

# 'Education For All' **A Summit With High Drop-Out Rate**

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*This article was sent to us from Thiruvananthapuram by the author, a former Pro-Vice-Chancellor, University of Kerala, a day before the 'Education for All' Summit took place in New Delhi on December 16, 1993. However, in view of the relevance and importance of the issues raised in this article it is being published for the benefit of our readers.*

—Editor

**T**he surest way to kill a good idea is to reduce it to a smart slogan or give it a high-sounding code-name. As a people we are now adept at it, and have successfully evaded several pressing political and social issues in this way. The slogans live on the lips of people for sometime and eventually die there. After having tasted success in this skirting of problems, we are now applying this art in the sphere of education also where there was very little scope for slogan-mongering as, say, in politics.

'Education for All' is hardly a new idea or slogan to raise at this fortythird year of the Indian Republic, in the Constitution of which it has been specifically laid down that "the state shall endeavour to provide, within a period of ten years from the commencement of this Constitution, for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years". In the context of this Article 45 of the Constitution the proposed UNESCO-UNICEF-UNFPA sponsored Summit of the nine educationally backward and most populous countries of the world including India on the theme of 'Education for All' is an indirect proclamation of our signal failure to fulfil this constitutional obligation more than three decades ago. But that should not prevent us not only from participating in it but also hosting the Summit. Perhaps India has a dubious claim to be the venue of the Summit as we lead, mainly due to the sheer continental size of the country and its teeming millions, in the matter of the largest number of illiterate and out-of-school children. India now accounts for one-third of the world's unlettered and twentytwo per cent of out-of-school children.

THE document published by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) of the Government of India on the Indian educational scene last October is as depressing in its statistics as unrewarding in its empty rhetorics. Close on the heels of this status-paper on Indian education came the World Education Report 1993 of the UNESCO which corroborates the facts, and presents, on the whole, a dismal picture of the developing countries in the matter of literacy and education.

India's slow decadal progress of literacy from the 5.35 per cent of the first census of our twentieth century in 1901 to the 52.1 per cent of the last census of this

century might look a little impressive in the eyes of incorrigible optimists. However, there is another side to this picture. Apart from this snail's pace of increase of literacy percentage-wise there is the astounding phenomenon of the swelling of the ranks of illiterates in terms of absolute numbers. Now we have 335.83 million illiterates in the country as against 241.64 million according to the first census of 1951 after independence. This is more than the total population of undivided India. That women constitute two-thirds of this huge chunk of illiterates is the most depressing aspect of the Indian scene. That is why the thrust of Education for All (EFA) and its goals, strategy and programme is on women's education and literacy. The World Education Report of 1991 has rightly emphasised this aspect of the universalisation of primary education with particular stress on girls' education:

**When schools open their door wider to girls and women, the benefits from education multiply... Countries which achieved near universal primary education for boys in 1965 but in which enrolment rates for girls lag far behind have about twice the infant mortality and fertility rates in 1985 of countries with a smaller gender gap.**

To reduce this gaping gender gap in India, particularly in what is called the 'cow belt', Herculean efforts are needed. Will the Central and State Governments show the necessary political will to liquidate this vast 'area of darkness' in a time-bound manner which means more investment of money, materials and energy especially at a time when the country is changing tracks in the matter of economic development? If the implementation of the EFA is to succeed and the envisaged goals to be achieved universalisation of primary education (UPE) should be made an integral part of the liberalisation policy. It is significant that multinational financial institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) have advised the Third World countries to spend more on education and public health particularly in the transitional period of structural adjustment. But the fact of the matter is that we have been spending hardly three per cent of GNP for education even under the earlier so-called socialistic dispensation.

More than the inadequate financial allocation, it was the highly centralised and rigidly bureaucratic organisation of the educational system that has frustrated any meaningful effective transformation and achievement of the set goals. Alongwith adequate funding there must be

active participation of the community, the accountability of the teachers is to be encouraged and mechanism for regular monitoring of the working of the system is to be created. All these must be built into the reorganised system. The New Education Policy of 1986 envisages Village Education Committees (VEC) and District Boards of Education (DBE) for planning and implementing school education upto higher secondary at the district level. This devolution of powers has not taken place except that the District Institutes of Educational Training (DIET) have come into being in some districts. Now, with the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments and the introduction of Panchayati Raj almost in a uniform manner throughout the country, universalisation of education should be given top priority on the agenda of items of the local self-government in rural and urban areas. This responsibility of the panchayats, district bodies and municipalities should be matched with adequate devolution of financial resources.

In States like Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Rajasthan which together account for forty per cent of India's population, the problem of universalisation of elementary education is indeed a formidable one as there is a huge backlog. The task of providing access to school, enrolling all the children of school-going age and retaining them till they attain a reasonable level of literacy is a daunting one. The oft-repeated claim that

there is a school now for every child in the country is exploded by the Report of the Fifth All-India Educational Survey conducted by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). Nearly three lakh habitats comprising 50 million people have no access to primary education is the shocking finding of the Survey.

EVEN when the problem of access is solved the enrolment of the entire children is a difficult proposition as child labour is rampant. Forty million children of the age group of five to fifteen are at present in the work force, according to the study of a research group of Gujarat, though the official statistics place it at a little more than seventeen million. Of those who enrol, sixty per cent drop-out of school before completing five years of education. Various are the reasons for this high drop-out rate and consequent waste. More than economic reasons the institutional and curricular inadequacies are said to be a major factor, according to some significant studies on this chronic problem. Here comes the question of not only what is being taught but also the way in which children are taught. Very poor physical environment of a large number of schools with no buildings, equipment, qualified teachers, urinals and even drinking water especially in the Hindi heartland where conditions are extremely depressing even after the 'Operation Blackboard' investment and strategies. 'Drop-outs' is indeed a euphemism for 'push-outs' from our schools. This situation can be fully remedied only with the meaningful involvement of the community in the education of its children. Mere exhortation to 'all teachers to teach and all students to learn' (as in the NPE 1986) will not do. A new climate and a new mindset has to be created for the generation of which considerable increase in the financial resources and radical changes in the school management system are necessary. A minimum of six per cent of GNP, as recommended by the Education Commission (1964-66), should be spent on education.

Moreover, the old remedy of legislation for compulsory primary education recommended and experimented in the past has to be thought of. The wording of Article 45 of the Constitution implies this element of compulsion. Myron Weiner has made out a strong case for such a legislation in his book, *The Child and the State in India*, with the now well-known statistics of the state of children in the country. Whether the ensuing nine-nation Summit on Education for All is really a summit or reduced to a conference due to unavoidable political situations in a few of the participating countries, India, as the host nation, has to address itself to this task of 'silent revolution', to use the expression used by the MHRD document on Education for All, as the magnitude of the task is the most formidable here in our country of the nine nations banded together by the UNESCO for this landmark meet.

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