

HIMACHAL PRADESH

Critical Issues in Primary Education

Primary education has made impressive strides in Himachal Pradesh. These have been due to investments made in the sector, the relatively less iniquitous social structure in rural areas and greater opportunities available to women. However, the increased attraction of private schools offers new challenges to government-run schools, where processes directed at improving the quality of education are yet to take root.

AKSHAY SOOD

Himachal Pradesh has notched up key successes on the literacy and elementary education fronts. The literacy level witnessed a quantum increase from 32 per cent in 1971 to 77 per cent in 2001 with female literacy trebling from 20 per cent to 68 per cent in the same period.

Its progress in education has been recognised nationally by Amartya Sen and the PROBE report (1999) also. The Public Report on Basic, Education (PROBE) prepared by Jean Dreze et al and the Centre for Development Economics, in fact calls it a 'schooling revolution'. Its success is supposed to be even more remarkable than that of Kerala and is attributed to:

- State initiatives and investment in Primary education;
- the relatively less pernicious social structure that persists in the hill regions;
- greater sense of village community and its participation; and
- greater gender equity and employment of large number of women teachers (nearly 41 per cent teachers are female).

Educational statistics suggest an impressive achievement in terms of access to schooling, even in difficult areas and in terms of enrolment and low dropout rates. The following statistics represent an impressive array of basic/elementary education achievements (in the table).

Yet quality continues to be a critical issue which education planners and community continue to grapple with. It is a matter of concern that despite the impres-

sive growth of schooling facilities, class I enrolment in the four districts of Chamba, Lahaul and Spiti, Sirmour and Kullu have actually shown a decline over the last few years. It declined from 39,410 in 1996-97 to 36,946 in 2000-2001. Similar trends are seen in class II also, though overall enrolment in primary classes did actually increase in this period.

As Jagbir Singha of Kotgarh points out, "In my school today, only children of Gurkha labour are studying. Most locals are getting their wards educated in Shimla and Chandigarh". This government school has actually seen a decline in enrolment.

The problem is not unique to Himachal Pradesh but is staring almost all the states. The reasons are largely attributable to: (i) the spurt in private schools including the unrecognised play schools/nursery/kindergarten schools; (ii) declining population growth in relative terms if not in absolute terms; and (iii) the desire or 'craze' for English medium education.

Table: Himachal Pradesh Education: Important Indicators

Number of Primary Schools	10633
Middle/High Schools	2892
Percentage of dropouts in primary schools	Less than 1 per cent
Pupil-Teacher Ratio	23
Number of teachers in Primary/Middle/High Schools	35500
Single Teacher Schools*	7-10 per cent
School building requiring major repair	20-25 per cent approx.
Schools without their own buildings and running in hired premises*	8-10 per cent
Gender equity Ratio	100 per cent

Note: * -The situation varies from district to district.

The above hypothesis is accepted by most educationists but the same remains still a matter of investigation.

Certain other quality indicators too should be a matter of concern. These are mainly the following:

(1) Quite high repetition rate (almost 20 per cent) in class I and similarly high repetition in classes 2, 3 and 4. Despite the no-detention policy, the teachers are concerned about children's competency and detain (read 'fail') children to maintain high pass percentage in class 5.

(2) The mid-term assessment survey (MAS) by Lokesh Kaul of HP University in September, 2000 has shown that learning achievements in maths and languages in class 5 are low. Children, especially, faced difficulty in maths. The MAS study shows that while pass percentage in class 5 was high, majority of students secured marks in the range of 45-59 per cent only.

(3) Continuous evaluation system in government schools in the shape of quarterly tests, terminal exams and report card system (as is done in private sector schools) is still a pipe dream. This is an important area where private schools score over government ones.

(4) Despite some initiatives in DPEP districts (Chamba, Lahaul Spiti, Sirmour and Kullu) pedagogic learning, activity based teaching and use of learning material (LM) is rare. This is attributed to limited accountability of the government teacher to local communities. Also the multigrade / multi level teaching situation [in single teacher schools (about 15-20 per cent) and in two – teacher schools (40 per cent)] where a teacher has to simultaneously teach two or more classes, is an important reason for mechanical teaching/class room processes. Teachers feel that activity based teaching takes more time, affecting syllabus completion

(5) The quality of physical infrastructure, classroom facilities and toilets leave much to be desired in several schools.

Some Initiatives

The state has taken several initiatives to improve primary school access and enrolment

Since 1996, District Primary Education Programme, a World Bank financed Rs 129 crore project was initiated in the four districts of Chamba, Lahaul and Spiti, Sirmour and Kullu to focus on improving female literacy. 808 schools were opened in these districts, posting 1,500 teachers in them.

New schools/additional class rooms construction has been started under DPEP and Saraswati Bal Vidya Sankalp Yojana. Under the latter scheme, Rs 63 crore were provided till July, 2001 to construct over 2000 class rooms.

An integrated Book titled 'Bachhe Seekhen Khel Khel Mein' for class I and II has been developed and launched to incorporate Maths, Hindi and EVS in the curriculum. The book is based on pedagogy, local needs and tries to inculcate students curiosity.

Trainings/capacity building workshops were organised for in service /new teachers for over 10,000 teachers.

Para teachers (low cost teachers) have been appointed in difficult areas to fill up vacancies.

Computer-based EMIS/DISE software have helped develop precious state wide data based on schools, children, habitations and teaching personnel providing important education trends.

Rationalisation of staff has been done to post surplus teachers in urban areas to the deficit rural/difficult areas.

Problem/Thrust Areas

Quality of educational processes in government schools remains a major challenge and thrust area. The private schools are slowly but surely capturing the turf, hitherto an exclusively government pre-

serve. It may not be a bad trend after all, in this age of corporatisation and privatisation.

But policy-makers, educational administrators, MLAs, panchayat office-bearers must take note of these trends before talking of opening new schools and trying to spread things too thin. HP spent Rs 330 crore in 2000-01 on its 6,66,000 primary school students in 10,600 schools (class I-V) which comes to Rs 5,000 per child per annum and Rs 3 lakh per school per annum. Are the people (parents) getting the best out of the huge investments being made by the state in this sector? Should we not improve the quality of classroom education to make it comparable to private sector education?

Should local communities not start having an 'ownership' of the primary schools and the teachers deployed here, to introduce accountability? Should we not empower panchayats/block samitis/village education committees to hire and fire teachers at local level? Should they be not empowered to determine the employment terms of teachers employed by them?.

Madhya Pradesh is doing so. In fact it has declared JBT as a dying cadre. The emphasis is on low cost teachers, in many other states. How about making suitable modifications in the northern states too? To meet the emerging challenges and opportunities in the field of primary education. [4]