

EDUCATION

Quality vs Numbers

One of the objectives that the United Progressive Alliance government has set for itself is the universalisation of primary education (classes I-V) by 2007 and elementary education (classes I-VIII) by 2010. The recent meeting of the governing council of the national mission of the Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (SSA), however, revealed some dispiriting statistics: A dropout rate of nearly 53 per cent at the elementary level, while at the primary level, the dropout rate is around 34 per cent. At the same time, there is little difference in dropout rates for boys and girls; ironically the dropout percentage is marginally higher for boys at the primary level (35.85 per cent compared to 33.72 per cent for girls). Enduring explanations for dropout rates have been a shortage of quality instructors, teacher absenteeism, lack of facilities as well as inadequate supervision by local authorities. Since 1994, the National Institute for Educational Planning and Administration's (NIEPA) District Information System for Education (DISE) has been monitoring the effective allocation and implementation of programmes such as the SSA and DPEP. In its latest report, *District Report Cards 2004*, DISE provides data on key education indicators for 539 districts across 25 states; for the first time, the north-eastern states have also been brought under its ambit.

According to DISE, education indicators continue to be dismal across Bihar, ranked among the poorer literate states, especially at the upper primary level (Classes VI-VIII). In states such as Bihar, Orissa and Uttar Pradesh, in the rush for improving primary enrolment figures, the enrolment in the upper primary sections has been neglected. While this reflects an inability of the school system to retain children after the primary stage, the quality of education imparted at higher levels is also poor. In Bihar, the number of schools set up after 1995 to cater to students beyond the primary system is abysmally low. Indicators that reveal 'quality', such as blackboards in schools and the proportion of schools with toilets, have revealed some improvements. Enrolment of girls too has seen an improvement but this declines towards the upper primary stage. Overcrowding and teacher shortage continue to remain issues, more at the upper primary than at the primary level.

In contrast, for Himachal Pradesh, literacy rates in most districts are above 70 per cent. The state's efforts to invest in female education have paid off. More upper primary and secondary schools have been set up, especially in rural areas. In Hamirpur, that recorded the highest rate of female literacy in the state (75 per cent), 78.4 per cent of the schools established since 1995 were meant exclusively for upper primary education;

for districts such as Kangra and Kinnaur, the figures are 67.4 per cent and 59.4 per cent respectively. Across the state, indicators such as the pupil-teacher and student-classroom ratios are also low. Some aspects, however, still cause concern. For instance, the number of students passing with percentages above 60, especially at the upper primary level remain equally low in Bihar and Himachal Pradesh.

The disappointing trends in the SSA are also because the 2 per cent cess imposed in budget 2004, to improve allocations to SSA and the midday meal programme, will only be transferred to states in 2005-06. For 250 identified priority districts, allocation is to increase to Rs 5 crore from the earlier Rs 75 lakh. For instance, in the next financial year, Himachal Pradesh will see the creation of a separate directorate to achieve universal elementary education (UEE) with a proposed outlay of Rs 553 crore. This will see the gradual upgrading of many schools. Still, not enough provisions are being made to improve the quality of teaching through investing in training facilities. There are also proposals to merge the midday meal programme with the SSA. A subsuming of the two programmes would appear unnecessary as the human resource development ministry now has more funds – from the education cess – to allocate for the schemes. At the same time, most states have consistently returned education funds as they are unable to effectively utilise them.

More serious issues such as planning, implementation and monitoring dog the SSA. Suggestions have been made to equip and delegate more authority at the block and panchayat levels, to decide, for instance, on the minimum required standards for schools to function; to also enable the village education committee to monitor schools and the functioning of teachers. To ensure quality, rather than an accentuated drive for numbers that look good on paper, education needs to move away from a top-down directed approach to one that is more accountable to the people. **EPW**