

# It's elementary, education matters

**A**PPARENTLY, Indians have begun to believe in themselves. We all think we belong to a country with a future. For 50 years we were not quite sure. All our actions demonstrated that uncertainty. Free markets, nationalisation, or a combination of the above — once this, then that, all half-heartedly espoused and quarter-heartedly implemented.

For many good and serendipitous reasons, we have abandoned our self-doubt. Now we are in a great hurry to move forward to somewhere. And the where is less important than the what and the how. Instead of bickering constantly about direction, we are talking a new language. All of us, whether we are the Lambani tribe women I met at the outskirts of Gulbarga or the carpenters I met in the slums of Mumbai. And I have asked others who have travelled even further than I, and they all agree that something is in the air.

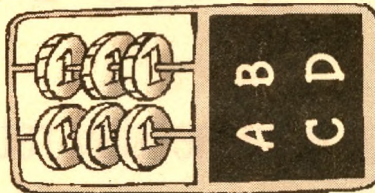
So, now, with a clear positive agenda to prove the mettle of India, let us attack sector by sector. Let us understand what is wrong and plan for what can be done.

I would here like to highlight the issues in the elementary education sector, which involves citizens between six and 14 years. World agencies have provided irrefutable data about the synergetic relationship between education and development. And it is plain common sense. Yet, we have never acted on the imperative of this argument. Our founding fathers had a great opportunity, perhaps, to create a common school system. It did not happen. So, today, we have great schools for the economically sufficient and poor schools for the poor. Can we do something now to set this right?

Recently, I heard Dr Abusaleh Shariff, who is the member-secretary of the PM's high level committee that will prepare a report on the status of Muslims in India, and who is more importantly, the chief economist at the NCAER. He has travelled the length and breadth of this country for a survey on the status of education, and he pre-

## GUEST COLUMN

ROHINI NILEKANI



- **Across sectors, parents want to educate their wards, at great cost to themselves**
- **Can India Inc engineer, or partner in a revolution to elevate our performance in elementary education?**

sented findings. Here it is, for those who can bear it. We have a national mean of three years of schooling for citizens above six years. The US has nine. Sri Lanka has 7.5. And Kerala has seven. Eighteen out of every 100 who enroll in school pass the matriculation exam. If you slice data across rural identities and that of women, it is 12 out of 100. Only 28% of the general population of Bharat has passed the IVth standard. And again, when analysed for women and rural, that number dips to 21%.

We need to look at these gaps as opportunities for immediate attention, to quickly build the India of our new imagination. Equally interesting is another statistic he quoted. The number of private schools in the country is shooting up. Until just 10 years ago, even in UP and Bihar, only 12 to 15% of children were in private schools. Today, that number is 30%. Now imagine this. On the one hand, the government is charging every citizen an education cess to universalise elementary education by 2010. And on the other, children are fast moving out of government provided schooling. And guess what is the biggest shocker? Scheduled castes and tribes may

be moving their children out of government schools even faster than others.

We should not really be surprised. We heard that a Brahmin educated unemployed youth in Rajasthan's interior finds a welcome livelihood by opening his own primary school. At Rs 30 per month per child that he charges, he may break even (depending on the learning materials he provides) and perhaps make a modest surplus. And, more than 50% of his students carry the 'SC' tag. Why would they spend money for schooling when governments provide free education in their neighbourhood?

Schools are a microcosm of society. All hierarchical tendencies are represented or magnified when upper caste teachers have to enable lower caste students. I am told that there is an increasing consensus among Dalit groups that if justice must be won, it cannot be wrangled from the old society. English and the new economy provide an escape from a life of servitude to those who have been historically disadvantaged. And of course, the Brahmin education entrepreneur teaches English from class 1.

We can find good news from all of these statistics. The first good news is that across sectors, parents want their children to be educated. At great cost to themselves. Because they have instinctively and rightly understood the power of the 'knowledge society'.

The second is an acceptance of a new, non-maai baap sarkar model even in rural India — perhaps a shift away from the dependency syndrome. The third is the fermentation towards an active, rights-based, quality 'demand' sector, which can use the abysmal data and all it implies, to create a new response from the supply side. There might be other reasons to engage with this issue.

Corporate India loves to project the demographic advantage, the growth potential and the optimism revival in India. But can it engineer, or partner in a revolution, or at least engage, in mission mode, to elevate our performance in elementary education, to the level at least of our own neighbours?