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English Education: A New Mantra of Social and Economic Development in Rural India

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Abstract:

The role of education in social and economic upliftment is widely accepted. Gandhiji was of the opinion that no policy or programme can be successful in this country unless it improves the lives of millions of our people who live in rural areas. Almost 70% of our population still lives in villages. A large section of this population is extremely poor and is forced to live in some of the most inhuman conditions. Access to quality education can prove to be a big boon in breaking this vicious cycle of poverty on a large scale in the underdeveloped regions of our country.

English being an international lingua franca has huge transformative power in bringing about sweeping changes in rural India through skill development and access to modern technologies in the globalised world. The present paper attempts to analyze the role of English language education in social and economic development in rural India.

Keywords: Education, development, poverty, social and economic upliftment, lingua franca

Introduction

That which cannot be stolen
By thieves from where it is kept,
Or which cannot be washed away
By the rapids of unknown depths
Or which cannot be confiscated by kings
Or Ministers...
Is Learning
Learning is all you need for the future. (Ganadevihella)

In India, education has always held a very high and sacred position in our society. In fact we adore “*Maa Saraswati*” as the goddess of knowledge. This clearly highlights the amount of

significance we attach to education from the time immemorial. India had been a global guru in education and philosophy for many centuries but the arrival of British Raj in India, meant the demise of our educational excellence. Today we are clubbed among third world countries grappling with the problem of providing even basic minimum education to all our children.

In the recent history, education in India has been monopolized by a small section of our society, who might be termed as urban affluent elite but the majority of our population that still lives in villages is deprived of minimum basic education, left alone quality education. There is a unanimous view among our educationist, thinkers and academicians about the phenomenal power of education as an instrument of bringing social and economic revolution in rural areas. In the Third Five Year Plan (1961-62), The Planning Commission of India described education as “the most important single factor in achieving rapid economic development and technological progress and in creating a social order founded on the values of freedom, social justice and equal opportunity”.

The problem of rural India today is not as much the absence of infrastructure or the scarcity of resources as the lack of educational opportunity. Children in rural areas are still on the peripheries of our education system and policy makers, thanks to the faulty and misdirected schemes that failed miserably in yielding desired results in the past sixty five years. In underdeveloped regions, education is the only hope and possible answer to most of our problems. In an article in *Economic and political Weekly*, Anita Rampal notes that, “If education is really to be a means of reducing social inequities and redressing the skewed course of development followed in the last few decades, it shall have to be reckoned as a site of struggle for power... The educational discourse would need to consciously give voice to the silenced majority and redefine its objectives by valuing their lives on their term”.

The need of the hour today is to relate education with economics, especially in the rural areas, so that we can accelerate our efforts of growth and development and English can play a very significant role in this regard. In fact, English has great market value or potential to change the entire rural landscape. In an article written in *Guardian Weekly*(2011), Max de Lotbiniere states that, “A study into the economic impact of learning English in developing countries has concluded that the language can increase the earning power of individuals by around 25% and that developing needs access to English if they are to grow and position themselves in the global economy”.

Utility of English in Rural India

Today’s world is a market driven economy, where everything is determined by market forces. English is the language of business and international communication that has huge market value. If we succeed in tapping it and use it for creating knowledge based economy in rural area that can generate big employment for the rural sector then it can become a big accelerator and growth engine for our village economy, and the good thing with English Language in India is that both in urban and rural areas, there is a tremendous excitement for English learning and even the last member of our social pyramid is well aware about the opportunities that English offers for climbing social ladder and securing respectful position in society. In this connection D.Graddol (2010:120) notes, “Throughout India there is an extraordinary belief, among all castes and classes in both rural and urban areas, in the transformative power of English. English is seen not just as a useful skill, but as a symbol of better life a pathway out of poverty and oppression”.

From father of the nation to the late Prime Minister Shri Rajeev Gandhi and even the leadership of the present time, everyone has stressed the need of strengthening Panchayati Raj and developing our villages through Panchayats. In this connection special emphasis has been laid on introduction and extensive use of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) like internet and e-mail to access relevant information about their day to day needs and to connect with the global economy. But most of this relevant information is available in English only.

In a big country like ours with so much of linguistic diversity and scarcity of resources the cost of translation of all the relevant information in regional or local languages is neither possible nor practical. Therefore the best feasible option is to educate our rural population in English language so that they can find out the new techniques and practices that have come into use in the agricultural sector and improve their yield. They can also locate new markets for their farm products and get good prices. Apart from this they can also learn about new technologies and businesses in the small scale industries sector and establish it in their own villages which will arrest the migration of our rural youths to already overcrowded metros. A modern well trained and educated village youth will also encourage the big business tycoons, especially in industries like BPO and medium level engineering goods manufacturing companies to set up their units in the village areas.

English says Crystal (1997) “fosters cultural opportunity and promotes a climate of international intelligibility”. It has the largest corpus of literature, and the ability to read and write English would also mean that our rural people will have the access to the best available literature in the world that will transform them to become responsible citizens of the country; greatly aware about their rights and duties resulting in greater participation of the village community in the decision making process and governance.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that English cannot be a panacea for all the problems in the rural development sector, yet it has immense potential to drastically change our rural landscape if we use it properly. India demographically is a very young nation and more than 65% of our population is below 35 years of age, and the majority of it is in the rural area, if we infuse them with professional skills and competence to compete in the global world then it can work wonders of our economy and nation and help us to realize our dream of becoming a developed nation in a very short span of time.

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