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India, Factor 16: Education
**India: Education, a weapon
against poverty**

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1.252 Billion people reside in the South-Asian subcontinent of India.⁶ Holding almost a fifth of the world's population, the country has a lot of mouths to feed. The country depends on farms and the farming families to keep the country from famines. Farmers suffer greatly, because of lack of steady income and their inability to educate their children. Based on 2005 data, 42 % of the population of India live in poverty, which is defined as living in less than 1.25 US dollars/day. Less than 5 percent of the rural population make enough to pay taxes, and only 10% have a steady salaried job.² Education is the driver of socioeconomic progress of a country. Education forms an important catalyst in the overall development of individuals, enabling them to comprehend their social, political and cultural environment better and respond to it appropriately. Education is the key to empower individuals and families with the knowledge to newer techniques or ways for sustainable farming and improve their livelihood. Education would help them understand and fight for their basic civil rights. Information will give them the power to negotiate and trade locally and globally. Education can help individuals and families obtain jobs in non-farming sectors as well, which would help them bring food to the table. India is grappling with serious problems of inadequate access, quality and inefficiency in the schooling system. I have no doubt in my mind that education is the answer to improve the lives of people in India.

73 percent of Indians live in rural areas, and are cultivators and agricultural laborers.¹¹ Rural families are much larger than the average urban family in India. They tend to have 4-8 family members of different generations living under one roof. Low access to education, and time-consuming farming practices, has led to the majority of the rural population not being educated. Their diets mainly compose of rice, dahl (lentils), wheat, millet, and inexpensive vegetables such as

Meghna Mallapan
Central Academy
Des Moines, IA
India, Factor 16: Education
**India: Education, a weapon
against poverty**

tomatoes and onions. Meals are made to be simple and filling, since household sizes are large and family income is very low in rural areas. This lack of education places women even more below the poverty line, meaning they make less than 2 dollars and 40 cents a day.⁷ This low-income makes it virtually impossible for these families to get health care. 70-80% of hospital visits made by rural people were paid out of pocket, because they cannot afford regular payments for health insurance.⁷ To continue keeping the production of agriculture steady, the government must aid rural farming families much more than it currently does.

The common sized farm in India is about 1.15 hectares. On this small piece of land, an Indian farmer grows rice, wheat, millets, a variety of spices, sugarcane, and a variety of vegetables. There are 3 main types of farming in India Subsistence farming, Plantation Agriculture, and Shifting Agriculture. While it may seem like they have a healthy agricultural system, farming families face many barriers in their jobs. Many families only produce crops to support themselves, and they cannot sell to markets, because their farms have a lack of irrigation systems. These irrigation systems are very expensive for a family farmer to implement, and the government does not allocate enough money to rural farmers for projects like irrigation. It is very hard for these farmers to produce more productively, because the amount of money they make is only enough to keep them surviving on a day to day basis. They do not make enough money to invest more into their farms. Subsistence farmers are very common in rural India, but the majority of them can never sell their product simply because of the lack of markets. To sell goods at Markets, rural farmers must travel to more densely populated areas, which are almost a 100 km away. Since the majority of these

Meghna Mallapan
Central Academy
Des Moines, IA
India, Factor 16: Education
**India: Education, a weapon
against poverty**

farmers don't own a car, or have any good way to transport their food to markets, they have little chance to make profit off their work.

The Indian farmers have the potential of growing their agricultural productivity, and helping better their country's economy. To do this the government must invest more time and money in expanding education throughout the entire country. By educating the youth of today they have more chance of creating a better future for the country. This lack of higher education leads to people doing more manual labor jobs. Manual Labor jobs don't pay very well and this decreases families income, and the amount of food they can purchase. Since this lack of steady stream of cash flow is a factor, many families cannot afford to put food on the table daily. Families are unable to get proper nutrition, because they choose to purchase the less expensive foods. They purchase cheaper things like grains, starch, etc. and are unable to buy lots of nutritious fruits and vegetables.

Education in India gradually improving, but at a pretty slow rate. There are about 8 million children not enrolled in school right now.⁶ The number gets larger as you pass elementary school, because families cannot afford to send a child to school when they could be working and providing for the family. The Education system is worse in rural and poorer areas. Access to secondary schools are limited, so most children only have up to a 8th grade education. There is also a greater disadvantage for girls. They are less likely to get access to education for lack of secondary schools in rural areas. It would be of much greater benefit to India to provide more education to girls in the country, because women account for 49.55 percent of the entire population.⁶ While India is implementing change in Education, it is not drastic enough. Most changes are directed towards populated cities and states, which is good, but this leaves rural families in a declining state. The

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India, Factor 16: Education
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situation for rural families is not changing much at all. The rest of the country is leaving them in the dust. Rural families have little to no education compared to urban families. Knowledge is power, and currently rural families are being declined this.

According to 2001 census report, overall literacy rate in India works out to be 64.8 %, the male literacy rate is 75.3% and that for females is 53.7%,⁶ showing a gap of 21.6 percentage points between the sexes at the national level. The gap is even more in the rural areas. Only 3.5 percent of students graduate and 35.7 percent of the population is illiterate.⁶ Of these students that get education, the majority of them are male, because rural India relies heavily on patriarchal societies. Based on 2015 UNESCO report, in terms of absolute numbers, India - with 28.7 crore illiterates - was the country with the largest number of adults without basic literacy skills in 2010-11. Net attendance ratio for Secondary school participation between years 2008-2012 dropped to 58.5 % from 82.5 % in Primary schools for boys and 48.7% from 81.4 % for girls.⁶ It is shocking to note that there are still as many as 3,077 villages in the country, which do not have a single literate.

Main factors that contribute to lack of education include high level of poverty, high rate of population growth, lack of adequate government funding, lack of basic sanitation in schools, traditional outlook of the poor families in using their young children either for earning some additional money or looking after their younger siblings at home. My research shows that several sections of the Indian society always rooted for the education of their sons than their daughters. Due to several biases and superstitions deeply ingrained in culture they ignored the education of their daughters.

Meghna Mallapan
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Des Moines, IA
India, Factor 16: Education
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against poverty**

Universal access to basic education for all still remains an unfulfilled dream. The World Declaration on education for All, the Framework for Action To Meet Basic Learning Needs, the E9 Declaration for Education For All, and the 40-year old Universal Declaration of Human Rights were aimed at giving prominence to basic education. The Jomtien Conference of 1990 established the goal of achieving basic Education for All (EFA) by the year 2000. However, despite all the declarations, that everyone has a right to education has not been transformed into reality in the Indian sub-continent. The Constitution of India, envisaged free and mandatory education for all children upto the age of 14, within a period of 10 years. The National Policy on Education, 1986, amended in 1992, proclaimed the same goal to be achieved by the year 2000. A decade or more past the deadline, the magnitude of the problem continues to daunt the country. The lesser goal of universal primary education (UPE) for children upto the age of 10 is yet to be reached. The 83rd Constitution Amendment Bill, 1997, seeks to make free education for all children of the country up to the age of 14 years a fundamental right.

If Indian farmers were educated on newer farming techniques, mechanization and irrigation, farming would be lot more efficient and productive. Currently, several of the farmers rely on erratic monsoon and do not have access to alternate ways of irrigation. Poverty and financial burden were the primary factors for 42% increase in farmer suicide between 2014 (5650) and 2015 (8007) according to the National crime records Bureau. While they could use their education to improve farming, it would also open doors to hold non-agricultural jobs when situation demands. Educating women would ensure that the family does not depend on a single source of income to feed them and provide the basic necessities.

Meghna Mallapan
Central Academy
Des Moines, IA
India, Factor 16: Education
**India: Education, a weapon
against poverty**

Major factors that stand in the way of achieving the goal for basic education for all, include population growth when supply cannot keep up with the demand, allocation of resources to improve infrastructure and breaking the barriers of deep-rooted cultural norms. It is interesting to note that the government expenditure on education as a percentage of Gross domestic product dropped from 4.3 % in 1999 to 3.8 % in 2012.⁷

After extensive review of data and understanding the challenges the country faces in providing basic education to its 1.2 billion people, I would like to focus on three important issues. My first and foremost recommendation would be to brainstorm ideas and implementing ways to close the gender gap in education. When women are educated, there is a significantly increased chance that they will focus on educating their children and community as well. Creating awareness in the local communities about importance of educating girls is one way to improve enrollment in school. This could be done by talking to local community leaders, advertisement campaigns in television, local newspapers. Involving local celebrities would help gather a wide audience. Another key element that I would focus on is improving basic infrastructure at school. This includes safe, clean, well-lit classrooms, textbooks, access to clean water and toilet facilities. Last but not the least, I'd urge the government to allocate more resources in terms of financial support, allocate adequate staffing, training teachers, social workers to make this dream of basic education a reality to all its citizens.

There are several projects and organizations working with the goal to improve basic literacy, numeracy, vocational education and continuing education for all, with emphasis on teens and women. Sehgal foundation is a non-governmental organization, whose focus is to improve school infrastructure with the aim of improving student

Meghna Mallapan
Central Academy
Des Moines, IA
India, Factor 16: Education
**India: Education, a weapon
against poverty**

enrollment and retention. The organization identified that girls are known to have to stay at home to help with procuring water for the family and the absence of toilets was another factor that kept the girls from attending school, especially during menstruation. It is a well established fact that access to toilets and safe, convenient water supply help reduce poverty in several ways; it frees up time to focus on education, agricultural activities, other means of livelihood and prevents morbidity and mortality from water-borne illness. The foundation has been working on water issues by setting up rooftop rainwater harvesting structures in schools and building toilets to help solve this problem.

Several other non-governmental organizations to include MV Foundation (child labor eradication), Pratham Mumbai Education Initiative (universalization of pre-primary and primary education in a metropolis), Bodh Shiksha Samiti (appropriate primary education for the Urban poor), Rishi Valley Rural Education Center (Multi-grade teaching model), Eklavya (pedagogic renewal) and Center for Education Management and Development (school improvement through management inputs) play a strong role in complementing the efforts to the government to provide successful schooling of underprivileged children and communities that face social barriers to education.

The government has initiated many projects to improve the literacy rate of women in India. National education for women, Saakshar Bharat mission, Indian Siksha Karmi project, Training of female teachers, Scholarships for her, Mahila Samakhya Program, Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya scheme are few worthy of mention. Thanks to these initiatives by the government, the female literacy rate grew from 53.67 % to 65.46% as per 2011 Census data.⁴ All these efforts of government and non-governmental organizations will be successful only with active participation of individuals and families both at the rural and urban

Meghna Mallapan
Central Academy
Des Moines, IA
India, Factor 16: Education
**India: Education, a weapon
against poverty**

level. The families should make sending their children to school a priority. It is also the responsibility of each citizen to take it upon themselves to assert their basic civil right for education.

While the literacy rate has improved over the years, the rate at which it is happening is concerning. As discussed above focusing on improving education would have a major impact on socioeconomic progress of the country. India would see a boom in its agricultural production if farmers were educated on improved techniques and methodologies in farming. Adequate allocation of resources by the government, combined with the support of NGO's would greatly enhance the pace of progress in education. More emphasis should be paid to educating women in rural areas, which would help alleviate poverty among the masses. Providing access to quality education, and improving the infrastructure in schools would be vital towards achieving the literacy goals. I strongly believe in Nelson Mandela's words 'Education is the most powerful weapon which can change the world'.

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Des Moines, IA
India, Factor 16: Education
**India: Education, a weapon
against poverty**

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Meghna Mallapan
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India, Factor 16: Education
**India: Education, a weapon
against poverty**

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