Backward and Forward Linkages that Strengthen Primary Education

It is widely acknowledged that a significant proportion of children, especially those from underprivileged backgrounds and girls, either drop out of primary school or even if they attend school, learn very little. Moreover, there is a wide gap in learning achievements between government schools and private/aided schools. The active participation of children in primary education hinges on a plethora of factors. Besides access, a range of demand and supply issues influence why children choose to attend school regularly. Thus far, policy-makers and education administrators have focused mainly on the formal school system and on improving access to education. The creation of 'backward and forward' linkages is essential to creating an environment where every child not only goes to school but benefits from it.

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I
The Context

For over a decade now the importance of five to eight years of schooling for all children has come to be accepted as a societal non-negotiable. Gone are the days when people, at least in the more educationally backward regions of the country, questioned the relevance of primary education in the daily battle for survival of the poor, particularly poor women. The remarkable progress made in Himachal Pradesh and the growing political importance of primary education in Madhya Pradesh symbolise a significant departure from the past, especially in northern India. In the last five years more and more people have been publicly voicing concerns about the situation of primary education in the country. The District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) has not only augmented available resources for primary education, but has also given primary education the attention and priority it merits in government. The Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS) of Madhya Pradesh challenged conventional approaches to educational access. For the first time, the governments of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu showed willingness to collect information on out-of-school children by setting aside the 'official' data generated by the system and actually enumerating children who are not attending school. The ball that was set rolling in the late 1980s in the wake of the National Policy on Education (NPE) has gained momentum in the last five years. Renewed efforts to make primary education available to all children in the 6 to 14 age group have made a difference in many areas of this vast and diverse country.

The important debate on child labour and primary education in the mid-1980s and the scaling up of a wide range of non-governmental initiatives, such as those to revitalise and strengthen primary education in urban areas, has made a deep impact on the discourse on primary education in the country.

This is not to say that all is well and we are poised to achieve universal elementary education in the next five years. What this signals is that, for the first time in independent India, primary education is receiving some focused attention by political leaders and administrators. The overall social and political environment is positive. However, while a lot is happening and there is intense debate on access, we still have a long way to go with respect to learning achievements, social inequality and gender issues. All children who enrol do not complete even five years; a significant proportion of them go through schooling and learn very little. It is not uncommon to come across children who have been to school but remain functionally illiterate. Curriculum and pedagogic issues leave much to be desired. Motivation and capabilities of teachers remain problem areas. And above all, there are still a very large number of poor children – especially girls – living in urban and rural areas who do not have access to quality education. Researchers and commentators point out that (barring a few states in India) it is the poor who go to government primary schools: those with even modest means prefer to send their children to private schools. The economic divide – particularly with respect to quality education – is getting wider. While we have started grappling with the complexity of the problem, many systemic issues continue to elude us.

It is widely accepted that government should shoulder the primary responsibility for elementary education, a view that is rarely debated in the dominant discourse on basic education. The question is whether the government has the capacity (financial, managerial and human resource) to organise/provide all the backward and forward linkages that would make meaningful elementary education a reality for those who are left out of the system. Even if physical access is ensured, does the system have the capability to ensure good quality education? Special programmes of the government have tried to reach out to some sections of the population in some states of the country; but by and large it is obvious that the government does not

have the capacity to work simultaneously on several fronts – access, quality and relevance. There is growing public recognition that other players, such as educational trusts/NGOs, citizens' groups and corporate bodies, could make a difference if given the space to do so. Unfortunately, the dominant and bureaucratic style of functioning of most state and local governments leaves little space for sustained inputs by non-governmental bodies. Despite enabling constitutional provisions under the Panchayat Raj Act, local bodies do not yet have the authority to set their own agenda, and plan and implement educational programmes. The gap between the stated intentions of the government and its actual practice continues to be wide.

A review of published and unpublished research and documentation reports (especially reports prepared under the aegis of foreign donor aided primary education projects and the DPEP) makes apparent that while there is no shortage of 'data' per se, there is little systematic documentation of programmes that have made significant impact on primary education. Mobilisation programmes for out-of-school children, child labour projects and innumerable remedial education and bridge courses have emerged in the last 10 years. Many of them have made significant impact on the mainstream. There are pockets where citizens' groups, concerned individuals and NGOs have tried to harness the support of corporate bodies, local business and the community to ensure availability of basic social sector services – education, training, healthcare, rural development, water and so on. In some areas, such external inputs complement existing government programmes; in others, they have successfully organised alternative channels. There is little documented information on such initiatives and their potential for replicability in the education sector.

This collection of case studies is a small first step towards bridging the information gap in primary education. It captures the different approaches adopted to meet the primary education needs of out-of-school children and of children who may be in school but are learning little or are potential dropouts. Though it was difficult to make a representative selection from the staggering range of educational programmes across the country, an attempt has been made to choose programmes and projects that could not only be replicated, but could influence the dominant discourse in primary education.

II
Backward and
Forward Linkages

It is widely acknowledged that a significant proportion of children (especially children from underprivileged backgrounds and girls) either drop out before they reach class V or, even if they continue to attend school, learn very little. This phenomenon is far more pronounced among children from the most disadvantaged sections of our society, most of whom rely on the government primary school system. It is common knowledge that there is a wide gap in learning achievements between government schools (rural and urban) and private/aided schools.

The experiences of NGO projects, government programmes and other collaborative ventures reveal that good quality bridge or condensed courses have been effective in encouraging children to re-enter the formal stream. Similarly, remedial courses and special learning camps/programmes have made a tremendous difference, not just in preventing dropouts but also in improving the learning achievements of children in school. Discussions with policy-makers, administrators and education workers reveal that universalisation of elementary education (UEE) would not be possible unless we address three important areas, namely: pre-school education, remedial education and bridge programmes for children who drop out or are unable to cope, and post-primary education. While the importance of early childhood care and education (known in India as ECCE) has been established beyond doubt, the same cannot be said for the other two areas. It is in this context that education workers across the country are talking about backward and forward linkages that strengthen primary education.

The active participation of children in primary education hinges on a plethora of factors. Physical access is just one dimension. Children do not attend school regularly, and even if they do, they do not learn very much because of a range of supply and demand issues. Let us begin with the systemic issues of access, dysfunctional schools, motivation and commitment of teachers and quality of schools. Once children reach school, a variety of factors determine whether they will continue or drop out, whether and how much they will learn and whether they will acquire the interest and the skills to pursue formal education. If and when children do drop out due to poverty/migration, rigid gender roles or other economic factors, the presence or absence of programmes that enable them to get back into the formal system determines whether or not they can get back to school. All these factors are mediated in the larger context of social and gender relations in the community, the employment situation in the area and the prevalence of child labour.

Experience has shown that the presence of a group of demoralised/disillusioned youngsters, who may have either completed primary schooling or dropped out, who are underemployed or have no employment or productive work, act as a disincentive for education of other children in the family/community. Younger children and their families see the writing on the wall – primary education does not always improve the situation of the poor unless what they learn is perceived as being relevant to their life situation. This is particularly true when education does not lead to any material gain (employment/self-employment), or for that matter even unquantifiable value addition (nowadays called social capital). Increasing adolescent crime, violence and general social unrest among the literate youth (or educated youth if you like) further reinforces negative attitudes towards the youth and towards education (especially if the cohort has completed primary schooling).

This phenomenon is often referred to as the vacuum or suction effect, where absence of identifiable role models among the educated youth leads to general disinterest in the population towards formal education. Conversely, the presence of strong role models and positive images among the educated youth acts as a propelling force, encouraging the community to invest in the education of their children. This phenomenon is particularly evident in urban slums and among the lower middle-class. High dropout rates, urban violence, crime, have all been well documented in the west. Investing in meaningful education of the youth and giving them a reason to hope and opportunities to develop as individuals and as a community ultimately influences the value communities place on primary education.'[1]

These issues are critical for elementary education. So far, policy-makers and education administrators have been focusing on the formal school system and trying to address the issue of physical access. Despite these efforts, there is growing evidence of resistant groups/pockets/areas. Reaching out to children on the margins has proved difficult. It is in this context that 'backward and forward linkages' are today seen as being essential to create an environment where every child not only goes to school but also benefits from schooling. The

importance of acknowledging the significance of other inputs, especially to establish the right of education and create educational opportunities for child workers[2] was driven home by the pioneering work of M V Foundation in Andhra Pradesh.

III
The Trailblazers

When M V Foundation started working with child workers and bonded children with the objective of pulling them out of employment and bondage and enabling them to get back into schools, it was confronted with a problem – slightly older children were not happy joining class I! And, given their background, their educational and counselling needs were not being met by the formal school system. As a result, the foundation hit upon the idea of organising camps to facilitate the children to catch up with their peer groups in formal schools. These camps also served to help the children make the transition from work to schooling and motivate their parents to acknowledge the right of every child to basic education. The first 'camp' was organised in 1991. The foundation was overwhelmed by the enthusiasm and learning pace of the children – most of them in the 9-15 age group. There was no turning back. Today, M V Foundation runs a large number of bridge courses camps for girls and two for boys.

Motivation to enrol out-of-school children starts in the villages. The foundation runs small motivation centres where child workers and other out-of-school children are invited to come for a few hours. The motivators-teachers interact with the families and talk to them about their dreams and aspirations. They also dialogue with parents and elders in the family. Within a few weeks, children in these centres are ready to go to the camp. Many boys get so impatient that they refuse to wait for their parents' permission – they just run away and join the nearest camp. However, in the case of girls, motivating the families takes a little longer. On reaching the camp, the children first learn the ways of community living. They are taught basic hygiene, personal grooming and, of course, made to feel that as children, they have a right to enjoy childhood. Children are encouraged to express their feelings through games, music and theatre – all essential components of the camp.

Within a period of 6 to 18 months, children complete class VII. Since some children learn more quickly than others, they are grouped according to their pace of learning. The teachers, who are all trained by M V Foundation, live with the children and interact with them all the time. While they adhere to strict timings for classroom work, teaching and learning are round-the-clock activities. As and when the children achieve class VII competency, they are encouraged to take the entrance tests for residential schools or are enrolled in the middle school near their village. A large number of children from the camps have successfully cleared the entrance examinations conducted by the government for enrolment into residential schools. Children and their families are motivated to acknowledge the right of education of every child and also recognise the inherent value of education. The government of Andhra Pradesh has recently scaled up this approach in the DPEP districts and made it an integral part of its strategy to reach out to out-of-school children.

While M V Foundation has indeed inspired many organisations across the country, the question before us is whether all children in schools are free from 'labour'? How do we come to grips with the heavy work burden of girls – before and after school? What about children labouring during peak agricultural seasons or artisan children who absent themselves during peak business season? Obviously there are no simple answers to such complex situations and problems. The 'Appropriate Education Programme of The Concerned for Working Children', which attempted to address the issue through the eyes of children and their families, is another trendsetter.

Let us unpack two scenarios and analyse the impact on the ground.

Scenario One

– The starting point is the conviction that all out-of-school children must be brought into schools, thereby eradicating child labour.
– Emphasis on the responsibility of the state towards the fundamental right of every child to basic (not just primary) education.

Simultaneously, mount a campaign against child labour – in the media, at the policy level, with the administration and the community. Declare products 'child-labour free', especially those meant for export.
– Identify and institute cases against people who employ children.
– Starting with contact centres in the village/wards, organise bridge courses (tran-

sitional education programmes designed for a fixed duration) and enable children to get back into the formal system.
– Lobby with the government to admit children from bridge courses into primary, upper-primary, middle and senior schools and where possible into residential schools.
– Declare villages 'child-labour free' and encourage the government and the community to take pride in this achievement..
– The accent is on social mobilisation and educational access, coupled with highlighting the duties and responsibilities of the government towards primary education. Teachers and social activists focus on enrolling every out-of-school child and leave the quality and achievement issue to the education system. There is also no formal visibility or recognition of work done by children before and after school (especially girls and those from small peasant families) and seasonal agricultural and non-farm work. They make efforts (at the policy and administrative level) to ensure children are admitted at higher levels; but where the ratio of primary to middle school and further to secondary schools is poor there is little they can do after the primary stage. As their primary focus is eradication of child labour, most of them they do not have the organisational capability to take care of the educational needs of these 'rescued' children beyond a point. They lobby with the government to take responsibility – right up to the secondary education stage.

Scenario Two

– Start by talking to and gaining the confidence of the children and the community.
– Map the range of work that children are engaged in, both school-going and out-of-school children.
– Mobilise and organise working children into a self-managed association/organisation. Educate them (and their families) about their rights, enable them to map the work children do and encourage them to set their own priorities for action.
– Simultaneously, work with teachers and the educational administration to improve the quality of education and take a close look at what is happening inside the school. How are children treated (girls, children from disadvantaged groups, children in difficult circumstances)? What are children doing, what are they learning and why do some of them drop out. In short, focus on both the pull and push factors that affect children's access to and retention in schools.

– Children's union/association to educate the community, set up a help-line and interfaces with local administration and panchayat. Create awareness about the rights of children (based on the convention on the rights of the child), namely right to education, freedom from exploitation, hazardous and non-hazardous work, shelter, nutrition and emotional and physical well being of children.

– Older children are encouraged to talk about their future – training, employment and self-employment opportunities and link education with future prospects.

– Children help-line to reach out to working children in distress, confront (even register cases) and work with the government, panchayat and employers to ensure the rights of children.

– Interface with panchayat, government schools and the administration to address barriers and also constraints that prevent children's realisation of their rights, including education.

– Work with schoolteachers and the education department of the government through training and pedagogic renewal to improve the quality of education in existing schools – thereby preventing dropout.

– Over a period, villages covered under the programme declare that their children go to school while acknowledging that their children do some amount of work at home.

The focus is on empowering children (and their families) with knowledge, confidence and a collective strength to set priorities for action and help each other. Children discuss and determine what work they can do and what kind of work is hazardous to their growth and development. The net result is withdrawal of children from full-time or hazardous work, while acknowledging the work they do at home, in the farm, in family occupations and in supporting the family during peak seasons. The quality, content and relevance of education are brought centre-stage in this approach. Social mobilisation and community awareness is achieved through the association of children.

What do the two approaches have in common? Children who participate in both kinds of programmes emerge as self-confident young men and women, carry themselves with great dignity and are not afraid to speak their mind. Both approaches focus on building the self-esteem of children. Theatre, music, games and a range of exposure visits and excursions give children a chance to experience the joys of childhood. The endpoint, at least in organisations working with rural children,

is the withdrawal of children from full-time work and enhanced access to education. Strategies and priorities are no doubt different as is the starting point. While one approach gives primacy to the duty of the state to ensure that every child goes to school, the other emphasises mobilising and empowering children under a child rights framework and work towards improving the quality of schooling.

Both organisations – M V Foundation of Andhra Pradesh and The Concerned for Working Children of Karnataka – have in their own way been trailblazers and the larger education community has a lot to learn from them.

Case Studies

The primary objective of this set of case studies was to document and make available to a wide audience, educational programmes that directly or indirectly influence/support/strengthen basic education. While our representation is admittedly not exhaustive, the endeavour has been to cover the following types of educational programmes

– Pre-school education;

– School preparedness camps and bridge courses;

– Meaningful access (not just physical access) – including relevance and the quality of education;

– Self-esteem and self-confidence building programmes for children and youth from disadvantaged communities/areas;

– Making school a joyful experience and infusing meaning into educational processes; in-school remedial courses that enhance learning and reduce dropout rates.

– Social mobilisation specifically targeted towards child workers;

– Accelerated educational programmes for out-of-school children and youth that give older children an opportunity to complete primary education and, where possible, enable them to either get back into the formal system or help them acquire knowledge/skills; livelihood skills (skills for development), life skills and holistic educational programmes.

Almost all the programmes and projects covered here focus on girls, children from disadvantaged communities in urban and rural areas and children in difficult circumstances, viz, urban street children and the children of sex workers who constitute particularly vulnerable groups. Unfortunately, the most glaring omission in the selection are programmes for disabled children (urban and rural).

All the case studies included here have tried to probe the hows' of it — elements that can be replicated – and problem areas. We hope this compilation will generate greater societal interest in the backward and forward linkages necessary in basic education and in positive initiatives with children and young people. Acknowledging that children and young people are the real wealth of any society is a first step in our effort to generate greater interest in their education among the people in general and among business and corporate bodies, voluntary organisations and, of course, the government in particular.

IV
Children, Work and Education

'Primary education in India is not compulsory; nor is child labour illegal. The result is that a large proportion of our children between ages six and 14 are not in school. They stay at home to care for younger siblings, tend cattle, collect firewood, and work in the fields. They find employment in cottage industries, tea-stalls, restaurants, or as domestics in middle class homes. They become prostitutes or live as street children, begging or picking rags and bottles from trash for resale. Many are bonded labourers, tending cattle and working as agricultural labourers for local landowners.'[3]

There is, formally, a widespread consensus about ending child labour and establishing compulsory universal primary education for all children up to the age of 14, a commitment that can be traced back to Gopal Krishna Gokhale's efforts at the turn of the last century. Yet, numerous commissions, reports, plans and experiments notwithstanding, more than five decades after independence, the situation remains dismal. Not only do many children never enter school, there are many of those who do drop out before completing basic education. And scores of children from the most deprived strata are or become part of the workforce.

Is this because, formal protestations apart, Indian society and its elites have no meaningful commitment to these principles? That, deep inside, they actually believe that the children of the poor should work, not study? The spectrum of arguments about poverty, about poor families needing the income of their children, or even that work, particularly within the household, is part of our culture and provides relevant skills to children would definitely so suggest. As does the

argument that formal education at the primary level provides few meaningful real-life skills for poorer children.

It is a matter of some concern that unlike the early years after independence, when the 'rhetoric' of both universalisation of elementary education and abolition of child labour was strong, pragmatic considerations of the 'difficulties' of realising this societal goal have, over time, become more pronounced. On the child labour front, demands for abolition have been tempered by those of regulation, of putting an end to exploitative practices generally even while banning child work in hazardous industry. And on the education front, despite the Supreme Court's recognition of education as a fundamental right and the recent 93rd Constitutional Amendment that has just been passed by the lower house of parliament (November 28, 2001) – no government wants to talk of compulsion.

Undergirding this contentious debate, with child labour abolitionists occupying the radical high ground and others pleading prudence, are widely varying perceptions about the meanings of both work and education, the role of formal schooling as an aid to learning, the pedagogic models of schooling, the notion of childhood and so on. All available research on enrolment and dropouts points to a wide variety of reasons behind the abysmal statistics, both internal and external to schooling, which are far more important than poverty as an explanatory variable. Clearly, hard-line legal action on both the child labour and compulsory education fronts, while signalling the state's commitment to constitutional norms, is by itself insufficient to improve the educational profile of our working children.

The set of case studies the first section titled 'Children, work and education' starts with the Appropriate Education Programme and Namma Bhoomi experiment of The Concerned for Working Children (CWC), Karnataka; the Baljyothi programme in Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh; and the efforts of CINI ASHA in Kolkata, West Bengal and CREDA in Mirzapur district of Uttar Pradesh – present a spectrum of experiences that might help in unravelling this contentious and complex debate. Representing, as they do, not just an ideological diversity but also children from both rural and urban backgrounds, these studies help us acquire a clearer appreciation of what works, how well, and in what circumstances.

First, Appropriate Education Programme of CWC works with government schools and extension schools to improve quality and make education joyful and meaningful. Namma Bhoomi, is a resource centre and residential school – part of the field project of CWC at Kundapur in Udupi, Karnataka. As far back as 1985, CWC, a Bangalore-based organisation, had made a distinction between 'child work' which should be regulated and 'exploitation of child work' which should be prohibited. It had also argued for government policy to protect working children and make provision for their education. Without at any level justifying child labour, CWC argued against stigmatising the situation and advocated a long-haul strategy.

Namma Bhoomi as a microcosm is an exemplar of this approach of non-judgmentally working through the extant situation of working children in a rural environment, conscientising them of their rights, involving both the community and the administration to become child sensitive and supportive, and arranging both educational and training inputs for children to help them cope with life and earn a living.

As children in Namma Bhoomi, a residential school, pointed out, most children work, whether or not they are in school, often before and after school hours. The CWC has not just organised them, including in a children's panchayat, but has helped them forge links for support. The school offers a one-year vocational course in practical skills and those who have passed out are encouraged to form groups, which can collectively bid for contracts. In a region otherwise marked by high out-migration of male children in the Udipi hotel business, the programme has succeeded in providing viable alternatives to children.

The other three cases discussed operate on a different premise and strategy, basing themselves on social mobilisation against child labour and helping out-of-school working children enter schools. Highlighting the rights of children and the responsibility of parents towards their children, even more that of the government, is crucial, if only because we as a nation are becoming less sensitive to people at the margins, particularly the needs and aspirations of children.

Taking its cue from the work of M V Foundation, the Baljyothi programme in Hyderabad City rejects the official definition of child labour and seeks to bring all children in the age group five-14 into schools. It sees this as the only way to abolish child labour. The strategy is to mobilise communities and create the circumstances, environment and infra-structure to enable all children to access schooling. Incidentally, Baljyothi firmly rejects non-formal educational options.

The programme represents an active partnership between an NGO, 'Pratyamnya', and the administration. After an exhaustive survey of all slums and 'bastis' in the city, the project has in the last five years started over 250 schools, each with 50 children, all of which are located in the bastis. Using a variety of strategies – bridge courses, neighbourhood schools, contact centres for domestic workers and street children and adding parateachers to existing government schools to help interface with the community – to bring children, especially girls, into schools, Baljyothi runs regular classes from 9 a m to 3.30 p m using the same curricula as government schools. The aim is mainstreaming. In addition, children without family homes are helped into social welfare hostels.

The key actor in this strategy is the teacher with the support of the community and the backing of the government. The programme has been successful in demonstrating that parents, communities and children value education, that potential income loss is no major deterrent and that schooling can work as a strategy against further creation of child labour. It does, however, need stressing that not enough has so far been done to improve the quality of schooling.

CINI ASHA in Kolkata works on similar principles, though in a far more difficult environment, focusing as it does on street children, those living on railway platforms, and children of sex workers in addition to those in slums and squatter settlements. While the aim, like in Hyderabad, is to help children – working and non-working – from disprivileged and difficult backgrounds join regular, mainstream schools, the programme has had to initiate many activities just to win the children's trust and help them face their everyday problems before weaning them into learning.

Be it contact or drop-in centres, night shelters, residential camps, health programmes, hostels for children with nowhere to go – with the help of local communities, other NGOs and municipal authorities, the programme has successfully created an environment where these children are not seen as a menace. Having gained the children's confidence, CINI ASHA runs bridge courses, coaching centres, residential camps and so on in addition to working with regular schoolteachers and authorities such that when the children are ready to join regular school they do not face a

hostile environment. Like Baljyothi, the courses are the same as those followed in regular schools. And while there is considerable stress on theatre and cultural activities – the aim is never diluted.

To have been successful with 'difficult children' does require extraordinary empathy and motivation. Clearly, the highly developed culture of locality organisations and clubs help because they ensure community support and goodwill. It also shows the need to be flexible, intervene at every level and rely on cooperation rather than confrontation as a strategy. Equally important is to design group specific programmes and strategies given the wide diversity of the clientele.

The final case study relates to 'CREDA' in Mirzapur, location of the infamous carpet belt with a huge number of working children, including bonded children. Unlike the other states, eastern UP also suffers from an overall educational disability. Nevertheless, over the last two decades, starting from social mobilisation and campaigns against child labour, CREDA has been able to involve the community, explain the importance of schooling and run special schools, mainly community based, to provide an accelerated learning environment to children at the primary levels and help them join regular schools.

Unlike Baljyothi and CINI ASHA, CREDA works under the overall framework of the non-formal education programme of the government of Uttar Pradesh – with the objective of mainstreaming the children after class V. The focus is on basic literacy and numeracy (along the lines of the prescribed syllabi of the government). It is reported that all the children who take the class V non-formal examination are declared successful. Given this context, quality of education and what children learn is not given adequate attention. Classroom instruction is supplemented by a rich cultural repertoire to sensitise the child to issues of child labour, bonded labour, rights and poverty. There is a healthy linkage with the formal system, as the project is positioned as being complementary rather than competitive. Though CREDA has enjoyed significant success in pulling children out of labour and into schools, the children who graduate from CREDA centres face difficulties because of inadequate training and preparation for further education. Worse, there is little attention paid to what these children might do in later life.

Overall, these four cases demonstrate the need to tie up both backward and forward linkages if one is to address the vexed questions of enrolment and retention. There is little doubt that education is valued, that poverty of family does not act as a significant deterrent, and that though many children do continue to work before and after school, their labour intensity does go down once they get into schooling. Equally, irrespective of one's ideological view on child labour, effective strategies demand suspending judgment and confrontation. Finally, if working children are to be attracted to schools and education, much greater attention needs to be given to issues of content and relevance.

V
Making Schools Joyful

More than a quarter century back, educationist J P Naik pointed to the elusive triangle of Indian education – the paradox of equality, quality and quantity. Traditional educational institutions, mainly 'pathshalas' and 'madrasas', were not only few in number, they provided mainly religious instruction and were accessible only to a small minority, those coming from the better-off sections and upper castes. The introduction of modern education under the aegis of the British, while undoubtedly expanding the system, did little to shake the inequitable nature of the educational enterprise. If anything, it deepened social inequality by incorporating children of the emergent middle classes while successfully keeping the rest out.

Fifty years post-independence the overall situation remains deeply unsatisfactory. Despite close to 95 per cent of all children theoretically enjoying access to a primary school within a kilometre radius, both enrolment and retention remain continuing problems. Non-availability of schools accounts for 10 per cent of our schoolchildren in rural areas and 8 per cent in urban areas – the differences between the sexes being small in rural areas and higher in urban locations. Be it lack of interest, the need to participate in household or economic chores, or just the non-availability of schools – all these contribute to limiting access. Even more distressing are the barriers created by nonfunctioning or poor quality primary schools in areas where they are most needed.

The District Primary Education Programme launched by the government in 1994 was expected to tackle dysfunctional schools and quality in a systematic manner. Though the mid-term learning assessment survey in DPEP districts (1997) did indicate significant improvement in language and mathematics, the achievements of children from disadvantaged communities and backgrounds remain far lower than those from other sections of society. Clearly, the teaching-learning processes in mainstream schools, despite efforts at reform, have proven inadequate in improving effectiveness. It is a little surprise that children who go through a few years of schooling without learning very much, tend to drop out. With opportunity costs, particularly for poorer children remaining high, families are prone to pull them out.

Making education free, providing textbooks and uniforms, and making provision for midday meals does help, but only where such schemes are implemented at a socially significant scale. Yet, by themselves, they are insufficient to attract those facing other social and economic barriers that prevent them both from attending school and staying on. It is also clear that unless significant reforms are brought into mainstream government schools, we will be unable to make a dent. Experimental and alternative schools run by voluntary agencies – and these are legion – do provide key lessons. But unless there is a simultaneous process of mainstreaming, these efforts will continue to languish at the margins.

Amongst those who face extreme difficulty in accessing schooling are children of urban slum dwellers and migrants. Even when their parents value education and go to some lengths to admit children to schools, they find private schools (even if government aided and not charging tuition fees) beyond their reach. As for municipal schools, they are widely seen as boring, unattractive, marked by ineffective teaching-learning – in other words, as being 'good only for the poor'. The first case study in this section presents the work of Pratham, an NGO that has done stellar work with municipal schools in Mumbai. Its emphasis, throughout, has been on strengthening the capabilities of government schools as also on helping children cope with the burdens of learning. Pratham also realised early on that a uniform strategy would not suit all children in scattered slums.

Pratham has chosen to be a supporter rather than a critic of the government, operating on the premise that since education is a state subject, it is the state that should be held accountable. Intervention ought to be directed at reform and improvement through consultation and participation of all involved parties rather than on designing alternative or parallel

systems. Since revitalisation of the government system requires both financial and human resources, Pratham has sought to forge a triangular relationship between community, government and corporate donors. Municipal teachers, corporate sector personnel, NGOs, social workers and academics have been brought together in a partnership to rejuvenate the school and help the child.

Starting with community based balwadis which function both as playschools and creches to create an environment permeated with the intent to learn, Pratham has gone on to introduce a cadre of balsakhis (friends of the children), work on teacher training and initiate bridge courses to prepare children to join regular schools. Both enrolled and non-enrolled children are helped to improve their capabilities and their progress is regularly tracked, all through involving both the municipal teacher and the community to ensure that the child does not drop out.

Over the last seven years, Pratham, Mumbai has managed to involve over 5,000 people, run 2,800 balwadis and 350 study centres, and conduct over 500 bridge courses affecting over 100,000 children in all municipal wards. The programme has now spawned an India-Education Initiative that has spread to many cities in different states. In brief, it has become a societal mission.

'Nali Kali in Mysore' district of Karnataka represents another effort to revitalise primary education by working with and training government teachers in child-centred, activity-based and participatory teaching such that the school represents a joyful environment. Starting in 1992, with a workshop of teachers to analyse the ills in the system and what could be done to improve quality, the teachers were sent on a study tour to the Rishi Valley satellite schools. Over the years, with constant nurturing and support from educational administrators and pedagogic inputs from experts and social activists, the teachers have designed new curricula and textbooks and evolved new teaching-learning and evaluation methods for all classes at the primary level. While working within the parameters of the official system, they have learnt to renegotiate the minimum level of learning requirements, view the curriculum as a continuum from Class I to IV rather than as compartmentalised into classes and subjects, and have experimented with new notions of classroom discipline and management.

The key principle is to work with children at the centre and proceed at their pace while nurturing their self-esteem. Second, the government teacher is trusted and helped to be creative and innovative. Third, the school is seen as a centre for exploration, learning and joy, not discipline and order. Finally, the supervisory system has been transformed from an inspectorate to friend and facilitator.

Even though the Nali Kali system demands much more effort from teachers without offering any additional remuneration, it has been a success. In an overall situation marked by teacher intransigence and hostility, with teacher unions often holding educational programmes to ransom, this experiment has not only improved retention and quality, but because it is embedded in the system, theoretically promises sustainability – provided the system of teacher management remains sensitive.

The final case study presents an alternative, experimental venture called 'Digantar' in Jaipur, Rajasthan, which over the last two decades has made significant interventions in the philosophy of elementary education. Inspired by David Horsburgh's teaching methods, Digantar began as a small experimental school in 1978. Working primarily with neighbourhood children from the economically deprived strata, Digantar tried to establish such principles as that real learning does not arise from compulsion; that since the children are free to come and go as they please, it is the responsibility of the teacher to motivate the child; that the teacher and the child are simultaneous learners; and that cooperation rather than mutual competition has to be a primal value. The stress, all along, is on the growth of the child who proceeds at his/her own pace. Since many of these children were themselves working, a significant emphasis was on practical activities, not to teach a skill, but to help them get a grip on different dimensions of life. There was no attendance record, no uniform, no syllabus.

A decade later, while continuing with its own schools, Digantar expanded its activities into domains of research and training with the intention of influencing other efforts and larger scale educational programmes. Over the years, Digantar has developed new curricula and pedagogic tools in the areas of language, mathematics, environmental studies, arts and handicrafts with a view to shaping general abilities and attitudes. All its schools are run with the help of the community, which values these 'alternative' efforts. The organi-

sation is now involved with other efforts, both within the state and elsewhere.

Unlike the Pratham and Nali Kali experiments that, while influencing curriculum and pedagogy, consciously opted to work within the constraints of the official system in an effort to influence scale, Digantar has chosen to be small, different and alternative. If, despite this 'exclusivity', it has found acceptance in larger, more formal efforts, both government and non-government, it is because it strives for excellence and 'success' in promoting an environmentally sensitive, child-centred mutual learning (not teaching) process. Its work in languages, mathematics and environmental education has influenced others into making their systems flexible and joyful.

All three cases, at varying levels, demonstrate the importance of the school environment and the need to factor in the world of the child. Equally, they demonstrate that reform is possible without huge reliance on funds and material infrastructure or waiting for larger systemic changes before intervening in the educational process. Of course, they simultaneously underscore the importance of the teacher, the need for constant community involvement and participation, and the spin-offs of effective networking. True, all this also demands an order of sensitivity and nurturing from the officialdom. But then, unless elementary education is seen as a societal mission, our schools will neither attract or retain children, nor help them to learn.

Reaching the Unreached

Whatever the purported successes of Indian education throughout the last 50 years and earlier when the country embarked on modern education and, grudgingly or otherwise, accepted universalisation of elementary education as a societal goal, there have been a strata of children who have persistently escaped the net of schooling. The preliminary results from the latest 2001 Census, several national sample surveys, as also DPEP baseline studies have attempted to estimate the extent of non-participation in primary schools. It has to be unfortunately admitted that dozens of programmes and experiments notwithstanding, these estimates range from a low of 61 million [NFHS 1993-94] or 77 million [NSS 1993-94] to a high of 89.64 million children [GOI/NSSO 1998].

Close to two-thirds of these are girls with, of course, significant variations by region, caste, tribe and community. Kerala and Himachal Pradesh represent major

success stories, managing near universal participation, while the BIMARU belt lags far behind. And though, as a result of specific focus programmes for the girl child, the growth rates in enrolment for girls have dramatically improved, being double that for boys in the primary stages (classes I to V) and even higher in the middle stages (classes VI to VIII), the situation remains worrisome.

Equally, if not more troubling is the situation of children from SC and ST communities. Many of these communities are not only poor; they face a range of social exclusions that keep them out of all publicly provided services, including education. Journalist P Sainath's reports show that across the country, even in progressive states like Kerala, communities once classified as untouchable continue to face formidable barriers to entry. This situation of forced exclusion is compounded by widespread low self-esteem as also a fear of exercising entitlement claims in the affected communities. The situation is far worse when we look at migrant communities, those once classified as criminal tribes and so on. Clearly, the segregated settlement pattern in most of our villages, with houses of the deprived located on the margins of the village – often replicated in urban slum settlements and shanty towns – adds to the difficulty of access.

Just adding more schools and teachers, even in the settlements of communities marked by low school participation, is insufficient since courses, language of instruction and pedagogic methods are more designed to suit children from a relatively higher class and caste strata. To break this vicious cycle, educational interventions not only need to be internally innovative, but also to attack the entrenched social discrimination that keeps specific groups and communities away from education. Unfortunately, large programmes, given their tendency to foreground homogeneity as also the ideology of national integration that insists that everyone should be treated similarly despite differences, invariably fail to design context-specific interventions. Let us not forget that the attempt by the Lok Jumbish programme in Rajasthan to work through madrasas and maulvis in the educationally deprived meo community areas was accused of fostering separatism.

The set of case studies in this section describe efforts, both voluntary and governmental, to address this problem. All the examples chosen are rural, partly because the intensity of social barriers is highest in pockets distanced from the mainstream; and partly because lack of proximity to centres of political power and visibility compound problems of low infrastructure and personnel.

The 'Agragamee' experiment with tribal children in districts of western Orissa clearly demonstrates that in a region where schools and teachers either do not exist, or are only sporadically present, the only way forward is to work with the communities directly, base educational efforts on their culture, lifestyles and language, be sensitive to their work and livelihood requirements and train teachers from the region and communities who will be trusted. Since education in such situations is rarely the highest priority, the intervention has to simultaneously address other problems of livelihood and survival.

Agragamee works with a concept of the school fully integrated with the wider community's struggle for survival and dignity. They thus combine general awareness and empowerment activities with schemes of watershed development, food security through grain banks and other income generating activities. The educational programme is non-formal, involving both children and adults, the timings are flexible, the teachers are drawn from the local youth, community participation is central, everyday experience is woven into the curriculum with the boundaries deliberately blurred between school and life, and the focus remains directed at self-awareness and respect, organisation and empowerment. In brief, Agragamee NFE centres are as much sites for political education as conventional learning.

Not surprisingly, the focus on political empowerment work where school participants are as involved with running and managing grain banks as in agitations against moneylenders, forest officials and, of late, mining conglomerates, neither endears the organisation to authorities nor does it necessarily demonstrate good results in an academic sense. Nevertheless, the schools, supported both by government and private co-financing agencies, are trusted, owned up by the community and seen as valuable.

Despite this, both through its NFE programme and innovative education centres, Agragamee has been able to work with children in nearly 300 sites. It brings together children in festivals, organises exposure trips and nature camps, has developed new primers, experimented with language teaching and demonstrated the importance of child-to-child learning. Apart from increasing general awareness, including about tribal rights, it has also been able to impact the formal school system, with an increasing number of tribal children now joining formal, mainstream schools.

As part of the larger 'Lok Jumbish' programme, 'Muktangan' in Rajasthan has shown how one can work with tribes that have little prior exposure to education. The work is concentrated on members of the sahariya tribe in Kishanganj block – an area marked by high land inequity. The Sahariyas are not only landless and socially ostracised, their settlements have no access to electricity and, often, even potable drinking water. Though the government had set up 14 schools in this cluster of 24 villages, the schools were all dysfunctional and without teachers.

Instead of working with and strengthening government schools, it was decided to work through specially trained teachers, all from outside the region and community, given the complete absence of educationally qualified sahariyas. Starting with intensive teacher training Muktangan has, over the years, been able to set up 17 schools in villages where either the formal school was dysfunctional or there was no school at all but at least 40 children in the 5 to 14 age group.

The process involves interacting both with the community and other NGOs working in education to design basic materials for both teacher training and child learning. Training 'muktaks' (teachers) to be socially and environmentally sensitive and work in such a manner as to overcome prejudices of caste, tribe and gender remains a central focus.

It is unfortunate that given the changes in the political environment, as also the fact that the Muktangan experiment did not easily fit any pre-existing mould (viz, teacher payment), Muktangan has faced declining official support. Larger programmes, particularly of the government, demand rapid results without appreciating the difficulties (and costs) of working with educationally deprived and isolated communities. The fact that in a few short years some children have reached class IV and V, or that in the banjara (a nomadic tribe) cluster all relevant age children are today attending school, should have been seen as validation enough. Unfortunately, it appears that training teachers to be sensitive is not enough; there is need to sensitise educational planners as well.

The final case study draws on the experience of the DPEP Hardoi (UP), in particular its effort at enhancing girls'

participation in primary education. This in a state where not only is the overall situation of education depressing, but where gender differentials are marked can be crucial for future planning. Mobilising the communities and reorienting existing structures to be more sensitive to the educational needs of girl children is imperative if states like Uttar Pradesh have to make a social breakthrough.

The DPEP Hardoi strategy involves a mix of policy changes – making girls' education free up to the graduation level; eschewing detention up to Class II; appointing gender coordinators for all DPEP districts; focusing on community mobilisation and support through campaigns; sensitising village education committees, activising mother-teacher associations and linking up with women's groups in a cluster approach; altering school environment through hiring more trained women teachers while reworking textbooks to make them gender sensitive; and finally, adding to incentive and support schemes. The overall strategy is to cluster all these efforts – which focus on girls and education – in a region and ensure coordination for effectiveness.

Sounds good. But does it make a difference? Unfortunately, though the trends are positive, it is much too early to make any definitive statements. Nevertheless, Hardoi does demonstrate a shift in commitment for the better.

Education, even in societies with a long history of sustained engagement, requires constant reinvention to remain meaningful and joyful. In societies and contexts such as ours, efforts to break through social barriers are much more demanding. It is still insufficiently realised that no broad-brush, uniform strategy will or can work, more so when confronted with deep social prejudices, low self-esteem and indifferent state commitment. If we are at all serious about eliminating pockets of non-schooling and living up to the constitutional directives of universal elementary education, our programmes and schemes (and this means decision-makers) have to both invest more resources while simultaneously being open to multiple, context-specific modes of meeting the objectives. It is likely that these difficult pockets will cost more, will demand more effort and time, and will for some time produce results that may appear unsatisfactory. But without patience and endurance there is no fruit. Hopefully these efforts will help convince others that the effort is worthwhile.

Emerging Issues

One common shortcoming in extant documentation of innovations is the near absence of data on learning achievements, transition from one stage to another and completion of each level of education. Stories and narratives of processes, life histories and other qualitative profiles undoubtedly add to our understanding of the texture. But in the absence of quantitative information on children's participation, transition and learning achievements, educational planners argue that we cannot conclusively say whether or not a particular model works. Most special programmes – in both the government and the NGO sector – are weak on quantitative data. It is therefore difficult to make any definitive statement about impact and efforts to do so remain anecdotal. Is there any value in process documentation of the kind attempted in this selection? *The 10 case studies reveal that notwithstanding the paucity of 'hard data', documentation of different practices expands our knowledge pool and generates informed debate on alternative strategies and approaches.*

Over the last 20 years the debate on value education has taken on a distinctly partisan hue. Basic values like rights, equality and citizenship – that are not only enshrined in our Constitution but form the essence of a democracy – have been lost in the din of religious and communal discourse. Moving from a rigidly hierarchical and didactic mode to a more participatory and decentralised one is perhaps a precondition for nurturing democratic values. It must be pointed out here that it is not only the children who are affected: teachers have little autonomy to respond to emerging needs, trainers who work with teachers are alienated from actual teaching, the supervisors are busy counting children and supplies, the district administrators only follow orders, and even the state government officers have little autonomy to steer educational programmes. Who calls the shots? Why is reform so difficult? Why has the system become rigid and inflexible? Some efforts were no doubt made in special educational projects, including DPEP, to enable people at different levels to feel that they are in charge. Possibly that is why Nali Kali happened. Plurality is really not only the essence of quality; it is also our only safeguard against the juggernaut of mediocrity. With greater space and freedom, basic democratic values may find their way into the school system and we may see more makkala panchayats and children's parliaments.

Campaigns against child labour and making formal schools accessible to erstwhile child workers have been quite effective in achieving their stated goal. However, it has been observed that such programmes have rarely addressed the quality issue – what are children learning, how much are they learning, what is the content of education and so on. Protagonists of this approach argue that it is the responsibility of the government to set the agenda for good quality primary education. On the other hand, people engaged in the quality and meaningful access debate argue that it is not enough to push children into school without working towards improving the quality and relevance of education. Unfortunately, large-scale, non-formal education and alternative schools with parateachers are more concerned with physical access. Investment in improving the capacity/calibre of teachers and organising continuous educational resource support and pedagogic renewal has taken a back seat. This brings us to the age-old maxim of maintaining a balance between scale and quality – isn't it essential to ensure basic quality standards when we go to scale?

Conversations with children participating in special programmes reveal that unless we are willing to invest in quality, children are not likely to be equipped to compete with the better-off sections of society. The academic rigour, time and environment necessary for children to move from primary to secondary to professional education are still beyond the reach of poor children. At best, most programmes for the poor go up to the secondary level. Even vocational education and training in livelihood skills are beyond their reach. The forward linkages necessary to make primary education a means to livelihood security are yet to be created. Creating exit points at different stages – especially between classes VIII and XII, would enable children to move on to livelihood and life skills oriented programmes. Most elementary educational programmes do not take a long-term view and plan ahead. Grappling with issues of quality and relevance would perhaps be a first step towards any long-term educational planning. We are still negotiating the early stages.

Innovations and experiments have an intrinsic value – they contribute to our knowledge pool and enhance our understanding of systems and processes. However, most people also recognise that fundamental changes are called for in the way primary education is positioned and

administered in India. It is here that the impact of pilots and innovations on mainstream educational thought and theory is important. Unfortunately, the system as it operates currently affords little scope for change. The people in charge of educational planning, research and training institutions of the government – i e, the think tanks – are not engaged any discussion or debate on alternatives; those who are, have little or no influence on mainstream institutions and systems. Nali Kali and the Model Cluster Development Approach – both embedded in DPEP – are rare exceptions. Questions about their sustainability beyond the tenure of the pioneers, however, remain.

Scanning the canvas of development action, especially in primary education, it is disturbing to note that most innovations are fragile – long-term sustainability and growth remains critical problems. The larger operating environment of most innovative programmes in both government and the voluntary sectors continues to be uncertain. Changing political priorities, change in leadership and changing priorities among donors – all these affect sustainability. The recent experience of a large-scale government programme, Rajasthan Lok Jumbish, is a case in point. While plurality and innovations are no doubt important, we need to build up momentum to sustain and expand the quality circle. Most organisations working in the area of primary education are not part of any national network that could lobby on their behalf.

A question that vexes most special programmes is that of ownership. It is instructive to learn that the Mumbai Municipal Corporation looks at the Pratham initiated inputs as its own programme – there is little of the 'us and them' divide. Information about the programme, financial assistance and human resource inputs, is freely available and transparent. Similarly, the Appropriate Education Programme of the Concerned for Working Children works in collaboration with the formal system. It is not someone else's programme, but their own programme – and here we see the spirit of ownership emanating from the parents and community leaders. Bhima Sangha, Makkala panchayat and the educational inputs into the formal school are seen as being part of one continuum. The 'us and them' divide is not apparent.

At another level, the question of ownership takes on a different hue with respect to the government. While a number of central and state government senior offi-

cials appreciate innovations and experiments – the 'system' continues to perceive them as exceptions, initiated by exceptional people and therefore not replicable. Far from being accepted as legitimate strategies, lessons drawn from these innovations are not even debated in the mainstream, either in terms of pedagogic renewal or teacher motivation and training. A case in point is a recent publication on mainstreaming gender issues in DPEP. While the publication lists, describes and celebrates a range of exciting and effective strategies, these 'successes' have remained small initiatives in a limited number of villages or schools. They are displayed with great pride and a sense of having 'mainstreamed' gender concerns. The main system and majority of schools continue to function as they always did.

Conclusion

The preliminary results of the Census of India 2001 reveal that 65.4 per cent people (75.85 per cent among men and 54.16 among women) are now literate. Population growth rate has slowed down to an annual average of 1.95 per cent[4] (being 2.16 per cent in the decade of the 1980s); the sex ratio has recorded a small improvement and now stands at 933 (women per 1,000 men) in comparison to 927 in the 1991 Census. However, what is disturbing is that the sex ratio in the 0-6 age group has fallen sharply to 927 in 2001 Census in comparison to 945 in 1991. We have been informed that literacy rates have improved everywhere and that improvement has been particularly rapid in Rajasthan, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh. This all-India picture of optimism does not hold good for Uttar Pradesh and Bihar where the increase in literacy rates is modest. Population growth rates have also recorded an increase in Bihar and Haryana. Similarly, while the national all-age sex ratio has increased in most areas, the situation has worsened in Himachal Pradesh, Gujarat, Haryana, Punjab and New Delhi. It is alarming to note that in Himachal Pradesh, while the literacy level has gone up and almost 98 per cent of children in the school-going age are enrolled and attending school,[5] the sex ratio has declined from 976 in 1991 to 970 in 2001.[6]

Literacy figures do not reveal the full picture. The 2001 headcount has generated a debate on the interlinkages between women's status, education, literacy and eco-

nomic development. There are no easy answers and no one-to-one correlation. Sex ratios are rapidly declining in prosperous regions where most of the children go to primary school. Many more girls are being pulled out of school in Tamil Nadu and Andhra – especially after class VI or VII – to work as wage labour in farms (picking cotton or vegetables) and in family enterprises. Economic prosperity has improved educational access, especially for girls in not-so-poor and middle-income families. But the situation of girls from poor 'below-the-poverty-line' households is a cause for concern. Documentation and dissemination of experiences to a wider audience, in a language that is not too academic or formal, could trigger some debate in the media and among ordinary citizens of the country. Education of children is both a sensitive and important issue – and it is time people took a long and hard look at the content, process and the overall value base of our educational system.

It is with this hope that this modest effort has been initiated. **EPW**

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Notes

[This is an overview of a collection of 10 case studies on backward and forward linkages that strengthen primary education. This research (supported by DFID, India) was completed in March 2001. This collection, titled 'Getting Children Back to School: Case Studies in Primary Education' will be published by Sage Publications India in 2003.]

1   Vimala Ramachandran (1999) 'The Visible but Unreached', *Seminar*, February, New Delhi.
2   M V Foundation argues that all out-of-school children should be treated – by definition - as child workers and strategies to eliminate child labour are inextricably linked to ensuring that every child goes to school.
3   Myron Weiner (1991) *The Child and the State in India – Child Labour and Education Policy in Comparative Perspective*, Oxford University Press. Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai.
4   During the decade of 1991-2001, the lowest growth rate was recorded in Kerala at 9.42 per cent followed by Tamil Nadu at 11.19 per cent and Andhra Pradesh at 11.36 per cent.
5   The Gross Enrolment Ratio is 115 (boys 115 and girls 114), it is 116 for SC students (116 SC boys and 115 SC girls) and it is 112 for ST (112 for ST boys and 111 for ST girls). The NER (1999-2000) for boys and girls is 97 per cent. Government of Himachal Pradesh, DPEP Project Progress Report for 12th Joint Review Mission, November 1999.
6   Wednesday March 28, 2001; C Rammanohar Reddy, 'Puzzling Patterns in Census 2001', *The Hindu,* Chennai.