

Quality crisis in education

Today, the quality of India's primary education is a bigger concern than the number of small children who don't attend school. India's gross enrolment ratio, at 98 per cent at the primary level, suggests that almost all children of the relevant population are covered. That ratio drops to just 60 per cent at the secondary stage, which means that 40 per cent of the children who should be in Classes IX and X are excluded. What explains the decline in enrolment ratio?

The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) has been successful, along with the mid-day meals programme, in drawing small children to school. One of the reasons, as the Ministry of Human Resource Development points out, is that “98 per cent of our habitations have primary schools within a distance of one kilometre”.

But why are children unable to improve on their educational skills and enter secondary schooling? There are three forces at work: the state's retreat from education prior to SSA; the impact of broader socio-economic forces on a child's schooling; and pedagogical concerns, or the absence of clarity on what is “knowledge”, and how it should be imparted. This article deals with the first two issues.

STATE'S WITHDRAWAL

The task of ensuring both higher enrolment and quality in education must lie with the state. That has been the experience globally, and there is no reason to believe that India is different. The private sector has played a role in raising enrolment and literacy rates, by responding to the prodigious demand for education. But it cannot, by its very nature, include the really poor.

After more than two decades of the private sector boom in education, it is clear that private schools are no alternative to the government as far as imparting quality education is concerned. If absenteeism of teachers is a pervasive problem in government schools, teachers are not qualified in most private schools.

The root cause of the quality crisis — one where a child in Class V cannot deal with study material meant for Class II — is the collapse of standards in government schools. The reasons for this can be traced to a simple fact:

Public services, be it ration shops, buses, trains and hospitals or schools, work best when the middle class use them. The poor, by themselves, are unable to enforce standards. Hence, the decline in quality of government schools can be traced to the exit of middle-class children since the mid-80s. It seems that the coming up of a number of private schools, marking the end of 'common schooling', contributed to this critical transition.

The private sector will exclude the disadvantaged, those who cannot exercise their so-called "right to free and compulsory education". On the Right to Education (RTE) Act, in effect from April 2010, the Draft Approach Paper to the Twelfth Plan says that "all schools, whether they receive financial aid from the government or not, must reserve 25 per cent of seats for children from disadvantaged households. However, barriers to private entry are high, which need to be re-examined."

Providing for reservations sounds fine on the face of it, but it is no substitute for greater direct state involvement. It is naïve to expect that reservations can be implemented, in the absence of any clarity on who constitute the "disadvantaged" — or worse still, the poor. And, even if the poor or the disadvantaged were to be clearly defined (a tall order, if the controversies on the poverty line or 'creamy layer' are any indication), they still wouldn't have the social power to enforce their rights.

That is why the 'targeting' of public services for the poor has failed, whether in the case of the public distribution system, as is well known, or in health. Private hospitals do not set aside a certain proportion of beds for poor patients, in exchange for having got land at concessional rates. Nor have court rulings rapping them (even in the National Capital) helped. Will reservations in schools be any different?

There can be no getting away from setting up more, and well-run, state schools. But for state-run schools to improve, the middle class must return to them. Higher budgetary outlays are necessary but not sufficient; government schools also need an image makeover. SSA funds should be imaginatively used to create model schools on the lines of Navodaya Vidyalayas and Kendriya Vidyalayas, whose standards are pretty much intact, because the rural and urban middle-class has not abandoned them. This cannot be done overnight, given the shortage of trained teachers (more than five lakh posts at the primary and upper primary level are vacant). But reasonable targets can be set for the next five years.

SOCIAL TRANSITION

Let us now look at the possible domino effect of economic and social factors on schooling. If household incomes have risen in the post-reform years, so have expenditures and debt, particularly on account of the rising costs of private health and education. A vast number of households can slide into crisis in the event of a financial shock.

Financial shock can give rise to mental stress within the family (the most extreme manifestation of this being farmers' suicides), more so because the social support systems to deal with them, such as the joint family, are on the wane. In addition, migration and urbanisation in the last decade may have had unsettling effects on family stability. Instability and stress within a nuclear family can impact a child's education.

This may not be a far-fetched hypothesis. As Pulitzer Award-winning writer David Shipler explains in his book, *The Working Poor – Invisible in America*, “Every problem magnifies the impact of others, and all are so tightly interlocked that one reversal can produce a chain reaction with results far distant from the original cause. A run-down apartment can exacerbate a child's asthma, which leads to a call for an ambulance, which generates a medical bill that cannot be paid, which ruins a poor credit record, which hikes an interest rate on an auto loan, which forces the purchase of an unreliable used car, which jeopardises a mother's punctuality at work, which limits her promotions and earning capacity, which confines her to poor housing.” To this, one can add, that the child had to leave school. This could well apply to India, especially with its weaker welfare net and eroding family ties (Business Line 7-2-12).