



The conundrum of literacy and skills in rural areas of Andhra Pradesh

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Abstract

Nearly 70% of the people of Andhra Pradesh State live in rural areas even to this day. In spite of having a large education infrastructure with nearly half a dozen special schemes and programmes dedicated to improve the quality of education among the rural children, nothing substantial has been achieved because the schools are not in a position to achieve their objectives due to the irregularity of their set-up, low levels of passion, zeal and enthusiasm among the teachers and the entailing poor quality of teaching.

With regard to current topic of interest, i.e. Human Resource Development (HRD) as I understand it in a larger sense connotes 'a livable housing, an unpolluted environment, good health care, right to quality education, right to employment and earning, right to quality food, drinking water and clothing, right to dignified living through gender equity, social equity, economic equity, political equity and cultural equity and right to enhanced physical and mental abilities'. To achieve all the above-mentioned rights, both, the state as well as each of the individuals have some primary responsibilities. The State has a primary responsibility of making provisions for 'improving the knowledge levels, skills and abilities of human beings so as to make them productive agents'. And individuals have a responsibility to use the said facilities to acquire such knowledge, skills and abilities as their fundamental right. In this context, constraints are bound to be faced by both the State as well as the individuals. Let me begin with the problems at state level. To understand the constraints faced by the state, let me narrate the conundrum between rural literacy and skills. To understand this conundrum, one must first understand three important characteristics of rural population of Andhra Pradesh-population growth rate, literacy levels and employable skills of Andhra Pradesh.

Keywords: human resource development, right to quality education, right to employment, quality of teaching

Introduction

Difference in the Growth Rates of Rural and Urban Population

Let me first begin with the population growth rate. An

analysis of the decadal growth rates between rural and urban areas between 2001 and 2011 delineates an interesting picture (table-1).

Table 1: Decadal population Growth Rates in Rural and Urban Areas in Andhra Pradesh (2001 and 2011)

Growth Rate in Percentages	Rural Areas	Urban Areas
Negative	Visakhapatnam, Krishna and Y.S.R. Kadapa	
0-5	Srikakulam, Vizianagaram, East Godavari, West Godavari, Guntur, S.P.S. Nellore and Chittoor	
5-10	Prakasam, Anantapuramu and Kurnool	West Godavari
10-15		East Godavari
15-20		Vizianagaram
20-30		Guntur and Anantapuramu
30-40		Visakhapatnam, Krishna and Kurnool
40-50		Prakasam and S.P.S. Nellore
50-60		Srikakulam and Chittoor
Above 60		Y.S.R. Kadapa

Source: Statistical Abstract-2011, Bureau of Economics and Statistics, Government of Andhra Pradesh, Hyderabad.

In Andhra Pradesh, rural areas of three district viz., Visakhapatnam, Krishna and Y.S.R. Kadapa experienced negative growth rates of population, seven districts (Srikakulam, Vizianagram, East Godavari, West Godavari, Guntur, S.P.S. Nellore and Chittoor) experienced positive growth rate of less than 5 percent, and only three districts

(Prakasam, Anantapuramu and Kurnool) experienced growth rate between 5 and 10. In contrast, urban areas of 5 districts (Guntur, Anantapuramu, Visakhapatnam, Krishna and Kurnool) experienced growth rates ranging between 20 and 40 per cent in population, and another 5 districts (Prakasam, S.P.S. Nellore, Srikakulam, Chittoor and Y.S.R. Kadapa)

experienced growth rates of above 40 per cent, this clearly indicates the skewed growth rates of population between rural and urban areas.

The said scenario, naturally, calls for an explanation. More so because, when no difference in fertility is observed between rural and urban areas of the districts, the growth rates should have been same for both rural and urban areas. The only reasonable explanation for the current scenario, no doubt, is migration from rural areas to urban areas.

Next logical question is why so much of migration. Either absence of livelihoods or only subsistence nature of available livelihoods in rural areas must be the major reasons for migration of people from rural to urban areas and for such population growth in urban areas.

Another point to note in this context is voluntary adoption of state supported family planning measures since generations to control population explosion. No doubt, we succeeded in arresting the overall population growth to a significant extent by adopting those measures. But this Tsunami of population growth in urban areas is in spite of those family planning measures. This means, there is no other alternative, except to live with unprecedented growth in urban population. This in the end, results in competition and conflict between original urban population and rural population migrating to urban areas for livelihoods available in urban areas.

Difference between Rural and Urban areas in Literacy Levels

Second important point that needs a close look is employable skills of migrating population. In understanding the skill levels, rate of literacy serves as a passable tool. For example, to secure a white collared employment in urban areas, suitable educational qualification is an essential condition. Further, the persons seeking employment in urban areas need thoroughly different skills as compared to the skills needed in rural areas. To understand the difference in literacy levels between rural and urban areas a comparative picture needs to be mapped (table-2).

Table 2: Comparative Picture of Rural and Urban Literacy Rates-2011 (in percentage)

District	Rural	Urban	Difference between rural and urban areas
Srikakulam	59.08	78.90	19.82
Vizianagaram	54.35	78.71	24.36
Visakhapatnam	54.52	82.01	27.49
East Godavari	67.97	81.12	13.15
West Godavari	72.46	81.47	9.01
Krishna	68.98	82.09	13.11
Guntur	62.53	78.56	16.03
Prakasam	59.72	79.04	19.32
S.P.S. Nellore	64.01	81.51	17.50
Chittoor	67.86	83.03	15.17
Y.S.R. Kadapa	63.68	75.95	12.27
Anantapuramu	59.85	75.56	15.71
Kurnool	56.16	73.57	17.41

Source: Statistical Abstract-2011, Bureau of Economics and Statistics, Government of Andhra Pradesh, Hyderabad (The details in fourth column are arrived based on second and third columns).

Based on the Census-2011 data, a vast difference exist between the literacy levels of rural and urban areas, about 15 percent in aggregate, which serves as a remainder to the concerned, indicating the failure of the state in improving the literacy rates in rural areas.

Difference between Rural and Urban Areas in Employable Skills

The third and most important dimension of the conundrum is absence of employable skills. According to many a saint, 'end of education is character', but in the modern world, it is essential to note, 'end of education is skills'. The rural youth migrating to urban areas can hardly identify themselves with such employable skills like reading skills, listening skills, comprehensive skills, subject skills, communication skills, competing skills, life skills, leadership skills, survival skills, etc.

It is important to note that, in this context that, a large chunk of rural youth is mere literate, rather than skilled. The reason for unskilled literacy is not difficult to delineate. Moreover right to education was an old slogan. In the competitive world right to quality education is the need of the hour.

No public exam until a pupil reaches 10th class caused a criminal neglect in classroom teaching and school education system. The practice of not allowing the teachers to resort to a strict while teaching is no doubt a good practice. But at the same time, the sticks were left with chief minister, education minister, education secretary, district collector, district education officer (DEOs) and mandal education officer (MEOs) to warn the teachers to improve the pass percentage in 10th class. Comparison of pass percentage between districts forced the district collectors to use the stick against the DEOs to improve the pass percentage in their respective districts. Similarly, while comparing pass percentage between mandal DEOs use the stick against the MEOs to improve the pass percentage in respective mandals. Likewise, comparison of pass percentage between schools forced the MEOs to use the stick against the Head Masters to improve the pass percentage in their schools. Since Head Masters had no stick. They have no other go except to request the teachers to improve the pass percentage. Teachers had no other easiest shortcut method of improving the pass percentage except awarding pass marks liberally even to the undeserving candidates. This caused a great loss to pupils in acquiring necessary skills at the school level. State run schools are the worst affected in this context. Once school education is completed without knowing the relative importance of different courses offered at intermediate level, parents and their wards have passion for science courses which is a stumbling block for their further studies.

Memory based exam system too contributed for lack of most essential skills among the children. Urban children are better placed with regard to, at least, some of the skills. English Medium schools, corporate schools and colleges, educated parents, tuition or supporting education facilities, exposure to print and electronic media help them to acquire certain currently relevant skills. In addition to absence of skills, the youth migrating to urban area are ignorant of absence of skills among them, available opportunities or the functional skills necessary for a particular job.

But it must be remembered that, unless the youth migrating from rural areas are offered the scope to acquire skills, along with basics, their employability and sustainability in urban areas remain a far cry. It is in this context, I have the following suggestions to offer. Childhood is the best age to imbibe all those necessary skills. Further, I tried to list out some of the ways and means of promoting skills among school going pupil by adopting some of the models delineated below. As all of you know without proper foundation a building may collapse within no time. Likewise, without basic knowledge at the school level, the children may not evince any interest on further learning due to certain inhibitions which he may not openly admit.

Reading Skills

Good-reading habits remain the best method of promoting different skills among children. However, since exam-forced

reading has become a necessary evil in modern education system, which haunts the children on day-to-day basis, good reading habits find no place in their academic curricula. So to begin with steps need to be taken for promoting good reading habits. Here promotion of good reading habits indicates reading of such books that encourage them to 'read and enjoy', based on the context, incidents, characters, excitement, morals, etc. Stories of Mahabharata, Ramayana, Bible, Quran, Chinnayasuri, Bhatti Vikramarks, Baghdad, Alibada, Cinderella and many other fairy tales from different corners of the world not only helps in promoting good reading habits but also imbues some of the essential skills among the children. Seven important activities have been identified for promoting good reading habits among the children, with each of the activities having three steps. Since school going children are the best bet, the activities suggested below may be taken up at high school level.

Table 3: Activities and Steps in Promoting Good Reading Habits

Activity	Step-1	Step-2	Step-3
Promoting Reading Habits-1	Identifying stories, incidents, lives, etc. that promote reading habit among the children	Identifying those story books that are written in good English – words, spelling and grammar	Procuring of such books from the best publishers (National Book Trust offers some of the best books)
Promoting Reading Habits-2	Dividing students of a class into Teams with each Team having 10 students; conducting Quiz Competition between them	Giving same story book to each of the ten students	Encouraging students to thoroughly read the book for two or three days (only 10 pages for each quiz); Pages can be increased as skills are found improving
Promoting Reading Habits-3	Sub-dividing the ten students into two Teams of five each	Quiz master preparing the questions, covering spellings, places, incidents, characters, animals, etc. from the earmarked pages of the book	Conducting Quiz Competition between the two teams (questions from ten pages only)
Promoting Reading Habits-4	Giving the Awards in the Morning Prayer Meeting	Offering the prizes of everyday use – lunch boxes, shoes, watches, caps and shirts)	Encouraging the winners to use the prizes while coming to school, which encourages other students gain inspiration to read more
Promoting Reading Habit-5	If all the Teams in the class are covered in 30 days, such Quiz Competitions within a class offers each student an opportunity / encourages to read same pages more number of times. At a rate of 30 days, about 10 rounds of Competitions can be completed in each class. If this is done from 7 th class onwards, it helps every students: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Participates in 15 Competitions in one year; ▪ Gets a chance to read all the story books of importance; ▪ Helps overcome the fear of English language; ▪ Promotes the habit of use of dictionary ▪ Learns spellings without additional effort; ▪ Starts using English words and sentences more frequently; ▪ Comprehends English text books (spellings, phonetics, grammar); and ▪ Understands the importance of reading. 		
Promoting Reading Habits-6	Advantages of the above Quiz Competitions are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Every student participates in competition; ▪ It involves no exams, no papers for corrections and no burden of carrying answer scripts home; ▪ Only Quiz Master has to prepare the questions from the book and conduct the Quiz; 		
Promoting Reading Habits-7	Requirements include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Identifying 10th standard English story books written in good grammar; ▪ Procurement of 15 copies each of identified 10 books; ▪ Procurement of 100 English-Telugu dictionaries; ▪ Identifying a Teacher who can maintain a record of issue of books and dictionaries to students; ▪ Instructing the students not to use pen or pencil in using the book (very important); ▪ Honorarium to the Teacher maintaining the books; ▪ Honorarium to Quiz Master; ▪ Finance to procure books; ▪ Finance to procure prizes; and ▪ Earmarking one afternoon session every week for Quiz; ▪ Completion of Quiz Competitions for all students of the class in one month; and ▪ Rotating books every month between different teams and conduction Quiz Competitions accordingly 		

Subject Skills

No doubt, subject skills among the children alone provide a chance of survival in this competitive world. But not many students accomplish necessary subject skills, even when they secured 90-99 percent marks in exams. Every student is being forced to secure 90-99 percent marks but not even 10 percent of the subject skills. Nobody realizes that, the subject skills of science, mathematics, social and English, especially grammar, of previous classes helps in moulding the essential academic character for the subsequent classes, and finally character for the subsequent life of students. Again nobody realizes a simple fact that, searching for a job without subject skills is like 'searching for a black cat in a dark room where there is no cat' to use a popular phrase. The subject skills can be imbued among the students by adopting the following steps.

- Promoting good reading habits;
- Encouraging to read only text books;
- Encouraging to understand every word, every sentence, every concept and every paragraph of the text book;
- Grouping of students and conducting Quiz Competitions in the classroom subjects;
- Spending more time teaching the introduction of each chapter and philosophy behind including a particular chapter and formulae in Mathematics, instead of teaching mere problem solving formulae;
- Spending more time in practicing English spelling, phonetics, grammar and sentence construction in the classroom;
- Encouraging to understand the science behind each of the science topics; and
- Adopting similar steps with regard to other subjects.

Spoken English Skills

Spoken English is the most important 'employability skill' in modern days, and this skill needs to be seen through the prism of employment. An undeniable fact of life is either employment or growth in employment or leadership in employment comes only to those who can communicate in English, more so in software industry and managerial industry, the only sources of employment at present. Next logical question is, why spoken English. The issues that need to be remembered in this context are:

- In public sector, competitive exams are conducted in recruitment, but not many opportunities of employment are

available in public sector;

- In private no competitive exams are conducted, and recruitments are carried out based on the performance of the candidates in interviews;
- Private companies never recruit persons based on the percentage of marks secured in University degrees but do so based on brains and skills of the candidates;
- Unless one has the capacity to present his / her subject skills, managerial skills, communication skills, inter-personal skills, leadership skills and life skills in a nutshell, that too effectively, within the limited time offered in an interview, no industry recruits a candidate; and
- While in employment too, spoken English helps in the survival and in further achievements.

No doubt, there are multiple sources for improving Spoken English skills. First source, no doubt, is the spoken English institutes located in towns and cities. But most of the institutes employ unskilled staff with a view to minimise the salary purse. Such institutes serve no purpose as they concentrate on words like 'yaa, nope, alright, that is fine, absolutely correct, nice to meet you, nice to see you, etc' and offer only minimum skills. Those who recruit better staff, automatically, price their services beyond the purse of the common man.

It is important to note that, spoken English is more difficult as compared to written English. In the case of written English there always exists a chance to correct even after one completes his/her entire idea. But no such liberty is possible in spoken English. Once an interviewee utters a word or a sentence, that is final, and no corrections are possible. In addition, the interviewer does not wait until the interviewee corrects his sentence. Interviewer always runs through the questions, expects answers to come in the similar speed. Hence, it is necessary to provide each student with the capacity to present his/her subject, managerial, communication, inter-personal, leadership and life skills in a nutshell in an effective manner within the limited time offered in an interview.

Spoken English skills acquired at school level are expected to offer them all the necessary ingredients. But a phobia of 'English is difficult to understand, speak and write' stands in the way of acquiring necessary skills. Steps that may be of some use in overcoming the phobia and in promoting spoken English skills are:

Table 4

Activity	Area	Overcoming fear phobia		
		Step-1	Step-2	Step-3
Spoken English Promotion-1	Spelling practice	Identifying words from respective English text book, as well as English words for important terms from other books	Writing on the blackboard and asking the student to memories by multiple readings and writings	Removing the word from blackboard and asking the student for spelling
Spoken English Promotion-2	Phonetic practice	Identifying words from respective English text books	Adopting vocal practice for multiple times	Asking the students to repeat the words, and insist on correct way of expression
Spoken English Promotion-3	Grammar practice	Teaching the grammar to practice, and not for exam; Making English homework compulsory on grammar	Conducting weekly one or two English grammar practice classes	Asking the student to say a sentence or write a sentence about an issue or a thing on the blackboard and correcting the same, if grammar mistakes are found, explaining the reasons for such correction

Spoken English Promotion-4	Interaction practice	Using easy words in the class room and allowing to believe that, English words are easy to understand and use	Encouraging to use words of English while speaking in the classroom, even if they commit mistakes	Encouraging interactions only in English for IX and X class students
Spoken English Promotion-5	Addressing practice	Conducting elocution competitions in English between small groups and making all the students participate	Conducting elocution competitions at class level on a class subject and on grammar	Encouraging the winners to address the gathering of teachers and fellow students after prayer at a rate of one winner per day

More important of all the steps is belief in the principle that, 'practice makes a man perfect'. Continuous practice alone helps them to imbibe the spoken English skills. In this context, it is necessary to remember that, there exist multiple types of memory. But we are only concerned with primary and secondary memory. 'Certain things' remain in one's memory for long but the same person forgets 'other things' very easily. The reason behind this is multiple readings or multiple recollections of 'certain things' and single reading of 'other things'. Multiple readings or multiple recollections push those 'certain things' into secondary memory. As and when we need, we can recollect them from the secondary memory. Single reading helps in retaining the matter in primary memory for some time and allows peter out in one or two days in many cases. Hence, students need to be encouraged to practice even if they commit a lot of mistakes. Efforts need to be made to help each student to understand those mistakes and the reasons for such mistakes, and ways to correct the same.

Leadership Skills

Imbibing academic and administrative leadership skills help the students overcome shyness, fear of failure and identity crisis. Leadership qualities also help a student in reaching various milestones in life. Hence, it is necessary to promote academic and administrative leadership skills among the students. But many students do not like to be leaders because of problems like shyness to lead, fear of leadership, fear of responsibility, no incentive for leadership, unwilling to become a leader and hidden character of escapism. Added to this, some students may be leaders by personality but remain faceless. More so, because, they don't want to be leaders or nobody recognised, nurtured and fine-tuned his/her leadership qualities. Hence, it is not enough that the teachers help elect a leader by the students of every class, but struggle promoting leadership qualities in every student.

Identifying a natural leader, allowing a student become a leader, encouraging a student become a leader and making a leader by offering incentives are some of the easy steps in promoting leadership qualities.

It is not possible to promote leadership qualities among all the students by training alone. However, by exploring available opportunities and by adopting 'help the students to help themselves' principle, leadership qualities among majority of the students can be promoted. But it is important to note that, leadership qualities cannot be promoted in one day, and only come over a period of time through concerted efforts. There are four main models of academic and administrative leadership leading from front, leading from behind, leading by equanimity and leading by example. Logic behind those models are:

- Leading from front: Leader works hard, reads more, answers more, and wins a quiz competition for the team

and believes that 'I was made leader because, I alone have the capacity to win';

- Leading from behind: Leader provides books and dictionaries to team members organizes group reading, encourages group discussion, maintains discipline in the group, conducts competition within the group as a prelude and encourages and motivates all the students to win the competition for the team and believes in the principle that 'my team is more capable than me';
- Leading by equanimity: Leader considers himself as equal among all the students in his group, and shares the responsibility of provision of books, dictionaries and facilitate group reading and group discussion; and
- Leading by example: Leader leads the preparation for quiz, leads his team in quiz, won't hesitate to correct his mistakes and agrees to take blame when things go wrong.

The leadership skills may be promoted while conducting competitions in reading promotion, spoken English promotion, subject skills promotion, etc. If all such groups are allowed to lead by students by rotation for three years, all the students get the chance of leading. Leadership promotion may also be taken up by adopting some simple guidelines:

- In case of Swatch Bharat, for example, identified students may be allowed, motivated and trained in identifying the place of work, sources of instruments, mobilizing the instruments, manpower mobilisation, manpower motivation, manpower organisation, first aid and waste disposal, etc.,
- In case of competitions meant for reading promotion, spoken English promotion, subject skills promotion, etc. the identified leaders may be trained in time management, student management, group reading, group discussion, earmarking the areas of specialization, etc.; and
- In case of elocution and essay writing competitions identified leaders may be trained in procuring material, promoting group reading, identifying areas of skills and organizing pre-finals of essay writing, etc.

Competitive Skills

It may be noted that participation in elocution, essay writing and games and sports or physical activities like Swatch Bharat and gardening offers competitive spirit among the students. If competitions are regularly conducted at group level, class level, school level and district level, automatically, the students are bound to imbibe competitive skills.

Life Skills

The term refers to those skills everybody needs in managing and living a better quality of life. Any skill that is useful in a person's life can be considered as a life skill. Simple activities like ironing clothes and brushing teeth are also useful life

skills. However, there can never be a definite and complete list of life skills. Importantly, every life skill may become useful at one time or other in one's own life.

For a school student it may not be right time to acquire all those life skills. But it would be better if students were encouraged to understand the meaning and the purpose of important life skills. The spellings and meanings of important life skills may be made part of exercises like the promotion of spoken English and Quiz competitions. Important skills include anger management, assertion, behavior modification, communication, computer usage, confidence promotion, conflict avoidance, conflict resolution, counseling, creative thinking, critical thinking, day-to-day numeracy, decision-making, effective speaking, emotion coping, empathizing, employability, fact-to-face conversation, finance management, friendship maintenance, friendship making, health maintenance, healthy diet intake, interpersonal communication, leadership, learning, lifelong learning, listening, mentoring, motivation, mind refreshing, negotiating, non-verbal communication, organization, personality development, physical exercise, problem solving, rapport building, reading, self-assessment, self-control, self-esteem maintenance, social network usage, stress management, teaching, time management, verbal communication, win-win situation promotion and written communication.

It needs to be remembered that, all the above exercises seek too much from the teachers, and all of them remain lifeless unless the teachers do not enjoy and willingly practice the above exercises. Hence, it is essential to offer appropriate provision to those teachers who put in their best efforts in promoting skills among the students. But those small provisions give much more to students as compared to the cost of the provisions.

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