

New Labels for Old

Teachers in Orissa's Non-Formal Education (NFE) Programme are faced with the threat of losing their jobs. These teachers, numbering about 40,000, have been working on a meagre salary of Rs 200 per month since 1996, many of them in remote, inaccessible districts of the state. To draw attention to their plight, early this month seven of the teachers went so far as to set themselves on fire outside the residence of the speaker of the state assembly in Bhubaneswar.

The threat to the teachers' jobs has arisen because of the state government's decision, taken in March this year, to replace the NFE programme with the Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS) and Alternative Innovative Education (AIE) Scheme. The teachers are demanding that they be absorbed under the new schemes on a monthly salary of at least Rs 1,000. The attempted self-immolation has succeeded in eliciting a verbal assurance from the state government that trained non-formal teachers would be given preference in recruitment of education volunteers under the new schemes, while untrained teachers would get next preference. Though the centre's guidelines expressly stipulate that suitable non-formal teachers must be given preference under the new schemes, the state government is yet to issue a formal notification in this regard.

Orissa is among the most educationally backward states. The centre's objective in setting up the NFE programme, in Orissa and the other educationally backward states, was to provide educational opportunities to those children between the ages of 6 and 14 who are, for various reasons, unable to attend formal full-day schools – including working children, girls, school dropouts and children in habitations without schools. The onus of setting up the alternative schools was on voluntary agencies which were extended financial assistance for the purpose.

From 1996 onwards, more than 23,448 NFE centres were set up in Orissa. Of the 14,618 girls' centres, only 13,022 centres could start functioning; the rest could not for want of suitable instructors. Some 210 voluntary agencies have been running the NFE projects, though the state government admits that there have been complaints against several of these. There have been problems of lack of coordination between the state government and the panchayati raj institutions which were also hampered by inadequate disbursement of funds. No provision was made for linkages to facilitate entry at different levels into formal schools. Above all, the scheme has been found to have covered less than 10 per cent of the 'out of school' children; in particular, small and scattered SC and ST habitations without schools failed to get enough attention under the scheme.

Hence ostensibly the government's decision to move over to the EGS and the AIE schemes. These schemes have been evolved on the basis of the experience gained from programmes run successfully under the Lok Jumbish and DPEP initiative by a number of states. Run with the help of NGOs, they incorporate flexible strategies of alternative schooling and are claimed to have shown that reasonably good quality programmes for 'out of school' children can be implemented with community participation. But in Orissa not only did the NFE not take off, the state government's other educational schemes – expansion of Operation Blackboard to cover more primary and upper primary schools, extension of DPEP to more districts and a separate education package for backward areas – have achieved little success.

While the financial allocations have been much less than the state's requirements, even the amounts allotted have often not been fully utilised. In 1999, three years after eight districts in Orissa were first brought under DPEP, the government admitted that the implementation of the programme had been extremely tardy and that just 14.18 per cent of the funds had been utilised. Several reasons – late release of funds, frequent transfer of key functionaries and large number of vacancies of teachers – have been advanced for the poor performance. Many posts of non-formal teachers under DPEP were never filled.

The new schemes do not differ all that much from the NFE programme. It is claimed that they call for greater community involvement. But against the background of the poor record of decentralisation and empowerment of local communities in the past, it is not easy to see how community involvement is going to be secured in the implementation of the EGS and the AIE schemes. These schemes would involve the setting up of 12,000 primary schools in villages without a school within a radius of one km. Village education committees/panchayats are charged with the microplanning for the schemes, including deciding on the location of the EGS/AIE centres, selecting education volunteers and purchasing teaching-learning material and equipment for the centres. **EPW**