T he public-private partnership (PPP) model is being seen as a possible solution for many problems. Does the model have potential?

It is definitely sensible to go that way in certain areas because government infrastructure is already present, and there is no sense in building parallel infrastructure. For example, through Ishi Vidyu, our rural education initiative, we are building one school in every taluk in Tamil Nadu which will serve as a model school. But this cannot be a comprehensive solution because creating new infrastructure in certain areas is necessary. So we have been working with the government and now we have adopted 586 government schools in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. A government school already has land, buildings and teachers. Many of the teachers are very dedicated, which has been a revelation for me. As part of the initiative, we brought in a few experienced teachers, taken the students under the wing and set systems to maintain cleanliness and enhance the teaching process where needed. We are no longer bogged down with building infrastructure because if it already exists, PPP would work wonderfully in an effort like this.

Companies can also get involved in higher education. Right now, India has 160,000 engineers, but the number of engineers produced by Indian universities is only 500,000. But even not 50,000 are really employ- able. They get a degree that works only in the marriage market, they get a degree that opens the door of one of the world’s largest truck manufacturers, and I was suggesting that they get involved with an engineering college and start training students right from the day the college opens. This way, you can train your students to work ethic and quality standards right from college. Then you don’t have to struggle and start orienting them three years later when you hire them. And because they have been trained by you, students will definitely have a certain loyalty towards you. So, industries have only been thinking of recruiting from the best colleges. There is a lot of intellectual brilliance elsewhere. It is just that they have not had the exposure.

Another significant area where PPP can work is in children’s nutrition. One of India’s biggest problems is that nourishment levels of women have to improve. It’s very important that up to four years of age, Medical science clearly tells us that if children don’t get the right kind of nourishment in the first four years, their body will develop at a much slower rate, which will stop them from growing after that period. Those first four years are very important. As a part of this, we spoke to a group in the US to create little vitamin tubes. These will be sweet to taste and a child can take one tube a day and they will have all the micronutrients necessary for his or her development. That little vitamin capsule can make a lot of difference, and it doesn’t cost anything. Our estimates show that 50% of kids cost around 27 paise per child per day. Or if you can’t give it every day, it could be provided to the child even thrice a week, we would produce much better human beings.

Today, for at least 60% of the people in our villages, even their skeletal system has not grown to its full size. Generally, we always associate a village with sturdiness. But if you look at 20-25- year-old boys in villages today, they are not as healthy. When a fundamental aspect of the physical body does not grow to its full size, your brain will definitely not grow to its full potential either. We are in the process of introducing this whole mass of substandard humanity. This is a quiet disaster happening in the nation. It is not like a tsunami or an earthquake—it does not make any noise, but it is progressing very quickly. Unless we invest in big way in human health and education, we will continue to perpetuate this disaster.

The nation’s economic aspirations and the tremendous eco- nomic upsurge we are witnessing right now could come to naught if we do not focus on these core areas. Health, nourish- ment and education are the key elements for a human being to live well. It is time that private corporates invest in these areas.

This is not charity; this is an investment for the future. Charity is not a sustainable thing. But if we can make a contribution in terms of enhancing the competence and capability of those around us, that would be very effective. The biggest challenge in the future will be to find employable human resource. Investing in basic education and healthcare will create a situation that all businesses will cherish. Even when a farmer plants a coconut tree, he waits 10 years to see money. This is an investment for the future that must happen.

The author is the founder of Isha Foundation.