

# Is Schooling for the Poor on the Government Agenda?

*While elementary education, its availability and distribution have shown an improvement in recent years, vast sections such as the poor, girls in rural areas, tribals and some among the scheduled castes remain out of its reach. The new government needs to review existing centrally-assisted programmes to ensure that region- and context-specific issues are highlighted, more particularly that such schemes are tailored to meet the varying needs of a vast and complex country.*

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Travelling across the country doing research on elementary education one cannot but notice a subtle, yet discernible change in rural India. There is a tremendous demand for quality education even among the poorest sections of our society. Parents want to send their girls and boys to school; they want their children to have a better life. But their dreams and aspirations come to naught when they see their children barely learning in the overcrowded and in many areas, dysfunctional primary schools. Those who do have some money pull their children out and send their children to private schools of all hues and shapes – from those well endowed with facilities and teachers to one room teaching shops. But the poorest of the poor and girls from not-so-poor families have to make do with the existing system. This is true not only of rural areas but also urban areas where new migrants and people living in slum settlements have to choose between dysfunctional municipal schools and rapacious teaching shops.

What has almost 10 years of District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) and the much talked about Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) done to enhance access to quality education up to the elementary level? Have these programmes done enough? Or have they been number games that we all are so familiar with in India?

At this juncture it would be worthwhile to recapture the history of externally aided primary education projects. The

ground-work for large-scale externally funded education programmes was laid between 1987 and 1990 – when the government reached out to donor agencies to participate in primary education. This process gained momentum in 1992-94 when the government decided to take a soft loan from the World Bank for primary education. The DPEP programme was originally planned under the Social Safety Net Credit Adjustment programme to offset lower spending in the social sectors under the structural adjustment programme. In 2000 the NDA government decided to merge all projects into an umbrella programme called Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. This programme was launched in 2001 with the understanding that no new ‘projects’ will be initiated after Phase III of DPEP comes to a close in 2007.

## What Were the Achievements?

According to government of India physical access to primary schools has improved considerably with almost 67,000 new primary schools opened in the decade of the 1990s (Select Educational Statistics, GOI, 2002). The NFHS data reveals that overall 79 per cent of children in the age group of 6-14 were attending school in 1998-99 up from 69 per cent in 1992-93. School attendance varies across states – more than 90 per cent attend school in Himachal Pradesh and Kerala to less than 60 per cent in Bihar in the 6-14 age group (NFHS II 1998). Attendance rates vary across different age groups – they decline as we move towards

higher ages. This is more marked for girls in rural areas, where they decline from 75.1 per cent for 6-10 years, to 61.6 per cent for 11-14 years, and 32.8 per cent for 15-17 years. The dropout rate at the primary level has come down to 42 per cent for girls and 40 per cent for boys. However, the dropout rate at the upper primary level stands at 50 per cent for boys and 58 per cent for girls.

The gap between states is worrisome – zero in Kerala to 78 per cent in Meghalaya! The Select Educational Statistics (GOI 2002) reveal that 59 million children in the 6-14 age group are still out of school, out of which 35 million are girls – i.e., approximately 59 per cent are girls. Equally disturbing is the distribution of out of school children by social group and by location. According to NFHS-II, rural girls belonging to disadvantaged groups like SC and ST are perhaps the worst off with a staggering 50 per cent and 56 per cent respectively having dropped out. The proportion of SC girls to all SC children in school is 36.5 per cent and that of ST girls it is 36 per cent, while the corresponding figure for forward castes is almost 48 per cent.

Furthermore, schools located in different localities in the same village are endowed differently in infrastructure, teacher-pupil ratio, training and capacity building of teachers. There is also a significant difference in the quality of schools that come directly under the education department and those that come under social or tribal welfare. There is also a big difference in the resource allocation (financial, human) between formal primary schools and a range of alternative schools like the Education Guarantee Scheme – even though the latter reportedly function more regularly because the teachers are appointed on contract basis. Most state governments – including West Bengal (where local women above the age of 40 and have studied up to grade 10 are hired); have appointed parateachers paying them less than one-third the wages of a regular teacher. Smaller habitations are worst hit with one teacher managing classes 1 to 5 in a school with minimal facilities.

The biggest blow to quality education came with the interpretation and mindless use of the no-detention policy. Children are pushed from one grade to the next with little care taken to ensure they attain grade specific competencies. As a result, we can

find children who reach grade five without knowing how to read or write! Teachers are not held accountable for learning levels – their ‘performance appraisal’ is limited to enrolment data and retention rate. No one really cares to find out whether children have learnt anything at all. As a result they can get away without teaching – as discovered in a number of research studies conducted under the aegis of the DPEP programme.

### Missing Teachers

One of the shocking findings of a number of qualitative studies is that the average number of teaching days is as low as 140 in many parts of the country, more so in schools that are away from the main road or those situated in slums in urban areas. Harvest, planting, rains, heat, cold and festivals – almost any reason is sufficient to close down the schools. Research studies have also noted high teacher absenteeism and the prevalence of a system whereby teachers come on a rotation basis and keep an undated leave-letter behind just in case there is an unscheduled inspection.

Even more worrying is that even when teachers do come to school, the average teaching time for each group of children in a multigrade situation could be as low as 25 minutes a day!

Intensive enrolment drives have brought a lot of children into the school – those who are first generation school-goers, those who dropped out but were helped to return through bridge courses, erst-while child workers, children of seasonal migrants and so on. While this is indeed heartening, researchers found that many of them dropped out within a few weeks – though they continue to be marked present. In functioning midday meal areas, children come to school, but learn very little.

Teachers – who do want to teach and those on contract who have to teach realise that they not only manage different grades in one classroom but have to deal with tremendous diversity inside the classroom. First generation school-goers have little support at home while those with literate siblings or parents are able to cope better. Children who have re-enrolled after a short-term bridge programmes find it difficult to cope in large classrooms. Children from very poor landless families miss schools when their parents migrate

for short periods. They find it difficult to manage their lessons when they return. The work burden of children before and after school – especially of girls – leave them exhausted inside the classroom.

The hard reality is that our teachers have not been trained to deal with diversity in the classroom – they are trained to mechanically move from one lesson to another expecting all children to follow. Even teachers who are committed find the situation difficult.

It is not that we do not have indigenous models or strategies to deal with diversity or that we do not have experience in the country. The basic problem is that the national government is busy chasing targets and, therefore, impatient with context-specific issues. The SSA is one national programme that uses the rhetoric of decentralised planning, but the entire planning and appraisal process has converted it into one multiplication exercise – targets, unit costs, budgets. While some state governments have used DPEP and SSA funds judiciously to improve overall access and quality – the educationally backward states have done little. Universal elementary education is not a priority.

It is more than apparent that while the educationally forward states may not require any handholding from GoI, the backward states not only need continuous resource support but also need to be monitored far more closely. One all-India monitoring/appraisal mechanism will not do.

The new government at the centre needs to review the SSA programme and associated programmes like the National Programme for Girls Education at the Elementary Level (NPEGEL). Thorough reviews of working guidelines are necessary to ensure that there is scope to deal with region and context specific issues – in particular to acknowledge diversity and tailor the programme to meet the varying needs of such a vast and complex country. It may be recalled that the SSA programme and also the new NPEGEL programmes were introduced with little debate or participation of stakeholders. They remain top-down programmes introduced with little consultation with the Central Advisory Board on Education (CABE), state governments or the larger elementary education committee.

Can the new government put this on its agenda of urgent issues to tackle? **EPW**