

A Sorry State

Several states have reacted with consternation to the revision, as proposed by the 11th Five-year Plan, of funding patterns to the government's flagship programme for universalisation of elementary education (UEE), the Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (SSA). The revision that would imply a shift away from the present 75:25 pattern between the centre and the states to 50:50 has also been specified in the SSA's statement of objectives, but the mid-term appraisal of the 10th Plan had recommended a continuation of the 75:25 pattern to enable the SSA achieve its objectives by 2010. Several states such as Rajasthan and Bihar have already lowered their respective budgetary outlays on education citing a shortfall of funds.

The SSA's progress has been varied and uneven across states and on parameters such as enrolment, learning levels, infrastructure, ability of teachers and community participation. The focus of governments at central and state levels, as recent studies such as Pratham's survey of education 2006 establish, has been on tom-tomming successes in raising enrolment targets that stand an impressive 93 per cent across India. Yet out-of-school children are 3.5 per cent of the 20.21 crore children in the 6-14 population group. More than 50,000 out-of-school children are concentrated in 24 districts in the states of West Bengal (9) and Bihar (11); the remaining four districts lie in the states of Assam, Chhattisgarh, and Orissa. Moreover, enrolment figures do not reveal actual attendance levels, even as the quality of education imparted is abysmal. The Pratham study revealed for example that in Kerala, Uttarakhand, West

Bengal, Bihar and Chhattisgarh, less than 25 per cent of children currently studying in class V were able to read a story of class II level with some ease. And the proportion of children at the same level unable to read at this level is higher for other states, i e, nearly 50 per cent children in Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh. In another instance, a survey by the National Council of Education Research and Training reveals that there are 6,014 primary schools in the country without a single teacher.

In the north-east, where the centre-state allocation patterns have been at 90:10, the SSA's progress has been halting. Monitoring reports available from Meghalaya and Mizoram reveal the varied quality of civil works that depend on the timely release of funds from the district monitoring committee, the ineffectiveness of the village education committees, and the lack of data on out-of-school children. The proposed revisions in allocation could affect such states dramatically.

The centre's inability to meet its own proposed allocations on education as well as protests from states reveal the lackadaisical attitude that persists towards elementary education. Some states have been efficient in using allocated funds, but the gap to reach the SSA's objectives of UEE by 2010 remains a yawning one. The Central Advisory Board of Education had estimated in 2005 that the outlay for education needed to be raised by Rs 10,000 crore in 2006-07 so as to be able to fulfil targets under the 2002 Right to Education Act. But gross budgetary allocations for SSA have dropped below Rs 3,000 crore in recent years. Most states such as Karnataka and Rajasthan, unable to meet their allocations, are now seeking the help of corporate groups. But such initiatives can at best only supplement the larger, coordinated efforts that are required, especially to reach more inaccessible areas as in the north-east and more deprived groups. **EPW**