

Deteriorating Primary Education

Quack Remedy

The Maharashtra government's decision to institute a new public examination at the end of the fourth year of primary education, which will be compulsory for students of all government-aided schools, cannot be expected to make any difference to the admittedly deplorable standards of primary education in the state when the government has no plans to meet the woeful shortages of trained teachers and essential school facilities.

J V DESHPANDE

The Maharashtra government's decision to introduce a statewide examination at the end of the fourth year of primary schooling "to improve the standards of education at primary level" can, at the charitable best, be described as adding a fifth wheel to an old, creaking vehicle badly in need of urgent and comprehensive repair. Despite strong opposition from teachers, many educational experts and even leaders of some of the parties which are part of the ruling coalition, the government has decided to go ahead. The examination is to be held every

year, starting with the current academic year. The first examination will be held in the third week of April 2003 and applications for it have already been collected, six months in advance. It will be a multiple-choice test and at least 2.4 million students, mostly 10 and 11 years old, will be required to take it. This number will of course keep rising. Every primary school receiving aid from the state government is required to send its students to the examination. Unaided schools are exempted.

The state minister for primary education, it appears from news reports, is a vigorous supporter of the new examination.

Recently the chief minister too has defended the proposal publicly. He has expressed deep concern over the poor standard of education in the state at the primary level, particularly of children from poorer backgrounds. A statewide test of the type proposed was necessary to shore up standards of primary education in the state. Endorsing this, the secretary to the department of primary education in the state government disclosed that after completing four years of schooling a large proportion of the students of government-aided schools cannot write their names easily, cannot multiply two-digit numbers and do not have the 5,000-word vocabulary in their mother tongues that they are expected to have acquired. According to the government, teachers in these schools promote students indiscriminately and it suspects that this might be the main cause of the poor standards of aided schools. The state-level board examination at the end of fourth standard is intended to be an independent means of finding out "what the teachers have taught".

Only a few years back the government of Maharashtra was trying hard to persuade school authorities to dispense with examinations altogether till the end of the seventh year of schooling. That proposal was also touted as being in the interests of poor and underprivileged students, especially in the rural areas. It was also supported by a set of experts. However, it petered out at the talking stage. It is not clear why the government has now veered to a diametrically opposite view.

Officially, the aim of the planned test is to find out whether the teachers are doing their job. But the government already has an inspectorate of schools that is easily a hundred years old. The inspectors of the education department are supposed to keep tabs on the schools in their jurisdiction by visiting them periodically and reporting on the errant ones. For a long time now visits of school inspectors or their deputies to schools have become a meaningless annual ritual. But if the present inspection system was found wanting, the natural course would have been to strengthen it. It is well known that just as school teachers and administrators are overburdened with routine work, so are school inspectors. But there is no proposal to reform and improve the school inspection system. Instead, the government has come up with the idea of a statewide examination.

At present, the first state level exam is for the SSC at the end of the tenth standard when the students are about 16 years old. Over 1.2 million students take that examination and this number is growing. The SSC examination board takes over three months to complete the entire process. The proposed new examination will be conducted by the same or a similar board. The enormity of the task can be judged from the fact that about 2.4 million students will be taking the examination. This number will also keep rising year after year. Many more examination centres will have to be opened than are needed for the SSC examination, many of them in very small places. Admittedly, the record of the state board in the matter of conducting mass examinations is rather better than that of the universities in Maharashtra. Yet it is going to a daunting task. It will not be easy to have thousands of centres to conduct the examination without major malpractices. If the official machinery is capable of accomplishing that, why not use it to strengthen the inspection system for schools?

The state government now runs a statewide scholarship examination for fourth standard students (and another for seventh standard ones). Thousands of students, about one lakh or so, appear for the scholarship examination every year. Based on their performance, the government awards small scholarships of about Rs 250 per year to those who qualify. The number of awards rarely touches 3,000 per year. But unlike the proposed new examination, these examinations are voluntary and the examinees are selected by the schools, which decentralises the whole process. Schools spot students with potential and often give them special coaching for the scholarship examinations which have certainly proved an incentive to students and teachers alike. If the state government were to raise the number and amount of scholarships substantially, that will be a positive step towards raising the standards of teaching in schools.

Many factors are responsible for the present deplorable standard of primary education in the state. The secretary to the department of primary education has himself listed some of them. According to him, the state urgently needs 50,000 more classrooms, which will cost about Rs 50 crore. Against this, he claimed, the proposed new examination could be managed within Rs 10 crore, as if an examination could substitute for urgently needed

classrooms. The teacher-student ratio in schools too needs to be significantly improved. The secretary took comfort from the fact that against the average ratio of 1:40 for the whole country, the ratio in Maharashtra is 1:38. These figures need to be examined carefully, but even if they are accepted, considering the low standards of primary education there is a strong case for improving the ratio to, say, 1:30.

The major cause of the poor standard of primary education is the lack of a good support system. The state is woefully short of classrooms, trained teachers, books and stationery and, very importantly, a well-run midday meals scheme which, it is well established, is a powerful incentive for better school attendance. The government has no proposals under consideration to address any of these problems. Examinations are not going to improve the standards of teaching without trained teachers and classrooms. The shortage of trained teachers has become chronic in the state and yet the government has no proposal to increase their outturn by starting new training institutes and by increasing the intake of the existing ones. This indifference to a basic educational need has marked all recent governments in the state, no matter which the party in power. There are numerous allegations of malpractices in admissions to most of the institutes for training primary school-teachers. Those managing these institutes, invariably politicians, seem to have found the scarcity conditions to their advantage and so have spared no effort to perpetuate them.

The mental stress of a mass examination for 10-11 year-olds, most of them first-time learners in their families with very limited exposure to schools and examinations, should not be underestimated. But the government proposal deserves to be condemned on many other counts, administrative and pedagogical. The examination is not going to improve the standards of primary education; it may at best provide a new tool to measure the low standards which are a well-established fact anyway. It is incomprehensible why the government is so keen on measurement of teaching standards when it has no proposals in hand for improving them.

Whether it is the SSC examination or the PSC examinations for recruiting policemen or clerks in the irrigation department, every statewide mass examination in practice turns out to be a bonanza to those running coaching classes and those producing so-called 'guides' and 'made easy' books. Of course, the examinations are also a lucrative opportunity for those organising them, as the innumerable instances of corruption have shown. In fact, it is time to decentralise even the present statewide examinations such as the SSC. Against this background and given that the proposed 'reform' is so patently devoid of any academic merit, the only conclusion that can be drawn is that decision-makers in the Maharashtra government are moved by considerations other than the interests of the students and the school system. ■■■

EPW

seeks applications for the position of Circulation Manager

Responsibilities will cover all aspects of the journal's circulation with special focus on planning, execution and follow-up of circulation promotion efforts. Candidates will be graduates with good communication skills and basic computer literacy. Interest in current affairs and some familiarity with the social sciences will be an advantage. Ability to learn quickly and assume independent responsibility for the circulation department will be more important than experience in similar work. Applications with relevant information may be sent immediately to the Editor.