

Indian Council of World Affairs

Sapru House, Barakhamba Road
New Delhi



Impressions of a Research Fellow on his recent visit to Cuba

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The major political turn in the Cuban history was the US victory in the Spanish-American War in 1898. The Americans granted conditional independence to Cuba in 1902 after four years of occupation. The Platt Amendment, forced on the Cubans, was the price the island-nation had to pay to get a withdrawal of U.S. troops. This amendment, grafted into the Cuban constitution of 1902, guaranteed the right of the U.S. to intervene in Cuban affairs to protect U.S. interests on the island. Till 1959 Cuba had an unstable political system, mostly puppet regimes remote-controlled from Washington. Before the revolution of 1959, Cuba was something of a "billionaires playground" for rich US businessmen for leisurely activities. During this period Cuba suffered from widespread unemployment and general deprivation amongst the majority of the population. The racist discrimination was rampant with widespread corruption, poverty and illiteracy. In 1959 the revolutionary guards led by Che Guevara and Fidel Castro defeated the military regime of Fulgencio Batista, a weak and unpopular administrator and also a marionette of US.

Cuba is celebrating 50 years of its revolution this year with unprecedented success in health, education and social security. Eradication of illiteracy, the massive expansion of primary and higher education and the tremendous achievements in public health in post-revolution Cuba. Cuba faced one of its major challenges in the early 1990s after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Majority of Cuba's trade was with countries belonging to the socialist bloc. By the mid- 1990s the economy of Cuba was in a shambles which is termed as "special period". However, by 2000 the

economy of the island-nation surged back and last year Cuba's gross domestic product (GDP) went up by 12.5 per cent.

Even during the crisis period in the 1990s the Cuban government's commitment to health, education and social security remained unchanged. Despite the American embargo Cuban leadership took specific measures to ensure that its population did not go hungry. During the worst years of the crisis, the health status of the population remained a top government priority. In fact, the Cuban Parliament actually increased the health sector budget in Cuban pesos and the share of GDP earmarked for health care at the expense of spending for the military and state administration. Since 1959 with the victory of revolutionary guards, education has remained free from the primary school level to the PhD level. In Cuba education has been seen as an imperative device to accomplish social equality.

Prior to the revolution, racial discrimination was entrenched in Cuban society. The Communist government banned slavery soon after assuming power. In addition the massive land reforms and housing scheme for the poor uplifted the marginalised black population to a great extent. Likewise health and education sectors became easier to access regardless of race. Elimination of racial prejudice was the prime concern of Fidel Castro and the Cuban Communist Party launched an ideological campaign against racism in the 1960s.

In Cuba during the colonial days, there was almost no education available in the rural areas where the peasants and slaves lived, although the urban Spanish population had access to education for its children. The immediate objectives of the revolutionary government were therefore to improve the educational system. The Cuban government declared 1961 as the Year of Education, and a remarkably effective campaign of adult education was launched. Almost 300,000 children and adults were sent out into the countryside to teach under the slogan, "If you know, teach; if you don't know, learn." By 1979, the literacy rate in Cuba was higher than 90%, comparable to the rates in the United States and other developed countries.

Cuba's health care system has been universally acknowledged as among the finest in the world. Health care for all Cubans is free unlike other countries. Because

of the high premium Cuba places on health, it currently has 5.91 doctors per 1000 people. In fact this is the highest ratio in the world. The average life expectancy in Cuba today is 78 years .In addition Cuba has well developed and sophisticated medical services such as cardiovascular surgery, treatment for chronic renal failure, and transplant services and so on. All these services are free of charge for the people unlike other countries including the developed nations.

Cuba defined health and education as social responsibilities of government and individual rights of citizens - it would be the job of this lean medical corps to create a unified national health care system, and provide universal, accessible, and free health services to the whole Cuban population. Perhaps the most important single catalyst determining the positive outcome from the precarious 1990s was the presence of a solid community-oriented primary care network accessible to virtually every family in Cuba.

The community clinic (polyclinic) model of primary health care is the backbone of the Cuban health system. Every village has a medical post with doctors and nurses working round the clock. I had the opportunity to visit the Medical post in the suburbs of Bayamo city. The doctor knows by heart the medical record of all the patients in the locality. The maternal-child health, from the start has been a priority. Consequently, infant mortality rate in Cuba is 5.9 deaths per 1,000 live births. It is to be noted that the infant mortality rates of majority of the Latin American countries are 10 times higher than that in Cuba. The community doctor-and-nurse teams, responsible for the health of families in a given neighbourhood, concentrated their attention on health promotion, prevention of disease, environmental cleanup, priority attention to children and the elderly, parental care, and early detection of infection and chronic disease. By the 1990s, Cuban children were being vaccinated against 13 childhood diseases -- more than any other country in the world, including the United States. A host of diseases were eradicated altogether, infectious diseases were at a minimum, and Cubans were dying of the same chronic conditions described in the mortality charts of industrialized countries. A significant socio-political corollary was that the majority of Cubans trusted the health care system to work for them.

Cuba's vast expertise in health sector is not just confined to Cuba. Today

nearly 40,000 Cuban doctors and nurses are working in 81 developing countries. The Cuban government established the Comprehensive Health Programme (CHP) to provide free medical support to Latin American and Caribbean countries. Later the programme was extended to assist the toiling masses of Afro-Asian countries. Over 1,500,000 people from Caribbean region have either improved or recovered their eyesight through Operation Milagro (Operation Miracle) formulated by the Cuban health ministry in 2000. Since 1965 more than 4 million patients from Caribbean region have been treated by the Cuban doctors. During the period 2007-2009 around 46,725 operations have been carried out by the Cuban medical team in the Caribbean region. Day care centres is another aspect of Cuban life and the day care free to families in which the mother worked. Day care became more than a place providing playtime for children. It provides continuous medical treatment, preventive health care, complete dental care, and proper nutrition for all children.

Last year Cuba was hit by three Hurricanes and surprisingly no causality was reported because of its well established disaster management system. Moreover Cuba always extend its disaster management expertise all over the world whenever natural disasters such occur. Cuban relief team's contribution during tsunami and earthquake in Pakistan in 2008 was highly significant.

The record of Cuban education is impressive .It has proportional female representation at all levels, including higher education. Moreover there is absolute equality of basic educational opportunity, even in impoverished areas, both rural and urban. In a recent regional study of Latin America and the Caribbean, Cuba ranked first in math and science achievement,' at all grade levels, among both males and females. In many ways, Cuba's schools are on par with schools in OECD countries, despite the fact that Cuba's economy is a developing one. The average educational level of Cubans by 2002 was ninth grade .Education in Cuba has become a top priority for the government since 1959. Reforming and reorientation of educational system in Cuba was one of the main revolutionary goals when Castro captured power. In Cuba education is entirely public, centrally planned, and free, in a global reform environment of privatization, downscaling of the state role, and cost recovery. Cuba spends nearly 10 to 11 percent of its GDP in educational sector and this very high compared to many developing nations. The Universalization of Higher Education

program is an important step in spreading general and comprehensive culture among the population. Though the Ministry of higher education is responsible for the overall educational aspects, like health sector education also has been highly decentralised. The schools and educational institutions are under the direct control of local municipalities.

The government today is directly responsible for all educational institutions it created free-of-charge for all. The U.S. trade embargo has created difficulties in getting supplies to the Cubans, such as paper, pencils, crayons, finger paint, and other basic supplies. Education is compulsory from age 6 to 16. After that, students up to age 16 are required to continue their education at the secondary level or to join the Youth Movement, which combined study with vocational training and service. Cuba's education system is performing so well, even under the severe resource constraints because of the continuity in its education strategies, sustained high levels of investments in education, and a comprehensive and carefully structured system. The main aspects of the Cuban primary educational system are the high quality of basic education and universal access to primary and comprehensive early childhood education and student health programs. Moreover unlike many countries Cuba has developed mechanisms to foster community participation in management of schools and has paid great attention to the quality of teachers. Higher education in Cuba does not mean University education alone. Higher education also has various alternative vocational streams like polytechnic institutes, pedagogical institutes, higher educational centres and many more are other institutes for higher education besides universities. Currently Cuba has 47 universities and roughly 112,000 students enrol in these universities.

To conclude, Cuba a small island-nation but it has the educational, medical and other social sectors of a highly developed countries. That Cuba could continue to excel in these fields despite embargoes and the collapse of its trading partners makes its gains even more impressive.

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23 June, 2009

