

Across the aisle: Celebrating gods, neglecting children – 2

Having the second largest standing army in the world or possessing nuclear weapons or putting satellites in orbit will not make a country a great power — or even a great people — if our children grow up into adults who are simply not equipped to build a great economy or a great nation.

On March 26, 2017, I had written a column titled '[Celebrating Gods, Neglecting Children](#)'. I had said "Our idea of human resource development is minus child development, minus child health and minus child nutrition'. My focus was on the state of nutrition of children and the data was based on the National Family Health Survey 2015-16. I should have added "minus child education and minus child skilling".

There is another acclaimed report published every year. It is the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER). We have a new report (2017) on the status of education in rural India and it was published on January 16, 2018.

Chilling Facts

ASER 2017 recalls a chilling fact that is known to all in the field of school education: ASER studies, over the last 12 years, have 'consistently pointed out that many children in elementary school need urgent support for acquiring foundational skills like reading and basic arithmetic'. Nothing much has changed except in terms of 'numbers'. Thanks to the Right to Education Act, the proportion of out-of school children has fallen to 3.1 per cent. Earlier, children were dropping out at Class V; now enrolment beyond Class V has improved dramatically and enrolment in Class VIII has doubled in the past decade, rising from 11 million to 22 million. However, as the numbers increased, the proportion of students with foundational skills has declined:

One-fourth of students enrolled in Class VIII cannot read a Class II-level text.

One-half of students enrolled in Class VIII cannot do simple division.

ASER 2017 shifted its focus to children in the age group 14 to 18 years in rural India. The report explains the reason: 'More and more students are completing eight years of elementary school at about age 14. Just four years later, these young people will become adults. So what do these youth do during these four years? Are we ensuring that they acquire the skills and abilities they will need to lead productive lives as adults?'

Regrettably, the answer is 'no' or, at least, 'not yet'. In 2008-09, 24 million children were enrolled in Class V, but in 2011-12 only 19 million students were enrolled in Class VIII. That was a loss of 5 million. As these students progressed to Class XII, another 7 million dropped out, and enrolment in Class XII in 2015-16 was only 12 million. On a rough calculation, therefore, nearly 1.7 million children drop out of school every year.

Among the reasons are vacant posts of teachers, teacher-absenteeism, lack of accountability in government schools, absence of regulation of private schools and low government spending on education.

The 14-18 Years

What do the 14-18 year olds do? Most are enrolled in schools, but significant proportions drop out every year, the number increasing with age. At age 18, 30 per cent in that age group have dropped out. One-fourth of the respondents in that age group said they had to discontinue their

studies because of financial reasons. Another 34 per cent said the reason was lack of interest and 16 per cent because they had failed.

Nearly 78 per cent of rural youth in the age group 14-18 — whether enrolled as students or not — do some agricultural work for wages or on their own land. Almost none aspires to join agricultural or veterinary courses, and ‘the percentage of students in agricultural or veterinary courses around India amounts to less than half a per cent of all undergraduate enrolment’.

What are we doing with our 14-18 year olds? The ASER survey has found that ‘there is not much evidence that children are learning vocational skills’. It found that young untrained youth are not flocking to skill development courses, nor is industry chasing the training centres.

So long as agriculture is a major source of employment for rural youth, the ASER report argues, ‘agriculture could use a more educated and trained workforce considering that productivity lags far behind world’s leading nations’. But there are no foundational agricultural courses on offer as alternatives to the usual bachelor’s degree courses that are worth nothing.

A Failed System

Our school education system is a failure. Fifty per cent of all children have dropped out at various ages before reaching the age of 18 and acquiring what can be called a ‘school education’. Many of whom are with no foundational skills, barely literate or numerate, not enrolled in foundational or skill development courses, unemployable except in low-skill jobs, and fated to depend on farm employment and other casual, manual labour.

Place that alongside the state of health of our children. Among children under five years of age, one out of two is anaemic; one out of three is underweight and stunted; and one out of five is wasted. It is well-documented that the first five years will determine a child’s physical and mental development during the rest of the child’s life.

Having the second largest standing army in the world or possessing nuclear weapons or putting satellites in orbit will not make a country a great power — or even a great people — if our children grow up into adults who are simply not equipped to build a great economy or a great nation. Reflect on the words of [Nelson Mandela](#): ‘Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world’. And India.

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