India's illiterate population equals all the people in USA

Author: Subodh Varma

India has one of the biggest education systems in the world. On a typical day, roughly 290 million students are attending classes somewhere. That's more than the total population of any country in the world, except China, India and the US. Most of these students are in school — there are over 1.2 million schools ranging from pre-primary to senior secondary. Over 1.1 million students attend colleges and universities. Then there are those learning vocational skills in diverse streams. A vast army of teachers — over 6.3 million of them — guides and nurtures the young, on their way to adulthood.

![Graph showing literacy rate](image)

Source: Selected Education Statistics, MHRD; NHFS 3

When India became independent, a large majority of people was illiterate, thanks to the policies of the erstwhile colonial rulers. Since then, considerable strides have been made in expanding literacy, though India has still not managed to ensure education for all its people.

In 1961, only about 28% Indians were literate. In 2006, estimates put the literacy rate at about 66%. That's an impressive jump of nearly 40 percentage points. It has taken 60 years, but the numbers involved are truly enormous.

However, it still leaves over 380 million people illiterate. That is the largest number of illiterates in any one country, more than the total population of India at the time of Independence and would be the third largest country by population.

Even the impressive figure of number of students —290 million — has a similar flipside. The total number of children and youth, in the age group of 6 to 24 years, is about 460
million. This is the age group that should ideally be in the education system. But only about 63% of them are studying. Over 170 million potential students are left in the lurch.

How does this compare with other countries? In high income countries, over 92% of the eligible age group (5-24 years) is studying. In the middle-income countries, this share is about 73%, while in low-income countries it is down to 56%. In China, the ratio is 69%, somewhat similar to India's. But Brazil with about 88% and Russia with 89% are almost there with the high-income group.

Experts and policy makers cite many reasons to explain why so many have been left behind by the country's education juggernaut. Apart from the pervasive curse of poverty, which forces young people to quit studying and start working as early as possible, there are also issues of social imbalances.

There are four great divides that slice up Indian society and pervade every aspect of life, including education. They are: rural-urban, men-women, rich-poor and caste. In each case, there is a disadvantaged section, which finds it difficult to get access to educational opportunities, and thus gets left out. Thus, women, scheduled castes and tribes, agricultural labourers and small farmers, all have lower literacy rates, lower enrollment ratios and higher dropout rates at various levels. Although there is vast improvement since 60 years ago, and the striving is there, the system is still not capable of providing equal access.

Then there is the question of relevance of education — after all it is being sought primarily to get a good job. A recent National Sample Survey report found that unemployment among youth was highest among graduates, post-graduates and technical diploma or certificate holders — in the range of 19-20%. This is way above the current unemployment rate of about 6% for this age group. The reasons for this are that in most cases the educational qualifications and job requirements don't match, and in any case, the number of jobs being created is highly insufficient.

What can be done to improve the spread of education at all levels, and ensure that education for all becomes a reality, rather than a mere dream? While experience the world over shows that general economic advance spurs the spread of education like nothing else, there can be no doubt that a massive effort is required to provide well-rounded education to all our country's people. Such an effort involves resources as well as people to carry out the task. The major responsibility for such a gigantic enterprise has to rest with the government in terms of providing at least the bulk of resources, as also providing some kind of regulatory framework for both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of education. But, what has been the government's role on these counts till now?

(Courtesy: Special Reports, Times News Network)