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Universalisation of Elementary Education

INTRODUCTION

After the achievement of independence, free and compulsory elementary education has been given prime importance. The framers of the constitution of India recognised the need and importance of such an education. In fact, when the constitution of India came into force on January 26, 1950, education received added importance, and it became the responsibility of the people. Therefore, high priority was given to the programme of universalisation of primary or elementary education. As a result, every boy and girl in this country should receive a minimum standard of education.

MEANING

Free and compulsory education—Article 45 of the Indian Constitution states, “The state shall endeavour to provide within a period of ten years from the commencement of this constitution, for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years”. In other words, we are committed to universal, free and compulsory elementary education. Universalisation of elementary education in India means making education available to all children in the age group from 6 to 14 or in the classes from I to VIII. The word ‘state’ which occurs in Article No. 45 is defined as, “The Government and parliament of India and the government and the legislature of each of the states and all local or other authorities within the territory of India or under the control of the government of India”. Thus, we notice that

the responsibility for elementary education lies with the Central Government, the State Governments, the local bodies and voluntary organizations.

The concept of universalisation of elementary or primary education signifies that education is for all and not for a selected few. Thus, it implies that education is the birth right of every child and it should be made free and compulsory upto the age of 14. Therefore, the State should provide elementary education to all children irrespective of their caste, colour, creed, sex, language, religion, socio-economic status and place of birth or living. Thus, all children of the country, whether rich or poor, living in rural or urban areas and in remote places should be provided with the facilities of elementary education.

NEED FOR FREE EDUCATION

Education should be free for all boys and girls between the age of six or seven and fourteen because it is the birthright of all the human beings. Gandhiji believes that primary education should be available to all. He observes "I think we can postpone the question of higher education for sometime, but the problem of primary education cannot be postponed even for a minute". Thus, the important prerequisite of basic education is to extend the torch of knowledge to all. This is because India is a poor country where all parents cannot afford the cost of education. Some parents cannot even afford to send their children to school. Education, therefore, should be made available free of cost. If it is so, parents will not consider it a burden. Moreover, in a democratic society, education of the masses becomes necessary to ensure its success and progress.

NEED FOR COMPULSORY EDUCATION

Education is regarded as the third eye of human beings which gives light. It is the remover of illiteracy, ignorance, superstition and poverty. But the majority of the people do not realise the real value of education. Some do not admit their children in schools due to their ignorance, illiteracy and poverty. Therefore, education should be made compulsory for every child. Children should be admitted to schools under the system of compulsory education. Some psychologists have proved that the minimum age required for education is six years. There is an apparent coordination in the physical organs of the child. Therefore, a duration of eight years makes education a complete entity or a terminal stage. This will make the child self-sufficient after the completion of eight years of education. For all these reasons education should be made free, compulsory and universalised for all children from 6 to 14 years regardless of their socio-economic conditions. Compulsory school education has become a part and parcel of the civilized world.

UNIVERSALISATION OF ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

Universalisation of elementary education may be defined as the provision of primary education to all children in the age group from 6 to 14 years or in the classes I to VIII. This also means that all children of the country either rich or poor, living in towns or rural areas are to be provided with the facilities of primary education. At present, we may think that universalisation of elementary education is a free education upto the primary stage. In developed and advanced countries free education means no fees, free books, and stationery, free mid-day meals and free school transport. But in our country free education means education "free of tuition fees" and other facilities free of cost.

IMPORTANCE OF UNIVERSALISATION OF ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

Primary education plays an important role in laying the proper foundation for the child's cultural, emotional, intellectual, moral, physical, social and spiritual development. It produces children with sound and balanced personalities. The development and progress of a country depends solely on the universalisation of primary education. In the words of J.P. Naik, "The progress of primary education is an index of the general, social and economic development of the country as a whole". That is why Article No. 45 of the Indian constitution stresses on free and compulsory education for all children, until they complete the age of fourteen.

1. Elementary education is a fundamental right of every citizen. In 1993, the Supreme Court of India declared, "The citizens of the country have a fundamental right to education. Every citizen of this country has a right to access free education until he completes the age of 14 years.
2. In 1945, Mahatma Gandhi in his letter to Nehru pleaded for the villages to be the focal point of free India's political structure, economic and developmental policies. But Jawahar Lal Nehru replied him, "Indian villages are intellectually and culturally backward from where no progress could be made". It is a fact that developmental policies do not reach the villagers who constitute nearly 60 per cent of the total population of our country. The basic reason for this failure is that most of the people have not received elementary education. Therefore, universalisation of elementary education is important for:
 - (a) Eradication of poverty
 - (b) Fostering economic progress
 - (c) Managing the growth of population
 - (d) Creating a clean and healthy environment

3. There cannot be effective empowerment of our Indian people without universal elementary education.
4. J.P. Naik, an eminent educationist of our country has rightly stated, "The progress of primary education is an index of the general, social and economic development of the country as a whole".
5. Primary education plays an important role in laying the proper foundation for a child's cultural, emotional, intellectual, moral, physical, social and spiritual developments.
6. Primary education contributes to the national development. Countries which have made proper provision for primary education are far ahead than those without adequate provision for primary education.

STAGES OF UNIVERSALISATION OF PRIMARY EDUCATION

There are three stages for universalisation of primary education:

Universalisation of provision: This means that primary education should be provided to all children between the age group of 6–14 years in the country. The location of the primary school should be within a walking distance (1 km) from the house of every child. During the first five year plan, primary schools were established so as to provide primary education within a distance of one mile from the residence of a child. It enables and encourages the parents to send their children to schools.

Universalisation of enrolment: This means that all children of the desired age group (6 years old) must be enrolled in the school. It is essential that all eligible children should be enrolled compulsorily by the school. The Kothari Commission feels that the problem of enrolment in class I is of great significance. Different states have enacted compulsory education acts their purpose. But the desired targets have not been achieved due to the ignorance of parents, isolation from school and local community and financial difficulties.

Universalisation of retention: This means that every child enrolled in Class I must continue in the school till he completes class VIII. That is, after the enrolment of the students in school is over, it is essential to see that they progress regularly from year-to-year. There should be no stagnation in the school. Again we should see that the child does not leave the school before the completion of the course so that there is no wastage. Kothari Commission has pointed out that wastage at the lower stage is very large. About 56 per cent of the boys and 62 per cent girls give up education at this stage. Hence, it is important schools to provide all assistance to enroll the children in the age group 6–14 and it is important to retain the children in the schools in order to complete their primary education without wastage.

PROBLEMS OF UNIVERSALISATION OF ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

Problem of finance: Lack of financial resources has been a major hurdle in the expansion of elementary education.

Problem of priority: The universalisation of education depends on priority basis. During the First Five Year Plan 50 per cent of the total educational budget was spent on primary education. But it was 31.9 per cent in the Fifth Five Year Plan.

Problem of population explosion: Tremendous increase in population frustrates all efforts to bring every child under the roof of schools. In spite of overall planning for the enrolment of vast number of children in schools, the explosion of population does not allow us to improve their condition.

Problem of poverty: Due to poor economic conditions, parents are forced to keep their children away from school. Instead of sending them to schools, parents send them to work and live on the labour of their children. The female children are engaged in domestic work due to poverty.

Problem of illiterate parents: Illiterate parents do not realise the importance of education for their children. They are indifferent to education due to their ignorance.

Problem of unattractive school: Our primary school programmes are dull and boring, because they follow traditional and uninspiring method of teaching. The courses of study are unrelated to the lives of the students.

Problem of wastage and stagnation: Wastage and stagnation stand in the way of universalisation of primary education. It was nearly 40 per cent in the class I itself. But now wastage and stagnation have been controlled.

Problem of girls' education: Some people do not like girls' education due to ignorance, superstition and poverty. Such parents do not like to send their daughters to school. Moreover, the girls are more useful at home. Therefore, instead of sending them to school, they are engaged in domestic work.

Problem of small and scattered habitation: There are more than 300,000 habitations of less than 100 people in each. Small habitations which are in inaccessible areas like dense forests, prevent the establishment of primary schools there.

Problem of scarcity of teachers: Universal, free and compulsory education at the elementary stage need a large number of teachers and adequate equipments. The paucity of teachers and other equipments particularly in rural areas, curbs the universalisation of primary education.

Problem of education of backward class: Like scheduled class and scheduled tribes, backward groups also do not bother about education because of different values of life and their social setup. In educationally backward areas like Bihar, Orissa, Rajasthan, Kashmir, Madhya Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh the number of people belonging to these groups is very high.

Problem of fictitious enrolment: Practice of fictitious enrolment is also seen in many elementary schools due to the pressure of parents who do not want to send their children to school.

Problem of education of the handicapped: Due to the non-availability of special teachers and financial resources for the education of disabled children, their education stands against the universalisation of primary education.

Problem of contact between teacher and parents: There is a lack of healthy contact between the parents and teachers, which also impedes the universalisation of primary education.

Problem of enforcing Compulsory Primary Education Act: The Compulsory Primary Education Act has not been properly enforced in the country. It is also a problem in the universalisation of primary education.

SUGGESTIONS FOR UNIVERSALISATION OF ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

Introducing programme of education for all: The programme of education for all should be introduced in hilly areas, rural areas, slum areas, sparsely populated areas and tribal areas where the number of drop-outs among girls is quite high and in these areas most of the people belong to the deprived section of the community.

Educating the parents: Parents should be educated so that they can realise the value of education. Educated parents send their children to schools.

Financial incentives: Financial incentives should be given to the needy parents.

Free books and uniforms: As the parents are poor, it will be difficult for them to send their children to schools. So, children should be given books, uniforms, transport facilities, healthcare and mid-day meals free of cost.

Separate schools for girls: Separate schools should be established for girls. Parents should be persuaded to send their daughters to co-educational schools where separate schools cannot be established for a small number of girls. Lady teachers should be appointed with proper training in the rural areas.

Control population explosion: Due to high birth rate, it is not possible to admit 100 per cent children of the age group of 6-14 in the primary schools. To solve this complicated problem, family planning should be enforced in the country.

Managing financial resources: The total educational expenses devoted to primary schools are much less than that of the secondary and university education. So, both the central and the state governments should see that primary education gets its proper share out of the total expenditure on education. The cost of primary education should be lowered and for this purpose: (a) class size maybe a bit large; (b) double shift system maybe introduced; (c) simple and durable buildings should be provided; (d) the equipment in the schools should be efficiently and economically used.

Participation of parents: Participation of parents in the educational programmes maybe encouraged to create awareness and interest regarding the utility of the education of the children.

Lessening wastage and stagnation: To avoid wastage and stagnation, a system of automatic promotion should be adopted. No student should be asked to repeat a class even if his performance is not up to the mark. The teaching in primary schools should be made efficient and attractive in order to decrease wastage and stagnation.

Broadening objectives of primary education: The qualitative improvement of education at primary level should be broadened. J.P. Naik says, "The objectives of teaching should be 3 Rs, good manners, healthy habits, some skills with hands, general knowledge about the physical and social environment of India, level land people and the building up of some essential qualities like sense of responsibility, cooperativeness, discipline and patriotism".

Suitable curriculum for the school: The curricula of primary education should not be rigid and bookish. They should be activity- and experience- centred related to the natural and social life of the children. They should enable the children to develop their individual potentialities and lead a corporate life in the school.

Provision of audio-visual aids: Provision of audio-visual aids for the development of education of children is very essential. This will attract the attention of the children towards education.

Improvement of elementary teachers: The conditions of the primary school teachers should be improved for the qualitative improvement of primary education. For instance, the teachers posted in tribal areas should also acquire the knowledge of tribal dialects.

Parental cooperation: Enlisting parental cooperation and community mobilisation in the education of the child lead to the universalisation of primary education.

Reforms in educational administration: The educational administration should be decentralised so that the powers and functions of administrative authorities at the village level, district level and state level can function more effectively.

It should be free from political interference for smooth administration. It should also keep in touch with the latest developments in primary education and should readily help the teachers accordingly.

REALISATION OF UNIVERSALISATION OF ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

Provision of school facilities: Several attempts were made for the universalisation of elementary education and quantitative expansion of elementary education by increasing the number of primary schools. For example, the number of primary schools increased from 2,10,000 in 1951 to 5,58,392 in 1991. But we failed to universalise elementary education in some schools as there were no buildings, sufficient teachers, and in some cases they existed without any enrolment or with very poor enrolment.

Universal enrolment: Attempts were made to enrol all children in the age group of 6–14. Such attempts include enrolment drive and public awareness programme through mass media such as the radio, the television, the newspapers, posters and pamphlets. Even though these attempts were taken, universalisation of elementary education (UEE) failed because of the following factors:

- Low enrolment of girls.
- Low enrolment of children belonging to SC, ST and backward communities.
- Low enrolment of disabled children.
- Low enrolment of children belonging to linguistic and religious minority groups.
- High rate of wastage and stagnation.

Universal retention: Attempts were made to ensure universal retention so that all children in the age group of 6–14 would continue in the school until they complete the elementary education. This means that children would not dropout from the school before completing class VIII. For the purpose of universal retention, the government has taken the following measures:

- Adoption of 'No Detention Policy'.
- Free supply of uniforms to girls and other children of backward communities.
- Attendance scholarship for girls and SC/ST children.
- Provision of mid-day meal.

In spite of these measures UEE failed because of the high rate of stagnation and wastage.

Universal achievement: Attempts were made to reduce the rate of stagnation and to ensure universal achievement. This means all children in the age group

of 6–14 would achieve success in relation to Minimum Levels of Learning (MLL). Universal achievement necessitates two conditions—equal opportunity to learn and qualitative improvement of elementary education. The government adopted several measures to provide equal opportunities to all children in the age group of 6–14 and to bring qualitative improvement of elementary education. Such measures are:

- Provision of minimum two classrooms in primary schools.
- Provision of minimum two teachers in primary schools.
- Supply of black boards and teaching aids to primary schools free of cost.
- Renewal of primary education curriculum.
- Identification of minimum levels of learning.
- In-service training of primary school teachers for ensuring qualitative instruction in the classroom.
- Introduction of workbooks for children.
- Introduction of teachers handbook in different subjects.

Several schemes and projects were implemented in different states to bring qualitative improvements in elementary education. They are:

- Primary Education Curriculum Renewal (PECR)
- Operation Blackboard (OB)
- Project Mass Orientation of School Teachers (PMOST).
- Survey on Educational Backwardness of Girls (SEBG).
- Centrally Sponsored Scheme of Integrated Programme (CSSIP).
- Education for Disabled Children (EDC).
- Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC).