

Education Guarantee in MP

Francois Leclercq in his article on the 'Education Guarantee Scheme and Primary Schooling in Madhya Pradesh' (May 10) has raised basically three issues – (1) the demand for schooling and how it is met, (2) gurujis and their status and competence and (3) quality of teaching and schooling – and concludes how the EGS has emerged as IGS (incomplete guarantee scheme). Those who have been involved in the educational scenario in MP would know that the tribal areas in particular had absolutely no access to schools of any type. There was 'unmet' demand for schooling and the policy-makers with their typical middle class bias dubbed the situation as a 'no demand' situation. MP was dubbed as a state where education was not 'demanded' and there was no need to provide 'access' to it. EGS changed the situation by providing access where there was none. Francois contradicts himself when he says that "habitations where EGS schools are to be created are identified by the expression of parental demand and this strategy seems to have worked impressively well, thousands of demands were received by the Rajiv Gandhi Shiksha Mission in the first months of 1997. Yet the adequacy of parental motivation on which the effectiveness of current policies depends *cannot be taken for granted*" (emphasis added). He adds that "parental demand alone cannot be a major source of change in the education system".

What else does he want the state to do? For the first time access has been created in such remote areas and since 1997 we find an upsurge of tribal children attending EGS schools and enjoying learning, however incomplete the EGS may be. Unfortunately our academics and policy-makers are caught in what I call a 'perfection syndrome'. We want the ideal thing to happen when we cannot even try to do the possible or the doable, moving from there to the desirable and finally to the ideal. EGS is the most doable or possible thing that a government could have done without the help of donors like the World Bank and other aid agencies. For the first time the state has created 'learning space' for children in the most inaccessible areas.

Gurujis are recruited locally and the village panchayats have been given the power to hire and fire them. What is wrong with this? Experts like Francois want the recruitment to be done by the MP State Public Service Commission to ensure corruption-free and merit-based selection. Primary education even in New York is controlled by the mayor and the school board. Village panchayats are now constitutional entities and are supposed to hire and fire their staff including gurujis. If the members of the state public service and the education bureaucracy take money and recruit teachers that is fine. If panchayat members take money and recruit gurujis that is bad. It is at the local level that corrupt practices are easily exposed and correctives are easily applied by the people. All available evidence so far suggests that gurujis, if trained properly, can become capable teachers outdoing the highly paid regular teachers of the school system. Francois says, "Giving autonomy to local protagonists in organising education may be necessary but cannot be sufficient to promote change, e.g., teaching methods generating joyful learning cannot be adopted by teachers to whom they are not familiar ways of interacting with children". In fact the gurujis, being recruited from the local areas, can make learning joyful by providing local settings and stories. In MP during the Shikshak Samakhya programme (1991-96) it was the local teachers who composed songs to teach the alphabet and make learning joyful.

Francois quotes Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen who acknowledge "the potential of second-track schooling facilities as temporary means to increase enrolment but stress the risks involved in terms of the quality, equity and sustainability of the resulting school system". When it comes to BRAC schools the same Amartya Sen praises them. EGS schools are in no way inferior to BRAC schools, but whereas BRAC can get international recognition for its schooling revolution the EGS has been continuously questioned ever since it was launched by MP. Whether Francois agrees or not, a schooling revolution is happening in MP through the EGS schools.

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