauritania(5.1), Cote d'Ivoire(5), Senegal(3.7), Gambia(4.9), Malawi(5.4), Ethiopia(4), Burundi(4), Burkina Faso(3.6) - all outspend us on education

It is not as if the government expenditure in India is low as a proportion of our GDP. Government spends about 28% of the GDP, and education accounts for only 11.6% of that. With an annual public expenditure of Rs 660,000 crores, is it difficult to earmark an additional Rs 10,000 crore for school education?

The net result is poor school infrastructure and high student-teacher ratio. In AP there are 55,000 primary schools, but there are only 136,000 teachers. The average number of teachers is an appalling 2.4 for five classes. There are lakhs of youth with teacher training certificates but unemployed, while the primary schools in AP alone need about 140,000

teachers. Yet 450,000 of the 900,000 government employees are clerks, attenders and drivers! Such skewed priorities are evident in every State. No wonder, enrolment in schools is unsatisfactory, and dropout by 5th grade is about 40% and 60% by 7th grade.

Alarming as is, there is no need to despair. The spectacular advances in school education and literacy in Tamil Nadu in recent years offer a ray of hope. A few strategic interventions like mid-day meals scheme, and other determined efforts ensured a dramatic improvement in a short time. If Tamil Nadu can do it, the rest of India can do it too. All it requires is political will and imagination. Higher investment alone does not guarantee better education. There are other problems – teacher training, their accountability, child-centered education and English as medium of instruction in private schools for non-English speaking children. But low investment in education certainly guarantees illiteracy and low level of skills. We need to revamp the Indian state, and redraw our priorities. It is time we focused attention on the real issues confronting our nation. Therein lies our true national security.

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