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Can India Inc make a difference?

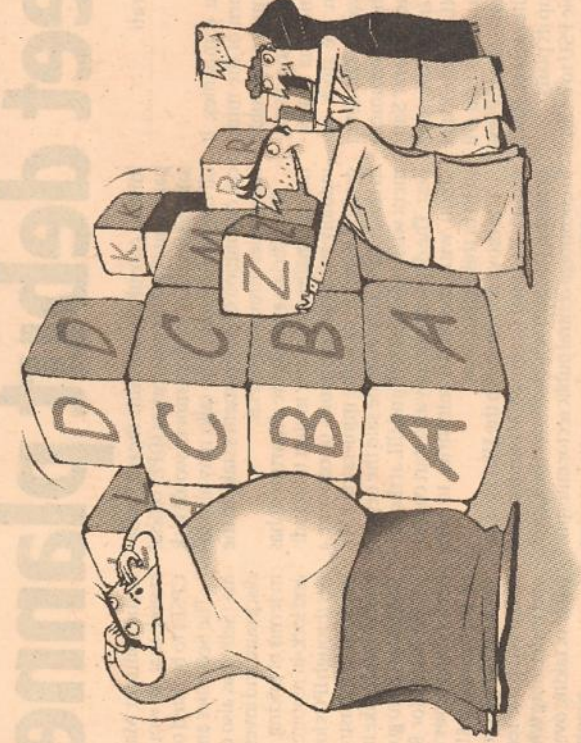
Corporates can play a huge role in the field of elementary education and there is no alternative but for them to do so, supplementing government efforts and resources, says Tarun Das

INDIA, there has been a tendency to always look to the government for leadership on policy, processes, implementation and, then, to blame it for all our problems. The origin of this tendency lies in the centrality of government in social and economic activity — for example, the public sector and the “commanding heights” of the economy or the micro-controls on capacity and production or the ownership, control and management of the infrastructure. Basically, these policy framework existed for over four decades.

With the emergence of a competitive private sector, through its own entrepreneurship and restructuring (within the framework of government policy deregulation), there is some change in this thought process. Thanks to the economic reform policy followed by the government since 1991, and the trust and space provided to the private sector, Indian entrepreneurship has shown, in recent years, the ability to compete globally, to move out to international markets, to be investors abroad and to be both competitive and confident.

The private sector is also increasingly engaged in the social sector; be it skills development, affirmative action, HIV/AIDS, public health, mid-day meals, education and community initiatives — to mention only a few examples. Whilst philanthropy is not new, the range of social activities has increased enormously. The industry in India has become involved both because of concern for inclusive growth as well as enlightened long-term self-interest. Add to that the fact that financial resources available for social development have multiplied.

The most critical challenge for India is to tackle the issue of elementary education at the grass-roots level where the numbers are in the millions and the problems are acute. NGOs such as Pratham have done outstanding work and continue to do so. Their Annual Status of Education Report presents the fact that children are not even learning the basics. There are many other issues such



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as teacher training and numbers, school infrastructure, the learning at the ‘anganwadis’, curriculum, delivery of resources, etc. What emerges is a very bleak picture of the status of elementary education in India. And yet, the future well-being of India, and Indians, depends hugely on the quality and reach of elementary education or, to put it differently, “every child has a good school to go to”. It will not be an exaggeration to say that this is a national crisis, however invisible it maybe.

Can the corporate sector make a difference, especially a real difference since the numbers are very large? Either directly and/or through their Trusts and Foundations such as the Tata Trusts, Bharti Foundation (which has committed to set up a thousand schools in a thousand villages), Akanksha, Infosys Foundation and many others? Daily, the media report the profitability of the corporate sector, the high aspirations, the global reach, etc. Can some part of these resources be used to tackle the crisis in

fairly well and without much delay if serious efforts are made.

One aspect is that there are numerous challenges in regard to elementary education in the urban areas so the private sector can get involved more quickly there. The question does arise whether the urban education sector will welcome industry partnership. Handled sensitively and thoughtfully, it should be possible. Industry is accustomed to deal with challenges.

The rural area challenge has also to be tackled and this, of course, is much, much larger because of issues of access, reach, poverty, infrastructure, etc. In both, there is only one way — partnership. here, NGOs, i.e., the voluntary sector, have domain knowledge.

In taking forward its role and contribution in this field, partnership with NGOs will be critical. Ideally, a PPP — Public Private Partnership — also involving the government at the Centre but, more so, at the state level. In fact, at all the local levels — district, block and panchayat.

It is also essential to recognise that there is no single formula or solution for the entire country. The basics are similar — infrastructure, teachers, curriculum, children, quality, etc., but the issues do and can vary from state to state and area to area. Therefore, each area, each state, each region will have its own unique solution, model and proposal.

Going forward, therefore, the private sector will need to come into this area much more than it has done. It needs to be clear that this is a marathon-cum-sprint race, not a 100-metre race. Also, that, alone, by itself, may not be equipped to make the difference the children of this country need — partnership with NGOs, especially, and governments will be crucial. If the top 200 corporates partner to support and improve 1,000 schools each, 200,000 primary schools can be benefited and millions of children whose future need to be assured. This is doable. In fact, this must be done.

ONE area of concern would be “do-main knowledge” of the issues at the grass-roots level in regard to elementary education, especially in the rural areas since private sector, by its very nature, is urban-focused. Acquiring ‘domain knowledge’ is not an issue. It can be done