

Malnutrition-Education Link

The approach paper for the 12th Five-Year Plan with focus on faster, sustained and inclusive growth is candid and forward-looking. On poverty reduction, the document notes, without comment, the annual trend decline of 0.8% accelerating to 1% during 2004-05 to 2009-10, against a promised target of 2% in the 11th Plan. It emphasises that India will easily meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of halving poverty by 2015, over 25 years.

This document, however, does not estimate or report on 'children in poverty'. Further, child poverty is not a serious input in the process of planning for poverty reduction, or for the implementation of the Right to Education (RTE). Our estimates indicate that 1 in 3 children lived in poverty in 2004-05 and that, at the above implied rate of poverty reduction, this number was in the vicinity of 100 million in 2009-10.

Efforts under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) since 2002, through substantially higher enrolments, have created the illusion that out-of-school children (OoSC; we refer to them as child labour and nowhere children) are a very small proportion of child population. This, we believe, is a serious error of judgment because the spirit of RTE is violated. Teacher absenteeism, need for community involvement, need to eradicate private tuitions and poor learning outcomes are discussed often. And the need to tackle these problems is also highlighted.

However, the stark reality that each one of these is a case of 'management failure' is not underscored, although such an inference would be obvious to enlightened citizens. It took over five years to work on RTE. The number of children in need of education was known at the state, district and even household level. What were we doing during 10th and 11th Plan periods? There are many ways to tackle these issues, if we have the will to deal with them. Analytically, eight years of quality school education meeting national standards envisioned by RTE in India has three distinct segments, with minimum overlap. First, the best quality education that money can buy with direct and indirect government support. Upper-income Indians keep this segment well managed and resourced, and also insulated. The RTE requires that 25% of their enrolments come from excluded children from their neighbourhoods. State needs to ensure that we keep potential Dronacharyas from treating them as Eklavyas.

Second, quality education that follows the principles of demand and supply is

delivered efficiently at a reasonable cost with as much subsidy from the state has been growing as fast as our middle class and aspirational lower strata of society. The middle class, estimated at 350 million, with less than one child in each family, has been demanding and getting such education for the last several decades. The 25% rule under RTE applies to this large and growing segment as well.

Finally, beneficiaries of SSA since 2002 are the residual category consisting of approximately of half of India's 365 million (under-15) children as per census 2001. That a large part of this group of children is growing up in households living in absolute poverty needs to be the focus in the 12th Five-Year Plan. Child poverty reduction and RTE are organically intertwined. Treating them as separate issues of poverty and RTE, we believe, would be a serious mistake. Implementation of RTE is a legal obligation and a constitutional responsibility. Resource constraints or teacher shortages are not admissible reasons, either in a court of law or in a democratic society hoping to be egalitarian.

Following the spirit of RTE, the three segments of elementary school education will get linked if the 25% rule is seriously implemented. Institutional arrangements under RTE are to be in place within three years from 2010. The 12th Five-Year Plan would have very little time to ensure their functioning. The informational and knowledge base is with the Planning Commission; awareness of the urgency and links to faster and inclusive growth is needed.

In the first graphic, we provide a snapshot picture of schooling and OoSC across states for 2004-05. We present data for children (aged 5-14) in poverty separately from that for the non-poor. Children growing up in poverty constitute a much larger proportion of exclusion from schooling compared to children growing up in non-poor households. Large, Empowered Action Group (EAG) states have much larger shares of exclusion than non-EAG states. Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Himachal Pradesh have over 90% of children in schools. Even in these states, the gap between the poor and nonpoor persists at around 10%.

Large and increasing gender bias in children aged 0-6, and lower participation of girls in schooling from poor and socially-disadvantaged sections, analysed in Chaudhri and Jha (2011 a,b), require particular attention if inclusive growth is to become meaningful. The demographic dividend has already been accruing to the sections of the population in categories (a) and (b) above and needs to percolate down to the population in category (c), failing which the country runs a high risk of being caught up in the middle-income trap.

The Planning Commission's poverty reduction and education divisions need to coordinate with each other. The improved policy outcomes from this are likely to be strengthened by a specialist seminar involving Unicef and India's think tanks working in these areas (ET 22-12-11).