

Primary Education in India: Current Status and Future Challenges

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INTRODUCTION

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Education can act as a powerful tool for reducing poverty and unemployment, improving health and nutritional standards, and achieving a sustained human development-led growth¹. Within the purview of overall education, primary education is recognized as a basic human right, vital both to the development of individuals and societies². In India, since independence, more importance has been given to higher education. According to the Indian Constitution, education has been a state subject and, therefore, for many years, provision for education in the Union Budget has been minimal. Within the overall amount allocated for education, spending on primary education has been much lower as compared to higher and technical education. However, around the seventies, importance attached to primary education started to increase. This got reflected in constitutional reforms, policy initiatives, and allocation of funds in the Union Budget. In 1976, education was put under the 'Concurrent List' of the Constitution, denoting joint respon-

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KEY WORDS

Right to Education
Indian Constitution
School Vouchers
Cascade Training
Para-teachers
Universal Elementary
Education
Non-formal Education

¹ World Bank (2004). *Attaining the Millennium Development Goals in India: Role of Public Policy and Service Delivery*, Human Development Unit, South Asian Region, June.

² UNESCO (2008). *A View inside Primary Schools: A World Education Indicators Cross-national Study*, Montreal: UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

sibility of the central and state governments. The New Education Policy (NEP) was announced in 1986 and subsequently revised in 1992. The revised NEP envisaged universal access to enrolment and retention of all children in the age group of 6-14 and substantial improvement in quality of education to enable all children attain essential levels of living³ thereby highlighting the greater importance of primary education. This is also indicated by the fact that until 1985-86, the allocation of funds for plan⁴ spending on primary education was the lowest and on higher education was the highest. Thereafter, funding for primary education gradually increased and reached the highest level among all the sectors of education⁵. Along with this, several initiatives were taken to improve the state of primary education in the country. Some of these initiatives are described below.

After more than 40 years of planned development, many schools lacked basic amenities. To address this issue, 'Operation Blackboard' was launched in 1987.⁶ It aimed at providing at least two rooms in all primary schools and one room in upper – primary schools (grade VI to VIII), along with two teachers in the former and a minimum of one teacher in the latter. Additionally, there was also provision for teaching-learning material (TLM) which teachers can use. Since the scheme was launched with the initiative of the central government, there was difficulty in making provision for and sustaining the funds towards salary of teachers, which was

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the responsibility of the respective state governments. Along the same time in 1987-88, primarily with the help of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), the programme on Non-Formal Education (NFE) was launched for children who had either dropped out of school or were not able to attend school as they were involved with work in the household or elsewhere. In this scheme, classes were conducted at a centre for two hours, mostly

in the evenings. However, due to low remuneration, rigidity in implementation, and inadequate supervision and management support, NFE had limited success. Another scheme, 'National Child Labour Project' (NCLP), was launched in 1998-99, specifically to educate the children who were engaged as labourers. Through 85 projects in 10 states, this scheme covered more than 1,80,000 children. In 1994, at the initiative of the central government, one of the most ambitious projects, 'District Primary Education Plan,' (DPEP) was launched in 42 districts in 7 states, which was later expanded to 214 districts in 15 states, covering about 60 per cent of the primary schools in the country. Some of the unique features of DPEP were the autonomy provided to districts in planning, implementation of the programme through

respective state governments, and an emphasis on a holistic approach to universalization of elementary education. As per the need, participating districts were granted autonomy for improving school infrastructure, providing for early childhood education before Grade I, teachers' training, and bringing the children out of their homes to take them to school. After DPEP, which covered children in Grade I to V, central government launched the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (Universalization of Elementary Education) around year 2000. This was aimed at enrolment and retention of all children in the age group of 6-14 in classes up to VIII by 2010. In 1995, the Government of India launched a new 'centrally-sponsored scheme'—the National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education. Under this programme, all government and government-aided primary schools were expected to provide cooked mid-day

³ (http://education.nic.in/Elementary/main_final.pdf)

⁴ The 'plan' component of the spending denotes expenditure on new schemes and programmes, while 'non-plan' spending represents spending of recurring nature on schemes and programmes initiated earlier.

⁵ Srivastava, Ravi (2005). "Public Expenditure in Elementary Education," In Mehrotra, S; Panchmukhi, PR; Srivastava, S and Srivastava, R (Eds.), *Universalizing Elementary Education in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

⁶ Jhingaran, Dhir (2003). "Universalization of Elementary Education: Government Policies and Perspectives," In Naila Kabeer, Nambissan, Geetha B and Subrahmanian, Ramya (Eds.), *Child Labour and the Right to Education in South Asia : Needs versus Rights*, New Delhi: Sage Publications.

meals to all children within two years. The period of two years was given as time for preparation, during which all enrolled children were to be provided with foodgrains. However, this transition from foodgrains to cooked meals did not take place until 2001, when the Supreme Court ordered all State governments to provide cooked mid-day meals to all children within a period of six months⁷.

These initiatives at several levels, spread across more than three decades, resulted in many positive outcomes with respect to primary education across the country. As per the data, in 2005, there were 10,37,813 primary schools in 581 districts in the country out of which more than 86 per cent were located in the rural areas⁸. In most parts of the country, children studying in Grade I to V have a minimum education facility available to them within a radius of one km and, for Grade VI to VIII, within three kms of their residence. More than 93 per cent of the school-going children in the age group of 6-14 are enrolled in schools. Several academic and admin-

istrative innovations were initiated by teachers and government functionaries across the country⁹. However, these statistics are dampened by the fact that more than 49 per cent of the children drop out from the school before they reach Grade VIII. A large number of those children who remain in the school till Grade V are not able to acquire reading and numerical competencies of Grade II level¹⁰. It is in this backdrop that this Colloquium aims to understand the issues regarding primary education.

The first contribution by Amit Kaushik examines the issues that revolve around the 'Right to Education' and the long and winding journey it has been through. Parth Shah has proposed the concept of vouchers in schools for children, which gives them the right to choose the school they want. Madhav Chavan approaches the issue of managing schools in a more innovative and effective manner through a new framework. The last two contributions by Caroline Dyer and Vimala Ramachandran, are devoted to issues related to teachers' recruitment and training. ✓

The Right to Education Bill and Its Implications for Elementary Education

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The Context

The history of the Right to Education in India has been a chequered one; The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Bill, 2008, introduced in the Rajya Sabha on December 15, 2008, represents only the latest manifestation of the evolution of this right. Historically, education in this country has almost always been socially exclusive, with education being restricted to a select few; till almost the end of the nineteenth century, education was a privilege afforded only to some,

largely on the basis of their caste backgrounds, with those from the lower castes being excluded from the formal education system. It was only in the last years of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth that compulsory primary education began to be viewed as something desirable for all, partly because of the work done by reformers like Raja Ram Mohun Roy, Swami Vivekananda, Dadabhai Naoroji, Jyotiba Phule and others, and partly as it became a demand of the free-

⁷ Drèze, Jean and Goyal, Aparajita (2003). "Future of Mid-Day Meals," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 38(44), 4673-4683.

⁸ Mehta, Arun C (2005). *Elementary Education in India: Progress towards UEE, Analytical Report*, New Delhi: National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration.

⁹ Chand, Vijaya Sherry and Choudhary, Geeta Amin (2006). *Shiksha Sangam: Innovations Under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*, Ravi J Matthai Centre for Educational Innovation, Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad.

¹⁰ ASER Institute (2009). *Annual Status of Education Report ASER (Rural)*, Mumbai: Pratham India Education Initiative.

¹¹ Former civil servant and Director, Department of Elementary Education & Literacy, Ministry of HRD (2001-2006).

dom struggle.¹²

However, while the demand for compulsory primary education was articulated during the freedom movement, it was not actually translated, as one might have expected, into a fundamental right when the Constitution was drafted. The debate about education when the Constitution was being written reflected the debate about governance itself—opponents of universal adult franchise argued that giving the right to vote to every citizen without linking it to literacy could possibly distort our fledgling democracy. Those who supported universal adult franchise argued on the other hand, that while it was essential to ensure that every citizen was educated by the State within a defined time-frame for democracy to succeed in the long run, every citizen should nevertheless have a vote regardless. Thus, while the framers of our Constitution agreed that education was the bedrock on which our democracy should eventually rest, they were unable to include primary education as a fundamental right in the Constitution of the new Republic. Instead, they compromised by exhorting the State to “endeavour” to provide free and compulsory education to all children below the age of 14 years within a period of ten years from the commencement of the Constitution under Article 45 of the Directive Principles of State Policy. The reason the cut-off was fixed at 14 years (hence restricting the responsibility of the State for education to the elementary stage only) was the argument that since children below 14 years could not be employed in labour under the law, it was appropriate and fitting that they be kept in an educational institution till they reached that age.

It has often been argued that a lack of education has not actually hampered our citizens in the exercise of their

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democratic rights. We have after all, had several national and state elections since 1951 in which the voter has spoken his mind regardless of his educational status; the latest example of this is the mandate given to the Congress party in the just concluded general election. But a lack of education does hamper the citizen’s engagement with the institutions of democracy, as it “affects the ability of people to transcend the situation in which they find themselves at birth, impairs their ability to negotiate the maze of institutions that sur-

round them, robs them of self-esteem and confidence and silences the voice of the marginalized and the dispossessed.”¹³ Education therefore, must be viewed as an essential prerequisite for a successful democracy.

Unfortunately, however, notwithstanding the founding fathers’ statement of good intentions, little attention was paid to education in the years immediately after 1950. Between 1951 and 1955, public expenditure on education remained less than 1 per cent of the total GDP, and stagnated between 1 and 2 per cent until 1979.¹⁴ And though Education as a subject was moved from the State List to the Concurrent List of the Constitution in 1976 to provide greater flexibility to the Centre in overseeing and improving educational service delivery, it was not until 1993 that the matter really took centre-stage, when the Supreme Court ruled in the now famous case of *J P Unnikrishnan vs the State of Andhra Pradesh* that education was a Fundamental Right flowing from Article 21 that guaranteed the right to life and personal property.

The Court held that “though right to education is not

¹² Aradhya, Niranjana and Kashyap, Aruna (2006). *The ‘Fundamentals’: Right to Education in India*, Bangalore: Books for Change, pp 3-4.

¹³ Ramachandran, Vimala (2007). “Democratic Inequalities: The Dilemma of Elementary Education in India,” in Amit Kaushik (Ed.), *Shiksha: The Challenge of Indian Education*, New Delhi: Buffalo Books.

¹⁴ Sorabjee, Soli J (2005). “Our Constitutional Commitment to Education: Regenerating Values in Our Youth,” in Rajni Kumar, Anil Sethi and Shalini Sikka (Eds.), *School, Society, Nation*, New Delhi: Orient Longman Private Limited.

stated expressly as a fundamental right, it is implicit in, and flows from, the right to life guaranteed under Article 21... (and) must be construed in the light of the Directive Principles of the Constitution.” Therefore, the “right to education, understood in the context of Articles 45 and 41 means (a) every child/citizen of this country has a right to free education until he completes the age of fourteen years and (b) after a child/citizen completes 14 years, his right to education is circumscribed by the limits of the economic capacity of the State and its development.”¹⁵

Despite this strong and unequivocal judgment, it was still some years before concrete action was taken by the Central Government. During this period, the concept of education as a fundamental right became an increasingly important part of public discourse, with academics, civil society organizations, and some political leaders strongly supporting suitable amendment of the Constitution. In 1996, the Saikia Committee was constituted under the leadership of Mr M R Saikia, Minister of State for HRD (Education), with State Education Ministers as its members, to consider the financial, administrative, and legal implications of amending the Constitution to make elementary education a fundamental right. Based on their recommendations, the Constitution (83rd Amendment) Bill was introduced in the Rajya Sabha in 1997, which proposed to introduce Article 21A stating that the State would provide free and compulsory education to all children between the age of six to fourteen years, “...in such manner as the State may, by law, determine.” A significant aspect of this Bill was the fact that it clearly and categorically left unaided private schools out of its ambit.

Note the difference between the directions of the Supreme Court and the text of the Amendment Bill as introduced. While the Court had categorically spoken of all children below the age of fourteen years, the Amendment changed the right to cover only those between the age of six to fourteen years. This modified age group

has continued to the present day, with The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Bill, 2008, also being restricted to this age group as a result of the Constitution (86th Amendment) Act of 2002.

The Constitution (83rd Amendment) Bill of 1997 could not be passed as the government of the day fell shortly thereafter. It was left to the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance government, which came to power in 1999, to withdraw the earlier Bill and reintroduce the revised Constitution (93rd Amendment) Bill, which was finally passed by the Parliament and approved by the President in December 2002 as the Constitution (86th Amendment) Act, 2002.

Educationists are unanimous in their view that the foundations of learning are laid at an earlier age, and that early childhood care and education, covering the needs of children between the ages of 0-6 years, is essential to ensure subsequent success in primary and elementary education.

In keeping with the earlier Bill, the text of the Constitution (86th Amendment) Act remained similar. The Act therefore introduced Article 21A into the Constitution, which stipulates that “The State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of six to fourteen years in such manner as the State may, by law, determine.” Provisions for children below the age of six years were made by amending Article 45 of the Directive Principles of State Policy, to say that the State would “endeavour” to provide early childhood care and education to all children until they reach the age of six years; once again, this is a non-binding provision. Finally, Article 51A (k) was introduced to make it a duty of every citizen who is a parent or a guardian to provide

opportunities for the education of their children or wards. The Act, which made no mention of excluding schools under private management this time, also carried a provision that it would come into force from a date to be notified by the Central Government through a suitable Gazette Notification.

Several criticisms have been levied upon the 86th Amendment (such as its failure to account for all children below the age of fourteen or between fourteen and eighteen, creating an additional citizen’s duty, etc), but the most significant refers to the fact that unlike all other fundamental rights provided under the Constitution,

¹⁵ AIR, 1993, SCC (1) 645.

Article 21A remains dependent upon a law to be enacted by the State. Thus instead of a law flowing from a fundamental right, the fundamental right flows from the law! Notifying the Amendment would clearly have been meaningless without simultaneously enacting the enabling legislation; the time taken to process the latter has meant that the fundamental right has never formally been notified by the Central Government.

The first draft of the enabling Right to Education Bill was circulated in 2003; a revised version was prepared in 2004 based on comments received from State Governments and others. With the UPA government taking power in 2004, the matter was referred to the reconstituted Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE), which suggested “essential provisions” in a report submitted in 2005, which in turn formed the basis of the draft Right to Education Bill, 2005. After a short-lived attempt to circulate this draft to the States as a Model Bill, it was finally introduced, after some significant changes, in the Rajya Sabha in December last year as The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Bill, 2008.

Implications for Elementary Education

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Bill, 2008, as introduced in the Rajya Sabha now, is substantially based on the draft Right to Education Bill, 2005, but omits several of its features. To begin with, the age of entry into school has not been defined, which is a standard requirement in all such legislation across the world. For instance, Section 16 of the Delhi School Education Act, 1973, provides that a child who has not attained the age of five years shall not be admitted to Grade I in a recognized school. In the absence of such a stipulation, children entering Grade I could be anywhere from an age below six years to well above it.

Section 2 (n) of the Bill defines a school as any recognized institution that imparts elementary education. This effectively overlooks all those primary schools, presently recognized, that limit themselves to Grade V, including both government and private schools. Such schools would thus need either to extend the number of their Grades to eight, or run the risk of derecognition under the new law.

Following from the 86th Amendment Act which restricts the fundamental right to children between the ages of six and fourteen years, The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Bill, 2008, also speaks only of the education of children in this age group. However, educationists are unanimous in their view that the foundations of learning are laid at an earlier age, and that early childhood care and education, covering the needs of children between the ages of 0-6 years, is essential to ensure subsequent success in primary and elementary education. The Bill merely exhorts the State to endeavour to make arrangements for the education of children below the age of six years. Given that the educational needs of children between the ages of 14-18 years have also been ignored, the Bill becomes inconsistent with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which India is a signatory, and which stipulates that a child shall be any citizen below the age of 18 years.

The proposed Bill is strongly input-driven, with little discussion of outcomes; various inputs have been stipulated, but outcomes are not mentioned, especially in terms of learning. For instance, the Bill mandates that in order to be recognized, each school will need to comply with the norms and standards prescribed in the attached Schedule. Thus as long as a school provides, say, the requisite number of classrooms as prescribed in the Schedule, it would qualify to be a recognized institution, regardless of whether the teachers actually teach in them or not.

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This is a matter of serious concern, especially when read with the Section in the Bill that states that no child shall be held back in any class. Various reports, including the Annual Status of Education Report 2008¹⁶ facilitated by the NGO, Pratham, have already established that the learning levels of children in our schools are poor, with a significant number of children in Class V unable to exercise skills they should have learnt in Class II. An emphasis only on inputs combined with an automatic promotion policy could lead to a situation where the problem of learning is merely transferred to the secondary stage, and is likely to lead to a further increase in the already high rate of dropout at the latter stage.

Given the concerns about learning expressed above, it is unfortunate that the Bill makes no provision for at least one teacher per class. The accompanying Schedule specifies that there shall be two teachers for every sixty children admitted, three for up to ninety children, and so on. This essentially legitimizes multi-grade teaching, with one teacher handling more than one class in the same classroom. Such a multi-grade situation, to meet the learning needs of marginalized and excluded children, many of whom would also be first generation learners, is more than likely to exacerbate the poor learning situation that already exists. Notwithstanding the success of the odd multi-grade pilot here and there, it is unlikely that large scale replication of this system will be successful, particularly in a situation where teachers have no accountability for learning outcomes. The provisions of the Bill thus make it more like a Bill for the right to schooling as opposed to the right to education.

Schools under private management (both aided and unaided) rose from 15.15 per cent in 2004-05 to 16.86 per cent in 2005-06, and to 18.86 per cent in 2006-07, thus representing less than one-fifth of the total schools in the country.

System (CSS). It is instructive to reproduce here the concluding paragraph of the Commission's discourse on the CSS:

*"If the proposals made above are implemented, we will have created a **common school system of public education embracing three categories of educational institutions—government, local authority and private-aided** (emphasis added)—which form the vast bulk of all the educational institutions at this stage. The residual responsibility for the financial support of this system will be borne entirely by the State, although the local authorities and private management will be raising some resources of their own to supplement State effort. Within this organisation, the existing 'caste' system on the basis of management will largely disappear and a number of common features will be maintained for all schools, such as parity with regard to teachers; common admission policies which will prevent segregation of classes and ensure admissions to all quality institutions on the basis of merit; involvement with local communities; and freedom for experimentation and creativity."*¹⁸

The Bill only requires non-government schools to comply with the requirement of recognition; it appears that schools run by government need neither be recognized nor comply therefore with the norms and standards prescribed by the Bill.

¹⁶ ASER Institute (2009), *Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2008, (Rural)*, Mumbai: Pratham India Educational Initiative.

¹⁷ Indian Education Commission, 1964-66, chaired by Prof P S Kothari.

¹⁸ Government of India (1966). *Report of the Education Commission 1964-66: Education and National Development*, New Delhi: Manager of Publications.

It is pertinent to recall that schools under private management (both aided and unaided) rose from 15.15 per cent in 2004-05 to 16.86 per cent in 2005-06, and to 18.86 per cent in 2006-07,¹⁹ thus representing less than one-fifth of the total schools in the country. If one considers the number of unaided private schools, the number will be even lower. Given that this provision is likely to meet with stiff resistance from private school managements, many of whom will argue that their right to practise a profession or carry out an occupation, trade or business under Article 19 of the Constitution has been compromised, it is not clear yet how this will actually pan out in the implementation. The provision to earmark these seats is further complicated by the fact that while the State promises to reimburse private schools for the expenditure incurred in this process, it does so at its own per child cost of education, which is likely to be far lower than the costs actually incurred by any private school. In all probability, this provision of the Bill will be contested in the courts and we will have to await a final verdict from Their Lordships before actually seeing it translated into practice.

The draft Right to Education Bill, 2005, had stipulated that after the commencement of the Act, teachers would be part of a school-based cadre, with each teacher being allocated to a particular school without concern about being transferred therefrom subsequently. Further, the 2005 Bill had provided that their activities in the school would be supervised by the School Management Committee, comprising parents or guardians of children in the school, local representatives, persons engaged in education, etc., who would even be responsible for sanctioning leave, paying salaries, and the like. These provisions had been included respectively to deal with the menace of transfers faced by teachers across the country, and to ensure that the local community assumed greater responsibility for the affairs of the local school. Unfortunately, both these provisions are miss-

ing from The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Bill, 2008.

Even more surprisingly, while stipulating norms and standards to be followed by each school, the Bill states that the Central Government would be empowered to change these norms as it deems fit; this is a departure from the earlier draft which had empowered the National Commission on Elementary Education to do so in consultation with the Centre and the States. Interestingly enough, the Bill only requires non-government schools to comply with the requirement of recognition; it appears that schools run by government need neither be recognized nor comply therefore with the norms and standards prescribed by the Bill.²⁰

These are significant changes that impact the effectiveness of the legislation. A Bill that ostensibly mandates free and compulsory education for all children but does not have the teeth to enforce this through subsidiary mechanisms is unlikely to change the existing situation in which nearly half of all enrolled children drop out before completion of the elementary stage of education.

The most significant component of any educational system in India will remain the teacher, at least in the foreseeable future. Yet the provisions for ensuring that teachers perform the critical role that may be legitimately

expected of them have either been diluted or removed. We have seen earlier how sections dealing with making them accountable to the local community or decentralising the cadre have been removed. Consider the implications of sub-section (2) of Section 23 of the Bill. This provides that "...Where a State does not have adequate institutions offering courses or training in teacher education, or teachers possessing minimum qualifications as laid down under sub-section (1) are not available in sufficient numbers, the Central Government may, if it deems necessary, by notification, relax the minimum qualifications required for appointment as a teacher, for

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¹⁹ Mehta, Arun C (2008). "Elementary Education in India: Progress towards UEE," New Delhi: NUEPA.

²⁰ See sections 18 and 19, *The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Bill, 2008*.

such period, not exceeding five years, as may be specified in that notification.” Since the Section does not specify that such relaxation will be for five years *from commencement of the Act*, it effectively allows the Government to relax teacher qualifications for five years at a time. Given that several states have already appointed large numbers of under- or poorly-qualified teachers as so-called “para-teachers” or contract teachers at wages lower than those payable to regular teachers, there is a strong budgetary disincentive to moving towards fully qualified teachers at full salaries. This loophole would allow such states to continue with their policy of appointing under-qualified para-teachers, thus compromising on the quality of teaching transacted in the classroom.

Finally, the Bill does not provide for accountability at any level of the system, from the teacher to the administrator. By failing to assign clearly defined responsibilities, the Bill sidesteps the issues of governance of the education system. Should the State fail to meet its obligations under the Bill, it will not be penalized in any manner, nor will the individual government functionaries whose job it is to ensure that the provisions of the Bill are implemented. It has been argued by some that failure to implement the provisions of The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Bill, 2008, should carry with it a personal liability for the administrators concerned, as in the case of the Right to Information Act.

There were nearly 200 million children in the country in the 6-14 year age group in 2005-06.²¹ According to the Annual Status of Education Report 2008, (Rural), 95.7 per cent of the children in this age group in rural areas were enrolled in some form of school—private, government, municipal, alternate, etc.—in 2007.²² Yet the sad fact is that dropout rates at this level continue to remain at almost half; in other words, for every two children who enrol in school in Grade I today, only one is likely

to reach Grade VIII.²³ In such circumstances, any legislative tool that helps to improve these statistics should surely be welcome.

It is not, however, as if The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Bill, 2008, is our first attempt at ensuring the universalization of schooling. Twenty States and/or Union Territories have earlier enacted their own laws for compulsory education. However, most of these laws have only enabling features by which the States can notify areas for free and compulsory education. The existing Acts in most of the States have not been effective for several reasons:

- The onus of compulsion was placed upon the parent or guardian.
- Involvement of the local community was never seen as a necessary part of these Acts.
- The authority under the Act and the geographical area where the Act would apply has never been notified in many States.
- Enforcement of penal provisions was found to be difficult.

Many of these lacunae have ostensibly been addressed in The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory

Education Bill, 2008. There is no doubt that placing the onus for providing free and compulsory education on the State rather than on the parent changes the complexion of the matter to some extent. However, as we have seen above, there are still several gaps in the proposed legislation that could render it ineffective.

Our demographical composition is such that we currently have approximately 70 per cent of our population below the age of 35 years and around 35 per cent below the age of 15 years, although this is expected to fall to 28 per cent by 2016. This young population can translate into a significant future advantage for India but only if we are able to equip the majority with the skills, knowledge, and education that they will need. Developing participative and involved citizens will require

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²¹ Government of India (2007). *Selected Educational Statistics 2005-06*, New Delhi: Ministry of HRD.

²² *Annual Status of Education Report 2008, (Rural)*, *op cit*.

²³ *Selected Educational Statistics 2005-06*, *op cit*.

the school to be more than just a place where children are force-fed the rudimentary skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic. It needs to be an institution that encourages recreation, builds cultural values, and fosters a spirit of citizenship. These aspects are conspicuous by their absence in the present draft of the Bill, even though it speaks of imparting education based on some of these values. Andre Beteille points out that while the school can play a significant role in reducing disparities, it cannot always eliminate them completely.²⁴ Yet the fact that the Constitution of India is based on the principle of equality of opportunity without reference to the accident of birth should compel us to establish and nurture a school system that works to-

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wards minimizing disparities. This can only happen if the laws that govern the education system consciously and carefully focus on going beyond mere mechanical skills.

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Bill, 2008, is no doubt a welcome first step in our journey towards making elementary, and hopefully eventually secondary, education a universal fundamental right available to all children. Yet, by itself, it is unlikely to be up to the task; we will need to take this process further by enacting several such instruments that address various related aspects and the lacunae it leaves so that one day, the vision of our found-

ing fathers is actually translated into reality. ✓

School Choice: Assuring Quality Education to All

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Over the years, India has tried varied approaches to improve enrolment and quality of school education. However, as some recent surveys and data show, there is a huge gap between our aspirations and actual achievements. In the process, we have created a two-tier system of school education. Those who can afford fees go to private schools and those who cannot, go to state schools. This gross inequality in schooling opportunities is the result of our current approach to education.²⁵

India is not the only country where state schools perform poorly. In fact, most of the people across the world are unhappy with the performance of state schools in their countries. The US spends one of the highest amounts per student in the world but education usu-

ally ranks as the second major issue of concern after the economy among her people. In a typical Western country, a vast majority of students go to state schools (almost 90% in the US). What are these countries doing to reform their education systems?

Each national education system is unique in some way and each one tries to fix its problems in its own way. However, one common theme underlying many of the reforms is the empowerment of parents, giving them more voice in the system. State schools are commonly accountable to the Education Department or Ministry. One reform goal is to increase the accountability of schools towards parents—restructure the system so that schools are at least as much accountable to parents as they are to the education officials. There are many ways to achieve this goal: Put parents on school boards or District Education Councils; give powers to Parent-Teacher Associations; create something like our Village Educa-

²⁴ Andre Beteille (2005), "The School as an Institution," in *School, Society, Nation*, *op cit*.

²⁵ website: www.schoolchoice.in

tion Committees. One new idea in this bucket is that of school vouchers. Several countries have undertaken pilot projects. Sweden has actually converted its school education into a universal voucher system where every child, irrespective of parental income, gets a voucher to go to a school of their choice among private or government schools.

School Vouchers: Making Schools Accountable to Parents

The voucher is a tool to change the way governments finance education, particularly of the poor. It is a coupon offered by the government that covers the full or partial cost of education at the school of the student's choice. The schools collect the vouchers from the students and deposit them in their bank accounts; the banks then credit the school accounts with equivalent money while debiting the account of the government. No money actually changes hands, only the vouchers move from the students to the schools, and back to the government.

In the present system, the schools are accountable to the government. The voucher system makes them accountable directly to the students and parents since they pay for their education through vouchers. If a parent does not like her child's school, she can take the voucher to another school. Under the voucher system, money follows the student. In the present system, money follows the school. The school voucher provides:

Choice for students: The voucher empowers poor students so that they can attend a school of their choice. If the school does not meet their expectations, they have the power to change the school.

Equality of opportunity: The scheme satisfies the basic human right that all children are treated equally and equal opportunity for education is provided to all irrespective of cash, caste or creed.

Competition among schools: Today, only private schools compete for students with money. With the introduction of vouchers, government schools will also compete for students, both rich and poor.

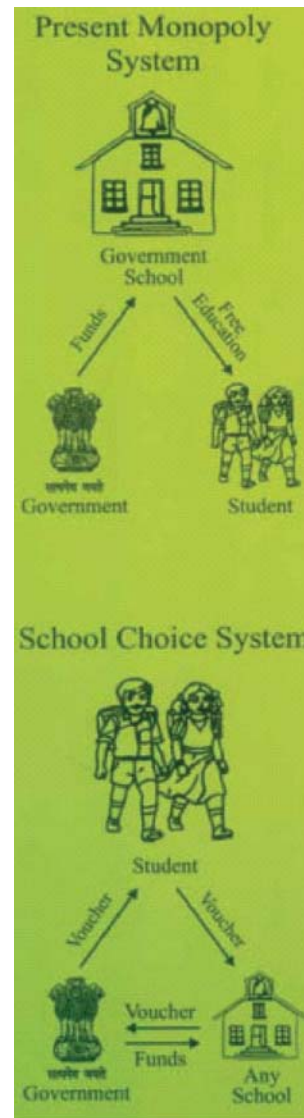
Performance-based payment: The revenue of a school depends on the number of students it has, including both, who pay directly and those who pay through vouchers. Schools therefore have an automatic incentive to improve quality that will increase enrolments and retain students.

Win-Win outcome: Those government school students who get a voucher are able to change schools and do better for themselves. Evidence suggests that even those students who stay in government schools perform better. First, the student-teacher ratio improves and second, the schools become more attentive to stop student numbers from going down further. All students achieve better learning outcomes.

In a voucher system, instead of funding schools, the government funds students. The resultant choice and competition, working together, provide universal access to as well as improvements in the quality education.

Critics and Skeptics: The Ideal School Ecosystem

There are many arguments against school vouchers—from encouraging privatization of education, increasing stratification and discrimination, to being anti-teacher unions and absolving the state from its responsibility to provide education to all. These are serious charges and if they are true, we should indeed look for better alternatives.



In the present system, the schools are accountable to the government. The voucher system makes them accountable directly to the students and parents since they pay for their education through vouchers.

In view of space limitation, I offer only two points for consideration. One, we should not convert the whole education system overnight to vouchers. Like any good public policy idea, we should do pilot projects, assess them vigorously, learn and re-design them, and then scale them up over a period of time. In the judgment of many well-read and well-meaning people, there is enough power in the idea as well as in the experience of diverse countries to try pilot projects in India. We should in fact conduct pilot projects in urban, rural, and tribal areas. That is the first point for the skeptics' consideration.

The second proposition is to outline an ideal school ecosystem that would indirectly answer some of the concerns. It is true that no one can predict with utmost certainty what would be the final ideal system, but it is feasible to imagine an intermediary ideal system. In that scheme, I envision state and private schools existing together; with more autonomy in pedagogy, curricula, and learning assessments; having teachers' unions, probably more in the shape of professional associations across government and private schools; government teachers' salaries being decided by the government (as now) but teachers hired and supervised at the school level (not as now); given the vastness and diversity of India, having 5-7 affiliation boards; and finally, a system where no school gets money directly from the state, instead all schools get their funding from parents (who either pay themselves or through vouchers given by governments).

Vouchers do not annihilate state schools; they make them more accountable to parents and compel them to compete with other schools to which parents can take their children. Most government schools are better equipped than the budget private schools (that charge Rs 50 to 300 per month per student) that the poor use—in terms of infrastructure for libraries, labs, and playgrounds, amount of funds they have per student, and qualification and training

In a voucher system, instead of funding schools, the government funds students. The resultant choice and competition, working together, provides universal access to as well as improvement in quality education.

Vouchers do not annihilate state schools; they make them more accountable to parents and compel them to compete with other schools to which parents can take their children.

of the teachers. On head-to-head competition, government schools should out-compete budget private schools. That does not happen today, but vouchers provide the missing ingredient that will change the incentive structure towards better performance of state schools.

Voucher Pilots in India

The idea of school voucher is similar to that of democracy—each comes in many shapes and sizes. More than 100 countries in the world are known

as democracies. Each one is similar in some and very different in other ways, but they are all democracies. Each voucher pilot is similar to other pilots in some manner but different in some other areas. The idea can be adapted to address varied problems and situations.

PAHAL in Uttarakhand: An Innovative PPP (private-public partnership) initiative has been providing school vouchers to children (6-14 yrs) who are rag-pickers, scavengers, snake-charmers, or orphans. The eligibility criterion is that the child should have never enrolled or has been a drop-out for at least a year and that there is no government school/EGS centre (Education Guarantee Scheme) within a kilometer of the habitation. The scheme was started in 2007 in Dehra Dun city and based on its success, a year later, was expanded to Nainital and Udham Singh Nagar with a total of 651 children.

Delhi Voucher Project: This privately-funded programme started in 2007, and is managed by the Centre for Civil Society (CCS) (of which the author is President). CCS awarded school vouchers worth up to Rs. 3,600 per year to 408 students in 68 wards of Delhi.

In these 68 wards, more than 50 School Choice Activists reached out to more than 12 lakh parents. All students studying in Class V or below in government schools qualified for the programme. Over 1.2 lakh parents applied. As a fair and transparent method of selecting students from the large number of applicants, a public lottery was held in each ward



where the local Ward Councilor picked 12 students—6 for the first list and 6 for a buffer list, in case some of the students in the first list had eligibility or acceptance problems.

Those who did not win the lottery submitted a petition to their Ward Councilor demanding school vouchers from the government. More than 2.5 lakh parents submitted voucher demand. On July 26, 2007, the vouchers were awarded to the winners in the presence of the Delhi Chief Minister, Sheila Dikshit, and the Education Minister, Arvinder Singh Lovely.

Gyanodaya Yojana, Rajasthan: The Yojana is meant to facilitate opening up of new schools for Classes VI to XII under Public-Private Partnership on a BOO (Build, Operate and Own) basis. In the first phase, a maximum of five such schools will be set up in each district. Fifty per cent of the seats in these schools will be sponsored by

the state government through school vouchers. The scheme has inbuilt monitoring and evaluation mechanisms and gives preference to girls and under-privileged children.

Shikshak Ka Apna Vidyalaya, Rajasthan: Under this scheme, particular emphasis has been given to the role of trained unemployed teachers. It aims to enhance the access to and quality of primary schools by enabling these teachers to adopt government-run one-teacher primary schools or open new schools in Public-Private Partnership (PPP) in the rural and backward areas of the state. All children living within an area of 3 kms can access these schools with government-sponsored vouchers. Such students will constitute 50 per cent of the school strength, while the remaining students would pay their own fees.

Both the Rajasthan schemes have been announced and are awaiting implementation.

In addition to these models, the following are some of the ways in which voucher pilots could be designed with private or government funds:

- Targeted vouchers could be introduced for specific under-served groups such as migrant children, out-of-school children, street children, girl children, ST/SC/OBC, Muslim children, differently-abled children, orphans, children from economically backward families, children of refugees, migrating tribes, and prisoners, and those living in peri-urban areas (e.g., resettlement colonies). Vouchers could be used to re-

On head-to-head competition, government schools should out-compete budget private schools. That does not happen today, but vouchers provide the missing ingredient that will change the incentive structure towards better performance of state schools.

ward better performance of government schools. When a government school attracts voucher students, who could also go to a private school, the voucher amount could be given to the school/teachers as an incentive.

- Mobile schools for children of migrant populations could be supported by vouchers where one of the educated members of the community runs a school and gets rewarded with the vouchers. This would ensure that children of such communities receive education throughout the year.
- To encourage establishment of

community schools, vouchers could be introduced specially in areas where there are no or very few government schools.

- School vouchers could be used to provide opportunity to enterprising principals/teachers to compete with the best in the industry. Such principals and teachers could opt for more managerial and financial autonomy with 100 per cent funding through vouchers.
- A city or state could decide that all new government schools would be funded through vouchers. The government would fix the voucher amount per student and the school would get money depending on the number of students it attracts and retains. A part of the payment could be tied to learning achievements of students.
- In educationally and economically poor areas, where there are no or very few government schools, universal vouchers can be given to all the children.

Private money is additional money in the system; so, the idea would be fully tested only if the pilots were funded by public money. A state can find money under the Innovations Fund of the SSA or by tapping the incremental part of the education budget, that is, by using the new money added over the last year's budget for voucher pilots without impacting the existing state schools.

Among the many ideas that are being considered to improve school education, vouchers deserve a try. There is sufficient theoretical and empirical evidence to sug-

There is sufficient theoretical and empirical evidence to suggest that vouchers could be the tool to expand choice for the poor, to put genuine pressure on state schools to perform, and to build a system that would strive to offer improved quality of education over time.


- Education shall be directed to the full development of human personality and to the strengthening of

gest that vouchers could be the tool to expand choice for the poor, to put genuine pressure on state schools to perform, and to build a system that would strive to offer improved quality of education over time.

Let me end by referring to the 1948 UN Declaration of Human Rights, which also forms the basis for the current Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The Article 26 of the Declaration that deals with education says:

- Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory; technical and professional education shall be made generally available; and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.
- respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance, and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

- Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

The Right to Education enshrined in the first two sections becomes meaningful only when it addresses the third section, that is, when it becomes the Right to Education of *Choice!* 

Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

Managing Elementary Schools

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The emergence of private schools in rural areas in the absence of a credible government school net-

work in several states is a new major development over the last decade. We have had private schools even ear-

lier, but what is happening today is quite different.

Across India, nearly 46 per cent of the villages have private schools that cater to 22.5 per cent of the children in the 6-14 age-group.²⁶ Leaving aside Kerala and Maharashtra, where respectively 49 per cent and 26 per cent of the children in the 6-14 age group attend private schools, which are largely government-aided, the country is divided into high private school states and low private school states. The North-Eastern states of Meghalaya, Manipur, and Nagaland have private schools in more than 60 per cent of the villages which cater to over 40 per cent of the child population. In Punjab, Haryana, UP, and Rajasthan, 30-60 per cent of the villages have private schools catering to 30-40 per cent of the children in the 6-14 age group. In urban areas, the private schools provide education to a much larger population. In states such as Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Orissa, Assam, and Gujarat that have varied per-capita income, the proportion of children going to private schools is 10 per cent or lower. But, in some of these states, an extremely high proportion of children go for private tuitions. This means that the private component in education is still quite high in these states ranging overall between 30 per cent and 60 per cent.

Barring the curious exception of Gujarat, it is clear that the children of the poorer parents in general, and also most children in the poorer states go to government schools. There is the issue of state laws and regulations too, because of which there is a greater proliferation of private schools in some states than in others.

There is a perception that private schools are better than government schools. This statement cannot be generalized without qualification. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) data indicates that after controlling for different factors that affect a child's learning, in different states, the quality of private schools is different as compared to govern-

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One of the clear impacts of private schools is a down the middle division in many villages between the children of the have's and the have-not's.

ment schools. In states such as Kerala, Maharashtra, MP, Chhattisgarh, Himachal, Tamil Nadu, and Punjab, the difference in quality is rather small. But there are states such as UP, Jharkhand, Bihar, and West Bengal, where the difference is quite large. The small difference is a reflection of both systems being equally good or bad in terms of learning outcomes.

One of the clear impacts of private schools is a down the middle division in many villages between the children of the have's and the have-not's. In Punjab, the proportion of *dalits* in the total population is about 27 per cent but the percentage of *dalits* in government schools is about 46 per cent since most upper caste and upper class parents send their children to private schools. While it is primarily a consequence of prosperity, it is also largely due to a number of educated unemployed not having employment options since the days of terrorism in the state. Similar segregation has been happening in urban India for quite some time. With rapid urbanization, the pace has quickened. The children of the poorest go to municipal schools. There is no place to start new schools and the land cost is high. In cities like Hyderabad, Lucknow, Varanasi, Patna, Kanpur and so on, shanty private schools have come up. Children are sent to these schools primarily because either the government schools do not function well, or there is no government school nearby. The situation is much more complicated in urban areas compared to the rural areas.

I was in a village in Haryana last August with a team of ASER surveyors. Overall, the village seemed green and prosperous. As the team randomly selected households to survey, I wandered with them taking pictures. An elderly man sitting with a *hukkah* insisted that I had a cup of tea at his home. I politely declined but he claimed that he was a *Chowdhary* and that I should not hesitate to have water and tea at his home. I had to give in. In response to my question about the school his grandchildren went to, he looked away and said that while he belonged to upper caste, economic conditions prevented him from sending the children to a private school. Of course, he

²⁶ Data based on ASER2008- the Annual Status of Education Report facilitated by Pratham. www.pratham.org and www.asercentre.org

hoped that things would get better in the near future. The poorer people in the village do not have this hope and depend entirely on what the government school can provide, which indeed is disappointing.

This segregation is not socially desirable and is harmful to the child. On the other hand, while integration is healthy for the society and is also achievable in a village scenario, it cannot be enforced by law in the prevailing conditions in our country. So, what is the option?

In the Rohtas district of Bihar, there is a village called Shivpur where the villagers are in more or less complete control of the school built with government funds. So much so, that excepting for the head-teacher, all other teachers in this school catering to about 450 children from Std I-VIII are volunteers from the village. The village raises funds from those who work in the cities. It had raised Rs. 17 lakh on its own. In all respects, the school is among the best I have seen in any village. I have recommended that the government should give the village assistance on a per-student basis that it would have otherwise granted for running the school. That would help the school compensate its volunteer teachers, look after the school building, and also buy new equipments.

Another example is that of the Bharti Foundation Schools.²⁷ The Foundation has taken over some government schools and constructed some on the land given by the government. But these schools are for the deprived and the weaker sections;

The most recent Bill for Children's Right to Free and Compulsory Education has for the first time introduced the idea of reimbursing private unaided schools on the basis of a computed per-child expenditure.

If taken to its logical end, it should be possible for the Union Government to allocate to all states a uniform per-child expenditure to add to their own similarly computed per-child expenditure that can in turn be transferred to the village to take care of the school expenses.

One problem with the free and compulsory education concept is that it does not allow a parent to contribute even if he/she can or wants to contribute. While ensuring that no parent should be compelled to pay and no child denied admission or schooling for non-payment, what is wrong with allowing parents to contribute?

they provide free education through financial support generated by the Foundation. Why should these schools, which have a low per-child cost with a promise of a high quality, not be aided by the government?

I believe that the model of Shivpur, which was common in the pre-independence days, either in combination with the Bharti model or on its own, is still quite replicable and also viable with some strong social and financial inputs. It is nothing but converting every village school into a government-aided school run by either the local/village government or an agency appointed by the local government. Of course, to make the school more effective, the government must stop micro-managing and

restrict its role to providing overall curricular framework, assessment criteria, and monitoring while holding the local agency to deliver the expected quality. How exactly to provide the financial aid is another issue.

This model will not only allow quality human resources in managing our schools, but will also encourage greater equity as the present government schools improve.

The most recent Bill for Children's Right to Free and Compulsory Education has for the first time introduced the idea of reimbursing private unaided schools on the basis of a computed per-child expenditure. If taken to its logical end, it should be possible for the Union Government to allocate to all states a uniform per-child ex-

penditure to add to their own similarly computed per-child expenditure that can in turn be transferred to the village to take care of the school expenses. This could be

²⁷ www.bhartifoundation.org

the basis of equity right that the child has; a common per-child expenditure. The village government can then either run the school on its own or assign an agency to run the school. Each district or village can then add on to these resources to make the school better.

One problem with the free and compulsory education concept is that it does not allow a parent to contribute even if he/she can or wants to contribute. While ensuring that no parent should be compelled to pay and no child denied admission or schooling for non-payment, what is wrong with allowing parents to contribute? In a model experiment in health that won the Global Development Network (GDN) Award in the year 2000, the MP Government had started the Rogi Kalyan Samiti²⁸ to manage government hospitals. The Samiti did not charge for

services, but patients were allowed to contribute whatever they wished and this led to accumulation of funds which allowed the hospital to buy even expensive equipments.

I believe that it is important to take a look at the way we run our systems and bring in reforms in managing schools. It is possible to wed the governmental and the private school models in a decentralized mode of functioning.

Often, the non-charging of service fees is a ploy to avoid accountability. But, it is common experience that even the poorest do not mind paying small amounts since it gives them dignity. Accepting a payment is also accepting accountability.

In conclusion, I believe that it is important to take a look at the way we run our systems and bring in reforms in managing schools. It is possible to wed the governmental and the private school models in a decentralized

mode of functioning.

The question is: Are we innovative enough, and bold enough to attempt a simple solution? ▼

Cascade Training: Learning Going Missing?

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In-service Training: Decreasing Teacher Motivation?

Improving the availability of in-service training (INSET) for primary teachers was a key strand of the National Policy on Education, 1986-92. Under this and succeeding policy initiatives, all serving government sector teachers are now trained via regular formal INSET, typically under the auspices of District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs) or larger cascade training programmes; and informally via Cluster Resource Centres. A quantitative assessment of progress would regard this as a success; certainly, institutional arrangements now exist in areas where they were previously patchy.

However, the quality and impact of investments in train-

ing remain a vexed question. An enthusiasm visible among teachers in the early 1990s about new training opportunities (Dyer, 1996) has given way to widespread teacher disaffection about training, reflected in dissatisfaction with the programmes they attend, complaints about lack of trainer competence; and poor transferability of training messages to classrooms.²⁹ Endemic low motivation among India's government teachers is flagged as a key challenge in educational reform;³⁰ but one might also argue that current training approaches

²⁹ Dyer, C; Choksi, A; Awasty, V; Iyer, U; Moyade, R; Nigam, N; Purohit, N; Shah, S; Sheth, S (2004). "District Institutes of Education and Training: A Comparative Study in Three Indian States" Report No. 55 in *Researching the Issues series*, London: Department for International Development.

³⁰ Ramachandran, Vimala (2005). "Why School Teachers are Demotivated and Disheartened," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 40(21), 2141-2144.

²⁸ I understand that this award-winning experiment was discontinued after a new government took over.

contribute to worsening this problem, rather than helping teachers engage meaningfully with children and learning.

A key INSET challenge is to help teachers reconceptualize their role, and in particular, to encourage a pedagogical orientation that embraces not only content, but wider questions of knowledge and learning. These are ambitious concerns in a context of the teacher crisis, Ramachandran identifies, but they cannot be ignored. Government schools have become the last refuge of the most disadvantaged and poor social groups^{31, 32} and social equity concerns³³ demand that teachers working in them become better able to respond appropriately to the diversity of children's learning needs and styles, and improve children's retention and achievement. To what extent does formal training address this need?

I reflect on the *modus operandi* of one of the most dominant forms of INSET - the cascade model. Teacher trainers are always concerned about 'transmission loss' in this model (Dyer, *et. al.*, 2004) but here I will focus on the place of 'learning' in training delivered via a cascade approach, arguing that training is not the same as learning; and that learning demands a primary focus. I draw upon an illustrative case of cascade training used to support a mainstream innovation—introducing primary teachers to the new Std. I textbooks in Gujarat in 2000 and 2001. This case is one example of cascade training with par-

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The Cascade Training Programme

Prior to the introduction of new textbooks, teachers in Gujarat had received through DIETs the national programme of Special Orientation to Primary Teaching, and training in competencies (Minimum Levels of Learning

(MLLs)) and assessment. All of these were packages developed at the state or national level and delivered by the DIET staff to teachers in batches of 50. Interactions with teachers suggested that they remained ambivalent about the activity-based approach that such training advocated. While some teachers grasped the idea of doing activities to promote children's learning, others understood activities as self-standing content; in the latter interpretation, for example, a new poem was something to be learned by heart, rather than a means of exploring sound and expression in

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language and linked to literacy learning. How to adopt a consistent activity-based learning approach in their own classrooms was a question often left unanswered by their training.

The new textbooks had been created by the State Resource Group (SRG), in a welcome departure from using State Textbook Board 'specialists,' and piloted. The cascade model was adopted as the mode of delivery and the resource material was one module (supplemented

³¹ Ramachandran, V and A Saihjee (2002). "The New Segregation: Reflections on Gender and Social Equity in Primary Education," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 38(17).

³² Vasavi, A (2003). "Schooling for a New Society? The Social and Political Bases of Education Deprivation in India. *IDS Bulletin*, Vol 34, 72-80.

³³ Ramachandran, V (2002). *Hierarchies of Access – Gender and Social Equity in Primary Education*, New Delhi: European Commission.

by video) which was used across all tiers. The module outlined two objectives: (1) To train the resource persons (RPs) at all levels of the cascade to make them effective trainers; (2) To bring awareness among teachers about the approach and content of the textbook, related activities, use of teaching-learning aids and so forth. Despite its stated objectives, the design of this massive programme reflects technocratic concerns with logistics and 'coverage' rather than a substantive focus on learning about training (see Table 1).

Many senior officials, teachers' union leaders, NGOs, and textbook writers contributed to a vibrant training climate at the top tiers of the cascade, where training strategies involved video demonstration, group work, discussion, and lesson presentations. One of the 25 KRPs commented:³⁴

The difference by giving training through video was there were children in the front. How teacher takes them into [the lesson], how he makes them aware of the subject, how he makes them understand, how a child grasps this new activity - we saw all that with our own eyes...If an expert was demonstrating we had to become children. But of course we are adults so whenever he asked us questions we gave direct answers. In the video, there was a child; to get an answer from the child, how many different methods one had to use.

Further down the cascade tiers, however, the video was

often technically problematic and how to use video as a training tool was not covered. In effect, therefore, the video also became an item of content, rather than a pedagogical resource.

In RP training of MTs, group work focused on devising model lessons to be shared with other groups, for peer/RP appraisal, an approach to be used all down the cascade. These lessons focused on appropriate delivery of the textbook content, thus satisfying the purpose of familiarizing trainees with the new textbook and its ap-

Future trainers were largely being taught the 'how' without the 'why' and this was exacerbated by the constant pressure of time, under which the emphasis consistently drifted towards doing the activity itself, without fully discussing the teaching/learning purpose behind it.

proach. However, the dominant focus was on reviewing textbook content, devising activities, and making teaching-learning materials (TLM) that could be then used in classrooms. What began to go missing here was any corresponding training about teaching – the pedagogical rationale underlying introduction of the new books (i.e., the learning approaches such content and activities are intending to promote, or how children's learning will be evaluated). Future trainers were largely being taught the 'how' without the 'why' and this was exacerbated by the constant pressure of time, under which the emphasis

consistently drifted towards doing the activity itself, without fully discussing the teaching/learning purpose behind it.

In subsequent cascade tiers from RPs downwards, the balance moved with every successive tier further to-

Table 1: Tiers and Staffing of Textbook Training Cascade

Trainer Type	Composition	Type and Amount of Training
25 Key Resource Persons (KRPs)	DIET staff in pilot study districts; SRG members; teacher experts in specified areas	Two further training days from SRG in this cascade.
160 Resource Persons (RPs)	DIET staff from all over Gujarat, Co-ordinators from Block and Cluster Resource Centres; some primary teachers	Four training days at Palitana by the KRPs
1,000 Master Trainers (MTs)	Same composition as the RPs	Four days by the RPs
Next trainer tier selected from within district	Primary school teachers (including CRCs)	5 MTs to each batch of 50-70 trainers; trained for four days at district level.
Schools	Teachers in batches of 50 - 70	Ratio of 5 trainers to one batch of teachers, for four days

³⁴ It is notable that this is a topmost trainer's view, demonstrating the lack of familiarity such 'experts' often have with classroom teaching.

wards content and away from pedagogy. The cascade training helped MTs learn about textbook content, but not the skills needed to facilitate learning by other adults – teachers of children. The quotation above also hints at a neglected training dimension: that teacher education in fact demands knowledge of, and simultaneous attention to, adult-to-adult learning and teaching (andragogy) as well as adults teaching children (pedagogy).

The remaining cascade training took place in individual districts. Our sample of MT – teacher training was in only one district, which therefore cannot be taken as representative, but it is instructive in its illustration of the technocratic approach noted earlier. The training programme was suddenly brought forward; so, MTs learned on Saturday that they were to begin training on Monday. This afforded no opportunity for pre-planning, either individually or in a group; there was a logistical obstacle as the group that had worked together in Palitana could not come together again as participants were not from the same place. Much of the first day of training involved planning activities instead of beginning the training. Most remarkably, the responsible DIET Principal had failed to ensure that textbooks for the training programme were available; they materialized on day three of the training programme, but no TLM were available. That the training process could be so severely compromised by a nonsensical bureaucratic decision that failed to ensure the most basic training requirement³⁵ was rightly questioned by many participants. Little of what had been planned could be covered as a result.

At the trainer to teacher level in the district, two sets of training were observed. Events in the previous cascade tier meant that trainers did not feel properly prepared and therefore requested MTs to come and support them so that one MT would work with three trainers. In both

cases, the MT took over and the trainers did not give any inputs, which meant that there was no effective return to the training effort in the previous tier. The two cascade trained MTs observed showed contrasting approaches. One (a practising teacher) adopted an interactive approach and attempted to link activities to their underlying concepts and used video excerpts to illustrate although he had not learned this in his own cascade training. The other (a member of DIET staff) showed the video and went through the lessons in the textbooks. Exit interviews with teachers illustrated tension. Teachers who had had the interactive training approach had enjoyed it and felt they learned from it, but were unsure if they could do it themselves; teachers in the other class felt they had not ‘got anything new’ (a common expectation of training) other than exposure to the new book. In neither case, therefore, did teachers we interviewed leave their training feeling particularly confident about the future; the conceptual ‘glue’ about children’s learning had largely gone missing as teachers were taught model lessons and particular activities.

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Learning and Training Needs in the Cascade Tiers – And Beyond

A focus on learning in the cascade itself suggests that the frequently cited problem of ‘transmission loss’ is a concern because training is conceived as a one-way flow from the top of the

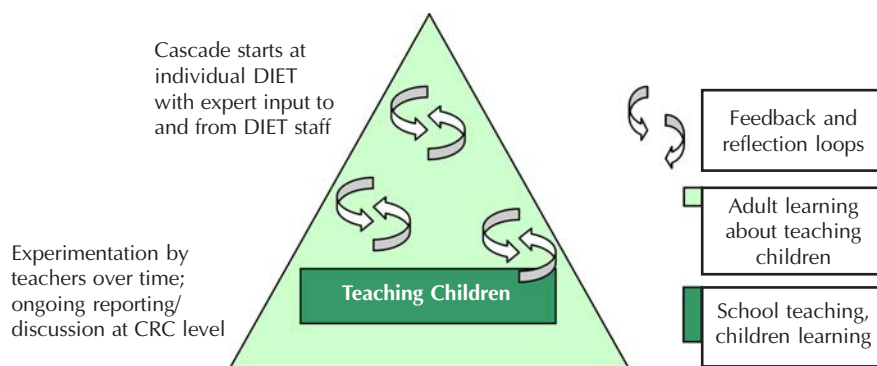
cascade, where the greatest knowledge is believed to be concentrated. The conceptualization of a cascade would benefit from adjusting this view in favour of understanding that different kinds of knowledge exist within it. School teachers have ‘local knowledge’ - practical classroom experience - and theories about learning and teaching that reflect their own educational experiences and their initial training. Understanding this as a form of knowledge that is relevant to training because it influences learning is not only critical, but has transformative potential – to reframe a discourse of primary teacher deficit in more constructive and action-focused terms.

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Understanding this as a form of knowledge that is relevant to training because it influences learning is not only critical, but has transformative potential – to reframe a discourse of primary teacher deficit in more constructive and action-focused terms.

³⁵ The State government took swift punitive action in response to this finding.

Figure 1: Enriching the Cascade by Horizontal and Lateral Links Focusing on Adult Learning



Both this, and observations of other cascade training undertaken by DIETs in our larger study (Dyer, et. al., 2004) suggest that learning within cascade training can only take place if feedback loops are incorporated to focus on evaluating the learning that passes from tier to tier. This requires those who train to reflect critically on their own training practices, rather than invoke the discourse of teacher deficit to explain poor take-up of training messages. However, this only seems likely if there is a stronger focus on institutionalizing the learning any programme intends to generate; here, using the institutions provided for teacher support (CRC and DIET) is key. If this dimension is not an integral part of cascade planning, teachers will continue to see each training programme as a once-off input rather than as part of a development strategy. This could be visualized as a shorter cascade with multidimensional lateral and horizontal links focusing on adult learning, not merely on the delivery of training (Figure 1).

Teachers constantly complain about the relevance and quality of the training they receive, and are more likely to be motivated by the associated travel and daily allowance. They have a point. This indicative model is one possible way of changing this. Through shifting the focus away from the point of delivery, which is currently the key aim, it focuses instead on different kinds of learning that (a) are needed and (b) take place throughout the training process. This model visualizes an engagement with learning about training that may in turn facilitate the design and delivery of programmes that are able to address the 'how' and 'why' of teaching and learning that teachers need help and support. At present, these seem to be the poor educational relations of the dominant bureaucratic-technicist approach to education, and its preoccupation with 'coverage,' 'batches,' and 'transmission.' Let us remember that good teacher education is less about the logistics of training and much more about what all those involved in training are actually learning and teaching. 🐦

What is 'Para' about Some Teachers?³⁶

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In 2003, towards the end of the fieldwork for a project in a North Indian state, I chanced upon a group of

young men and women who were standing in front of the Block Education Officer's (BEO) office. They looked agitated. They were talking about non-receipt of salary for over six months and wanted to know why they should work. I started talking, and over the next two days, heard the story of Ramesar and his colleagues.

³⁶ This write-up is based on a draft booklet by Ramachandran, Vimala; Bhattacharjea, Suman and Sheshagiri, K M, titled, *Primary School Teachers – Twists and Turns in Everyday Practice* (Unpublished Mimeo, October 2008). This research was supported by Azim Premji Foundation, Bangalore.

Ramesar's Story

Ramesar was a young man of about 30 years. He had finished his high school several years back and had subsequently completed a primary teacher-training course. He had tried hard to get a job in the government but the concerned state government had (at that time) stopped recruiting regular teachers, having decided to recruit only contract teachers. When Ramesar could not find a job as a teacher, he had started working as a shop assistant in the local market.

In 1999, there was a buzz in his village that the government was planning to sanction a school in the nearby tribal habitation. He was informed by the village *pradhan* that he had been asked to recommend names of local persons who could work as teachers. An overjoyed Ramesar put in an application to the village *pradhan*, indicating that he was willing to work anywhere—even in a remote habitation. He desperately wanted to be a teacher.

Ramesar was asked to report for an interview at the block headquarters and after a few rounds of tests and discussions, he was offered the post of a contract teacher in a remote habitation. Soon after his appointment, Ramesar attended a 20-day induction training in the district headquarters. He was then asked to report to the village *panchayat* that had identified a space for the school and also prepared a list of 29 children who would enrol.

The first few weeks were rough. Ramesar had to clear up the space, meet the parents, and ask them to send the children to school. He was shocked to note that several children had been pulled out of the nearby government primary school and enrolled into his school. The children were all from extremely poor families. As the months went by, Ramesar was able to procure textbooks for them and also persuade the village *pradhan* to supply slates and chalk. Over the next year, a thatched-roof school building was ready and Ramesar settled into the routine of teaching. He attended the monthly meeting at the cluster and also collected his honorarium of Rs. 1,500.

The euphoria that surrounded the new school died down soon. Ramesar did not get his salary every month and the *pradhan* would ask the teachers to find out from the cluster and block why the funds had not been transferred to the *panchayat*. Several months went by and there was no salary. He then heard that an association had been formed and there was a day-long agitation in the state capital. Finally on the second last day of the financial year, Ramesar was paid for six months. The erratic payments continued over the years. He heard that there were tribal areas where contract teachers had not been paid for over two years; he also heard of instances where nothing was paid during summer vacation.

Para-teachers are wholly unprepared and poorly compensated for what is, by any standard, an extremely difficult and complex task: bringing education to first-generation learners in remote, poor, and disadvantaged corners of the country.

In the three years that he was a contract teacher, Ramesar attended two training/refresher programmes two days each. These workshops focused on how to fill out the household survey and other forms that were routinely handed over to them. There were a few lectures on 'joyful learning' and during one training session, they had a one-hour session on making teaching and learning material for children.

Ramesar had just heard that all the *panchayat* schools were to be made 'regular' upper primary schools. But the system of contract teachers would continue. It had been almost four years since he had been appointed as a contract teacher. His salary had gone up to Rs. 2,500 per month. Ramesar is a disillusioned man. He now had to teach 35 children in the age group of 4-5 to almost 12-13 years. So, every year he started off with the alphabets and numbers, managed to go up to simple addition and subtraction and maybe a few sentences, by which time the academic year would be up. The next year he started off again with alphabets and numbers. Many of his students have gone through this drill with him over and over again and have not been able to move beyond the basics in reading and arithmetic.

What does Ramesar's Story Tell Us?

There is really nothing 'para' about Ramesar. He is qualified, having completed high school, and a diploma in education; he works full-time—meaning that he man-

ages the school for six hours. He attends the monthly meetings held at the cluster level and sometimes even in the block office. He fills out the same forms as his peers who work in regular primary schools. He is eligible to attend refresher-training programmes like any other 'regular teacher.' He is also asked to participate in non-academic duties like national and local elections, Pulse Polio campaigns, and drought relief.

How is Ramesar different from his 'regular' peers?

His working conditions are much more difficult:

- He is appointed on a contract basis, which is renewed every year (in some states, it could be every three years).
- He is not a government servant.
- He gets Rs. 2,500 a month, while his peers who are 'regular' teachers take home almost Rs. 8,000 a month.
- His salary comes once or twice a year (roughly once in six months).
- He works in a remote rural area and cannot be transferred. He will remain in the same school as long as he and the government want.
- He is not part of the primary teachers' union but is a member of an unrecognized association.

He also faces extraordinarily difficult teaching conditions:

- When he was first appointed, there was not even a school building—Ramesar had to push for its construction as well as for the provision of basic teaching-learning materials.
- Because he works in a poor, remote rural village, he works with first-generation learners. Family support for and understanding of educational processes are limited or non-existent. He has to persuade parents to send their children to school and keep them there.
- He has to teach in a multi-grade classroom, with students enrolled in Classes I to V and, in some areas, even in Classes I to VII, all sitting together.

He is thrown into this situation without adequate training and support:

- In remote areas, teachers like Ramesar can be ap-

pointed after completing Class X. In many states, para-teachers are not required to have a diploma in education.

- Ramesar received 20 days of induction training, by no means sufficient to teach children from Classes I through V, even under better circumstances. In some states, para-teachers receive as little as five days of induction training (for example, West Bengal).
- He received two days of in-service or refresher training a year. Even these two days were largely spent on issues unrelated to teaching and learning.

Ramesar's situation is by no means unique. Although details may vary from state to state, what is clear is that para-teachers are wholly unprepared and poorly compensated for what is, by any standard, an extremely difficult and complex task: bringing education to first-generation learners in remote, poor, and disadvantaged corners of the country.

Corruption makes the situation even worse. In Rajasthan, for example, a single (para) teacher school was opened in a Schedule Caste (SC) settlement under the erstwhile Rajiv Gandhi Swarna Jayanti Pathshala (RGSJP). An important political leader was appointed as the teacher. Although all the children from the

settlement were enrolled, the school was almost always closed. In other villages also, RGSJP schools functioned irregularly as their teachers were 'too busy to teach'.³⁷

The para-teacher phenomenon is widespread and is expanding all over the country, although there is a wide inter-state variation in the policies with respect to their employment (Table 1). In some states such as Kerala, for example, a few 'contract' teachers have been appointed, supposedly as a purely temporary and stop-gap measure. At the other end of the spectrum, Madhya Pradesh had (at one point of time and the current policy is not clear) decided to discontinue the appointment of regular teachers and even declared regular teachers as a dying cadre. In between these extremes, we find Maharashtra, where all new primary level teachers are ap-

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³⁷ Sharma, Rashmi and Ramachandran, Vimala (2008). *Elementary Education System in India: Exploring Institutional Structures, Processes and Dynamics*, New Delhi: Routledge.

Table1: Number of Para-Teachers/Contract Teachers, Selected States (2006-2007)

	Primary	Primary with Upper Primary	Primary with Upper Primary and Secondary	Upper Primary	Upper Primary with Secondary	Total	Women (%)
Andhra Pradesh	24,355	21,045	3	0	17,920	63,323	44.85
Bihar	43,730	23,756	655	305	282	68,728	37.81
Karnataka	114	176	27	7	6	330	51.82
Kerala	736	987	215	255	240	2,438	74.45
Madhya Pradesh	75,597	20,794	3,499	17,910	1,403	119,212	30.56
Maharashtra	851	1,469	195	9	1,181	3,922	40.03
Rajasthan	24,384	6,700	647	37	404	32,172	26.87
Tamil Nadu	1,350	534	952	1,718	0	4,554	76.31
Uttar Pradesh	94,853	458	64	349	45	95,773	47.91
West Bengal*	1,345	26	135	746	6,942	9,221	49.42
India (All States)	330,389	94,810	9,285	32,610	31,444	498,944	38.68

Note: * Does not include *Shishu Shiksha Karmasuchi* (SSK), *Shishu Shiksha Prakalpa* (SSP), and *Madhyamik Shiksha Karmasuchi* (MSK) as they do not come under the Education Department. (**Source:** Mehta³⁸).

pointed on a three-year contract with a low honorarium, even though their qualifications are the same as 'regular' primary teachers; after three years, they are eligible for appointment as 'regular' teachers. There is also Orissa, where on completion of nine years on contract, *Sikhya Sahayaks* can be appointed as regular teachers in primary schools against vacant posts with regular scales of pay. This decision was taken by the State Government in 2007. Further, after completion of five years as para-teachers, their monthly remuneration increases to Rs. 3,600, which is equal to the basic scale of pay of a trained regular primary teacher with a diploma in education.

States like Kerala and Maharashtra which require the same qualifications for para-teachers as for regular teachers

are, unfortunately, exceptions to a frightening trend. Merely opening a school and providing a person who is given the label of 'teacher' is to make a mockery of the provision of an educational service. A growing body of research and policy recommendations point to the futility of expecting untrained and unsupported young people to even have the subject knowledge, let alone the pedagogical skills required to teach. The story of Jhumur, a para-teacher in West Bengal (Table 2), is instructive.

Jhumur's Story

Jhumur is 45 years old and lives in a large village. There are different hamlets/settlements in her village and they are often segregated by caste and community. There is one primary school in the main village but it is so over-

Table2: Status of Schools and Teachers in West Bengal, 2006-07

Level	No. of Schools	Enrolment including SSK and SSP	No. of Regular Teachers	No. of Para-Teachers	Sahayika/Samprasarika	Crude PTR* with Para-teachers	Vacant Posts of Para-teachers
Primary and Junior Basic	49,206						
Shishu Shiksha Karmasuchi	16,054	10,331,000	161,479	7,511	2,132	60.37	13,177
Shishu Shiksha Prakalpa	1,066						
Junior High School	1,582						
Madhyamik Shiksha Kendra	1,752	3,622,000	15,474	22,822	6,198	81.40	5,581

* Pupil-Teacher Ratio

Source: GoWB, Annual Report (2007).

³⁸ Mehta, Arun C (2008). *Elementary Education in India—Progress towards UEE—Analytical Report 2006-07*, New Delhi: NUEPA.

crowded that children from her hamlet find it difficult to get admission. In 1999, she heard that a local community school would be created by the Panchayati Raj Department. As her husband was a member of the local CPM party cell, he had advance information about the school. She was told that they were looking for women above the age of 40 with a high school degree (Class X pass). She was expected to run a school in her habitation and the local panchayat was to help identify a space.

Soon after she was appointed as a *Sahayika* to the Shishu Siksha Karmasuchi (SSK), Jhumur was asked to attend a five-day training programme, which was conducted by a few retired teachers. The five days were quite uneventful—Jhumur heard many lectures and was given the syllabus and a set of textbooks. On her return from the training, she was told that a group of ‘elders’ (actually the SSK Management Committee) would supervise her work in the village and that she would be paid an ‘honorarium’ of Rs 1,000 per month. As she had a fairly large verandah in her house, Jhumur decided to run the school from her home.

It is now almost seven years since she started the school. Jhumur says that she has not participated in any refresher programme. The *panchayat* has increased her salary to Rs. 1,500 because she is dedicated and opens the school for four hours every day. A retired school teacher visits her school once every few months, talks to the SSK Management committee (the elders) and encourages Jhumur to carry on.

Reflecting on her work, Jhumur thinks that she is lucky to have got this opportunity—now that her children are grown up, she says this is good ‘timepass’—but immediately retracts her statement. When asked how much her students learn, she admits that they manage to come up to Class III level. She adds that her Maths is rusty and she just cannot go beyond simple addition and subtraction. Her language skills are good. She finds it difficult to teach Social Studies and Science—she showed me a chapter in the Class III textbook on feudalism and

imperialism. Laughing out loudly, she said, “This is party propaganda and I myself cannot understand these big words,” quickly adding that some education is better than nothing and many of her students take private tuitions and enrol in the SSK only to be eligible to sit for the examination.

What sort of education are Jhumur’s students receiving? Let us remember that Jhumur has only studied till Class X, received all of five days of induction training, and has not participated in any refresher or in-service

training. By her own admission, the content she is supposed to teach is far beyond her comprehension. How to teach first-generation learners, in different classes, of different ages, and of varying levels of ability is not an issue she has even thought about. Further, as SSKs do not come under the education department, they do not get any ongoing academic support. Retired teachers and teacher educators who visit the school encourage her, but do not address her needs.

Further, while the budget for SSK and MSK flows from GoI’s Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, there is no convergence at the state level. That is, there is no ownership of these schools by

the Education Department. The *Sahayikas* and the *Samprasarak/Samprasarika* do not see themselves as being part of the larger teaching force of the state. Although the Planning Commission of India and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) showcased the SSK programme as a management innovation in 2005,³⁹ the reality is that these teachers are resentful, their morale is low, and they continue to work because other jobs are not available. One *madhyamik* teacher who has been trying to unionize them noted:

The teachers’ union in West Bengal only safeguards the interest of formal school teachers in government

Although the Planning Commission of India and the United Nations Development Programme showcased the SSK programme as a management innovation in 2005, the reality is that these teachers are resentful, their morale is low, and they continue to work because other jobs are not available.

³⁹ Government of India and Planning Commission (2005). ‘Impact of Various Schemes related to Elementary Education: A Comparative Study of Girls’ Literacy in Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh,’ <http://planningcommission.nic.in/reports/sereport/ser/mpissb/mpissbexec1.htm>

schools—they are not concerned about para-teachers or sahayika or those working in private aided or un-aided schools. You see, 90 per cent of the regular teachers are members of the CPM-led teachers' union and therefore they do not bother about us—we are neither government employees nor do we have regular jobs.

Retracing the History

The big shift began in 1997 with the Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS) in Madhya Pradesh (MP), designed to address the issue of access. The idea behind EGS was simple. The programme guaranteed a school within 90 days of receiving a written request from a *panchayat*. The community, represented by the *panchayat*, was expected to provide space (building, tent, hut, etc.) and also to identify local people who could be interviewed for appointments as teachers. These teachers were paid a fixed salary and appointed for a fixed term. The *panchayat* formally appointed these 'contract teachers' and could also terminate their services for unsatisfactory performance.

Looking back, the euphoria that accompanied the launch of MP-EGS and the initial resistance by the World Bank and other donors to subsequently supporting (and even actively promoting) the idea was indeed an important turning point. While the Rajasthan Shiksha Karmi Project had already appointed local youth as teachers, the *raison d'être* of the scheme was fundamentally different from MP-EGS.

Several state governments saw in the MP-EGS programme's 'Guruji' a cheaper alternative to a formal school teacher. Given the budget constraints faced by many state governments and the fact that they were under tremendous pressure to expand the primary education system, appointment of teachers on lower salary and contract was an attractive option. Howes and Murgai⁴⁰ argue:

"Some states have been successful in the education sector in changing the hiring terms of new staff and offering lower pay and conditions. This has been done

Some state governments even declared formal school teachers as a 'dying cadre' and announced that all future appointments of teachers would only be on a contract basis.

through hiring of parateachers, whose salaries are often 20%-50% of regular teachers (...). The parateacher experiment can perhaps be better understood as a cheap means of expanding low-quality education rather than as a way of radically changing the quality of education (...). While parateachers are typically thought of as providing informal education within an alternative community-led framework, several states have also used them in regular education institutions to fill vacancies, provide substitute teachers, and provide a second teacher in single-teacher schools." Noteworthy among the states are Rajasthan, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh. Some state governments even declared formal school teachers as a 'dying cadre' and announced that all future appointments of teachers would only be on a contract basis.

This trend 'implicitly implies dismantling of the teacher service cadre at the state level. Gradually, this unevenness in service conditions of teachers within each state and across different states in the country has increased. Local self governing bodies within the state are given a reasonably free hand to decide on teacher recruitment at the local level, apparently operating within a broad frame-

work provided by the state. While some teachers are employees of local village level bodies, the block level or district level bodies may employ some others; though the older ones continue as state government employees. The policy and practices related to para-teachers in different states essentially have their origin in this gradual liberalization of control and the un-stated move towards dismantling state level teacher cadres'.⁴¹

If we look forward from 1987 (when Shiksha Karmi was initiated), we find that the term 'para-teachers' was not used until after 1994. The word was first used as a generic term drawn from the health sector (paramedical workers) to denote teachers who were locally recruited on a contract basis and also those who were appointed under different service conditions and drawing lower salaries (honoraria). In the first instance, *Shiksha Karmi* (a Hindi word) was used to denote a teacher with a dif-

⁴⁰ Howes, Stephen, and Murgai, Rinku (2004), "Subsidies And Salaries: Issues in the Restructuring of Government Expenditure in India," NIPFP-IMF Conference Paper, January.

⁴¹ Govinda, R and Josephine, Y (2004). *Parateachers in India – A Review* (Draft), New Delhi: NIEPA.

ference, one who is dedicated to teaching.⁴² Qualifications were relaxed in order to find people who would be willing to live and work in remote and inaccessible areas. Even before Rajasthan, the Government of Himachal Pradesh had introduced the Volunteer Teacher Scheme in 1984 to improve the condition of single-teacher schools in remote areas.

Over the years, different terminologies have emerged—*guruji*, *shiksha mitra*, *sahayika*, *shiksha sahayogi*. The moot point is that there is no agreement on the definition. The term para-teacher is used loosely, and the terms, para-teacher and contract teacher, are used interchangeably. The Madhya Pradesh government clarified that *guruji*s are not para-teachers and by mid-2000, they had regularized all EGS schools and converted them to formal schools. However, the contractual nature of teachers' appointments was not changed. Rajasthan introduced the Rajiv Gandhi Swarna Jayanti Pathshala (RGSJP) in 1998 where local persons were hired as teachers. Again, like MP, the Rajasthan government also formalized these schools without necessarily changing the contractual nature of teachers' appointments. West Bengal set up Shishu Shiksha Karmasuchi (SSK) in 1998. By the time the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) came to a close and the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan was launched in 2001, the Government of India⁴³ introduced the concept of 'transitional schools' where teachers' appointments were made on a contractual basis. The two states that resisted the appointment of para-teachers and contract teachers in regular government schools are Tamil Nadu and Kerala. However, Tamil Nadu permitted government-aided schools to hire teachers on a fixed pay and considered their regularization on completion of the five-year tenure.⁴⁴

⁴² Government of India (2000). *Para Teachers, DPEP Calling*, New Delhi: Gol.

⁴³ Government of India (1999). *Reaching Out Further—Para Teachers in Primary Education—An In-depth Study of Selected Schemes*, New Delhi: Educational Consultants India Ltd.

⁴⁴ Howes, Stephen and Murugai, Rinku (2004). "Subsidies and Salaries: Issues in the Restructuring of Government Expenditure in India," NIPFP-IMF Conference Paper, January.

Practice Shift without Policy Sanction

This is an instance of a 'practice shift' without any policy level decision, which has received a lot of attention from teacher unions, educationists, and researchers. Discussions with teacher union leaders during the course of a study in Rajasthan were insightful.^{45, 46} They were quite vociferous in their opposition to the notion of para-teacher and contract teacher (they used these terms interchangeably). They were also critical of the efforts of the government to create different layers of teachers—calling it a caste system within the teaching profession.

Other scholars have drawn our attention to the long-term impact on the quality of education, the professional identity of the teacher, and the self-esteem of the teaching cadre. The government, on the other hand, argues that contract teachers are as qualified as regular teachers. It also argues that there is no discrimination when it comes to in-service training. Notwithstanding the justification made by the government, teachers across the country are disturbed but the teacher unions have remained silent. For example, in West Bengal, the teacher unions essentially represent the 'regular' teachers, just like the labour unions, which only represent the formal labour force. Daily wagers, contract labours, and workers in the

informal sector remain outside the jurisdiction of formal trade unions.

There is another dimension to this debate. Educationists have pointed out that while the initial studies conducted in Rajasthan may have been positive with respect to motivation and dedication of the *Shiksha Karmi*, with the prevalence of the phenomenon of contract teachers, economics became the motivating force. One article points out that low salaries and insecure working conditions of contract teachers do not auger well for the

⁴⁵ Ramachandran, Vimala (2005a). "Why School Teachers Are Demotivated and Disheartened," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 40 (21): 2141-2144.

⁴⁶ Ramachandran, V; Pal, M; Jain, Sharada; Shekar, Sunil and Sharma, Jitendra Sharma (2005). *Teacher Motivation in India*, New Delhi: Educational Resource Unit.

education system; in fact, the quality of education has suffered.⁴⁷ Another study notes that the teachers' absence rates do not depend on the type of contract: 'para-teachers are no more or less likely to be absent from work than regular school teachers' (Muralidharan, 2004 cited by Howes and Murgai, 2004).

*The total of some 2,20,000 parateachers (...) and the number is going to increase further with Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar having announced new schemes to hire parateachers. This phenomenal growth has occurred despite the finding recorded in this report that classroom transactions are of poorer quality under parateachers. The report says that low salary, combined with the contractual character of the job, has been the major source of discontent and lack of motivation among parateachers. The study suggests that the move towards parateachers runs counter to the DPEP's own resolve to concentrate on the formal system and to improve it with the help of better planning and management (...) Perhaps the biggest irony is that the parateacher policy has surfaced at a time when the Union government has barely begun to tighten the norms of school teaching as a profession. This process has been undertaken under the auspices of the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE), a statutory body set up with the specific purpose of raising the standards of teacher training, recruitment and supervision. The policy of appointing parateachers violates the NCTE Act, both in letter and spirit.*⁴⁸

Discussions with administrators, regular teachers, and para-teachers/contract teachers in different states also confirmed this.⁴⁹ Delays in payment of salaries (honoraria) and the tenuous nature of the contract were cited

as factors influencing motivation. Para-teachers/contract teachers most often work in single or at best two-teacher schools and have to handle multi-grade classrooms. The overall infrastructure and facilities available in schools located in remote or relatively inaccessible areas are well known.

The government at the centre and the state governments are fully aware that the notion of para-teacher or contract teacher does not have policy level sanction and have been brought in through projects. Later on, they have been formalized through a national level committee of state education ministers. In the last few years, contract

teachers have challenged this in court and there has been a lot of debate within the government about the continuation of this practice. Unfortunately, the courts have not supported the cause of para-teachers and contract teachers and to date this remains a contentious issue.

What Implications Does this Have for Teachers as a Community?

As we have noted above, contract teachers/para-teachers slipped into educational practice without any policy-level sanction. DPEP project documents had referred to the idea of contract teachers and promoted the practice in project schools, but the first major reference to the issue can

be found in the recommendations of the National Committee of State Education Ministers (1999) which was set up to recommend the approach to be adopted for achieving Universal Elementary Education (UEE). The Committee's views on the subject are worth reading:

Lack of community control over teachers, teacher absenteeism, and low teacher motivation is often cited as reasons for not recruiting new teachers but for only concentrating on reducing wastage and internal inefficiency of the educational system. Even after making allowance for enrolment in private unaided and unregistered private schools, the teacher shortages are very significant. It is on this account that the recruitment of parateachers has to be considered a priority if all vacancies have to be filled up in shortest period of time. The issue of teacher/parateacher recruitment has to be addressed by all states as the long-term implications are for the

We have an expanding teaching force that is demoralized, paid far less than their peers for doing the same job (thus violating the constitutional guarantee of equal pay for equal work), insecure, not sure if their contracts would be renewed, and poorly trained with little or no ongoing academic support.

⁴⁷ Kumar, K; Priyam, Manisha and Saxena, Sadhana, (2001). "The Trouble with Parateachers," *Frontline*, 18(22).

⁴⁸ Kumar, *op.cit.*

⁴⁹ Interviews and group discussions were held between February and July 2008 in West Bengal, Rajasthan, and Maharashtra. Detailed interviews and discussions were also conducted in two other research studies anchored by the principal author of this document—namely, 'Teacher Motivation in India' (Rajasthan, fieldwork done in 2003-04) and 'EE System in India—A Field-based Investigation into Institutional Structures, Processes and Dynamics' (Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh, fieldwork done in 2005).

states (...) for meeting the demand for teachers in a manner that the state can afford. Appointment of pay scale teachers to fill up all teacher vacancies as per teacher-pupil norms would require resources that state governments are finding increasingly difficult to find. The economic argument for parateachers is that provision of teachers as per requirement is possible within the financial resources available with the states. The non-economic argument is that a locally selected youth, accountable to the local community, undertakes the duties of teaching children with much greater interest. The accountability framework is well defined and by making the local authority as the appointing authority, the parateacher's performance assessment is the basis for his/her continuance. The quest for UEE as Fundamental Right signifies a certain sense of urgency in doing so. This urgency calls for appropriate modifications in National Policy in order to respond to local felt-needs. The recruitment of parateachers is a step in this direction.⁵⁰

A few years later, in 2001, the working group for the Tenth Plan warned: '... In the recent past, there has been a move to decentralize recruitment and to make the teacher accountable to the local community of parents (...) Some of the newly recruited parateachers may be ill-equipped to teach—particularly beyond Class III. There is yet no long-term career development plan for these teachers. Consequently, this situation could quickly deteriorate into low quality education...' (p. 102)


Notwithstanding the apprehensions expressed by emi-

nent educationists and educational administrators, the number of contract teachers and para-teachers continues to grow.

So, we have an expanding teaching force that is demoralized, paid far less than their peers for doing the same

job (thus violating the constitutional guarantee of equal pay for equal work), insecure, not sure if their contracts would be renewed, and poorly trained with little or no ongoing academic support. The quality of education has clearly taken a back seat. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that the political leadership of the country is so wary of notifying the Right to Education Constitutional Amendment and introducing the Right to Education Bill in Parliament. The first practice that will be challenged is the phenomenon of different kinds of schools with differential investments for children—effectively making sure

that the poorer and more remote a child is, the greater the chances that she will be unable to access a school that can provide her with a meaningful education.

Teachers we spoke to were categorical in their assertion that the introduction of contract teachers has been a huge blow to the teaching profession. In the absence of a pedagogical strategy that helps teachers to deal with diversity in the classroom, we expect them to do the impossible and they are designed to fail. How can we expect the most poorly equipped teacher to deal with the most challenging of situations? 

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CONCLUSION

Rajeev Sharma

The various contributions in this Colloquium present a rather complex, and more importantly, not a very encouraging scenario of primary education in the coun-

try. The article on the 'Right to Education' describes how some provisions of the RTE Bill have got diluted in different stages of its implementation, the manner in which it has been delayed, and that even after such a long time, it could not take the shape of a law till date. The fact that this bill was introduced indicates the concern and importance which policy makers and planners might have

⁵⁰ Government of India, Report of the National Committee of State Education Ministers under the Chairmanship of the Minister of Human Resource Development to Develop the Structure and Outlines of Implementing Universal Elementary Education in a Mission Mode, MHRD, New Delhi, July 1999, 22-23.

attached to primary education. However, the fact that the bill could not become a law even after several years of its introduction tells a different story.

The two contributions which have delved on the issues relating to the teachers have highlighted the pathetic state of teachers' training and the manner in which teacher shortage has been addressed. In a situation where the infrastructural requirement of the schools and students' enrolment have shown improvement, the high rate of drop-outs, and the low levels of learning among those remaining in school, certainly demands that the issues related to the quality of teaching and learning are appropriately addressed; and, obviously, this will have to be done by the teachers. Having para-teachers in the system offers a low-cost option which might look attractive in the short-term but generates serious complications in the long run. What is disturbing is that in spite of so many initiatives, an effective mechanism to train teachers could not be put in place.

Although there is no quick-fix solution to the problems of managing good quality schools, a decentralized participative management of the school system which involves stakeholders and is accountable to the society definitely has merit.

The article about providing choice of schools to children and parents brings in a new dimension to financing of primary education. It suggests the possibility of more accountability without compromising on equity. However, its implications for a socially, economically, and geographically diverse country like ours need to be examined carefully. The article about managing elementary education offers a few pointers indicating how good quality schools can be managed. Although there is no quick-fix solution to the problems of managing good quality schools, a decentralized participative management of the school system which involves stakeholders and is accou-

ntable to the society definitely has merit. It is encouraging to note that there are several options available for improving the primary education system, some of which have been tried and seem to be working. However, the question of how to implement them on a large scale offers a challenge of unprecedented magnitude. Only time will tell, how and when it can happen! 🐦

*The purpose of **primary education** is the development of your weak characteristics; the purpose of university **education**, the development of your strong*

— Nevin Fenneman