

Worrying decline in special-need children's school enrolment

A DECLINE in the number of students with disabilities in mainstream primary schools in four years, from 1,12,444 in 2013 to 81,891 in 2016, is disparaging and this is more so when the number of such students increased in schools meant for special-need children in the period. The situation is clearly in breach of an order that the government issued in 2009 asking all primary schools to enrol children with special needs if they approach. The order seems to have so far been flouted by the schools and, duly, ignored by education managers. The situation does not also raise any hope for the government to meet its target of enrolling 5 per cent of the children with disabilities on primary education every year, ultimately setting out for a total inclusion of such children in primary education. It also holds back the government from 'extending free and compulsory education to all children' and 'relating education to the needs of society' as set out in the constitution. All this, fears of guardians to send children with disabilities to mainstream schools and the school's refusal to enrol such children, segregates them from society and lead them to feel like a burden.

While schools appear to have been refusing to enrol such children all these years on one pretext or another, under a bit of legal coverage, the education managers have also conveniently ignored it or given little attention to the education of children with disabilities. But why does such fear or refusal come in to play? Partly because guardians think that their children might be bullied or ignored by peers, or even teachers, and partly because teachers, or managers of the schools, think that dealing with such children could be a hassle. Coupled with this, there are problems of physical infrastructure such as entrances to the schools and classrooms, seating arrangement, staircases and toilets designed in a way that stop children with special needs from using them. There is then a lack of understanding of teachers about children with disabilities, which often may stem from lack of training. Not all schools having teachers adequately trained to impart education on children requiring special care also plays a role in such fears, uncertainty and refusal. The government has to remove all such obstacles to achieve its goal of enrolling 5 per cent of the children with disabilities on primary schools every year, on a path to gradually make education inclusive.

It is now time for the government to understand that the issuance of an order is not enough as orders do not get implemented on their own. They need to be implemented putting in place a well-thought-out mechanism, supported by action that could help children with special needs to feel themselves as part of society in a seamless manner. It is important for the government to take action against schools not obeying its order, but it is also important for the government to create an environment where schools can obey the order.