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A STUDY ON NEED OF EDUCATION IN MODERN INDIA WITH A REFERENCE OF GOVERNMENT AIDED PROGRAMS FOR RURAL PEOPLE

Pradeep Das Gupta

Research Scholar OPJS University

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Abstract

The paper examines the issue of rural people's access to education in India. Drawing on existing literature and various statistics concerning rural people's education, the paper provides an overview of the state of education with respect to rural people and highlights some of the issues and barriers to rural people's education. Based on an analysis of emergent issues, some recommendations and suggestions are offered in terms of grassroots level interventions, strategic initiatives and enabling policy framework, towards improving rural people's access to education.

Keywords: Rural people, Education, Government

Introduction

Free and compulsory education to all children between the ages of 6 and 14 is a fundamental right of citizens under the 86th Amendment to the Constitution of India. Yet, the state of education of rural people in India is far from 'free' or as totalizing and encompassing as the right appears to guarantee. Although the government, through its various initiatives such as the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (aimed at providing primary education especially to girl children from disadvantaged rural areas), attempts to improve the education of rural people, the barrier to educating rural people is not

always monetary and within the purview of the state.

Post independence there has been a concerted attempt to improve literacy levels of the population in India. Many schemes have been introduced to increase the access, expand coverage and improve the quality of education. Amongst them the universalisation of elementary education, incentive schemes for retention and non-formal education for adults are noteworthy for their scope and intent. Special attention has been given to the education of rural people in all of the schemes. However,

despite the varied attempts of the government and various NGOs operating in the field of education, the statistics for rural people's education leaves a lot to be desired.

According to the 2001 census data (Census Report, 2001), national literacy rate stands at 64.84%. While male literacy was noted as 75.26%, female literacy lags behind at 53.67%. A more recent government report on education statistics (2008), notes that the literacy rates for rural people in India has steadily increased from 8.9% in 1951 to around 57% in 2004. Although substantial progress has been achieved since India won its independence when less than 8% of females were literate, the gains have not been rapid enough to keep pace with population growth. Although there has been marked improvement over the years, there is still much wanting in terms of rural people's literacy. The problem is further compounded if we look at the male-female gap in literacy rates. This has almost always been more than 20% over the years.

The various statistics and numerous studies have repeatedly pointed to the need to extend the reach and access of education to the rural people of the country. Although literacy rates and access to education are an area of concern for both males and females, they appear particularly problematic for rural people. The dropout rates and enrolment in higher education imply that getting girls to enroll in schools is the first hurdle, once surmounted girls are more likely than boys to stay on for primary education, but pose a challenge again at the

secondary and higher level of education. Although it is well acknowledged that when you educate a woman you educate a nation, this often-quoted maxim has somehow been lost in translation as the reality of rural people's education in India seems to suggest.

Primary and Secondary Education

Under the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education, government has made education free for children of 6-14 years of age. One would expect that with this promise of free education, there would be an equal number of girls enrolling in primary education. However, in reality the picture looks much different. According to a 2008 government report, educational statistics indicate that the number of girls per 100 boys is around 80% for classes upto the VIII and a little over 70% for secondary higher education that covers classes upto XII.

Secondary education generally covers children in the age group of 14- 18 years, which is roughly 88.5 million people according to the 2001 Census. However, enrolment figures show that only 31 million of these are attending school (Census, 2001). Of those attending, it appears that attracting and retaining girl children for secondary education is more difficult compared with primary education as well as attracting and retaining boys at the same level of education.

Higher Education

India's higher education system is the third largest in the world, after China and the United States. As of 2009, India has 20 central universities, 217 state universities, 106 deemed universities, 5 institutions established and functioning under the State Act, and various institutes which are of national importance, such as the IITs, IIMs and universities such as JNU. Other institutions include 16000 colleges, including 1800 exclusive rural people's colleges, functioning under various universities and institutions (Government Report, 2009). Significant male-female disparities exist in the enrolment of rural people in higher education. Gender disparity in enrolment ratio is also because of visible differences in rural areas.

Female literacy amongst the four large northern states - Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh - is lower than the national average (53.67%), while states such as Kerala, Goa and Mizoram record comparatively higher literacy rates for rural people (Census, 2001). The discrepancy between male and female literacy rates is also higher for states such as Bihar, Jharkand, Chattisgarh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. The differences in literacy rate for rural people also vary across urban and rural areas. The access level of education for rural people (as measured by the Gross Enrolment Ratio, see Appendix I) in rural areas is almost three times lower than that of urban areas (Census, 2011). There is also considerable inter-state variation in education access, as can be inferred from the 2011 Census data. While



the GER at the aggregate level is about 13%, it is more than the national average in states such as Kerala, Goa, Nagaland and Manipur and substantially lower in states such as Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh.

Vocational education is a separate stream of higher education aimed at providing opportunities to students to choose programs of study towards gainful employment. The total enrolment in over 8000 institutions spread across the country catering to technical vocational skill building such as the Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) and the Arts and Crafts schools is of the order of 1.4 million, of which rural people constitute less than 28% (UNESCO report, 2011).

Of the 950 or so ITIs including both government and private, 104 were set up exclusively for rural people giving training in areas such as receptionists, electronics, book binding and the like. Even considering technical education imparted through polytechnics, 35 of the 450 recognized ones have been exclusively set up for rural people, providing training in areas such as pharmacy, food technology, textile design, commercial art etc. Although the rate of participation is gradually increasing, rural people constitute, on an average, only about 10 percent of total enrolment in technical and vocational education at post secondary level, and about 28 percent at secondary and post secondary levels, taken together.

Barriers to Rural people's Education

Why do the statistics reflecting rural people's literacy, their enrolment in primary, secondary and higher education or their dropout rates read so poorly? What do they tell us about rural people's access to education? What systemic errors have aided in this and what can be done to remedy the situation? This section highlights some of the barriers to rural people's education, drawing on previous studies where possible.

Inadequate school facilities can sometimes serve as a deterrent for the girl child's participation in formal schooling. A report by the International Programs Centre for the U.S. Department of Commerce (Velkoff, 2008) lists the chief barriers to rural people's education in India as inadequate sanitary facilities, shortage of female teachers and gender bias in curriculum. A BBC news report by Kaushik Basu (2014) notes that a study of 188 government-run primary schools found that 59% of the schools had no drinking water and 89% had no toilets.

Another report in the Times of India (2005) cites a 2003/2004 data by National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration that reported only 3.5% of primary schools in Bihar and Chhattisgarh had toilets for girls. In Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh, the rates were 12-16%. Lack of toilets can be particularly detrimental to girl's school attendance, where the only option of attending to nature's call out in the open can pose both a physical as well as a psychological barrier.



Some of the barriers to rural people's education are sociological, rooted in gender stereotyping and gender segregation, and others are driven by economic concerns and constraints. A consequence of gender profiling and stereotyping is that rural people tend to participate more in programmes that relate to their domestic role. In institutions of higher learning, rural people are more inclined to enrol in courses traditionally considered more suitable for them such as arts and education, but less in courses related to science and technology. Likewise enrolment in vocational and technical fields has been male-dominated and providers of non formal education and training tend to conduct programs that relate to rural people's domestic role rather than their productive role. Families are also far less likely to educate girls than boys, and far more likely to pull them out of school, either to help out at home or for other socially induced normative considerations.

Parental reluctance to educate girls is a huge factor inhibiting their access to education. There exist various factors that fuel the choices parents in Indian society make with regard to refusing or limiting the education of the girl child. The way a society views its rural people determines the roles it delegates to them and the choices made for them or those they are allowed to make. When rural people are seen primarily as child bearers and rearers, then education is sometimes viewed as an unnecessary and extravagant indulgence.

A mindset that views education for girls as unlikely to reap any returns ascribes to the view that investing in the education of the male child is like an investment as the son is likely to be responsible for caring for aging parents, and rural people with largely a reproductive role in society have little need for education and any gains from it are anyway likely to accrue to the homes they go to after marriage. Economically poorer sections are often not in a position to send their children to school and are likely to invest in the male child than in the female child if they can for the above-mentioned reasons.

The middle class too often does not consider education for rural people an important means for preparing them as individuals in their own right. Amongst the upper middle class, where education of rural people may not be encumbered by economic constraints, discriminatory stances, such as rural people's education having lower economic utility or at best being a secondary wage earner, do exist and are pervasive in the attitudes and norms prevalent in society.

In many cases, rural people themselves are responsible for holding back their participation in education, working on preconceived notions that they will be unable to cope with the pressures of balancing work and home, assuming that mobility in employment can cause strain at the home front, or to confirm to socially induced images of femininity.



Studies conducted by the National Committee on the Status of Rural people in India (2014), covering a sample of 200 undertakings in the private and public sectors, reveal amongst others that rural people were restricted to a few limited types of occupation because of prevailing social attitudes regarding their aptitude, resistance of employers, denial of training opportunities in higher skills and their ignorance regarding the opportunities open to them.

Rural people and girls receive far less education than men, due to prevailing social norms and sometimes fears of violence. Pointing to the inhibitions parents feel, especially amongst the poor or backward sections of society, Sonalde Desai, in her book on Gender Inequalities and Demographic Behavior, argues that 'another disincentive for sending daughters to school is a concern for the protection of their virginity. When schools are located at a distance, when teachers are male, and when girls are expected to study along with boys, parents are often unwilling to expose their daughters to the potential assault on their virginity'.

Added to these biases and concerns is the social reality of the girl child as a vital resource in agriculture and household chores. Census reports and findings across various studies on the employment of rural people reveal that rural people workers in agriculture and related activities constitute about 88% (of the total female workforce) in

Discussion

In rural households and especially amongst the poor, the girl child is a valuable resource for housework and in the fields, an additional hand that cannot be wasted away through an education with almost invisible gains and far too heavy a price that most rural and poor families cannot afford to pay. Thus, a large proportion of the girls missing from schools are kept at home to tend to the responsibilities of housework and serve as free labor in the farms and fields.

It is interesting to observe that although rural people constitute a major chunk of the workforce in rural areas especially with respect to agriculture, the percentage of rural people in skilled, technical and professional level in agricultural machinery, production, marketing and extension services is just around 4% according to the UNESCO report. Here is a massive segment of working rural people badly in need of training through non-formal modes to help them adopt scientific and technological devices and practices to improve their work and productivity; however, their education for the same seems to be hugely lacking.

If we consider different stages or avenues for education, then education can be categorized in terms of primary and secondary school education, vocational and finishing school education, arts and sciences and professional-level education. Primary and secondary levels would encompass the



basic school level education while finishing school would refer to skills training for employment in sectors such as nursing and BPOs.

Arts and science education pertains to higher degree education in the field of arts and sciences with graduates in commerce, home science, sociology etc. falling in this category. Medical, engineering and other professional level education appears at the other end of the chain.

Issues of rural people's access to education are not uniform along the varying levels as the figure indicates. Although getting the girl child to enrol in primary schools seems to be the most problematic, once enrolled girl children are more likely to continue their primary education. At the secondary level of education, girls tend to drop out more than boys, again posing a challenge to retain the girl child for secondary education. Therefore, the focus primarily is on drawing girl children to enrol in schools at the primary level and ensuring their continuation for secondary education. Participation of rural people in vocational training and skills building, particularly in non-stereotyped ones, and in professional-level courses also requires particular attention as the statistics suggest.

Thus, addressing the issue of rural people's access to education may require a customized approach, with issues at different levels of education varying by region or state. For example, the BIMARU states (Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan,

and Uttar Pradesh) may require greater focus on primary and secondary level education for rural people given their poor literacy levels.

Urban pockets may want to focus more on finishing schools with more avenues for employment in catering services or BPOs, and rural areas could benefit with a greater concentration of vocational schools geared towards agriculture-related skills training. It may also be kept in mind that the impact of interventions for improving access to education may also vary according to the level. For example, attempts to ensure participation of the girl child in formal schooling may have a higher impact at the primary level, since there is a high probability that once enrolled girls will continue with their education.

Role of the Government

Being the largest machinery for dispensing and disseminating education, the role of the state in providing rural people access to education is most primal and influential. Over the years, the government's commitment to education articulated through the constitutional Act for Free and Compulsory Education until the age of 14, its National Policy on Education, or its various schemes and initiatives to promote the education of rural people all have been oriented towards enhancing rural people's access to education.

The Mahila Samakhyia program was launched in 2008 in pursuance of the goals of the New Education Policy for the



education and empowerment of rural people in rural areas, particularly of rural people from socially and economically marginalised groups. Rural people from remote, underdeveloped areas or from weaker social groups across more than 21,000 villages fell under the Mahila Samakhyia Scheme. Apart from provisions for education the program also aims to raise awareness by holding meetings and seminars at rural levels.

Another government initiative, the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), was started in 2011, with the intent to provide education to children between 6 and 14 years by 2010. The program focuses especially on girls and children with challenged social or financial backgrounds, charged with providing infrastructure and relevant resource material in the form of free textbooks to children in remote areas. The effectiveness of the program is yet to be measured.

Although these various endeavors of the government have, over time, yielded significant results, especially with respect to increasing literacy levels amongst rural people, gender disparities continue to persist, more so in rural areas and amongst disadvantaged communities. Many villages continue to not even have a school, fewer than one third of India's primary and middle-school teachers are rural people and schools have remained inflexible to the labor demands of girls as various reports suggest. The question of improving rural people's access to education then remains, beyond the structural changes, at a deeper level one

of a sociological change rooted in changing mindsets and empowering rural people, to challenge the assumptions we hold as a society about the role of rural people in the labour market and the value of educating rural people.

The attempt of the state thus far has been a blanket approach to address the issue of access to education for rural people. Its various initiatives such as the Sarva Siksha Abhyan have largely focused on spearheading education access for all across the country. Although these efforts are commendable, a more customized approach may be required as discussed earlier. Approaches for addressing the issues would differ based on the particular requirements of the region. Enhancing literacy levels should take priority in states with lower literacy rates through sustained interventions and programs designed for the purpose, while in other areas where basic education issues may be addressed, for example states such as Kerala, employable skills and professional-level education efforts may warrant greater attention to address the issue of migration.

Although the government and various voluntary organizations engage in various attempts to sensitize the local population to the need for rural people's education, much needs to be done in this area. Unless parents of the girl child see value and merit in sending the girl child to school, they will resist doing so and instead prefer to use her help in household chores or agricultural activities. Institutes of higher education such

as the IIMs and other management schools can lead the way by designing programs using marketing and selling skills to facilitate dialogue and build greater awareness about the benefits of educating the girl child.

Sensitization and awareness building for rural people's education

Rural immersion programs for management students, especially in regions where the participation rate in schools is particularly low, will pave the way for better understanding and awareness of the differing needs and constraints of the intended beneficiaries. Parental reluctance can be targeted and stymied through such interaction, with a discussion of the various options and avenues that education can open up building awareness, and joint exploration facilitating alternate solutions keeping in mind the needs of the target population. Institutes of higher learning such as the IIMs, IITs, NITs, TISS, JNU etc. can lead the way by partnering with the state governments in the region to spearhead such an initiative.

In rural areas, where enrolment of rural people in education is rather low, mechanisms need to evolve such that the schools are more accessible for the girl child as well as the psychological and sociological barriers to sending the girl child to school are overcome. An approach that ensures the schools go to the girls instead of the girl child having to struggle to reach the school

is one possible direction. For example, the concept of mobile schools in far-flung rural areas where the teacher and the classroom can be made mobile is likely to reach far more girl children and also effect parental sensitization for education of the girl child in the process.

Similarly, other mediums can be explored such as video and tele schooling, imparting education through e-choupals and panchayats, and tie-ups with mobile health clinics to get the school to reach the girl child rather than have them labour to reach the schools. A segmented approach will have to consider how best to address the particular requirements and needs of the region, depending on the potential for tie-ups and alternative media that can be used to deliver education.

A recurring concern is that of poor infrastructure in schools, such as provision for toilets for rural people, that specifically addresses the needs of the girl child. While every school needs to have adequate facilities such as drinking water and toilets for both men and rural people, the fact that these are currently not in place indicates perhaps the lack of will or the fund and resource crunch at the local level.

A way out might be to tie up with the NREGS (National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) that focuses on developmental projects while ensuring minimum 100 days of employment with education-related projects. State governments can introduce projects under



the NREGS that focus on providing adequate infrastructure in schools, with particular attention to the specific and differing needs of the girl child. This will jointly address the NREGS objectives as well as assure the female population of adequate school facilities.

The role of legislation and government intervention is one of the most powerful and effective tools to remedy systemic errors and imbalances prevalent in any society, which continue to be sustained over a period of time. A form of affirmative action, akin to other affirmative actions that provide for reservation to SC/ST and OBC in institutes of higher education, reservation for rural people in education can potentially reduce the disparity in education access and enrolment, and therefore opportunities made available to rural people. Although government intervention may not always be desirable, there is no denying that the reservation policy for 'backward castes' has benefited a section of the population and has been instrumental in correcting existing social imbalances.

Extending the same logic, since rural people have continued to be inadequately represented across the education value chain, necessitating a certain percentage of rural people participation across various levels through required legislation and reservation will not only ensure fair representation but also encourage schools and institutes to actively devise means and programs to attract rural people to their portals. Additional subsidies and incentives

can further augment such structural mechanisms to ensure gender parity in education.

Conclusion

One may ask why education of rural people is even important, or why the state ought to focus on it, beyond improving the numbers and statistics to reflect figures at par with the rest of the developed world. Is it a mere image building exercise in an attempt to stay on top of the numbers? Although that may be equally important, there are more to accrue for the individual, family unit and ultimately the nation, with investment in education of its rural people. Neglecting the education of rural people, who constitute nearly half of the population, does not auger well for the development of any nation.

Beyond the obvious imbalance in the labor pool, education for rural people is an important determinant of their enhanced self-esteem and self-confidence, helping to build a positive image, developing their ability to think critically, fostering better decision making and helping them make more informed choices about health, employment and even the education of their children. Education will not only ensure more participation in developmental processes but also enhance awareness of rights and entitlements in society, so that rural people can enhance their participation in society on an equal footing in all areas. The economic independence that education brings is an added incentive. Economic independence and awareness will help



curtail the vicious cycle of reinforcing negative stereotypes and aid rural people in charting paths as individuals in their own right, contributing to society, polity and the economy.

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