

Education as a Tool for Sustainable Development of Remote and Backward Areas

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I. INTRODUCTION

Development-regional or national-can neither be achieved nor sustained unless every citizen of a country is well educated in the real sense and has an access to every kind of information and ability to use this information for his personal growth as well as for the growth of the organization/institution he belongs to. History is replete with instances where only well educated societies were able to achieve significant levels of development and whenever the focus on education started diminishing, the process of development also slowed down.

Since our policy makers at the helm of affairs are fully aware of the importance of education as a tool for ensuring sustainable development of remote and backward areas, there has been a lot of emphasis on extending the benefits of elementary as well as higher education to the remotest and the most backward areas with a specific aim to increase the gross enrollment ratio so that Indian economy could emerge as a knowledge economy, well prepared to face the emerging global, national and local challenges. Since India happens to be one of the youngest nations in the world, the quality of education that we provide to our children will alone be the deciding factor whether our burgeoning population is our best asset or our worst liability. The present paper attempts to examine the functioning of our educational system in remote and inaccessible areas.

The present paper is based on the ground level experience of the authors who are presently working in the Higher Education Department of J & K Govt. in one of the most remote and backward areas, i.e., tehsil Bhalessa and has been written in the backdrop of Bhalessa region, popularly known as “Bhale logon ka des”.

Tehsil Bhalessa is situated between an altitude of six thousand to eight thousand feet from the mean sea level. Approximate population of tehsil Bhalessa is one lakh while literacy rate is 45% - much below the national average of 65%. People of Bhalessa, decent and peace loving as they are; attach a very high significance to education but their desire to provide decent and meaningful education to their wards is constrained by lack of resources and opportunities, with a very few families being able to afford to send their wards to elite schools outside Bhalessa. Female students are particularly at a loss. Setting up of a Govt. Degree College in 2008, which is still functioning from the premises of Govt. Higher Secondary School, Kilhotran, in only four rooms, has given wings to the dreams of local youth. In Bhalessa region, educational institutions are treated like places of worship and teachers are revered like demigods by the students as well as the local citizenry. Even the non-teaching staff is held in high esteem. The authors feel that, with necessary thrust, educational institutions in this area can be developed as centres of excellence which can attract students from all over the Country. The paper also seeks to highlight various problems faced by Govt. institutions located in far flung and remote areas and possible solution to these problems so that the very purpose of setting up academic institutions is optimally served. Listed below are some of the problems and their possible solutions.

II. INFRASTRUCTURE

Infrastructure of academic institutions is a major area of concern and leaves much to be desired. For example take a look at the state of affairs in tehsil Bhalessa. Following is the breakup of educational institutions in this tehsil (all data was collected unofficially because of paucity of time):

Govt. Primary Schools =180
Govt. Middle Schools = 130
Govt. High Schools =40
Govt. Higher Secondary Schools =12
Kasturba Gandhi Bal Vidyalaya =01
Govt. Degree College =01
Total = 364

- Govt. Degree College, Kilhotran (Bhalessa) was established in 2008 under PMRP and since its inception is functioning from the premises of Govt. Higher Secondary School, Kilhotran, in a total of four rooms. In session 2012-13, it had a healthy strength of 383 students. It has a total of 11 higher secondary schools in its catchment area (10 in tehsil Bhalessa and one lies in Kishtwar tehsil). Despite the fact that science subjects are being taught in all the higher secondary schools in its catchment area, the College offers only humanities stream obviously because of non-availability of its own building.
- Out of the 10 higher secondary schools, only three schools have playgrounds worth the name. Even these playgrounds are not big enough for games like cricket. Most of the high schools, middle schools and primary schools do not have playgrounds. In some of the schools, morning assemblies are conducted on the roads or pavements.
- Almost all the schools, except two higher secondary schools are not having any electricity connection. Drinking water connection is also rare and toilets are without water supply.
- Not to talk of middle schools or high schools, even most of the higher secondary schools (except a few) do not have proper labs or libraries/reading rooms. Computer education and INTERNET connectivity, which is available to students studying in cities as a routine matter, are unheard of.
- Most of the higher secondary schools are under-staffed. For instance, the only girls' higher secondary school of tehsil Bhalessa has only two permanent lecturers. Some of the higher secondary schools do not have even a single permanent lecturer and classes are taught by master grade/ general line teachers.
- In primary and middle schools, there are a total of 794 sanctioned posts, out of which 106 are vacant, rest of the posts are partly filled by permanent teachers and partly by ReT teachers.
- Although all the higher secondary schools have toilets, many middle and primary schools do not have this basic facility and wherever they exist, they are in a shabby condition.
- A sizeable number of schools are located in areas which are not connected by roads.
- There are a total of 13 mobile schools in tehsil Bhalessa, most of them are in miserable condition.
- Most of the primary schools function in only two rooms, out of which one is office/staff room/store room and the other one is meant to serve as class room for all five classes simultaneously. Food provided to students under mid-day meal scheme is cooked either in open or in makeshift kitchens under un-hygienic conditions.
- Private schools, with service as slogan and profit as the sole motive, are conspicuous by their near total absence. Even charitable organizations with service to humanity as their motto, have not made their presence felt.

The above facts may portray a dismal picture but there can be no denying the fact that the situation has vastly improved since the times when schools, much fewer in number, used to function without buildings and at the mercy of nature. There has been penetration of schools into even the remotest areas. Since the process of expansion and up-gradation is nearing its saturation point, there is a need to focus on consolidation. Infrastructure of academic institutions, particularly in remote and backward areas, leaves much to be desired and is crying for attention. Of late, there has been a lot of talk about establishing institutions of higher education which are of international standards. But, it is simply not possible to build colleges, universities and research institutes of international standard unless we build schools of international standards. The least that should be done in this regard is outlined as under:

- Minimum standards should be defined for school buildings and playgrounds separately for primary, middle, high and higher secondary schools both for govt. as well as private institutions and these norms should be implemented strictly but in a phased manner so that schools get transformed into attractive places- both for students and teachers.
- A well stocked library along with a spacious and comfortable reading room should be an essential feature of every institution. Likewise, labs are also a necessity for middle, high and higher secondary schools.
- For institutions located in remote and far flung areas, a suitable accommodation for teaching staff within the campus is very essential for optimum utilization of the human resources, i.e., teachers. Teachers residing in such quarters can make themselves available to students even after school hours and holidays and conduct remedial teaching classes.
- Govt. school buildings can always double up as community centres for the local populace, where, after school hours, students, teachers and local citizenry can assemble, exchange ideas and knowledge, inculcate good values in students, play games, relax and enjoy in a congenial atmosphere. Such a measure not only can make schools an attractive place for students and teachers but can also serve a broader social purpose; this may even attract donations. A well stocked school library can also double up as public library.
- Forming clusters of institutions for sharing resources (both human and material), infrastructure, libraries etc., is an idea which is being taken with seriousness. In view of scarce resources, mechanism needs to be

developed to form clusters of academic institutions in remote areas on preferential basis for optimum utilization of available facilities.

- When it comes to education, women across the board and those belonging to backward areas in particular are less privileged as compared to their male counterparts- traditional Indian thinking being the main factor responsible for it. In addition to this, women in remote and backward areas of J & K were particularly hit by the long spell of militancy. Of late, thanks to various initiatives by the state and central Govts., there is greater awareness among the masses about the significance of women's education. But, there can be no denying the fact that more impetus is required for women's education for the overall socio-economic development of the country.

III. TEACHERS AND TEACHING-LEARNING PROCESS

Sometimes back, there were reports in media that only 1% of the candidates who appeared in the Central Teachers Eligibility Test (CTET) could qualify this exam which makes them eligible for appointment as teachers for class I to class VIII in schools affiliated to CBSE. This exam is conducted with a purpose to set national standards and benchmark of teacher quality in the recruitment process and send positive signal to all stakeholders that the Govt. lays special emphasis on teacher quality. This is a sad commentary on the state of affairs of a nation which is an IT giant and aims to become a knowledge economy and was the first nation in the world to establish a university around two thousand years ago. There is no doubt that whenever a few posts of teachers are advertised, candidates in thousands apply for these posts; but this is only a reflection of lack of employment opportunities and is hardly a guarantee for quality in teaching. Bitter truth remains that teachers are a demoralized lot and teaching is one of the least sought after profession- a fact supported by the studies conducted by researchers in social sciences from time to time

At any given time, a large chunk of teaching positions remain vacant even in the most prestigious institutions of our country like IITs and many top ranking universities; so the lot of less privileged schools and colleges can be very well imagined. Teachers at all levels are always looking for greener pastures and leave this job at the first available opportunity- a decision they rarely have to regret as there are better working conditions, promotion avenues, perks and frills in other jobs and those who are left behind live with a sense of failure. A general line teacher at present draws a starting salary of around 20,000/- pm which is by no means sufficient if one has to feed a family, provide decent education to children, build a house, look after ones parents and discharge social responsibilities. Although, teaching is still an attractive profession among women, but posting in far flung areas adversely affects their working- burdened as they are with family responsibilities. It would be pertinent to mention here that UGC pay scales along with time bound placement in higher grades curbed the exodus of college and university teachers to a great extent. Similar measures need to be taken in favour of school teachers/lecturers. At present, teacher welfare schemes are completely non-existent. The following steps are suggested to make teaching profession more lucrative:

- Time scale promotion to higher grades
- A transparent and just transfer policy
- Adequate provisions for higher studies
- Higher age of superannuation as compared to the other departments as a morale boosting measure
- Housing colonies for teachers
- Housing loan on easy terms
- Isolation of academic institutions from unnecessary external interference
- Very remote and backward areas be considered non-family stations and a decent accommodation, free of cost, without deduction of HRA, be provided to teachers who are posted in these areas.
 - Providing good working conditions and ambience within the institution like comfortable cubicles, canteen, INTERNET facility, attendant, etc.
- Posting of the spouse at the nearest possible station, if working in the same department
- Amount of CA which at present is inadequate, should be enhanced substantially so that posting in a remote areas becomes lucrative
- Higher weightage to the period spent in the backward areas for the purpose of next promotion
- The possibility of making some of the posts non-transferable should be explored
- Experience and wisdom of the retired teachers should be optimally utilized by formulating a re-employment policy

IV. NEED FOR INTROSPECTION

Nations aspiring to be on the top of the world map cannot afford to compromise on the quality of education. Development of the nations is linked to the quality and holistic education being imparted to the students, particularly belonging to the socially backward and marginalized sections of the society. The hapless parents belonging to poor socio-economic background living in rural areas as well as urban slums are left with

no choice other than ill- equipped government schools. Unfortunately, in the recent past, results declared by the J&K Board of School Education are the testimony of the fact that few students from government schools could find a place in the merit list. Here lies a paradox. Government schools have the highly qualified teachers as compared to that of the private school but results shown by the private schools are much better than that of the government managed schools. One of the reasons for widening gap between rich and the poor in our society is the difference between the standard of education in private and government schools. Some of the top ranking private schools have better infrastructure in the shape of modern high-tech classrooms, upgraded science and computer labs, scientific equipment, Edu-comp, smart classrooms, and all other modern gadgets for imparting good education to the students. And then there are Government schools with highly qualified teachers, duly selected by SSRB by following well defined selection criteria. These teachers are being paid as per 6th Pay Commission norms. There is no reason as to why they should not have shown good results.

Teachers have their own arguments to explain the reasons for not being able to perform. Teachers of government schools rue that the deplorable condition of govt. school buildings, lack of student-friendly classrooms, labs, equipments, lack of supporting grants, lack of parental care etc. are some of the reasons for poor performance of these schools. Moreover, most of the students in the rural areas are the first- generation learners. Proper teaching-learning process is possible only when teachers and parents come together. It has been seen that the students studying in private schools in urban areas also take extra classes at coaching centers or by engaging individual teachers. For financial reasons or otherwise, this facility is a rare privilege for the students studying in govt. schools, particularly located in remote areas. There are many children belonging to the socially and economically backward sections of the society with potential to excel in any field but, for want of opportunity and good schooling, they are not able to prove themselves since such children are caught in a vicious circle of poverty. Hence, the gap between the rich and poor widens.

We need to motivate teachers to impart quality education in the government schools. Special motivational campaigns can be launched through specially designed modules under the expert guidance of State Institute of Education/District Institutes of Education. Commitment of the teachers is of paramount importance. Up-gradation of infrastructure will take time. Good teachers will always find ways to deliver education with utmost dedication and commitment with whatever type of infrastructure is available. At times, it becomes a lame excuse that adequate infrastructure is a hurdle in imparting quality education in the government schools. A teacher can perform and show results despite poor infrastructure available in the govt. schools. It is better to perform than to wait for state-of-the-art infrastructure to be made available in the govt. schools.

Teachers also need to be made accountable. Till date, there is no objective mechanism in place to make teachers of the govt. schools accountable. The Department of School Education and Department of Higher Education need to sit together to devise a formal mechanism to make teachers accountable. Some of the good schools in the private sector are already observing different methods to fix the responsibility of the teachers. A few govt. school teachers are doing remarkable job and their contribution is praiseworthy. Some of the good schools and good teachers need to be identified and awarded by holding special events. There must be special incentives and promotional avenues for good teachers. Bad performers also need to be identified and given sufficient time to mend their ways by way of holding special motivational therapy. Punishment to a bad performer in teaching profession is not going to make him/her an ideal teacher. So, motivation is the only mantra to make him/her to actualize the spirit of a good teacher. There are many other challenges being faced by a teacher. Come what may, a teacher has to assert and stand on his/her feet to meet all kind of challenges and keep on guiding the students, particularly those belonging to the lesser privileged sections of society.

V. RESOURCES

Raising the quality and standard of education is not possible unless there are substantial financial inputs. At present, Govt. of India spends only around 3 % of its GDP on education, whereas most of the developed as well as developing countries spend a higher percentage of their GDP on education. For example, USA and Canada, where literacy level is much higher and education is largely privatized, this spending is 6.05 % and 5.2% of GDP respectively. The need of the hour is to replace populism with rationalism as there is no such thing as free lunch. Various mechanisms should be devised to raise adequate financial resources for educational institutions. One of the possible ways to raise financial resources can be to levy the fee selectively. For example, if a student has studied in a private academy up to a certain level and shifts to a govt. school/college for the next class, he/she should pay at least the same fee to the govt. institution that was being paid to the private academy. A substantial amount can be collected in this way which can be used to develop infrastructure in govt. institutions. Govt. should also consider attractive tax exemptions on donations given to govt. institutions as well as educational infrastructure bonds.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

The paper is concluded with the opinion that to ensure balanced and overall development of remote and inaccessible areas, a lot of thrust is needed to improve the condition of educational institutions in these areas- infrastructure being the main priority. Area specific studies should be conducted to identify the loopholes and ways and means to plug them. The expansion process should not be haphazard but instead undertaken after giving due consideration to various factors like feasibility, road connectivity, feeding schools, topography, availability of suitable land, etc. The genuine concerns of teachers and parents should be addressed and a host of welfare measures for the teachers should be put in place so that teaching becomes first career choice of India's youth. It would not be out of place to mention that many of the present day prestigious boarding schools were established in what were then remote areas- far from the madding crowds.

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