

GUEST COLUMN

Whose Children Are They?

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Equitable education in India implies, among other things, quality universal elementary education.

It was a one day orientation in Kolar for the various officials of the education department. Block Education Officers (BEO), Block Resource Coordinators (BRC), Cluster Resource Centres (CRC) and Head Teachers from the three taluks in the district were in attendance. This marked the beginning of a unique programme launched by Azim Premji Foundation and Jeevika in collaboration with the Education Department, in 2001. The main focus was to achieve quality universal elementary education in the four selected taluks of the state.

We began by ascertaining facts regarding out-of-school children. A head teacher from a school in Shidlaghatta taluk claimed that there were no children out of school in his village! But the BEO of the taluk refuted this claim immediately. An honest and earnest officer, he contradicted the teacher saying, "Let me walk with you down that street in the village, and I will identify a dozen out-of-school children right in front of you!" How a teacher who was familiar with the village, could declare without any qualms, that there were no out-of-school children in his village was indeed astonishing. Was it mere ignorance, or was it deliberate? How could an officer, not directly connected with the village but with enough sensitivity, confidently contradict the head teacher's statement?

I will attempt an explanation in the second half of the essay.

Of the children, adults and women, who remain illiterate in India, most of them belong to the scheduled castes (SC) and scheduled tribes (ST). To some extent, they may also belong to the backward communities and minorities like the Muslims. Importantly, it is the government elementary schools that mainly cater to the children from these communities.

This is so even when we have a fundamental right to education for those between 6 to 14 years of age which has been acknowledged by the 86th amendment to the Constitution of India in 2002. We did not require this amendment at all since a Supreme Court Judgment in 1993 had declared the fundamental right to education as part of the fundamental right to life, as enshrined in Article 21. Furthermore, there is a fundamental right specifically regarding children, viz, the right against employment in hazardous occupations, mines and factories. Yet, the amendment will remain as ineffective and redundant as the directive principle on universalisation of primary education was for half a century, unless the

amendment is backed by a legislation to make adequate provision for children's education. *There is no such central legislation so far.*

The central draft bill on education to make the fundamental right to education a reality has, instead, been sent to states as a model for them to draw up a suitable statute! The reason for this has been identified as paucity of funds.

The Tapas Majumdar Committee in 1996 had assessed the demand for universalisation of elementary education at Rs. 13,700 crore each year, for a period of 10 years. The 93rd Constitution Amendment Bill in its financial memorandum, mentioned a much reduced requirement of Rs. 9,800 crore per year. Instead of providing for this smaller sum, the Union Budget is content in allocating a further revised sum for the "Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan" project.



Seventy per cent of the expenditure on universalisation of primary education is to be borne by the State governments. But they are unlikely to do so as they are starved of funds. In no country has universal education been achieved without the state assuming the primary responsibility.

Japan, at the close of the 19th century, and Russia, at the beginning of the 20th century, achieved universal primary education within a matter of a decade through immense state support.

There are some crucial questions that need to be asked at this juncture. Why is the state of India so reluctant? Why is the concern of millions of children not a focal point for our policy makers? Who are the policy makers and whose children are they concerned about?

The answer to a great extent lies in the caste system the country has inherited. The caste system is not a division of labour; but a division of labourers, as pointed out by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar.

Coming back to the incident cited at the beginning, it is possible that children outside the head teacher's caste (as per his own admission), did not matter to him and those children hailing from the ex-untouchable castes would have been

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beyond his reckoning. The teacher, as most of our officers and policy makers, was evidently from the so called, "high caste".

Another striking feature of the caste system in India is the utter antipathy to manual labour and the concomitant exploitation of labour leading to an inequitable remuneration.



If we are serious about achieving equitable education and universalisation of quality elementary education, we require bringing about, among other

things, the following:

- 1) *The appointment of a large number of teachers from SC, ST and Backward communities*

Given the upper limit for reservations, there cannot be more than 22.5 per cent from SC and ST communities and more than 27 per cent from the OBCs. In most of the villages in Karnataka, as much as 80 to 90 per cent (and in some villages it may even be 100 per cent) of child labour are from dalit communities and hence they do not even get the opportunity to attend school! Hence, 80-90 per cent or rather even 100 per cent of the teachers should be selected from these communities.

- 2) *The next best alternative available is to recruit a sufficient number of volunteers, from these communities, who will supplement the workforce in formal schools*

In Karnataka, there are a large number of dalit youth who have completed secondary education or graduation but are unemployed due to the poor quality of elementary education they may have received in school. However, due to their talent and zeal to perform they can be an asset to the community. They should be recruited in large numbers, supplementary to the main workforce, or as 'barefoot' teachers and be given a reasonable remuneration. They could function as intermediaries between the government schools and the community (comprising of dalits, tribals, backward castes and Muslims). They should be motivated and trained appropriately to perform tasks like community mobilisation, parent motivation, identifying child labour and mainstreaming them, conducting bridge courses and coaching classes outside schools, supplementing teaching in the schools etc.

- 3) *The primary workforce of our schools consists of teachers from non-dalit and tribal communities*

So is the case with the officers and policy makers. Therefore, unless youth from these communities are prepared in large numbers to address the issue of primary education, they will be unable to deliver as per expectations, irrespective of the strides that we may have made in the space of policies and structures.

- 4) *Implementation of living wages for the agricultural labourers and traditional artisans*

Children from these families are mostly found to be working as labour. To begin with, bonded and other forms of forced labour must be stopped completely and the minimum wages must be implemented; the minimum wages must be raised continuously in keeping with the rise in the cost of living index. The concept of minimum wages must eventually be replaced by that of fair wage and then of living wage. If wages of daily labourers are made fair, coupled with the proper implementation of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (whose scope has also to be widened further), there is no other incentive that will be required to encourage them to send their children to school.

What prevents parents in poor families from sending their children to school? It is not because they do not recognise the value of education for their children, but it is their sheer helplessness to make ends meet in spite of working tirelessly through the day, that prevents their children from attending school. Given a chance, they would strongly desire quality education for their children.

Besides implementing the existing legislations on bonded labour and minimum wages, all sections of society must lend their support for the long standing demand of enacting a comprehensive legislation for the workers of the unorganised sector, both at the Centre and in the State.



The children, to whichever community they may belong, are a national asset. By not investing in them, it is only the country that is ultimately to lose!

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