

Primary Education in Rural Areas

An Alternative Model

The indifferent success of the present system of primary education in India, which has left 30 million children out of schools, calls for a complete change of the method of delivery of education. The model discussed here has features that ensure flexibility, accountability and quality, which can help achieve the threefold objectives of elementary education – universal access, universal retention and universal achievement.

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Numerous books have been written elucidating the social, economic, and political importance of elementary education. A number of official resolutions have been adopted and judgments pronounced on various occasions to ensure education for all Indian children. Still the goal of universal elementary education (UEE) remains elusive [Godbole 2001].¹ The National Policy on Education (NPE), 1986, as modified in 1992, meticulously enumerated the problems relating to universal elementary education in India [GoI 1992]. The document not only talks of problems, but also recommends several innovative parallel systems to reach the goal of UEE [ibid:38]. These innovations² no doubt have helped improve coverage [Chen 2002], yet a huge gap exists. Translated into numbers, this means that more than 30 million children are out of school in India, the majority from rural areas.

According to Amartya Sen, "Primary education in India suffers not only from inadequate allocation of resource, but often enough also from terrible management and organisation" [Sen 2002]. To him, 'organisation and governance of primary schools' has remained a neglected subject in much of India. Albert Einstein opined, "The problem cannot be solved on the same level on which it was created. One has to rise above it to the next level." Thus an entirely new approach is required. The delivery system needs to be altered drastically. Changes in strategy, i.e., devising an altogether new delivery mechanism, is the need of the hour. A model that is

cost-effective, self-sustaining,³ and has reduced scope for corruption is presented below.

Under this model, designed mainly for rural India:

- State will provide 'free and compulsory education' to all children subject to the limits of its economic capacity;⁴
- Competition ensures better service at lower cost;
- Human beings per se are not averse to learning (education). In other words, given the proper environment every child yearns to learn;
- The prime objective of primary level education is to help the child acquire the ability to read and write;⁵
- The state will build schoolrooms around a playground and lease them out to qualified teacher entrepreneurs to run primary schools from standard I to IV according to the curriculum designed and approved by the state;
- The state will continue to support primary education by giving educational vouchers to all eligible children which can be used to pay fees in any school of their choice run by the teacher entrepreneurs.

With these parameters in mind, a simple model is constructed which meets the threefold objectives of 'universal access, universal retention and universal achievement'. Given a trial it may revolutionise the present educational scenario, like that of the 'countrywide communication boom' led by the opening of STD booths.

How the Model Works

The objective of primary (elementary) education is to develop the ability to read, write and do a little bit of arithmetic. At

the primary level, starting with 'ank and akshar',⁶ the curriculum should include only two subjects – basic mathematics and one language.

We recommend that basic mathematics and one language (preferably the mother tongue) should be taught at different levels from standard I to standard IV. Subjects like general knowledge and moral science can be incorporated in the language paper. The ideal age group for this level of learning is 6-10 years. (Standard I to standard IV.)

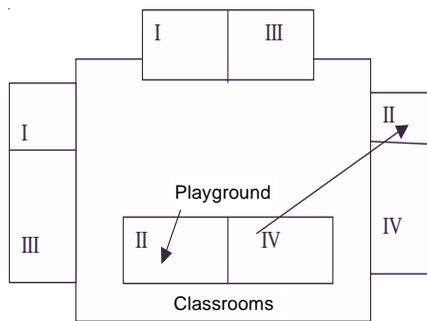
We further recommend four hours of schooling from 9 am to 1 pm with liberal attendance requirements. The flexibility in terms of timing and attendance requirement may appeal to parents 'reluctant' to send their children to schools. One of the most important reasons for the high rate of dropouts is said to be the 'need for children to work or look after siblings'. A half day school (in the forenoon hours) with flexible attendance requirements shall be least interfering with the socio-economic compulsions of rural parents. There shall be no schooling for the children of the tender-age group in afternoon session.

We recommend no examination till standard IV for, 'fear to failure' among grown-up children is a valid reason for avoiding school. As long as the 'four-year schooling model' achieves its stated objective of 'developing the ability to read and to write', it can go without a formal examination system. There is no need to frighten first-generation learners unnecessarily. This does not mean that we are against the concept of evaluating students. A student seeking admission to standard V in a recognised school shall have to clear an eligibility test conducted every year by the state.

We are deliberately not recommending structured 'co-curricular and extra-curricular activities' in the school curriculum for two reasons. Firstly, physical exercise is inbuilt in rural life. Secondly, any state-prescribed programme for 'co-curricular or extra-curricular activities' may have a discouraging impact upon fun-loving kids.

The school building, should be airy, bright and clean. Such primary school buildings should be constructed around a playground and owned by the state. The logic behind this is simple. In rural areas, private operators may not be willing to invest in land and buildings. Moreover, such schools should be socially as well as

Figure: A Model School Campus



physically accessible to all. The location and ownership of schools [Mishra 2000] becomes a critical issue in this case. Moreover, the government has the power to utilise available common land or acquire such land near or within the village for the purpose. Besides, the gender and caste equity question can be addressed more meaningfully with the state retaining overall ownership of the school.

Construction of four blocks (a two-room set) around a common playground is recommended primarily to keep costs under control. Further, the presence of more than 200 children in the same campus provides a conventional school-like atmosphere (even under four different managements). It shall also abstract the location advantage (if any) to a particular set of entrepreneurs as well as students. In an extreme situation, it will be easier for a parent dissatisfied with a particular management to switch over to another school under different management located in the same campus (Figure).

No other construction (toilets, separate activity rooms, store rooms, drinking water rooms, auditorium, mid-day meal kitchen) should be allowed inside the premises to avoid cost escalation both in terms of construction as well as maintenance. In the absence of proper maintenance, these places invariably turn into smelly potholes. The mid-day meal scheme (MMS) for the children shall be handled by a separate agency.

Altogether, in one cluster, there shall be eight rooms under the control of four teacher-entrepreneurs with a capacity to accommodate 240 students (30 in one room) comprising two units each of class I to IV.

The four blocks should be leased out to four enterprising teachers with a minimum HSC qualification [NCTE 1998]. The qualification of HSC is recommended keeping in mind the balance between local

availability of manpower in rural areas, a uniform standard criteria across the country and meeting the 'prescribed' qualification for primary schoolteachers. It can help in addressing the problem of unemployment among educated youth in rural areas.

The blocks should be leased out at a minimum rate of Rs 500 per month renewable after three Anklesaria-Aiyar (2002)⁷ years. By charging this sum, entrepreneurs' stakes are created in the system. In the absence of such stake, there exists a possibility of derailment of the entire system. In any case they are going to make the payment out of their earnings from the system.

Further, the teacher entrepreneur shall have the full liberty to use the buildings beyond school hours to enhance his earnings. A set of dos and don'ts can be included in the lease agreement. He/she should have the liberty to undertake tuition except for the children of their own school.⁸ All such provisions are meant to enhance his/her stake in the system by giving them the opportunity to earn more so that (s)he take a keen interest in running of the schools. Under the agreement, they shall have to employ at their own cost at least one assistant (HSC pass).

It is expected that an enterprising teacher getting a contract for running two classes can admit at the most 60 students in a year. Hence they can earn Rs 6,000 per month (Rs 100 voucher per student per month). Out of their earning, they have to hire one assistant and to pay the stipulated rent. Even if (s)he saves Rs 3,000 per month,⁹ it is not an insignificant amount for an HSC pass person in a rural area. Depending upon their ability and aptitude, they may earn more.

Quality of Education

In the present circumstances, coverage is prime, quality follows. The curriculum prescribed by the state shall be followed to ensure syllabus uniformity. As it is assumed here that the young entrepreneurs shall make bids for such schools, there will be strong inbuilt competition among them to attract students to their schools to increase their income within the prescribed limit. The inbuilt competition shall ensure the quality of education in terms of regular attendance of teachers and students as well as involved teaching.

Under this model, the teacher-pupil ratio shall be 1:30, an improvement over the

present national norm of 1:40 (Gujarat Education Vision 2010, www.gujarat-education.gov.in).

No dilution has been suggested in terms of teachers' qualifications. Currently, the minimum qualification for a primary schoolteacher is HSC and we retain it.

Judgment of the quality of education¹⁰ should be left to the parents, community opinion-leaders, and in a way, to the market (as reflected in voucher transactions). No examination should be conducted to assess the quality of education.

The government shall provide educational vouchers¹¹ (Rs 100) to all students. These vouchers can be used to pay school fees. The voucher cost for one lakh children will be Rs 12 crore per annum. The teacher-entrepreneur shall collect the vouchers from the students. The vouchers shall be encashable by the recipient schoolteacher at par in a nearby post office or bank. The voucher shall be made available to the parents/natural guardian through ration shops, local post office or local branch(es) of commercial banks (like recruitment stamp, or postal order). In order to minimise corruption,¹² the vouchers can be encashed by the teacher after obtaining the signature/thumb impression of the mother of the child.

Parents/natural guardians shall have the right to choose schools. At any time, even in the middle of the academic session, they can shift their wards to another 'performing' school under this framework. Under the system, schools that do not perform will lose their students and their funding. The freedom to exercise the option of quitting a school and joining another will keep the teachers on their toes, on the one hand, and save the child from the irrecoverable loss in terms of time.

In order to maintain transparency, the movement of vouchers should be available on the internet, in a system similar to that of the railway reservation system.

The existing primary schoolteachers and other state/district/block-level functionaries of the education department should not feel threatened by this model. The model presumes that their job will continue with a higher level of responsibility. The existing schools along with their teaching staff shall be upgraded to upper primary or secondary schools. The same teachers shall continue to teach the upper primary level students in existing schools leading to an improved teacher-pupil ratio with a lessened burden of small age-group children. Existing government functionaries shall

continue to supervise the education department in the same manner. They shall have extended zone of influence in terms of number of schools.

The parents shall be empowered by receiving educational vouchers available free of cost. In a way, a mutually enforcing bonding shall emerge between 'empowered guardians' and 'enterprising teachers, hitherto unemployed educated youth'. This synergy may lead to a 'literacy boom' in the country at least among children.

The political class – from the central to panchayat level – shall be happy to fulfil its constitutional obligation without spending 'extra money'. Learners will be happier to go to a school where no examination is conducted.

However, opposition from vested interests such as private management schools and the bureaucracy cannot be ruled out. We leave this issue to be handled by the political leadership.

The teacher entrepreneur needs no supervision in a rigid sense. Teachers' sincerity of purpose shall be under the constant scrutiny of 'voucher empowered parents'. The inbuilt competition in the model is expected to bring about substantial improvement in teachers' attendance. They may need some guidance in terms of curriculum design and improvement in teaching methods. The state education boards and freelancing NGOs can take care of this need.

The workability of such a model depends critically upon funding.¹³ The construction cost of one school (four blocks X two rooms) has been estimated (at Rs 30,000 per room¹⁴) to be Rs 2.40 lakh. This cost can be brought down.¹⁵ The government of India has already undertaken a massive programme of dwelling construction in rural areas under the Indira Awas Yojana. To begin with, a small amount of funding can be diverted from this scheme towards constructing school buildings in needy villages.

The voucher cost for one lakh children at the rate of Rs 100 per month is estimated to be Rs 12 crore.¹⁶ For 240 students (the maximum number in one unit of four blocks) this amount comes to Rs 24,000 per month. The state can start this project forthwith in rural areas that are not covered by the existing system. However, we don't recommend it as a supplementary exercise. In due course, the existing system shall have to be replaced altogether.¹⁷

Assuming that 30 million students are eligible for such primary schools, the annual voucher cost comes around Rs 3,600 crore. It is not a big bargain for preparing the nation for 'the third wave revolution' in Alvin Toffler terminology.

We reluctantly discuss the employment potential of this model, as the issue under consideration is 'illiteracy' not 'unemployment'.

However, as an attendant social benefit, it is estimated that around 33,000 teachers (read currently educated unemployed youth) per one lakh children can be absorbed at a monthly income of Rs 3,000. In rural areas this is a significant amount which may help arrest the rural-urban migration to some extent.

Conclusion

This model fulfils all the three objectives of universal access, universal retention, and universal achievement (table).

The present model (3-T model), as presented in the preamble earlier, fulfils all the needs for progress in terms of primary education by being an interactive partnership business model with two primary schools in four adjacent buildings run by four enterprising teachers. It plays a major role in improving the literacy rate. At the same time the number of dropouts will be reduced significantly because of the flexible time schedule. This viable, cost-effective and sustainable model being free from bureaucratic interference achieves its goal of direct assistance for eligible people. The 'prime education' in primary education becomes accessible through vouchers and promises quality due to its inbuilt choice for beneficiaries. The model promises an overall progression in primary education by an increase in the number of schooling days, a significant decrease in dropout rate and guaranteed decrease in teacher absenteeism. It even requires less expenditure to fulfil the constitutional obligation of education for all. Thus, the model is more appropriate for rural India than present structures of primary education. **EDW**

Notes

[The authors acknowledge their motivation to build this model to the engaging debate between two spirited citizens – Amartya Sen and Swaminathan S Anklesaria Aiyar.]

- 1 According to Probe report (1999), India has an estimated 50 million children out of school, about a third of the world's total.
- 2 There are many innovative parallel systems being established, prominent among which are Shishu Shikshan Kendra (WB), Education Guarantee Scheme (MP), Charbaha Vidyalayameadow school (Bihar), DPEP (Guj), Shiksha Karmi Project and Lok Jumbish (Raj), and AIE Scheme (Orissa). Many of these schemes are facing the problem of stagnation and sustainability.
- 3 Chen (2002): "Two challenges of these parallel systems are operational effectiveness and

Table: Comparison of 3-T Model with Present System

Quality of Education Depends on	Present System	3-T Model
Curriculum	Prescribed by the state	Prescribed by the State
Teacher's qualification	HSC	HSC
Schooling days	150	130
School hours per day	5 hours	4 hours
Environment and ambience	Closed, unclean and unpleasant at many places.	Open, airy and clean everywhere.
Teachers' absenteeism	Quite rampant 33 – 75 per cent	Nil
Quality of supervision	Unsatisfactory	No longer relevant as teacher's involvement is guided by self-interest.
Teacher-pupil ratio	1:40	1:30
Disruption in teaching	Frequent, as teachers are assigned additional work w r t census, family planning, election work, etc.	Nil, teachers no longer remain government servants.
Dropout cases	Quite alarming	Expected to reduce significantly due to enhanced accessibility, constant persuasion by teacher entrepreneur, flexibility in attendance rule, absence of exam-stress.
Other advantages		
(a) Per student expenditure	Rs 2,800 per year	Rs 1,200 per year
(b) Coverage	94 per cent	100 per cent
(c) Playground	Not available at many places.	Available everywhere
(d) Student's achievements	Highly unsatisfactory	Expected to maintain the state-prescribed minimum level of learning. Less (negligible).
(e) Scope of corruption	More	

Note: The information regarding the present system has been compiled from various sources mentioned in the References.

system sustainability. For the longer term, there are issues of sustainability in the evolution of the formal and informal systems as well as the private and public systems.

Vimala Ramachandran, in 'Community Participation in Primary Education: Innovations in Rajasthan, *EPW*, June 23, 2001 writes, "Rajasthan has the distinction of being the home of a range of highly visible innovations in primary education and women's development. ...Sustainability of innovation has remained a problem in the state. ...People across the country are asking about the sustainability of innovations, especially when the bureaucracy does not wholeheartedly endorse such innovations. Rajasthan seems to be more susceptible than other regions of the country. Is it because the administrative culture of the state is still feudal and rooted in individual charisma and loyalty?"

EPW editorial (August 25-31, 2001), 'Primary Education: New Labels for Old', 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. ...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.

- 4 India's parliament in November 2001 passed unanimously the 93rd constitutional amendment assuring all Indian children of the basic right to elementary education.
- 5 The ability to read and write, as mentioned in this paper, is in the spirit of prescribed minimum level of learning (MLL) at the primary level.
- 6 A saying in Tamil 'Ennum Ezuthum Kan Ena Thagum' meaning numbers and letters are two eyes of a person.
- 7 Anklesharia-Aiyar (2002): "In countries like China teachers are hired on renewable three years contracts. Teachers that perform can get double promotions, drones can be sacked."
- 8 For an engaging debate between Sen and Swami over the issue of private tuitions read 'Amartya Sen Revisited', *The Times of India*, November 24, 2002.
- 9 *EPW* editorial op cit. The teachers (under Orissa's NFE Programme) have been working on a meagre salary of Rs 200 per month since 1996, many of them in remote, inaccessible districts of the state.
Chen, op cit SSK teachers are mostly females, appointed and supervised by the community, and paid about Rs 1,000 monthly, manifold less than formal teachers. Informal systems over time will have to address the severe disparity in teacher salaries.
- 10 Chen, op cit. "The Pratchi and BRAC surveys both underscored worries about educational quality, curricular content, and child learning. Of grades three and four students who did not obtain private tutoring, only 7 per cent could write their names in West Bengal."
- 11 Swaminathan S Anklesharia Aiyar, op cit

writes: "Educational vouchers are an alternative way of empowering students. The government can give all students educational vouchers, usable to pay fees in schools of their choice. Private schools should compete with government ones for students. Parents will be empowered by the right to choose schools. Schools that do not perform will lose their students, and their funding."

- 12 As it involves public fund, the possibility of 'hand-in-glove' misappropriation by an ignorant guardian, a greedy teacher, and a cut-addict functionary of the state does exist.
- 13 The Tapas Majumdar committee laid out the macro-level financing picture, recommending that investment in education be increased from the current 3.8 to 6 per cent of GDP. With nearly all state governments running up huge fiscal deficit (debt burdens), finding the extra funds will not be easy. Yet, an expansion of public budgets for education, even modest levels for critical inputs, is essential.
- 14 Construction materials-bricks 10,000; cement 45 bags; stone chips 4 brass; iron 4 quintals. Sand, etc, as required.
- 15 The cost can be reduced by opting for thatched/ tiled roof in place of RCC roof; half-wall in place of full walls.
- 16 In Bangladesh, BRAC, a non-governmental organisation, has developed 'informal' schools for children that now service 1.1 million children at \$ 19 (19X 47=Rs 893) per student per year. In our case it is Rs 1,200 per student per year.
- 17 Private entrepreneurship is an indispensable ingredient in economic development over the long term. However, in present context, private entrepreneurship may be reluctant to undertake the risks associated with new ventures in rural areas.
According to the Public Report on Basic Education in India (PROBE – 1999) in many of the sample villages, private schools are a flourishing business.

References

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