

theirview

How many sacks of rice?

India should revisit its priorities in education and learn from Japan's paradigm of the basics

BY ASHOK ASHTA

The signals from the Indian government's efforts to limit the financial freedom of the IIMs (Indian Institutes of Management) and news reports of students of medical institutes protesting government interference are in stark contrast to the Japanese education experience—where the bigger issue for government is not how institutes are run, but how access to good education is ensured for its population at large.

The role played by education in the modernization of Japan has aroused the academic interest of researchers in many advanced countries. Importantly, it is also of great interest among developing countries and I believe India can learn from the priorities Japan pursued in developing its education system.

The Japanese have concentrated their efforts on the foundations of the education pyramid of primary, secondary and tertiary education. This traditional cultural bias on fundamentals remains to this day; former prime minister Junichiro Koizumi, too, was inspired by the paradigm of the basics. In his early days in 2001, he would pepper his speeches with the quote "tsune ni senjou ni ari", which translates to "always be in the battlefield". This term can be traced back to Torasaburo Kobayashi who is considered to be the founder of the modern education system in Japan during the Meiji era in the 1870s. Kobayashi is also the protagonist of the *Kome Hyappyo* (100 sacks of rice) story that inspired Koizumi.

The story goes like this: Kobayashi's village in Nagaoka province of Japan is facing economic

difficulties. A neighbouring province sends 100 sacks of rice to Nagaoka to assist. Kobayashi decides to sell the rice and build a school with the funds generated. The famished samurai and village people angrily question why Kobayashi won't distribute the rice instead. What good is the school when people are dying of hunger, they ask?

Kobayashi replies that the rice, if distributed immediately, would just last two or three days and there would be nothing left to show for the 100 sacks of rice. The school, on the other hand, would survive to educate the children of Nagaoka and the educated population would be better equipped to face economic downturns in the future. He argues that through the school the 100 sacks of rice would multiply to 10,000 and then to 50,000 barrels in the years to come. He explains how education is fundamental to preparing a strong foundation.

Fortunately for Kobayashi, and for Japan today, his people could recognize the wisdom in his words. They realized battle-preparedness starts with education. The school that was then built is till today recognized as

The thrust on financial control and equality in access to higher education comes out of a short-term view

the foundation of modern education in Japan.

Koizumi learned the lesson of concentrating on fundamentals from Kobayashi. As Kobayashi said, "The prosperity of a country, the growth of cities—everything depends on people. Build schools and develop people of ability."

This story demonstrates a practical example that India's leaders could emulate. I see several parallels with Kobayashi's village. The sacks of rice are a metaphor for the government's efforts—where should they be invested? In following a short-term approach, the government could concentrate on issues of equality, financial control, etc., at the level of the institutes of higher learning, which is what it seems to be doing. This attempts to satisfy the immediate hunger for perceived equality. Alternatively, the government could concentrate on building the foundations for the future. Any effort that detracts attention from primary and secondary education dilutes the foundation of the building—the stage that we must recognize we are at when one-third of the populace remains illiterate.

Since my earliest interactions with Japan over 20 years ago, I have marvelled at how they have progressed. India was ahead of it after World War II had devastated Japan. No doubt, help from the US aided its rapid development. But there was more to it than American assistance. One of the "secrets" explained to me by a senior Japanese business leader was that even a devastated Japan was fully educated. That educated workforce served as the strong foundation for country's rapid resurgence as is increasingly recognized by the academic world.

The Japanese education system ensures compulsory education till Class IX. Over 93% attend high school and most of them graduate. While a decline in the quality



of the products of Japan's education system is now being debated, it remains a fact that its education standards are amongst the highest in the world. The emphasis on school education has two highlights. First, salaries at the primary and secondary levels are attractive enough to induce the brightest to take up teaching and teachers remain diligent in their duties. Second, the ministry of education, culture, sports, science and technology is, as a mat-

ter of policy, trying to create an environment in which universities operate more independently and autonomously.

If India could reverse its priority and concentrate on basic education at the bottom of the pyramid, it would contribute more to broader economic prosperity.

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