

Challenges in Ensuring Elementary Education for All

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Article 45 of the Indian Constitution vows to provide free and compulsory education to all “children between the age of six and fourteen years” (henceforth, schooling aged children). The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (ssa) was launched in 2002 to make elementary education a fundamental right. This book makes a critical assessment of the universalisation of elementary education and highlights the challenges ahead. Its 14 papers are clubbed under four sections: (1) Disparities and Inequities; (2) The Challenge of Quality in Education; (3) Issues Related to Curriculum, Pedagogy and Learning; and (4) Towards Inclusive Education.

Review of Progress

While Rustagi in the introductory chapter outlines the importance of elementary education and the progress made to universalise elementary education, Jandhyala Tilak critically analyses various educational policies and the underlying problems in the elementary education.

A review of the achievements in enrolment, retention and attainment of a given level of learning highlights both the improvements and the conspicuous failures. The gross enrolment ratio (GER) for the schooling aged children in 2004-05 for the country as a whole was 93.5, which has risen from 32 in 1950-51 and 86 in 1990-91. Thus, between 1990-91 and 2004-05, the GER improved only by 7.3 percentage points. The rate of dropouts from elementary schools in the same year remains as high as 50.84%. Even at the primary levels in 2003-04, the dropout rate was 31%.

The state-wise data between 1990 and 1991, 2000 and 2001 and 2004 and 2005 shows no significant improvement in access to primary schools. In fact, there was a decline in access between 1990-91 and 2000-01. There were 66 primary schools, on an average, for every one lakh population in 1990-91 and this declined to 62 in 2000-01. Access to public (government

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and government-aided) schools is highly limited in the case of primary education. Only three-fourths of the villages on an average have a government or government-aided primary school and 42% of the households in urban areas have access to such a school. Further against the current norm for pupil-teacher ratio (PTR) of 40 in primary schools, the real ratio stands at 46 at all India level in the year 2004-05. This ratio varied across states; 1:104 in Bihar and 1:50 in Uttar Pradesh.

Most of the state governments have shunned the recruitment of full-time qualified and trained teachers and appoint para, contractual and part-time teachers. Tilak points out that the “barefoot teacher and barefoot schools” may finally produce a barefoot system of education.

In the national policy on education 1968, the government allocated 6% of the national income to education from the public exchequer by 1986. However, currently, only 3.7% of the gross national product (GNP) is being invested in education. Although the expenditure on elementary education has increased modestly, it lies far below the desired level of 3% of the GNP and at least 6% for the total education sector.

Disparities

Dhir Jhingran and Deepa Sankar in their articles measure the spatial disparity in the universalisation of education. They unravel the significant variation across the districts within a state and the country. Elementary education needs a major shift to target districts, blocks and panchayats and specific social groups that are lagging behind.

Sunil Batra elaborates different forms of inequities, quantitative and qualitative, prevailing in the current system. As against the national literacy rate of 64.84% in

2001, 47.1% of scheduled tribes and 54.7% of scheduled castes were literate.

The difference in the quality of education arises due to different forms of schooling – public versus private schools, different types of private schools and different forms of government schools. Divided by class, education of parents, degree of wealth and region, private schools cater to different sections of the fee-paying population. Between 1986 and 1993, 60% of the urban enrolment growth in primary education occurred in private unaided schools. In rural areas, during the same period, only 16% of the total enrolment growth was accommodated by private unaided schools. Such different private schooling generates a systematic inequity among different economic strata. Instead of working towards reform in schools that underperform, government schemes rely on creating new schools to address “excellence”, and in turn, breed new kinds of inequities in the Indian school system.

Nowhere Children

The dropout of children from the primary and upper primary level remains a serious concern. It varies significantly across different regions social, economic and gender groups. For example, 57% of the SC children and 66% of the ST children who enter Grade I, drop out before reaching Grade VIII. About 80% of the ST girl children drop out before reaching Grade VIII in Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Tripura and West Bengal (2004-05). Even among ST boys, the corresponding rates are above 75% in these states. The dropout rates are also consistently higher among girls than boys.

Tilak points out that the reasons for never attending school and dropping out are broadly similar; the most important reason is the high cost of schooling (including the opportunity costs). Moreover, mere provision of a school facility is inadequate to attract and retain students in the schools rather the schools should have reasonably good physical infrastructure, committed teachers and should provide an attractive learning environment. The 52nd round of National Sample Survey shows that lack of interest in education accounts for 30% of non-enrolment.

Vimala Ramachandran and Afke De Groot provide evidence from their field visits and interviews of various stakeholders of the

education system in Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan. While official data claims near universal enrolment, 24% of the children in the survey sample were reported as being never enrolled. Groot cites the number of “nowhere children” around 100 million. The children who are neither in school nor reported to be participating in the labour force have been termed as the nowhere children by D P Chaudhri. Apart from the economic condition of family, sociocultural factors, quality of education, non-recognition of the relevance of education, inaccessibility of schools and their improper functioning act as the major factor keeping children out of school.

Questions have been raised on the number of out of schoolchildren and their whereabouts. L Rustagi, Balwant Singh Mehta and Sunil Kumar Mishra provide a detailed account on this. As per the Census 2001, more than 87 million children are still out of school which constitutes 34% of all children in the age group of 5 to 14 years. Although, all states have registered a decline from 1991 to 2001 in the proportion of children outside of school cover, a high degree of disparity persists among states. While Bihar records the highest 57% of children out-of-school, in Kerala this figure is as low as 11%. Moreover, many of them work as labourers. The Census 2001 data reveals that around 11% of out-of-school children work as child labourers. The decade between 1991 and 2001 shows a downward trend in the child work participation. Around 96% of child workers were out of school. This figure fell in to 74% in 2001 reflecting that the proportion of school-going children among the child workers is increasing.

Quality Concerns

The quality of elementary education, particularly in government primary schools remains a matter of serious concern. Shaik Galab, Moestue, Antony, McCoy, Ravi and Prudhvikar Reddy demonstrate from a field study in Andhra Pradesh that, first, children in private schools have better literacy and numeracy skills regardless of wealth or caste than children in public schools; second, children with uneducated parents (especially, mothers) are at a disadvantage; third, this disadvantage is greater in public schools than in private schools, and finally, girls have lower learning scores than boys.

Krishna Kumar in his article discusses the conceptual issues pertaining to the quality of education and the failure of two innovative schemes – Basic Education (BE) or Nai Talim and Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme (HSTP). The two programmes were designed to change the social character of school learning and thereby improving the quality of education available to rural children. Krishna Kumar stresses that while evaluating the quality of education, we should depart from the “outcome” approach and pay attention to contextual details, such as the historical legacies of a system, the characteristics of the social structure and the conditions shaping the school’s everyday reality. In this context, the chapter by Rahul Mukhopadhyay argues that the assessment of the quality based only on the parameters like “total admission in school”, “total attendance”, “percentage of retention of these throughout the year and marks/grades scored by them”, “promotion to next class”, and “percentage of passes” would fail to account for the socio-economic contingencies that actually shape the domain of learning.

Curriculum, Pedagogy and Learning

Debates surrounding the National Curriculum Framework (NCF), 2005 have been discussed by Padma M Sarangapani with insights from Popper’s philosophy of science and his political philosophy. It is pointed out that although the goal of education should be to navigate social reform, it should not subdue the local identities, history and knowledge for establishing a singular national identity and a universal knowledge system. Education system should rather facilitate for multiculturalism and plurality. Sadhna Saxena points that although greater progress has been made on raising the female literacy and in higher education, patriarchal values pervade the school pedagogy. Although substantial contributions have been made by the feminist scholars to the so-called mainstream discipline, this knowledge generally does not become part of school curriculum. Saxena, thus, calls education as a political process, where the interests of women have been sidelined.

Sudesh Mukhopadhyay reflects upon the inadequacy of measures to address the needs of the children with disabilities in spite

of the rhetoric made in several international forums. A very high level of illiteracy prevails among persons with disabilities, especially in rural areas and except for the persons with locomotor disability. About three-fourths of the disabled persons in rural areas are illiterate. In urban areas, the position is slightly better and except in the case of mentally retarded persons, about half the disabled are literate, while among people with locomotor disability, the proportion of illiterates is about 32%.

Regarding the presence of over-aged children in all the classes, Usha Menon points out that one-third of these over-aged students are older by four years or more than the expected age for entry into schooling. With bivariate analysis, she argues that, the presence of over-aged students negatively affects the overall performance of the class. To get rid of this negative effect she suggests exploring alternative enrolment schemes.

Conclusions

The book will be useful for the researchers, activists and policymakers working in the field of elementary education. It makes use of most of the secondary data sources available in the public domain and supplements it with primary data sources, which makes it very comprehensive. Chapters based on secondary data analysis depict the macro picture of elementary education and the chapters based on primary data analysis and ethnographic works present the microscopic picture of the ground reality.

However, at many places it fails to carry out any critical analysis of the problems to come out with concrete remedial measures. For example, although quality of education in government schools has been pointed out to be abysmal, most of the papers remain silent on the issue. The entire book remains silent about the pitiable condition of schoolteachers who work on a meagre salary. For improving the quality of education in government primary schools, the perspectives of both the teacher and the taught have to be taken into account. Nevertheless, the book maintains a silence on the teachers’ perspective.

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