19 | Innovations in Education of Marginalised Children
Vasu Dev Bhasin

Introduction

In India, children constitute about 46.2% of the total population, which is world's largest child population in any country. Millions of out-of-school children are left totally unserved by formal school system and only 40% of adolescents attend secondary school. India has more than 25 percent of the world's out-of-school children. Thus a large number of children are outside of any educational system. These children belong to disadvantaged or minority communities, migrant families, and the urban poor, or are working children, children with special needs, or children in difficult circumstances. Given the diversity of such groups across India, each group faces challenges that needed to be addressed with special initiatives. Malnutrition, child labour, and adult illiteracy all some of the factors that contribute to the number of Indian children out of school. Around 125 million children in India are chronically malnourished, and one in every six of them is engaged in child labour. Improving access, equity, and equality of educational services offered to children throughout India are some of the challenges for the existing educational system.

Education plays an important role in achieving sustainable all round growth and development of the society. The educational institutions are expected to equip children to the best of their ability for securing a meaningful place in the society and thus fostering a process of developing an egalitarian society (Bandyopadhyay, 2006). As mentioned above a large number of children in India are excluded from the educational system and this means that they cannot participate meaningfully in the economic, social, political and cultural life of their communities (Maheshwari, 2012).

Marginalised Groups

The concept of Deprived/ Marginalised Groups is generally used to analyse socio-economic, political, and cultural spheres, where disadvantaged people struggle to gain access to resources and have full participation in social life. In other words, marginalised people might be socially, economically, politically and legally ignored, excluded, or neglected, and, therefore vulnerable. People who are deprived/ marginalised are outside the existing systems of protection and integration. This limits their opportunities and means for survival. Marginalisation can be due to class, in relation to specific social, cultural, economic and political conditions, as well as ideological systems, social awareness, and human action (Maheshwari, 2012). Many communities, a result of colonisation, experience marginalisation and face discrimination.

The marginalised groups lack the required social and cultural capital to participate in the mainstream development processes. Their social networks are weak and vulnerable. They are deprived of access to resources, such as, economic, educational, cultural, and other support systems. This creates social isolation and limits their participation in the development process. The ability for many to find work or gain education in a suitable area has been hampered by physical, social, and economic barriers, marked by regional variations and socio-cultural biases.

Policies on various aspects of education (for example, teacher recruitment and qualifications) vary across states, as does the availability, quality, and efficiency of investment in education. The marginalised out-of-school children belong to disadvantaged or minority communities, migrant families, and the urban poor, or are working children, children with special needs, or children in difficult circumstances; a disproportionate number of them are girls. Given the diversity of such groups across India, these groups face challenges that needed to be addressed with special initiatives (World Bank).

Education for All

Efforts have been made to make education accessible to all. However, there is wastage and stagnation in education. There are economic, social and bureaucratic reasons that hinder the education of children coming from lower strata of society. Although India ranks a low fourth in South Asia in terms of both adult literacy rate and youth/child literacy, several achievements have been recorded according to the government data, in the field of education since independence. India has managed to reduce poverty from 46 percent in the mid-1980s to around 34 percent in 2004-05; this is still high and continuing this improvement trend poses a huge challenge. The average literacy rate was 65% in 2001 (up from 18% in 1951). The number of uneducated persons declined for the first time since Census 1951 by almost 32 million in absolute terms between 1991 and 2001. Illiteracy has come down from 35 percent to 26 percent between 2001 and 2011.

The passage of the Right to Education Bill in 2009 marked a major milestone in India's history. The Right to Education Act 2009 guarantees free and compulsory education to all children in the age group of 6-14 years. However, there are several stumbling blocks on the road towards achieving the goal of universal education in the country. It is believed that it would require massive mobilisation on an unprecedented scale and seamless collaboration between the government, businesses and social organisations to enroll every eligible child in school.

This makes the role of social non-profit organisations even more critical as they seek to supplement, complement or substitute the formal education system in the country and reach out to the excluded, underprivileged and challenged sections of society.

Under the aegis of the government's flagship *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA) programme, over 98% of children in India have access to schooling within one kilometre of their habitation and almost 92% to an upper primary school within three kilometres of their habitation. However, this is the only part of the story. Research indicates that learning outcomes in government primary schools in India are well below acceptable standards. Moreover, the quality of students across different states is varied. Evaluations by the government and NGOs across several districts highlight alarming deficiencies in children's learning per their stated grade level (CII, 2013). The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), conducted each year since 2005 in all rural districts of the country, shows that in 2010, only 53% of grade 5 students in rural India could read a grade 2 level text, and only 36% could solve a three digit by one digit division problem. This indicates that a vast proportion of grade 5 students lack the very basic skills expected of them.

It is found that across different grade levels, a student's pace of learning is much lower than what is desired of them by textbooks and learning material. The quality of teaching also requires discernible improvements. Further, honing creative skills such as writing,

drawing, painting, etc., receive limited attention. Indian schools also lack an environment where students are encouraged to ask questions. On the contrary, India's education system places significant emphasis on learning by rote. The RTE is a step in the right direction as it aims to address several of these deficiencies. However, universalisation of education cannot be achieved unless there is intervention at the community, household as well as school level and it is only the NGOs which are equipped to work at all these levels. The Education for All (EFA) and SSA also make copious references to Education Guarantee Scheme and Innovative/ Alternative Education with extremely poor allocation/resources.

Role of NGOs in Education

NGOs innovate, fill part of the huge gaps (80 to 100 million out-of-school children) and compliment Government efforts towards EFA and make contribution to reach marginalised children. This makes community-based alternative education models all the more relevant.

A non-profit registered NGO based at Gurgaon was set up in 1996 as an endeavour to give a new lease of life to underprivileged children. It was when a group of like minded, concerned and committed citizens were driven by the wholehearted passion to better the conditions of the large number of children of construction workers and migratory labour in Gurgaon. Their zeal to make a difference resulted in Sankalp. The first school was started under a tree with 30 children, and now it has grown to being multi-functional and multi-locational reaching out to more than 900 beneficiaries.

The NGO is firmly committed to provide quality education and holistic development of marginalised children to enable them to reach their full potential and contribute to their community and world as responsible and productive individuals. The motto was a powerful equation that meant to make these children realize their dreams i.e *Sakar Hote Hain Sapney.*

Continuous improvements and innovations are being carried out in areas of managing and imparting quality education to marginalised children and the same are summarised below.

Mobilising Children from Street to School

Bringing street children to schools is a hard task and requires lot of persuasion of the marginalised community dwelling in slums for the reasons that their parents are mostly illiterate and struggling to meet two ends meet, have lost hope for future and resigned to their fate without any long term positive prospective of lives of their children. Certain innovative activities undertaken by the volunteers help in reaching out to the marginalised children. These are:

- Survey of slum areas and construction sites to gather data of kids, 4-16 years,
- Hold motivational talks with opinion leaders on importance of education,
- Hold street plays to glorify role and importance of education in one's life,
- Offer target linked incentive for kids enrolment for opinion leaders, and
- Bring a friend to school campaign with existing kids in school.

Lots of gaps exist in desired delivery of government lead programs to impart primary education to marginalised children, thus offering opportunities to NGO and community to fill these gaps. In a unique model under which any NGO can collaborate with government

schools to offer their underutilised infrastructure to operate schools for providing quality education to marginalised. Such an innovative initiative has been taken by Sankalp. Further a volunteer based management team comprising professionals and educationists coordinates with local community, individuals, corporates, foundations, and other NGO, to mobilise various resources required to operate the organisation effectively. From 30 children in 1996 under a tree, *Sankalp* has grown to three schools with over 900 beneficiaries after 16 years.

The students coming from nearby slums lack basic hygiene, manners, discipline and motivation to attend school regularly. Thus an introductory course is conducted for three months where basic manners are taught and basic education is provided with emphasis on games, drawing, painting and music. With the objective to provide right kind of education to the children any time at their pace admission is done throughout the year with no restriction on age. The children are helped to grow at their own individual pace ensuring holistic development of every child's personality. As the students cannot get any help in studies from their parents, the volunteers with the NGO help the weak students.

Proper care and guidance from parents is the birth right of every child. These children are deprived of even this basic right by their own illiterate and poor parents who are working late hours. Underprivileged children mostly suffer from emotional and psychological problem which affects their behavior, concentration and interest in studies. Teachers, volunteers and counsellors help them overcome their emotional problems.

Innovative Steps Taken

It is often difficult for education systems to reach and retain children from marginalised groups (both physically and metaphorically). These children are often out-of-school, at the bottom end of the distribution for years in basic education, and heavily under-represented in secondary education. Marginalised adults are often illiterate, and lacking in opportunities for skills development. In the area of learning achievement, children from marginalised social groups are more likely to experience poor quality education, and to leave school and enter adulthood with poor skills. Certain innovative steps can be taken to ensure that students find school interesting and do not drop out. In addition to this focus was on the overall personality development of the child. Some of the initiatives which can help in ensuring this are mentioned below:

Healthy mind in healthy body: As healthy body is essential for a healthy mind, annual medical checkup of the children can be made mandatory with provision for medical aid as and when required. NGO's and community welfare organisations working with marginalised children do take up various initiatives to ensure health of the marginalised children. For example, the NGO running *Sankalp* School has helped in carrying out over 20 cardiac surgeries for underprivileged. Schools for marginalised should also provide nutritious mid-day meal every day to all the students, with milk and fruits atleast once a week.

Developing self-confidence, leadership and sharing qualities: It is important to develop self esteem in the students from marginalised groups. Children from marginalised groups often have low self-esteem and leave school early. Many innovative steps can be taken to strengthen their self belief and inculcate leadership qualities in these children. Various efforts can be taken in this direction. At the NGO *Sankalp* every student is given a responsibility like Notebook Manager, Uniform Manager, Discipline in Class Manager,

Neat Classroom Manager and Joy of Giving Manager (one who helps weak students in class or anyone who needs any help) for a week. Students feel empowered and enjoy this activity.

Steps to reduce dropout rate in school: High dropout rate is a big challenge in schools dealing with marginalised children because the target group is slum children who have unstable life due to migratory nature of jobs of their parents. Most of the times due to poverty, children in the age group of 6-14 are put to work to earn some money by their own parents. Various steps can be initiated to reduce dropout rate with positive results like:

– Rewards for 85-100% attendance, regular work, punctuality, good behavior and creative activities in a month.

– Regular counselling of students and their parents to tackle high absenteeism.

– No bag day on every Saturday. This day can be devoted to skill development activities like games, dance, music, painting and mehandi on hands.

– Visits to corporate and public schools can be arranged to envision the possibilities that education can provide them. Students gain a lot of confidence from these visits.

– Computer education not only helps in reducing drop-out rate but also improves the attendance.

At the *Sankalp* School these steps have helped to reduce the dropout rate from 45% to 25%.

Girl child education and retention: There is a need for greater emphasis on motivating the girl child for education. Proper counselling of both the parents and the girls on Right to Education, Right to Equality, Right to Protection from Exploitation and Abuse helps in encouraging them. Special counselling can be given to girl students to make them aware of the importance of cleanliness. Sex education can also be provided to them. Various incentives given to the girl student at the completion of a particular class can go a long way in motivating them to continue with the studies. For example in case of *Sankalp* School, the prize of a bicycle to every girl student on completion of Class V has helped in making school and studies attractive to them, and the girl child ratio has improved from 15% to 40% over the period.

It is extremely important to inculcate secular values in the children. If the students get to participate in different festivals like Holi, Diwali or Christmas, it helps to develop secular culture and vision of national heritage.

Students take a lot of interest in learning computer. The incentive of computer education also attracts them to school. In case of *Sankalp* School it is found that there is 100% attendance on the days when computer classes are held. This school has taken help from the corporate sector in the endeavour to provide computer education to the marginalised children right from class 3. In order to make the learning process interesting to students, audio-video medium of instruction can be used effectively. Students enjoy and learn better in this manner. Therefore, DVDs on every subject can be shown as a medium of instruction.

Teachers form the most essential component of the entire system of providing education to the marginalised children. Proper training of the teachers helps in ensuring better education for the children. This should be an ongoing activity to enable them to handle underprivileged children in a better way. These children once out of school need continued help and guidance to carry on with the education. The coordinators can be so trained and instructed to keep track of these students, and help and guide them from time to time.

Conclusion

It is well known that education for underprivileged children is the key to the progress of the nation itself. However, the magnitude of efforts required to make every child in the country literate is very huge. This initiative is a small contribution for the betterment of marginalised children. It is a collaborative effort which encourages all individuals to come forward to participate in the process of nation building through education.

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