

The New Segregation

Reflections on Gender and Equity in Primary Education

This article, based on a desk review of the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) and qualitative micro studies in six states – Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, Haryana and Tamil Nadu – attempts to capture the impact of primary education programmes on the ground. Introducing the emergent concept of ‘hierarchies of access’ to describe the new segregation occurring in primary education, the article focuses on the micro studies documenting the tangible and intangible dimensions of gender and social equity that frame the implementation of DPEP at the village and panchayat level. On the basis of the findings of the desk review and the micro studies, the authors discuss ways to reverse the trend of segregation so as to make universal primary education a substantive reality.

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It is commonly believed that the decade of the 1990s was one of the most productive decades in primary education – a decade not only of tremendous churning but also one where the country made a significant leap in literacy rates. While India still has a long way to go before we are able to ensure good quality basic education for all children up to the age of 14, even the worst of the sceptics will agree that the decade was one of optimism – the 2001 Census revealed that 65.4 per cent people (75.85 among men and 54.16 among women) are now literate, and that for the first time the absolute number of illiterates actually went down. It also revealed a decadal jump of 11.8 in the literacy rate among men and 15.00 among women – Chhattisgarh recorded a jump of 24.87 in literacy levels among women, Madhya Pradesh a 20.93 jump in female literacy and Rajasthan a jump of 21.47 (M) and 23.90 (F) in literacy levels. A number of programmes were initiated during this period, most notably the DPEP, and the government mobilised considerable external funds for primary education.¹ While all this is indeed creditworthy – dissenting voices tell us that all is not well. Primary education is not only about formal access and literacy rates. It may be recalled that the National Policy of Education (NPE 1986) stressed that the central issue was “removal of disparities and to equalise educational opportunity by attending to the specific needs of those who have been denied equality so far”. The focus was both on education and social equality. The

Programme of Action (POA 1992) correctly highlighted the intervening and empowering role of education in people’s struggles for equality and justice. The question before us now is whether the decade of the 1990s has made a difference to those who have been left out or pushed out of the education system.

This article, based on a recently completed study on the experience of the DPEP titled: ‘Hierarchies of Access: Gender and Social Equity in Primary Education’ [Ramachandran 2002, forthcoming], attempts to capture the impact of primary education programmes on the ground. The study started by acknowledging the historical baggage of social and economic inequalities that has reinforced educational disparities for over 50 years in India. Ploughing through data generated through the Census (1991 and 2001) and National Sample Surveys on the one hand and education department statistics (EMIS and PMIS of DPEP), we realised that most data fail to capture social and gender gaps in education. Our research team took on board the problems associated with relying on gross enrolment data, particularly from schools and the education department, since they are marked by a tendency for over-reporting. Instead, we tried to look at net enrolment, retention, transition and average years of schooling data disaggregated by gender, social grouping and type of school (unfortunately not always available) to assess the effectiveness of policies. We tried, wherever possible, to complement this data with information

on dropouts and on those who have never attended school [Visaria 2002 forthcoming].

Our hunch about the inadequacy of existing data was confirmed and we further observed that even DPEP’s own gender and social equity indices seemed to be caught in a quantitative warp and hence unable to adequately reflect the existing gender and social disparities in education across the length and breadth of the country. We decided to supplement the desk review of DPEP data and project information with six qualitative micro studies to explore in-depth the underlying motivations, feelings, values, attitudes and perceptions of ordinary parents, teachers, children as well as the community regarding primary schooling and the impact of DPEP in transforming them. We examined if gender and equity issues had been ‘mainstreamed’, or whether they remained sporadic and localised. This led us to analyse if and how equity strategies were positioned in the programme and whether EGS/AS is fast emerging as the vehicle to bridge the equity gap – especially with respect to children from disadvantaged communities and in scattered habitations. An important focus of our research related to a subtle but nevertheless discernible hierarchy of access in education resulting in new forms of segregation in primary schools.

This article is based on our findings from the desk review of DPEP and qualitative micro studies in six DPEP states – Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh,

Haryana, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu.² The introductory section briefly focuses on the DPEP, especially with regard to its strategy to achieve gender and social equity in primary education. Section II reviews the available statistical data on primary education and maps out the success and failures of the last decade in primary education with special emphasis on girls and other marginal groups. Section III, on the basis of the statistical review as well as other documented evidence, introduces the emergent concept of 'hierarchies of access' to describe the new segregation occurring in primary education; whereby a child's caste, class, and gender seems to be defining the nature of school they attend – government primary schools, AS/EGS, or private schools – and its implications for the process of teaching and learning as well as achieving the larger stated objectives of gender and social equity. Section IV further unravels the 'hierarchies of access' by shifting the focus on to the micro studies and extensively documenting the tangible and intangible dimensions of gender and social equity that frame the implementation of DPEP at the village and panchayat level. It specifically focuses on the persistent inequalities of gender, caste, class, and community that often define educational outcomes in their varied guises – often old and sometimes new – even as universal primary education becomes a reality as opposed to a dream. The penultimate section draws from both the desk study as well as the micro studies and suggests ways to reverse the trend of segregation in order to move ahead and make universal primary education a substantive reality. The last section, by way of a conclusion, is a summing exercise and highlights the social and gender equity dimensions that frame primary education today.

I District Primary Education Programme

The DPEP was initiated as a part of the larger Social Safety Net Credit Adjustment Loan under the Structural Adjustment Programme of the World Bank to India in 1991. Taking off from the policy guidelines in NPE 1986 and drawing upon the experience of a range of primary education programmes, the DPEP Guidelines of 1994 state that holistic planning and management is necessary to achieve universal primary education, and that it

“should incorporate a gender perspective in all aspects of the planning and implementation process”. It recognises the importance of mainstreaming gender and making it an integral part of DPEP, the need for gender focus in tackling the problem of access, retention and achievement levels and the importance of reaching out to children from most disadvantaged groups/communities. Educationally backward districts with female literacy below the national average were taken as the priority districts. Equally, the project stressed education for socially disadvantaged groups. The goals set by DPEP are:

- Reduce differences in enrolment, dropout and learning achievements between gender and social groups to less than 5 per cent;
- Reduce overall primary dropout rates for all students to less than 10 per cent;
- Raise average achievement levels by at least 25 per cent over measured baseline levels by ensuring achievement of basic literacy and numeracy competencies and a minimum of 40 per cent achievement levels in other competencies for all primary school children; and
- Provide access for all children to primary schooling or its equivalent non-formal education.

These goals bring out the programme's intent to increase coverage of girls, improve their academic achievements and reduce gender disparities in respect to enrolment, retention and learning achievements [DPEP 2000]. Essentially, DPEP adopted a two-pronged strategy to meet the gender and social equity goals, namely:

- Make the education system more responsive to the needs and constraints of girls and children from disadvantaged communities, and
- Create community demand for girls' education and enabling conditions for greater participation.

In pursuance of these objectives, DPEP created monitoring systems and structures to track gender and equity issues. The information and monitoring system of DPEP consisted of the following:

- Project management information system (PMIS) to capture inputs – teacher deployment, civil works, training, research completed, expenditure and reimbursement – thereby tracking both physical and financial information;
- District information system for education (DISE) to capture enrolment, teacher deployment, classroom and performance indicators like Gross Enrolment Ratio, Net

Enrolment Ratio, repetition rates, student classroom ratio and pupil teacher ratio. The data was to be disaggregated by gender and SC/ST; and

- Bi-annual joint review missions, research studies and, most recently, household surveys to estimate the number of out-of-school children to enable the government and donor partners to assess progress towards short-term, medium-term and long-term development objectives.
- The DPEP MIS cell based in NIEPA developed the Index of Gender Equity and Index of Social Equity to track progress towards gender and social equity objectives and this continues to be a mandatory exercise in reporting on progress.

DPEP is currently operational in 18 states and 271 districts after taking into account recent bifurcations and trifurcations in districts and the carving out of three new states. Twenty-three districts of Gujarat, Orissa and Rajasthan were included very recently, i.e., after April 2001.

II Overwhelming Finding

The overwhelming finding that emerged from the desk review of reports and data on education in the 1990s is that there has been a significant increase in overall literacy rates and school participation rates across the country. Gender disparities have declined with an overall increase in school attendance.³ This is more than confirmed by the Census 2001 data and also the recent NFHS-II (1998-99) data. Perhaps the most significant change that has taken place in the 1990s is the increase in the demand for primary education across the country. Intensive campaigns, enrolment drives and the changing social and economic situation have contributed to an appreciable increase in the demand for schooling.

There has been a decline in the proportion of never enrolled children. Data also reveal an increase in the number of schools across the country – alternative schools (AS), Education Guarantee Scheme schools (EGS) and private aided and private unaided schools. DPEP was initiated in low female literacy areas, and it is encouraging to note that that very low female literacy districts have shown the maximum gains in literacy levels – especially in MP, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan (Census 2001). The share of girls to total enrolment in very low female literacy districts increased from 43.8 per cent in 1995-96 to 46.7 per cent in 1998-99 [Aggarwal 2000a and 2000b].

While this is indeed an encouraging trend, the data also indicates that we still have a long way to go before gender and social gaps are bridged. As Yash Aggarwal (2000a) points out: "While household enumeration has been conducted in many DPEP districts/state to identify out-of-school children, the findings are not available in most of the cases... The NSS estimates (52nd round data, 1995-96) indicate that 31 per cent of children in the 6-11 age group were not attending school... availability of schooling facility even within the habitation does not offer any guarantee that all children in the eligible age group attend school." This observation is reinforced by Vaidyanathan and Nair (2001): "While the narrowing of spatial disparities suggests that educationally poor areas have experienced, in general, relatively rapid improvements, scrutiny at a more disaggregated level (talukas and villages) reveals the existence of pockets of persistent educational backwardness."

A large number of children belonging to disadvantaged communities, working children and children with special needs have not yet been covered (coverage of AS and EGS schools is limited to some regions of the country). DPEP data reveals that this is particularly true of phase II districts, where participation levels are still very low. Similarly, children living in urban slums and peripheral areas have largely remained outside the reach of DPEP. Without addressing the concerns of urban out-of-school children, the goal of universalisation of primary education (UPE) cannot be achieved in its entirety. Household surveys coordinated in 1997-98 by Vaidyanathan and Nair (2001) further confirm that, "literacy rate variations across space and between gender and caste groups are highly correlated; and that higher overall literacy goes with lower disparities between these groups". Hence, the more educationally backward the region, the greater are social and gender inequalities (see Table 1).

However, we have yet to generate adequate data on educational access of disadvantaged groups. While NSS, NFHS and other sample survey data provide a macro picture, intra-regional and intra-community diversities as such are not captured in such surveys. Further, given the time lag in publication of detailed Census 2001 tables, most researchers are still relying on 1991 Census data, which is outdated, particularly in the light of preliminary Census 2001 data that reveals

a significant jump in literacy levels. Some specific studies (mostly done before 1993) have addressed the issue of access and performance of marginal social groups. The NCAER data (Table 1) indicates the wide fluctuations between the literacy rates for men and women belonging to landless families and scheduled tribe and scheduled caste households in selected states. For instance, in UP, the overall literacy rates for men and women are 62 and 28 per cent respectively and these figures sharply contrast with 38.20 and 7.40 per cent among landless families and 48.10 and 13.80 per cent among the scheduled castes.

Researchers have pointed out that 50 per cent of dalit children who enter primary school leave by class V, with a majority dropping out before they reach class III [Nambissan 2001]. According to the MODE/UNICEF Report 1995, "The socio-economic profile appears to be a barrier to enrolment directly or indirectly. SC/ST families tend to live in colonies removed by a kilometre or more from the main village. A school in the village within walking distance for the families in the

main village would still be at a distance to these children. Secondly, a feeling of alienation from the rest of the village and consequent fears (real or otherwise) of discrimination in school may keep these children away from school. At an indirect level, the high incidence of non-enrolment in SC/ST families almost 'legitimises' not going to school and makes it the norm rather than the exception in the community..." The learning environment, attitude of teachers, backstopping support from home/parents and the sheer economics of school participation for extremely poor/landless families – all these factors tend to push children out of school.⁴ Dominant perceptions about mental abilities of dalit or tribal children coupled with stereotypes about certain communities lead to subtle and sometimes even blatant discrimination against some children.⁵

What about girls? Girls' enrolment has made considerable progress and as revealed in Census 2001, in the more backward regions like Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh, many more girls are in school than ever before. However, the

Table 1: Educational Indicators of Select States

Indicator	Kerala	Tamil Nadu	Uttar Pradesh	Rajasthan	West Bengal	Maharashtra	Orissa	Haryana	Madhya Pradesh
Literacy rate (7+)									
Male	93.00	75.00	62.00	60.00	66.00	71.00	68.00	70.00	59.00
Female	87.00	53.00	28.00	19.00	50.00	47.00	41.00	38.00	27.00
Net enrolment rate (6-14)									
Male	99.00	91.00	73.00	78.00	67.00	88.00	79.00	84.00	69.00
Female	98.00	84.00	53.00	42.00	65.00	82.00	63.00	72.00	56.00
Discontinuation rate (6-14)									
Male	1.50	7.50	3.30	3.10	5.90	5.90	6.20	3.90	7.00
Female	2.00	14.80	5.60	6.60	6.90	8.40	9.30	4.60	9.00
Literacy rate of landless wage earners									
Male	86.50	60.50	38.20	44.00	43.60	54.60	43.00	52.50	40.10
Female	77.90	41.40	7.40	5.60	27.50	29.20	15.70	24.20	14.10
Literacy rate of medium size land holders									
Male	98.40	89.30	80.50	63.70	83.80	70.1	85.90	72.50	64.20
Female	92.70	49.70	41.60	19.80	68.60	49.40	55.70	39.10	28.20
Literacy rate of large land holders									
Male	98.60	87.80	83.10	65.90	93.40	84.20	87.10	72.80	73.00
Female	100.00	61.10	53.80	21.40	84.30	51.40	64.20	45.30	37.60
Literacy rate of STs									
Male	–	–	–	39.10	–	52.90	40.70	–	42.80
Female	–	–	–	7.50	–	25.20	15.60	–	16.80
Literacy rate of SCs									
Male	82.60	57.30	48.10	51.80	62.50	60.50	60.40	60.10	47.40
Female	72.20	37.40	13.80	9.10	46.00	34.40	29.80	28.90	17.50
Literacy rate of dominant minority									
Male	94.00	85.80	47.10	45.90	59.30	75.60	73.60	84.50	67.10
Female	89.40	67.90	20.20	7.80	44.40	52.10	41.50	59.70	30.30
Literacy rate of Other Hindus									
Male	95.00	80.60	70.80	66.40	75.50	76.80	78.40.5	74.00	69.10
Female	87.40	57.90	35.60	23.90	58.80	51.50	2.40	43.10	34.50
Ever enrolment rate of landless wage earners									
Male	98.40	88.40	52.70	63.10	51.10	77.10	62.20	69.10	54.10
Female	100.00	76.80	25.80	15.20	45.50	72.50	32.20	50.00	39.30
Discontinuation rate of landless wage earners									
Male	1.70	9.50	5.20	4.10	3.50	6.00	11.40	4.60	9.20
Female	6.10	17.40	4.40	17.20	16.20	12.30	19.80	4.40	13.40

Source: Shariff and Sudarshan, (1996).

situation of girls in poor households among disadvantaged groups remains a cause for concern. Education may be technically free, but it is not so in reality. Given the quality of government schools, parents also incur some expenditure on tuitions—even though this is more prevalent among children going to private unaided and aided schools. This has many implications for girls' participation [Bashir 2000; De et al 2001]. While gender is a determining factor at the time of decision-making by parents on whether and where to enrol, independent research studies and DPEP studies reveal that gender inequities and gender bias was not significant among enrolled girl children [De et al 2001].

Administrators, educational researchers and development practitioners agree that discrimination inside the school continues to be a major barrier in school participation for girls and other marginal groups [Madan 2002, forthcoming]. Unfortunately, without the availability of adequate data, it is not possible to make generalisations on push and pull factors in DPEP. With the exception of recent household survey data from Karnataka, the project has not generated any kind of textured micro data. This continues to be an important lacuna in DPEP information system.

These extant issues of access and social equity in government formal schools are overwhelming and need to be given constant priority. Issues of equity in education seem to have taken on more complex overtones within the emergent context of declining enrolment in formal government schools, the growth of private schools across the nation, and the opening of state-sponsored Alternative Schools and Education Guarantee schemes in some parts of the country. This new development seems to be reinforcing the existing stratification evident in our educational system in rural areas (which so far has been a defining feature of urban areas). Further, what is significant is that it is giving rise to a new trend of 'hierarchies of access', whereby, paradoxically, the democratisation of access to schools seems to be accompanied by a reaffirmation of a child's caste, community and gender in defining which school she or he attends.

To add to the complexity, the accumulating empirical evidence illustrates that while most teachers in private schools are untrained and work under adverse conditions, teachers in the extant government schools or the AS/EGS are ill equipped to address the needs of first-generation

learners. In addition to concerns of quality and standards, what is disturbing is that there is no consistent policy vis-a-vis unrecognised school. The remainder of this paper is devoted to exploring the variety of factors that frame these emerging dynamics of 'hierarchies of access' and their implications for issues of equity.

III Hierarchies of Access: Defining the Problem

A significant revelation in recent years has been the documentation of a gradual decline in class I enrolment. As Yash Aggarwal points out, "Over the years, the enrolment in formal schools has shown declining trends... It is observed that the states, which witnessed slower growth in formal school enrolment, registered faster increase if the enrolment of formal and alternative modes is combined. This is particularly true of Madhya Pradesh... For the 1998-99 and 1999-00 period, as many as 14 districts (out of a total of 40) showed a decline of more than 5 per cent in Grade I enrolment... The decline in enrolment of class I is more alarming for the educationally backward states like Orissa and Assam... A pertinent question at this stage is, where are the children going? [Aggarwal 2000]." Further, DPEP data also reveals that after a spurt of enrolment in 1995-96 and 1996-97 in DPEP I, class I enrolment is declining. At the national level, enrolment has remained steady at 110 million for some time now.

While enrolment in government schools has remained stagnant, there is growing evidence of a large number of out-of-school children on the one hand and growth of

and enrolment in private schools on the other. This is indeed a disturbing trend—especially in educationally backward regions of the country. Table 2 documents that private schools constitute anywhere between 5 per cent and 10 per cent of primary schools in Karnataka, Haryana, and UP (and the share increases with higher education) along with AP, MP, and Maharashtra as well. Research studies reveal that while there is a rising demand for primary education across the country and a sharp reduction in children who have never enrolled, there has been a steady growth in the number of private schools—in both rural and urban areas⁶ [Aggarwal 2000a; Srivastava 2001; Krishnaji 2001;⁷ Bashir 1994 quoted in De et al 2001⁸]. Six per cent of rural children and 19 per cent of urban children at the primary stage are studying in private unaided schools; this proportion goes up when we include the 31 per cent children who are studying in private aided schools [World Bank 2001].

Among the reasons for the growth of private schools is the reported decline in government school quality (poor infrastructure, shortage of teachers, lack of accountability of government schools leading to teacher absenteeism and negligence). This gives way to a positive preference for private schools—even though they may have a relatively poor infrastructure, less qualified teachers and are definitely more expensive [PROBE 1999; De et al 2001; Vaidyanathan and Nair 2001; Aggarwal 2000a and b]. DPEP studies reveal that parents are becoming disillusioned with the overcrowding and poor quality of instruction in government schools and are opting to send their children to private, fee-charging schools. Free education offered

Table 2: Distribution of Primary Schools by Management, 1998-99

Stat	Government			Private		Others	Data not Available
	Department Education	Tribal Welfare	Local Body	Aided	Unaided		
Andhra Pradesh	78.11	8.37	4.42	8.69	0.04	0.02	0.36
Assam	96.44	0.87	1.15	0.20	0.13	0.26	0.95
Bihar	97.63	0.21	0.06	1.19	0.04	0.06	0.82
Gujarat	9.86	6.69	79.54	1.88	0.82	0.40	0.81
Haryana	90.83	0.65	0.39	1.27	3.60	0.21	3.05
Himachal Pradesh	97.98	0.28	0.14	0.07	0.07	0.57	0.89
Karnataka	87.05	0.47	1.16	3.43	6.30	0.15	1.44
Kerala	45.01	0.25	3.54	49.86	0.14	0.46	0.74
Madhya Pradesh	66.46	22.43	1.48	1.17	5.32	1.23	1.91
Maharashtra	0.93	1.85	78.53	14.57	3.58	0.13	0.41
Orissa	93.78	3.69	0.55	0.32	0.52	0.28	0.86
Tamil Nadu	13.78	4.36	71.27	10.00	0.16	0.12	0.30
Uttar Pradesh	92.08	0.38	1.23	1.90	2.79	0.57	1.04
West Bengal	8.24	0.23	90.42	0.18	0.03	0.09	0.81
DPEP States	62.43	10.34	19.06	3.96	2.65	0.43	1.14

Source: Aggarwal, (2000b).

by government schools is no longer an attraction [DPEP October 2000].⁹ One of the reasons for disenchantment with government schools is the indifferent attitude of the teachers towards teaching/learning and an uncaring approach to the social and economic hardships faced by students from poor and vulnerable families. These issues are relevant, as 30-40 per cent of the population in educationally backward areas are barely able to meet their survival needs [Aggarwal 2000]. Between 1986 and 1993, the enrolment in private unaided (recognised) schools increased at a compound growth rate of 9.5 per cent per annum. The corresponding increase in enrolment in government schools was 1.4 per cent per annum. While the contribution of private schools to universalisation of elementary education (UEE) is significant, it raises a whole range of equity issues.

Implications for Gender and Social Equity

In the last 10 years there is growing evidence on a hierarchy of access to primary education – between states, between communities and groups and between different types of schools. DPEP focuses on improving the access and participation of children in the 6-10 age group, so that all such children, irrespective of their place of origin or socio-economic background, are able to complete at least five years of reasonably good quality primary education in five years. However, a few recent independent studies that have explored gender and equity questions (PROBE Report 1999; De et al 2001; Vaidyanathan and Nair 2001) reveal a disturbing picture. Dysfunctional government schools continue to be an area of concern in the more underdeveloped regions of the country. Where children of the more powerful groups shift to private schools, the pressure on government schools declines sharply. While there is a growing demand for primary education, even in UP, Bihar, Orissa and Rajasthan, the ability of the government schools to respond has not been demonstrated – as yet. With the exception of Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh, which have shown strong political will to ensure universal access to elementary education, the same cannot be said for other educationally backward states.

The most compelling evidence has been thrown up in reviews and research studies done under the aegis of DPEP. Yash Aggarwal points out that while there was

a rapid increase in enrolment in the formal system in the first two years of DPEP (phase I districts), ‘subsequently most of the increase in enrolment is accounted for in the alternative school system’. Several states also report a gradual decline in class I enrolment – partly explained by a slowdown in population growth, improvement in the internal efficiency of the system and the increasing preference for private schooling in some parts of the country. Despite the rapid growth of private and aided schools in many areas of the country, it has been noted that the proportion of girls is higher in government schools as compared to private schools. ‘The proportion of girls in unrecognised schools was very low as compared to their share in the government schools. The gender bias in school choice by parents is quite evident. Many villagers report that girls are sent to government schools because they are entitled to various types of incentives’ [Aggarwal 2000a and b]. Researchers and administrators have also noted the prevalence of discrimination between girls and boys in the choice of schools [Sharma 1999].

As seen in Table 3, SC and ST populations are more concentrated in the low female literacy districts and the share of SC/ST enrolment to total enrolment has increased. However, Agarwal (2000a and b) cautions: “Taken together with evidence of increasing enrolment in private unaided (recognised) schools and increasing enrolment in AS/EGS schools, this increase in SC/ST enrolment may not be as encouraging as it seems.” Evidence shows that it is the poor who access government schools – and SC and ST populations are amongst the poorest. Among the poor, it is the most disadvantaged and those living in remote habitations who opt for alternative schools. Given that the hardest to reach are most likely to enrol in government primary schools, and that the better off (at least in most parts of the country) opt for private schools, the *raison d’être* of a government programme should

ideally be to respond to the educational needs of the poor. However, as Manabi Majumdar (2001) argues, “The recent phenomenon (of growing private schools) is obviously an outcome of unfulfilled educational demand of certain relatively affluent sections of society and their dissatisfaction with the low quality of instruction imparted in government and aided schools. The question, therefore, is not about permitting the private sector in education but about promoting it. Is there a case for encouraging the expansion of the private sector at the elementary level?” Such expansion may further accentuate existing social divisions and reduce commitment towards quality improvement in government schools.¹⁰

Consequences for Teaching and Learning

The emerging dynamics of ‘hierarchies of access’ has important consequences for the process of teaching and learning in the classroom as it is also defined and created by the larger politics of teacher recruitment, appointment and training. According to Aggarwal (November 2000), “The large share of SC and ST population in DPEP II districts is also associated with low literacy rates in these districts. It was observed that out of a total of 30 districts in which the ST population was more than 5 per cent, as many as 11 districts showed less than 10 per cent female ST literacy (1991 Census)... In the 66 districts where share of SC population was more than 5 per cent, as many as 29 districts had female literacy varying between 10 and 25 per cent (1991 Census). Thus most of the school-going children, especially the girls, in these districts will be first generation learners” given that the proportion of government schools with a larger concentration of SC and ST students has been steadily increasing, such schools invariably have large numbers of first generation learners and require more experienced teachers.

Table 3: Changes in the Share of SC/ST Enrolment by Levels of Literacy

Category of District	Per Cent Share of SC/ST Enrolment to Total Enrolment by Category			
	SC		ST	
	1995-96	1998-99	1995-96	1998-99
Very low female literacy	15.8	16.7	20.3	23.9
Low female literacy	16.3	17.4	17.2	20.4
Moderate female literacy	22.3	22.9	9.3	11.7
High female literacy	8.9	7.6	3.8	3.0
Average for DPEP I	18.6	19.4	13.4	15.9

Source: Yash Aggarwal (2000).

An overwhelming message emanating from DPEP studies and the Joint Review Mission (JRM) reports is that many states continue to face a shortage of teachers. This is more than evident in data on the proportion of single teacher schools, especially in phase II districts. In DPEP phase I districts, the overall share of single teacher schools has declined from 18.5 per cent in 1995-96 to 14.3 per cent in 1999-00. But in DPEP phase II districts the proportion of single teacher schools increased from 14.3 per cent in 1995-96 to 19.1 per cent in 1999-00 [Aggarwal 2000].

If the shortage of teachers in general and the proportion of single teacher schools in particular is analysed in the context of teacher-student ratio – the emerging picture does not auger well, especially in educationally backward states. On the one hand, according to DPEP data Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa show a high percentage of schools with less than 20 students per class (the situation is different in multigrade classrooms/single teacher schools). On the other, in states like West Bengal, Assam and Uttar Pradesh the share of schools with more than 90 students per classroom is high, at times with states like Assam having only one-room schools. According to Aggarwal (2000b), “There were about 25,553 schools with an estimated enrolment of 6.12 million students for which the Student Classroom Ration (SCR) was more than 90.”¹¹ Another related issue that is integral to social equity is that most of the single teacher schools, especially the AS/EGS schools, are primarily frequented by children belonging to the SC and ST community [see Ghosh 2002, forthcoming].

Among the strategies adopted by DPEP to promote girls’ participation is recruitment of female teachers. DPEP data reveals that one-third of the teachers are women (33 per cent or more in Gujarat, Haryana, HP, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu; 27 per cent in Maharashtra, 26 per cent in Assam and UP, 25 per cent in MP, 23 per cent in Orissa, 22 per cent in Bihar and 17 per cent in West Bengal, and 34 per cent female teachers in MP’s DPEP districts). However, given the large number of single teacher schools, the low distribution of women teachers in such schools is indeed worrisome; in addition, 72 per cent of two-teacher schools are without female teachers. For example, in Tamil Nadu 86.8 per cent and 89.4 per cent single teacher schools do not have any female teachers in phase I and phase II districts

respectively. However, the picture seems to be slightly better in Alternative Schools, where reports indicate that Assam has 50 per cent, Bihar 100 per cent, Karnataka 10 per cent, Tamil Nadu 25 per cent, UP 62 per cent and West Bengal 25 per cent single teacher schools, where the teacher is female.¹² Though the presence of female teachers does have an impact on girls’ participation, it emerges that functionality of schools is a far more critical factor for participation. Studies reveal that more than the gender of the teacher, the dysfunctional schools and teacher absenteeism have a negative impact, as parents are not happy about leaving their daughters unsupervised in school [Srivastava 2001].

IV Field Evidence

The micro studies conducted in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Haryana have been instrumental in generating rich data that highlights the importance of the local context (political, social and economic) within which DPEP initiatives are implemented and impart a more textured and nuanced understanding of ‘education’ in rural India. The methodology adopted for these micro studies is primarily qualitative and interpretive in nature and attempts to capture the local dynamics that frame social and gender equity issues in primary schooling in the DPEP districts across the state. The districts were selected by virtue of being DPEP phase I districts (with the exception of Andhra Pradesh) as well as having a sizeable SC/ST population so as to be able to reflect the social complexity of local contexts. Similar criteria have been used to select the research block as well as the panchayat. The selection was done in tandem with state and district authorities; however, the choice of the panchayat was left to the discretion of the principal researcher (with the exception of Madhya Pradesh) so as to preclude any obvious bias.¹³

The studies traverse a broad canvas of experiences in primary schooling that lie between the two extremes mirrored by the ubiquity of dismal statistics in Chhattisgarh and the ‘wonderland’ of primary education in MP. It is observed that while at times the identified issues are played out in a similar manner across diverse contexts, in other instances the same issues take on completely different hues with different social consequences. It needs to

be qualified at this point that although the issues discussed here to some extent impact on all children, some children – by virtue of being girls or belonging to certain social groups – experience these events differently and often with severe social consequences. Some of the important issues are as under:

Prioritising Education

A tangible impact of DPEP has been the accompanying social processes by which ‘education’ has been lodged firmly on the rural agenda in DPEP districts. All six microstudies clearly indicate that the local demand for children’s education is growing by leaps and bounds. This is not to say that the demand did not exist before; but rather that DPEP, especially through its LSA in MP and Chhattisgarh as well as similar surveys in AP and Karnataka, has been able to practically isolate the ‘out-of-school’ children, shine the spotlight on them, and in the process tried to convince the larger community of its collective responsibility to educate children as opposed to letting the burden fall on individual families. Thus it is not surprising to find that while peer pressure seems to work as an effective mechanism to ensure enrolment and attendance in school in MP, the Chhattisgarh study contrarily observes that “the increasing emphasis laid on education and on sending children to school by the different government functionaries has made the community ‘silent’ on this aspect (non-attendance), so it even becomes difficult to assess the reasons behind children not attending school.”

Table 4: Distribution of Schools by Share of SC/ ST Children to Total Enrolment
Phase I

State	60-80 (1999-00)	Above 80 (1999-00)
Assam	8.1	30.0
Haryana	7.7	2.8
Karnataka	6.6	5.7
Madhya Pradesh	11.4	15.7
Maharashtra	12.3	14.1
Tamil Nadu	9.2	10.6

Phase II	
State	Above 80 (1999-00)
Assam	42.7
Gujarat	28.9
Himachal Pradesh	15.8
Madhya Pradesh	15.4
Maharashtra	23.5
Orissa	23.0
West Bengal	15.7

Source: Aggarwal (2000b).

Unpacking Access – the New Segregation

Physical access to a functioning school, at least on the surface, has emerged as a non-issue in all the studies except Chhattisgarh, where it is still relevant because of extant dysfunctional GPS as opposed to lack of schools. In large part, access has been eased by the introduction of new GPSs and private schools in the south (TN, AP and Karnataka) as opposed to burgeoning private schools in Haryana and EGS schools in Chhattisgarh and MP. However, there is an urgent need to unpack the term 'access' to schools since it glosses over several important issues. One such issue is that within the larger context of universal access, there is an emerging trend whereby children belonging to different social backgrounds are attending different schools. In AP, there is a divide between the dalit basti GPS and the main hamlet GPS and only SC students attend the former school, while the latter has very few SC students. The youth in the SC colony in the AP study were categorical that even if children from the SC colony try to seek admission in the other GPS, they are discouraged and told to attend the school in their own colony. A similar divide is observed in TN which is made all the more significant by the glaring disparities between the infrastructure of the two schools in favour of the non-dalit school. In both these studies, local private schools are also vying for students and most of the children who go to these schools are from relatively well-off families as well as BC and FC families. In AP, there was no clear information regarding 155 children between the ages of 6 and 14; according to the mandal resource person, they are probably in private schools outside the village. This seems to be a valid assumption, given the fact that six private school buses ply in the research village.

There seems to be a strong belief in rural India that private schools instil discipline, are better organised since each class has a teacher, and their main advantage is that the child learns English. Despite evidence to the contrary and the high fees charged, the belief and perception of private schools offering 'quality' education seems to be strengthening and is best illustrated by the situation in Haryana. Enrolment in private schools in the research panchayat reveals the exclusivity of its children in terms of social status as well as a large gender divide. While the village has almost an

equal ratio of SC to OBC and forward caste population, more than 90 per cent children in the government school are from SC community and more than 90 per cent private school-going children are from OBC and forward castes. Despite this high number, the proportion of forward caste girls is extremely low in all the schools partly because of a low sex ratio in the age-specific population of the village. This is particularly noteworthy among the forward castes – bishnoi, jat sikhs (jat) and mehta (bania) communities. It is now well documented that sex ratios among the forward communities in Haryana are particularly skewed against girls. According to Mahajan, the phenomenon of the missing FC girls from village schools can also be attributed to their enrolment in 'convent' private schools of the nearby town, which have a transport pick-up facility. The Karnataka study too highlights the growing lure of private schools and yet at the same time also captures the struggle between the schools to establish their credibility in the community, especially when the local GPS can boast of similar or more facilities than the private school and is supported by the village power elite.

A different manifestation of the new dynamics of school segregation is evident in MP where the newly introduced EGS schools are primarily attended by the ST community while the locally dominant Kurmi community (OBC) sends its children to the GPS. The issue of segregated schools is also further complicated by the presence of a separate girls' primary school (a consequence of the political negotiations by the kurmi community), which not only reinforces the parallel school systems in the village but also reflects the socio-cultural attitudes of the different social groups. The segregated GPSs mainly cater to the OBC community and allow for the education of kurmi girls while the co-educational classes of the EGS/AS are more reflective of the relaxed gender norms evident in tribal communities. Despite the lack of tangible evidence regarding the 'performance' of the different schools, local perceptions and opinion clearly consider the GPS to impart 'quality' education in comparison to the EGS and as more 'suited' to the needs of the OBC children. In an interesting turn of events, the Chhattisgarh study turns the dichotomy evident in MP on its head; the EGS schools here are monopolised by the OBC and the tribal elite whereas the dysfunctional local GPSs

have been transformed into the preserve of the poor tribal population.

Given the above empirical evidence, it is becoming apparent that the democratisation of access to schools is ironically being accompanied by a reification of a child's caste, community and gender in defining which school he or she attends. This development has considerable equity implications since it seems to be further reinforcing the stratification already extant in the Indian educational system. What is of particular concern is that in the absence of objective criteria to actually rank these schools (with the probable exception of Chhattisgarh), the emerging social ranking seems to reflect larger social divisions in society and are primarily contingent on 'who goes to school where'.

Reaching the Hardest to Reach

Despite universalising access, several special groups of children still remain hard to reach and constitute the majority of out-of-school children. These groups are identified in the different studies as child workers, special needs children, and adolescent girls. The child workers have been targeted primarily through the concept of alternative schools with the intention of mainstreaming them in existing formal structures. These groups are most prominent in AP, Haryana and Chhattisgarh and actually fall in the category of 'indentured labour'. In AP it is observed that most of the boys who are out of school are bonded child labour, called 'jeetagallu', where the boys are bonded to well-off families for agricultural work, watch and ward in the field or for grazing livestock. According to Jandhalaya, "The use of the term of out-of-school children has tended to gloss over the issue of the existence of bonded children in the village. It is only in extended conversation with the teachers and community that the problem is named." Although the AP government has identified strategies to mainstream out-of-school children by running bridge classes through non-residential centres (NRBC) at the habitation level, residential bridge camps, community campaigns and drives and a closer monitoring at village level of the out-of-school children, it is observed that the jeetagallu consistently fall through the cracks. For instance, the cohort analysis reveals that among boys there are five dropouts. Of these dropouts, two have gone back to being bonded labour. At the time of writing, the researcher was in-

formed that there are still about 32 children in the SC colony who are out of school. They include eight girls and 26 boys, 21 of whom are bonded labour. What makes the issue more complicated is the fact that the practice is not exclusively observed in inter-community relations and is also documented between SC families. One of the reasons why the issue of bonded labour is not able to draw special attention is that it is seen as the responsibility of the mobiliser attached to Non-residential Bridge Course (NRBC) and not the primary schoolteacher. Since the current mobiliser is wearing multiple hats at the moment (he is also the designated teacher at the NRBC as well teaches the lower classes in the primary school), he is unable to do anything about it.

Similar experiences are reported from Haryana. Vandana Mahajan observes that there is a clearly visible practice of child labour, which has not been addressed at all by the school, VEC or the CRC and BRC. During discussions with the class V boys in the GPS, the issue of child labour bonded/contracted to local landlords emerged as an important area of concern. Several young boys (in the 11-14 age group) are given away as Pali to the landlords on a yearly contract of Rs 3,000 to Rs 5,000 (plus food, some grain and clothes). They do a range of household and farm work and some are enrolled (on paper) in the AS school. Although the teachers in the GPS were at pains to explain that child labour is no longer a problem in their village, there was enough circumstantial evidence of its prevalence brought out during our interactions with and visit to the poorer and SC communities in the village. According to the head teacher's own rough estimate, presently there are 100-150 'palis' in the village. These children are from the SC community and work as *palis* in the landowning GC families in the same village. The Chhattisgarh study also mentions the presence of such a practice, though it does not document it in detail. There is no doubt that the issue of equity takes on a new dimension with the presence of child labour – both within inter- and intra- community interactions.

A glaring absence of strategies to cater to the special needs of children with disability is observed in all the research panchayats with the exception of AP. AP is the only study that highlights the state's acknowledgement of the needs of disabled children. This is primarily because

Warangal is one of the districts selected for a pilot initiative for Integrated Education by DPEP. The IED initiative in the research panchayat started in 1999 and a survey was undertaken to identify the 'special needs' children (five handicapped children in the SC colony, of which two are hearing impaired, two are mentally retarded [one of whom is also physically handicapped] and one has behavioural problems). Currently, only one hearing impaired girl in class IV and one mentally retarded boy in class V are in school, while the physically handicapped slow learner boy is enrolled in the Non-Residential Bridge Centre. For the remaining children, records show that they are enrolled but are not attending school. While the identification has been done and aids provided, especially to the hearing impaired and physically disabled children, teachers are not equipped to deal with the special needs of these children, especially the slow learners. Despite this, these children seem comfortable and well integrated in regular classrooms and it was observed that other children interact comfortably with them. There was little evidence of any support provided from the mandal resource group that was formed to help and assist the teachers to deal with these special needs; the effort being made was primarily an individual choice facilitated by the fact that the current headmistress has a daughter with a speech impediment and hence was sensitive to the issue. This is a far cry from MP where, despite the initiatives at the district level, the concept of disability itself is unclear or Chhattisgarh where the discourse on special needs is absent.

Infrastructure

DPEP's gender and equity strategies included improvement of school infrastructure and provision of toilets for teachers and students. It was argued that improving school infrastructure could have a positive impact on enrolment and retention of children in school. The six microstudies confirmed that overall improvement in school infrastructure and facilities does make a difference. Conversely, lack of proper infrastructure – like the broken-down building of the GPS in Chhattisgarh – exerted a negative influence on teachers, students and the community. Low attendance, lack of interest among teachers and indifference of the community were linked to the crumbling school building. In Tamil Nadu, poor facilities (one-room thatched

building) of the school in the Dalit hamlet were cited as a proof of discrimination. A dirty swamp surrounded even the new building constructed recently by the Adi Dravida Welfare Board. The hand pump and toilet were right in the middle of a cesspool. These differences between schools within the same village raise doubts in the minds of the poor about the intention of the government to provide equal opportunities to all, irrespective of caste, community or economic status.

Another interesting thread that runs through the six microstudies is the issue of toilets. In almost all the schools, availability of toilets was perceived as being un-important, at least at the primary stage, for children (girls and boys). Toilets in schools were mostly used by the teachers. Discussions with children revealed that they do not see toilet facilities as an encouraging or inhibiting factor in school attendance. On the other hand, availability of drinking water was an important issue – hand pump, well or access to water from a bore-well. In Chhattisgarh, the EGS school children fetched water from a well that was considered 'dirty' and a few children were sent to the primary school (about a kilometre away from the EGS school) to fetch water from the hand pump for the teachers. In all six panchayats, children in government primary schools did not bring any water bottle with them, but almost all the children attending private schools (observed in Haryana, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka) were seen carrying water bottles and lunch-boxes with them.

Inside the Classroom

Classroom processes, child centred learning and pedagogic renewal are issues that have received a considerable amount of attention in DPEP. While a considerable amount of work has been done in this area, a coordinated and multidimensional approach (simultaneous work on curriculum, textbooks, teacher attitudes, pedagogic renewal, teacher-pupil ratio) has not been followed evenly in all DPEP I districts. This unevenness is clearly reflected in the six microstudies.

While almost all the teachers interviewed in the course of the microstudies have participated in DPEP training workshops, not all of them are convinced about the value of child centred pedagogy. Many of them have not internalised the spirit of the new approach and seem to apply 'techniques' mechanically. For example, in

Tamil Nadu, the teachers were familiar with the new approach, but were not convinced – one of them used his cane to order children to sing! A few continued to use the stick. In Karnataka, the teachers' familiarity with the vocabulary and techniques, did not always lead to change in classroom processes, but corporal punishment has definitely come down and there was little fear associated with school. This was also the case in Haryana and Madhya Pradesh. There was no evidence of impact in Chhattisgarh.

In most of the panchayats visited there was not much change in teacher attitudes towards girls and children from very poor/socially disadvantaged groups. It is not that teachers discriminated against all girls – social class, cleanliness and performance also influenced behaviour. There was a clear bias in favour of the better performers and relatively better-off children (it must be noted that most of the children coming to government schools are from poor communities). The double impact of gender and social status was evident in the attention given to children by the teachers, allocation of work in the school, seating and in classroom interaction.

Discussions with teachers in all the six panchayats revealed that there was not much understanding of the family circumstances and special needs of first generation learners. Similarly, teachers have little appreciation of the work burden of children and their inability to devote time to studies when they get back home. In particular, the teachers were not sensitive to the predicament of girls putting in several hours of work in the house or the problem of boys who graze cattle before coming to school. They seem to dismiss such children as low performers or bad students.

Discussions with the teachers did not reveal periodic or ongoing academic support given by the block, cluster or mandal resource centres. For example, in Andhra Pradesh the mandal resource person is engaged in checking enrolment in the school and non-residential centre – thereby playing an inspectorial role rather than an academic one. In Chhattisgarh, the BRC and CRC were guardians of data and records and again did not seem to provide sustained or regular academic inputs.

Another interesting revelation was the minimal use (if any) of TLM in the classroom. In some areas, funds for TLM have been discontinued in the academic year 1999-2000.

VEC and Community Participation

Community participation has been an integral part of the DPEP vocabulary. However, all six microstudies reveal that it is synonymous with the VEC or SBC (or any other formal committee instituted for alternative schools). These committees are the primary interface between the school and community and evidence from the field indicates that they either do not function or seem to function with a mechanical intensity rather than a genuine sense of participation and commitment. The VEC is dysfunctional in Chhattisgarh and the last meeting of the village education committee had been held more than a year ago and the records do not include signatures of members. The resolution supposed to have been approved in previous meetings to repair the school building has not been carried out. In Haryana, the functioning and responsibilities of the VEC are restricted to that of occasional get-together and celebration of national days like Independence Day and Republic Day. School related issues are apparently not discussed in any of the village forums, whether it is the VEC or the gram panchayat and gram sabha or the village development committee. According to Vandana Mahajan, seven VEC members (out of 12) participated in discussions with the field study team, along with three special invitees. Children of only two members were studying in the government primary school. The children of the remaining members were either going to private schools or were below the age of six. They admitted that the VEC does not meet regularly, not surprising given that the children of most of the members attend private schools. In this year it has met only once to give approval for auctioning of trees inside the school campus, which fell during a storm.

Further, despite the mandated composition of VEC to ensure gender and social equity, in reality the VECs seem to uphold the interests of the dominant group. As per DPEP Haryana norms, the VEC of this village should have representation from the SC community, women, and two parents of children studying in the GPS, with the Head Teacher of the GPS as its member-secretary. However, in reality the official VEC has been 'replaced' by another VEC that has been constituted by the block office of the education department, resulting in a local power tussle. Membership of the Village Education Construction

Committee (VECC), which is formed out of the VEC, is sought after because of the substantial funds transferred to VECC for the proposed school building: 'It was quite shocking to see that members of the VEC were openly discussing the possibility of misappropriation of school building funds in front of the research team. In the view of the VEC members, its functioning and role is limited by the local level politics of using these bodies to exert influence, extract benefits and distribute patronage. Participation of the women members on the VEC was also not evident. Most of its members had no knowledge of their role and importance of the VEC to address issues related to children's education.'

Such politics tend to create a hierarchy between the various schools committees based on the political clout they wield. In AP, the teachers of the GPS in the dalit basti were aware of the play of caste and class factors in determining facilities for the school. They were unequivocal in stating that the school in the main village stands to gain by being in the proximity of the high school as well as having a majority of children from the dominant BC social group of the village. Consequently, their school committee is stronger, and therefore able to lobby for more benefits, better infrastructure, space, etc. This view was expressed during the discussions with the community in the SC colony as well. Similarly in MP, caste identities were reflected in the school committees, with the VEC representing the OBC and the SMC representing the ST and the latter lacking resources to demand facilities for its school.

In Karnataka, the existing VEC was considered to be very active and efficient and claim a high level of community participation. In reality, the community here is reduced to a few elites who, according to Vani Periodi, "participate, take decisions and implement according to their wish and others follow". She further adds that though there are young people who are active and vocal in the SC community, their voice is not heard by the VEC. When they speak out in the gram sabha or in front of visiting officials, the elders are called and warned by the village elite. At the time of study, however, the state government had withdrawn the VEC and introduced a school development and monitoring committee (SDMC) comprising of parents of children attending the school. This new committee has not yet been constituted and is already a source of much concern and friction in the community. The VEC was

rather critical of this development as it challenged their authority. They were blunt in expressing their displeasure about ordinary people occupying the same position as them.

In the case of the village level committee (VLC) in Tamil Nadu, the situation is even more polarised. The committee hardly meets as some members live and work in Chennai. The headmaster is keen to have an operational VLC and keep the members informed about the school's needs, concerns and events. He admitted that convening a meeting was difficult. He meets each member of the VLC, writes a report in the format of a meeting and circulates it among the members for their signature. He meets the members again to get their views on the draft and transcribes the minutes to a book. Each member is expected to sign and pass it on to the others. The interesting aspect of the TN study is not the in-absentia functioning of the VLC; it is the only case study which actually documents genuine community participation by women's self help groups and local dalit activists. Their participation is neither mechanical nor bureaucratised. Often, it is a highly political activism, especially in relation to the school in the Dalit area. According to Rathnam, this is due to the presence of a village unit of the Dalit Panthers of India. Young Dalit men spend time in the local school and take a few classes, so that the teacher can concentrate on another class. Their participation in teaching has helped the teacher cope with a multigrade classroom. They pitch in extra-curricular activities and provide continuous moral support to the teacher.

The teachers of both schools reported that the women's groups should be credited for the high rate of enrolment and retention at the primary level. They have been enthusiastic participants of enrolment campaigns at the beginning of every academic year for the past four years. Women's self-help groups (SHGs) are not only active, but are very clear about their role – they see themselves as the support structure for the school. They keep in touch with the headmaster throughout the year and their engagement with the school ranges from leading a procession of students for enrolment, supplying sweets during school functions, persuading parents to make extra efforts to enhance their wards' academic performance to demanding improved facilities for the school in panchayat meetings. Those who live close by allow the girls of the school to use the toilets in their houses. They provide drinking water to the

students and also persuade reluctant neighbours into extending these facilities to the children. The TN experience also clearly marks the emergence of women's voices and the growing recognition that they are major players in the enterprise of getting children to school. But, apart from TN, we did not see any concrete evidence of DPEP efforts to encourage women to be more active at the local level through the creation of MTAs and holding of mother-daughter fairs and one-third reservation in the VEC (also reinforced by the PRIs). The situation on the ground, at least in the six panchayats covered, does not suggest active community participation.

Mechanical interpretation of community participation and equating it to an officially constituted VEC has not fostered genuine participation of families of children who attend government schools. Karnataka has made a beginning by dissolving the VEC and replacing it with a school betterment and management committee comprising of parents of the children. It remains to be seen whether this new committee will have the teeth to monitor the regular functioning of the school.

Competing Inequalities

The undeniable fact is that people, be they parents, teachers, children or community members, do not have one homogeneous identity and hence cannot be subsumed in a generic category – the community. While there are distinct social and economic groups like SC, ST or OBC, these categories also need to be further broken down in each specific context. Similarly though gender is no doubt a source of stratification, it is also stratified along the lines of caste, class and community. Thus the experiences of a poor ST girl will be qualitatively different from that of an OBC girl and so on. In fact, the situation of girls in some forward communities could be worse in some areas. Similarly, in areas where boys migrate for work (like in the hotel belt of Karnataka), girls may have greater access by virtue of the fact that they remain in the village while boys are often compelled to drop out from school and leave for the city. It is observed that DPEP's emphasis on broad categories of social stratification actually tend to render invisible the competing inequalities that define children's lives and their experiences of primary schooling. A primary source of inequality that is overlooked is the social and economic geog-

raphies of marginal settlements within the context of the larger panchayat and its impact on access to 'functional' schools. All studies point to this fact and elaborate upon the consequences of this spatial organisation.

Another issue that is overlooked is that all members of a social group do not necessarily share the same economic standing and there may be differences within the community. For instance, the practice of bonded labour occurs within the SC community across families – with some children working in the homes of richer SC families in the same village. There is also a local perception that the relatively better off SCs who live on the periphery of the main settlement in the AP study and whose children attend the main GPS are of a different sub-caste and hence different from the rest. Similarly, the majhwars in Chhattisgarh are classified as ST, as are the kunwars. However the similarity ends here with the latter exhibiting a very high rate of literacy while the majhwars are the landless labourers and barely 5 per cent of their children make it to school. The situation of children from valmiki households is different from other SC groups in Haryana. Among the Sikh community, the social and economic situation of jat Sikhs is far better than the mazhabi Sikhs (SC community) living in the same village.

V Reversing the Trend

At the outset, it needs to be reiterated that, with the exception of Chhattisgarh, almost universal enrolment in primary schools is a reality. The number of never-enrolled children – girls and boys – is almost negligible. The presence of a functional upper-primary and secondary school exerts a significant influence on children's and parent's motivation to continue their education. The cohort analysis reveals that the dropout rate at the primary level is very small and almost all children go up to class IV (in Andhra Pradesh) and class V (in other areas). The problem begins at the last stage of primary and post-primary level. Hence the availability of and accessibility to middle and high schools could dramatically change the educational scenario in rural India. This is of greater importance for girls and children from very poor families. The microstudies reinforce this very significant finding of desk research.

The micro studies also reveal that while the better off have the resources to send

their children outside the village, it is the poor who are left behind. However, the quality issue remains a challenge in almost all the areas – learning achievements, pedagogic renewal, gender and social class sensitive classrooms, teacher attitudes – these need a lot more work if we are to ensure good quality education. Further, decentralised micro planning under DPEP is expected to address context specific issues and tailor the programme to reach out to the hardest to reach. However, the six micro studies reveal that this is not happening, even where village level surveys have been done – like in Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Further, these were undertaken by the teacher and other DPEP functionaries (like the social mobiliser in Andhra Pradesh). The overwhelming finding of the six micro studies is the need for panchayat level micro planning to meet the educational needs of the most deprived in the area. The village education committee and/or school betterment and management committee has not been mandated to actively participate in planning nor do they have any decision-making power. Given the composition of the VEC, the children of most VEC members do not go to the government primary school. The members thus have little interest in the school or the marginalised groups in the village. The composition and the role of VEC need to be reviewed (as it has been done in Karnataka) and these committees given more teeth.

The immediate need of the hour is thus to contain this trend, whereby the universalisation of primary education is accompanied by the emergence of segregated schools based on caste and community identity. The initial evidence seems to indicate that ‘hierarchies of access’ are becoming an inevitable feature of UEE and this does not portend well for a democracy that is defined by multiple social identities and voices. DPEP needs to keep this in mind and focus on steps that will strengthen the existing infrastructure as well as introduce new interventions that will make primary education truly democratic.

Essentially, research studies and reports on DPEP during the last five years confirm increased demand for schooling among all sections of the population and also point to a significant increase in the supply of schools. Though gender inequalities have been shrinking and the prognosis for the future is positive, the persistence of regional, social and economic inequalities, particularly with respect to access to func-

tioning schools of a reasonable quality remains an area of concern – more so in educationally backward districts of the country and especially for first generation learners.

Who has a stake in improving primary schools? The PROBE report and other studies of the late 1990s reveal that states like Himachal Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and to a certain degree Kerala have achieved universal elementary education mainly through government schools and private aided schools. In particular, children of almost all the important social and economic groups depend primarily on government schools. As a result, they have a stake not only in ensuring that schools function, but also in improving quality. It is rare to come across children in class V who cannot read or write. However, recent micro studies done in Uttar Pradesh [Srivastava 2001] and the micro study (see endnote 3) done under this project in Chhattisgarh reveal that several children who emerge from primary schools are barely literate! Making sure schools work (according to the stipulated timing and calendar) and that teachers teach has to become a non-negotiable agenda. While DPEP Education – Management Information System (EMIS) data from educationally backward districts suggest a sharp increase in enrolment, we still do not have any reliable information on functionality and quality.

We also have very little information on the functioning of village education committees/school betterment committees/parent teacher’s associations. What we do have in the form of qualitative micro studies (see endnote 3) is not very heartening. All the studies clearly indicate that strengthening mechanisms for community participation without ensuring the participation of parents is often counter-productive. Village leaders whose children do not go to government schools have no stake in it.

Elimination of gender, caste and community bias inside the classroom, especially among teachers, remains a challenge. The bias persists and is reflected through:

- Attitudes of teachers and even educational administrators towards children from first generation learner families
- Stereotypes about tribal children (especially the more disadvantaged among tribal groups, for example Pahadi Korba, majhwar, Pando and Kodaku in Chhattisgarh)
- Students from disadvantaged dalit communities (valmiki, rohit, adi dravida and other communities who were part of erstwhile untouchable groups).

The indicators point to a much deeper malaise in our society. These have been reflected in extensive reporting on the situation of dalits by journalist P Sainath (articles appearing in *The Hindu*) and reports of dalit organisations struggling against the persistence of caste prejudices (World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in Durban, South Africa in September 2001). While acknowledging that the teachers are as much a part of society as anyone else, it becomes more than evident that the government has to play a positive interventionist role to ensure a bias-free and a prejudice-free classroom. This unfortunately has not happened in DPEP. While gender issues have been brought centre stage, the same cannot be said for caste, community and other social prejudices.

A related issue is the pressing need to critically interrogate generic social categories like SC, ST and minorities and further break them down into more region-specific subgroups in order to address their needs more effectively. The most glaring example comes from Chhattisgarh where there are vast differences among the scheduled tribes, with some being on the margin of the marginalised. The situation of Oraon or even Gond tribes is far better than that of the Pahadi Korba and majhwar, among whom it is difficult to find even one literate adult. Recent press reports on starvation deaths among Pahadi Korba tribes and other marginalised subgroups among SC and ST communities further reinforce the issue that these need micro level and context-specific strategies since they remain the hardest to reach.

DPEP studies and reports argue that the first and the most obvious implication of these hierarchies is for teacher training. Apart from social sensitisation mentioned above, special training would be necessary for handling first generation learners, especially from socially and economically vulnerable groups. The second implication is for more focused and ongoing support from block resource centres (BRC) and cluster resource centres (CRC), with respect to pedagogic renewal. Thirdly these schools need to be placed on a special watch list. Given that existing mechanisms for community involvement, including village education committees (VEC), are weak and strife-ridden, a far greater effort would be necessary on the part of the teacher to reach out. Teachers with commitment and aptitude would have to be posted in such schools. While the government has

acknowledged the importance of this issue, specific strategies are yet to be developed to meet the changing composition of government schools. Similarly, the pedagogical implications of the changing composition of government schools are yet to be explored.

Finally, there is unanimity among researchers and administrators about the need to increase children's access to upper primary and middle schools. The absence of post-primary educational opportunities continues to create greater inequalities in the system. Gender bias is more pronounced at this stage – many more girls drop out after the primary level because of lack of meaningful access to upper primary schools. Social inequalities in access are also more pronounced at the upper primary stage – with a smaller proportion of children from SC and ST families studying in private aided and unaided schools. At this stage, it is the poor who depend more on government schools.

A recent World Bank report on the subject revealed that 72 per cent of the children in the 11-13 age group attend school; only 43 per cent of them attend upper primary, the rest are in primary school.¹⁴ This information erived from NSSO 52nd Round, Sixth Educational Survey (1993) and other DPEP reports reveal that the demand for upper primary education has been increasing exponentially – in almost all areas, both rural and urban. Equally, given the wide variations in the quality of primary education, 61 per cent students (56 per cent girls) who enter class I complete the primary cycle. This national picture hides wide regional differences. However, what is encouraging is that most of the children who complete the primary cycle are eager to move on to the upper primary level. Our micro studies also confirm that the presence of an upper primary and/or high school in the village is the most important factor affecting transition from primary to upper primary. This is particularly true for girls and for children from poor families.

VI Summing Up

The six microstudies reinforce many of the findings of the desk review. DPEP has made a good beginning and has definitely put primary education on the priority list. Yet, it has a long way to go before inequalities are addressed and the most deprived children have meaningful access to schooling. No single programme or project,

however extensive it may be, can hope to correct decades of educational imbalances and inequalities. While acknowledging that DPEP is perhaps the most ambitious primary education initiative in independent India, eight years is indeed a short time to bring about radical changes and turn the system upside down. This paper acknowledges that the social and economic dynamics that frame educational access is not the creation of any programme, but a historical baggage – a product of over five decades of social development and educational planning. DPEP may not be able to directly provide solutions to the gender and social inequalities that define every aspect of the Indian social, economic, and political fabric. Yet, its success is inextricably entwined with its ability to critically engage and dialogue with the larger weave of Indian society and thus constantly ensure that its programme is designed to do just that.

What is disturbing is that we as a nation are becoming more insensitive as the years roll by. The two-glass system is not only confined to teashops – it has permeated all social structures and institutions – including our schools, the real 'temples' of modern India. A new kind of segregation is clearly discernible at different levels and not all of it has been captured in DPEP data and research studies. At one level, children from clearly different social and economic groups attend different types of school – private unaided, private aided, government primary schools, EGS schools, alternative schools. Even within government primary schools, there is some evidence of sharp difference in quality – physical facilities, community participation, allocation of funds – as illustrated in the micro studies as well as other reports and research papers. [Ramachandran and Sethi 2001; Mazumdar 2001; Nambissan 1996, 2001]. Single teacher schools, multi-grade situations (especially when the teachers are not trained to handle it), poorly trained parateachers – all these have a greater impact on children from disadvantaged groups, as such children have no other options (private schools, tuitions) and their parents cannot support them at home.

General household characteristics like income, caste, occupation and educational level of parents continue to determine access, attendance, completion and learning achievements. Children from rural families with substantial land, non-agricultural occupations and educational level

have greater access than children from landless, agricultural wage-earning families and migrating groups. In some regions of the country, for example Uttaranchal, researchers have found a strong positive correlation between distance of forest and water source and non-enrolment and drop-out rate of girls, and even boys in specific age groups [Pande 2001]. Children-women ratio was found to be an influencing factor in the enrolment and continuation of girls in school and the work participation rate influenced the enrolment of boys in Andhra Pradesh [Krishnaji 2001]. Similarly, in many areas, the number of animals to graze and manage also exerts influence on school participation, as parents cite grazing as an important reason for irregular attendance or non-enrolment. This is referred to as dependency ratio – 'the larger the number of infants and old people in the household (i.e., the higher the 'dependency burden' on the household), the smaller are the chances of children getting enrolled in school' [Vaidyanathan and Nair 2001]. However, NGOs, especially those who are part of a nationwide campaign against child labour, argue that motivation of parents coupled with mobilisation of working children to get back to school can overcome this challenge. Ravi Srivastava's (2001) study in UP reveals that the burden of dependency is generally borne by adult women and is not necessarily passed on to small children. It may, however, be of greater significance at the upper primary and middle school level, particularly for girls.

Since completion of the fieldwork for the micro studies, we have had the opportunity to travel to Udupi, North Kanara, Bellary and Davanagere districts of Karnataka – three of them being non-DPEP districts.¹⁵ The overwhelming impression we gathered was that, at least in the villages we visited in Karnataka, there are negligible number of out-of-school children in the 6-11 age groups. Primary schools were functioning and teachers were regular in attending school. However, what disturbed us was meeting a large number of working children in the 11-14 age group and an even larger number of them in the 15-18 age group. Discussions revealed that many of them had dropped out after class IV, V or VI – with poverty and need for work cited as reasons for dropping out, even in the more educationally forward districts of Udupi and Uttara Kannada. Relevance of education (especially beyond the primary stage), lack of employable or self-employment related skills, insecurity

about the future and economic pressures continue to push children out of school and into work. This observation is certainly quite different from the situation in Bijapur, Raichur, Koppal where a recent household survey reveals a large proportion of out of school children in the 6-11 age group. But it is interesting to note that even when a district (like Udipi and Uttara Kannada) achieves universal enrolment and participation at the primary stage, ensuring 8 years of basic education poses a major challenge.

Similarly, prior to the commencement of this research, a team of researchers were involved in documenting backward and forward linkages that strengthen primary education.¹⁶ We covered two districts in Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, one in Orissa and the cities of Hyderabad, Mumbai and Kolkata. Again, the overwhelming impression gathered was that parents recognise the value of primary education and notwithstanding their economic situation, are eager to send their children to primary schools. In the more educationally backward areas of the country, availability of a functional primary school remains a problem. In urban areas, accessibility of schooling for children in difficult circumstances and from migrant families continues to pose a major challenge. In almost all these areas a significant number of children drop out at the primary stage – with an overwhelming number of girls dropping out after class IV or V. Again, accessibility to and availability of post-primary education remains a problem in many areas.

Notwithstanding prevalent social and economic barriers to schooling, the overwhelming message emanating from DPEP schools is that the presence of a good quality government school, which functions regularly, can indeed surmount many obstacles. Special strategies would, however, be necessary to reach out to the hard core, most of whom are people who not only belong to the most deprived subgroups of scheduled castes and tribes; they are also the people with almost no voice in society.

The challenge for DPEP is to reach out to this hardest to reach group with good quality education. We can no longer look at gender disparities in isolation – the intermeshing of geographic location, social status, economic position, gender, occupation and displacement/migration has resulted in new forms of disparities and disempowerment. Ensuring equal quality of access remains a big issue. Reaching out to the most deprived demands more

resources, more human resource inputs and a great deal of commitment from the government. Low cost options will not do; they will merely accentuate existing cleavages in society.

The lesson from a range of research studies done in the last 10 years reiterates that there are no shortcuts or magic formulae to address fundamental problems of access, equity and gender disparity on the one hand and quality, content and relevance on the other. Education has to be perceived as an integral part of people's survival and their fight for a life of dignity and self-respect. Different components like physical access, mobilisation, quality, teacher management and pedagogic renewal need to be addressed simultaneously – ensuring confluence and synergy. An integrated approach is necessary for meaningful change and lasting/sustainable impact. Also just five years of primary education – classes I to V, age 6-11, is insufficient to ensure significant value addition and in many cases even retention of basic literacy and numeracy, particularly for groups who have historically been denied education. Eight years of basic education is essential and needs to be recognised as the basic minimum and taken on as a non-negotiable.

Primary education is not a stand-alone activity and the government has to acknowledge the importance of looking back and looking forward. Pre-school is a critical input into primary education and conversely, upper primary education is necessary to encourage and motivate children and their families to send children to primary schools. Moving one step forward – availability of relevant and good quality vocational and life skill educational opportunities is essential to generate the necessary momentum for primary and upper-primary education. The age span we are looking at is 3 to 18, with one level feeding into the other and higher levels creating the necessary suction effect for earlier stages.

There is a consensus that the primary responsibility of basic education has to be shouldered by the government because it alone has the mandate, the ability and the wherewithal to respond to the educational needs of the poor. This study – like several others – shows that the rich have walked away from government schools in urban areas and all indications are that rural India is not far behind (with notable exceptions like Himachal Pradesh). It is the very poor who go to government schools. Enhancing

their capabilities and providing them the tools to negotiate this unequal world from a position of strength requires political commitment and societal support. Investing in the development and growth of those who need it most is the need of the hour. DPEP has indeed made a beginning with respect to primary education; the question is whether this momentum will be sustained at higher levels and for another decade. If it is, India may well be able to achieve the goal of Universal Elementary Education by the year 2010. 

Notes

[This article is based on a recently completed research study: *Hierarchies of Access: Gender and Social Equity in Primary Education*, (Vimala Ramachandran (ed) European Commission, Forthcoming February 2002). We are grateful to the European Commission for their support. Vimala Ramachandran and Aarti Saihjee work together in Educational Resource Unit, Jaipur and Delhi.]

- 1 Discussing the spurt in elementary education spending in 1995-96, Sajita Bashir points out, 'After deducting the expenditure on these two programmes (DPEP and Lok Jumbish), real plan expenditure (domestic) for elementary education has grown at the rate of 22 per cent p a, compared to 27 per cent p a when external funds are included. Thus, the increase in domestic funding has been the main factor in raising Plan expenditure on elementary education.' *Government Expenditure on Elementary Education in the Nineties*, European Commission, New Delhi, July 2000, p 12.
- 2 Aarti Saihjee, *Long Live the Alphabet! Reflections from Betul District, Madhya Pradesh*; Vidya Das: *More Unequal than Others. Evidence from Surguja District, Chhattisgarh*; Vandana Mahajan: *The Hidden Picture, A Case Study from Hisar District, Haryana*; Vani Periodi: *Second Generation Issues in Equity and Education. Learning from Kolar District, Karnataka*, Kameshwari Jandhyala: *So Close Yet So Far: Primary Schooling in Warangal District, Andhra Pradesh and Aruna Ratnam: The Weft and the Warp of Public Education. A Tale of Two Primary Schools in Cuddalore District, Tamil Nadu*.
- 3 "Across states, districts and even villages, the literacy rates of females and scheduled castes and tribes (SC/ST), though much below average, are highly correlated with overall literacy rates. Also, inter-group disparities tend to decline as the average literacy rate increases. In other words, as we move up the scale of overall literacy, females and SC/STs are found to be more literate. Also gender gaps as well as the differences between socially disadvantaged and other caste groups become narrower..." Vaidyanathan and Nair, 2001.
- 4 'Schools in 46 districts in eight states were surveyed as part of the district primary education programme of the ministry of human resources development. The learning levels of over 50,000 students were assessed. It was found that in none of the 46 districts surveyed did primary school students achieve an average score of 80 per cent in the basic letter and word reading tests that were administered to assess

- their learning levels. In many districts students could barely read five to eight words correctly. Children also fared poorly in basic numerical skills.' (*The Times of India* 1994, quoted in Geeta Nambissan, 2001)
- 5 P Sainath a noted journalist has documented the situation of dalits across the country from 1999 onwards. Articles appearing in *The Hindu* reveal persistent social discrimination inside the school. Certain specific groups among the dalits, like valmiki, rohit, thoti, chamar and in tribal areas the non-dominant tribes and denotified tribes (classified as criminal tribes by the British) are not only discriminated against by the forward castes, but by other dalits, who consider them untouchable.
 - 6 'It is estimated that the enrolment in unrecognised schools is doubling every five years. *The proportion of girls in unrecognised schools was very low as compared to their share in the government schools. The gender bias in school choice by the parents is quite evident...* What we need is that the government schools should compete with private schools in terms of quality of access, efficiency and performance standards and both sectors supplement each other's effort to achieve the goal of universal primary education.' Aggarwal, November 2000.
 - 7 "Less than 10 per cent of poor families have their children in private schools as against nearly 30 per cent of middle income families and 45 per cent of well-to-do families" (Krishnaji quoted on p 12 of Anuradha De et al 2001).
 - 8 Sajita Basir's study in Tamil Nadu in 1994 revealed that pupils in private unaided schools came from relatively well off backgrounds, with only 10 per cent being SC. While in government schools, the proportion of SC children is 26 per cent in rural areas and 46 per cent in urban areas. She also discussed the educational status of parents from private unaided schools and aided schools as being very different, with more first generation learners enrolled in government schools. Sajita Bashir quoted in De et al 2001.
 - 9 DPEP. October 2000, *Study of Declining Enrolment in Class I in Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu – A Synthesis Report*.
 - 10 "This differentiation accentuates the precarious position of the disadvantaged groups in terms of access to basic education both quantitatively and qualitatively. This tendency, if allowed to continue, will further aggravate the already serious inequality in access to higher education, thus making a mockery of the notion that education is the most potent instrument for achieving greater equality of opportunity" Vaidyanathan and Nair 2001.
 - 11 "West Bengal has recorded the lowest share of female teachers – merely 15.8 per cent as compared to 73.6 per cent in Kerala. As a first priority, the share of female teachers needs to be improved in single and two-teacher schools...Despite significant moves and gender sensitive recruitment policies, the position with respect to the availability and deployment of female teachers is less than satisfactory... Serious concerns about deployment prevail, as the number of male teacher schools is exceptionally large...The trends indicate a stagnating share of SC/ST teachers in phase I" [Aggarwal November 2000, Chapter 6].
 - 12 Ed CIL, 2000. *Bringing Girls Centrestage*, DPEP/Government of India, November.
 - 13 For details of the methodology adopted for the micro-studies, please refer to the original study. Before proceeding further, a caveat is also necessary here. The objective of this exercise is not to pronounce generalisations on the basis of these micro-studies; rather, it is to provide insight into the underlying issues most pertinent to the topic under study. Hence, all comments and observations should be taken in the spirit in which they are intended.
 - 14 'Across the total population aged 15 years and above in 1995-96, 32 per cent had completed at least an upper primary schooling. There were major differences by gender and income group. For urban males the completion rate was 63.6 per cent and for rural females the rate was 14.6 per cent. While just over half of the members of the wealthiest 20 per cent of households had completed this level of schooling, the rate for the poorest 20 per cent was under 15 per cent' World Bank, 2002, *India Expanding and Improving Upper Primary Education in India*, March, p iii.
 - 15 Vimala Ramachandran and Aarti Saihjee travelled in the project areas of The Concerned for Working Children between September 24 and October 1, 2001.
 - 16 Educational Resource Unit was engaged in a DFID/GOI supported research project to document experiences of 10 primary education programme in India titled – Getting Children Back to School: Case Studies in Primary Education (2000-2001), Sage Publications, New Delhi, Forthcoming 2002.
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