ABSTRACT

All over the world education is one of the most significant means for the empowering any individual or community. In a democratic welfare state like India, education is not only a means to an end but an end in itself. Among all levels and dimensions of education - elementary, secondary, higher, technical, vocational, professional, the elementary level of education happens to be the first step of education, the foundation stone or the real base of all attainments of a society. However, even after more than six decades of economic planning and the end of eleven Five Year Plans, the elementary education sector in India is still besieged with many issues of serious concern. Quality which is one of the most deserted issues since long. Time is to focus on quality instead of quantity only as it has already been pointed out that quality indirectly helps in making the quantity. If there is a quality education in the schools, there is no need of other support systems. Many issues are there which are directly or indirectly related to quality issue. In order to overcome the serious challenges before elementary education in India, the need of the hour is to apply determined and sustained effort for a wide and equitable network of elementary education so that most educational issues should be eradicated relating to elementary education in general and quality education in particular without any further delay.

Keywords: Quality Education, Elementary Education, Quantitative Education

INTRODUCTION

In a democratic welfare state like India, education is not only a means to an end but an end in itself. It is one of the most important determinants or constituent components of economic development and social welfare. On the one hand it endows the country with a strong base of human capital for economic development and on the other it enables people to ensure all round development of their individual selves leading to fuller and more meaning full lives. “Education not only brings about a change in an individual’s and even community’s collective perceptions, aspirations and goals but also enhances capabilities to achieve them. Not only this, even it is a powerful tool for reducing poverty, unemployment and inequality, improving health and nutrition and promoting sustained human development led growth” (World Bank 2004). Educated people play a crucial role in effecting a development oriented demographic, social and political transition of the economies of their countries. There is a strong correlation between lack of literacy (education) and poverty, both in economic sense and in the broader sense of deprivation of capabilities (UNESCO, 2006). Education has an impact on all types of human development outcomes (Mehrotra and Delmonica, 2007) which is accompanied by the increase in the well-being of the individuals and economic growth of the country. This has been proved by the inferences drawn from different survey studies.

Importance of Elementary Education for Individual and Social Development

In India's literacy rate stood at 74% and it was well behind those of other developing counties in the region such as that of China and of Sri Lanka which stood at 95% and 91.2% respectively in the same year (Wikipedia, 2013). The Human Development Index (HDI) which is presented and used by the
United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to measure the overall state of human and social development in a country in its annual Human Development Report, is based on three crucial indicators (i) purchasing power parity adjusted per capita income (ii) life expectancy at birth and (iii) adult literacy rate. According to the Human Development Report 2012, India secured a low rank of 136 on HDI while many other developing countries like Cuba, Mexico, Malaysia, Brazil, China and Sri Lanka which are almost at a similar or even lower level of economic development as compared to India occupied much higher HDI ranks of 59, 61, 65, 85, 101 and 92 respectively. India’s low literacy rate, as compared to other comparable economies, is also a major factor behind India’s low HDI rank (UNDP, 2013).

India’s education system is the world’s largest education system. Expansion of elementary educational facilities may be deemed to be one of the first positive steps, first essential prerequisites towards providing a durable base for a participative process of socio-economic transformation to ensure social equity in a country. However, eminent sociologist Andre Beteille feels quite certain that ‘even after elementary education has become universal, inequalities will remain in the quality of what is available to children from the different strata of society. Even at the level of elementary education, universality does not mean equality’ (Beteille, A. 2001).

Micro-evidence on the returns to education consistently finds positive returns to primary education in developing countries ranging from 7 to 10% per extra year of schooling (Duflo 2001; Duraisamy 2002). Elementary education or basic education (Class I-VIII), of which primary education (Class I-V) is the initial part, forms the foundation on which the entire edifice of education is erected. Therefore, in the Indian context the term elementary education, generally means the first eight years of schooling which corresponds to the constitutional goal of free and compulsory universal elementary education until the age of 14, and is divided in most of the States into two parts i.e. primary stage (Class I-V) and upper primary stage (Class VI-VIII).

Constitutional Provisions

Realising the importance of elementary education for the overall socio-economic development of the country, the founding fathers of Indian nation, initially included the objective of free and compulsory elementary education for the children as one of the Directive Principles of the State Policy in Indian Constitution, in Part IV under Article 45. The purpose was to provide the right to free and compulsory education as the non-justifiable, socio-economic right of individuals, the progressive fulfilment of which depended upon the gradual accumulation of the economic capacity and resources at the command of the state. However the watershed came in the form of the strengthening this right further by a historical judgement of Hon’ble Supreme Court of India in 2009. The judgement pronounced right of child to free and compulsory education as a part of the Fundamental Right to Life under Article 21A of Indian Constitution and as a consequence of this judgement the Parliament of India enacted the Right to Education Act (RTE Act), 2009 which guarantees the right to free and compulsory education as the justifiable, Fundamental Right of every child aged 6-14 years in India.

Issues of Quality Concern for Elementary Education

The National Knowledge Commission (2007) has been emphasizing on ‘quality primary education’ for making India as a knowledge society in the world. The quality of education mainly depends upon physical infrastructure, qualified and competent teachers, curriculum and instructional materials, support materials and equipments, teaching learning strategies, comprehensive and continuous evaluation and effective management. Quality in education includes a concern for quality of life in all its dimensions. In general terms quality education means, “improving the quality of education invariably” means raising the levels of academic performance usually measured in the test scores in the various subjects which form the part of school curriculum. With reference to education quality is a relative term and hard to define and even more difficult to measure. Even after more than six decades of economic planning and the end of eleven Five Year Plans, the elementary education sector in India
is still besieged with many issues of serious concern. However, one need to look into the serious issues which are directly or indirectly related to quality education in elementary schools.

**Quality Issue**

Quality issue is the most burning problem now a day in schools in India. The elementary education system in India is infamous for very poor levels of learning outcomes among Indian students. Nationally, the proportion of all children in Std. V who can read a Std. II level text remains virtually the same since 2012 at 47%. This proportion decreased each year from 2009 to 2012, dropping from 52.8% in 2009 to 46.9% in 2012. Among Class V children enrolled in government schools, the percentage of children able to read Class II level text decreased from 50.3% (2009) to 43.8% (2011) to 41.1% (ASER, 2013). In terms of Mathematical abilities, 46.5 per cent of Class V children could not solve simple two digit subtraction problem with borrowing in 2012. In a recent organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development- Programme for International Student Assessment (OECD-PISA) study, India has been placed at the tail end in international comparisons rating (PISA-2009+). ASER data suggest that not only are the levels of learning low, but that the trends in learning levels are in fact negative. Since basic reading and arithmetic are foundational skills, the low levels of learning suggested by the ASER data are especially alarming since they suggest that the Indian education system is doing well at enrolling children in school, but failing when it comes to teaching them even basic skills (Pratham, 2012).

**High Dropout Rate**

Many more problems are there which are either interrelated or interconnected. The fact of less-than-full enrolment of children in the age group of 6-14 years in elementary schools is proven by a very high prevalence of out-of-school (OoS) children in 6-14 years age group in India. Their number was estimated to be 8.1 million in 2009. A recent study estimated a total of 3.5 per cent rural children to be out of school in 2011. However, in a few States like Rajasthan and UP, the percentage of OoS girls in the age group of 11–14 years is as high as 8.9 per cent and 9.7 per cent, respectively. More than the issue of less-than-full enrolment and the prevalence of Out-of-School children, it is problem of high dropout rate and low school retention rate at elementary education level, which requires greater attention. The dropout rate at elementary education level in India is abnormally high. The percentage of students who stay in school till Class 5 is 61.2% which is way below the global average of 83.3% and on an average 42.39 per cent children drop out of education stream before completing Class VIII in 2011. In addition to this, SC and ST children are less likely to access their right to 8 years of schooling and their dropout rates are much higher than the national average. The dropout rate for SC children is as high as 51.25 per cent and that for ST children is as high as 57.58 per cent in 2011.

**Demand of Private Schools**

Another issue which is interrelated to quality is demand of private schools. As it is rising day-by-day not only in urban areas but also in rural areas. Despite gradual improvement in the school infrastructure facilities, teacher-pupil ratio, provision of free education, scholarship and other
incentives like mid-day meals, school dress, school books in government schools, the demand for government school education at elementary level is not increasing as intended. Private school enrolments at elementary level have been rising year after year since from 18.7 per cent in 2006, 25.6 percent in 2011, 29% in 2013 and 30% in 2014.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Private School Enrollment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>18.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>25.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ASER, 2014

It is a very serious issue that more than 45 percent of children in rural India are enrolling themselves in private schools (ASER, 2013). Quality is the basic issue regarding this shift. Irony of the system is the students of private schools are coming for private tuitions to those teachers who are employed in government schools and even they teach them more seriously and feel accountable towards their parents. Close to 25 per cent of students in Std. I-VIII in rural India pay to tuition classes (ASER, 2013).

**Daily School Attendance Rate**

Not only this, the daily school attendance rate among students of elementary schools is also less than desirable and a large number of students who are already enrolled, do not attend the school on regular basis. Some of them attend the classes only when it is a time for distribution of any government incentive. Despite the enhancement of government incentives and gradual improvement in school infrastructure in recent years, children’s school attendance rate has not shown any marked improvement and has largely remained stable at 73.4 per cent in 2007, 70.9 per cent in 2011, 73.1 per cent in 2012 and 71.8 per cent in 2013, in rural primary schools in India (ASER, various years). In India, all studies on measurement of school attendance rate, including ASER, 2013 have noted huge variations in school attendance across Indian States; ranging from 90 per cent on a random day in schools in south India to close to 50 per cent in schools in some northern States. (ASER, 2013).

**Problem of Infrastructure**

The problem of infrastructure also needs immediate attention. There are many schools where facilities such as boundary wall, building, toilets, drinking water, electricity and teaching-learning equipments are lacking. The Eleventh Five Year Plan underlined that backlog of additional classrooms was about 6.87 lakh and opening of about 20 thousand new schools was required. The retention of girls in school remains difficult as over 63 per cent of rural schools have no usable toilet facilities for them. Lack of adequate classroom facilities compels the children from different age groups to sit in same classroom and taught by the same teacher at a time i.e. teaching the students of classes I, II and III together in the same room which leads teaching boredom, disinteresting and monotonous for them. According to the data of Twelfth Five Year Plan during the year 2010-01, a significant percentage of schools suffered from the lack of basic infrastructure facilities, as is described below:
Table 1. Primary Schools without Basic Facilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facilities</th>
<th>Schools without facilities (2010-2011)</th>
<th>Schools without facilities (2013-14)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Toilets(girls)</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drinking Water</td>
<td>15.2%</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Twelfth Five Year Plan: 2012-17, Volume III

Paucity of Required Number of Teachers

The problem of paucity of required number of teachers is another problem of primary/elementary education. Teachers are the most important resource for elementary education, especially in rural areas where access to other type of teaching learning materials is limited. Teacher’s role is very important in imparting quality education and brings about a qualitative change in the learning environment. One can say that shortage of teachers is giving the way to quality issue. The proportion of schools that comply with RTE pupil-teacher ratio (PTR) norms are only 45.3% in 2013 (ASER, 2013). Although there has been improvement in this direction due to the appointment of additional teachers as Para teachers in ShikshaKarmi Project launched in 1987, yet there are many schools that are being run by a single teacher and large numbers of teacher’s vacancies are yet to be filled in many schools in many states. 38.9 per cent schools still facing the problem of pupil-teacher ratio at all India level (ASER, 2011).

CONCLUSION

Elementary education acquires immense significance for its role in social reconstruction since it is a prominent means for a child to start learning the skill of evaluating social traditions and values, adopt the healthy ones and discard those known as social evils. Thus elementary education preserves a nation’s cultural traditions and hands them over to the next generation. It imbibes the spirit of patriotism, builds national characters, upholds democratic traditions, attempts to mitigate social inequalities of caste, class and gender and shapes a child’s personality by offering opportunities to develop his capabilities. Therefore, elementary education has a great empowerment value. In order to overcome the serious challenges before elementary education in India, the need of the hour is a determined and sustained effort for a wide and equitable network of elementary education so that educational deprivation is eradicated without any more delay. However, parental aspirations for education are belied by endemic poverty and unequal social relations, and by lack of adequate provision of schooling of equitable quality. It is time that the nation pays heed to the quality dimension. As it has already been pointed out, quality indirectly helps in making the quantity. As a result, quality improvement programmes need to be devised for all levels—national, state and district.

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