

## Rural-Urban Disparities : Education\*

EDUCATION is a highly complex variable and the rural-urban differences may be usefully studied along different dimensions of education. There is therefore a tremendous scope for a variety of comparative analyses in respect of education. Yet, hitherto this field has attracted little attention. Other types of educational differences, for example, male-female, scheduled-non scheduled castes, have been studied. The question therefore, arises—why is there this lack of interest in rural-urban differences in education?

Obviously, the interest of scholars is enhanced when they perceive reality as a social problem or as something which is a discriminatory practice. In the case of women and the scheduled caste educational differences are looked upon as educational inequalities. In the case of comparative rural-urban position, the corresponding differences have been taken for granted just as facts of life. No doubt, efforts are made to equalise facilities of elementary education between rural and urban areas. This, however, is attempted as an endeavour to universalise elementary education as matter of human rights or of democratic norms.

Against this background, we may look at the papers for this session. Most of them have dealt with rural-urban differences only in so far as they relate to literacy. We have among them an overview of India's educational progress since Independence. This progress is approached in terms of educational facilities at different levels, student enrolments, provision of teachers, educational expenditures etc. The relevant data are drawn from secondary sources. However, on the point of rural-urban differences, both the evidence and the discussion are meagre; the reason advanced is that there is a paucity of studies addressed to this aspect. It does even so, reveal wide differences in rural and urban literacy rates.

\*Organiser's Statement on Education in the Plenary session of the VIII Conference of the IASP *op. cit.*

Further, it clearly shows that facilities for elementary education are widespread in both rural and urban areas and that even in rural areas, primary schools are accessible to about 98 percent of the population within a radius of 2 kms from their homes. There is on the other hand a wide rural-urban disparity as regards accessibility to institutions of higher learning.

It is pointed out that equal accessibility to primary schools should not be judged by the same yardstick for rural and urban areas. For, in a large number of cases the primary schools are located outside the village community even though it may fall within a radius of 2 kms. Because of the location being outside, many parents are not inclined to sending their children to these schools.

Next we have an examination of literacy rates for rural, urban and total population in respect of both the sexes for different districts of West Bengal. This examination reveals that literacy rates are on the whole related to the degree of urbanisation of the district population; while female rate is lower, the difference between the two rates is positively correlated with overall literacy rate of the district population; and similarly while the rural rate is invariably lower, the rural-urban differences is related to the overall literacy of the district population. Several discrepancies in these relationships are, however, pointed out. The exposition is of limited value as no analysis of causal factors underlying the established relationships and the discrepancies is available.

Then we have an interesting hypothetical model used to estimate the impact of educational equalization between rural and urban population on population growth, the underlying assumptions being that higher educational attainment increases the age at marriage and that the latter results in reduced fertility. In contrast to this, we have straightforward measurement of rural-urban educational disparities at the State level. This exercise also attempts to pinpoint the underlying determinants. On the basis of the relevant 1981 data for 17 States, rural-urban disparity is correlated with such independent variables as area of the State, percentage of the scheduled caste in the total population, percentage urban population, percentage of non-agricultural workers in the working force, per capita state income, educational expenditure as a percentage of the total annual budget of the state and per capita expenditure on education. The exercise reveals that only three of these variables exert substantial effect on the rural-urban disparity in education, namely the two variables of educational expenditure and the percentage of non-agricultural workers in the total working force. Of these three, the last is shown to exert the highest influence.

Finally, in my paper an attempt is made to analyse educational rural-urban disparities against the perspective of urbanisation. This exercise takes states as units of analysis; the states chosen are those with more than one percent of the country's population. From among them, Kerala is excluded since urbanologists find it difficult to precisely define its urban character on account of the dispersed pattern of settlements there; indeed, Kerala ranks very low in terms of the

urban content of its population but it has, according to the 1981 Census, the highest percentage of working force in non-agricultural activities. The data are taken from the 1971 and 1981 Censuses, for 14 states in 1971 and 13 states (excluding Assam) in 1981. In all states, both in 1971 and 1981, there were wide gaps in literacy percentages between rural and urban populations, the rate for the latter being far in excess of that for the former. There is a systematic relationship in literacy percentage between rural and urban areas; the higher the percentage in urban areas, the higher it is for the rural areas. Rural-urban disparity is negatively related to the general level of literacy in the state. With increase in literacy, the rural-urban disparity tends to decrease. When urbanization is taken into account, a high degree of correlation is found between the degree of urbanization and urban/rural literacy ratio. The strength of this correlation is found to have increased from 0.62 in 1971 to 0.86 in 1981. If percentage of non-agricultural workers is taken as proxy for the degree of urbanization in order to include Kerala in the computation of correlation, the coefficient of correlation rises to 0.76 for 1971. It is also further confirmed that with the increase in the degree of urbanization, the urban/rural literacy ratio tends to decrease; this is true of both the male and female populations. This may be explained in terms of two hypotheses; one relates to the process of differentiation and the other to that of diffusion. Regarding the first, the rural to urban migrants are found to be more literate than those who stay back in rural areas; this coupled with the greater tendency on the part of the urban people to send their children to school, increase the urban/rural ratio. With regard to the second hypothesis, it would appear that urban areas, acting as nuclei for the rural communities, tend to radiate their influence. This is particularly true of industrial urbanization. This diffusion process, however, operates at higher levels of urbanization. There are several discrepancies in this relationship, these can be explained in terms of other features related to urbanization such as (a) the degree of industrialization; (b) the degree of dispersal of both industrialization and urbanization; (c) the relative degree of masculinity of urban population; (d) the percentage of migrants from outside the state; and (e) the level of development of the state.

From the above discussion, several problematic aspects of rural urban disparities in education emerge. The question, for example, arises as to whether the disparities signify just nominal differences or they represent inequalities. It can be argued that to the extent education is considered as an independent variable in development, those who are denied educational opportunities are also deprived of a chance to participate in development.

It is well known that educational opportunities are channelled through the social structure. These differences can, therefore, be said to reflect rural-urban differences in social structure. Similarly rural-urban migration is also channelled through social structures. As a result, there obtains a polarisation of rural

and urban populations in terms of their socio-cultural backgrounds. The elite of the two segments of the population are therefore, different; whereas the rural elite are politically powerful, their urban counterparts are economically more dominant. There is already some evidence of a struggle on the part of the rural elite to displace the urban from their position of economic power. In such a setting, if education is recognised as an important human resource, the rural people, especially the elite among them are likely to feel that they are discriminated against.