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**Article** in *Economic and Political Weekly* · January 2004

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Source: *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 39, No. 11 (Mar. 13-19, 2004), pp. 1171+1173-1178

Published by: Economic and Political Weekly

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4414769>

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# Primary Education in Jharkhand

*This paper details the results of a survey conducted in selected areas of Jharkhand's Dumka district. While inadequate infrastructure and the lack of teachers affect the quality of teaching, poverty is responsible for the alarming rates of non-enrolment, dropouts and poor attendance of pupils. Scheduled tribe children are particularly at a disadvantage as education is not imparted in their mother tongue. The state of primary education, as this paper suggests, needs a multi-pronged effort to ensure its greater effectiveness. While the government can step in with incentives such as midday meal schemes, community participation in the governance of the primary schooling system has to be ensured.*

**KUMAR RANA, SAMANTAK DAS**

The present district of Dumka<sup>1</sup> formed a subdivision of Santal Pargana district<sup>2</sup> until it was given the status of a separate district in the early 1970s. The district was divided into two in April 2001, with the new district created, Jamtara, comprising four of the 14 blocks of the old Dumka district.

The literacy rate in the district, according to the 2001 Census, is 48.3 per cent, far below the national average and lower than the state average, with a large gap between literacy rates of males and females. The literacy rate among males is 63.3 per cent and 32.7 per cent among females.

From a total of 10 community development (CD) blocks we selected three blocks (Jarmundi, Shikaripara and Gopikandar) on a random sampling basis. Four villages were randomly selected from each of the blocks, making a total of 12 villages. From a total listing of 944 households from these villages we randomly selected 216 sample households (18 households from each village) for in-depth study.

Fieldwork began in October 2002 with listing and sampling of the households. In November-December 2002 the research team canvassed questionnaires in the selected households. Of the respondents, 118 were male and 98 female; 170 belonged to scheduled tribe (ST) communities, 22 to scheduled caste (SC) communities and 24 to other communities; 132 of the respondents were illiterate. Literacy among female respondents was found to be much lower (15 per cent) than among male respondents (39 per cent).

The main reason for the high number of ST respondents is that the entire study was conducted in the rural areas (Pratichi's studies in West Bengal and Jharkhand have focused on rural areas) where the ST population is high. Almost the entire ST population of the district lives in the villages, while some 50 per cent of the other caste population live in urban or semi-urban areas.

Among the 216 households where the research team canvassed questionnaires, there were 126 households with children of primary school-going age. Twenty-six households were found with exclusively never enrolled or drop-out children and 100 households were found with children enrolled in primary schools – the latter group was intensively interviewed about the delivery of the primary schooling system. Of these 100 households, 80 have government primary school-going children, 14 have private school-going children and six have children who attend schools run by non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Besides canvassing the questionnaires, a large number of interviews with government officials, NGO functionaries and persons other than the sampled respondents were also conducted.

## I Delivery of Primary Education

The main cause behind the half-century long movement for a separate Jharkhand state was large imbalances in terms of distribution of resources. Jharkhand was the front-runner among Indian states in terms of natural resources, yet the people of Jharkhand – both tribal and the non-tribal poor – lived in abject poverty [GoI undated]. Given the huge inequality in terms of distribution of wealth the condition of the poor of the state<sup>3</sup> can well be imagined.

The local land and economic relationships, such as land alienation, indebtedness, impoverishment and pauperisation, etc [Rana 1997; Roy Chaudhury 1965], have played a major role in restricting the scope for spreading education, particularly among the tribals and other poor communities.

Historically, the state has been considered a very useful source of cheap labour for the tea gardens, construction sites and agricultural fields of different parts of the country [Hignell 1903; O'Malley 1910; Birt 1909], and the same kind of labour migration continues to date [Rogaly et al 2001; Rana 2001b].

At the same time, the state has seen a continual increase of immigration, mainly from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, which has brought about a major change in its demographic profile. The proportion of tribals to the total population has been in steady decline for some time [Kesri 1979; Roy Chaudhury 1961, 1965]. The complex nature of inequality based on ethnicity, regional identity, class, caste and gender has left the state in a situation where tribal egalitarianism has lost out to an imposed anarchical inequality.

However, it is also apparently one of the wealthiest states of India. Every 36th person owns a two-wheeler, and every 156th person owns a four-wheeler! There is one truck per 501 persons and a bus per 4,176 persons.<sup>4</sup> Literacy, as we have seen above, is not only low but also marked by a wide gender gap in literacy rates – 28.6 per cent [Banthia 2001a, 2001b].

*Infrastructure and teachers:* There are 17,304 existing primary schools (including the upper primary and secondary schools with primary sections) in the state, which, given the low population density (338 persons per sq km) and vast geographical area (79,714 sq km) with plateaux, hills, forests and undulating lands,

is woefully inadequate. Each of the primary schools on average caters to an area of 4.6 sq km.

Figures for Dumka district give a better picture, but only relatively. Although there is one primary school for every 3.5 sq km on average, we found children of a village attending a school located more than four kilometres away. More depressing to note is the fact that 243 (12 per cent) schools have no classroom and 72 (4 per cent) have no building at all.<sup>5</sup>

The inadequacy in the number of schools along with the poor number of teachers per school adds to the severity of the problem of the primary schooling system. In Dumka district the average number of teachers per school is 2.5 (3,154 teachers in 1,254 schools) but, as happens almost everywhere in the country, many of the schools in the rural areas are run by a single teacher while many of the schools in the urban and semi-urban areas enjoy the luxury of having an excess number of teachers.

Of the 11 primary schools we surveyed,<sup>6</sup> three (27.3 per cent) were single-teacher schools, six (54.6 per cent) were run by two teachers and the rest were run by more than two teachers.

In the district as a whole, the number of female teachers in primary schools comprises only 31 per cent of the total. In the study areas this figure was a little higher – 36 per cent. However, in the remote corners of the study areas we found very few female teachers – most of them are placed in schools with relatively better accessibility (concerning transport and other facilities).

These factors coupled to others have resulted in the erratic functioning of schools<sup>7</sup> despite very high levels of aspiration on the part of parents for acquiring education for their children.

### *Aspiration for Acquiring Education*

One hundred per cent of the respondents in the study villages responded positively about the importance of acquiring education by their sons, and 95.5 per cent of the respondents said that they wanted their daughters to be educated too. The high level of aspiration among parents matches other study reports, such as the Public Report on Basic Education (1999) and the Pratichi Education Report I (2002).

*Enrolment, drop-out and attendance:* The high level of aspiration, however, is not reflected in the actual enrolment of children in primary schools. For the state as a whole, a Sarva Siksha Abhiyan document shows that 25 per cent of the children of primary school-going age still remain out of school.

From a total of 944 households listed in the first phase, a total of 774 children were found to be of primary school-going age (6-11). Of them 533 (69 per cent) were found enrolled, and 181 (23 per cent) were found to have never enrolled. Drop-out rates at the primary stage were relatively low – only 8 per cent (60 children of 774). The extent of non-enrolment was further confirmed from the sampled households where among 160 children, 106 (66 per cent) were found to be enrolled and 38 (24 per cent) were found to have never enrolled. The number of drop-out children was 16 (10 per cent).

From both sets of data never-enrolment and drop-out was found to be higher among the scheduled tribes. Average enrolment per primary school surveyed was 113. The poor rate of enrolment is further aggravated by poor attendance. The overall attendance of children on the days of our visits to their schools was 43 per cent. In response to the question of attendance in school, 53 per cent of the respondents said that their wards had attended school on all six working days in the week prior to our visit, 33 per cent said that their children had not attended school for even

a single day, and 8 per cent said that their children had attended school between one and three days during the same period.

### *Varying Perceptions on Dropout and Attendance*

There were varied perceptions about never-enrolment, drop-out and poor attendance rates at primary level. Many of the government officials, NGO functionaries and teachers interviewed held the parents responsible for not enrolling their children or discontinuing their studies. While some of them sympathise with parents' inability to provide for their children's education because of their poor financial condition, many believe that the tribals and other poor communities do not really value education. The latter view is commonly found in other parts of the country as well and the causes for this undercurrent of prejudice are deep rooted.<sup>8</sup>

It is true that children of many families simply cannot attend school because of family responsibilities, such as looking after younger siblings, tending cattle, doing domestic chores, and so on. Many of the families migrate out in search of work from season to season,<sup>9</sup> which makes their children's attendance at school impossible. Yet, from what we gathered from the views expressed by respondents, there are more reasons – often very strong ones – for the so-called 'disinterest' of parents and children towards acquiring education.

Parents' responses to the questions asked to determine reasons for never enrolment, drop-out and poor attendance underlined the following points: the child was needed for other household activities; poor family condition; school too far away; child less interested in studying; child engaged in caring for younger siblings; parents withdrew the child due to irregular functioning of school; or ill health of child or other family members

Hunger and malnutrition are synonymous with the lives of most of the people in the area and these, in turn, compel families and their children to engage in other activities, like tending cattle, doing farm and domestic work, gathering food, etc.

However, the obstacle to universalising primary education cannot be explained by invoking the inverse relationship of poverty and education. One has to look beyond this simplification to other components (such as infrastructure, teachers, teaching time and quality, implementation of incentive schemes, etc) which, in many cases (like retention of children in school), are far more responsible for the poor functioning of primary schools.

## **II Functioning of Schools**

It is the only proper functioning of primary schools that can assure the delivery of primary education. The functioning of schools depends upon the school environment, the motivation and dedication of teachers and proper supervision and monitoring by both school inspectors and local people.

Although all the 11 schools we surveyed had their own building: eight of them (73 per cent) needed major repairs; none of them had toilet facilities; three of them (27 per cent) had no drinking water facility; seven of them (64 per cent) had no maps or charts; eight (73 per cent) had no teaching kits; one (9 per cent) lacked even a blackboard; and six (55 per cent) had no playground.

Programmes like 'school dela – come to school' launched with much fanfare, have put colourful murals on the walls of buildings in towns and villages but, so far, have not succeeded in changing the dull school environment into an attractive one.

*Teachers' attendance:* The question of teachers' attendance is taken more seriously than the lack of basic amenities by the

parents. Many of the parents complained that teachers frequently remain absent from school. During the Pratiche research team's visits to the schools, we found 20 per cent of the teachers absent.

Absenteeism among the teachers was found to be higher in the tribal villages located in the hinterland, while teachers in schools located in the non-tribal villages were found to be more regular and punctual.

We did, however, come across some very dedicated teachers who are respected in their localities for regularity, punctuality and the use of innovative teaching methods.

*School days, timings and teaching:* At least two of the 12 primary schools were found to have been functioning most irregularly. Besides, some other schools were also found to have erratic working days. Quite apart from the occasional declared or undeclared holiday, many of the teachers (particularly the men) were reported to often come to school much later than the scheduled time and leave much earlier than they are supposed to do.

Female teachers, in general, were found to be more regular and punctual. Also, they were said to be much friendlier with the children. As mentioned above, very few female teachers are found in the remote areas of the district. However, it was reiterated by the parents of some remote localities where female teachers have been placed (we found three such primary schools) that female teachers are not only regular, they also spend sufficient time in actual classroom teaching, which cannot always be said to hold true among the male teachers.

Where the functioning of the schools is poor, it is not surprising that actual classroom teaching remains far from satisfactory. From a total of 43 children responding to the question of subjects taught in the school, 21 per cent said that no teaching was done on the day (or the day immediately preceding) our visit, although the school itself was open. From our respondents, it appeared that Hindi and Mathematics are the only subjects that are taught. Although subjects such as Science, History and Geography, Sanskrit and English are supposed to be taught in classes three, four and five, none of the children mentioned these subjects. To our utter surprise, one teacher of a primary school was not even aware of the syllabus!

*Parents' perceptions about teachers' performance:* There was a high degree of dissatisfaction among parents concerning the performance of teachers with 33 per cent of them expressing their clear dissatisfaction with teachers. The number of satisfied parents was lower than 50 per cent and 21 per cent of them were either unable to answer or unwilling to comment on teachers' performance.

Parents' knowledge about government primary schools was much higher than for private schools (50 per cent of the parents of private school going children either could not or did not respond). This is probably since government primary schools are located in and around villages and local residents – whom many teachers and policy-makers consider to be 'fools' – are able to observe teachers' attendance, school-timings, children's attendance, etc on a daily basis.<sup>10</sup>

Children in primary schools have, it seems, little respect for their teachers. Many of the children said that few teachers ever taught in class, even when they came to school. Sleeping in the classroom, getting their bodies massaged by the children, gossiping with colleagues, are the 'tasks' most of the teachers were 'complimented' for.

*Quality of teaching:* The functioning of the schools speaks volumes about the quality of teaching delivered in primary schools. An assessment of 63 children from different primary classes (classes 2 to 5) showed that 48 per cent of them could

not even write their names, 36 per cent of them could write but could not read fluently and only 16 per cent could do all the tasks of reading, writing and solving simple sums. The number of poorly performing children was found to be much higher among the scheduled tribe children. The figure was much lower among the children belonging to other castes.

While the main reason behind the poor level of learning achievement is the poor quality of teaching, there are also other important reasons identified by parents, teachers and some government and NGO functionaries. These reasons include poor implementation of incentive schemes, poor governance and supervision, the problem of the medium of instruction, lack of teachers, poor school infrastructure and amenities and so on and so forth.

The poor quality of teaching in primary schools leaves parents with two options: (i) helping their children with studies at home or arranging private tuition for them, and (ii) leaving their children at the mercy of the teachers and praying for the best.

A third option is gradually emerging, not only in Dumka, but all over the state. More and more parents who have the slightest capacity to do so are enrolling their children in private schools. *Assistance given at home:* Given the poor educational background of the households, a majority of the parents (particularly among the SC and ST communities) simply cannot help their children with studies at home. Only 39 per cent of parents said that their children were given assistance, either by themselves or by other relatives, at home.

Educated mothers are more likely than fathers to assist their children with studies. Among our respondents in Dumka district only 15 per cent of the mothers were literate. This is a major reason why most of the children do not get home assistance for their studies.

*Private tuition:* Unlike in West Bengal,<sup>11</sup> resorting to private tuition has not yet become a significant phenomenon at the primary level of education in the rural areas of Dumka district.

It is likely that the inability of parents to pay for private tuition and the non-availability of qualified private tutors are mainly responsible for the comparatively small number of children taking private tuition. Among the sampled households, 24 per cent of the children were found to have taken private tuition.

Private tuition among communities other than SC and ST was found to be higher. While 44 per cent of the total number of general caste children were found to be taking private tuition, in case of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes the figures were 29 per cent and 18 per cent respectively. Interestingly, the number of children in private and NGO-run schools taking private tuition was found to be higher than the number of children in government primary schools who resort to private tuition. In some private schools, teachers reportedly insisted that students took private tuition from them. It is also undoubtedly true that parents who can afford to send their children to private schools in the first place can usually also afford the additional cost of private tuition.

Whatever impact private tuition has on the quality of learning, it certainly creates or reinforces class boundaries among people. The relatively affluent sections of society (irrespective of caste and ethnic identity) shrug off their responsibilities towards the monitoring or supervision of (government run) schools, which they (and only they, given the social set up) are otherwise capable of doing. Their ability to take expensive private measures for their children's education creates a false sense of security, which makes them indifferent to other, sometimes greater, social insecurities. This sense of the virtue of privately arranged security is not confined to the affluent, its desirability percolates down

to others lower down the socio-economic ladder. The quality of private tutors (and the instruction they impart) is often not beyond reproach, yet some of the respondents (who are far from being affluent) were found to have borrowed money to pay the fees of private tutors.

*Private schools:* The number of private school going children is significant given the poor economic condition of the area. The inclination to send children to private schools was found to be equally high among all the castes, and it was particularly evident among the relatively affluent scheduled tribe families. Of the 14 children enrolled in private schools, 12 were from scheduled tribe communities, obviously from the relatively better off households. Although the quality of teaching in the private schools is not assured (and, in some cases, is worse than that imparted in government schools), the illusory positive perception about these schools has taken firm root among the people.

All the parents who send their children to private schools expressed the belief that the learning achievement of children in private schools, especially in learning the English language (which is one of primary selling points of these schools, who advertise themselves as 'English medium' schools, even if this is far from being the actual state of affairs), would help the children in building their futures. In addition, there is a belief among many respondents that since the private schools charge fees, they must be imparting quality education. Another reason for the growing inclination towards private schools is the relatively better management and apparently disciplined atmosphere of such schools.

These can perhaps be seen as pointers to the expression and intensification of class divisions among tribal societies. Property and other economic relations have already brought about a change among them and phenomena such as private schools serve to intensify these divisions.

### III Ethnicity and Class

As well as the emergence of a class-divided society, ethnic challenges must also be addressed. This is particularly relevant in a place like Dumka where more than 40 per cent of the population belong to the Santal tribe (and many non-Santals in the rural areas use Santali as a lingua franca and are largely incorporated in the Santal culture).

L S S O'Malley (1910) wrote about Santal Pargana in 1910, "... the district is a backward one, chiefly because the population is mainly composed of aboriginals, who have little thirst for knowledge". The O'Malleys may have left, but their Indian successors continue to hold on to such beliefs.

These beliefs are often expressed in official policies and programmes. The tribals, on the one hand, are accused of being indifferent towards acquiring education, yet on the other, are not allowed to acquire education. Tribal children face major hurdles, both in terms of geographical accessibility and the poor functioning of the existing primary schools. Poverty is a key issue here. Those who somehow manage to cross the barriers of accessibility and affordability find themselves facing an even greater challenge.

The problem that the tribal children face everyday is the barrier of language. Hindi, the official language of Jharkhand and the medium of instruction in government primary schools, is as foreign to them as any other imported tongue. All the general caste teachers we interviewed said that for them the biggest problem of teaching is that of communication. Children, who are otherwise quite intelligent, simply do not pick up anything

in school because they cannot follow either their teachers or the prescribed textbooks.<sup>12</sup>

Most of the children of the lower classes responded to only a few of the questions asked by the members of the Praticchi Research Team. One reason for this could be that the identity of the researchers, in their eyes, was not very different from the identities of their teachers to whom they seldom speak (either because of shyness or from fear). However, 27 children (of a total of 63 interviewed) responded to the question about whether or not they understood their teachers' language and that of their textbooks. All the tribal children taught by non-tribal teachers said that they understood little of what the teacher taught.

There are other ethnic issues as well. The division between policy-makers/implementers and the people they are supposed to serve is drawn along ethnic lines. Non-tribal officials and teachers do not care much to hide their distaste for tribals. The firm belief that tribals are not fit for acquiring education (according to some, not even to be called human beings!) was expressed by many of the officials and teachers during interviews with the researchers.

The tribals of Dumka district, particularly the Santals, have no historical inheritance of formal schooling. Their history of continuous migration from one place to another [Coomer 1987] and the political economic relations of the country [Rapaj 1993, 1998-2002] did not allow them to become acquainted with formal schooling. Yet, they have a rich cultural heritage. They have a language of great complexity, compiled by P O Boddington in a five-volume dictionary (1993). Perhaps the policy-makers have never taken this into account!

At the same time, the emergence of class divisions among the ethnic groups must be kept in mind. The emergence of class disparities was established through land relationships but in addition to many other class components in tribal societies, one is the great divide between salaried employees and others. Some of the tribal teachers, particularly the men, were found in many cases to indulge in gross absenteeism. The high salary they get (between Rs 5,000 to Rs 11,000 per month) has put them 'above' ethnic loyalties and they seem to have willingly joined the class of persons who have little empathy for others, particularly for tribals (and their children).

On the other hand, we did come across some tribal teachers whose dedication towards their work has earned them high esteem and who, through their dedication and innovative teaching, have made school attractive for children and improved enrolment and attendance rates.

The relationship between ethnicity and class is not only intricate but also a very delicate issue that needs careful examination. Within village and community class relations, deprivation based on class and class exploitation is emerging. When tribals face 'others' in the world outside their community ethnicity becomes a much more important factor. Policy formulation can never be complete if it does not try to understand and take this into account.

### IV Hunger, Poverty and Primary Education

Of all the sufferings of life, the most painful is hunger and poverty.  
(Santali folk song)

To translate the above line we have had to use two words 'hunger' and 'poverty' to come closest to the meaning of the Santali word *rengec*. A poor man is called a *rengec* hor, and Santals use the same term *rengec* to express feelings of hunger. For many of the families in the rural areas of the district (among whom, besides the Santals, there are many other poor commu-

nities like Pahariya, Blacksmith, Ghatwar, Rajwar, etc) who suffer from abject poverty, particularly during September-October, a full meal of rice is considered a luxury [Rana 2002]. Among these people poverty is defined by a single parameter – the filling of the stomach.

In such a situation, developing strategies for coping with hunger, ill-health, indebtedness and so on preoccupies the peoples' minds and, despite their strong inclination to acquire education – the 'thirst for knowledge' that O'Malley understood – they are often helpless to do so.

Who will look after siblings when parents go out to work? Who will tend the cattle? How will children fill their empty stomachs if they sit in classrooms and do not go out to hunt and gather? Who will look after school-going children at home when parents migrate out seasonally for wage earning? Where will the money to buy books, stationery and clothes come from? Who will give them private tuition free of cost? These are questions one has to address before planning the universalisation of primary education.

Not that the policy-makers are wholly unaware of the situation. In fact, some policies have been formulated (though there is considerable room for improvement in the formulation) to address these issues – for example, the midday meal scheme, cash incentive for attendance, free uniform scheme for girls, free textbooks for all children, scholarship schemes, etc.

However, plans and their implementation, as it appeared to us from the responses of parents and teachers, are like two parallel lines, which meet each other at infinity.

*Midday meal and other incentive schemes:* Although out of a total of 80 households with government primary school going children (children going to private and NGO schools are not covered under the incentive schemes provided by the government) 63 (80 per cent) said that their children had received rice (under the midday meal scheme), but both the quantity of rice and the frequency of distribution were reported to be ridiculously erratic. While some parents said that their children had received rice once or twice a year (this national scheme is supposed to be implemented every month at the least), responses on the quantity of rice received varied widely from village to village. Distribution is most erratic in villages located in remote areas.

The other schemes like the distribution of free textbooks, free uniforms, cash incentive for attendance, scholarships, etc. have, as parents and teachers reported, been implemented in a manner that makes the irregularity of rice distribution look like a model of efficiency.

## Governance

*Inspection:* One major reason for the poor functioning of schools was attributed by many of the respondents to the poor inspection system. Of the 11 primary schools we could survey, two (18.2 per cent) had not been visited by any school inspector in the past year prior to our visits. Four of them (36.4 per cent) had been visited by inspectors just once in the year. Another 36.4 per cent were visited twice in the year. Only one (9 per cent) was inspected three times in the year. Primary schools located near the block headquarters or with easy accessibility were visited more often, while schools in remote villages were largely neglected.

*Parents' participation:* Although 100 per cent of the primary school teachers interviewed said that there were parent-teacher committees in their schools, only 21 per cent of the parents of children enrolled in government primary schools agreed with the teachers.

When asked whether teachers hold meetings with them, only 33 per cent of the parents of primary school going children replied

in the affirmative. Figures for the private schools were found to be much worse. In the case of the NGO schools no parent said that teachers held meetings with them.

Nevertheless, the majority of the parents said that they responded positively when teachers invited them to meetings. In fact, some of Pratichi's researchers witnessed meetings where the attendance of the parents – both fathers and mothers – was very encouraging. There are other encouraging evidences as well [Rana, Johnson, Santra 2003].

Parents' inclination towards participating in the governance of the primary education system is clear from their expressed desire to offer assistance and improve schooling. Seventy five per cent of the parents of primary school children were willing to offer assistance. However, the willingness was much lower in case of private and NGO schools.

## V The Way Forward

The basic problems that hinder the delivery of primary education, particularly in impoverished rural areas, are essentially the same for most of the country barring few exceptions like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and some other states (see Probe Report, Pratichi Education Report I). As our studies in West Bengal have shown, the complex nature of the problems, and the ways in which they feed off each other, has to be kept in mind while formulating policies for universalising primary education. These problems are further exacerbated in the case of Jharkhand by three factors. First, the extent and degree of rural impoverishment, particularly among the scheduled caste and scheduled tribe communities, which is far more acute in Jharkhand than in most other states. Second, the very low levels of literacy, especially among women, and most particularly among scheduled tribe women that has a direct impact on children's learning achievements, or the lack thereof. Third, the use of Hindi, which is essentially a foreign language, and never used at home by scheduled tribe children, as the medium of instruction.

*Rural impoverishment and importance of incentive schemes:* The degree and extent of impoverishment has a direct impact on all aspects of the delivery of primary education. In addition, there is a direct correlation between poverty and levels of literacy – the poorest are usually those who are illiterate, those who are somewhat better off have marginally higher levels of literacy and so on. In such a situation, where primary education is concerned, not only are children from the poorest families deprived of any help at home, they are also unable to make use of alternative systems to acquire education – such as private tuition, or private schools. Further, poor parents' voices are effectively silenced by the wealthier, more powerful, parents. Those who need education the most are unable to acquire it and also unable to make their demand for it heard.

Abject poverty forces parents to employ children in activities other than studying and also, in many cases, compels children to go out and gather their own food. Malnutrition and ill health are commonplace and often aggravate absenteeism among children. The intricate relationship of poverty, ill health and indebtedness<sup>13</sup> also has implications for enrolment and attendance. Wage earning through seasonal migration is a phenomenon not only in Dumka, but also in many other parts of Jharkhand, and affects both enrolment and attendance in the schools.

In such a situation, setting up more schools and increasing the number of teachers alone cannot succeed in making primary education available for all. This needs proper implementation of

the present incentive schemes and the introduction of some new policies.

The implementation of the midday meal scheme – a real midday meal with cooked food – is immensely important not only for improving enrolment and attendance but also for providing some nutrition to malnourished children. Apart from Tamil Nadu, where mid day meal has been in force for years, a recent report by Jean Drèze and Aparajita Goel (2003) finds that states such as Karnataka, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh, where this programme has been recently introduced have shown remarkable improvement in attendance, especially of girls. Midday meals also have other benefits such as the breaking down of caste barriers, inculcation of a sense of community and so on.

The cash incentive scheme for attendance, distribution of free textbooks, distribution of free uniforms to girl children and scholarships for SC and ST children are also important for improving enrolment, attendance and learning achievement. Proper implementation of these schemes is a must for the poverty-stricken children, many of whom cannot even buy the minimum amount of stationery required for studying, leave alone proper clothes for attending school and supplementary books (assuming, of course that they receive their free textbooks).

Simultaneously, besides long-term programmes of poverty alleviation (through land reform, improvement in agriculture, creating job opportunities, etc) policies have to be developed for delivering primary education to the children of migrant workers. Residential schools for the children of migrant workers (at least during the migrating seasons) can be one way of getting these deprived children into the arena of primary education. The school calendar can also be modified in accordance with the migration seasons. Modification in school timing needs serious attention since many of the children are engaged in other activities like tending cattle and other domestic and farm work during part of each day. *Low levels of literacy:* The extremely low literacy levels in Jharkhand adversely affect the possibility of the poorest acquiring primary education. Women's literacy can have a positive impact on children's education, and a case can be made for initiating a special drive for female education in Jharkhand.

'A literate father', it is said "does not necessarily assure literate children. But a literate mother guarantees that her children will not remain illiterate".

Some special programmes may be designed for enhancing education not only among female children but also among adult females. A number of NGOs (most of whom lay special stress on 'GAD' - Gender and Development) are working in the district. There is no reason why these NGOs cannot take up such an issue in their agenda. The government can, and should, also play a major role in this aspect.

*Mother tongue and medium of instruction:* One major reason for children's low attendance and learning achievement is the problem of comprehension, since the language through which they are taught (Hindi) is foreign to them. Unless Santali and other tribal languages (for other parts of Jharkhand these include Mundari, Ho, Kurukh, etc) are made the medium of instruction, children seem unlikely to learn anything at all in school.

Historical evidence shows that even the most educationally backward nations can achieve high levels of education through propagating it in the mother tongue. Some of the former Soviet republics are classic examples of this [Horris 1991].

The language issue in Jharkhand is complex. Tribals are a minority in the state they dreamt and fought for. Again, the tribals are divided into many linguistic and ethnic groups. Yet, given the richness of these languages, they should be given the status

of mediums of instruction at least at the primary level. There is absolutely no justification for alienating tribals from their mother tongues and preventing these tongues from flourishing. A beginning can be made by making the mother tongue the medium of instruction at the primary level.

In addition to these problems, which are particularly acute in Jharkhand as a whole, and in Dumka in particular, there are several other areas that need urgent attention.

The rate of enrolment needs to be considerably improved. All children of primary school going age have to be brought under the fold of primary education. This needs immediate measures to increase the numbers of primary schools and teachers in order to make primary education accessible to all children of primary school going age.

*Fighting teachers' absenteeism:* Teachers' absenteeism (both in terms of erratic attendance and time spent on actual teaching) is a matter of serious concern. The school inspection system has to be strengthened in order to deal with this problem firmly. And teachers' unions have to support a positive move in this direction.

At the same time community participation in the governance of the primary schooling system has to be ensured. Parents of primary school going children should be given a role in improving the inspection system and the functioning of primary schools. Formation of parent-teacher committees in every primary school with legal powers to make school grants conditional on their approval is likely to be a positive step forward for making primary schools accountable and equitably functional. Parents responded very positively when the idea of forming such committees was put to them and said that such committees should have representation of parents from different classes, castes and communities so that the demographic structure of the area served by the school is reflected in the parent-teacher committee. Given the social structure of the villages – which, in general, have strong community values and systems – ensuring community participation in the governance of primary schools should not be a particularly difficult task.

*Setting up a uniform system of governance:* A mechanism should be developed to check the mushrooming of private schools – which, in most cases, are mere institutions for making money – in order to make relatively influential parents take part in the governance of government schools. Influential parents are often indifferent towards the functioning of government schools since they, or their children, have no stake in their proper functioning.

However, given the present government's stand on primary education (inviting private players into this sector) such a move seems unlikely unless public pressure is put on the government to do so. It is not only the rapid growth of private schools, but also the absolute lack of public accountability of such schools, that gives cause for serious concern.

At the very least the syllabi and governance of such schools should be in consonance with government schools and acceptable to the education department and parents. This means that a common syllabus has to be followed in all the primary schools of the state and all schools have to be brought under the government inspection system. These schools should also be accountable to parents, which can be done by forming parent-teacher committees such as has been suggested for government primary schools.

The same criteria should be applied to NGO-run schools as well. However, care has to be taken to keep the education system free from bureaucratic red tapism. Absolute power in the hands of the



bureaucracy might prove to be counterproductive and encourage corrupt practices, which the state is already infamous for. [27]

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## Notes

[The Pratichi (India) Trust, one of whose major objectives is that of making positive interventions in the primary education sector, has already conducted two studies on the delivery of primary education in West Bengal. The trust thought it appropriate to enquire into the status of the delivery of primary education in neighbouring Jharkhand, a state positioned second from the bottom among the 35 Indian states and Union Territories with regard to literacy.

Although the geographical area of our study was confined to Dumka district and our findings are suggestive rather than definitive, the intensive nature of our investigations, our efforts to relate the delivery of primary education to class, caste, gender and other social factors, and corroboration with wider public discourse, form, perhaps, a basis for some general conclusions that may be applicable to the present state of primary education in the state of Jharkhand as a whole.

Mention may also be made of a workshop conducted at Dumka town on July 6, 2003 by the Pratichi (India) Trust, with the participation of parents, teachers, village level workers and NGO functionaries from the study area. Santali and Hindi versions of the summary findings of our study were distributed and elicited wide-ranging discussions. Workshop participants corroborated our findings regarding the delivery of primary education in Dumka district, which, they felt, held true for Jharkhand as a whole. Our primary thanks are due to Professor Amartya Sen, founder and Chair of the Pratichi (India) Trust who has been the inspiration and guiding force behind this report and to Professor Jean Drèze who read and commented on an earlier draft. Our sincere gratitude to the Managing Trustee of Pratichi (India) Trust, Antara Dev Sen for supporting the study in many different ways. We are also indebted to Subhrangsu Santra, Amrita Sengupta, Arindam Mukherjee and Abdur Rafique – all research associates with the Pratichi (India) Trust for their contribution in fieldwork, data analysis and report writing. Thanks are also due to Saumik Mukherjee for logistical and other support before, during and after the field work. Munni Hembrom, Agatha Baskey, Pushpa Murmu and Agnes Murmu provided field assistance both in terms of data collection and language interpretation. Our sincere gratitude is due to them. We are also indebted to the Ayo Aidari Trust, Dumka, for their unstinted cooperation during the fieldwork. The usual disclaimers apply.]

- 1 We deliberately chose Dumka as our study district for it is contiguous with Birbhum district of West Bengal where the trust has conducted studies on primary education. Besides, Dumka has a fairly large tribal population, particularly in its rural areas. Also, it is a district with high levels of poverty and hunger and there are strong interconnections between poverty, hunger and educational backwardness.
- 2 Santal Pargana district was created in 1855 from parts of Bhagalpur and Birbhum districts. The formation of the district followed the Santal insurrection of 1855 and was designed to pacify Santal unrest.
- 3 Households below the poverty line form 56.8 per cent of the total, and among tribals this figure is much higher.
- 4 Calculated from Vision 2010, Government of Jharkhand
- 5 DPEP, Dumka, Reports on EMIS, Year 2001-02. However, these figures are for the old Dumka district and include the blocks that presently form Jamtara district. The document does not distinguish between 'no classroom' and 'no building'.
- 6 In one school the survey could not be conducted because of the absence of the teacher on four consecutive days. He was finally traced on the fifth day but was not in a position to respond because of his inebriated state!
- 7 A DPEP report reveals enormous variation in the number of working days among primary schools. While some had less than 125 working days in a year, others had more than 250 working days in the same period.
- 8 See the *Pratichi Education Report I* (2002) for a more detailed discussion on this issue.
- 9 Dumka district is one of the main sources of labour for rice cultivation. Labourers migrate out four times a year and the duration of stay at Bardhaman district (West Bengal) varies between 15 days and one month each season. For details see Rao and Rana (1997), Rogaly et al (2001), Rana (2001a) and Rana (2002).
- 10 Rao (2000) also contains similar observations.
- 11 For details, see the *Pratichi Education Report I* (2002).
- 12 See also Rana (2001a), Rana (2002), Srijana (2000) for similar observations.

13 For details, refer to the Pratichi Health Report (forthcoming) and Rana and Johnson (2003).

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