Basic Education Ignored

Development policies in India have all along missed the link between quality of life and literacy by R M Pal

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; large-scale 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 in the list of priorities has rendered India vulnerable in all fields.

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 universal...
Need for the implementation of universal primary education

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Great Britain introduced this
programme in 1870 and
through successful implemen-
tation of this programme esta-
blished 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 welfa-
re programme successful in
our country.

With our planners, both past
and present, the unwritten law
has been that universal prima-
ry education cannot be imple-
mented until poverty is
removed. This habit of putting
the cart before the horse is also
inherited in many of our high-
flyers social activists.

We have today a good num-
ber 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 abolish-
ed only when the child is sent to
school. We have a very well-
publicised movement for abol-
tion of child labour, but there is
no movement for compelling
the government to implement
the constitutional provision for
implementing compulsory pri-
mary education which should
have been done decades ago
soon after India won
Independence.

Lack of funds is also usually
cited as another reason for fail-
ure in this sector. We however
seem to have funds for everyth-
ing else. It is a question of prio-
rity, for example, spending a
fortune on giving a lecture on
Gandhi in Paris, or to imple-
ment the basic education
scheme.

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