

Absent Maam

In Chamraiya, a remote village in UPs Sitapur district, Mohini Devi does not send her two daughters to the government school nearby. The girls go to a private school. Illiterate herself, Mohini is keenly aware of the importance of education. They hardly teach anything in the (government) school. My neighbour's daughter who studies there cannot tell the table of four whereas my daughter knows all tables till 10, she says.

How will students learn if there's no one to teach them? Government figures routinely show 95% teacher attendance. But educationist Gita Kington, who studied teacher absenteeism in 180 schools of UP and Bihar, found that 25% teachers are not present in school on a given day. That translates into a whopping 87,500 missing teachers.

Kington attributes the problem to a systemic flaw which is poor accountability. Para teachers locally appointed instructors called shiksha mitras are more regular than permanent teachers despite high pay disparity, she says. A para teacher gets Rs 3,500 a month while a government teacher's pay packet is around Rs 23,000. Accountability is a crucial factor. Para teachers are usually local and there's more social pressure on them. Though there are provisions like holding back salary and even suspension to check government teachers, for villagers it is difficult to go to a tehsil office and lodge a complaint, she explains.

Defending themselves, the teachers say the state's policy of postings is weird. As per the policy, a teacher has to be posted in a remote block of some remote district. That may not be difficult for men but for women it is, says Vijay Lakshmi, a retired government teacher. This reportedly leads to malpractices such as proxy teachers local representatives being hired to mark attendance and sometimes take classes as well. To discourage this, the basic education department introduced photo attendance registers for teachers in 2009.

UP faces a serious shortfall of 1.10 lakh teachers, according to official estimates. The current requirement is 4.6 lakh. And the ones that are on the rolls often get roped in for jobs like population surveys, drought relief and polls.

It's Friday, 12.30pm. At Lucknow's Tope Darwaza government primary school, four of the five regular teachers are away on election duty. The fifth is undergoing

teachers training. But there are lots of children around. Some are playing in a small courtyard, while others wait eagerly for the mid-day meal to be served.

An hour later, the bell rings. The students all 86 of them, from Class I to V sit down to study. Minutes later, a woman in her early 30s arrives and starts giving assignments. Shabana Begum is a shiksha mitra. The only hope for the students of Tope Darwaza school this election season (TOI 22-1-12).