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Education as a Human Right: India towards Equity with Quality

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Abstract:
The post-independent India had expected some sort of egalitarian society as one of the important flanks of national struggle, for independence was to give India not only political freedom, but also social, economic and educational freedom as well. Hence, for formation of socialistic pattern of society based on equality, liberty and fraternity, it laid down certain provisions in Constitution of India for the social justice and development of the downtrodden India, as part of national commitment. Following the guidelines of the Constitution several measures were formulated and implemented. Legislation for compulsory primary education (Article 45) has been enacted in most of the states and in union territories. Through 86[th]Constitutional Amendment, compulsory education for children between the age of 6 and 14 has been devised and Sarva Shisksa Abhyan has been launched to implement such programme. For educational development of weaker sections various special schools and hostels were constructed especially for girls. Indian government has mobilized some youths in the form of Siksha Karmi or Anganwadi for rural teaching. However, when we evaluate these programmes of development, the empirical evidences provided by many studies do not support the implementation in letter and spirit by the government. Based on the recommendations in the Dakar Framework for Action and the Convention of the Right of the Child, as well as a number of other national and international conventions and recommendations, it can be concluded that everyone has the right not only to receive education, but also to receive education of a high quality. A quality education system must manage to provide all children and young people with a comprehensive education and with an appropriate preparation for working life, life in society and private life. The present paper advocates that quality education as a basic human right should be made available to all people regardless of race, class, religion and gender.

Keywords: Education, literacy, quality, right to education, student development, teacher role

1. Introduction

Education is not only a key component of human development; it is also a great liberating force. The present one is an age of science and democracy. But can science and democracy be meaningful without placing human beings at the centre of development. A true democracy is one where the basic education is universal and qualitative, where people understand what is good for them and the nation and know-how to govern them. This reiterates the country's renewed commitment for universalisation of elementary education and eradication of adult illiteracy. In India's constitution, there are a number of provisions in favour of the basic education for all the citizens of the country. These constitutions provisions put a responsibility on the country to provide educational facilities for its citizens, particularly for the weaker sections and the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes.

Many educationists in India expressed themselves in favour of a human right status for literacy in the country. The world conference on 'Education for All' in Jomtien, Thailand from 05-09 March, 1990 highlighted the criticality of the basic education requirements as one of the survival needs (UNESCO, 1990). India has come a long way since the Jomtien meeting. The steady progress toward universal elementary education over two decades saw the momentum further strengthened with enactment of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act 2009 which makes it the right of every Indian between 6-14 years of age to gain admission for education to complete 8 years elementary schooling. The heartening facts are universal access for near 200 million children and an equity dividend with gender parity at elementary level education (Little, 2010; Sadgopal, 2010). The case of Education for All (EFA) in the literal sense of word 'all' has become much facilitated with education as a fundamental right. In 2000, ten years after the world conference on EFA, the international community met again at the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal. The forum agreed on the Dakar Framework for Action which re-affirmed their commitment to achieving Education for All by the year 2015, and identified six key measurable education goals which aim to meet the learning needs of all children, youth and adults. In addition, the forum reaffirmed UNESCO's role as the lead organization with the overall responsibility of coordinating other agencies and organizations in the attempts to achieve these goals (UNESCO, 2000, 2015).

The six goals established in The Dakar Framework for Action, Education for All: Meeting Our Collective Commitments are:

- Goal 1: Expand early childhood care and education
- Goal 2: Provide free and compulsory primary education for all
- Goal 3: Promote learning and life skills for young people and adults
- Goal 4: Increase adult literacy by 50 percent

- Goal 5: Achieve gender parity by 2005, gender equality by 2015
- Goal 6: Improve the quality of education

In order to evaluate each country's progress with regards to the EFA's goals set in the Dakar Framework for Action, UNESCO has developed the Education for All Development Index (EDI).

2. Issues and Challenges to Universalisation of Education

India has a long tradition of organised education. As a historian has put it, "There is no other country where the Love of learning has early an origin or has exercised so lasting and powerful an influence". However, educational effort in the country has come a long way from this traditional position in its definition, coverage, as well as impact. The current educational system in the country operates in an altogether different context from the classical past (Aggarwal, 2007). The country's commitment to the provision of education for all and endeavour to achieve this goal in a speedy fashion has to be seen in this complex milieu within which the educational system is currently functioning.

India is a vast country, continental in size. It is a predominantly rural society, despite the existence of few very large urban centres. However, the agro-climatic conditions across the country represent wide diversity, influencing the socio-economic and cultural characteristics of the people. While there are fertile plains and mighty rivers, there are also arid zones barren of any vegetation. While sharing a common heritage, different regions of the country have their own customs, traditions, and other distinguishing sub-cultural features adding immense variety and complexity to the context.

There are wide disparities in the availability of facilities of health, education, communication, entertainment and information between urban and rural areas. While the urban populace is by large vocal and organised, the rural mass is quite unorganised and remains unnoticed. This lack of ability to articulate their needs, grievances and demands highlights the need special to literacy in rural areas.

The tribal communities in India constitute about 8% of the population with more than 400 different tribes spread all over the country. The tribal groups have their own distinct tradition, social organisation, pattern of economic activities, customs, code of conduct and value system. In spite of determined efforts and large number of special programmes with huge financial outlays for their development, a large section of the population continues to remain in a deprived and exploited condition. The educational efforts in the tribal areas appear to be seriously lacking in their relevance to the life style and needs of the people, hindering their participation in the system. It is essential to reorient the education system in such a way that it becomes culturally sensitive which while accelerating the pace of development among them may help strengthen and preserve their distinctive socio-cultural heritage.

India has numerous languages. Many major languages have several dialects which different considerably from the standard language. There are a number of tribal languages with rich folk literature which continue to be maintained through the oral tradition. Of the numerous languages in the country, there are more than 20 officially recognized languages in India. The question of languages is important both from the point of view of universalisation of education and of fair competition in social and economic opportunities. Further, the division of country into states based on linguistic considerations has combined the issue with questions of regional identity and cultural tradition and made it a complex emotional issue. A related issue is that of linguistic minority groups living in different parts of the country who are likely to be at a disadvantage in several ways. These are facts of the Indian society that have to be reckoned with in any process of planning and more so in the field of education.

All the major religions of the world have their followers in India. While the bulk of the people are Hindus, those following Islam, Sikhism, Christianity, Jainism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism and Judaism constitute a large number. India is secular country, it has no official religion. The constitution of the country has unequivocally declared there can be no discrimination on the grounds of religion. The constitution of India also guarantees the right of minorities, whether linguistic or religious, to follow their language, script, and culture and to establish and administer educational institutes for this purpose. While there is no discrimination in admission to educational institutions and in job opportunities, on account of various other socio-economic and historical factors, some religious and linguistic minorities still continue to remain educationally backward(Ramachandran, 2003).

The multi-religious plural society in our country has a further complexity in the shape of a rigid social stratification based on a hierarchical caste system. While discrimination based on caste is publicly denied by all, caste considerations continue to play a dominant role as the scheduled castes and other backward communities continue to be marginal and educationally backward. The social discrimination which these caste groups suffer from, in addition to economic deprivation, presents a more difficult barrier in obtaining benefits of any developmental efforts, including educational opportunities. In some so called "unclean occupations", there are a large number of persons of scheduled castes suffering from discriminations in the urban areas, deserving special attention.

Gender disparity is a signification factor characterising the Indian society. Even though women play a very important role in agriculture, handicraft and many other economic activities, they enjoy an unequal status in the family as well as society. Thus, this situation, combined with numerous complex socio-culture and economic factors have made women the most deprived group as for as literacy is concerned. In spite of different acts and schemes of government to empower the women in the country, they are discriminated and marginalized at every level of the society, whether it is social participation, political participation, economic participation, and access to education. Women in India bear a disproportionately heavy burden of household and family responsibilities. Due to the combination of domestic chores and their role as primary caretakers, women have very little free time to experiment with education (Weingarten, 2013). All this demands a holistic approach to women's education in India. Various aspects of women's lives-health, child care, employment, shelter etc. has to be seen as an integral part of education. Creating a thirst for knowledge and a mechanism to reach out to it half the battle won. Only when the real meaning of education is understood by women, will education become an instrument of liberation, rather than reinforce gender stereotypes. They will become literate in an enduring way if they are allowed to seek education of quality at their own place, own rhythm, and in their own time (Kaur, 2014a).

Most of the groups subjected to social discrimination also suffer from serious economic deprivation. Children of these poor groups join the workforce at a very early age in order to supplement the income of the family. The problem of child labour is of a very large dimension. This is particularly true of the girl child who is required to do a variety of household chores such a looking after younger siblings, fetching water, fuel and fodder. The families below the poverty line and the working children pose a serious challenge to the educational planners as they also have a right to become literate persons. Adults as well as children of poor families are not in a position to make use of the educational opportunities for obvious reasons.

In a vast country like India, considerable variations are bound to exist across different regions in terms of their developmental status. But the actual range of variations observed happens to be too large to be believed. Partly because of differing agro-climatic conditions and partly as a result of differing historical development and experience, there are very sharp regional disparities within the country. If the various indicators of development like roads, irrigational facilities, agricultural production, health, and educational facilities are considered, one come across highly developed pockets in stark contrast to the large expanse of very backward areas. Seen in the context of education, at one end, there are districts like Barmer, Jalori and Jaisalmer in Rajasthan, Gonda, Baharaich and Rampur in Uttar Pardesh, Jhabua, Rajgarh, and Sidhi in Madhya Pardesh, and West Champaran and Saharas in Bihar Where the rate of literacy touches a level below10%. At the other extreme, one has a district like Ernakulum in Kerala where 100% literacy has been achieved (Ramachandran, 2003; Ritimoni, 2011; Kau**r,** 2014b).

The rapid population growth witnessed since the fifties has compounded the complexities of socio-economic and educational planning in the country. It is only by 2050 that a stable population can be visualized. The country is, therefore, faced with the challenge of planning education for all, when the very base is expanding at a fast pace.

In the twenty-first century, we have to ensure that India does not remain a country where people simultaneously live in several centuries - some people tucked away in the hills, deserts and forests who can neither read nor write and have remained unaffected by the progress in science and technology and new gadgets with ease.

3. Education for All: The Force of the Future

Education for all is justified on many considerations. Education leads to creativity, improved participation in the social, economic, cultural and political life of the country. This in turn, leads to more effective contribution to human development. In fact, a minimum amount of education is a pre-requisite not only for the full exercise of the individual's right, but also for understanding and respecting the rights of the others. Literacy in itself is of value for every man and woman. What is even more important that it opens up avenues for further education and only a literate person can do so?

Education provides skills and competencies for economic well being. But more important is that it is an expression of an aspiration and as desire on the part of the world-consciousness to create a universal society of enlightened persons with understanding, fellow feeling, an attitude of cooperation, sharing and helpfulness and such other positive traits (Kaur, 2015). That is, the aim is that all human beings should reach a level of development where the conflicts and the wars that are due to considerations of caste, creed, religion, language, nation, etc., should get replaced by human values and oneness of all persons. Let us cultivate the mind to avoid wars. Quality education is conductive to this and minimum education for all the human beings is the first step in that direction (Spanbauer, 1992; World Bank, 2002).

The World Education Forum, held inDakar (2000), reiterated the commitment of the global community and approved a comprehensive set of goals in the areas of early childhood care in education (ECCE), primary education, gender, youth and adolescent, adult education and quality of education. Following this commitment, India prepared a National Plan of Education (2002) delineating various programmes and strategies for achieving various Education for All (EFA) Goals. Subsequently, the mid- term assessment of progress of EFA goals, undertaken in 2005, underscored the concern for equity and inclusion and highlighted the need for accelerating the efforts for achieving EFA goals. India, undoubtedly, has made substantial progress towards achieving EFA goals during the last two decades. Adoption of Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE), 2009 has given further momentum to the national efforts for ensuring quality education for all in a time- bound manner. India has added its own resolve to understand whether children's achievements are improving over time in an equitable way. Three rounds of National Achievement Surveys (NAS) have been completed for class III, V and VIII levels. In the latest NAS report on class III overall Class III Children were able to answer 64% of language item correctly and 66% of mathematics questions correctly. School infrastructure has climbed up to 1.4 million schools with 7.72 million teachers so that 98% habitations have a primary school (class I-V) within one kilometer and 92% have an upper primary school (class VI-VIII) within three kilometer walking distance. Out of school children and dropout rates have reduced substantially, through not evenly, across all social groups (NUEPA, 2014).

Despite substantial progress towards the goal of Education for All, education sector in India faces several challenges. Some of the issues which need increased attention include: (i) quality-related deficiencies in ECCE programmes; (ii) lower enrolment rates in upper primary and secondary/higher secondary education; (iii) higher drop-out rates in elementary and secondary education, especially among children belonging to socially and economically disadvantaged population groups; (iv) lower level of student attendance rate at primary and upper primary stages of education in some of the educationally backward States; (v) lower level of participation in education of children with special needs; (vi) unsatisfactory level of student learning; (vii) deficiencies relating to teacher quality and teaching-learning process; (viii) difficulty in sustaining the involvement of the volunteer teachers in adult education programmes and in creating sustainable demand for literacy; (ix) inadequate vocational education and training facilities; and (x) shortage of funding for some of the education sector development programmes (NUEPA, 2014).

4. How Teachers Can Improve Quality

UlfFredriksson, Education International (www.ibe.unesco.org) discusses three issues on how can teachers do themselves to improve quality:

4.1. Quality Awareness and self-evaluation

Of general importance for teachers' ability to improve the quality of education is the ability to reflect on their own teaching, critically examine the methods used and looking for alternative ways of teaching. One major way of doing this is to systematically evaluate their teaching and its results.

4.2. Professional Freedom

Professional and academic freedom for teachers is of crucial importance in achieving teaching that is independent of any political, economic, ideological or religious influence, in order to preserve young peoples' right to and democratic exercise of critical creativity. There has to be a general thrust in the creativity of the teacher. How the teaching is done in the classroom should never be prescribed by persons outside the classroom reality. This does not imply that authorities should not suggest new teaching methods through in service training, professional development and other means. For teachers to be given different approaches and models for their teaching is important and necessary, but it must never turn into a process of dictating which methods to use. The Article 61 in the ILO/UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Teachers reads: "The teaching profession should enjoy academic freedom in the discharge of professional duties. Since teachers are particularly qualified to judge the teaching aids and methods most suitable for their pupils, they should be given the essential role in the choice and the adoption of teaching material, the selection of textbooks and the application of teaching methods, within the framework of approved programmes, and with the assistance of the educational authorities" (UNESCO, 1996) .

4.3. Professional Ethics

Teachers meet a large number of children and young persons from different backgrounds. In many educational systems teachers have also been given more and more responsibilities. All these developments underline the questions related to their tasks and duties. Teachers should follow a set of basic rules to follow in order to guarantee certain standards of the teaching-learning profession.

5. Conclusion

Education as a human right is today a compelling goal. If every child is educated and every adult is literate in any nation, it facilitates that nation's development. The basic learning needs comprise both essential tools such as education and essential content such as knowledge, skills, values and attitudes required by human beings to be able to survive, to develop their full capabilities, to live and work with dignity, to improve the quality of their lives, and to continue learning. It is certain that with the rapid technological and social changes, all over the world, previously accepted notions of a relatively fixed body of basic knowledge and skills, which could be acquired during a predetermined duration of schooling or college are yielding place to a new concept of education, namely to earn how to learn. That is why it is now commonly understood that education is lifelong and continuing process. The base of this process is, however, minimum education to be obtained by all children and adults in any country.

In a nutshell, an educated person is always a good person in every sense of the world. This is the ideal. And if this ideal can be achieved, it will result in happy society for everyone. Education for all will make the whole planet a village, where there will be peace, clam and happiness everywhere and for everyone. Education, therefore, not be looked upon as a sectional target to be fulfilled but as a plan for human development up to the highest level. It has a place in its own right and a very important place, indeed.

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