THE PIONEER 07 SEPT 1995 N00

B a s i c E d u c a t i o n I g n

D e v e l o p m e n t p o l i c i e s i n I n d i a h a v e a l l a l o n g m i s s e d t h e l i n k b e t w e e n q u a l i t y o f l i f e a n d

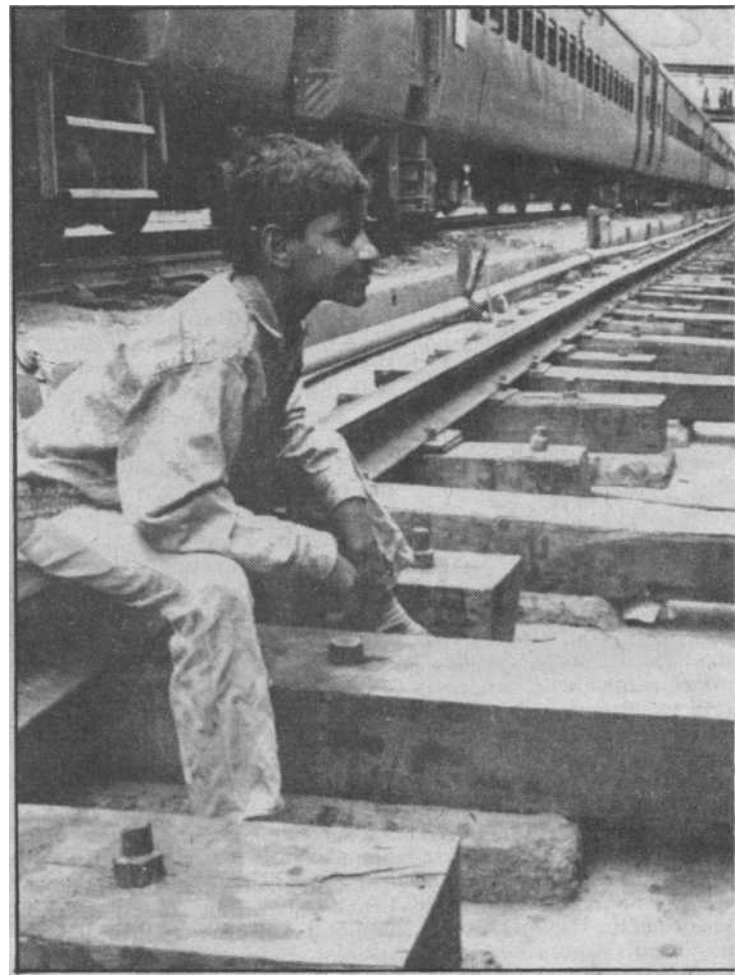
THE QUALITIES of sympathy and humanity are sometimes underestimated in economics, but they can be a major asset in significant economic work. Economic growth is, of course, important, but it is valuable precisely because it helps to eradicate deprivation and to improve the capabilities and the quality of life of ordinary people.

Basic education, good health and other human attainment are not only directly valuable as constituent elements of our basic capabilities but they can also help in generating economic success of a more standard kind, which in turn contributes to enhancing the quality of life even more.

It was refreshing to hear, not a social activist who is usually cynically dubbed as a do-gooder by the middle class, but an economist of eminence, Amartya Sen propounding this old-fashioned, but all important thesis in his D T Lakdawal Memorial Lecture in the Capital last year. Refreshing because economists and social scientists, not to speak of political rulers, have forgotten the "ordinary people" and the need for universal primary education. Consequently, development and economic growth for the ordinary people and improvement in their quality of life has paled into insignificance.

It is indeed surprising that our economic planners do not take into account the fact that illiteracy has many adverse effects in relation to: The freedom and welfare of the people; social change; health care; largescale female infanticide; abysmal poverty; economic disparity, population control; eradication of social evils like discrimination based on caste and sex; child marriage, child labour (India contributes the largest share in the child labour force in the world, almost 90 per cent of child workers employed in the notorious match factories in Sivakasi are girls) — the list is vast. These and other development programmes cannot take off until children are sent to school, their rightful place.

It is all the more painful when we look back. Non-implementation of the programme of universal primary education and not putting this social welfare programme first tin the list of priorities has rendered India vulnerable in all fields.



Need for the implemention of universal primary education

Today, as documented in a number of International Labour Organisation (ILO) reports, except Kerala the picture is grim all over. In UP for example, one third of the male children and more than three-fifths of female children are illiterate. It is the same in respect of school attendance for India, more so for UP in rural areas, more than quarter of the boys and more than half the girls have, never been enrolled in schools. India, is not only behind China, Sri Lanka and South Korea, but also behind "low-income countries" (as defined by the World Bank) including Sub-Saharan Africa.

Today, idealism of any kind has been replaced by an utterly vulgar scramble for power and; diabolical political activities. In such a foul atmosphere, development and reform with a view to bettering human life does not appear to be a precondition for development is the eradication of illiteracy and the "divinely ordained" hierarchical order of our society.

In 1947, India's destiny was designed by leaders many of whom were intellectuals well-versed in the history of development like the present-day economists and social scientists who are today entrusted with the task of evolving methods for development and progress. They knew or ought to have known that development and economic reforms for improving the quality of life cannot be attained in a nation which lives one-quarter in freedom and three-quarter in slavery, and that slavery thrives on illiteracy.

Let me give just two instances of priorities for development — it is a great pity that our economists have chosen to treat these as irrelevant. The emperor of Japan decided to concentrate on only one welfare programme in 1869 with a view to tackling all other problems — he introduced univer-

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Great Britain introduced this programme in 1870 and through successful implementation of this programme established its supremacy in the industrial world and arrested population rise and child labour.

One tries in vain to find a rational explanation as to the singular lack of will to make this all-important social welfare programme successful in our country.

With our planners, both past and present, the unwritten law has been that universal primary education cannot be implemented until poverty is removed. This habit of putting the cart before the horse is also ingrained in many of our high-flying social activists.

We have today a good number of articulate activists who move around the world much too frequently to propagate the abolition of child labour; hardly any one maintains however, that child labour can be abolished only when the child is sent to school. We have a very well-publicised movement for abolition of child labour, but there is no movement for compelling the government to implement the constitutional provision for implementing compulsory primary education which should have been done decades ago soon after India won Independence.

Lack of funds is also usually cited as another reason for failure in this sector. We however seem to have funds for everything else. It is a question of priority, for example, spending a fortune on giving a lecture on Gandhi in Paris, or to implement the basic education scheme.

In India, everything except children's education is unavoidable expenditure. Compulsory primary education can wait. It is time for bureaucratic-economic planners to consider whether it is possible to bring about development and economic reforms and a change in the quality of life of the ordinary people.