

Is it really possible?

AMARJEET SINHA

‘It is noteworthy that among the several articles in part-IV, only Article 45 speaks of a time limit, no other article does. Has it no significance? Is it a mere pious wish, even after 44 years of the Constitution?’ asked the judges, while declaring education up to the age of 14 years to be a fundamental right in the J.P. Unni Krishnan Case 1993. The judges agreed with the statement in the Bandhua Mukti Morcha case that ‘right to education is implicit in and flows from the right to life guaranteed by Article 21.’

This landmark judgement transformed an incremental developmental goal set by the National Policy of Education 1986, of ‘universal elementary education of satisfactory quality by the turn of the century’, into an entitlement of all children up to the age of 14 years. By clearly rejecting economic capacity arguments for elementary education, the Supreme Court demanded a sense of urgency from the state, defined in Article 12 of the Constitution as ‘the national, state and the local government’. The Tapas Majumdar Committee (1999) reiterated that the financial implications of a fundamental right to elementary education is well within the national commitment of 6 % GDP for the education sector.

What has happened since then? Have things really moved? Is it really possible to make elementary education a fundamental right? Do we have the political will to have adequate number of publicly funded, well-equipped schools that are more accountable, attractive and autonomous? Does not the rise of large scale privately funded schools tell a tale of the decline of the public system and the growing inequalities in society?

Do we really reflect on the learning needs of the diversity of under 14 children and provide for a range of interventions to meet their learning needs? Are we doing enough to improve the health of children and reduce the poverty of households to improve the successful completion of schooling by poor children? Are girls really welcome in schools and have parents accepted their right to basic education? Can mindsets of teachers that poor children will never learn, ever change? Does a constitutional amendment making elementary education a fundamental right really alter anything?

How will a central legislation help? Isn’t the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan’s goal of eight years of elementary schooling for all by 2010 an ambitious one? Will we ever encourage education for life in schools? What about the difficult regions like Bihar, UP, Orissa, with their large out of school children? Can the success of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh be replicated in these backward regions as well? Will we ever succeed in improving the management of education by making it transparent, effective and efficient? Will teachers finally stop running after postings?

We are in 2004, a year after 2003 when all 6-14 age children were to be in school – education guarantee schools/alternate schools/back to school camps/bridge courses – had Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan goals been achieved. Information gathered from states as well as independent studies does suggest a significant decline in the number of out of school children, that the number of 6-14 age out of school children is down to 10 million from nearly 40 million in 1998-99. The evidence about children in school and learning, however, is still unsatisfactory, as demonstrated by weak reading and writing skills even in classes III and IV.

Has something happened over the last decade to change our perceptions, to indicate that it is possible to honour the right to elementary education? Is there an emerging political will pushing for universal elementary education? Do politicians consider quality basic education important to their vote gathering agenda? Has basic education begun to be understood as the only sustainable way of promoting social justice? Will the learning aspirations of 200 million children in the 6-14 age group be honoured? Is the quest for schooling going to translate into education, learning and completion for all?

As recently as 1998-99, only 43% girls and 56% boys completed elementary education in the 15-19 age group. Clearly, there is some distance to covered if the goal of eight years of successful completion of elementary education by 2010 is to be achieved. The large inter-state differences in 6-14 age girls attending schools (54.1% in Bihar in 1998-99 as compared to 97.4% in Kerala in the same year), the gaps in performance of children belonging to SC/ST families as compared to others (NSS 1997), makes SSA goals appear daunting indeed.

For a country that as recently as 1986-87 (42nd Round NSS) had 42% of its children in rural areas that never enrolled in school, 7-8% enrolled but discontinued and only 50% currently enrolled, the failure of basic education in the first four decades of freedom is shocking. But is the state of affairs really so dismal so as to kill all hope? Has something changed in the latter half of the 1990s that generates some hope?

The regional differences begin to blur on the issue of learning achievements. Children are not learning enough even in the so-called educationally better off states like Kerala, Himachal Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. Studies on completion, on learning and figures of children securing more than 60% at class V level continue to be a serious challenge for the schooling revolution. There is a long way from school going to translate into effective learning. This calls for an even more serious assessment of what we want children to learn and to assess whether the formal schooling system builds on or breaks the context of learning from the natural, cultural and social environment of the children. Learning can only be reinforced by the use of greater flexibility in curriculum, language, diverse learning materials in local cultural contexts and most of all, greater focus on individual learning needs of children with a framework that allows them to develop at their own pace with additional support when required.

The issue of relevance of basic education has also been highlighted by many critiques of universal elementary education. The principle of *samanvaya* (integration of mental and physical development) so critical to the Gandhian basic education system, needs to be revisited, especially in the light of a common perception that links education to a narrow pursuit of white collar employment. The failure of basic education to develop respect for physical/manual labour is a serious one as it interferes with the notion of education, not only for learning skills but for life. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan is an opportunity to re-visit the issue of relevance, especially at the upper primary level.

The last decade has seen a strong articulation for education from the poorest households. Even low cost, functional initiatives have attracted children in large numbers, despite a series of bad rainfall years. Poor parents perceive value in education and are willing to make adjustments to support their children, including girls, in schools. The demand for basic education facility in every habitation has become a symbol of social assertion with hitherto unprivileged communities demanding a school of their own, however under-funded it may be.

Travelling in the remote corners of Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, Orissa or Jharkhand, one is struck by the enthusiasm in the community for local education, low cost, local teacher run facility. Tribal girls in a Balika Shikshan Shivir in Baran district of Rajasthan, tribal girls from the KBK districts of Orissa in low cost hostels, child labour in back to school camps of MV Foundation in Andhra Pradesh, the community enthusiasm for special summer camps for reading skills for urban deprived children by Pratham in Mumbai, Delhi and other cities, all tell a tale of community assertion for quality schooling. Is the state responding adequately? Are mindsets changing? Are adequate resources being provided and matched with effective decentralization and school autonomy? Are the demands of poor people for quality education being reflected in national and state level resource allocation? Do poor people really matter?

Clearly, the formal system is taking a long time to improve its accountability. Education administrators are still grappling with effective and efficient management of schools, reluctant to shed powers to elected representatives and school committees. Transfer of teachers, deployment of teachers against fake enrolments, non-accountability of school systems to local people, continue to be in the mystified domain of powerful bureaucracies. Decentralization is paid lip-service when it comes to shedding powers over teachers and schools. Transparency is shunned and corruption reigns supreme in many states in matters like teacher appointment and deployment. Teachers continue to dodge processes of local accountability and *sarpanches* manage to keep communities away from exercising greater control over schools.

Parent teacher associations and elected school education committees have stepped in to demand improved schools, but their voice is often drowned in the fathomless educational bureaucracy. Teacher development and establishment of institutions of excellence to support this process at cluster, block, district and state levels is still weak in many states. These institutions are often seen as a dumping ground for those unwanted as education

administrators or preferred options for those teachers not wanting to teach in remote locations.

Will we ever achieve the goals of SSA if we do not focus on the reform and decentralization agenda, school autonomy and institutional development thrust? The answer is an emphatic no. But then, this is what the framework of SSA expects states to initiate and adopt. The challenge of SSA is to change the mindset of education bureaucracies and teachers, to make them responsible for meeting the learning needs of all children after providing the resources at their command to do so. The challenge is to create basic minimum learning conditions for all children in all schools/learning centres/all habitations.

The apathy of the state reflects in the slow pace of effective decentralization and community control for local level accountability of the school system. With the proliferation of private unaided schools and the parental preference for such schools, government funded schools today are catering largely to the poor. Any significant improvement in their performance, therefore, will have positive consequences for poverty reduction. The withdrawal of children of the elite from government schools has also led to their decline as those charged with maintaining government schools do not suffer if the school functions irregularly or ineffectively.

Given the political clout of the teaching community in many states, efforts at making them locally accountable are fiercely resisted, often with success. The choice before the political and bureaucratic elite today is whether to side with an unaccountable school system or to ensure that poor children get quality education through well-endowed and effectively managed government schools. The Kendriya Vidyalayas, the Navodaya Vidyalayas, the specially endowed schools in some states, are examples suggesting that government funded schools can also be properly endowed and well run.

The starting point for SSA has been an intensive habitation based household survey to ascertain where the under 14 children are. These household survey forms, stitched together, are expected to form the Education Register, to be available in the local school. This register, prepared in collaboration with local communities, has to be updated annually to record the progress of children in the school system. Community owned school registers are already being maintained in Madhya Pradesh with effective outcomes under the supervision of the Rajiv Gandhi Mission.

Habitation planning is a reality in Andhra Pradesh. Periodic household surveys are the norm under Rajasthan's *Shiksha Aapke Dwaar* programme. Many chief ministers have expressed a strong political will to honour the right to education through community contact programmes, special interventions and over all support for universal elementary education. The constitutional amendment making elementary education a fundamental right and the comprehensive SSA programme is an opportunity for states to move towards honouring the right to elementary education. It is not simply a resource issue; it is equally important a reform issue as well, as no amount of resources will be a substitute

to a fundamental change in the mindsets of those who currently control and manage the school systems.

There surely are many signs of hope. Involvement of elected representatives of panchayats and parents of children in schools has increased in most states. The Supreme Court's intervention for hot cooked meals in schools had an impact with more states complying with its instructions. There are more resources available at school level to meet the contingent needs of teaching/learning materials, school repairs and maintenance, and petty grants. New textbooks are available to most students, generally on time. School facilities have improved with the thrust on VEC led school construction efforts.

Government and local body schools look more attractive these days on account of school maintenance support and large scale, low cost teaching materials that have been developed, though not adequately used, in many schools through teacher and school grants. Teacher development programmes have increased and in many states, block and cluster resource centres are functioning effectively for teacher support. Household and school surveys have generated enthusiasm in teaching the out of school children. A diversity of interventions like residential and non-residential bridge courses for 9-14 age children have made it possible to provide for age specific mainstreaming of older children who are out of school. Education guarantee schools and other forms of alternate schooling in unserved habitations has led to an access revolution of sorts, however ill-equipped and under-funded the initiative may be.

Large scale recruitment of locally selected but generally Higher Secondary pass teachers, at lower than pay scale, has become a reality even in states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, even though teacher vacancies continue to be staggering in some of the educationally backward states. While there can be no alternative to a well paid and well trained teacher in the long run, the short run evidence indicates that low emoluments are not coming in the way of teacher effectiveness. SSA norms of a teacher for a group of 40 children, primary schools where numbers justify their conversion from alternative forms, upper primary schools as per need, possible interventions for disabled children, preparation of ten year perspective district elementary education plans reflecting the uncovered gaps in universalization, are sending strong messages of the right to elementary education.

Surely, we live in times of change, times of demand for quality elementary education from the poorest households. While SSA is a minimalist programme for guaranteeing basic learning conditions, nothing prevents the central government and states from adding onto the framework in the context of special needs. Even when the bulk of expenditure under SSA is for improving the formal school, a lot of the criticism is about promoting alternative under-funded learning centres. There are instances where SSA funds are actually being used to strengthen the alternative learning centre and develop it into a well-endowed formal school.

The sobering thought is that on both reform and resource, we need to move much faster. The government's own assessment of resources in the financial memorandum to Parliament for the constitutional amendment bill to make elementary education a fundamental right was Rs 98,000 crore over ten years. Even this commitment is not being honoured in the annual allocations, significant increases notwithstanding, and is a serious cause of concern as the Parliament had approved the amendment, including the financial memorandum.

All arguments of fiscal constraints vanish into thin air as ultimately it is a matter of priority, a question of whether elementary education of poor children really matters. Given that it is mostly poor children who throng government/local body schools, any effort at their improvement is directly pro-poor. For a nation striving for global eminence, eight years of quality schooling for all is the minimum requirement for sustainably enhancing human capital and banishing poverty.

Resources alone, however, are only part of the solution. Equally crucial are reforms to effectively decentralize down to school level, allow for local initiatives, make communities manage the affairs of the school, encourage transparency and social audit, focus on institutional capacity development for quality and excellence, and most of all, develop an accountable public system of schooling. Effective decentralization is inconceivable without a strong emphasis on micro-planning and habitation based planning. Communities ought to have the right to plan for the educational needs of their children.

Broad norms would be acceptable but denying the community a role in planning interventions and expecting it to play a limited role in execution is not the way in which school autonomy and effective decentralization can be nurtured. Much greater investment on developing skills among teachers and community leaders for effective management of schools is required for effective decentralized management. Forms of social audit that allow full transparency in maintenance of school records will be needed if schools have to acquire autonomy in real terms. the SSA framework provides the space for many such efforts, only if reform is at the top of the agenda of states.

The challenge of seeing all children in school, children learning and completing eight years of elementary schooling by 2010, is indeed a daunting one. It not only requires more resources, but major reforms as well. Reforms necessarily question existing power relations. If schools are to exercise more autonomy, others above in the chain must be willing to shed power. Similarly, for institutions (CRC, BRC, DIET, SCERT) to develop as centres of excellence, the selection criteria must be transparent and clear responsibilities earmarked. Large bureaucracies often cover up non-performance as the outcome orientation is weak. The challenge, therefore, is to look at changes in power relations in the school system.

The poor are demanding education. The fact that hungry, malnourished faces throng in schools, both in rural and urban areas in enrolment drives gives reason for hope. Not doing enough to keep them in schools will become ground for despair. Hope never dies in a democracy. Political democracy has taken great strides in independent India with the poor participating in large numbers, during elections at all levels. Leaders from hitherto unprivileged communities are today in positions of power. It is an opportunity for them to honour their commitment to social justice.

Remember, the children who are not in school are from poor families in rural and urban India, mostly girls and children from dalit, minority and tribal households, eking out a living as agricultural labourers, migrant labourers, construction workers, as destitute women, or as lowly paid seasonal labourers. Even they have demanded quality schooling for their children. Let democracy not fail them.

* The views expressed are entirely personal.