

Letters to editor

Teaching Science to Schoolchildren

When one reads Manu Kulkarni's casual description (August 26) of primary education as a game in which Eklavya cannot be a player because it doesn't enhance ability to perform in the rat race, one begins to get a sense of the mindset of the "exceptionally brilliant and committed" bureaucrats of MP whom he defends. Bereft of a vision for education or an understanding of pedagogic practice, beyond "scaling up retention and learning enhancement" and EGS as the way of achieving these, they have, with unexceptional single-mindedness, invented a series of 'reasons' to close down one of the most important working models of decentralised curriculum planning and examinations in the country. In describing the experiments in *Bal Vaigyanic* as "mysterious and romantic experiments in the name of science teaching", Kulkarni sounds as foolish as the MLA from Itarsi who complained that in HSTP children brought leaves into the classroom. It suggests that he has very likely not even seen the books, or worse, that he may not understand why these experiments give life to teaching science in the classroom, whether in Hoshangabad middle school classrooms, filled with wanna-be rats, or in Bangalore middle school classrooms, filled with wanna-be rats. Regardless of whether any panchayat in the country agrees with this or not, as an 'expert' in science teaching I believe that doing experiments is a must for learning science. This 'common sense' truth is obviously not as common as one hoped; neither with the humble MLA from Itarsi, nor the brilliant bureaucrats at Bhopal who believe it is perfectly all right for children to read about experiments rather than do them.

Primary education may be also a concern of the panchayats, but by no

means is it their alone; to call it their 'preserve' suggests an unnecessarily feudal attitude. In any case, this does not explain how any panchayat can vote out HSTP and the social science programmes which were both middle school programmes. This point may seem like a mere technical detail, but in education, at each level of schooling there is a shift of state policy in matters of control, funding, curriculum and examinations. This is particularly clear in rural areas. The Eklavya story amply proves that the 'community orientation' mantra is not as straightforward as it seems. It is absolutely essential to figure out the nature of relationship of representatives of the community with teachers, curriculum makers and other education administrators. The arguments and counter-arguments have brought out the complexity and the many levels that have been drawn into play leading up to this decision and later in justifying it.

It is also facile to say that in the course of disagreement between experts, the children lose out. One only wishes there was more real disagreement about what is happening in the name of education and learning in schools! Not simple stone-throwing at issues such as medium of instruction or examinations that are guaranteed to create a squabble, but deeper matters of what, how and how much and why. Eklavya has contributed valuably to curriculum, textbook writing, teacher education, and school examinations. And it will no doubt continue to do so, in new ways. For the moment the ones who have really lost out are the children and teachers of Hoshangabad district who have to revert to memorising science from drab, badly written textbooks.

PADMA M SARANGAPANI
Bangalore

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Economic and Political Weekly

Economic and Political Weekly

Hitkari House, 284 Shahid Bhagatsingh Road,
Mumbai 400 001

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Starvation Deaths in Orissa

The recently released NHRC report probing the deaths reported last year from the Kashipur block has turned the spotlight once again on the abject poverty and the chronic hunger that afflict the people of Orissa. As you have rightly pointed out in your editorial ('Probing Starvation Deaths', August 24), the protracted quibbling on the question of starvation deaths is nothing more than an obfuscation of the real issue, a red-herring, a cover-up and a self-serving exercise in semantics which has been employed by successive governments in the state with spectacular success to cling on to power while people died like worms. As per the Orissa Relief Code, if a person dies with an empty stomach then only can it be termed as a 'starvation death'. This definition virtually makes starvation deaths a near impossibility as no able-bodied human being is likely to sit with folded hands, resigned to the prospect of starvation death.

Though Orissa seems to have been condemned by nature, its greatest condemnation has been the absolute misgovernance which has characterised almost all the dispensations that have administered the state since it was founded. The incumbent CM, despite his formidable pedigree, who does not speak Oriya (and is clueless about the rich and diverse culture of the people), becomes outraged at the people's apparent inability to stay alive on delicacies like mango kernels and inedible mushrooms. Though much maligned, Mary Antoinette was civilized enough to think that the staple diet of her subjects was bread, cake and the like.

Mr Chief Minister, the people of

Orissa tell you categorically that starvation deaths cannot be checked by advancing dubious definitions and demand meaningful action to ameliorate their plight. If you think you can't deliver on this demand, you would do well to manage your business in Mauritius.

Benny George,
Jharsuguda, Orissa.

Health Care in West Bengal

Your editorial 'Health Care: Enforcing Accountability' (September 7) is a scathing comment on the role of the West Bengal government in the deaths of children in a Kolkata hospital. The immediate reaction of the state government and the health minister to the death of 15 children at B C Roy Memorial Hospital sharply brings into focus the plight of health that has long been under fire in West Bengal. The tragedy of the hapless children needs to be seen together with the controversial Anuradha Saha death case that has shaken the community of medicos. One should not overlook the fact that the initial response of the state government to the B C Roy Hospital incident was one of nonchalance and apathy. It took the government more than 24 hours to gauge public sentiment and come up with a sympathetic response as a face-saving formula. The behaviour of the minister in charge, who happens to be a doctor himself, only served to justify the people's loss of faith in doctors and government hospitals. If a doctor-turned-health minister could turn so apathetic, incidents like the death of Anuradha Saha or of the children at B C Roy Hospital cannot be treated as rare occurrences. One cannot expect

improvement in the health scene in the state where the minister in charge seeks to defend himself with statistics instead of empathising with the human loss. The state government too, in its turn, hastened to put a tight lid on the sources of public information at the hospital for fear of further embarrassment. Your editorial pulls up the health minister alone. How can the state government as a whole go scot-free? It was simply because of the hue and cry by the people and the media that the government had to relent.

CHANDIKA PROSAD GHOSAL
Kolkata

Social Sciences in South Asia

In the collection of papers on Social Science Research in South Asia (August 31), Partha Chatterjee in his paper mentions Myron Weiner's article 'Social Science Research and Public Policy in India' which had cited research studies the results of which were suppressed as they did not find favour with the authorities. Chatterjee himself has not exhibited any concern for this crucial issue. The articles on Pakistan and Nepal are lively and enlightening. Some of the issues raised are relevant to our country.

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