

EDUCATION

Much Incoherence

In line with the Common Minimum Programme's (CMP) promise of spending 6 per cent of GDP on education, the 2 per cent cess on central taxes proposed in the budget promises to help the government raise much needed funds for primary education and provide midday meals to school students. The cess would have brought in additional funding that was to accrue to the HRD over and above the central outlay of Rs 11,061 crore (including the higher and secondary education budget of Rs 5,057 crore). But this year, much time will be spent in transferring it to the HRD ministry and then to the states and the real impact of the cess will only show next year. Thus, the HRD ministry's proposals to utilise the accruals from the cess to increase the allocations for elementary education will have to wait for next year. The ministry had identified 250 priority districts, on the basis of demographic patterns – population of scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and minorities in the district. The allocation for each district was proposed to be raised to nearly Rs 5 crore from Rs 75 lakh. But now, even funds actually mobilised may not be spent this year since the department of elementary education has not been provided proportionately larger resources.

The allocations under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) remain the same, with earlier schemes such as Operation Blackboard and the Education Guarantee Scheme subsumed under it. However, the SSA is also implemented with the help of substantial external assistance, largely from the World Bank, DFID and the European Commission. On the other hand, a programme like District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) which is supposed to cover 18 states as a part of the strategy of universalising elementary education, has seen a sharp reduction in allocation over the years. The present budget has slashed Rs 200 crore off from the district education programme.

Using additional funds remains an uphill task, as expenditure patterns of the HRD ministry and state governments show. For the past decade, most states have consistently spent much less than was allocated to them by the centre under the DPEP and SSA. The major reason for this has been the inability of many of them to undertake the entire range of planned activities resulting in fund underutilisation. The district educational establishment is not equipped with the capacity and manpower resources to spend such huge amounts of funds within a year. Another reason for the inability of states to utilise funds has been the SSA's requirement that states contribute 25 per cent of the amount proposed to be spent; from 2007, this will rise to 50 per cent. Already many states are finding it difficult to provide their share and these constraints will rise as states are expected to make a corresponding rise in contribution to elementary education following the centre's example in the budget. In the CAG report of 2002, another reason cited is non-release of grants by the centre, owing to the availability of unspent balances with state governments.

Despite the enhanced allocation, there still remains the problem of delivery, especially with regard to education and cooked midday meals on a regular basis. The prime minister recently pointed to the dysfunctional nature of government delivery mechanisms, where the good proposed is undone because state governments do not cooperate, teachers remain absent, children soon drop out and funds do not reach the needy. Pumping in more funds will serve little purpose unless appropriate transparency and accountability mechanisms are also in place. This actually implies not more expenditure, but a reorganisation of the education superstructure. **EPW**