

Why Right to Education Act Alone Cannot Solve the Existing Literacy and Socio Economic Problems in India

Charu Nautiyal

(Principal Dunne's Institute, Admiralty House, Wodehouse Road, Colaba Mumbai 400005, India)

Abstract: In 1947 number of literate Indians stood at a dismal 12%. Education was not a fundamental right of a citizen. Six decades later 30% Indians remain illiterate. Right to Education Act was passed by the Indian Parliament in 2009. A noble intent but difficult to achieve without proper action plan. Existing hurdles include poor infrastructure, lack of motivated teachers, gender disparity and poverty. There is little or no relationship between education and vocational education resulting in ever widening gulf between rich and poor. Prioritize Education and review the policy to adapt to our circumstances. Government must create proper infrastructure. Education at primary level must be holistic and inclusive and evaluation of the student must be comprehensive and not bookish. A nationwide debate including both intellectuals and common people, offering creative suggestions should be encouraged as it can bring us closer to our goal.

Key words: Right to Education Act, socio economic problems, India

1. Introduction

At the time of Independence number of literate Indians stood at a dismal 12%. Needless to say that the policy makers were confronted with the daunting task of educating masses without which progress would remain a pipe dream. Education was not a fundamental right of a citizen, but part of Directive Principles of the State Policy in our Federal Structure. Most Indian States and Union Territories made Primary Education virtually free yet 30% of our population remains illiterate. The state of Kerala has achieved 100% literacy whereas densely populated states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar come up with depressing figures. There is general apathy towards female education though males fare better. The obvious relationship between poverty and illiteracy is too blatant to be ignored.

2. Right to Education Act

In 2009 Indian Parliament passed the Right to Education Act which certainly is a step in the right direction, towards addressing India's gigantic illiteracy dilemma. According to this act:

- (1) Every child between 6–14 years will be educated by the State.
- (2) No child is to be denied education or turned away from School for any reason.
- (3) Children cannot be detained in any class up to fourteen years.
- (4) All schools to have certain minimum essential facilities.

Charu Nautiyal, Principal of Dunne's Institute; research areas: school education (primary and secondary), illiteracy in India, infrastructure woes of government schools, private and public schools in India, school dropouts. E-mail: nautiyalcharu14@rediffmail.com.

(5) Private schools to reserve 25% seats for the poor.

(6) Primary schools to be brought within walking distance of the children's homes.

The noble intent of the government behind this act can hardly be exaggerated. It also wants to reach elementary education to every Indian child particularly those who are very poor. However in practice government fails to explain, how it hopes to achieve this without a concrete action plan in place. Merely giving it a legal statute might not yield the desired result because poor people neither have the resources nor the wherewithal to challenge the violation of their fundamental right.

3. Existing Hurdles in the System

The basic infrastructure for education in India leaves much to be desired. There are very few Government Schools which come up to the required standards. Buildings are not maintained, classrooms are dingy with rickety furniture and washrooms are filthy. Mid day meals are insipid and have little nutritional value. Very few teachers are motivated with desired knowledge and required skills. Teaching is not a lucrative profession since teachers are paid pittance in today's materialistic world.

Gender disparity continues to plague our society due to certain social norms. It is not going to be easy to bring the girl child to school, when her very existence is wished away by some sections of society. In spite of the reservation policy for over six decades, children from Scheduled Castes and Tribes are mostly marginalized. It appears that reservation policy has benefitted only a few families, and their successive generations, thus totally defeating the very purpose of the policy.

Government has banned the practice of child labor. I am certainly not in favor of children working but sometimes poverty compels human beings to compromise on their dignity. Poor children are not coming to school because there is failure on our part to offer any alternative to the wages earned by these children to support their families. Parents see it as a loss of livelihood rather than any gain in educating their children.

Right to education act makes it mandatory for private Schools to admit 25% poor children free of cost. These Schools will be compensated by Government much below the fee charged by them. Private and Christian missionary schools in India have done a reasonably good job and are the preferred choice of the middle classes. They give quality education at a price, without any financial assistance from the State. Lack of financial viability might close down some schools. At this stage when Government is planning to open new schools in the vicinity of residential areas, closing down the existing ones does not help its cause.

Henceforth no student can be detained in a class up to fourteen years. This can also encourage children not learn anything, yet reach the next grade. It should not imply that we are only looking at improving our literacy statistics rather educating our citizens in the real sense. One of our biggest failures so far has been a total disconnect between our education and vocational education.

4. Implications

Each year thousands of young students flock to colleges for higher education aimlessly and finally end up as unemployed graduates. Since there are more aspirants and fewer seats in colleges, the cut off percentage each year is mind boggling. To site an example, this year one of the colleges in Delhi University declared a cut off of 100% raising alarm bells across the entire nation. This leads to unnecessary stress and disillusionment amongst the youth, notwithstanding the fact that entry to these colleges does not ensure employment.

We should have invested more generously in education in the decades gone by. As a result today India is emerging as a country of contrasts. Our millionaires in the Forbes list multiply every year but our poor don't seem to be reducing either. Some live in homes worth millions, millions of do not have homes at all. Many are obese but many more are malnourished. Some children go to best schools; others never get to see a school.

5. Solutions

Our definition of literacy requires review to adapt to our requirements and circumstances. Let right to education act like catalyst to educate each and every child in India. Government cannot accomplish this alone but must take the lead with a steely resolve, and encourage every Indian to participate in Mission Education. However today the greater challenge for us is not only to bring the children to school but to keep them there:

(1) Education must become a national priority. Motivate ordinary citizens to participate in propagation promotion and execution of policies. Let there be a nationwide debate at all levels to overcome the hurdles pertaining to education. It should include Doctors, Teachers, Principals, Scientists Politicians, NGOs Environmentalists to come up with creative suggestions. Any delay would only worsen things because 30% population when changed to figures would mean three hundred millions, four times the population of France.

(2) Education up to Primary level must be kept simple, holistic and all inclusive. Let there be uniform curriculum with a universal aim. It should prepare a child for life.

(3) Education and vocational education must be linked. As the saying goes you give a man fish, you have feed him for a day; you teach him to fish, you feed him for life. Children should be taught life skills.

(4) Government must spend generously on improving the infrastructure of education. Only an attractive school with a good playground will help to bring the children to school. Cash rich sports bodies like Board of Control for Cricket in India can open sports centers for schools to encourage sports.

(5) Open counseling centers within easy reach of schools. As professionals, counselors can also help in convincing parents about importance of educating the girl child besides dealing with other range of psychological issues. In addition girls can be given scholarships and stipends.

(6) Children coming to schools should be given dry rations in form of lentils, rice and flour, which can be carried home. Poor parents will be encouraged to send all their children to school.

(7) Passing every child up to fourteen years can be counter-productive. The purpose of education is not to impart bookish knowledge, but to encourage independent and logical thinking. Evaluation of a student must be comprehensive which must include games and other co-curricular activities.

(8) India is a giant in information technology and hence reaching basic education to every nook and corner should be least of our problems IT companies like Wipro, Infosys, HCL, can lend support in return for tax sops.

(9) Other Corporate houses and businessmen can be encouraged to participate in this mission, partly as social responsibility and partly in form of tax holiday. They can be made to adopt school or schools from village to city levels. It is only imperative that the rich share their wealth in the larger well being of the Nation

(10) The task of local administrative bodies like Gram Panchayats in the rural areas and Municipality in the urban areas must be clearly defined by the government with fixed targets and ensuing accountability. Those Government servants wanting to participate in mission education can be given five year extension with full pay and training. Similar incentives can be offered to elderly citizens retiring from the private sector.

(11) School children after class XII can adopt the project of "each one teach one". Extra marks can be

awarded to every student who undertakes such a project. Students can also spread awareness about education by conducting lively street theatre.

(12) Let print and electronic media voluntarily come forward to spread educational awareness. It can even contribute in distance education programs.

(13) India needs to treat its teachers well and give them the respect and dignity they deserve. Government could create “Indian Teaching Services” on same lines as Indian Administrative Services. Teachers must be paid well to attract the best talent in this line.

(14) Government should foster partnership with private schools and compensate them well. Private Schools will not only accommodate poor children but also impart quality education.

6. Conclusion

India is the second most populous country with a huge pool of human resource. It is also the second largest emerging market with an anticipated growth of 10% in near future. The size and population increases our complexities and hence to look for a single formula for solution would not be very wise. However that also does not give us a reason to be complacent any more. As an educator for last nineteen years and having taught in nine different states, reinforces my belief that we need to work collectively as a nation, to tame the monster of illiteracy. Revolutions are made possible when common people participate. The world does not care about the labor pains until you show the baby. Six decades post independence a large number of our people are still groping in the dark. It pains me when a movie like ‘Slum Dog Millionaire’ gets noticed by the world as I am unable to come to terms with reality. Let us double our collective resolve and invest whole heartedly in education to secure the future of this great Nation.