

Skill Development through Non-Formal Education: An Imperative for National Development in India

Banhi Jha¹, Dr. Vandana Goswami², Dr. Ajay Surana³

¹Research Scholar, Banasthali University, India

^{2,3}Faculty of Education, Banasthali University, India

Abstract: *There is growing consensus among scholars that non-formal education offers a solution to the deficiencies of formal education and contributes to the developmental needs of developing countries. The growth in numbers and range of non-formal educational initiatives post-2000 is creating an upsurge in adult education and lifelong learning across the world. In India, the ambit of new initiatives in non-formal education is being increased to include larger numbers of disadvantaged and excluded groups to address the social and gender imbalance. While this paper maintains a global orientation, the focus is on the conditions and problems of non-formal education in India and its significance in the context of skill development and employability. It aims to contribute to the development of theoretical insights on increasing regarding employability opportunities through skill development.*

Keywords: *Employability, India, Non-formal education, Skill development.*

I. Introduction

The need for skill development is being emphasized with renewed vigour in recent times by government policy makers based on the embedded rationale that an educated and appropriately skilled workforce is instrumental in increasing national productivity. In 2014 the Prime Minister of India has emphasized the imperative of achieving the goal of skilling 150 million people by 2022 to achieve the vision of making India the 'skills capital of the world'. Recent government initiatives in India strongly underscore the need for skill development also referred to as 'skilling', at different educational levels as a strategy for employment-generation for the nation's human capital.

India's 1.21 billion people have a median age of 32 which is ten years lower than most other nations in the world. As the largest contributor to the global workforce, the age of its working population surpasses 950 million. This unique demographic advantage has contributed to India emerging as the world's third largest economy. The Report by CRISIL Centre for Economic Research 2010 points out the demographic advantage of India as a young nation over the next few decades as compared to the rapidly ageing population of China due to the latter's one-child policy. According to the United Nations report 2008 on World Population Prospects, India's population is likely to increase at the rate of 1% per year to 1.48 billion by 2030 making it the most populous in the world. The proportion of the working age population in India between 14 and 59 years is likely to increase from approximately 58% in 2001 to more than 67% by 2021. While a young population is India's demographic dividend, this advantage optimized only if the people are healthy, educated and adequately skilled for employability. This requires a greater emphasis on skills-related vocational education leading to employment as the key to the transformation of the country.

II. Need For Non-Formal Education

One way of imparting skill-training to the disadvantaged population segment is through non-formal education. This form of education emerged as a global imperative particularly in the second half of 20th century as a result of general economic, political and social developments. Emerging from the widespread thinking on the challenges of education articulated by Ivan Illich (1973) [1] the need for a new approach to education not only in developing countries but also in the developed societies has been re-iterated by Bowles and Gintis (1976) [2]. This has contributed to the felt need for planning and policymaking in education in developing countries primarily through non-formal education. In the post-Jomtien era, the need for attention to non-formal education by governments and departments of education has been pointed out by academicians who have emphasized the need to reassess diverse educational areas by providing suitable policy and financial support. In the light of the resolutions of the Dakar Conference in 2000, the growth in numbers and range of non-formal educational initiatives beyond the purview of formal education is creating an upsurge in adult education and lifelong learning across the world. The majority in developing countries is often deprived of basic facilities and services such as literacy, numeracy, health education, and community improvement. The objective of strategic intervention for poverty alleviation leads to the varied manifestations of non-formal education across countries.

Non-formal education refers to a sequential structure of learning experience, which take places outside the formal system but is generally part of some other organization or programme. It is difficult for formal educational systems alone to respond to the societal challenges and therefore needs reinforcement by non-formal educational practices. There is increasing agreement among scholars that non-formal education offers a solution to the deficiencies of formal education and contributes to the varied needs of developing countries. Coombs and Ahmed (1974) [3] argue that while formal education is a highly institutionalized, chronologically graded and hierarchically structured 'education system', spanning lower primary school to the upper reaches of the university, non-formal education comprising educational activities outside the framework of the formal system provides selected types of learning to particular subgroups in the population of adults as well as children. Khawaja and Brennan (1990) [4] opine that the failure of the formal education system to fulfill its prescribed role of addressing the needs of the disadvantaged has been instrumental in the evolution of non-formal education as an alternative form of education. It is also differentiated from informal education, or rather 'informal learning', as a lifelong process wherein individuals acquire experiences, knowledge, skills, attitudes and insights from daily experiences and exposure to the environment. Thus, non-formal education is a systematically organized learning and training that occurs outside of the formal system. However, formal and non-formal education should be seen as collaborative elements, not antagonistic competitors.

The four characteristics of non-formal education are its concern with specific target groups, the focus on clearly defined purposes specific to its objectives, needs of disadvantaged groups, and organizational and methodological flexibility. It provides a unique opportunity for the disadvantaged due to its low costs and its nature of adaptability with the needs and requirements of its target groups. The choice of courses and the curriculum in non-formal education has a 'bottom-up' approach with the needs of learners as the core purpose and to empower them to understand the surrounding environment. The need for non-formal education arises from the need to provide fundamental literacy and employability-based skills within the limitations of financial resources. The methods followed by non-formal education are mainly the learner-oriented and based on dialogue between learner and instructor.

III. Non-Formal Education In India

The understanding of the need and genesis of non-formal education in India is inextricably associated with the socio-economically rooted problems of those sharing multiple handicaps of economic deprivation and marginalization. It hinges on the underlying twin issues of urbanization and unemployment. Two factors are considered to be primarily responsible for urbanization. The first is the rapid industrial development in and around metros and cities. The second reason is the large scale migration from rural to urban areas for employment attributed to poor employment in villages due to underdevelopment and dwindling livelihood options. Cities appear to hold a promise of employment and opportunities of socio-economic mobility. The combined effect of the two factors has encouraged migration to cities and thereby increased the urban population resulting in critical socio-economic problems particularly for first generation migrants and deprived communities. Similar conditions affect people at the periphery of cities who are employed in the neighbouring urban areas. The precipitation of rural to urban migration increases the quantum of a large transient group of workers along with micro-traders in the informal sector of the urban economy which provides cheap labour primarily for manual labour. This group of workers and their families can benefit from non-formal education. by developing and upgrading their employable skills and thus increasing their capability for income generation.

While non-formal education can be imparted to minors as well as grown-ups, in the post-Independence period in India, it has been closely associated with adult education. Adult education itself has been interpreted and envisaged in different ways ranging from citizen training to its redefinition as an alternative to formal education with a three-pronged objective:

- i. To focus on the target segment of young adults in the 15-25 year age group belonging to the underprivileged social segment
- ii. To link formal education and non-formal education for optimal utilization of available resources
- iii. To focus on inculcating functional skills as an imperative for development

With the felt need of added impetus on occupational training beyond functional literacy, the National Literacy Mission launched in 1988, gave a fillip to adult education programmes which led to the emergence of the concept of developmental literacy. Aiming at higher participation of the disadvantaged and underprivileged, adult education programmes created awareness about development schemes of the government. This included components of self-reliance in basic literacy and numeracy, social awareness, acquisition of relevant skills and imbibing the values of national integration, conservation of environment. The inclusion of gender equity underscored the need for empowerment for women. The imperative of strengthening the economy necessitated that functional literacy and lifelong learning is included in its ambit. With the underlying idea that eradication of illiteracy alone may not be the panacea to poverty eradication, the focus of the government is increasingly on their vocational education and skill training needs. The target of the Eleventh Five-year plan was

to achieve 80% literacy rate, to inculcate general awareness about conscious attitudinal responses to balance gender disparity by reducing the gender gap in literacy to 10% and to reduce regional and social disparities through polyvalent education. This contributes to the continued focus of India's adult and lifelong learning programmes on adult basic literacy and continuing education which, in turn, generates the need for trained manpower.

The relevance of non-formal adult education is increasingly relevant to address long standing problems in mass illiteracy and creating social awareness. The World Bank Report (2000) states that imperative of education and learning for societal development in India is similar to international concerns in light of the fact that almost half of the world's population lives in abject poverty. Empowerment and socio-economic transformation of the disadvantaged is crucial for national development. The lack of empowerment includes both 'returns scarcity' which refers to the deficiency in level of financial returns and 'capacity scarcity' which refers to the paucity of opportunity to utilize one's capacity. It is through basic literacy and skills that an increase in efficiency, employability and entrepreneurial abilities can be achieved to overcome aspirational barriers. Amartya Sen (1999) [5] interprets development as removal of unfreedoms which are obstacles to freedom and trade barriers, in terms of 'capability deprivation' and underscores the imperative of development of capabilities for poverty-alleviation, social development as well as well-being of the individual (Sen 1999). To overcome capability deprivation requires measures designed to ameliorate financial situation to enable such people to break away from the illiteracy-poverty mire. In India, the ambit of new initiatives in non-formal education is being increased to include larger numbers of disadvantaged and excluded groups to address the social and gender imbalance. This places the importance of catering to the educational needs of these groups through a well-planned, systematic strategy through institutional arrangements.

IV. Skill Development And Employability

A focused approach towards skill development is instrumental not only in improving employability but also in creating sustainable enterprises for economic growth of the nation. Planning for skill development needs to synergize the supply of trained workers according to the mutating dynamics of employment. One such challenge is to determine the appropriate balance of technical skills and employable skills for the workplace. The definition of employability is complicated by the coexistence of different perceptions of what it means to be employable. Employability is the career potential defined as 'the continuous fulfilling, acquiring or creating of work through the optimal use of competencies (Heijde and Heijden 2006) [6]. Basic skills enhance workers' abilities to learn new information and techniques and make the future workforce more adaptable to change (Herr & Johnson, 1989) [7]. In response to the changes of necessary workplace skills, non-formal educational programs have to identify knowledge and skill levels needed in the future workforce. While deficiencies in basic workplace skills are not a new problem, their growing numbers poses a challenge, emerging from a volatile mix of demographic, economic, and technical forces. In this context, non-formal education incorporating functional literacy and skill-training in vocational courses is envisioned as a mechanism to reduce the vulnerability of this social segment by creating opportunities of employability to overcome factors that act as barriers to meeting their aspirations and thus empowering them.

The gap between the requirements of the industry and the availability of skilled manpower is highlighted the disjunction between skill-availability at the operational level and the need for strengthening the curriculum and infrastructure of vocational training institutes like Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs), Apparel Training and Development Corporation (ATDC) and polytechnics in India, it underscores the need to impart specialized training programmes for the unskilled and semi-skilled workers. The shortfall in the target achievement of Eleventh Five-year Plan has necessitated greater impetus on skill building in the Twelfth Plan Approach Paper as a way to improve worker-effectiveness and to boost economic growth and social empowerment. There has been a concerted impetus of the government and policy-makers on incorporating skill-development with education in order to synergize the need for generating employment opportunities to the youth and fill the competency requirement of the industry. Employability involves the creation of linkages between education and employer. Formal knowledge may not be the most important attribute sought by all employers for employment at different levels. Employers are interested in recruitment of not only educated and professionally trained graduates but also of workers at lower levels for skill-based tasks. It therefore becomes necessary to create an integrated education system which can enable the production of a critical mass of skilled manpower at an accelerated pace. With increasing numbers and diversity of industries there is a corresponding need for non-formal adult education and skill training suitable for employability. This implies that forging backward and forward linkages between the industry/employers and education/employees, whether at the higher levels of the organization or the lowest, are mutually beneficial.

The National Literacy Mission Authority policy manifesto focusses on the need to integrate literacy with vocational training and innovative income-generating programmes with the assistance of NGOs, State Resource Centres, Jan Shikshan Sansthan and other local bodies. The Saakshar Bharat Scheme launched in 2009

by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India states that Jan Shikshan Sansthan, set up under the scheme of assistance to voluntary agencies for Adult Education and Skill Development has been institutionally networked with adult education centres and other district implementation agencies for furtherance of its objective to equip non-literates and neo-literates with vocational skills to improve their living and earning conditions. The 2012 report of National Skill Development Corporation highlights its mandate to 'enhance, support and coordinate private sector initiatives for skill development' targeting school drop-outs and workers. The objective is that India's demographic advantage of the world's youngest workforce of 63.8 million people needs to be optimally leveraged to enhance productivity and employability, since the shortcomings of the nation's skill development are critical constraints to rapid industrial growth. NSDC meets 30% of the overall national target of skilling 500 million. The National Skill Qualification Framework launched in 2013 is a quality assurance framework system to organize qualifications in levels of knowledge, skills and aptitude. The emphasis is on learning outcomes which are imperative for learners regardless of whether they are acquired through formal, informal or non-formal learning. It is anchored by National Skill Development Agency (NSDA), an autonomous body which will coordinate and harmonize the skill development efforts of the Government and private sector to achieve the skilling targets of the Twelfth Five Year Plan.

Polyvalent or multi-dimensional education is arguably as important as specialized skills for the urban unorganized workers in order to provide wider employment opportunities. The polyvalent approach aims to provide knowledge and impart skills in an integrated manner, based on the underlying idea that the needs of workers require specifically tailored programmes relating employable skills with functional literacy. This is based on the basic premise that a worker should have access to education and training programmes which should be varied and flexible in duration, content and form throughout his/her life without any terminal point. Such education experiences should therefore be functional, integrated and designed to meet each individual's specific needs and expected learning outcomes, develop self-reliance and the ability to generate additional income for improvement in the overall quality of life. It is the combination of literacy and skill-based inputs that make polyvalent adult education centre different from other formal adult educational institutions.

Jan Shikshan Sansthan (JSS), a Scheme of People's Education is an example of a polyvalent institute in the non-formal education sector under the aegis of Directorate of Adult Education, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India. Started as the Scheme of Shramik Vidyapeeth launched in Worli, Mumbai in 1967 and renamed as Jan Shikshan Sansthan in 2000, currently there are 271 sanctioned JSS across 28 states and Union territories in India in 2013 out of which 252 are functioning JSS. The threefold-objective is to provide employment-based non-formal education to target groups, to provide polyvalent education linking literacy with vocational skill training, and to facilitate services to other similar organizations. It identifies mandated target groups through socio-economic profiling, enrolls learners from disadvantaged backgrounds on need-basis with the aim to benefit those who have fewer opportunities as compared to their peers, or have personal difficulties that limit or prevent their inclusion within the formal education system. This includes socio-economically backward and educationally disadvantaged groups of rural and urban youth in the 15-35 years age bracket, the employed and unemployed, illiterates, non-literates and those with rudimentary education, Schedule Castes, Schedule Tribes with 65-70 percent comprising females. While there are several institutes which offer non-formal education and skill training programmes for those with formal education, the uniqueness of JSS emerges from the fact that it is the only institute which provides knowledge and skill training in vocational areas without insistence on prior qualifications.

V. Conclusion

The tangible outcome in terms of heightened employability and socio-economic benefits is increasingly drawing the attention of analysts and policymakers. The value of learning requires closer cooperation between formal and non-formal education sectors and institutional/ organizational partners. The fast pace of change in the contemporary workplace environment continuously challenges the advancement of educational programmes. The convergence of industry, individuals and educational institutions as stakeholders is necessary for harnessing human resource for socio-economic empowerment since it is difficult for any single agency to comprehensively cover the gamut of activities if it works in isolation. The skill development community must squarely address the question of financial affordability as well as physical accessibility.

The industry needs to enable changes at the level of the education system through curriculum reform, technology adoption and policy adoption. The effectiveness of imparting skill training in employment-oriented courses to the target population segment on a nation-wide scale hinges on a multi-pronged participatory approach by the government, non-government agencies, and institutes of higher education to support the efforts of non-formal educational organizations. It is their integrated efforts that can successfully address the challenge of integrating the aspirations of the disadvantaged with national growth and play a pivotal role in increasing employability.

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