

EGS and Primary Schooling

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While commenting on French investigator Francois Leclercq's balanced and constructive critique of the MP government's much-publicised claims of a 'schooling revolution' ('Education Guarantee Scheme and Primary Schooling in Madhya Pradesh', May 10), Anup Kumar congratulated Leclercq for "taking on the mighty PR machine" of the state government (May 31). He ended his letter by observing: "We await the next advertisement for clarification". The state government did much better. It managed to bring out in *EPW* (July 5) on the inside of the front cover an unsigned full-page blind advertisement entitled 'Human Development Index of Madhya Pradesh Improves by 20 Per Cent'. The blind advertisement predictably ends by concluding that "Under the leadership of Shri Digvijay Singh, the quality of life both in urban areas as well as in rural areas has improved at a pace much higher than in previous decades". This self-aggrandisement at public expense was accompanied in the same *EPW* issue by an adulatory letter from Manu N Kulkarni in defence of MP government. This is not the first time that Kulkarni, a former UNICEF representative in Madhya Pradesh, has held a brief for the state government's educational schemes like Padhna-Badhna (misnamed a 'movement' that it never was), UNICEF-sponsored Shikshak Samakhyas (which died unsung after UNICEF stopped funding it) and now the over-hyped EGS. He is apt to ascribe to these schemes' achievements which even the "formidable bureaucrat duo of Gopalakrishnan and Sharma" (a phrase from Anup Kumar's letter) will hesitate to do. Last year (July 2002), when the Digvijay Singh government issued a 'fatwa' against the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme (HSTP), Kulkarni promptly defended the action by stating that the "state education sector is presently managed by exceptionally brilliant and committed bureaucrats" (*EPW*, August 24, 2002, p 3560). Given this bias, it is not surprising that he found contradiction in not just Leclercq's logic but in Amartya Sen's too (July 5). But about this a little later.

Leclercq has raised some critical issues

afflicting the new policies postures adopted by the union government in collaboration with the state governments. For instance, he produced data to show how the parallel layers of school-like facilities (Alternative School, Education Guarantee Scheme, etc) may be reducing the physical distance to education but not the social or pedagogic distance between the teacher and children relating to caste, class, gender or language. Such a distance persists despite local recruitment of teachers in EGS. This limitation has the expected adverse impact on the quality of education in EGS centres. It only confirms the recent reports of similar experiences in West Bengal (*EPW*, May 31, pp 2159-64) and Himachal Pradesh (*EPW*, June 21, pp 2469-70). Leclercq also inferred that while the EGS centres with their locally appointed 'gurujis' "remain 'sarkari' institutions staffed with would-be civil servants", the rapidly mushrooming private schools in villages "reproduce existing social structures instead of challenging them". A highly provocative observation, indeed! Even more significantly, Leclercq probes the issue of administrative vs political decentralisation as evident in EGS. He provides sociological insight into why "administrative decentralisation does not result in deeper alterations of teachers' behaviour" and why the decentralised academic structures like Block Resource Centres (BRCs) and Cluster Resource Centres (CRCs), introduced initially under the World Bank-sponsored DPEP, "tend to neglect academic issues as compared to administrative ones". Leclercq interestingly observes that "the system represents teachers' (at least) as much as pupils' interests", decentralisation in EGS notwithstanding. Raising the issue of political decentralisation in EGS, claimed as its central theme, he states that it has "created some potential for parents and panchayat members to get involved in school management, but its effectiveness depends on the quality of local political processes" and thus "the decentralisation process still remains a potential". Probably the most significant observation made by Leclercq is about the misleading impressions built up by the government-sponsored 'occasional papers', commissioned studies and the Madhya Pradesh Human Development

Reports concerning the role of village panchayats and community or parental involvement in EGS. While noting that habitations for EGS centres are “identified by the expression of parental demand”, he points out that “the adequacy of parental motivation, on which the effectiveness of current policies depends, cannot be taken for granted”. The contradiction which Kulkarni claims to find in this stand (July 5) shows how superficially we understand the socio-political process of educational transformation (often reduced to questionable quantitative parameters alone such as gross enrolment ratios) and how several overenthusiastic, otherwise well-meaning, intellectuals are too ready to oversimplify a highly complex situation. More importantly, in Leclercq’s observation that “parental demand alone cannot be a major source of change in the education system” we have a strong ground for resisting the ongoing dangerous move of policy-makers to first rationalise and then legitimise abdication of the state’s constitutional obligation towards ensuring elementary education (not just literacy!) of eight years (not just five or three years!) of equitable quality for all children. Such insights have led Leclercq to dwell upon the ambiguities in the state’s position on the issue of quality of education for the children from deprived segments in Madhya Pradesh (one may recall here that the Digvijay Singh government declared its stand against learning science through experiments and the method of inquiry by closing down, instead of expanding, the HSTP last year!). The urgent need to explore and evolve a new paradigm of the state’s relationship with panchayati raj, gram sabhas, village education committees and community involvement in universalisation of elementary education cannot be overemphasised. We have to ensure that this paradigm will be consistent with the core concerns of India’s Constitution rather than with what the present policy-makers are bent upon doing to fulfil the dictates of the IMF-World Bank’s Structural Adjustment Programme in the health and education sectors. This is all what Leclercq’s field study of EGS in nutshell is asking us to do, i e, to reconstruct education policies for moving towards an egalitarian, democratic and enlightened society, rather than to reproduce the prevailing retrogressive, hegemonic and patriarchal social structures.

It would be wrong to assume that in questioning the basic premises of EGS, one is deriding a scheme conceived by a Congress government only. When it comes to the dictates of the imposing Structural

Adjustment Programme, there is hardly any distinction that can be made amongst various political parties, irrespective of their ideological colour. Evidence for this convenient political consensus can be seen in the unanimous voting by all political parties in support of the 93rd (later termed 86th) Constitutional Amendment Bill in both the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha, even though the bill excluded the 0-6 year age group from Article 21A and diluted the right of children in the 6-14 year age group by legitimising low quality parallel layers of educational facilities (such as Alternative Schools and EGS) for different social segments (see my articles in *Mainstream*, Annual 2001, December 22, 2001, pp 43-50 and *Frontline*, January 4, 2002, pp 107-08). Being a product of the IMF-World Bank policy to reduce public expenditure on the social sector, EGS was adopted by the BJP-led union government as a national scheme in less than two years of its inception in Congress-ruled Madhya Pradesh. Neither did it require an independent and objective evaluation nor a debate in the parliament. West Bengal, Bihar, UP and other states were quick to introduce their own versions of EGS. Those who dithered are being persuaded to fall in line under the umbrella of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (see ‘National Plan of Action – Education for All’, Government of India, June 2003, p 27).

One would have logically expected a pro-people government to introspect on the issues raised by Leclercq and to rectify its policies. The least one hopes from the MP government is an attempt to engage in a genuine dialogue with people who are daring to raise questions. However, as Anup Kumar predicted, it is probably too much to ask for. Now it is the turn of Leclercq (as has been the case with Indian critics previously) to be ‘attacked and vilified’. The tool which the government has chosen to marginalise Laclercq’s critique is the well-tested tool of commissioned studies, thereby giving an academic mask to this cynical exercise. As evidence, I am reproducing below an official note (No 12533 dated July 18, 2003) sent by S C Behar, former chief secretary of the state and at present concomitantly advisor to chief minister Digvijay Singh and director general (equivalent to vice-chancellor) of the Makhanlal Chaturvedi Rashtriya Patrakarita Vishwavidyalaya at Bhopal (a state university of journalism) to his university’s heads of departments:

A copy of the article entitled ‘Education Guarantee and Primary Schooling in Madhya Pradesh’ from the *EPW* was sent

to all of you prematurely earlier, although I had intended to enclose it along with this note that I am now sending. I hope you have gone through the article. The Rajiv Gandhi Shiksha Mission, Madhya Pradesh has offered to financially support our University to repeat the study in order to ascertain to what extent it reflects ground realities and to what extent distortions have kept (sic) in because of:

- (i) Different cultural and linguistic background of the author,
- (ii) The role of mediators,
- (iii) The bias on account of ideology or a particular education philosophy of the author or otherwise.

It has also been suggested that the study may include the dynamics of journalism – how and why some articles get published, get prominence and others do not find a place for publication or even if published, they do not find similar place of prominence, despite similar quality or merit. While I will personally be coordinating this study, I would like one of the faculty members to be associated with me and take the major responsibility of supervising and conducting this study. If you are interested, please let me know along with the study design you would like to adopt.

No comments. Amen! **EPW**