

Are We Being Fair to Our Rural Children



*Major General P K Saighal**

India is singularly fortunate that over 75% of our population is young and productive. This gives us an immense demographic advantage that we need to quickly capitalize on. Population in almost all the Western countries is fast aging, whilst there is serious decline in population in countries such as Russia, Germany, Japan, Singapore, Canada and Australia, etc. Fortunately for us, China too would very soon suffer aging and loss of productive hands, thanks to its flawed one child policy.

Since last seven to eight years, I have travelled extensively through rural India to counsel our under-privileged children. This gave me an excellent opportunity to look at the rural child, besides interacting with over 5.0 lakh rural children, their parents, teachers and the village elders.

These interactions convinced me that our rural children are reasonably sharp, hard working and capable. They have a keen desire to learn and absorb. They have abundance of intrinsic commonsense and grit, but their inherent strengths notwithstanding, these children are unable to develop their full potential because the Govt and the society have failed to reach out to them in a manner that enhances their self image, confidence, focus and commitment. I found them to be highly impressionable and more easily mould-able than their city counterparts. Interestingly rural children have fewer distractions as against their counterparts in the city.

It is unfortunate that despite numerous NGOs operating in rural areas, the rural children are totally oblivious of the present day opportunities and the way ahead. In the absence of the above, they are prone to losing focus. Most have illiterate or semi-literate parents with modest to less than minimal means. Besides, environmental limitations and severe constraints tend to degrade their commitment.

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Their difficulties are further compounded due to poor infrastructural support. Laboratories, libraries, medicare, basic civic amenities, sports facilities etc. are either non-existent or notional. Teacher to student ratios are mostly unacceptable. Besides, the quality of teachers and their commitment is suspect. Most of the plus 2 schools in the villages do not have Science or Commerce streams thereby severely curtailing the available opportunities to the rural child for no fault of his.

Most rural children have a narrow vision, limited focus and restricted ambition. A majority of them neither dream nor think big. Absence of structured guidance at school level takes a heavy toll of their intrinsic desire to excel. They invariably tend to migrate to bigger towns and cities for fulfillment of their aspirations. This has cascading ramifications for the rural areas as well as towns and cities. The real tragedy is that in majority of our states, the Govt or its Education Department simply does not care. I discovered that Principals, teachers, parents and village elders too were mostly ignorant of the opportunities that exist today for the child to earn a decent living. I was rather surprised to see that a number of children aspiring to be doctors and engineers were unaware of the subjects that they ought to be taking to realize their aspiration. This indeed reflected very poorly on the quality of principals and teachers of the said schools.

I found the rural children to be rough and tough. They withstand physical stress and strain with considerable ease. This makes them ideally suitable for vocations requiring manual skills, such as carpentry, plumbing, auto technician, electrician, machinery operators, etc. They are also first-rate material for Armed Forces, Police, BSF and other Para-military forces.

Societal prejudices against the girl child and concerns for her safety continue to be areas requiring special attention. Most parents want to marry off the girl child the moment she finishes class 10 or latest by 10+2. Social Workers and governmental agencies must work in concert to ensure the empowerment of the girl child. An educated girl is a boon to the society and a source of strength to her parents as well as the in-laws. This would also make a major dent on our galloping population.

Another area where the village child is languishing is in the field of computer literacy. Computer labs are mostly small, drab and dingy with just three to four computers available. Serviceability is a major issue, besides quite often there is no electricity. When the electricity does come ten or more children stand huddled around a computer. In some schools there are no computer-trained teachers available to impart computer training. It is absolutely essential that the issue of computer training receives proper attention by the powers that be.

I found that medium of instruction in almost all rural schools is either Hindi or vernacular. Inability to communicate in English automatically deprives the rural child of a whole range of opportunities that are now becoming available due to rapid aging of the population in several Western countries and a steep demographic decline in some countries enumerated earlier. These countries require two to three million skilled persons per annum. Countries fulfilling this need would earn 2-3 billion dollars annually. Some egalitarian states have already announced plans to introduce English in Schools at all levels to prepare their children for the emerging opportunity. J&K, West Bengal and Punjab have recently announced plans in this regard while Southern States are already ahead; others too need to follow suit.

The rural schools need major governmental cum societal support to provide to the child the wherewithal to exploit emerging opportunities. A well-educated child as against a mere literate child would be a great boon to the Indian society. In fact, the empowerment of the girl child coupled with even a 2-3% increase in the productivity of the other rural children, (to begin with), could turn the nation around. Our democratic institutions would stand strengthened. Population growth would automatically be taken care of. Better governance as opposed to the existing models of governance will become the order of the day. And lastly, India could soon occupy its rightful place in the sun in conformity with its size and potential.

Majority of the schools have only one combined lab for Physics, Chemistry and Biology due to shortage of rooms; an extremely unworkable arrangement. Wherever these labs do exist the equipment for conduct of practicals is insufficient. Unfortunately, what should be the citadels of a proud nation are horrific examples of neglect, decadence, decay and lack of societal pride.



Journey of Life; Love It, Live It!

Our life is a journey between birth and death,. It sounds so cruel, but it has a great message. Don't live under a mistaken notion that we are here permanently. Make some good companions for enjoying the ride. Don't carry an unmanageable load of worries, jealousy and anger. Enjoy the beautiful world God created for us to enjoy. Let God do his work, why worry?

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