

Diamonds in the rough

Educating our citizens is fast becoming a national emergency



SATISH JHA

The last couple of decades have been filled with hope for India. The spectre of population explosion that underlined the 1950s, when it had some 400 million citizens, has made way for the optimism of the 'demographic dividend' as we added a billion folks to our democracy.

This 'dividend' has true potential provided we treat the diamonds in the rough well and cut and polish them to create new value. Alternately, we run the risk of turning our potential dividend into wasted minds with consequences unbeknownst to us.

Wasting minds, millions of them, year after year, has not yet woken up our leaders. In a way, the challenge of educating our citizens is fast becoming a national emergency. The knee-jerk response to offer vocational education, address it as a skills development programme, while leaving the foundation weak, is a sure shot recipe to stay well behind the curve of human progress.

We need to recognise that children are born with unlimited potential and how we treat them determines what they grow up into. So far, we have worked hard as a nation to ignore them and turn potential scientists into poorly skilled domestic helps.

That can be changed quickly. By educating our children in ways they begin to think rather than memorise, solve problems rather than repeating what is taught, begin to imagine instead of being coerced to follow, we may change the nation's future sooner than we can visualise.

The biggest challenge to do so is our unwillingness to recognise that we are facing a huge problem as much as the way we try to solve them. Nearly every single educational experiment in India has been akin to offering aspirin to a patient suffering from cancer.

In fact it's a lot worse. In the 65 years since independence, we have added more than twice the population we inherited on the column of illiterates.

Nearly every single effort borne out of goodwill has been a patchwork at best. Whether it is about helping children begin to read alphabets or numbers, talk straight sentences or write a

correct sentence outside the school, a patchwork of goodwill achieves little. Because schools in villages and slums do not do their job well, they create a new hope that becomes meaningless in the light of the increasing learning divide.

Most CSR initiatives in education have not had an opportunity to pause and ask if they were ready to really make the difference they promise to make. If one large CSR in education initiative tries teaching the teachers without having any track record of being the best in pedagogy, another thinks just offering ₹30 per month of support in teaching will make these citizens worthy of the 21st century challenges.

In about 25 schools where one laptop per child (OLPC) has been donated, children begin to programme at age 6 or 7. They begin to write sentences in their mother tongue, the national language and English. And OLPC laptops help them step in the world now, regardless of where they are and how

challenged they may be. It may sound like a miracle to those who have not had any experience with OLPC. For those who work with it, all this is commonplace. It works with solar or hand or bicycle power as well as regular electricity and children can study with it under a bright sun, can walk with it in torrential rains, in

a very dusty environment when virtually no tablets work and regardless of local temperatures as it's designed to work from -20 to +60 degree C.

By adopting OLPC along with any or every program to augment children's learning, they will have an opportunity to become scientists and engineers, critical thinkers and problem solvers.

In Nicaragua, just one foundation, Zomora's, adopted 35,000 children and their lives have changed forever unlike anyone could have thought possible. In India, children in schools of Uttarakhand managed by Professor Veena Sethi stand tall as they learn with OLPC when there is little infrastructure. The village of Khairat in Raigad district of Maharashtra has been helping every child learn with OLPC to begin programming at 7 years of age and a couple of dozen schools across India and the government of Manipur have supported a few thousand children learn to become the citizens of time we live in. ♦



The author is
chairman, OLPC
India Foundation