

Education as a right and a duty

By Sk, Sadar Nayeem

WHEN the Human Resource Development Minister, Mr Madhav Rao Scindia, recently said that 'the Central Government is fully committed to higher allocation of funds for education', he obviously missed one vital point. With only an increase in investment in education as a proportion of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), it is not possible for India to overcome the problem of the limited effectiveness of its primary education system. Official figures on the high illiteracy rate are indicative of the Government's failure to deal with the problem.

Mr Scindia said that India is spending, at present, 3.7 per cent of its Gross National Product (GNP) on education. But the problem is that the country is still the largest single producer of the world's illiterates. Only between 1961 and 1981, the total number of adult illiterates in the country increased from 333 million to 437 million. It is true that what we are spending today on education is still below the six per cent norm stated in our National Policy of Education. But the question is that when many developing and low-income countries by spending equal proportion of their GNP (between three and 3.5 per cent) have a higher level of literacy, why only in India, as a result of population growth, the number of illiterates has increased. In Indonesia with an equally high population growth rate, the number of illiterates has declined. The answer is that we are still reluctant to move more rapidly towards the universalisation of primary education and the expansion of literacy.

If India spends 3.7 per cent of its GNP on education, Burma spends 1.6 per cent, China 2.7 per cent, Sri Lanka 3.5 per cent and Indonesia two per cent. But all these countries have higher literacy rates than India. Another important reason that explains these differences in educational performance between India and these countries is that while India spends a larger proportion of its educational budget on higher education, the aforementioned countries spend a large portion of their educational budget on primary schools.

Further, we have a strange explanation that mass education depends upon the level of per capita income. We have already seen that with less spending of GNP on education, it is possible for even low-income and developing countries to experience spectacular increase in literacy rates. It is also proved that there is no clear relationship between literacy and per capita income because there are so many Asian countries which achieved higher literacy rates even before their rapid economic growth. Even one of the Indian states, Kerala, has a literacy rate of 85 per cent despite the fact that its per capita income is not higher than that of the rest of the country.

The major concern for us is that our National Policy of Education never tries to find out a link between mass education and economic growth. The experience of developed countries has proved that knowledge, skills, attitude and values acquired by an entire population are fundamental to economic growth and material well-being. Even those who are engaged in relatively low-skilled occupations find early schooling valuable because the return from primary educational are highest at all educational level

Secondly, primary or mass education and population, public health and the mortality rate are interlinked. A review recently by the World Bank found that female education influences the number of children mothers have. An additional year of schooling for a mother results in a reduction of nine per 1,000 in the mortality of her offspring. Likewise, early schooling correlates with increases in agricultural production, especially when the opportunity exists to introduce new technologies.

The problem with us is that our ruling elite is not interested in having an educated electorate, because then it would be difficult for it to inculcate political loyalty and submission. However, no one can deny the importance of mass education as a requisite for a democratic political system. On one hand, it enhances rationality, increases norms of tolerance and facilitates national integration and, on the other, it reduces crime. Compulsory education can only ensure facilitation of high rates of social mobility weakening class divisions. This social mobility is dependent on high rate of economic growth which, on the other hand, is largely dependent on the expansion of education. That is why, the real task before us is to bring down India's global share of illiterates. We will have to introduce the notion of compulsion in our policy of education. A conceptual change is needed so that we can think about education not as a right but as a duty.