

EDUCATION FOR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION: A COLLECTIVE STEP FORWARD

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Education needs to be a positive force in building peaceful communities in a rapidly changing world. Thus, the educational programmes and structures are being looked upon to take the responsibility of nurturing religious pluralism and spirituality in society.

India has made significant progress on the educational front. The crudest measures show that the percentage of literates in India is 65, according to the 2001 census. By and large the improvement made at different levels of education: primary, secondary, higher and technical education has been quite substantial. However, despite these achievements, educational development in India suffers from two serious drawbacks. The first is that the progress made by geographical regions and social groups differ considerably. Literacy in rural India is 59 per cent in comparison to the urban literacy rate of 80 per cent,

as well as substantial inter-state and inter-district variations in educational advancement. Across social groups also the educational achievements differ; the literacy rates among the weaker sections are substantially lower as compared to other groups. Probably the most pertinent is the gender gap in education that still exists after fifty years of planned development. As per the 2001 census, the gender gap in literacy rates (i.e. the difference in the literacy rates of males and females) in India is 25 per cent for rural areas and 13.4 per cent for urban areas.

The role of education

Rightly, alarms were raised in various sectors regarding the quality of our education. As Prof. D.S. Kothari, an eminent Indian educationist put it: "Knowledge is vitally important; but if it is to transform society from a state of

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relative stagnation to one of dynamism and progress, there must be a general willingness and determination to make use of it in the service of the community".¹

This statement, made more than thirty five years ago finds favour with individuals who are concerned about the direction Indian education is moving towards in building a strong nation.

Education is perceived as the most important tool for both accumulation of social assets and formation and accumulation of social capital. This was proved by research across disciplines, over time. This is also why educational development occupies a central position in social development in any society. Those countries where the levels of education are low or achievements are biased, the aim should be either to improve educational levels or reduce inequalities.

A society's progress is dependent mainly on its capability in the acquisition and accumulation of social assets. The pace at which this happens, the processes involved, whether the accumulation occurs due to the improved development indicators of selected sections of society, all would have an effect on the potential impact on quality of life of the population. For instance, accumulation of social assets can be improved substantially by focusing on the developmental efforts of selected sections of the population, say, males or the rich. In such cases, the implications of this accumulation for social transformation would be vastly different as compared to the improvements brought about in a more equitable way.

An equitable way of social transformation means basic needs of

people are placed before predatory pursuits of economic growth. It recognizes that health, well-being, security of people depend upon fair distribution of resources and power. It involves people's participation in decision-making concerning their lives.²

In other words, the effect of social assets on societal change would depend upon the quality of accumulated social assets. One may think of education (facilities, levels, quality, and equality across sections), health, etc as social assets and the advances made in these sectors result in the accumulation of social assets. Such accumulation is expected to put society on the path of progress and since the accumulation would not be reversed (in the natural course) the progress itself cannot be reversed.

The formation of 'social assets' is crucial for a society's progress. Social capital formation can be conceived as a result of accumulation of social assets. Thus, in contrast to the improvement in levels, facilities, quality and equity in social development indicators (which forms the basis of the concept 'accumulation of social assets') the term social capital would mean those characteristics of social organisations such as **networks**, **norms** and a **social trust** that would enhance co-operation and co-ordination for mutual benefit. Working together is easier in a community blessed with substantial stock of social capital.³

Lack of preparation for educated in civic managements

Civic engagement of people, particularly, of the educated is an expected primary outcome of social development and a prerequisite for social transformation. In this context, do the

educated in India sufficiently involve themselves in civic activities or are they becoming more and more self centred? Does the present education system provide enough awareness and knowledge about the importance of civic engagement and avenues to participate? Do the educated across various social groups have equal opportunities to engage themselves in building social capital? How far are the existing inequalities responsible in preventing people from productive participation in civic activities?

Civic disengagement of the middle class

There is an emerging concern about the civic disengagement of middle class Indians. Disintegration of joint families into nuclear units, rapid urbanization, rising aspirations, consumerism, the information and communication explosion consequent to the globalization process are regarded as the main culprits of this trend. Constructive solutions must be found to disengagement which, if allowed to continue unabated would result in the deterioration of social capital and would seriously hamper the social transformation process.

The middle class in India forms about 60 per cent of India's population, if the middle-middle and upper middle income categories are included. This means that more than 600 million Indians would fall in the middle class category.⁴ If a large section of this category could be blamed for their declining social responsibilities evident from civic disengagement trends, then what can India hope for in the future? This situation can be improved in two ways: one is, to consciously introduce the concepts of civic engagement responsibilities in the existing education system in a manner which would attract the attention of students. Only learning by-

heart the civics lessons would not be sufficient to motivate students in civic participation. Further, new avenues with equal access for all should be created for participation in schools, colleges, universities as well as community development activities.

A second way of dealing with the problem is by empowering (education in its true sense would lead to empowerment but is constrained by the effect of other factors) the educated who are from the weaker sections. Among them are the educated females, the disabled, persons from low-income families who despite being well educated are not able to find opportunities to participate or even when opportunities exist, the scope of participation is very limited. In both cases, along with appropriate policy changes and programme introduction of the government, voluntary organizations can play a vital role, especially in illustrating the effectiveness of innovative models of civic engagement.

Vital role of voluntary organisations and people's movement

The voluntary sector in India and other countries is playing a vital role in advocacy, training, networking through empowering the vulnerable groups viz, children, youth, disabled, elderly and families at risk. There are voluntary organizations in India like FPAI, SEWA, Spastics Society of India, YUVA, Childline, KRIPA Foundation and several others who work with different groups and engage in creating 'social assets'.

The organisation, Technology and Social Health (TASH) Foundation is working with communities living in the slums of Mumbai.⁵ These slum settlements have become an inevitable adjunct to the growth of the metropolis and continue to attract

migrants from all over the country. The down side is the appalling living conditions, bereft of basic civic amenities and the exploitation by civic, government workers, politicians, religious fundamentalists and the local mafia. The coping resilience and approaches to survival is ample proof that human beings are highly adaptable.

***Empowering the vulnerable:
youth and women***

The youth form an important part of society who influence and shape the society's future. They are full of optimism, hope, enthusiasm which needs to be channelised in a positive direction. Education is a continuous learning process for youth - be it formal or informal learning. There are several forces in a community – both positive and negative – which influence young minds.

In a community development process, youth are involved as major participants of the programme. In the *Samarth* project, (founded by the Italian Association Amicideraoul Follereay), of TASH, both persons with disabilities and able-bodied youth form an integrated team of volunteers. Through their involvement in the community, they have assumed the role of community leaders, developed self-identities and have earned respect in their neighbourhood by their sincerity and commitment. For example, *Pravin*, a resident of Lumbini Baug or *Sunita* of Bhimwadi at Mumbai have assumed the role of leaders or contact points in the community to whom people come with their queries or to seek information. Though they have no formal education, they have developed leadership and communication skills, are sensitive to people's needs and are constantly improving themselves.

This subtle process of transformation and change is illustrated through the

Samarth project which has several youth with disabilities who did not make any plans for their future five years ago. They had been whiling away their time in non-productive activities which would have yielded neither economic gains nor enhancement of self-esteem. But with continuous participation and involvement as volunteers in project activities, they realized that they needed to develop skills, acquire higher education and cultivate dignity of labour in order to contribute and be regarded as self-respecting citizens of the society. *Mahender* one of the young volunteers with polio began studying for his 10th standard after a gap of three years.

Shamim Momin, another bright girl with lower limb impairment, wants to be economically independent and be the breadwinner for the family as there are no sons in the family. This inner drive towards independence and excellence has been very rewarding. She has been excelling in her studies and is currently pursuing final year B. Com. She expressed her self-confidence in her own words; "I do not want to be an ordinary stone but a shining diamond in my life".

Although women in general are a vulnerable group they are a strong mental and balancing force in communities. They hold the reins at home and outside and are a stabilising factor for children and men in families. Women, with their resilience, patience, courage and perseverance have been able to face many difficulties in their lives and have emerged stronger and winners. The Project observed the transformation in many women in the community. Some striking examples are mothers of children with disabilities who have been faced with an additional challenging task of rearing such children. In some cases even two such children. It is the indefatigable efforts of mothers, performed with a smile that makes the child with a disability blossom

into a fine, balanced, confident, and well-adjusted adult.

Networking as a transformation in the education process

Networking and interdependence are an integral part of any community development process. It is a key ingredient in building the social capital of a community. The project *Samarth*, has been able to build close linkages with several support organizations, both governmental and non-governmental. This has helped in optimum and effective utilization of services and has helped in widening the scope and reach of the Project. It is largely impossible for any voluntary organization to be able to provide an umbrella of services independently. In order to increase the effectiveness of work, networking proves to be an ideal tool which helps all the concerned organizations in fulfilling their tasks. In the *Samarth* project, networking is a strength because it has been able to reach out to a large number of people by providing referral services backed by a strong follow-up mechanism. Be it in education, training, medical services, certification process, or provision of aids and appliances, it is through a strong networking process that the project *Samarth* functions.

The recent collaboration between TASH Foundation and all the DAV schools of the Western region in the form of 'Punyashree Project' offers scope for sharing the strengths and opportunities of education in the process of social transformation.

Revival of social trust

Good neighbours and neighbourliness is the challenge in inequitable situations in our fast changing society. In Gandhiji's words, "there is enough for every man's need but not enough for his greed". It is this concept of sharing and caring that

people need to adopt to bridge the widening gap between different classes in our society. Like in the West, India is slowly witnessing a decline in social connectivity. Studies show that the proportion of Americans who socialize with their neighbours more than once a year has slowly but steadily declined over the last two decades from 72 per cent in 1974 to 61 per cent in 1993. Interestingly, on the other hand, socializing with friends who are not a part of the neighbourhood appear to be on the increase, a trend that reflects that there is increasing social connections with people from the work place.⁶

A distinctive change in mindsets, life styles alone can bring about equilibrium in society where the gap between the rich and the poor reduces as years go by and our interactions with our neighbours increase. TASH Foundation through its advocacy and awareness programmes is trying to sensitize not only people from middle and upper-middle class families but also community residents to bring about changes in their life styles which would accelerate the rate of progress.

Samarth Project has several women volunteers from upper middle class families. They have not only been beneficiaries but also learners in the process. Echoing the sentiments of a senior volunteer, "visiting the slum settings of Govandi has been an eye opener for me and for many of my friends. Each time I come I see a difference and these experiences have been enriching my life, acquainting me with the harsher but true realities of life". This dimension of education which is more akin to sensitivity building, transcends the boundaries of textbooks and classrooms to the experiential settings of life.

The concept of good neighbourliness is also fostered within the community. A collective effort of families, individuals, and

professionals and of the neighbours is a key factor in sustaining the rehabilitation process. A neighbourhood survey by TASH Foundation found that the attitude and awareness levels of the neighbours had undergone a visible change. Their own perception of the abilities of disabled people, their attitudes, their beliefs had begun to change from disbelief, fear, mistrust to a more positive attitude of trust, hope, faith and above all a belief in the capacities of young individuals with disabilities. This is the transformation of neighbours through an experiential education process.

CONCLUSION

Education is not merely narrow or limited to classroom experiences but, a holistic and experiential learning aimed at social transformation.

The collective and collaborative effort of social institutions including families, educational institutions, state, voluntary sectors and most importantly, people themselves can bring about community effectiveness.

Social capital which, is considered as a vital ingredient in economic development

can be built through a regional network of indigenous grassroots associations, community groups, corporate sectors, schools, colleges, universities and other organizations. Educational policy makers need to move beyond debates about curriculum and governance to consider the effects of social capital. Education has to become *people-centric*.

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