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COUPLING MICROINDUSTRY WITH RURAL SCHOOLS: AN INTERESTING POSSIBILITY

Rural India suffers from a problem of having poor or irrelevant education for our children. The author has worked and researched the possibility of combining micro-industry with rural schools to create vibrant, sustainable schools that do not need the help of the Government in the long term but could transform the nation

SEVENTY percent of India lives in rural areas. For India to join the legion of developed countries, we need to focus on development that caters to these seven hundred million people. Thankfully, this fact is not going unrecognized at least in some sectors. Many concerned groups and individuals are pushing for better infrastructure for rural India. President, Dr Abdul Kalam is pushing the concept of PURA (providing urban facilities in rural areas) for this purpose. Rajesh Jain of Indiaworld fame, Atanu Dey and Vinod Khosla, the greatest venture capitalist on the planet are propagating the concept of RISC (Rural Infrastructure & Services Common).

The rest of the world is today taking India seriously because of its enviable growth in the knowledge economy, especially in IT, Software and Pharmaceuticals. IITs are recognized around the world for their ability to instill a world class education in one of the world's poorest nations. Rural India needs to join this knowledge economy. One of the primary enablers for them to do this is education.

However, a closer look at rural education today shows that it suffers on several counts. First, 90 percent of schools across the country are run by central, state and local governments. In rural

areas, there is no adequate infrastructure. If the infrastructure exists the teachers are missing. If both exist, the teachers are untrained, and the quality of teaching suffers. Curriculums are unsuited for training students for adulthood and this leads to high percentage of drop outs. There is no ownership from the community and hence no accountability from the people who are involved in delivering rural education. The facts speak for themselves. In four of the most populous and under-developed states of the country (Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh) 31% of primary schools don't have a pucca building, 20 % are single-teacher schools, 56% don't offer potable water and 70% percent are without toilet facilities. Little wonder that of the 146 million children who enroll in primary schools nation-wide annually, 59 million drop out before they reach class VIII.

To sum it up, the school system in rural India is today in a pathetic situation.

Compare this to urban India. Apart from government schools there are now a large number of private schools. Though many of these promoters can be accused of profit motives still it can't be denied that many of the private schools provide a superior infrastructure, better trained teachers and well defined

system of conducting classes and examination etc.

Why don't we have such private initiatives in rural education? This is easy to answer. Rural schools are not economically attractive for the private sector. An urban school with a student population of two to three thousand in a second grade city in India can generate a surplus of Rs 50 lakhs to Rs 1 crore, while a rural school can't even manage its revenue expenses from the fee it can collect from students. This deters private



initiative in rural education. The responsibility falls on notoriously unreliable state governments, who are required to offer free education to its citizens at the primary level. But with millions of students with no schools, the government has not been able to fulfill its promises.

So can there be a private initiative to offer quality education to rural students at a fee that students can afford? One of the ways is to couple

micro industries with rural schools.



Gandhiji was involved in education on Tolstoy Farm (photo above) in South Africa. Students learnt subjects like mathematics, geography, and literature while working on farms producing crops and vegetables. Dayalbagh College in Agra also has similar arrangement. PSG Charitable Trust in Coimbatore runs an industry along with its engineering college and other institutions. This industry (PSG Industrial Institute- PSGII) produces motors, pumps, fans and many other tools. There is a symbiotic relationship between PSGTech and PSGII. The profits from PSGII go into building infrastructure for PSGTech and other institutions while students of PSGTech work as apprentices in PSGII and gain valuable work experience. The faculty of PSGTech acts as resources for PSGII and help in designing and developing new products.

There are more examples. Similar experiments have been carried out in some schools in

China. One school runs a popular restaurant where students have been working for

last few years. In India, similar experiment has been carried out in rural Karnataka, where one school prepares fresh flower garlands, and in Gujarat, where one school was set up so as to generate revenues from the farm and dairy it maintained through the efforts of its students. These are a few examples, but it offers significant potential.

Can inspirations be drawn from these examples for coupling



micro industries with rural schools? Yes.

The term “micro industries” needs to be defined first. Any income generation activity that suits the local context can be termed as micro industry. For example, a school can carry out mushroom farming and that can be treated as a micro industry. A news article in India Today informed that mushroom farming by village women in Assam has changed the economic status of many rural families in Assam. A big tailoring firm attached with a school that can produce shirts, pants and other clothes which can be sold in nearby rural areas can also be termed as a micro industry. In fact a school in a nice scenic setting can start eco-tourism facilities and generate resources.

The coupling of micro industries with schools can create many benefits. It can generate surpluses that can partially or completely fulfill the resource requirement of the school. It provides technical training to students and promotes the concepts of leadership,

teamwork and entrepreneurship.

It has also resulted in lowered drop-out rates. Students drop out from schools since they don't see any value from the education imparted. In Bhubhaneswar, poor parents are not willing to send their children to schools because each child can earn an extra income of rupees 100 a day if they work at the butchering shop instead.

A micro school could significantly change behavior. It could set up a unit to teach students to process the meat, and teach concepts that would allow them to export to other parts of the country or even overseas. Then surely parents would like to send their children to that school. The training in the attached micro industry may also encourage students to set up enterprises if they are not very academically inclined, or to continue to work there after graduation.

A state like Orissa with widespread poverty, illiteracy and unemployment needs more micro industries than big industries. Big industry employs high technology and few, highly skilled people. Experience has shown that not much downstream industry comes up in the immediate vicinity of these larger industries. On the other hand, small industries suited to available local

resources and local requirements can be viable, involve large numbers of people and initiate large scale economic activities.



A visit to villages in interior of Orissa revealed that people there had no clue regarding what kind of micro industries could be set up and they had no information from where the technology could be brought. Schools can help in this direction by being role models, extending the knowledge about possibilities and becoming sources for creating entrepreneurship in villages.

By putting these rural schools into a larger network, schools can have access to larger human resources and technology. The network can float a few rural technical schools that can impart necessary technological training

to people wishing to pursue

entrepreneurship. In fact the network can float a marketing arm and a common brand name that can help micro industries attached with schools to sell their produce easily and at a better price. The network can even collaborate with micro financing companies to provide much needed financial resources to entrepreneurs.

All this costs money. Government as well as private sponsorship could be better spent by providing the seed funds for sustainable schools in rural India, creating an employment and skill set revolution. If more minds give serious thoughts about this concept more creative solutions can be brainstormed. Only then can rural education be made more meaningful and vibrant, and the economic status of villages can be improved to a great extent.

Then truly a developed India can emerge!

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