

DPEP and Primary Education

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This note is not to be construed as a rejoinder to 'Looking beyond the Smokescreen: DPEP and Primary Education in India' by Krishna Kumar and others (*EPW*, February 17, 2001). Nor is it purported to be a DPEP supportive view. Let us begin by delineating some of the authors' major arguments or critiques that they hold as central to their presentation. These are:

- The access to external funding, while being sponsored through a post-1991, foreign exchange crisis driven, World Bank-led social safety net philosophy, also hid the real story, that of the states contracting commitments for formal education and dismantling existing structures of formal education, proliferation of 'teach anyhow' strategies, publicity management, etc.
- Funding of a competent national idea through external debt, DPEP signified a process of contested mainstreaming of the national model of external assistance for primary education.
- Goals and objectives are sought to be reached through emphasis on enhancing professional and managerial capacities for the delivery of primary education with the underlying belief that people's education is a technical input which can be put in place with the help of enhanced resources acquired through external borrowing.

One may begin by wondering what exactly were the central objectives of the researchers. If the focus was to look more into the mode in which DPEP was launched and thus at three salient aspects of the programme - viz, concept of community, implications of teachers and impact on enrolment and the system - then it is evident that there is a positional issue of viewing these components not as integrated within the context of other interventions, but in terms of how the 'external' factor that has impinged on outcomes.

Be that as it may, if there is to be a constructive critique of DPEP, one could begin by taking on the more relevant aspects internal to the design, planning, imple-

mentation and outcomes of DPEP as a programme and strategy for universalisation rather than the extensive harping and insistence on the external factor. These could be in the form of questions. Did DPEP funding, though conceived as an additionality, actually lead to a substitution of state funds? How convergent was DPEP in conceptualising its input amidst the plethora of existing schemes of primary education both at the central and state level? Was the quantum of funding related to district-specific contextual needs? What were the institutional inputs from academia and other state funded bodies on strategy-led issues such as emergence of the alternative school? Can the alternative school, as the authors wish to emphasise, be looked at purely as an access

issue? In addition, can the issue of para teachers be reduced to the crisis of regularisation of para teachers in government jobs? The more serious concern, and this the authors have clearly failed to even point out, is that of learning outcomes in alternative schools and, more importantly, mainstreaming of children from alternative to formal schools. There is thus much that is flawed in the authors' approach. If monitoring of learning outcomes is to be contextualised, then are the national level norms as prevalent in DPEP adequate in the light of the wide-ranging differences in curriculum in the states? In their treatment of the community issue, the entire content of decentralisation seems to have been completely wished away by the authors. While dealing with enrolment, the comment of the researchers is on the gradual decline in enrolment. How this has been collated with the population trends for children in the 6-11 age group or even

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cross-referenced with the available body of researches in the field of trends in enrolment is not established.

The article, it would appear, is based on scanty reference to the available literature. The critique of DPEP would have been more incisive and useful for a wider body of researchers and policy-makers had this been done with some feedback from the field.

Indeed, it is in the design and execution of DPEP which in turn determine the broad outcomes that one would have liked to see as the frame of analysis. By burdening the analytical parameters heavily, if not principally, with the World Bank-dictated syndrome of the DPEP, the researchers have missed the wood for the trees. The smokescreen, it would appear, is a selectively generated one, rather

than based on a composite analysis of interventions.

If policy-makers were to look for research-led inputs from policy critiques as an important source of learning, this may well lead to the searching question: how aware are academics of the implementation issues at the ground level? The answer, it seems, will take a long time to come. **EPW**