

Education – Foremost on India’s Development Agenda!

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In the post-independence period our leaders, planners, politicians and administrators envisaged various growth strategies to bring about socio economic development of the country. While economic progress was top most priority it was also to be balanced with social justice and equitable distribution of wealth and income. The standard development agenda of political system and parties in our country, in the last seven decades, never had education as a priority focus item. It is high time political parties come out of their shells, shed the narrow dogmatic perspectives, and adopt truly progressive outlook in their policy orientation, in expansive national interests.

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Introduction – The National Developmental Priorities

In the post-independence period our leaders, planners, politicians and administrators envisaged various growth strategies to bring about socio economic development of the country. While economic progress was top most priority, it was also to be balanced with social justice and equitable distribution of wealth and income. It was recognized that being shackled by foreign rule for nearly two centuries, the country lacked in basic infrastructure particularly in terms of developed industrial sector to survive in the emerging world order. The predominantly backward agrarian economy was to be transformed into modern industrialized economy through sustained planned investment by the government. It was recognized that being shackled by foreign rule for nearly two centuries, the country lacked in basic infrastructure particularly in terms of developed industrial sector to survive in the emerging world order. The predominantly backward agrarian economy was to be transformed into modern industrialized economy through sustained planned investment by the government. Thus the exclusive focus of successive governments was on continued investment in public sector industries in industrial as well as consumer goods segments. Also other infrastructure such as transport, communications, air and sea ports, power and irrigation sectors were also mostly under government control and required massive funding. In between, due to rise in population numbers and failure of monsoon, there were situations of food shortages resulting in additional focus on agriculture sector, through Green Revolution initiatives. Defense sector, which was also exclusive preserve and prerogative of government, needed urgent funding and focus from time to time due to foreign aggression. Quite often, due to populist considerations huge outlays were allocated towards social welfare programmes and non-developmental expenditure such as subsidies, debt waiver etc. In this scenario, the education sector was invariably relegated to the background and always got lesser attention and allocation than what it legitimately deserved. Populism overrode pragmatism in the policy orientation of political parties, and short term objectives and considerations always edged out long term desirable goals. Thus the standard development agenda of political system and parties in our country, in the last seven decades, never had education as a priority focus item.

Education – the pre-requisite for development

It must be clearly understood that education is the ultimate index of progress and development of a nation. Education creates responsible, productive, committed citizens who can contribute effectively to the country’s growth in socio-economic parameters. It is all the more imperative for our country with a vast demography of 1.2 billion to harness effectively the vast human resource potential only through massive and focused investment in proliferation of education. Education again need not be restricted to narrow confines of academic qualification but must be interpreted in more holistic terms as connoting knowledge, techniques, skills, attitudes and orientations which will enable any person to evolve as a valuable human resource asset. Thus education should help create employees, managers, leaders, entrepreneurs, volunteers, and above all socially responsible, good citizens who can be instruments of socio-economic development.

Education – the neglected sector in policy planning

However, education has been one of the most neglected areas as far as development policy predilection is concerned. Neither, leaders nor planners nor academicians could effectively understand, assess and emphasize the vital need to have education as prominent priority in goal setting for national growth. Education was regarded as an adjunct area for planned expenditure and its inexorable impact on development of nation was never fully recognized. Whatever outlay / investment was made in education in the first three to four decades after independence, even though fairly inadequate, still helped to create a semblance of adequate school level and higher education infrastructure in the country. The intellectual capital created in India in decade of sixties and seventies after independence, migrated abroad due to lack of adequate opportunities to utilize their talent. They became respected goodwill ambassadors of India globally and as NRIs also contributing to economic revitalization of country by sending valued remittances in foreign exchange.

Lopsided spread of educational infrastructure

The population explosion in later years (the decade of eighties and nineties), coupled with reduced proportion of spending on education as well as absence of focused approach towards assessing and addressing educational needs for nation building, resulted in haphazard and lop sided development of educational system. Few states and regions progressed much in spread of educational facilities and also the growth of school and college level institutions and number and variety of courses for higher education was not quite systematic and not quite integrated with needs of economic system. It again demonstrated that policy makers, particularly the people's representatives, and their political affiliations, were totally apathetic towards education as a development priority. A streak of suspicion is aroused in a logical mind that whether the political class deliberately wanted to slow down growth of education as it may make masses more aware about their rights and demand more accountability from people's representatives.

Benefits of investment in education

It needs no emphasis to assert that investment in education has multiplier effect and yields tangible and valuable returns in form of enriched human capital resource. The human capital can have multiple uses and produce results/benefits in various forms of socio economic output. Take for instance women's education. Women have a major transformational role in society whether as an employee or entrepreneur or simply a home maker. In India despite a perception that women play a second fiddle to men in various spheres of activity, their role has been recognized and exalted and many women have shown exemplary performance in different areas of expertise. This has been possible only due to educational empowerment of women. In rural areas, particularly the self-esteem of women and their decision making capabilities are augmented due to education. In matter of up-bringing of children the famous adage "hand that rocks the cradle rules the world" is indicative of strong influence mother has on development of children. Thus education of women is perhaps as or even more important than education of men because of the tremendous impact educationally empowered women can make on society. In India there is also the major issue of liberation and empowerment of socially and economically backward / disadvantaged sections of society, particularly from rural background. These depressed sections of society are vulnerable to exploitations by various vested interests and being economically weak are tremendously vulnerable. Educating such masses for their socio-economic upliftment is a major challenge but can result in miraculous transformation in terms of growth and development not only of the concerned people but the entire nation.

Education and technological transformation in India

The decade of eighties and nineties ushered in technological transformation in India. A young generation of Indians having knowledge and skills in field of engineering and technology was ready and prepared to exploit the opportunities in Information Technology sector, which was the emerging frontier of development globally. The manner in which Indians have acquired mastery and dominance in fields of Information and Communication technology worldwide demonstrates the immense potential of education to unleash massive force of development and progress. The Indian technology companies have spread globally and becoming multinational organizations. Perhaps the contribution of policy makers to the evolution and expansion of I.T. sector in India was negligible at the best. In fact it was perhaps ironically for good of I.T. sector that authorities did not interfere in its natural progression. Otherwise given the shackling regulatory environment in the country, the I.T. sector may have perished in its infancy!

The holistic impact of education

Education is not merely about endowing people with academic qualification or making people capable of generating economic resources through employment or entrepreneurship. There is also the holistic aspect of education which transforms the outlook, perception, attitudes and behavior of a person towards contributing for the welfare of community or society. For instance in India we have the qualified technocrats from IITs and Post Graduate in Management from IIMs who are entirely dedicated and working for social causes as individuals or through Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) rather than chase lucrative opportunities for highly paid jobs with corporate sector. Globally also educated and affluent personalities have distinguished themselves as philanthropists. In India, however we have a paradoxical situation where politicians who are supposed to be policy makers and working for people welfare, indulged in corrupt practices and siphoning public money for personal benefit. Notwithstanding such aberrations it is amply evident that education is a powerful catalyst for multi-faceted development of individuals, and through them the community, society and country. Is it not a matter of great surprise, and consternation that inspite of such amazing possibilities of progress that can be unfolded through education, the policy makers, particularly political parties, have turned Nelson's eye towards education, in defining their development priorities, all these years.

Rapidly changing educational scenario

In the recent times the scenario in educational sector, particularly higher education has been witnessing rapid changes. There has sudden spurt in number of educational institutions offering graduate and post graduate programs in professional and technical education. Most of these are through investment by private trusts and few from government initiatives. Also there has been entry of corporate sector in education to ensure that such institutions are created which will impart employable skills to youth, who can be later absorbed in various business enterprises. Also private universities have made their entry and presence felt in a significant manner. The foreign universities are waiting at our shores to enter and establish their network here. All these nascent developments portend a paradigm shift in educational system in our country in very near future. Unless policy makers take close cognizance of these events and trends, there cannot be any meaning and substance in educational policy planning.

Integrating education policy with developmental needs

As mentioned before, educational policy is subservient to political system and due to political compulsions there are frivolous spirited debates on non-issues and education never finds a respectable mention in priorities and manifestoes of political parties. Trivial and temporary emotional issues gain prominence during elections and major aspects of development get sidelined. India is a democratic country with a complex political system. It has been amply demonstrated in the independent nation that all developmental policy decisions are based on political expediency rather than genuine concern for progress. The corollary is that political will is needed to push any progressive measure forward to a logical conclusion. This can be possible only when education is an integral part of policy framework of political parties for growth and development. It is thus essential that education should be foremost or prime in the agenda and manifesto of political parties seeking people's mandate. The political parties must clearly spell out their stand on education and how they intend to prioritise and fund the educational system. The roadmap for contemporary, progressive and purposeful educational system must be explicitly outlined in the manifesto of political parties. The developmental goals of the country are inextricably linked to the educational system, hence progress of education can be regarded as sine qua non for progress of nation. The globalization of education and advent of private and international universities in the country will have wide ramification and will radically alter the educational landscape of the country. There is need to have social and political consensus on educational policy to take cognizance of all these developments. It is high time political parties come out of their shells, shed the narrow dogmatic perspectives, and adopt truly progressive outlook in their policy orientation, in expansive national interests.
