

Elementary Education in Social Transformation and Happiness – Economics and Relevance: An Indian experience

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ABSTRACT

“Nearly a billion people entered the 21st century unable to read a book or sign their names”. (refer: State of the World’s Children, 1999, UNICEF)

We are in that part of the globe which accounts for more than one third of the poor population of the world. It has to be understood that for a vast majority (poor as we call), absence of elementary education create a void at the start of their lives and crippled their existence. The meaning of Happiness to these endangered lots is so little and short lived that it is almost a misnomer. The root cause of poverty in the South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa is the absence of elementary education. Education is the most basic ingredient of capability building in Human beings. The discussion on happiness has to include the most neglected part of our world the vast poor rural segment. In the event that the National happiness does not address their basic happiness then it will fail to live up to its promise as envisioned in the wisdom of the King of Royal Kingdom of Bhutan, His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuk.

In my earlier papers on GNH, the focus of discussion was on capability development that is necessary for individual happiness. In line with the same thought process, this paper underlines that elementary education creates the basic platform for capability building. At the micro level capability development of the individuals are the corner stone for social transformation and National Happiness. In my last paper, I have mainly tried to find out the linkage between micro finance and capability building through the process of social transformation by improvement of living standard. That was mainly from the supply side of the equilibrium.

This paper will mainly examine the root problem in the capability development of individuals caused by absence of elementary education for achieving individual development as a part of a community. The first part of the paper will focus on the conceptual and theoretical framework of relevance of elementary education in capability building, bringing social transformation and happiness. The middle part will deal with economics of elementary education. And the final part will look for solution in terms of Indian experience – to bring out economics and relevance, which can be further researched and explored.

Education, Capability Building and Happiness

According to Capability Approach theory as propagated by Professor Amartya Sen, the main purpose of education is the development of capability to achieve valued functioning, instead of mental satisfaction or resource consumption. Mental satisfaction provides an inaccurate metric of Happiness due to the phenomenon of adaptive preferences. In similar way, resource consumption cannot be used as a metric of happiness because of inequalities in the ability to convert income and commodities into valued functioning. A study of 35 developing countries shows that educational attainment (as indicated by average years of schooling) has a significant effect on life expectancy independently of its effect by way of income growth. A 1% increase in per capita income increases life expectancy by 0.073954% while a 1% increase in average years of schooling directly increases life expectancy by 0.055324%.

Education helps an individual as a person having the ability to act (agency), to think and to communicate with others. A notion that is central in the capabilities approach is that of “agency”. In order for a person to take action he/she has to be the principal agent responsible for the present and future events of his/her life, to be *“someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her/his own values and objectives, whether or not we assess them in terms of some external criteria as well”* A Sen, *Development as Freedom*

The objective of “education for all” must be steered towards enhancing capabilities and enlarging choices and developing agency by building different dimensions of happiness. Educational content/delivery system must therefore be reviewed to remove the stereotypes and age old norms that persist.

Education, poverty and vulnerability

Human development aims at improving people’s capabilities and liberties in all dimensions: economic, social, cultural, political, ethical, and spiritual. For the sake of sustainable development it is necessary to define the elements that education must consist of in order to fight not only “poverty” of all types – monetary, poverty in living conditions, poverty in terms of potentiality; but also “vulnerability”.

The vulnerability of a person “is the probability of having his/her situation worsens when facing a dramatic event. Such a focus on vulnerability implies identifying the threats, and more generally the risks that people encounter, assessing their capacity to cope when faced with the realisation of such risks can help define the means required to overcome the social consequences related to this realisation”. Rousseau and Dubois (2001), “Reinforcing Household’s Capabilities as a Way to Reduce Vulnerability and prevent poverty in Equitable terms”

Enhancing the capability of a individual requires increasing the “ability” needed to escape poverty of all forms as well as “potentiality” to prevent people from falling into poverty. For disadvantaged groups, education is a means of fighting poverty and in the long term reducing their vulnerability to events that they face.

Education, Health, Nutrition

The relation between health and education is often perceived as a one-way street, with most discussions focusing on the role education can play in facilitating health awareness and improving the health status of individuals and communities. Usually left out of the debate is the critical and reciprocal link between health and education, specifically in relation to children, whereby poor health and nutrition work as a barrier to attendance and educational attainment/achievement. Children definitely do not receive adequate nutrition. Even if families have heard about balanced diet, safe water storing practices and importance of eating vegetables, they have not paid much heed to them.

There is a synergy between health, education and nutritional inputs in the overall development of children in different poverty situations and reflects on whether the proximal and distal environment - social, political and economic dimensions of health, nutrition, and education, promotes a holistic development of the child from the moment of conception till the formative stage.

Health and nutrition status of mother, the family, community, state, service delivery mechanisms, and the presence of NGOs all play important mediating roles in creating a supportive environment for holistic skills development of a child. Education identifies certain determining factors and developmental milestones across the stages, namely

- adequate nutrition and balanced diet,
- protection from illness and timely medical care,
- hygienic living conditions and
- clean drinking water,
- safe environment
- free from violence, abuse, bondage, hazardous work, and trafficking
- above all, mental and physical stimulation for all children.

In essence, successful primary school completion requires not only completion of five years of schooling. It also implies the ability to read and write with comprehension, be an active learner as well as develop self-learning capacity, ability to articulate/communicate, and develops positive self-esteem and self-confidence. The strength of education lies in its ability to integrate the physical and psychosocial development of children with the social, political, and economic dimensions of health, and nutrition.

Education and Child Labour

Modern State regards education as a legal duty, not merely a right. In developed and many developing countries, the employers are not permitted to employ child labour and the parents, even if they are poor, are not allowed to keep the children out of school. Compulsory education is the policy instrument by which the state effectively removes from the labour force.

India is a significant exception to the global trend toward the removal of the children from the labour force and establishment of compulsory primary education. Child labour are the offshoot of poverty but due to the direct absence of primary education. The effect of education on eradication of child labour system will be assessed with facts and figures.

Education, Gender and Social Equity

In all countries, especially in developing ones, there is a clear segregation by class or (minorities, backward and tribals) and gender (girl child) regarding the type of education and facilities. Issues like caste, social practices like untouchability or child marriage and spatial segregation on the basis of community and religion are pervasive in developing societies and have considerable impact on educational performance.

The class bias in Education is the direct byproduct of social, economic, cultural and political factors. In case of girl specific gender bias, patriarchal discriminator is adding to distortions in perceptions and programmes caused by social disabilities. The overall decline in access, infrastructure, functionality and quality affect all children. However owing to social inequalities and hierarchies, these factors affect the poor – among others, girls and socially deprived groupings – more than the relatively privileged class.

Elementary Education in India : Economics and relevance

- **More than 10 million children are still not in school**
- **Of the 0.77 billion illiterate adults worldwide, 0.26 billion are in India**

Professor Amartya Sen once wrote, "The remarkable neglect of elementary education in India is all the more striking given the widespread recognition, in the contemporary world, of the importance of basic education for economic development. Somehow the educational aspects of economic development have continued to be out of the main focus" in India.

This is really quite striking as in India the role and importance of basic education was recognized as early as at the time of independence. Article 45 of Indian Constitution lays down that the state is "to endeavour to provide within a period of ten years from the commencement of the Constitution, for free and compulsory education until they complete the age of 14". It is on account of non-implementation of the article, the Supreme Court had to pass a judgement in 1993 to make it a fundamental right.

According to Sen, the traditionally elitist tendencies of the ruling cultural and religious traditions in India may have added to the political problem. Both Hinduism and Islam

have, in different ways, had considerable inclination towards religious elitism, with reliance respectively on Brahmin priests and on powerful Mullahs. The elitist hold is quite strong in both these religions [even today]. This contrasts with the more egalitarian tradition of Buddhism. In India both ancient and modern biases shape policies reflecting prejudices of class divisions as well as traditional cultures, and that even left-wing political parties are not interested in combating inequalities.

Another significant fact to which Professor Sen has drawn attention is that the contrast between importance given to higher education and neglect of basic education is "intolerably large", and this inequality helps to sustain social disparities. And, as we all know, social disparity gives rise to human rights violation. Deprivation of basic education is one of the serious human rights violations.

In order to elucidate the economics and relevance of elementary education for social transformation and happiness, the paper will also cover the following :

- Current scenario of elementary education in India - both in quantitative (enrolment trend, out of school children, dropout rates), and qualitative terms mainly to show the economics and future relevance
- Critical issues and problems in the progress towards a fully literate populace
- Outlining future prospects and innovative ways to cover the divide - literacy campaigns, education of girls, childhood care and education, education of underprivileged, role of NGOs in education, enhanced role of civil society decentralized management and financing of elementary education etc. – mainly from the point of sound economics and relevance to Happiness.

Indian experience in this paper will be used as a metaphor of millions of under privileged people devoid of elementary education. Their plight in the pursuit of happiness will be analysed in order to bring about the necessary changes in the policy document and social discourse. The most important driver for happiness is the elementary education especially it is true for the poor. It will help them to break the shackles of poverty cycles themselves and will build their capabilities for valued functioning so that they can participate in the community as well as National Happiness. The paper will come up with certain indicators which will help in measuring happiness state of a society/ country in terms of elementary education.