

## EDUCATION

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The two decades of this century witnessed India's remarkable achievement in making elementary education nearly universally accessible to children, a contemporary curriculum framework, the passage of the Right to Education, the development of one of the largest data bases on schools, and a restructuring of the country's EFA programmes to create a holistic, overarching programme from pre-school to higher secondary. However, these successes also created new areas of concern: vast numbers of children at well below their age-appropriate learning levels, systems struggling with institutional and personnel issues, an inability to make a pedagogical transition, and persisting discrimination that prevents children from gaining in proportion to the time they spend in school. It can be said that the battle for EFA has irreversibly shifted from what it was at the turn of the century – from provisioning to ensuring equity – but the experience of the last thirty years has also yielded possibilities of what we can do. This chapter makes an effort to capture the evolving story of education in India from pre-school to the secondary level.

### PRE-SCHOOL

While a country-wide pre-school system does not yet exist (it is in the making, though, as explained ahead), large sections of the population are reached by the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), which focuses on health, nutrition and education of children (birth-six years) from the underprivileged sections. The scheme is now available to 67.23% of the targeted population (Government of India, 2013). In 2014, around 34 million children in the 3-6 years age group accessed the Anganwadis run under the programme (Government of India, 2014). With the Government of India signing an agreement with the World Bank in May 2018 to finance its expansion, the scheme is now slated to be upscaled to all the districts. ICDS has tended to function better in nutrition and health, with the education component tending to be weak, given the poorly trained, overburdened and underpaid Anganwadi workers.

The entry-level age for pre-school education, in Nursery, remains three years in most states. However, for middle class parents eager to give their children a start and also avail of day care facilities tend to enrol their children into play schools, often from the time they are around one and a half years of age. One of the intentions is to enable the child to later gain entry into a 'good' school, thus initiating the child into competitive 'academic stress' from early on. This is then capitalised by the burgeoning private pre-school sector that usually introduces young, pre-school children to the alphabet and numbers even though there is overwhelming evidence as well as policy advice against this.

For those without the means that the well-off can tap there are other, lower cost, lower 'quality' options, mainly in the urban areas. With 97% working women being in the informal sector (World Economic Forum, 2018), especially domestic workers with long hours and lack of extended family support (due to migration as a nuclear family to the city), there is an acute need for day care centres. This need is now served by 'tuition' centres for young children that teach children literacy and numeracy (and some claim, English). Most slums

now have a large number of preschools/tuition facilities in one or few rooms of private home, usually providing limited space and inputs to children. They may also be used by older children when their mothers are away, to complete their school work or be with other children. Apart from the large number of unregulated centres, there are also some run by NGOs (Burly, 2018).

Rural areas too have witnessed an expansion of private schools, with most having initiated Nursery and KG sections as a means of 'capturing' students from early on, contributing to a reduction in enrolment in government schools (Kingdon, 2017). As part of the overall expansion of school education in India, the number of pre-schools too has grown greatly since the turn of the century, though not so strongly in the government sector. Around 20.17% of the government schools had 'attached' pre-primary sections (DISE 14-15) but with lower enrolments and number of teachers when compared to private schools. Interestingly, of the children from low-income families who access pre-school, over 80% rely upon low fee private schools (Jadhav & Borges, 2017). Some states, e.g. Haryana, have responded by asking government school teachers to open 'Nursery' sections to enrol children from the beginning. Schools that have done so are finding that their enrolment is stable or increasing as parents tend to continue their children's education in schools where they began. In the case of Himachal Pradesh, over 300 SMCs had set up pre-primary classes in the school, and the state decided to support this by launching pre-primary classes across all primary schools.

Given the lack of school readiness among children due to lack of access to adequate pre-school education, many states have tried to address the issue by incorporating several weeks of 'readiness' work in the first few weeks in the curriculum and textbooks. However, in the absence of training and an overt focus on this aspect, teachers tend to neglect or remain unclear on what needs to be done during this phase.

The examples of initiative described above may be seen as informal efforts of state governments to provide a semblance of preschool education. However, with the recent formulation of the Samagra Shiksha by merging various programmes being run by the MHRD, as well as the emphasis of the draft National Education policy on Foundational Learning, pre-school education is now formally a part of the Government of India's EFA drive. Towards this, curriculum guidelines and policy have been formulated by the NCERT. Several states have begun the process of 'co-locating' Angawadis with schools, though the process is mired in confusion at the moment. On the one hand it is not clear if Ministry of Women and Child Development will cede its control over the pre-school sector. On the other hand, states also need a specially allocated teacher who is trained for the purpose, along with space and infrastructure, both of which require substantial funding. Some states, e.g. Tamil Nadu, has deployed 'surplus' teachers (resulting from reduced enrolment in government schools) by training them to run pre-school sections, beginning with 2382 pre-schools that are already located within government schools.

An analysis of the Project Approval Board meeting minutes for the year 2019-20 shows that money has been allocated for training of Anganwadi instructors to strengthen the education component. Some states have also been sanctioned money to initiate pre-school classes 'co-located' in primary schools. However, it is not clear how the policy confusion of the

jurisdiction between DWCD/MWCD and DOE/MHRD will be sorted out. The administrative process required for the large number of teachers to be recruited also needs to be worked out. At present, the overall thrust seems to be on a one-year pre-primary (rather than the two years as is typically the case), with emphasis on health and nutrition along with education.

Though the incorporation of pre-school in primary school can potentially benefit children and their learning greatly, other factors stand in way of those gains being accrued. Overall, the thrust in school tends to be on the more scholastic and academic aspects, with children being pressured to ingest components of literacy and numeracy they may not be ready for. At this age, their development demands a great deal of physical activity, unstructured but supervised free play, a stimulating environment, a substantial amount of time devoted to oracy and expression in diverse ways, and plenty of scope to handle concrete objects – all of which provide the basis for later learning. However, whether in the private school or in the government one, children are made to sit for long durations and made to repeat songs or letters or numbers, initiated into writing work, and trained to fall into a regimen. Instead of child-centred processes that give primacy to children's voice, scope for them to learn through purposeful activities where they are mentally engaged, the tendency is to subject them to 'direct teaching', a dull experience involving instruction after instruction, with little to involve children's minds. It is possible that the forthcoming expansion of pre-school education might just lead to subjecting children to all of this, which is known to be harmful for their development!

Another potential fallout is that the discrimination that children experienced at the age of six, will now begin earlier. This applies to the fact that a large number of children do not speak the language of the school. While the home and school language divide is well known in the case of tribal children and those who speak variations of languages such as Hindi, large-scale migration and urbanisation in recent times has led to over a dozen languages now being present in a classroom in a slum area. Not only do teachers not know how to deal with this, they are prone to discriminate against and deride children with backgrounds in languages other than that of the school. (There has been very little effort to develop a pedagogy of language learning for multi-lingual pre-school contexts, the notable exception being in Odisha, where BvLF supported the development of mother-tongue based ECE for four tribal languages.) Apart from language, schools are prone to discriminating children on basis of gender, caste, class, ethnicity, disability or being from a minority group – all of which may now be experienced by children at a younger age than ever before.

One way to address these potential issues is to look at successful small-scale programmes run in the NGO sector, of which there are several good examples in the country (e.g. Mobile Creches or Uttarakhand Seva Nidhi Environmental Education Centre, or Society of Integrated Development of Himalayas – SIDH, or the pre-school curriculum development process used in Odisha by IgnusERG involving communities from four tribes). Lessons could also be drawn from DPEP, SSA and the processes involved in implementation of the RTE, with regard to the introduction of child-centred pedagogy, and the use of concrete materials and oracy in early primary schools – if nothing else, at least the mistakes made earlier could be avoided. Finally, the need to involve parents and community is critical to

the success of pre-school programmes and the available structures (of SMCs and PRIs) could be built upon to this end.

## **ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**

### **A brief history of how we reached where we are**

India's journey towards Education for All (EFA) began with the 1986 National Policy on Education, with its focus on Universalisation of Elementary Education (UEE). The Plan of Action for the Policy (1992) emphasised enrolment with retention, the need for an attractive school environment, participative planning, reform in teacher education and flexible provisioning, especially for girls and working children, through Non-formal Education (NFE). Following the release of the policy, the Government of India initiated Operation Blackboard (1987-2003) to ensure provisioning of materials, infrastructure and teachers, with a focus on recruiting women. The ongoing Andhra Pradesh Primary Education Programme (1989-96) was also upscaled to cover all the districts of the state.

It was after the World Conference on Education in Jomtien in 1990, though, that large-scale EFA initiatives got a boost, with the launch of Lok Jumbish (1990-2003), Bihar Education Project (1991-1997) and the UP Basic Education Programme (1993-2000). These eventually became part of the District Primary Education Programme (1994-2003) which ran across 18 states. In turn, DPEP was replaced by Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, SSA, (2001-2018) which was the first programme to cover the entire country. As the need was felt to address gaps in secondary education, the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan, RMSA (2009-2018) was created as an extension of SSA.

In Aug 2009, the Parliament of India enacted the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE), making education a fundamental right of children between the ages of 6 and 14. The act specified minimum norms for elementary schools and included reservation of 25% seats in private schools for children from economically weaker sections. The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan was now recalibrated to become the designated vehicle for the implementation of the RTE, with the National Council for the Protection of Children's Rights (established in 2007) allocated the role of a monitoring agency.

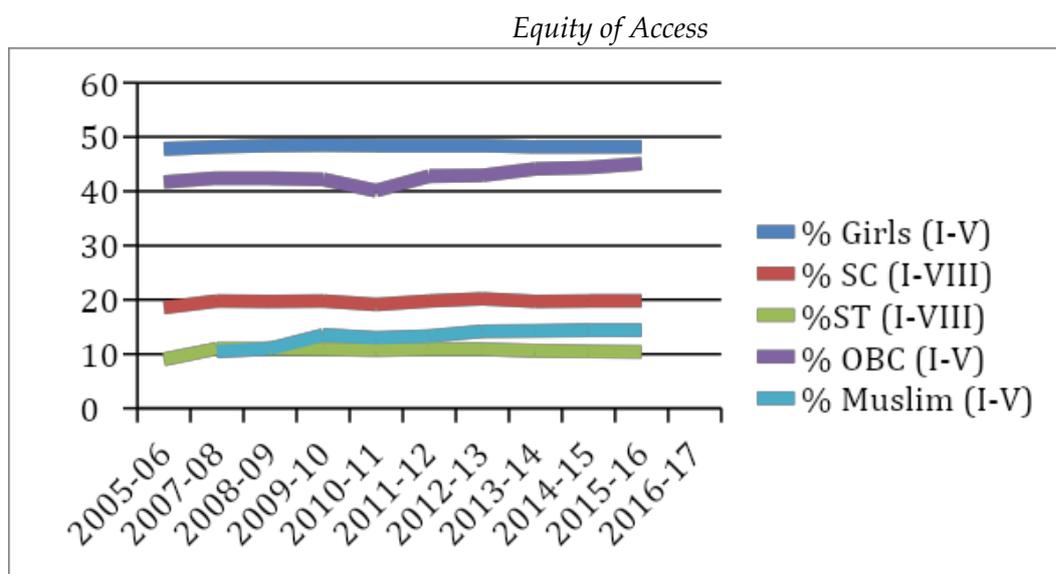
As education was now required to take place in defined formal settings of schools, this led to the winding up of most NFE and Alternative Education initiatives, including those run by NGOs, which then transited to mainly supporting government efforts. In 2013, India introduced a law mandating large companies to spend 2% of their average net profit on activities related to Corporate Social Responsibility, with a substantial proportion of that expenditure being spent on education since then.

In 2018, SSA, RMSA and the Teacher Education schemes were merged into Samagra Shiksha, in order to 'to treat school education holistically without segmentation from pre-nursery to Class 12'.

The pattern begun with the earliest large-scale programmes has continued with there being a focus on increasing enrolment, retention and quality (with a focus on equity, interpreted as reducing disparity in access to services initially and, later, learning levels).

### Participation in school improved

Following the various initiatives mentioned, the number of primary schools increased from 528,872 in 1986 to 638,738 in 2001 and to 847,118 in 2015 (Selected Educational Statistics, GOI, 2001; Educational Statistics at a Glance, GOI, 2016). While the focus had been on primary education from 1995 onwards, in 2000 upper primary grades began to be included in universalisation efforts too, with a range of incentives (including mid-day meals, free school uniforms and textbooks, etc.) being provided to enhance participation of various disadvantaged groups in education. From 2001 to 2015, enrolment in upper primary schools increased from 42.8 million to 67.16 million, with the GER for primary level (6-10 years) reaching 100.1% and for upper primary (11-13 years), 91.2 %. Children are now referred to as being 'out-of-school', 'dropouts', 'truant', 'never-enrolled' or 'school-going', as if that is the only aspect of their lives. Those who are the first in their family to attend school are unfortunately referred to as 'first generation learners' as if no previous generation ever learnt anything! In fact, they are merely first-generation school goers.



Source: *Elementary Education in India: Trends* retrieved from [www.schoolreportcards.in](http://www.schoolreportcards.in)

Though the infrastructure expanded rapidly, the recruitment of teachers did not, with an estimated 1.2 million teacher vacancies reported by the NCTE in 2010. The overall allocation of the expenditure too did not go beyond 3.71% of the GDP, against the advocated 6% (Economic Survey of India 2018). These factors combined to limit the gains made by universalisation.

In 2011-12, dropout rates still remained very substantial, being much greater in the case of ST children, as can be seen below.

Table: Dropout rates at different levels of schooling by social groups

Classes	General	Scheduled castes	Scheduled tribes
I-V	22.3	23.5	35.3
I-VIII	40.8	40.2	57.12
I-X	55.3	55.3	65.9

Source: "Statistics of School Education" (2011-12). MHRD, Government of India

Those out of school disproportionately include girls, children living in rural areas, those from migrant and minority communities (including linguistic minorities), street and homeless children, those living in slums, working children and children with disabilities.

Around 67% of the OOSC population comprises children from Muslim, Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities, though they are only 40% of the child population (Planning Commission, Government of India. 2011). In all groups, a greater proportion of girls and children in rural areas are out of school, though in urban areas more boys than girls do not attend school (Global Initiative on. Out-of-School Children. ALL IN SCHOOL. August 2014. A SITUATIONAL STUDY OF INDIA). However, children with disability are five times more likely to be out of school than SC or ST children (World Bank, 2007).

### **Quality and learning levels remain a concern**

Though learning outcomes are only a proxy for the quality of an education system (aspects such as classroom processes and inclusiveness being other critical factors), they do offer us a window into what is not working well. For instance, the NAS 2014 showed low performance in reading comprehension and basic mathematical operations, and the trend has not changed much, increasing marginally by 3% in language but declining by 4% in mathematics in the NAS 2017. These continue to persist in higher grades. A survey in 5 districts of UP supported by the Government of UP, Unicef and Ignus Pahal in showed around 70% children to be below expected levels in grades 3 and 5. These gaps persist in higher classes, with more than 60% of the students entering grade 9 being found at grade 4-5 level (in a survey in Bihar, UP, Odisha and MP).

### **Poor schools for poor children**

The struggle for EFA, it can be said, has now shifted from outside the school to inside the classroom, with the dice continuing to be loaded against Dalit, Adivasi and Muslim children, whose learning levels remain well below those of upper caste children (Borooah, 2012). Many factors account for this, in particular that children from poor families are likely to attend poorly resourced schools (in terms of infrastructure and teachers) whether government or low-fee private ones, thus compounding their disadvantage (Ramachandran, V. 2014. Equity and Quality are Two Sides of the Same Coin in India's School Education. Nehru Memorial Museum and Library. New Delhi.)

Given that PTR norms provide for teachers at 1:30 students, and that a majority of schools are small schools (with 70-90 children), it is common to find 2 or 3 teachers handling 5 grades, implying that a majority of teachers are teaching in multi-grade contexts. Yet, curriculum, textbooks and teacher training continues to assume a monograde setting.

### **The student profile has changed**

However, a bigger factor has been the inability of the system to respond to the changing profile of students. With the increase in enrolment made up mainly of those from marginalised backgrounds (those from low income families, tribal children, socially excluded groups, working children, migrant groups, girls, CWSN) classroom diversity increased dramatically. Many of the earlier assumptions did not hold. For instance, for many children it is not possible to attend school daily, or function in the language of the school or get support from family on school work. In urban slums, migration created classrooms where a dozen languages might commonly be found. Overall the learner is expected to adjust to the requirements of school while the school itself does not adapt to learners' contexts and needs.

Unfortunately, instead of responding to the situation by changing the educational design (e.g. through reformulated curricula, classroom processes, materials and assessment), the education system persisted with the expectation that children would adjust to school, resulting in a situation that rendered children unable to participate in the teaching learning process, triggering what is being characterised as a 'learning crisis' (World Bank).

### **Teaching-learning processes proved difficult to change**

At the heart of this is also the issue of pedagogy. From the 1986 policy onwards and in particular from NCF-05 onwards an activity based, 'constructivist' and holistic approach is advocated, and even enshrined in the RTE, which asserts that children will learn through 'activity, exploration and projects'. The intention is that children should play an active role in their own learning, through engaging tasks that lead them to reflect and apply their learning. However, what we continue to see in school is a didactic approach, 'imparting' education rather than enabling children to develop their understanding. The child's agency finds no place as teacher control dominates learning.

Similarly, though holistic and higher order learning is advocated, the focus tends to remain on the basics and aspects that can be easily examined, as may be seen in the focus on science facts rather than scientific thinking. This is a model that emerged during 'information-scarce' times and does not hold in a context where a mobile phone can be used to access such facts. Though '21<sup>st</sup> century skills' are often referred to, there is little to suggest that those most likely to be affected by 21<sup>st</sup> century issues – of climate change, loss of jobs to technology, a cultural homogenising and the resulting marginalisation – are being equipped to deal with them through education.

In order to facilitate holistic education (including the emotional, social, physical and emotional development of the child), the RTE mandated 'continuous, comprehensive evaluation' as a pedagogical tool – the intention being to assess different domains on an ongoing basis, and respond to the findings by altering the teaching learning process to fit the levels and needs of children. This is in keeping with the rights perspective, where the child is the rights-holder and school is the duty-bearer. If children do not learn, the onus is on the school rather than the child – for this reason, the detention policy had been done away with. However, over the years, CCE has tended to boil down to two kinds of tests (summative and formative), diluting the original intent. Moreover, the introduction of non-detention was

seen as removing the 'fear' assumed to be behind learning and leading to low levels of learning. In the last year, the RTE has been modified to allow states to detain children at certain levels, which will in all likelihood disproportionately affect children from marginalized backgrounds.

### **Learning materials – available, underused or limited**

Learning is supported through the supply of textbooks to students in government schools for free. While delays and quality issues affect this component, it can be said that most children have had access to this vital resource, especially since they began to be provided free of cost in the early part of this century. Alongside, enormous amounts of material to support learning has been supplied to schools under TLM (Teaching Learning Material) grants, beginning from Operation Blackboard and repeated since in every programme that has followed, with SSA having included a TLM grant for teachers every year. It is common knowledge, however, that various observers and teachers themselves report that this material often lies unused. In a recent visit by this author to tribal villages not too far from a metropolis, some of the schools had TLM 'kits' contained in metal trunks from Operation Blackboard, DPEP and SSA, all lying unopened.

Starting in the mid- to late 1990s, satellite TV, computer aided learning and later tech-assisted learning has been proliferating in government schools as well. There is little evidence, though, that the substantial investment in this regard has generated commensurate returns. In the early phases of ICT incorporation, a greater focus was on putting the textbook on the screen or providing video explanations – if these components did not work in the original it was unlikely they would work on their screen manifestations! With a large number of vendors sensing opportunity, government systems are now awash with various tech companies offering various devices, apps and programmes, with a focus on 'improving marks'. As yet there has been no 'disruption' – mainly because tech inputs tend to adopt the limitations of the education system (e.g. marks orientation, teacher/content domination) rather than challenge it to bring about improvement (e.g. by enhancing learner agency to support autonomous learning). Many states (such as Gujarat, UP and MP) have also introduced mobile phones as a means of ensuring accountability, with teachers being required to mark their attendance by uploading a selfie or marking attendance on a geo-fenced app. Critics (and many teachers' unions) have labelled this as surveillance that intrudes teacher's and children's privacy.

Overall, for the bulk of the children in the country, then, elementary education remains a work in progress, with much to be achieved when it comes to the quality of education, student experience in school and the learning levels attained. It might be expected to be somewhat better at the secondary level, given the comparatively smaller number of schools at that stage – however, as may be seen ahead, this expectation is belied by the expanding gap between what the school system offers and what students actually need.

## **SECONDARY EDUCATION**

### **Enrolment and retention**

India responded to its demographic bulge comprising of adolescents by beginning to focus on enrolment in the secondary stage (grades 9 and 10) from the year 2009 onwards, when the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan commenced. However, enrolment drives covering the secondary stage had begun much earlier and from 2001 to 2015, enrolment in secondary schools rose from 27.6 million to 61.8 million. This brought the GER for secondary level (14-15 years) to the current 78.5 % and senior secondary (16-17 years) 53.5 %. While this is significantly lower than the GER for the elementary level, it is also compromised by high drop rates and poor transition rates at 69.04 % (from secondary to higher secondary). Significant reasons for dropout include the poor quality of elementary education that ill prepares students for the sudden increase in academic difficulty in grade 9, and schools weeding out children to improve Board results. A 2014 survey found an attendance rate of only 71%; those from disadvantaged group often being held back to support families (Bhatty, 2014).

Several other barriers confront children at this stage. As education at this level is not free and entails expenditure (especially as there are more private and aided secondary schools than government ones), this affects the ability of the poor to participate. The home to school distance, especially in rural areas, and for girls in particular, acts as a deterrent. The 68<sup>th</sup> NSSO Report indicates that 31.1% of 15-19 year old boys are engaged in work or seeking employment. With nearly half of tribal children in the age group 15-17 being in child labour (Rustagi, Mishra & Mehta, 2011), their participation remains low. The urban poor (17% of urban households live in slums, Census 2011, and an estimated 11 million children live in street situations, Unicef 2011) remain deprived of educational opportunities. Similarly, though inclusion of CWSN has been provided for in both SSA and RMSA, a large proportion of adolescents with disabilities do not attend school, with estimates ranging from a quarter in the 'best' state (Karnataka) to over half (in MP and Assam) (World Bank, 2009).

Girls face the greatest barriers among all disadvantaged groups, including hostile public spaces, disparities in nutrition, burdened by household work and care related responsibilities, withdrawal around puberty or early marriage (20% girls in the age group 15-19 are married, Census 2011). Boys are more likely to attend private schools and Muslim girls may receive only religious education. Within the school, the infrastructure may not be sensitive to girls' needs in terms of provision of toilets and security. During field visits, girls have informed us of being offered Home Science instead of Mathematics, which they wanted to study. In school, too, girls may be expected to take sex stereotyped activities such as maintaining cleanliness. In 2010, an estimated 83% girls made the transition from primary to upper primary, 61% to secondary and only 37% to higher secondary (Department of Secondary and Higher Education, Government of India, 2010). The gender parity index remains at 0.96 (Unicef, 2011), partly also because a large section of boys of this age is involved in labour.

### **Quality and learning levels**

The NCF-05 recommended education that would promote "independence of thought and action, sensitivity to others' well-being and feelings, learning to respond to new situations in a flexible and creative manner, predisposition towards participation in democratic processes, and the ability to work towards and contribute to economic processes and social change." (p.1, 2010, AEP, NCERT). However, as is evident this remained only an idea and a

weak programme at best, with secondary curricula continuing to emphasize scholastic content in the subjects with a focus on preparation for the school leaving examination.

The inability of the school system to teach in a manner that is appropriate to the age group and the developmental stage at which adolescents are, and the persistent discriminations faced by various categories of students, contribute to the poor levels learning that most students seem to attain.

A common feature of secondary education across states remains the high number of vacant teacher posts, in particular in Science and Mathematics. With a much higher pupil-teacher ratio, there is a reliance on a one-way lecture method, using more complex language drawn from the discipline. Though adolescents bring considerable knowledge, skills (even expertise) and experience from the world outside school, this is hardly ever made use of. Moreover, they are capable of using logic, creativity, imagination, critical thinking, higher order thinking, and reflection – yet they are compelled to endure hour after hour of passive listening to content that may not relate with them.

While this is something that adolescents across all groups go through, certain groups experience specific forms of discrimination. Dalit students, for instance, may be made to sit in segregated rows or be allowed to drink water only after upper caste boys, or might be excluded from extra-curricular activities (Ramachandran and Naorem., 2013). Teachers may stereotype first-generation school-goers as being incapable of learning and not worth ‘wasting time’ on. Children who are absent or CWSN may simply be ignored by teachers. Adivasi and dalit children whose home language is different from the textbook language, and who may not have support at home, face not only hampered learning but also adverse effects to their motivation and sense of self and identity, often being labelled ‘backward’.

It is not surprising then that by the time they enter secondary classes, children have acquired cumulative learning gaps (as mentioned earlier, an Ignus Pahal survey revealed children entering class 9 to be at class 4-5 level). By this time, children also need language for academic proficiency – another gap that prevents them from accessing learning or participating in classroom processes. In contrast to what may be expected, the ASER report of 2017, ‘Beyond Basics’ looks at 14-18 year olds in rural areas (the first cohort to have been through school after introduction of the RTE 2009) found 25% not being able to read fluently in their own languages and more than half struggling with simple maths problems.

Clearly, secondary education is far from fulfilling the promise of helping India make the leap to a developed nation.

## **WHAT THE SCHOOL SYSTEM CONTINUES TO STRUGGLE WITH**

As will be evident, certain strands running across the various stages of education continue to hold back progress. Some of the more prominent ones are described in this sub-section.

### **Sources of inequity**

Despite all the possibilities offered by EFA programmes, the RTE as well as the NCF-05, as well as the proliferation of technology, the didactic process adopted remain of the one-size-

fits-all avatar. This increases the 'waiting time' experienced by a majority of children (i.e. the time that children are in the class but not engaged in learning, as it is at a level or pace not appropriate for them). Because teachers 'teach to the average' and do not return to topics already 'covered' many sections of the classroom keep falling behind, leading to low learning levels.

This is also exacerbated by issues related to cultural contexts and iniquitous situations that many children face, such as:

- The home vs school language divide: with most children speaking a language at home that is different from that of the textbook, and schools typically not spending enough time to develop oral proficiency in the school language, children suffer from this gap through much of the academic career. Both the RTE and the NCF-05 advocate the use of home language in the early grades; however, this does not happen, though there are a few MLE (multi-lingual education) efforts in Odisha and Jharkhand.
- Much of the curriculum, materials and classroom process relate to contexts that are more middle-class and urban in nature. A consequence of this is that the cultural capital and knowledge heritage that vast swathes of children bring with them to the classroom is rendered unusable and children are treated as being of 'low standard'. Thus a tribal child's fund of knowledge, say, of plants and animals, or that of a rag-picker's about materials – finds no place in the classroom, leading to alienation and the feeling of being 'below' others. The homogenising thrust of school, that privileges the languages, knowledge and culture of dominant groups, delegitimises those of numerous others.
- This is taken further in the discrimination that various children's groups face, especially girls, SC, ST, working children, minorities and those with special needs. They are often victims of what is referred to as the 'hidden curriculum', where in messages are conveyed to them about their position in the social hierarchy, unconsciously by various processes and practices, such as who is allowed to answer questions in the classroom, or assigned duties (such as cleaning up). There is also overt discrimination, whether in the mid-day-meal or at the handpump for drinking water, or the various names used for children from certain groups. The fact that newspapers consider it fit to report when a child from a poor family does well in an examination underscores the widely held assumption in society that such children are not really 'supposed' to do well (or it would not be newsworthy!).

### **Low returns on investment**

At this point, it is difficult to come across any issue or gap for which interventions have not been made through innovative pilot or large-scale programmes, whether alternative education modes for marginalised children, recurrent in-service training of teachers, introduction of different models of 'child-friendly' schools, various capacity building programmes for personnel and institutions, large-scale assessments, development of a variety of packages (including for multi-grade and multi-lingual contexts), community involvement through School Management Committees that include parents, etc. Many of these are run today with civil society involvement, including CSR support, a majority of

whom conduct 'baseline' and 'endline' tests to reveal poor performance of children and teachers. An unwanted consequence is the demonization of government school teachers visible in media as well as literature related to schools.

An accompanying refrain, though, is that all these efforts ultimately fail to lead to the kind of sustained and ongoing improvement expected. Parents, including those with meagre resources, have voted against the government school by sending their children to private school. Most states now have 'excess' teachers (ranging from hundreds to thousands) due to declining enrolment in government schools, while low-fee or 'budget' private schools have seen a phenomenal growth in the last two decades. Along with this, the proliferation of the coaching industry in the country is visible in every town and village. And a small home schooling movement too has begun in India in response to what formal school education has become.

### **Key issues that persist**

The continued poor quality of the government school system stems from many reasons. Apart from the inability to respond to change in students' demographic profile mentioned earlier, some of the other factors that play a significant role include the following:

- Vacancies at various levels: not only are there teacher vacancies, there are substantial gaps in the administrative cadre, as well as in institutions such as the DIETs and SCERTs, ranging from 25% to 70% in certain cases. This affects teacher professional development, supportive supervision and monitoring, fund flow and governance aspects, to the detriment of schools and children.
- Lack of continuity due to changes in leadership: Though a large number of small- and large-scale programmes have been initiated in the country and even demonstrated success, when leadership changes (as in the transfer of an education secretary or director, or the change of government due to elections) such efforts are discontinued and new ones begun, leading to a waste of resources and momentum. Teachers, too, learn to 'wait out change' as they feel that what is advocated today may not continue for long.
- Inability to strengthen the 'cutting edge' or 'last mile': The inability of states to define the role and strengthen the capabilities of Cluster Resource Centres (CRCs) and Block Resource Centres (BRCs) – both of which play the role of quality assurance at grassroots level – has led to a relatively unmonitored system where teachers do not face oversight or receive the academic support needed.
- Lack of internal consistency across different components: Very often there may be a lack of consistency among, say, the curriculum (holistic) and textbooks (discrete), or training (activity-based) and assessment (favouring rote learning). This negates the gains made in one aspect as other aspects do not support it to the extent required.
- Insufficient focus on shedding the command and control mindset: Though the overall objective in policies is to develop 'autonomous learners' who can think for themselves, the education system functions in a command and control manner,

where instructions are to be followed and hierarchy to be observed. An overall feeling is still that if there is no fear, people will not work. This is one of the reasons why 'non-detention' has been opposed.

- Inability to re-consider the design to address disadvantage: In what may be an instance of systemic blindness, curriculum and material developers are unable to perceive that large sections of children are unable to attend school regularly, that a majority of teachers teach in multi-grade rather than mono-grade contexts, or that there are multiple languages within a classroom. Each of these situations, if recognized and responded to, can actually be a resource where what are considered present 'disadvantages' could actually be the contrary. In the absence of this, continuing with present expectations is likely to increase the gap between the learning 'haves' and 'have-nots'.

### **MAKING A DIFFERENCE**

Experience over the last three decades does indicate that it is not impossible to overcome the limitations pointed out. Some of the key learnings that could help define the way forward, include the following:

- A holistic, long-term approach that is persisted with, makes a great difference. This is what enabled the transition in Kerala from ranking in the 30s in the first national survey of learning achievement in 1995, to consistently figuring in the top 3 from a year later onwards.
- Creating practical manifestations of the advocated pedagogy is central to the desired change. It is important to make activity based, differential learning easy for teachers to understand and implement. An instance of this is the use of the learning cycle in the form of ERAC (experience – reflection – application – consolidation) which has successfully been implemented in a large number of schools in several states.
- Rather than instructions being passed 'down' it is far more helpful to share a vision with the various stakeholders. This could turn the present hierarchical (and somewhat adversarial) relationships between administrators, teachers and communities a set of constructive partnerships.
- Empowering various participants (teachers, trainers, supervisors, for instance) with better thinking skills will generate the ability to perceive the limitations in what seems 'natural' and 'normal' while also learning to implement alternative ways of functioning.
- Defining outcomes at multiple levels: Though programmes and systems are clear on the learning outcomes at the level of children, they do not spell out the capabilities or 'outcomes' needed at the level of teachers, teacher educators and supervisors to be able to deliver learning outcomes among children. This leads to an inability to ensure focused professional development, monitor progress and ensure that learning outcomes (which are children's right) are delivered. A few recent efforts to define

and measure performance indicators of teachers and supervisors in an ongoing and real-time manner have led to encouraging results.

- Finally, progressive/incremental changes over a long term are more likely to yield lasting change. However, this requires deepening our understanding of how teachers, schools and systems learn. Towards this too, work done in the last 10 years provides many inputs that can now be stitched together to transform education to strongly serve the interests, needs and rights of children.