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 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 will not hesitate to send the child to school.

There is in every child, unlimited potential to learn and achieve. All the children who are out of school want to learn and achieve. All the children who are out of school have the potential to learn and achieve. All the children who are out of school have the potential to learn and achieve. All the children who are out of school have the potential to learn and achieve.

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.

The most important issue is that every child has a right to childhood and right to education.

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