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Talks Under Way to Recast Literacy Mission

The government started the process of recasting the National Literacy Mission as the National Mission for Female Literacy so as to focus on women's education. This follows President Pratibha Patil's promise, in her address to Parliament, to revamp the scheme.

The new mission document is expected to redefine literacy that will focus on continuing education for neo-literates and not just teaching the beneficiaries basic literacy. It will also define parameters for evaluating neo-literates.

"While male literacy went up to more than 75 per cent in the last census and is expected to be

higher now, female literacy stood at a mere 54 per cent in 2001. My government will recast the National Literacy Mission as a National Mission for Female Literacy to make every woman literate in the next five years," Ms. Patil had said.

Briefing reporters after the first round of consultations with the stakeholders, including non-governmental organisations, Minister of State for Human Resource Development, Smt. D. Purandeswari said the government had received feedback from the participants that would help spot where the mission had faltered.

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Don't curb sexual knowledge

Leaving young people to fathom things for themselves can result in unsafe sex, spread of diseases, and encourage wanton use of emergency contraception pills. Helplines are a good alternative to educate teenagers and young adults about 'birds and bees', but we need other options if schools are to be debarred from talking about sex

Ever since the Committee on Petitions of Parliament said "no" to sex education in schools, two views have emerged. The first that the panel is right. Most Indian homes never allude to the facts of life and teachers find classroom sex talk loathsome, whatever they might proclaim before zealous superiors.

The second view point is that if sex education is not undertaken on a massive scale it would have disastrous fallout in terms of unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions, and the suppression of curable diseases. Most scary of all, ignorance and inhibitions could fan the spread of HIV transmission.

The parliamentary panel has also directed withdrawal of adolescent education literature from all state-run or CBSE-affiliated schools in the country. It is unlikely that any future conclave of Chief Ministers would negate the Committee's recommendations. Some States had earlier rejected sex education in schools (and some decided to restore it.)

India is not alone in grappling with this impasse. Other countries have faced and are still confronting this dilemma. Despite the extraordinary achievements ascribed to Mr Mechai Viravaidya who led a successful safe sex campaign in Thailand and won accolades for averting an HIV epidemic, the one-time Cabinet Minister actually lost his patience with the Government and had to undertake his pro-condom

campaign as a lone show.

In the US the 'abstinence only' programme has been accused of causing the highest teen pregnancies in any developed country. *The Economist* recently referred to research conducted at the University of Washington suggesting that teenagers that received comprehensive sex education showed a 50 per cent lower risk of becoming pregnant. Recently, two Bills seeking funding for sex education and parental independence to decide whether they want sex education or abstinence education (or nothing) in schools have been introduced.

Two years ago the Jansankhya Sthirata Kosh or the National Population Stabilisation Fund requested gynecologists and community health doctors to recommend useful strategies in the context of ongoing population stabilisation efforts. Without exception the doctors recounted the appalling levels of ignorance that persisted, cutting across urban and rural clients and equally between children from posh colonies and neighbouring slums. The doctors recommended that a call centre service should give authentic information anonymously in a matter-of-fact way. Examples of professionally-manned call centres were cited, along with the lack of sustainability of helplines.

It took NPSF more than a year to prepare the question bank, convert it into software and

establish a BPO-run service manned by life science graduates. They were trained by Delhi's Maulana Azad Medical College. Today the call centre receives around 500 calls a day, even from the most conservative districts of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Districts like Balrampur and Kishanganj falling in the lowest development quintile of the country, where women on an average have five or more children, where the age of marriage is between 15 and 17 for girls and long before 21 for boys, and where contraceptive use is abysmally low, have started telephoning the call centre. Most of the calls relate to contraception and within that, information on the use of condoms and natural methods dominates. In decreasing proportion come questions on the use of pills, intrauterine devices, emergency contraceptives and sterilisation. Male sexual health is a huge preoccupation among male callers of all ages. An experienced doctor handles specialised information needs and supervises the agents.

The moot point is whether Governments have a responsibility to impart sex education for adolescents at risk. Leaving young people to fathom things for themselves can result in unsafe sex, spread of infection, and encourage wanton use of emergency contraception pills — as often as six times a month. A perilous abortion is also hardly an option. The call centre service has

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Delhi's infant mortality doubles in 2 years

In India's capital, the number of children dying within the first year of birth has almost doubled in the past two years, according to the Delhi government's own statistics. Data released in the Economic Survey of Delhi for 2008-2009 shows that the infant mortality rate in 2007 was 25.4 deaths per 1,000 children between the ages of 0 and 1 years, compared to 12.9 in 2006 and 18.1 in 2005.

Though Delhi's IMR is still better than the national average of 55, the 2007 figure comes as a jolt, especially since the last time that Delhi saw such a high IMR was in 2001, when the figure touched 24.5.

Delhi's medical fraternity admits that the figure is worrying; especially as the city claims to be progressing towards a better future, bolstered by a higher spend on the healthcare sector. In the 2008 budget, the Delhi government had allocated Rs 873.70 crore — a substantial 9% of the total outlay, for the health sector.

"There are various reasons for the rising mortality rate, number one being the lack of education of the parents, especially the mother," said Dr Sudha Prasad, senior doctor at LNJP Hospital. Dr Prasad, who specialises in IVF, cited the patients coming to LNJP. "The socio-economic profile of the mothers make it extremely hard for them to concentrate on one child, since most have a large brood of children. Many times, the parents can't even diagnose the symptoms properly, failing to bring the child in time for treatment," added Dr Prasad.

Other healthcare professionals are also agree with the above statement.. A senior doctor in the paediatrics department of AIIMS cited the SRS number, which puts

the IMR at a higher 36. "Compare this to Kerala, which is only 13. The number is shameful, especially if you consider that IMR is the symbol of a nation's development and not the number of roads or weapons we have," said the source.

According to health experts, the reason why the IMR in Delhi is so high is because of many factors, including the increasing influx of migratory population with poor access to proper healthcare. Add the fact that the city doesn't have adequate number of beds for the existing population, with the large hospitals facing the brunt of the healthcare demand, and it becomes obvious that something drastic needs to be done soon.

Health minister Kiran Walia, agrees. "We've been concentrating on healthcare for some time now, including introducing Anganwadi and healthcare workers. Special schemes like the Janani Suraksha Yojna and the Mamta schemes are also functional. But all efforts get neutralised in the face of the large influx of migrants into the city," adds Walia. The Survey backs the claim, with figures that show a rise in number of migrants: in 2007, there were 47.42% migrants in the city, when the percentage of natural growth was 52.58%. In absolute terms, the natural increase in population during 2007 was 2.21 lakh, whereas migrants increased by 2.45 lakh. The figures are based on birth and death rates and the total increase in population.

Interestingly, the Survey also throws up an interesting anomaly — whereas the death rate has gone down from 6.11 per 1,000 in 2006 to 6.07 in 2007, the number of average deaths recorded per day has gone up from 271 in 2006 to 277 in 2007. The number one cause of death in the city is heart disease, with transport accidents also accounting for quite a few. □

More chance of girls being born in tropics

Couples hoping for a baby girl might be best advised to go and live in Africa, if a study is to be believed. It points to big differences in the proportions of male to female births between tropical latitudes and temperate and sub-arctic latitudes.

This gap remains even when local cultural and social preferences - such as the preferences for males in India and China, resulting in the abortion of female fetuses - are taken into account. University of Georgia endocrinologist Kristen Navara looked at official data collected from 202 countries over a decade, from 1997-2006, and published it in the Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook. Averaged around the world, there were 51.3% male births to 48.7 female births, she found.

But this average masked big differences according to latitude: in tropical latitudes, male dominance fell to 51.1% of births. In tropical sub-Saharan Africa, it was just 50.8%. "Significantly more females were produced at tropical latitudes," she said. "This relationship emerged despite enormous lifestyle and socio-economic variation among countries and continents."

Navara, whose paper appears in the British journal *Biology Letters*, said more research is needed to explain the puzzle. She speculated that human gametes - sperm and eggs - may be affected by ambient light and temperature, and this could exert a bias in favour of one gender or another. □

Health of urban poor should be top priority

The blinding lights of the city — good jobs, the promise of a financially stable future — are making the rural poor migrate to interior towns. And it is this population that India's new health minister will have to be concerned about.

An ambitious plan — National Urban Health Mission envisaged by former health minister A Ramadoss — failed to take off during his tenure, but the new health Minister has to see it go through at the earliest.

Designed on the lines of UPA's flagship National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) which aims to provide healthcare to the vast rural population, NUHM aims to provide accessible and affordable primary healthcare to the poor and homeless urban population — a number that is steadily rocketing. NUHM aims to improve the health of 22 crore people living in urban slums in 429 cities.

And with the threat of pandemic becoming real, viruses re-asserting in nature to cause mass outbreaks, like the H1N1 swine flu virus presently causing havoc, the health minister's to-do list has to include an effective Integrated Disease Surveillance Network.

India holds the dubious distinction of being the world's diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, TB and malnutrition capital. Government spends just 1% of GDP on health. As a consequence an already poor population has to meet medical needs through out of pocket expenditure amounting to about 4.2% of GDP. The country is short by six lakh doctors, 10 lakh nurses and two lakh dental surgeons. The new health minister must deliver what was declared under the 11th Plan — the setting up of six AIIMS-like institutions, 60 new medical colleges and 225 new nursing colleges. □

Delhi's special initiative for its poor, underprivileged and women

The data of 50 lakh vulnerable families of the Capital would be available to the Delhi Government in the coming year to facilitate accurate budgeting and handling of various departmental schemes for them. Addressing a seminar on "Mission Convergence" at Delhi Secretariat, the Chief Minister said Mission Convergence would provide social justice in the best coordinated way to ensure that the underprivileged and the poor regularly receive welfare services for both sustainable growth and eradication of poverty.

Per capita income

Describing Mission Convergence as an attempt to lay the foundation for a proper psychological, physical and social development of the poor and unheard communities, Ms. Dikshit said the Human Development Report shows that the annual per capita income in the Capital was twice the national average. "It is also a fact that only 14.7 per cent of the population belongs to the below poverty level category against the national average of 27.5 per cent. On the other hand, the HDR report also indicates that 45 per cent of the population resides in slums and resettlement colonies," she said.

Stating that Mission Convergence had been established to provide an institutional mechanism for unifying special policies impacting the poor, Ms. Dikshit said it was also formed to facilitate integrated delivery of welfare entitlement to the underprivileged citizens in an efficient, transparent, convenient, friendly and cost effective manner.

Extensive network

"An extensive network of community organisations has been selected for running the Gender Resource Centre-Suvidha Kendra. Forty old GRCs were strengthened with additional provision

of Suvidha Kendra component. Forty new centres were started by the Samajik Suvidha Sangam with GRC and Suvidha Kendra components. A massive area mapping exercise was undertaken so that each centre has a unique catchment area with a population of 15,000-20,000 households. The gender empowerment and mainstreaming efforts through these centres have received a massive boost with the launch of the Mission. Five million women benefited from these structures," Ms. Dikshit added. The Chief Minister said that nine Delhi Development Goals were aimed at eradicating poverty and hunger to achieve universal elementary education, to promote gender equality and empower women, to reduce child mortality, to improve maternal health, to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, to ensure environmental sustainability, to strengthen Bhagidari and to improve public safety. Hailing Mission Convergence as a unique combination of social security measures for families with an empowerment framework dedicated for women for sustainable growth, Chief Secretary Rakesh Mehta said it was also an initiative of citizen-government partnership to bring more inclusive development. "It reinforces that Delhi cares for its poor, vulnerable and underprivileged. This is an extension of Bhagidari of the Delhi Government." □

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Don't curb

managed to penetrate into a few homes of every district in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar and since responses are provided only to specific questions posed by the caller, it does not upset or repulse the uninitiated. But no call centre can become a panacea and alternatives must be found if schools are debarred from fielding the subject.

Courtesy: Shailaja Chandra

Give Girls a Chance

This report 'Give Girls a Chance: Tackling child labour, a key to the future', notes that while recent global estimates indicate the number of children involved in child labour has been falling, the financial crisis threatens to erode this progress.

"We have seen some real progress in reducing child labour. The policies chosen in the present crisis will be a test of national and global commitment to take this fight forward," said ILO Director-General Juan Somavia.

The report says the danger of girls being forced into child labour is linked to evidence that in many countries families give preference to boys when making decisions on education of children. It states that because of the increase in poverty as a result of the crisis, poor families with a number of children may have to make choices as to which children stay in school. In cultures in which a higher value is placed on education of male children, girls risk being taken out of school, and are then likely to enter

the workforce at an early age.

Other factors which could push up the numbers in child labour include cuts in national education budgets, and a decline in remittances of migrant workers, as these remittances often help to keep children in school. The ILO report says the most recent global estimate indicated that more than 100 million girls are involved in child labour, and many are exposed to some of its worst forms. Girls face a number of particular problems that justify special attention. □

Women can use present law to fight past crimes

Women subjected to violence by their husbands even before the Domestic Violence Act came into force can sue their husbands under the Act, a city court has held.

The Act came into force in October 2006.

Vinod (name changed), a businessman from South East Delhi married Kavita (name changed) in January 2002.

After a few months of their marriage, Kavita told her parents that Vinod used to beat her regularly. And Vinod's parents, she told them, were only encouraging their son.

"My husband comes from an influential family and has been threatening me to withdraw the court cases," said Kavita in her complaint.

Kavita had alleged her

miscarriage was a result of the violence inflicted by her own husband.

Later, she filed a complaint against her husband and his family members.

Kavita separated from Vinod after just six months of marriage.

Disposing off the complaint, Metropolitan Magistrate Surya Malik Grover said, "The court is competent to take cognizance of the act of domestic violence committed even prior to the Act came into force and pass necessary protection orders."

Rubinder Ghumman and Anu Mehta, counsels for the complainant, contended, "Domestic Violence Act is retrospective in operation. And despite court orders, the accused

have not paid the maintenance amount regularly to the complainant."

Vinod's counsel contended before the court that the couple is staying separately before the passing of the Act in 2006, and all alleged acts of domestic violence have been committed before the Act came into force.

"The respondents — Vinod and his family members — cannot be subjected to penalty greater than that which might have been inflicted under the law in force at the time of the commission of the offence," said the respondent's counsel.

"In view of the aforesaid discussion, I am satisfied that the present complaint under the Domestic Violence Act is maintainable" the judge said. □

Govt. aims at 100% female literacy in 5 yrs

In its second innings, UPA intends to do a balancing act between continuing and strengthening key educational programmes with some seminal changes, especially in higher education.

President Pratibha Patil's speech to the joint session of Parliament straddled the two worlds with ease. She talked about eradicating female illiteracy, so much so that the National Literacy Mission is promised to be recast as National Mission for Female Literacy so that over 50% female literacy becomes 100% in the next five years. Patil said female literacy would become a "force multiplier" for all social development programmes.

At the same time, the President talked about setting up a National Council for Higher Education in the next 100 days as recommended by the National Knowledge Commission and UGC's Yashpal Committee. A similar attempt by Arjun Singh met with stiff resistance from other ministries like health and agriculture that refused to give its turf to a regulator that is essentially seen as working under the HRD ministry. In fact, NKC is going to be more acceptable to HRD ministry now than during Arjun Singh's time.

The President also reiterated the government's resolve to make right to free and compulsory education a reality soon. The bill is with the Rajya Sabha and is likely to be passed in the next session of

Parliament.

Patil reiterated UGC's decision to develop a "brain gain" policy to attract faculty from across the world for the 14 "innovative universities" proposed in the Eleventh Plan.

Patil spoke of providing skill development training to about 50 crore people by 2022 to ensure that India contributes significantly to the global workforce. "Education which provides employable skills holds the key for equal opportunities for OBCs, SCs, STs and minorities," she said. The President's speech also praised the achievements of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Mid-Day Meal scheme and spoke of new Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan promising to universalise secondary education. □

IGNOU to promote community colleges

The move for setting up community colleges in all parts of the country has gained momentum, as over 250 institutions met at the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) for a day long conference to decide action-plan. From May onward, in about 10 States, the university will convene regional meetings of experts, NGOs, Government and semi-Government agencies and interested academics of all disciplines to identify and tie-up with formal colleges, finalise programmes and contextualise course contents to start associate degree programmes from the July cycle. Similar efforts will gradually be extended to other States in the next phase for starting the move there, maybe, from the January cycle of 2010.

Eminent social workers from

some NGOs, Vice Chancellors of State-level open universities, UGC member Fr Xavier Alphonse, representatives of leading organisations in the movement like Young Men's Christian Association and All India Women Council attended the conference.

The university expert committee for the project is busy at present in fine-tuning the current plan. The committee comprises subject experts from States and the IGNOU representatives.

They would oversee academic planning, develop curricular framework and management of the community colleges. The members of the committee will also ensure judicious blend of theory and practice, locale-specific needs clearly integrated and industry-community linkages. Colleges, which will offer the two-year

associate degree programmes from the ensuing July cycle, are also likely to be identified in the month of May. Vice Chancellor Professor VN Rajasekharan Pillai, who presided over the conference, said that the movement has its seed in the 11th Plan outlay of the nation, in which Planning Commission had identified Community College mode strong enough to disseminate education to all segments of the society. Meeting will conceptualised the community colleges the way these are likely to impact the society and the country's education scenario. Community Colleges, which would register with IGNOU, would have to offer Associate Degree on a range of job-oriented industry-trained academic programmes, at affordable costs. The philosophy is — These are colleges by the community, for the community and of the community. □

Ministry of Minority Affairs puts focus on Muslim women

A scheme to provide skill development and leadership training to Muslim women exhibiting entrepreneurial skills is set to be rolled out soon by the Ministry of Minority Affairs as the Manmohan Singh Government begins work on a 100-day action plan for governance.

The Minority Affairs Ministry is giving final touches to the scheme, aimed at empowering Muslim women who have been left out of the development trajectory. The scheme, which would be Centrally sponsored, is likely to have a flexible one-time financial support component as well.

Though the scheme would be implemented directly by the Minority Affairs Ministry, the services of state governments and NGOs would be sought to identify the beneficiaries. A selection committee would be set up to screen the individual applications and the names forwarded by states and NGOs.

While the Ministry is yet to finalise the lower and upper limits of the financial support aspect, sources said the National Minorities Development and Finance Corporation could be linked with the beneficiaries to ensure that they continued to get support till they became self-reliant.

The Sachar Committee had pointed out that although Muslim women were “overwhelmingly self-employed” and engaged in home-based work, they did not have

independent access to credit facilities, opportunities for skill up-gradation, or access to markets. There was discrimination in giving Muslim women credit facilities.

The Ministry’s plan is to support such self-employed women to develop the leadership skills in them, sharpen their entrepreneurial talent and help improve their primary skills. The Sachar Committee had found that self-employed Muslim women were primarily engaged in activities like sewing, embroidery, agarbatti rolling and beedi making.

Besides, the female work participation rate among Muslims is only about 25 per cent while the literacy rate is abysmally low. In view of the poor socio-economic status of Muslim women, the scheme is essentially on the lines of the Prime Minister’s 15-point programme for the welfare of minorities.

Although the scheme was conceptualised by the Women and Child Development Ministry, it was later transferred to the Ministry of Minority Affairs, which began working on it after the interim budget, presented by Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee, earmarked Rs 45 lakh for its implementation. Initially, the scheme is likely to be implemented in select states only where there is a large minority population. The scheme could well be the first that new Minority Affairs Minister Salman Khursheed may announce. □

लिंगानुपात मामले में 15 पायदान खिसका भारत

लिंगानुपात के मामले में भारत दुनिया के मानचित्र पर 15 पायदान खिसककर 113वें स्थान पर पहुंचा गया है। 2008 में वह 98वें स्थान पर था। भारत सिर्फ लिंगानुपात ही नहीं, बल्कि महिला साक्षरता, सुरक्षा व स्वास्थ्य के मामले में पिछड़ता जा रहा है। यह बात भारतीय प्रबंधन संस्थान अहमदाबाद में रविवार को जेंडर रिसोर्स सेंटर द्वारा आयोजित एक परिचर्चा में सामने आई।

गुजरात जैसे तेजी से विकसित होते राज्य में भी स्थिति ठीक नहीं है। यहां प्रति एक हजार लड़कों की तुलना में लड़कियों की संख्या 921 है, जबकि 1991 में यह संख्या 934 थी। परिचर्चा में इस बात पर आश्चर्य जताया गया कि शहरीकरण के इस दौर में जब ज्यादा से ज्यादा महिलाएं आत्मनिर्भर होती जा रही हैं, तब भाहरी लड़कियों की जन्मदर के निरंतर गिरावट देखी जा रही है।

एक अन्य चौंकाने वाली बात यह सामने आई कि केवल ग्रामीण ही नहीं, बल्कि शहरी क्षेत्रों में रहने वाली महिलाएं भाहरी पुरुषों की तुलना में खुद को पिछड़ा हुआ महसूस करती हैं। □

