

The Times of India, Bangalore
Date: September 10, 2007

Want development? Educate girls: Tharoor

The 51-year-old writer would not like to take the 62% literacy levels of India, on the face of it. In an interview to The Times of India on Sunday, former United Nations under secretary Shashi Tharoor says it's time the government roped in the private sector in education, given the scale of challenging in reducing the huge dropout rate and ensuring the every child in India is in school.

Excerpts:

India seems far away from achieving the goal of Education For All (EFA) by 2015. Despite various initiatives to bring the child to school, why and where have we failed?

Merely having schemes to enroll children in schools will not help. We must look at social realities of every child. Why will a girl child travel for two hours to reach the school, when her family back home is starving? Teacher-absenteeism is worst in India. Why will children go to a school where there are no teachers? Not to discount the achievement, we have gone from a mere 18% to 62%, but the challenge is huge. Though I am personally dubious about these figures, we would not like to question it as it is official. It's good to have goals; I want the goals, so that we work towards it.

What then are the urgent steps India needs to initiate to reach the EFA goal?

The time has come for the government to facilitate private sector involvement in education and promoting literacy. We can no more rely on the government for everything; the cooperates must step in. We cannot become a 21st century leader with so many illiterates. India has more number of children who have never seen a school than any other country. The challenge must be to have world class leaders from India and these leaders from India and these leaders must be our poor boys and girls. Why not?

What is that one step you would advise for development?

Educate girls. This is the magic bullet for development for not just India, but every country. Girl education is one of the most urgent initiatives that we must take up seriously. It is a universal truth that educating girls is transforming families and societies.

Increasingly, young and the educated seem to be taking up the path of terror...

I would like to believe that it is only a tiny minority. Every society has its criminality; we should not generalize. Today deadly weapons are easily available and there are people supplying them.

Should India sign the nuclear deal?

Wait for my next column.