

## 3Rs of education thrown into disarray

Pratham's seventh Annual Survey of Education Report (ASER) of rural India released on 16-1-12 tells a similar tale: rising enrolment but declining attendance, over-reliance on private tuitions, decline in reading and mathematical ability of children in the age group between six and 14.

Use of computer is also on the rise in upper primary schools. Almost a third (30.8%) of upper primary schools had computers. But proportion was high in Kerala (78.4%), Tamil Nadu (51.1%), Gujarat (31%) and Maharashtra (30.6%). In contrast, only 7.9% government primary schools had computers. Kerala is the only exception, where 78.5% of primary schools were equipped with computers.

Despite the claim by Pratham that ASER is the largest educational survey in the country, the National University Educational Planning and Administration's district education report is far bigger - reaching out to each and every school with more comprehensive data. Sibal said that it would be wrong to blame the Central government alone for ills of elementary education as it is left to state governments to carry out work at the ground level.

The good news about ASER 2011 is that 96.7% children in the 6-14 age bracket were enrolled in schools. Heartening news continues on the girl's enrolment front as well that increased from 89.7% (2010) to 94.8% (2011). Credit goes to states like Bihar, where 95.5% girls were enrolled, West Bengal and Chhattisgarh each logging 95.7% girls' enrolment. Till 2006, these states had around 90% enrolment for girls. Uttar Pradesh continues to perform poorly. Girl's enrolment stands at 88.9%, a decline from 90.3% in 2006.

Another positive aspect of enrolment is increase in enrolment of five-year-old children in schools. National average is 57.8% with strong variation across states. For instance, enrolment of five-year-olds was 87.1% in Nagaland, and 18.8% in Karnataka.

Enrolment story has another interesting aspect. More and more children are going to private schools. Nationally 25.6% children are going to private schools. In 2006, only 18.7% children were enrolled in these schools. Kerala and Manipur had more than 60% children going to private schools. Between 30% and 60% of children in rural areas of Haryana, UP, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Punjab, J&K, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh were enrolled in private schools.

Children's attendance has declined from 73.4% (2007) to 70.9% (2011). Decline is slightly steeper in upper primary schools, where it decreased from 75.6% (2007) to 71.9% (2011). In Bihar, there has been a sharp decline, from 59% (2007) to 50% (2011). In Madhya Pradesh, it has fallen from 67% (2007) to 54.5% (2011); in UP from 64.4% (2007) to 57.3% (2011). But teacher attendance is high at 87%. Gujarat topped with 95.6% attendance.

On the rise is incidence of private tuition especially in eastern states. In both government and private schools, between 20% and 25% children attended paid tuition classes, but it was high in Odisha, Bihar and West Bengal. Kerala also has a high incidence of tuition.

The worrying aspect of ASER is decline in the learning ability of children. The national figure for the proportion of children in standard V able to read standard II text dropped from 53.7% (2010) to 48.2% (2011). However, there has been improvement in states like Gujarat, Punjab and Tamil Nadu. Several north-eastern states have also shown positive change. The missing part here is that ASER ignores its own findings - in Inside Primary Schools released last October - about quality of textbooks when it deals with reading ability of children. Inside Schools' report had said "Textbooks' expectations of what children can do and should learn are completely unrealistic as well as often arbitrary in terms of both content and sequencing." It also said textbooks are being written for an "imaginary set of children".

In case of arithmetic, there are far more worrying signs. The proportion of standard III children who can solve a two-digit subtraction problem with borrowing dropped from 36.3% (2010) to 29.9% (2011). The decline is nationwide except Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Among class V children, the ability to do the same task dipped from 70.9% (2010) to 61% in (2011).