

## Primary Education in India

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Synopsis: Primary education in India is in a very bad shape and the literacy rate is just 52 per cent and that of women merely 39 per cent. Even after 50 years of independence India has failed to provide universal, free and compulsory primary education to its children. The quality of primary education in the country is the worst because of our ad holism and casual approach to the issue. Then there are problems of dropouts, absenteeism etc. The mid-day meal schemes, giving free uniforms, textbooks stationary and grant of liberal stipends and incentives can solve these problems to a great extent. Illiteracy and poverty are inter-related and a great obstacle in the socio-economic progress of the country. The infrastructure facilities for primary education need to be improved. The teachers should be well-trained and paid and made accountable. The recent decision of the Center to make primary education a fundamental right it welcome step. It was really overdue.

The rate of literacy in India is 52.21 per cent-64.13 for males and 39.29 for females. The gender wise difference is a source of great concern and so are side variations among States. Kerala stands on the top with about 90 per cent literacy rate and Bihar at the bottom with a 38 per cent. India spends merely 3.5 per cent of GDP on education and even less on primary education. And ninety-sever per cent of it is spend towards payment of salaries to the teachers and the staff. Consequently, the primary school infrastructure is in shambles, Most of the children are found engaged in one or another kind of manual labour and not in schools. More than a third of the children going to school dropout before completion of their primary education and another 15-20 per cent do not attend the school regularly.

India's failure to achieve universal literacy even after 50 years of independence cannot be termed but shocking. The Article 45 of the Constitution which is part of the Directive Principles of State Policy, lays down that every child up to the age of 14 years shall receive free and compulsory education. The indirect adverse impact of illiteracy on social and economic growth and development are far-reaching. It impedes the industrial and economic growth and agriculture sufferers the worst. Thus, illiteracy bodes ill for our food security and agricultural growth.

At the present rate of growth of literacy, it would take another 50 years for the country to achieve total literacy. More than 50 per cent of the villages in India still do not have a primary school and there are many schools without chalks,

blackboards, even today, single teacher schools exist in Rajasthan, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Orissa which operate out of a single trunk. This single trunk is the whole school in itself- the playground, the teaching aids and material, the office etc. Thus, paucity of funds available for rural primary education is a great bottleneck in the spread of education and literacy. India spends merely 11.2 per cent of its total public expenditure on education. It is much higher in other Asian countries like Korea (22.4), Thailand (20), Malaysia (19) and China (12.50).

The quality of primary education is still worse. The teachers lack proper motivation, dedication, quality and training. They do not go to schools regularly and punctually. They are often found engaged in running teaching shops or doing some other profitable business in the school hours. This reflects our casual attitude towards such an important issue. The large percentage of dropouts is directly linked with this phenomenon of teacher-absenteeism. There is no accountability, no proper governance and administration. Therefore, it is essential that allocation of funds for primary education is suitably increased. Higher education in India attracts far more allocation than primary education. And it is the students from well off families who ultimately benefit from subsidized university and higher education. It shows not only paucity of funds but also lopsided policy and wrong priorities.

Teachers in primary schools work under bureaucrats who are often corrupt and least bothered about the quality of education and teaching. The remedy lies in transferring all the primary schools to local governments. It would go a long way to increase teachers accountability as has been in the case of West Bengal.

In Tamil Nadu, the mid-day meal scheme has been quite successful. It has ensured regular attendance and decreased the dropout rate considerably. Similarly, the schemes of giving free uniforms, textbooks, stationary etc. and even attendance allowance to those from the weak and poor classes living below the poverty line, have yielded excellent results. These schemes should be implemented in other States as well. Kerala shows the way as how to achieve near total literacy even in the given conditions of low funds and lack of primary school infrastructure. What is needed is the right policy and thrust. Teachers should be given proper training in motivation and teaching-skills and made more accountable. Their pay-packets should also be made attractive. The schools should be provided with blackboards, chalk, teaching materials and buildings. The policies and programmes related to education and economic activities should not be decided in isolation. Literacy is essential for sustained productivity. Illiterate farmers, workers etc. cannot make proper use of

the modern technologies essential for growth and development both in agriculture and industrial sectors. Illiteracy and poverty are the two aspects of the same coin. Remove illiteracy and poverty will be removed automatically. The sooner we realize this fundamental principle, the better.

Recently on 16 May 1997, the union cabinet decided to make elementary education to children in the age group of 6-14 a fundamental right. The Constitution is proposed to be amended for this purpose. The statutory amendment will also make it a fundamental duty of every citizen, who is a parent or a guardian to provide the opportunity of education to children in the age group of 6-14. Government's commitment to make free and compulsory education a fundamental right would go a long way in increasing the rate of literacy in an appreciable manner. The Government has also announced that it will commit 6 per cent of the GDP for education as against the present 3.7 per cent. The number of primary schools had gone up to 5.90 lakh in 1995-96 as against 2.10 lakh in 1990-91. Now, 95 per cent of the rural villages have a primary school within one km and 85 per cent an upper primary within a distance of 3 km.

Children are an asset, and essential and integral part of a national wealth. They are the future parents, leader, scientists, engineers and makers of the history. IN them lies hidden the future course and destiny of a country. If they remain illiterate and un-educated what good can be expected. The children living in villages, amidst nature, possess higher general intelligence than their counterparts in cities and towns. They have a very close contact with nature and so have natural wisdom. Their neglect in respect of education, health and economic is imperative that primary education is made universal and compulsory for children in the age group of 6-14.