

## Mixing work with study

Basic education has slipped in priority in the national policy matrix over the decades. The Census and several other data sets have pointed to various dimensions of the problem. Recently, the Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2017, published by a non-governmental organisation and containing data from 26 districts in 24 States, has some national-level findings that should cause concern.

Focussing on the 14-18 years age group, the 'Beyond Basics' study has tried to assess, inter alia, whether this cohort of young people is enrolled in any educational institution, whether they are both enrolled and pursuing work, how well they have been prepared in previous schooling, their access to technology, and what occupies their time. This is an important segment of the population, on the threshold of adulthood, and, importantly, political participation.

The insights from the study are based on a sample of 28,323 youth who are at different levels of development. A national-level finding is that as a group, 14.4% of youth aged 14 to 18 years are not enrolled in school or college. Yet, this figure conceals variations by age: while it is 5.3% for 14-year-olds, it rises to 30.2% at age 18. The imperative clearly is to look at factors that prevent them from being part of formal higher secondary education, of which availability and affordability of schools would be important.

Evidently, a large-scale vocational education system on the lines of the "dual" German model — classroom instruction plus apprentice training — would help raise the productivity of both individuals and the economy. ASER's statistics indicate that overall, only 5.3% of the age group is enrolled in a vocational course, while 60.2% of out-of-school youth are engaged in some form of work. These trends underscore the need to scale up substantive skill-building programmes, making them free or highly subsidised.

It is in this context that the role of agriculture as a provider of jobs and prosperity must be viewed. Among those who are already working in the 14-18 age group, 79% are engaged in farming, and that too in their family farms. By contrast, agriculture as work ranked very low as an aspiration among the youth. What this appears to show is that for a significant number of youth, a useful education in agriculture, coupled with access to the formal economy for finance and marketing, could raise the quality of life. In fact, the ability of farmers to adopt technology, avail benefits offered by the government and demand stronger institutions would be enhanced, if elementary education is improved. It would also produce the additional benefit of promoting health-seeking behaviour among these youth.

At the moment, though, the education tests administered to them seem to show that they can read text, but feel challenged when it comes to solving a simple mathematical problem. They will do better if the teaching-learning process becomes engaging and effective.

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