

SCHOOL EDUCATION

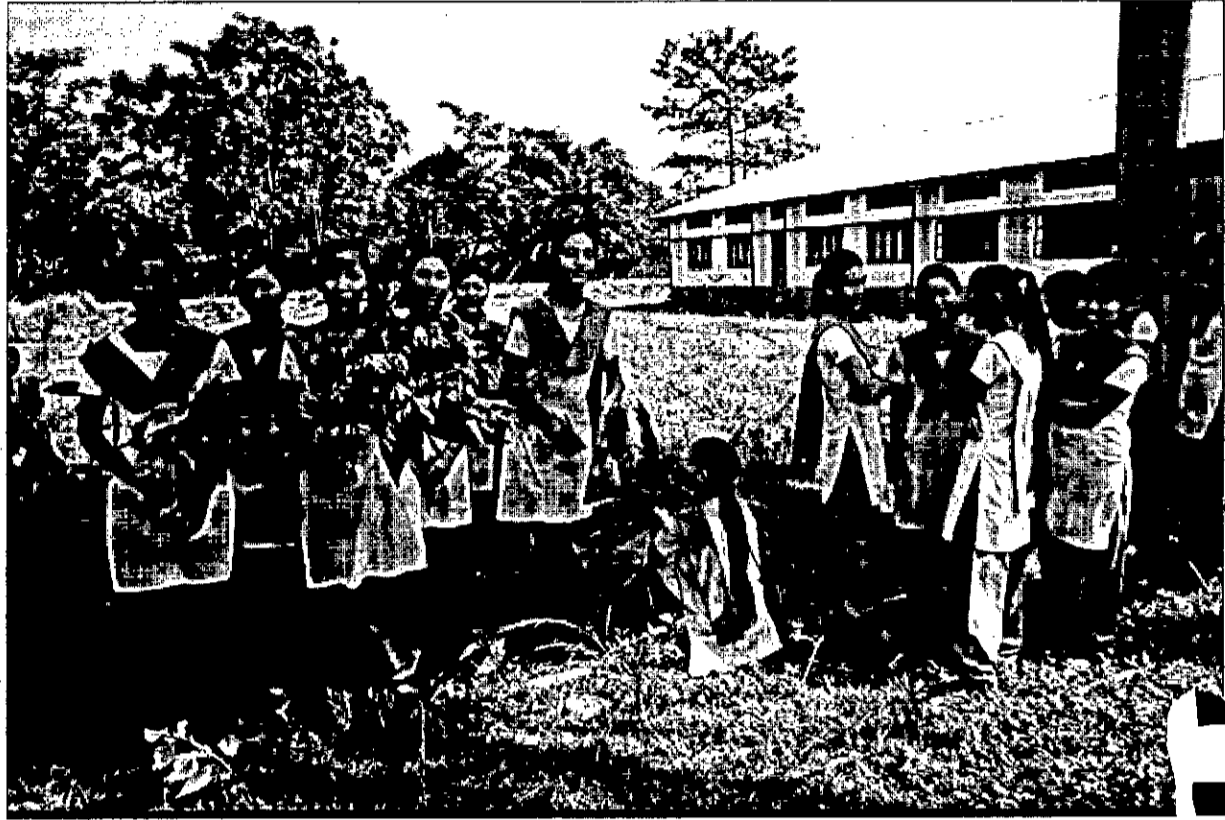
# Looking beyond enrolment figures

by Satvinderpal Kaur

UNIVERSALISING education involves issues of both distributive justice and quality. While former embodies education to reach to the marginalised, later counts for education of comparable and meaningful quality. Indian school education system is among the largest with almost 26 crore children enrolled in Class I to XII. In the last decades, education system in the country has witnessed a huge expansion and major focus has been on increasing enrolment figures. At present, India is close to universal enrolment with 96.7 per cent of the children in age group of 6-14 are enrolled in schools. Though the nation is moving closer to the constitutional commitment of the right of children to free and compulsory education through the Right to Education Act 2009 with satisfactory gross enrolment ratio figures, the right to quality education is still not met to all. The Indian Education Commission (1964-66), the National Policy of Education (1986), the Programme of Action (1992) and the Right to Education Act (2009), etc all had laid stress on access to good quality education to all children irrespective of their caste, class, gender and locale, but yet issues of equity and quality are standing still.

Diminished attention has been paid to quality of education and learning skills equitably to children across all social and economic groups. Evidently a significant proportion of children (especially children from underprivileged backgrounds and girls) either drop out before they reach Class V, or even if they continue to attend school, learn very little. As per the Annual Status of Education Report (2014), the number of children in Class II who could not even recognise letters of alphabets increased 13.4 per cent in 2010 to 32.5 per cent in 2014. The reading levels of children in Class V also declined during the previous years. This phenomenon is far more pronounced among children from the disadvantaged sections of society. Hence multifaceted silent exclusion of a vast majority of children from educational arena is taking place. Poor academic performance not only results into low self-esteem but also causes failure at higher grade, dropout, educational deprivation, unemployment, poverty and elimination.

Rather than providing a common school system as recommended initially by Kothari Education Commission (1964) and then by the RTE (2009), the present school education system tends to increase social segregation by widening class distinctions. Stratification of education and growth of multiple schools by both private and government sector have further aggravated the complexity of situation by creating social division. In addition to schools run by central and state government, private sector includes different categories of schools; first, are aided schools which run under grant-in-aid system. The second category is composed of private schools, which are recognised and fulfil some specified norms laid down by government for recognition process and are generally situated in urban areas. These are high fee ushers and are out of reach to majority of the population. The third category is of unrecognised, popularly called 'English medium' schools which are



usually low-cost private schools. Since the last few decades the government-run schools are perceived as schools of have-nots and the vacuum created is filled by unrecognised and unregulated growth of this third category schools in rural and semi-urban areas. The wide proliferation of third category private schools has perpetuated the myth that they offer education in English medium through a sound pedagogy and, therefore, provide quality education. In the last couple of years, the changing policies of state along with the gross neglect of government schools, have forced parents to resort to private schools. Consequently, discernable trend in shift of children from government to private schools in both rural and urban areas is being experienced. The affluent and education conscious parents have shifted their wards from rural government schools to urban sector. At present, 31 per cent of children in the age group 6-14 go to private schools at an all-India level while the percentage is more than 50 in many states (ASER 2014). With this backdrop of the growing popularity of private schools in rural sector has posed many questions about learning outcomes of children and the quality of education. Research studies have evidently proved that the quality of education in both government and private schools, especially in rural areas, is far from satisfactory. The shift of children from government to private schools is not adding any value to access good quality education for rural children.

The existing system of school education reflects economic and social inequalities. Exclusivity prevails in such a manner that only privileged could manage to gain access to education. As per the National Sample Survey Office (2014) net attendance figures, 89 per cent of children of the richest fifth of population of both rural and urban attend primary schools. The percentage drops by 10 points (78 per cent) for the poorest fifth of population in rural areas and 79 per cent for urban areas. Social and income disparities continue to be reflected in gaps in learning level of children. Children of disadvantaged and weaker sections of society exhibit lower learn-

ing outcomes and drop out from the school due to poor performance in numeracy and literacy skills.

It is obvious that nearly 70 per cent of the population of India lives in rural areas. Rural schools cater to girls, children of small farmers, labors and low-caste and disadvantaged families. A vast majority of them come from subsistence economic background and many of them are first generation learners. Being voiceless, rural illiterate parents are unable to have a look on the quality of education imparted in the schools. Unfortunately, the situation is worsening day by day with the exit of better off families from rural to urban sector and crisis in rural economy while children of affluent families have access to good quality high cost urban private schools.

School education is the most crucial stage spanning the first 10-14 years of life and lays foundation for development of personality, attitude, confidence, habits, learning skills, and communicating capabilities of the child. The basic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic acquired at this stage constitute building block for higher education. Outcomes of early experiences at home and school determine the future position of child in the society. Without parental involvement and good quality schooling, rural children grow into illiterate, unemployed and poor adults because educational exclusion is the worst kind of exclusion which excludes the person from all walks of life.

It is a fact that enrolment ratio and attendance figures do not convey the true picture of the state of education. Emphasis on enrolment and retention of children in the education system has no purpose when in fact it is not making children able to get even minimum levels of skills and competencies. Quantitative expansion is required to be clubbed with learning achievement of children at all levels. Moreover, in order to assess the progress in expanding school education, it is required to take into account not only the figures for attendance, but quality and performance of schools with desirable learning outcomes.

Investment in education should be

viewed as human resource investment and a way to generate human capital. In India, the educational expenditure has remained substantially low as compared to other developed and developing countries of the world. All national policies of Education right from Kothari Education Commission and the National Policy on Education 1986, 1992, recommended 6 per cent of the GDP as the minimum expenditure on education. This target has never been met till day and expenditure on education never did rise above 4.3 per cent and is currently 3.5 per cent of the GDP.

The prevalent teaching-learning process is inadequate which in subtle ways reinforces the marginalisation of a vast majority of children. Instead of allowing mushrooming growth of private, ill equipped, profit oriented, poor quality teaching shops to mislead ignorant people, need is to strengthen the government and government aided schools.

The present situation demands an immediate attention from all stakeholders namely, the government, administration, teachers and social organisations for the preparation of comprehensive action plan to deal with the situation. Education should be envisioned as the great equaliser able to mitigate the effects of poverty on children by equipping them with knowledge and skills. Further, to address the issue of dwindling rural economy, the investment in education is must to raise assets through skills and employment. Need is to focus on school education by knowing structural complexity of different factors and to see how these factors mediate pedagogic, curricular processes and learning skills. Moreover understanding of the word 'quality' in education should not be 'corporatised'; it should rather be viewed by integrating with learning outcomes, teachers' accountability, equity, fair management and by creating conducive learning environment in schools.

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