

Public education key to equitable society

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Every year, as Class 10 and Class 12 Board results are declared, we read stories of courage, ones where talent has triumphed over adversity. The story of a daily wage worker's daughter scoring big in Karnataka Pre-University exams, a gardener's son clearing JEE Mains with flying colours and so on.

These stories are inspiring and need to be celebrated. We rejoice because these children beat the odds and broke the brutal socio-economic constraints that came bundled together with their birth.

However, make no mistake, these stories are not the norm and often hide the dark side of unequal opportunity. A friend of mine calls this the 'great ovarian chance' i.e. educational opportunities and hence life chances for a child in India are determined by two parameters — parents and pin code.

In the period 1990-2010 post liberalisation, the doors of opportunity opened up for the educated and emerging middle class in India. Their disposable income increased and world views broadened. Their children reaped the benefit of their parents' success. From a scarcity mindset that defined earlier generations, children were now growing up with a mindset of plenty, in an era of opportunity.

But scratch the surface and you can see the not-so shiny side of this. Like the recent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report confirms, the gap between the rich and the poor in India has only increased.

The trickle-down theory put forward by economists has had limited effect. It is a period of jobless growth — workers from the unorganised sectors are still exploited for pennies, debt-ridden farmers unable to fend for their families are killing themselves and manual scavengers continue to lead dreadful lives trying to make a living.

All this has meant unequal and missed opportunities for their children. This and more is the cost of the ever increasing gap between the rich and the poor. We are sitting upon a tinderbox; a ticking time bomb of social unrest that can disrupt our orderly society any time.

A child born in an educated middle class home is much more likely to complete a K-12 education and go on to make an honest living. The child is also more likely to develop into an informed citizen of the country, aware of her rights and duties. She is also more likely to become financially independent — adding more to the already privileged middle class.

Now for a moment consider the trajectory of a child born in a slum, where her parents struggle to provide two square meals to the family.

There is a high likelihood of the child dropping out of school and not finding the escape velocity to lift the family out of the vicious cycle of poverty, debt and sickness. Here, educational opportunity becomes fundamental to a just and equitable society.

So, how do we create equitable educational opportunity and hence a good Indian society?

The Delhi model

Clearly, the strongest weapon is good, affordable public education that empowers the citizens of tomorrow. A heart-warming example of this is seen in the recent Class 12 CBSE Board results of government schools in Delhi. These schools had a pass percentage of 91% and out-performed the private schools and the CBSE national average.

This has happened on the back of three years of sustained working doing all the right things – higher budgetary allocation, improved infrastructure in schools, focused teacher training and re-energising the School Management Committees.

Another important means is to create the next generation of leaders who have a better appreciation of society and become the harbingers of social change. They will play a significant role in bridging the gap between the rich and the poor.

We need to create awareness, encourage them and create opportunities for them to work at the grassroots of society. They can take up courses, fellowships and eventually jobs that positively impact society. This will mean they have the joy of giving back some of what society endowed them with.

Universities offering courses in Social Sciences as well as Fellowships like the ones offered by Teach for India, Kaivalya Foundation and SBI are great to get an immersion into how to create a better India.

And, of course, there are so many meaningful jobs being offered by good NGOs which will help our youth create a land of equitable opportunities while simultaneously building fulfilling careers!

(The writer is the Chief People Officer at Azim Premji Foundation)