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A Learning Experience

A Child's Right to Education

By AZIM PREMJI

IN 1950, the architects of the Indian Constitution stipulated that every child up to the age of 14 years should be provided education by 1960. Since then, successive governments extended this deadline by 10 years at a time. In 1993, in a landmark judgment, the Supreme Court, in the case of Mr Unnikrishnan, pronounced that basic education (education up to the age of 14 years) is a fundamental right of every child. However, although several years have since passed, the constitutional amendment to include this right as part of the Constitution is still pending.

Today, about a third of the country's population is illiterate and nearly half the children of school-going age are out of school. We also have the dubious distinction of having an estimated 100 million children working as child labour.

On the other hand, during the past five years, India has emerged as a superpower in the information technology (IT) industry in general, and global software services in particular. It is quite unthinkable that we achieve a leadership position in the global market, and yet we cannot quickly get our act together and universalise elementary education in the country. The need to universalise elementary education is critical as a number of studies have revealed that basic education has a direct positive impact on a number of social and economic indicators like population stabilisation, healthcare and sanitation, law and order, employment, productivity, GDP, economic growth and the opportunity to make informed choices for each citizen leading to the practice of true democracy in our country.

Elementary education is also an effective solution to child labour. The problem of the girl child's education is even more acute and requires special mention. The enrolment as well as retention ratios of girl children as compared to those of boys are significantly lower. In one of the rural education camps I visited, I was personally moved and impressed to hear the story of a girl who was married at the age of 11 and yet fought her way back to the education camp with the help of volunteers. The girl had tears in her eyes while narrating her own story. There are thousands of such stories.

Poverty as an excuse for not sending children to school is a myth. Dozens of parents I met in

rural areas wanted to send their children to school despite their poverty. They were willing to make sacrifices to see their children in school and learning.

The fundamental problems in universalisation of elementary education are enrolment, retention and satisfactory learning by the children in the school. There are so many reasons for this ranging from the lack of schools, to insufficient number of teachers, to poor attention to children and to lack of training of the teachers.

To begin with, every parent, especially the ones who have themselves never been to school, need to be convinced that sending their children to school is the most natural action to take. It is like breathing. There is no other alternative. I strongly believe that parents want their children to have a bright future, and if schooling is clearly equated to that bright future, they

would not hesitate to send their children to school despite their poverty. They were willing to make sacrifices to see their children in school and learning.

tention to children who have a little difficulty in maintaining the learning speed. At that impressionable stage, all that the children perceive is teachers as their role models. Shouting at the students, not teaching in an interesting manner, not involving the child in learning, sending children out of school for any reason, and all other acts of discouragement will not serve the purpose of education. Parents, on their part, must ask the child what has been learnt in the school, ask questions, meet the teachers and express interest in the learning process. The government also has a role in setting performance standards for learning and ensuring that they are adhered to.

I have seen that whole-hearted participation of the community in the education process works wonders for the morale of both teachers and students. I also feel that such participation of the community will form the backbone of the universalisation of education.

The essential requirements to universalise elementary education will be strong political will on the part of the government, greater involvement of communities and society, effective leveraging of available financial resources, mobilisation of additional financial resources and innovative approaches and an urgency to achieve results. The good news is that the government has now set a target to universalise elementary education in the country by 2010. It is encouraging to note that the leadership at the Centre and in some of the states is very keen to ensure that this goal is achieved much before the deadline. And that many corporates, individuals and NGOs are coming forward to help achieve this goal.

We do not have any option but to ensure that every child in the country goes to a formal school, remains in the school, and, most importantly, learns in the school. In fact, the definition of literacy needs to be changed to education till the 10th standard, and information technology literacy needs to be made compulsory.

There is in every child, unlimited potential to learn and achieve. All the child needs is an opportunity to discover and develop her full potential. The most important issue is that every child has a right to childhood and right to education.

(The author is chairman of Wipro Corporation)

IN BRIEF

- The amendment to include the right to education as part of the Constitution is still pending
- It is a myth that the poor don't want to send their children to school
- The whole community must be involved in the education process

will not hesitate to send the child to school. There is a lot of debate on the way the syllabus is currently designed and what the child will do after getting the education. There may even be merit in that debate. However, the fact is that we, the educated parents, never have that debate while admitting our child in school. We never ask this question as to what the child would do after passing the 10th or 12th standard. For us, it is the most natural thing to put our child in school. It is, therefore, important that we address the second layer issues at the second stage and insist first on enrolment of the child in school.

An even more important issue is that of retaining the child in school and ensuring that the child is learning and actively participating in the learning process. Both teachers and parents have an equal role in this. The teachers need to make learning enjoyable, and pay special at-