

Looking beyond the Smokescreen

DPEP and Primary Education in India

The system of primary education in India has yet to be analysed critically – a critique that would seek to probe the linkages between education and social change. This study seeks to initiate that process by looking at the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) that was subscribed to by most World Bank borrowers, including India, as a social safety net against the social and economic turmoil that followed any structural adjustment processes. In India, the reach of DPEP extended to 240 districts across 16 states, within the first six years of its existence. Despite this, surveys showed a decline in growth at the primary enrolment stage in most Indian states. More disturbing was the increasing presence of the ‘para teacher’ and the consequent labelling of the full-time teacher as an impediment to the system’s further development.

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The system of primary education in India has gone through significant structural changes over the last decade or so. Some of these changes are still unfolding, and the eventual shape they will take cannot be easily predicted. The changes are pervasive – ranging from alterations in the role of the state to definition of the professional status of teachers. Despite the scale and the speed at which they have occurred, there is hardly any recognition of these changes in the social sciences, let alone any concerted analysis, critical or otherwise. All one can find in the name of analysis is a body of promotional literature. Apathy towards history and a studied blindness towards the linkages between education and social change are two prominent characteristics of this literature.

It is our contention that this manner of analysis has helped the state to construct a smokescreen, which discourages any critical study of primary education policies and impact. As it is, the social sciences in India have been indifferent to the study of education. In the context of recent trends in the state’s relationship with society and education, the traditional indifference of the social sciences towards the study of education has become a kind of consent.

Perhaps the hesitation of social scientists in treating this as an arena of rigorous enquiry, like any other social issue, is due to the benign image of education, particularly children’s education. The discourse of education has an overarching

assumption—that no educational programme can possibly harm the people or the nation. Raising any fundamental issues about an educational programme that too a programme aimed at serving the rural poor is also regarded as politically incorrect. A smokescreen of charity protects any educational initiative from rigorous enquiry or scrutiny.

The present paper represents a modest attempt to question and disturb this consent. With this purpose in mind, we have chosen the ambitious, externally funded District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) as the focus of our study. We believe that a number of tendencies and directions which started to surface in state-society relations during the nineties can be explored with the help of a study focused on this programme, which was initiated as a part of the structural adjustment process in India. Those concerned about education and its future ought to use the DPEP as a challenge for learning to look beyond the smokescreen.

Historical Background: Jomtien Story

Let us begin by reviewing the background scenario, the world in which this programme unfolded. On a first reading it would appear that suddenly in the 1990s, the wealthy countries of the world converged on the agenda of educating the poor, and that this change of heart facilitated a substantial amount of resources in the form of both loan and aid for

education in Africa, Latin America and south Asia. The Jomtien Conference of the 1990 was seen as crystallising this support strategy.

However, to look at Jomtien as a biblical start of international devotion to children is to commit a willing methodological error – one of ignoring history and interconnections while looking at state policy inclinations or changes. These are seen as variables that can be explained by themselves, without a reference to their interconnections with society, politics, and culture. It is our contention that one of the chief characteristics of the smokescreen is its ahistorical character.

In contrast, an approach, which seeks to analyse the programme in its interconnections with these other variables, would look at the contingent circumstances – global and local – which paved the way for this significantly different genre of programming for primary education. What were the circumstances in which India, which had till now only accepted bilateral donor assistance in the form of grant for education, became amenable to debt-based expansion and improvement strategies for primary education?

A disparate set of developments form the global background for this change. While the DPEP is significant for its proximity to Washington-led initiatives, its story will have to begin with the Jomtien consensus on ‘Education For All’, a UN-led initiative. These two approaches, while seemingly divergent, played the role of complementary competition, which agreed

in their acceptance of a global paradigm of development and the key role of education in it.

Jomtien goals, articulated in a language of benign benevolence, were a response to the economic crisis of the 1980s, which was developing the distinct dimension of an education crisis. Falling household income, contraction of the formal economy in Latin America and Africa meant that the per capita expenditure on primary formal education fell. Gross enrolment ratio fell by 10 per cent over the decade from 78 to 68 per cent in Africa, wiping out many of the gains made since independence. In south Asia, the situation was somewhat different, yet one fourth of the school-going age children were out of school and gender gaps were the widest in the world. Jomtien represented a collective attempt to address this quantitative crisis which was accompanied by a less visible yet more serious questioning of the qualitative aspects of education [Watt 1999; Lopes 1999].

Jomtien's answers to this quantitative and qualitative crisis were the slogans of 'education for all' and 'lifelong learning' opportunities. Far from seriously questioning the structural adjustment process and its guiding ideology, this concerted effort by the world's governments looked at enabling strategies for this model of development to prosper. These helped in maintaining a creditworthy world in which debt-led strategies for development could find space to proliferate.

In India, in the 1980s and early 1990s, the Bihar Education Project, the Lok Jumbish Programme, Rajasthan, and the Andhra Pradesh Primary Education Programme, ushered in with the help of UNICEF, SIDA, and ODA, represented the 'Education For All' ethos. India also began to develop its relationship with the World Bank in Primary Education through the Uttar Pradesh Basic Education Programme started as a pilot project in 10 districts with the lowest female enrolment in UP. DPEP represented an ascendance and entrenchment of this relationship.

The 1991 economic crisis provided leverage to the World Bank to insist that developing countries must borrow for primary education and health. The unseen and unquestioned entry of large-scale commitments were made due to macroeconomic compulsions, and subsequently the question of, 'why loan for education' would remain largely unasked, something out of the purview of the

educationists, belonging to the realm of economics.

DPEP was started thus, as a part of the structural adjustment programme (SAP) of the Indian economy. The latter was a process of initiating the 'correct' development philosophy wherein the macro-economic frame provides the perceived skeleton with visible disabilities, as also the immediate entry point for the correctives. It is essentially a set of policies tuned to the development needs of the developed. SAP is not a choice between state control and privatisation – as common sense notions developed from day-to-day reading of newspapers or magazine articles on topics like this (loss-making PSUs to close, nationalised banks to undergo restructuring and, restructuring and privatisation in electricity boards, etc) would have us believe. Nor is it a one-to-one correspondence with marketisation and competitive practices.

It is a policy support to trade and culture of the US and a large number of western European countries – for casting the 'New World Order without firing a shot' but only by deploying an 'army of uniform economists' as Susan George (1994) has put it. This policy support comes by way of making the governments of developing countries more open to aid, loans, and policy 'advice' from the developed, and creating a general ambience of international cooperation within an unequal nation state system. While these policies and their effects in the core and infrastructure areas such as industry, power, agriculture, have been easily perceived and analysed, not so in education. There is little awareness of the broad contours of the policy, its intended impact, and the dimensions of its actual unfolding.

Jomtien commitments were articulated in universal variables of 'education for all'. Without contradicting this, DPEP put for itself a smaller agenda – a focus on inequalities and deprivations expressed in local and global terms, particularly caste and gender. While seemingly an ally of the appeal for 'education for all', these represented an astute and fine rationale for limited state commitments – for a retreat of formal state commitments for primary education.

Behind the smokescreen then is a vivid story of the roll-back of the state, of contracting commitments for formal education, of the dismantling of the existing structures of formal education, proliferation of 'teach anyhow' strategies, a thrust

on publicity management, and a neo-conservative reliance on the community. Any analysis of DPEP and the agenda of universalisation of primary education minus this global context actually amounts to a conscious strategy of either looking the other way or collaborating with the global actors.

In the rest of this paper, we first present an overview of the mode in which DPEP was launched. We then look at three salient aspects of the programme: the concept of community underlying its implementation, the implications it has had for teachers, and third, its impact on enrolment and on the system itself.

I Launching of a 'National' Programme

DPEP is a part of the 'Social Safety Net' offered to World Bank borrowers as a short-term protection against the social and systemic turmoil caused by the structural adjustment process. While structural adjustment in African and Latin American countries was surgical and overt, the initiation of this process in India has been careful and complex, apparently reflecting the basis of experience and maturity gained from operation as well as the opposition that this policy has faced in other developing countries. India's persistent refusal to borrow money from World Bank for primary education till the 1980s, and the fact that India was among the few countries in the world to do so, were also important reasons for such caution.

It is, therefore, necessary to understand the programme design not merely in terms of its stated features and claimed objectives, but in a total frame of reference that includes fragments of the experience from development trajectories of other countries, as well as the experience of reform in other sectors of the economy.

This is not an easy task, for it is difficult to locate a single coherent document in the public realm that would begin with a statement of the donor's objectives, their diagnosis of what ails the primary education system in India, a suggested reform package, and the long-term implications of this in a comparative analytical framework. An imaginary document of this kind would need to be reconstructed from the discursive terrain that underpins aid literature and studies (see studies by Graham, King and Jandhyala Tilak).

Exploring the Guidelines

The DPEP guidelines, as formulated in 1993, and subsequently revised with minor modifications, make an interesting document to explore. It can be said with some amount of certainty that this document, as one of the first public and widely circulated documents on the programme, puts forward a carefully constructed statement on DPEP. Even by 1995 the guidelines do not state in real terms who the funders of DPEP are. Though this is the first instance of World Bank loan funding for Primary Education in India there is not even a cursory mention in the document. In addition, there is a laboured attempt to argue that DPEP as a programme has a strong national character, even though external funding for it has been drawn under considerable international pressure.

A full reading of the guidelines leads one to conclude that the repeated plea of the document is to describe DPEP as a 'homegrown idea', a 'national programme' (GOI, 1995:iii), based on 'national experience' an 'operationalisation of NPE 1986' (GOI, 1995:3). Whereas in earlier years the use of the term national to describe a programme, was to convey the idea of an all-India geographical spread of, or to refer to a central initiative in the federal centre-state structure of India, in this context an additional meaning ensues – national in contrast to international. In spite of international donor funding, a part of it given in the form of loan, DPEP is described as having a national character. 'DPEP is a homegrown idea in keeping with CAGE guidelines, and its distinctiveness lies in that in spite of diversity of sources of funding, it is a national programme intending to achieve UEE in a contextual manner...' [GOI 1995:preface].

The reference to DPEP's externally funded status is tangential in the preface and the first chapter – 'diversity of sources of funding' for DPEP, or in the first chapter talking about the basics of the programme, it is stated that, 'GOI contribution to the programme is expected to be of the order of 85 per cent and is likely to follow the existing pattern for releases to IDA projects' [GOI 1995:5]. There is no explanation why the GOI contribution should follow this pattern, or to state the fact that GOI contribution is coming only from foreign funding. It is only in Chapter II while discussing the financial parameters of the programme that this status of DPEP is conceded: 'As DPEP is externally funded...'

[GOI 1995:8]. Further, while cautioning the programme implementers to maintain utmost parsimony in expenditure, it is stated that the ethos of cost effectiveness and accountability is even more important in the case of DPEP as it is largely financed by external debt [GOI 1995:9].

What was the necessity that led to the funding of a competent national idea largely through external debt? What were the contingent circumstances that led to a u-turn in the stand hitherto taken by the government of India of not taking loans for primary education? While the 'guidelines' are not a document that could be expected to analyse these issues of broader relevance, there is a complete absence of discussions on these issues both in government documents and in the academic domain. To a large measure this has been possible because of hedged information provided by the government that has pre-empted a detailed discussion in the public domain on the causes and consequences of external aid in education, and drawing broad comparisons with global lessons in this area. The benign image of primary education also helped in preventing such a probe.

While the programme document attempts to firmly root DPEP in the experience gained from earlier externally aided programmes like Bihar Education Project, Lok Jumbish and Andhra Pradesh Primary Education Project among others, in actual fact DPEP signified a process of contested mainstreaming, of the national model of external assistance for primary formal education in the states. While most of these other programmes could scarcely withstand the steam rolling and switched over to the DPEP model, the full blown picture of the contest was evident in the case of Lok Jumbish in Rajasthan, where a strong leadership and focused media attention was able to divide territory between LJP and DPEP, funded by DFID and World Bank respectively.

Goals and Objectives

While the programme is certainly an outcome of the post-Jomtien era, official programme documents seldom make a mention of the link between DPEP and Jomtien. The guidelines couches the goals and objectives of DPEP within a general discussion of universalisation of elementary education in India. A closer look tells us that DPEP is a time-bound (5-years), specific intervention programme, (not a

programme for universalisation) with emphasis on access and quality. It aims to reduce the differences in enrolment, drop out rate, and learning achievement among boys and girls and between social groups to less than 5 per cent, and the overall drop out rates to less than 10 per cent. It also aims at raising learning achievements in terms of measured achievement levels in baseline surveys. This is sought to be done by building 'national, state, and district managerial and professional capacity' for sustainable primary education development. Further, the project is described as a first investment in a longer-term programme to improve the literacy and numeracy skills of the citizens of India, particularly the rural poor [World Bank 1994]. Its major emphasis is on enhancing professional and managerial capacities for the delivery of primary education, for that is the perceived malady of our system. The underlying belief is that people's education is a technical input, which can be put in place with the help of enhanced resources acquired through external borrowing.

Programme Design

While DPEP is primarily supported by loan from the World Bank, funds for it have been placed in a pool that consists of grant money from other donors such as the European Union, ODA (UK) (now DFID), the Government of Netherlands and UNICEF. The mixing of loan and aid money from various donors gives the impression of a unified strategy of indifference (or non-preference) towards donors. The World Bank soft loans (to be repaid at 3 per cent interest over a 35-year maturity period) constitute the most important part of the funds for DPEP. These have been expanding in terms of volume and the areas covered. This is not so for other donors (see Table). Also, from the initial stance of programme – lending for DPEP as a national programme, the World Bank has presented such lending as a part of the lending for overall economic restructuring of a state.

In 1994, DPEP covered 42 districts in seven states: Assam, Haryana, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. It now covers some 240 districts in 16 states [Aggarwal 2000]. While the criteria for the selection of districts have been fairly clear (e.g., low female literacy, positive environment generated by Total Literacy Programme, etc) the selection of states has been a

discretionary process, allowing room for some role for political kinships and donor preferences. Irrespective of whether the money being earmarked for the states is in the form of a loan or a grant, it is passed on to them free of interest by the centre. The centre provides 85 per cent of the project costs, which it has mobilised through foreign funding; and the states are expected to contribute the rest. The states also committed to maintain the real expenditure levels in primary education prior to the commencement of the programme. The money is transferred directly by the centre to state-level registered societies. Each district receives funds within a ceiling limit of Rs 40 crore.

Preparatory Studies

An important respect in which DPEP differed from the African experience of external aid involvement in primary education was in the marked Indianisation of the planning process. In contrast to Africa, Indian scholars and educational planners were involved from the beginning in the formulation and preparation of the projects. This helped not only in giving a 'national' image to the programme, the Indian state was also seen as responding to a national emergency created by the high levels of illiteracy. Such participation at an early stage facilitated the process of making World Bank funding look more acceptable.

DPEP strategy was hailed as one that was built around interventions based on research. For this, the practice of externally commissioned sector studies carried out by foreign consultants, commonly witnessed in Africa, was set aside. In its place there were six studies on education finance, learning achievements, teacher policy and training needs, gender issues, educational problems of tribal children and text books carried out by a team of scholars from NCERT and NIEPA, while IDA and UNICEF provided the funds. Unlike the common procedure for bank lending, these were not part of a completely externally initiated and organised process, with no role for indigenous consultants. Yet these were studies undertaken within the context of aid relationship. The planning stage, of which these studies were a part, was described thus in an NCERT synthesis document: 'the four-stage planning strategy of the World Bank has been strictly adhered to. The identification stage followed by the preparatory,

the pre-appraisal, and the appraisal stages have been strictly gone through' [NCERT 1994:3].

In contrast to the African situation, where Samoff (1999) complains of limited national control, and even less national ownership in education sector research undertaken by external agencies to justify and rationalise their aid disbursements, the 'national' dimension has been prominent in these benchmark studies done for DPEP in India. Yet, beyond this there are striking resemblances. The studies have common starting points, shared assumptions and, therefore, similar recommendations. The links between the studies and the understanding available in scholarly literature are weak. Rarely are the studies critical or even reflective of the constructs or categories that they apply. None of them even explore the issue of why such strategies need a delivery mechanism with an enhanced central government role and foreign funding.

These studies are said to be providing an empirical base for realistic formulation of district plans. They use mainly simple survey methodology, with an attempt to quantify certain behaviours. Cause and effect relationships have not been analysed for paucity of time. The people involved in the conduct of the research are described as experts in basic and applied behavioural research [NCERT 1994]. The Indian situation is apparently more 'national' than the

African one in the sense that entrenched research orthodoxies have built up the capacities of our institutions to collaborate in the process of rule by paradigms.

It is instructive to look at two studies that throw light on the equity focus of the programme intended to reduce gaps. These are the studies on tribal education and gender. The study on tribal children uses an administrative understanding of the tribes, with no evidence of the use of critical questions like who the tribes are and what labelling distinctions have seen the people of India as belonging to a mainstream in contrast to a tribe. The tribes are seen as something unique, a colonial anthropological standpoint which has been deeply contested in field study-based sociology in India. Language issues are seen as unique to tribes. However, social science research and understanding sees the 'bhasha' and 'boli' divide as critical in building hierarchies among the so-called non-tribal, mainstream populations. Further, hardly does the research spin contextual narratives of the tribes that it looks at in five different states. What comes out is a generalised narrative of unique people with unique features that can at best be an aid to a mainstream handling of what are contextual inequities.

The gender study, a 'qualitative' study undertaken in 21 districts of Assam, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra and Haryana, lists out a whole range of issues

Table

Programme	Funding Agency	Amount	Period
DPEP Phase I			
a) Assam, Haryana, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu	World Bank	US \$ 260 m (Rs 806 crore)	1994-95 to 2001-02
b) DPEP Madhya Pradesh	European Community	ECU 150 m (Rs 585 crore)	1994-99
DPEP Phase II			
a) Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Orissa	World Bank	US \$ 425 mn (Rs 1,480 crore)	1996-97 to 2001-02
b) Expansion in DPEP I states and UP	World Bank and Netherlands (for Gujarat)	US \$ 25.8 mn (Rs 90 crore)	
DPEP Phase III			
Andhra Pradesh	ODA (UK)	£ 42.5 m (s 220 crore)	1996-2003
West Bengal		£ 3 7.71 m (Rs 207 crore)	
DPEP Phase IV			
Bihar	World Bank UNICEF	US \$ 152.4 m (Rs 530 crore)	1997-98 to 2001-02
Andhra Pradesh Economic Restructuring Programme –DPEP in 15 districts of AP	World Bank	\$ 137.4 m	

Source: DPEP moves on ...Towards Universalising Primary Education, (Department of Education, MHRD, GOI (undated) and World Bank Group 1999).

that relate to why girls do not come to school, attitudes, biases in text and administrative structures. Yet, all this is not linked up to any theoretical or structural understanding of what makes gender. As colour makes race, so sex makes gender! Theory is difficult to translate into practice, so DPEP 'qualitative' research doles out common sense understanding, which can easily be transmuted into strategy. A contextual DPEP might have been expected to list out the patriarchies prevailing in India. What we get instead is a gender study without a mention of what makes gender.

II Resurrecting the Community

DPEP literature is replete with references to the community. Right from the original guidelines (1995) to the ongoing flow of appraisal reports and research studies, the 'community' has a central presence in the discourse of DPEP. The guidelines booklet says that the DPEP strategy consists of 'stressing the participatory processes whereby the local community facilitates participation, achievement and school effectiveness' [GOI 1995:2-3]. The wordiness of this statement is consistently matched by the repeated references to the 'intensity of community participation' in school functioning.

DPEP literature talks about participation of the community not just in monitoring the teacher's attendance, school supervision and improvement in the school building, but in matters like identification of para-teachers and curriculum improvement as well. The usage of the term community by DPEP technically implies 'institutions' like Village Education Committees (VEC), Parent Teacher Associations (PTA), Mothers Teacher Associations (MTA), Mahila Mandals, etc. Of these, 'The VEC has been envisaged as a key institution for community mobilisation, participation and empowerment under DPEP' (Ed Cil 1999a:3). The VEC facilitates community participation and empowerment, but its own capacities to perform these key roles are developed by the functionaries of the DPEP.

Considering the central importance that DPEP documents give to the community, we need to probe it both conceptually and functionally. We need to ask whether community is a discovery or an invention. We also need to recognise the history of

the community in the discourse of the state. Finally we need to ask what function the concept of the community is serving in the DPEP in the present-day historical context. To begin with, the vast body of writing that the DPEP has generated leaves us in no doubt that the community is an invention, not a discovery. Had it been a discovery, its own powers or life forces would have been recognised. Instead, we find that the DPEP presents the community itself as an instrument to be first devised and then sharpened for a given purpose. Thus invented community however, does not have the freedom of choice to either demand what it actually desires or not demand primary education as the invention is bound by a predestined purpose. There are two dimensions to the purpose: one, to generate a demand for primary education; and two, to make the fulfilment of this demand contingent on the clientele's willingness to take responsibility for making schools work. Clearly, DPEP planners do not believe that there is already a great demand for primary education. Inquiry made under the auspices of the Probe Team (1999) as well as the empirical reality of a massive rise in rural private schools provide ample evidence of such a demand. The DPEP seeks to establish its own purpose in transforming the existing system of education from its present delivery model into a demand-fulfilment model. It sees the inefficiency of the existing system in terms of the clientele's apathy towards it. Once apathy is altered into involvement, the system will function with buoyancy – that is the hypothesis.

In order to assess the validity of this hypothesis, we need to make sense of the concept of 'community' and historicise it in the present-day context. In the early 1950s the Community Development (CD) programme attempted to infuse village society with the spirit of self-help. One purpose was to take the state's messages to the people and to make state schemes in key areas like health, education, modernisation of agriculture and financial savings work. The reflections on the failure of the CD programme brought to the fore the inadequacies in the use of such a term to describe Indian villages. The idea of community underlying this historic programme was much too simplistic. The manner in which CD's benefits were cornered by the already better-off and dominant sections of the rural society itself provided the evidence to say that the average

Indian villages could not be seen as a community. These were arenas of a deeply entrenched power struggle and a paid volunteer could not be expected to alter the structures of power that constituted the communities.

Then, in the early 1970s, the community was invoked in a somewhat more targeted manner, differentiating the large-scale farmer, who had quickly reaped the fruits of the green revolution, from the small-scale farmer whose marginalisation required checking in order to curb unrest [Feder 1973]. In the late seventies, the 'community' again found favour with policy-makers, this time under the National Adult Education Programme (NAEP). It now bore the burden of Freirean theory, according to which awareness raising was the heart of popular education [Kidd and Kumar 1981]. In the post-emergency ethos, the community stood for a politically awakened mass, capable of overcoming the problems of inequality and exploitation under the auspices of a centrally managed state programme.

We can now consider what 'community' might mean in the mid-nineties when the DPEP chose it as the pivot serving an externally financed, evidently global drive to universalise elementary education. And also, when the development discourse of the nineties seem to align with it and use the term, displaying no trace of memory of the past. Some historical attractions of this choice are easy enough to recall. The nineties were a period of sweeping changes in economic policies, all of which were aimed at giving the individual the promise of greater freedom of opportunity to participate in the global market. The new technology of communication also highlighted the miraculous reach that any individual could now have across the globe. Against the neo-liberal ethos, which the emerging economic policy assiduously constructed, it must have appeared particularly tempting to refer to an old primordial institution such as the community. The only usage in which it had figured during the preceding decade was that of protest by people's movements for various livelihood issues (e.g. land and forest rights) and against large-scale displacements. In that usage, whole communities were described as facing the threat of destruction. Against the background of this usage, the idea of an empowered community, actively involved in the running of the village primary school makes a reassuring, warm reading. It gives the so-called human face

to structural development programmes. The face hides the massive cultural dissonance and economic pauperisation of the weaker sections of society. The face also upholds the value of self-help, a value the state wants to promote in the wake of its own abdication of social responsibility.

Let us look a little more closely at the so-called community that is supposed to benefit from, and is therefore required to be involved in the functioning of the provisions made under the DPEP. By recalling the sweeping trend towards the establishment of privately run and private schools throughout mofussil and rural India over the preceding two decades, we can apprehend the composition of this so-called community. This trend has been visible for quite some time, though government reports do not fully document the number of these private schools. In the DPEP literature, they are occasionally referred to as 'unrecognised' schools. Their enrolment figures are uncertain, but they are suspected to constitute the explanation for the decline of enrolments in the primary schools run by the government [Aggarwal 2000]. It is true that rural private schools have siphoned off the children of the better-off families. Whoever can spare the cash to pay their modest tuition fee caters to them. The government primary school, and the new 'alternate' schools started under the DPEP are to look after the poorest sections of the rural society. It is they who from the real community celebrated in the DPEP literature.

In the model adopted by the DPEP, the community is supposed to exercise its influence on the primary school by means of the VEC. The number of members in the VEC ranges from 8 to 17, including women and representatives of SC/SC. A study of community mobilisation done under the DPEP's own auspices are silent on the social background of the VEC members. An equitable male-female ratio is the only clue it offers to the nature of the VECs' composition. Except in Karnataka, where according to study by Ed Cil (1999a), the community selects the VEC members, the appointment of members is mainly by nomination. In some cases, the VEC leadership coincided with the panchayat. The study shows that in nearly all states, the headmaster who is also the secretary of the VEC convened the VEC meetings. The report talks of the 'overwhelming evidence of voluntary and free services' given to the VEC for its various functions, the report does not share

any such evidence with the readers. Similarly, the study claims 'a clear evidence of expanded spheres of participation beyond school construction and facilities', evidence of teacher accountability, and even of involvement of the community in the integration of disabled children, and in all that 'feeling of ownership has begun to emerge'. Not one of these claims is substantiated. But then, this is typical of the so-called research literature produced under the DPEP. Finally, the study makes the following alarming statement with the same indifference to the need to provide details or supportive data: 'Social structure and caste configurations still largely dominate the dynamics of VEC functioning'. Apparently, the writers of the study did not think that this statement puts a big question mark on the validity of nearly all the claims made in the study.

In all its references to the community, there is an attempt to imbue it with a sense of self-determination, as an upholder of a common good. The dilemma poses itself as follows – why should the community with its caste-based and gendered power structure act in concert to educate the poor? From a feminist point of view, how is the community expected to make a break with discriminatory and patriarchal practices of which it is the upholder? Experiences of rural social mobilisation, and dalit upsurges in recent years confirm the idea that the community is often an upholder of a casteist and sexist positions.

III Para-Teachers

Though DPEP started with a considerable commitment that the real expenditure in primary education would be maintained, and regular teaching positions in formal schools would be filled up in line with formal procedures, the experience of actual operation in this area has been otherwise. While there may not have been a direct stimulus to withdrawal and cuts in the area of primary education, in actual practice, states have used the opportunity structure offered by DPEP to affect the move to dismantling the formal system of primary education and setting up convenient short cuts.

The Crisis

Ban on the appointment of full-time teachers in primary and middle schools for last few years has created an unprecedented

crisis in primary education in several states. In addition to no new appointments of teachers, retirements and resignations of the old staff have left a lot of vacant posts in schools [Sharma 1999, DPEP Calling 1999, Ram 2000]. This, along with the rising number of unemployed trained teachers, could have taken an ugly turn, at least in some of the states, had it not been for the introduction of the scheme to appoint para-teachers in place of teachers.

With the launch of DPEP in various states in the last one-decade or so, the pressure to fill the vacancies increased. As DPEP funds were only additional to existing state allocations, filling of existing vacancies as per government norms was the commitment of the respective state governments under one of the 'conditionalities' of DPEP funding [GOI 1995]. However, in the past few years, different state governments have sought to resolve the crisis caused by vacancies by making contractual appointments on one-fourth to one-fifth of the regular salary instead of making full-time appointments against the vacant posts. In certain cases, there was also a vague promise of regularisation after 3 to 10 years of 'satisfactory' work. Repeated litigations by teacher unions did not dampen this process in any significant manner, except for some marginal raise in emoluments.

Engaging unemployed educated youth could well be a major concern for the state governments as in each state para-teacher schemes repeatedly emphasise the employment of educated local youth as one of the main objectives. What could probably have been an explosive political situation arising due to rising unemployment of educated youth and the closing down of the option of teaching jobs, was thus handled peacefully in the name of a cost-effective and 'innovative' scheme of primary education. So powerful and effective has been the rhetoric of concern for the unemployed youth, and the search for cost-effective models for universalisation that the rapid weakening and general dismantling of the structure of primary education have remained unnoticed.

The State Scenario: Commitment and Contradiction

Para-teachers have different names in different states. For example, they are called 'shiksha karmis' in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, 'shiksha mitra' in Uttar Pradesh, 'vidya sahayak' in Gujarat, and so on. In

the Ed Cil document (1998) formal school para-teachers are defined as, 'full-time teachers, who are para-professionals, paid lower than the government teachers and working with regular schools'. Honorarium of para-teachers appointed in regular schools also shows a lot of interstate variation, and many states have had to revise it after receiving court orders. The first such scheme was formulated by Himachal Pradesh called the Volunteer Teacher Scheme (VTS), 'in response to the need for providing additional teachers in single teacher schools, basically as a low cost-alternative' [Ed Cil 1998:3]. Under this scheme 10,000 VTs were appointed. From 1995, however, due to an order from the high court, no further appointments of VTs were made in Himachal Pradesh. However, in other states the scheme continues. In fact, in Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh it has evolved into yet another 'innovative' scheme called 'Maa Badi' (my school) in Andhra Pradesh and Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS) in Madhya Pradesh. Schools opened under this scheme are neither provided with regular teachers nor any infrastructural facilities. According to the above document, 'the main objectives of the two programmes—Maa badi in Andhra Pradesh and Education Guarantee Scheme in Madhya Pradesh—is to provide universal access to primary education especially for children living in small, school-less habitations. Unlike NFE centres, the schools under this scheme are full time and function during the day' [Ed Cil 1998:4]. The teachers under this scheme are however paid much less than even the para-teachers of regular schools.

Para-teachers in regular schools are described as low cost-alternatives and are mostly chosen from the 'local community'. Although DPEP began on a strong formal note of institution building, the appointment of para-teachers in the various DPEP states has been represented as an important achievement of recent years. A complete absence of any mention of para-teachers in the otherwise very carefully drafted DPEP guidelines was probably intended to avoid any pre-empting of crucial changes in the structure of primary education. For example, under the head 'salaries', the guidelines envisage that as a result of DPEP interventions there would be an increase in enrolment, 'therefore from the third year of the project, teacher post would be sanctioned on a school to school basis' [DPEP 1995:15]. DPEP was

also expected to finance posts of teachers in new schools according to the guidelines. In fact, under the head 'Safeguard of Investment in Elementary Education' the guidelines stress, 'the need to safeguard existing expenditure on elementary education' and state that a basic requirement of DPEP is maintenance of expenditure in real terms at least at 1991-92 level. Even in the section on planning, the DPEP guidelines do not give an inkling of appointment of para-teachers at any stage.

Other statements included in the guidelines, e.g., not suggesting NFE type of alternatives in place of proper schools, firmly indicate that in the teacher vs para-teacher debate, DPEP was inclined towards the former. However, there was also a body of opinion at that time which argued the case for para-teachers as a possible way out of the problems of achieving UEE. This opinion had votaries among the international agencies, such as ODA in APPEP, as well as among the national level programme implementers. International and national agencies rationalised the idea on the basis of unit cost calculations, efficiency and time frame arguments. For seeking legitimacy, the idea was sometimes given an emotive articulation as well, e.g., 'generations of children have wasted away waiting for primary education' [Gopalakrishna and Sharma 1998].

A careful reading of the DPEP guidelines suggests that there is a contradiction between the guidelines and the emerging primary educational programmes and arguments in favour of para-teachers. In the light of an emerging national level consensus on para-teachers amongst external funders and indigenous policy-makers, the DPEP guidelines come across as an example of double talk. One may well ask whether the real intention has always been in favour of low-cost, de-institutionalised set-ups for the disadvantaged, the 'unreached and un-served', groups residing in remote parts of the country? The strategy of publicising such efforts does surely help in projecting a pro-poor image of the state. Very few people are able or even willing to challenge the claim of 'successes' either on the basis of a theoretical critique or on the basis of fragmented grass roots level information they possess. When both the problem and the solution are put across from the perspective of the funders and the policy framers in an aggressive and euphoric manner, a mindset and a kind of smokescreen are created, and they discourage people from civil society to peep

behind the smokescreen and see grass roots level realities.

Rationale and Claims

While it is interesting to delve into the genealogy of the term para-teachers, the enthusiastic efforts that seem to surround these new appointments proclaim them to be akin to the barefoot doctors of China. The general climate of opinion that seems to have swung the tide in favour of para-teachers suggests that teachers represent a critical failure in the system. Absenteeism is said to be a chronic problem, along with subcontracting of the job to local people by teachers posted in backward areas. Their teaching methods are described as being inflexible and uninteresting while their salaries are considered too high. When the 'shiksha karmi' scheme was launched in Madhya Pradesh, a standard response to any doubts expressed about the reduced status of teachers in the scheme was that private school teachers deliver better results in almost one fourth or fifth of the government school teachers salary. It is also said that teachers are a politicised community; they protect their inefficiency through trade unions and affiliations with local leaders. 'Teachers do not teach' is a routinely made statement to explain why primary education does not take place successfully in the government-run formal schools. Yet, when one analyses who does not come to schools, irrespective of the plural national canvas, it is the poor, disadvantaged low caste and girls who stay away from schools. Surely the 'teachers do not teach' factor does not assign a formal equality to an analysis of who does not come.

The states that have gone in for a large number of para-teacher appointments argue that para-teachers teach better because they are on contract. The DPEP document on para-teachers enunciates this better. According to it, 'the contractual nature of appointment and the scope for getting a better paid permanent job in future have helped to keep the motivation of para-teachers in full-time formal schools high' [Ed Cil 1998:5]. It is also said that since the community appoints them and is supposed to monitor their work, they have an immediate sense of accountability. They are amenable to better training as permanent appointees resist re-training. It is claimed that with better managerial and pedagogic inputs, these para-teachers teach better.

The immediate conclusion is that the less paid and insecure you keep teachers, the better would be their performance. However, studies commissioned by the DPEP itself cast a shadow of doubt on the claim of quality improvement. These studies show that training inputs have not been of any great standards. A 1999 study refutes almost all the claims on quality training, community participation, para-teachers' enthusiasm, and role of the village education committees in terms of academic supervision and inputs, learner achievements, infrastructure and so on [Ed Cil 1999]. According to this report, classroom transactions were uniformly poor, but more so when conducted by para-teachers with lower qualifications. It says that low salary, combined with the contractual nature of their job, has been the major source of discontent and this has led to de-motivation among them. The payment of such low salaries, besides being untenable, is also not conducive to sustainability of these programmes, being inherently deficient on the count of social justice. The study suggests that the move towards para-teachers runs counter to the DPEP's own resolve to concentrate on the formal system and improve it through better planning and management.

NCTE's Resolve and Deprofessionalisation

Historically, it is important to remember that as a policy measure, the recruitment of para-teachers has been undertaken at a time when the government seemed determined to professionalise school-teaching and streamlining its training-related provisions. We are referring to the setting up of a statutory body by the name of National Commission on Teacher Education (NCTE). The NCTE Act, passed by the parliament, makes teacher training mandatory and clearly states that no untrained teachers can be employed in the teaching profession. This statutory body has advocated professionalisation and upgrading of teacher training, placing it at par with the training given for other professions. The policy of downscaling the teachers at all levels – even at the higher secondary level – by appointing para-teachers or teachers on contractual basis in the name of efficiency and cost-effectiveness violates the stipulated conditions laid down by the NCTE. Yet, major structural changes are being introduced at all levels in states like Madhya Pradesh where the existing

administrative, academic and supervisory structures are being dismantled and all such responsibilities are being handed over to the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and other local bodies. Similarly, a recent cabinet decision has endorsed the Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS), first introduced by the Madhya Pradesh government in 1997, for the whole country. It is a crucial step towards dismantling of the permanent teacher-based structure of primary education at the national level. Such a change has far-reaching and long-term implications. One implication is that the setting up of the NCTE is itself part of the smokescreen that prevents people from noticing the game of disestablishment of public education.

IV Impact of DPEP

DPEP's Assessment

A comparative analysis of enrolment in DPEP and non-DPEP areas, based on government statistics, undertaken at the time of mid-term review of DPEP in 1997, concluded that the primary stage enrolment in India is witnessing a declining trend in growth rate. In fact, these figures show that at the national level enrolment growth has almost reached a plateau. In the 1980s, this rate was about 2.65 per cent per annum, whereas between 1994-95 and 1998-99, it declined to about 0.41 per cent. This decline was not confined to only boys' enrolment, but was equally serious for girls' enrolment. This has also been accompanied by a decline in share of public expenditure on GDP [Aggarwal 2000]. Data for DPEP districts, collected under the District Information System on Education (DISE) give an overview of what is happening in DPEP districts within this larger national framework. Before we refer to that data, two comments on the process of gathering this data may be in place. First, the DISE data are collected by head teachers and given to cluster resource coordinators and on to the on block education officers. Cross-verification is done by head teachers of one school doing it for another, or by education department officials, i.e., from within the system. So, the quality of data generated under DISE is likely to be very similar to that of education statistics of the government. Second, comparisons between DPEP and non-DPEP districts are not available, as the agreements for this study did not include

this. Therefore, it may not be possible to conclude how DPEP districts fare better or differently from those without DPEP interventions.

The DISE data show better progress in Phase I districts in comparison to Phase II districts, which joined the programme later. The Phase II states were also more educationally backward to begin with. In districts covered under Phase I of DPEP, the growth rate of enrolment was 4.1 per cent per annum. When the enrolments for alternative schools are added on to this, the growth rate reached 6.2 per cent per annum. It must be pointed out here that 90 per cent of total enrolment under Alternative Schools and Education Guarantee Scheme in 1998-99 was in the state of Madhya Pradesh alone.

Disaggregated annual figures of enrolment show a gradual decline in the 1995-96 to 1998-99 period. Aggarwal (2000) concedes that despite best efforts, the functioning of management information system is far from perfect in DPEP states. In DPEP Phase II districts, Aggarwal looks at data from 75 districts in 13 states. Here, the per annum increase is about 1.63 per cent in formal schools; along with AS/EGS enrolments it becomes 2.55 per cent. This is a modest increase, though socially significant because these were educationally more backward districts. The study by Aggarwal notes the more worrying trend of decline in enrolment in three states: Assam, Bihar and Maharashtra. It also observed an overall deceleration in growth of enrolment in DPEP districts. Perhaps the positive achievement of DPEP has been the maximum gains, in terms of girls enrolment, shown by the very low female literacy rate districts. Even then Aggarwal emphasises, 'there are miles to go before universal enrolment is achieved'.

Learners Achievements

Findings of learner achievement are based on the baseline studies in 200 districts and mid-term assessment in 42 districts covered under DPEP-I. Despite criticism that Minimum Levels of Learning identified in India for primary education are lower than many other countries, it is stated that for the sake of 'combining quality and equity', these studies are based on 'achievement competencies'. The lowered expectations still did not show encouraging results, at least in DPEP-I districts.

According to Aggarwal, achievement tests were conducted for 30,659 children

from class I, 14,030 from class III and 19,894 students from class IV. The major findings are: the mean achievement score is highest for class I, followed by class III and lowest for class IV. That is, the educational standards decline as students move from lower to higher classes [Aggarwal 2000:83-84] or as children progress through the grades, their performance deteriorates. This is true of both mathematics and language scores. Extent of underachievement in language comprehension was found to be so low that Aggarwal says that 'about two-thirds children of class V should not have been there'.

In this study, students achieving less than 40 per cent were defined as under-achievers. According to this norm, under-achievement was much higher in mathematics where nearly three-fourth of the children failed to score the minimum percentage fixed at 40 per cent. The study also showed that the scores of socially and economically backward students were generally lower than others. It also showed that as against the large share of under-achievers, the proportion of those attaining mastery level is extremely small.

Deeper Impacts

Although the practice of appointing para-teachers did not begin with DPEP, and was perhaps against the initially announced aims of DPEP, today it certainly stands fully accommodated within the programme and symbolises it. We say this because the reported achievements of DPEP are being attributed more to the new para-professionals and the maverick institutions (e.g. 'alternative schools') they uphold than to any significant changes in the formal structure of the old primary school. Indeed, the rhetoric associated with DPEP, often presented as its research output, spares no occasion to castigate the full-time teacher as an unreliable, worthless tool of the system and an impediment to its further expansion. This rhetoric has done more than a little to promote the stereotype of non-working, politicised teachers.

During the 1990s, the propagation of this stereotype has branded teachers at all levels – from the university levels downwards. An impression has been created that teachers eat up far too much of the financial provisions for education and deliver too little. In the larger context of the new economic policy, particularly its emphasis on privatisation, the onslaught on

the teachers deserves to be seen as a policy to dismantle the Indian intelligentsia.

We are aware that this kind of associative logic will be seen in many quarters as a sweeping, unnecessary generalisation. Its alarmist tone will be cited to undermine its authenticity. Despite these risks, we insist on identifying DPEP as an aspect of the historic changes that seem imminent in Indian civil society on account of the structural adjustment of Indian economy. Teachers have been a significant part of the large intellectual workforce that gave India a distinctive character among post-colonial nation states. Though they were theoretically a segment of the state apparatus, they also constituted a substantial section of the civil society, sharing with other intellectual professions the responsibility to protect what spaces were available for liberal exchange.

The role teachers have played in rural society to facilitate the circulation of civic concepts is customarily ignored in any record of educational development. Not even the direct responsibility they perform in ensuring the conduct of free and fair elections is recalled. Their job in mediating old institutions like caste and clan both inside and outside the four walls of the schools has not been documented. Given their weak economic and professional status, the stereotypes used to criticise them en bloc go unchallenged. In the current phase of India's social history, teachers seem destined to become a dwindling social force. With the slow demise of the state-run school system, the full-time trained rural teachers may soon become a relic of an age when the state had a stake in the circulation of valid knowledge and ideas.

Apparently, DPEP is a part of larger historical processes of which it is one significant instrument as well. We need to ask a fundamental question if we wish to contextualise DPEP in the history of our times. The question we must ask is why foreign funding was necessary for further expansion and improvement of Indian primary education. We should also ask how the state would fulfil its responsibility towards rural primary education after external funds dry up. **EPW**

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