

INVOLVING LOCAL COMMUNITIES IN RURAL SCHOOLS

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Undoubtedly India has made remarkable strides in educating its rural masses by fighting illiteracy and opening new avenues for its rural population. It's worth noting that when India got independence the rural literacy rate was just 12.1 per cent in 1951 but it reached to a respectable 67.8 per cent in 2011.

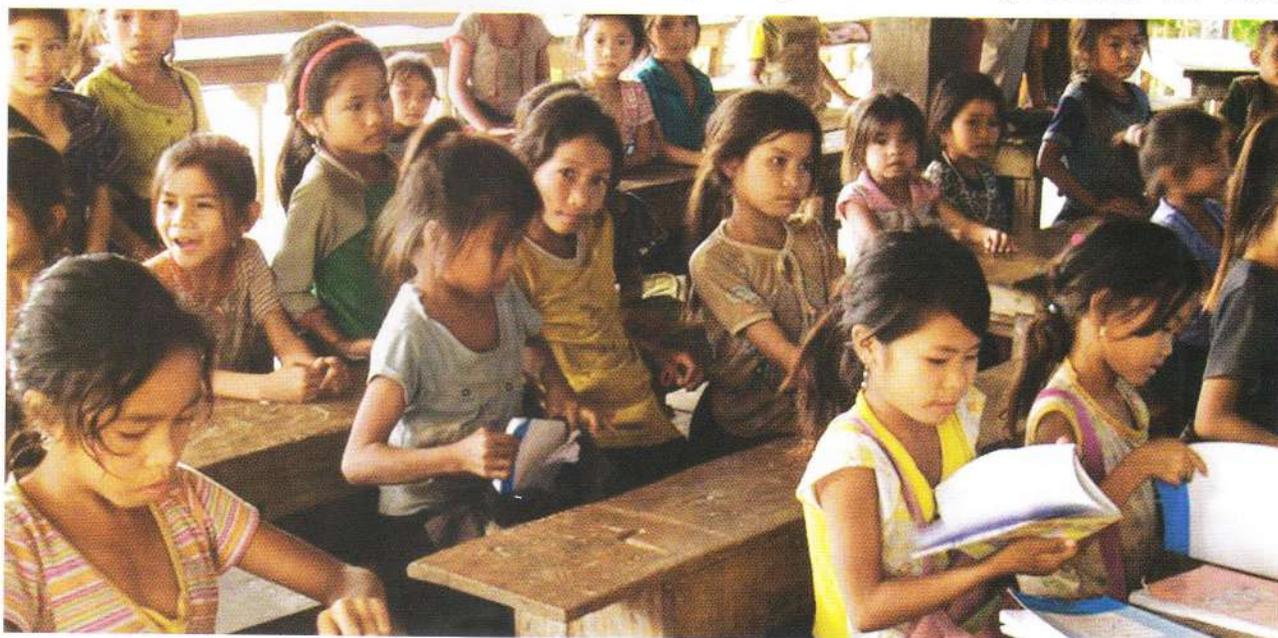
Educating and imparting quality education to the rural masses to empower and make them equal partner in the development process is one of the challenges India is still grappling with even after 72 years of independence. There is no doubt that India has made remarkable strides in educating its rural masses by fighting illiteracy and opening new avenues for its rural population. It's worth noting that when India got independence the rural literacy rate was just 12.1 per cent in 1951 but it reached to a respectable 67.8 per cent in 2011. It was not an easy task before the new government in 1950s. But enormous efforts by central and state governments in educating the rural masses in the last 60 years ensured more than five times growth in rural literacy rate.

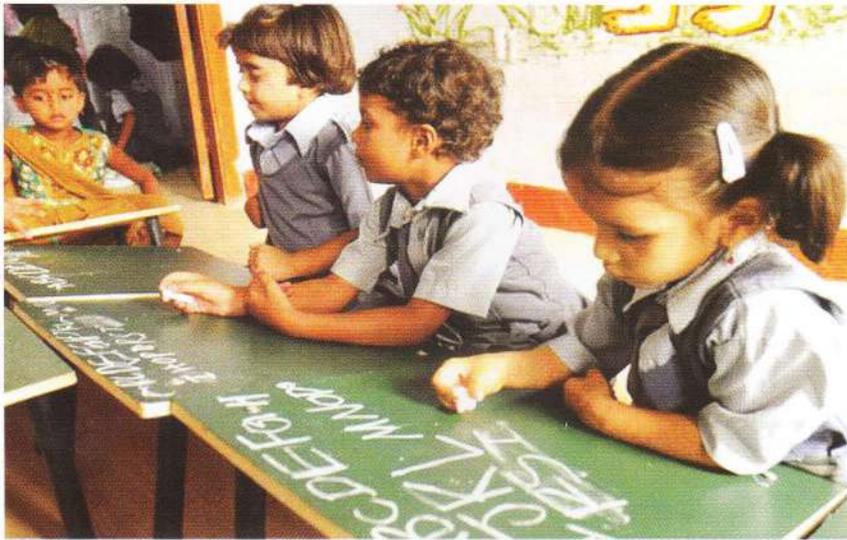
However, it's still an unfinished and humongous task to achieve 100 per cent literacy in rural masses especially among women, SCs/STs and marginalized sections of the society. The challenge is how to drastically improve female literacy rate which is still 58.75 per cent while literacy rate in SCs is 62.8 per cent and only 56.9 per cent STs are literate in rural

areas. But the bigger challenge is how to ensure access and equity in educational entitlement of the rural masses and simultaneously improve the quality of education in rural areas. It's because the real challenge is not just achieving 100 per cent literacy but providing quality education at every level to the rural masses to equip and empower them to realize their true potential.

Quality of Education

Despite the fact that India has made remarkable gains in achieving higher literacy among the rural masses in the last few decades the poor quality of education, drop out from the school and shortage of higher and technical/professional educational institutions in rural areas are some of the most pressing challenges before the governments and policy makers. While central and state governments have been able to quickly expand the network of schools and colleges in rural areas the quality of education is still not satisfactory. Number of surveys conducted either by non-governmental organizations like ASER





(Pratham) year after year indicate that more than 50 per cent children in class 5 are unable to read the text prescribed in class 2 or government's National Achievement Survey (NAS) which shows that the average scores in many grades and subjects still ranges between 40–50 per cent.

The situation in rural areas is more worrisome. While central and state governments have almost resolved the access problem in rural areas by providing primary schools in and around every habitation/village but surprisingly, according to the NITI Aayog majority of these schools have less than 50 students. These schools are also facing the shortage of qualified and trained teachers, perennial problem of poor infrastructure including no toilets or non-functioning toilets, no electricity, no running water, no library or computer labs, absenteeism in teachers and poor governance. Unfortunately, in public perception government schools are now synonymous to poor quality of education. Due to this wide spread perception substantial numbers of parents in rural areas too are not sending their children to the government school and in fact, preferring private schools. It is not surprising that the percentage of children going to private schools is increasing every year.

The conditions of rural high schools and colleges are not better either. It is certainly affecting the employability of young people from rural areas as employability is directly related to the educational outcomes. If the quality of rural education is poor in terms of basic skills, knowledge and language efficiency required for number of jobs, it will affect the chances of rural youth. On the other hand, it has another ramification for the country's growth

and development as India requires manpower with better schooling and skilling. Clearly, India may miss the much talked about 'demographic dividend' benefits if it fails to improve rural education as majority of workforce will come from the rural areas.

Finding Creative Solutions

Now, the real challenge is how to tackle the quality issue in school as well as college education in rural areas of the country? It genuinely requires out of box thinking to deal with this complicated challenge. But it's easier said than done. There is no dearth of good

ideas and suggestions on improving the quality and governance of education and making it vibrant and performing. In fact, there are dozens of reports by expert committees and groups offering hundreds of suggestions and excellent ideas to improve the quality of education in rural areas. But things are not improving as fast as one may expect.

Where to start? Firstly and most importantly the solution must come from the grassroots. Time has come to discard the 'top down' approach of policy formulations and instead go to the masses to find solutions to the grassroot problems. If rural schools and colleges are suffering due to poor governance, shortage of infrastructure, facilities and teachers the solution to these problems must come from the grassroots. It is very important to involve the local communities in rural areas as the most crucial stakeholder in educating the rural masses with quality education. They must take the ownership of rural education. Their active participation and engagement in the process of improving the quality of education in rural areas is a necessary condition for educating and preparing the rural masses for the future challenges.

Decentralization in School Management

There is no doubt that decentralization in school/college management and governance is the key for fixing and reviving the broken governance system of rural education in India. In this connection, the role of local bodies and self-help groups becomes most crucial in reviving and improving the quality of education in rural areas of the country. While local bodies like Panchayats, Block Development Committees (BDC) and Zila Panchayats are elected

and hence representative bodies of the rural communities, the self-help groups are grassroots initiatives by the local communities to work together and help each other for creating opportunities and opening the avenues for the financial betterment of the member families.

It is important to note that the local bodies are directly accountable to their electors. The members and head of the local bodies come from local villages and block and district and also most of the time present in their areas. Similarly members particularly women members of the self-help groups are also active members of the rural communities. Both local bodies as well as self-help groups are best suited to lead and manage the affairs of schools and colleges. They can play very crucial role in opening of the schools and colleges, developing its infrastructure and managing and maintaining it as well as in monitoring the performance of teachers and students.

Both can mobilize local communities to take the ownership of the local schools/colleges and motivate its members to contribute physically and financially (for example Shramdaan or giving land or other resources for school/college) in expansion and maintenance of the school/college infrastructure on regular basis. There are hundreds of examples in rural India where local communities have built and ran efficient and well performing schools/colleges. It is high time to learn, revive the spirit and replicate those examples.

Self Help Groups in Education

Self-Help Groups (SHGs) are now integral part of development process and discourse in India. The idea of SHGs articulated and promoted by Bangladesh Nobel laureate Mohammad Yunus in 1970s is now accepted by many developing countries including India. The central and state governments are incorporating and actively promoting SHGs in many development programmes. For example, SHGs are playing a very crucial role in implementation of DAY-NRLM scheme launched by the central government. SHGs are main drivers of financial inclusion. They are also actively used by the governments in service delivery.

These SHGs can be used in management and governance of rural schools on pilot basis after giving proper training and capacity building programmes. It will ensure local participation and monitoring in school management. SHGs know local problems



and issues and can offer local solutions to rural schools. In the beginning, on experimental basis the state governments can hand-over the operational management of five rural schools to different SHGs with a clear mandate and full financial as well as manpower support to improve the quality of education in three years time period. A local body like BDC of the area can monitor and review the functioning of those schools on periodic basis. There must be inbuilt system of reward and punishment for the success of this experiment.

Another area where SHGs can play an important role is managing the mid-day meal in rural schools. There are regular complaints appearing in news media regarding the quality of food, mismanagement and corruption in the ambitious mid-day meal scheme. Another problem of mid-day meal scheme is wastage of precious time of a teacher in overseeing the preparation of the mid-day meals in rural schools. To deal with it effectively, SHGs can be entrusted to manage and oversee the mid-day meal scheme in rural schools.

Similarly, SHGs can play important role in dealing with the rampant problem of teachers' absenteeism in rural school. Teachers should be accountable to the school management committee managed by a SHG. Also SHGs should have some say in teachers' transfers and postings.

To sum up, it is important to note that India cannot ignore the issue of quality of education in its rural areas. The time has come to involve local bodies and SHGs creatively and purposefully in revitalizing the rural education.

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