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ELEMENTARY EDUCATION IN INDIA: QUALITY AND QUANTITY

Dr. Sharmila Devi

**Assistant Professor, Department of Distance Education,
Punjabi University, Patiala, India.**

ABSTRACT

The key concern about education in any formal educational system, of all time has been its quality. At present, in India, no educational problem is exercising the public mind so much as the rapid expansion of education accompanied by a question of quality. For years, the major focus in India has been on getting children into school. And that effort has been a success: in *Global Education Monitoring Report 2015*, by UNESCO, India claimed that it has successfully moved towards reaching the EFA goals, especially in ensuring near Universal Elementary Education and enrolment of girls. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 and the national Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan Programme contributed well for achieving the targets. The present paper emphasizes that the



crisis of learning is both deep and widespread and there is a dire need to pay attention towards this. Moreover, it is a crisis for children, who leave school believing they are failures. At the elementary education stage, quality and quantity are complementary - we must have both- every child must be at school and he/she must have good education as the efficiency of elementary education system has direct implications on secondary and higher education system to expand and thus in nation's growth and development.

KEYWORDS: India, Elementary Education,

Quality, Quantity.

1. BACKGROUND

India start its journey towards the goal of universal and free basic education more than six decades ago with the Indian Constitution stating, 'The state shall endeavor to provide, within a period of ten years from the commencement of this Constitution, for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years'. The struggle to meet this goal began forthwith. The conditions were really miserable. The overall literacy rate was 18 per cent and female literacy rate was only 9 per cent. The gross

enrolment ratio at primary stage (class I-V and age group 6-11) was 43 per cent; the corresponding figure for girls was only 25 per cent. At upper-primary stage (class VI-VIII and covering age group 11-14) only 1 of 8 children was enrolled in school; among girls, only 1 of 20. Under the larger umbrella of National Policy of Education (NPE, 1986), in the light of the resolve of Education for All (EFA, 1990) and Programme of Action (POA, 1992) India initiated a wide range of programmes for achieving the goal of Universalization of Elementary Education (UEE). The National Policy on Education (NPE), 1986/92 states, 'In our national perception, education is essentially for all... Education has an acculturating role. It refines sensitivities and perceptions that contribute to national cohesion, a scientific temper and

independence of mind and spirit thus furthering the goals of socialism, secularism and democracy enshrined in our Constitution’.

The Operation Black-Board Scheme (OBS, 1987), the District Institute of Education and Training (DIET, 1987), the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP, 1994), the National Elementary Education Mission (NEEM, 1995), the National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education (MDM, 1995) and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA, 2000), National Programmes for Education of Girls at Elementary Level (NPEGEL, 2003), Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA, 2009) are some of the example of initiatives made by Government of India to enhance the quantitative and qualitative aspects of universal elementary education. SSA is a flagship programme for achievement of UEE in a time bound manner, as mandated by 86th amendment to the Constitution of India making free and compulsory education to the children of 6-14 years age group, a Fundamental Right. In 2009, India went further and passed the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE Act, 2009) which came into effect from April 1, 2010.

2. QUANTITY: WE ACHIEVED IT!

Providing elementary education for all, with galloping population, the task has not been an easy one. However, there has been large expansion of primary and upper-primary schools in the country. The number of primary schools increased nearly three times between 1951 and 1991. In 1950-51, there were about 210 thousand primary and 14 thousand upper primary schools. The numbers increased to 627 thousand and 190 thousand respectively as in the year 1998-99; thus showing an average annual growth of 2.30 and 5.58 per cent per annum. The increasing trend has also continued during the year 2000-01 to 2013-14 (Table 2.1).

Table 2.1: Number of primary schools, schools imparting upper primary education and schools imparting elementary education (2000-01 to 2013-14)

Year	Number of primary schools (schools with only primary section)	Number of schools imparting upper primary education	Number of schools imparting elementary education
2000-01	638,738	206,269	845,007
2004-05	767,520	274,731	1,042,251
2012-13	853,870	577,832	1,431,702
2013-14	858,916	589,796	1,448,712

Source: Educational Statistics at a Glance 2014, MHRD, GoI; and Unified District Information System for Education (U-DISE), National University of Educational Planning and Administration (NUEPA).

The Government of India took initiative to build schools in rural habitats as 70 per cent of Indian population lives in rural areas. As a result, 78 per cent of the rural population have primary schools within habitations (148 thousand habitations) and 94 per cent of the rural population have primary schools within a walking distance of 1km (7th AISES). The availability of paved roads increased, so that 78 per cent of schools had a road within 1 kilometer in 2010 compared with 69 per cent in 2003 (Muralidharan, Das, Holla and Mohpal, 2014). As a result of the government initiatives, today 93 per cent of primary schools have a brick building, 80 per cent schools have drinking water facility, 47 per cent have urinals and 40 per cent have toilets (7th AISES). The ratio of primary to upper primary schools during the period from 1950-51 to 1998-99 at the all-India level revealed that the ratio has improved from 1:15 in 1950-51 to 1:6 in 1960-61. It showed a declining trend thereafter and it stabilized at around 1:3 in 1988-99. The ratio of primary to upper primary school is 1:2 in 2014-15. The number of teachers both at the primary and upper primary levels of education over time has increased many folds. From a low of 538 thousand in 1950-51, the number of primary school teachers in 1998-99 increased to 1,904 thousand. Similarly, upper primary teachers during the same period increased from 86 thousand to 1,278 thousand. The total number of elementary school teacher rose to 4,682 thousand in 2013-14. The pupil-teacher ratio which was 36: 1 at the elementary level in 2005-06 came down to 25:1 in 2014-15. The percentage of teachers with

professional qualification was 78.2 in 2006-07 and the number increased to 80.1 in 2014-15 (U-DISE, 2014-15). The improvement in the ratios over a period of time indicates that the overall situation changed for the better.

For years, the major focus in India has been on getting children into school. To ensure continued participation of girls in education, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (Save the Girl, Educate the Girl) initiative has recently been launched in India". It also reported that India made marked progress, increasing its net enrolment ratio significantly. Mid day meals and school feeding programmes in rural India had a substantial impact on girls' enrolment. It has led to the tremendous transition rate from primary to upper- primary level as the rate in 2004-05 was 83.36 per cent and in 2014-15 it went to 89.74 per cent (U-DISE, 2014-15). In India, the RTE and the main EFA programme, SSA, also created opportunities for people with disabilities to be included in mainstream schools. National estimates of enrolment of children with special needs show a sharp increase, from 566,921 in 2002-03 to 2.16 million in 2007-08, and the percentage of schools with ramps increased from 1.5 per cent in 2004 to 55 per cent in 2012-13 to 77.4 per cent in 2014-15. However, a large share of children with disabilities still remains out of school. In 2012-13, it was estimated that, nationally, almost half the children with mental disabilities were out of school. Still, the advances represent major progress and reflect emerging political attention to children with disabilities (Singal, 2015).

All the concerted efforts to provide elementary education to the children in the age group 6-14 years have yielded encouraging success in terms of universal access and universal enrolment with little difference by gender. About 123 million children were enrolled in primary classes according to the 7th All India School Education Survey (7th AISES, 2007), conducted by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), New Delhi. Statistics reveal near- total universalization of school enrolment at the primary level in almost all states of India (Economic Survey, 2014-15). India's Twelfth Five Year Plan (2012-2017) notes that the four main priorities of education policies are access, equity, governance and quality which also support the major components of Universalisation of Elementary Education.

3. QUALITY: WE ARE IN A SORRY STATE OF AFFAIRS.

One important component of Universalisation of Elementary Education is the quality of education. But primary education policy in India has paid almost no attention to measure and improve learning outcomes. This is visible in the "Results Framework Document (RFD, 2012-13)" of the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD). The RFD gave direction to the goals of MHRD for the year and outlines different priorities including access, equity, quality, and departmental processes. It is notable that the most recent RFD for Department of School Education and Literacy (2012-13), had no measure of learning outcomes. Although 'quality' of education is given prominence, the document defines quality only in terms of improving the 'inputs' into education – with most of the focus being on teacher training. Many a times, it is being observed that even the states that have almost attained universal access, enrolment and retention, the quality of education is very poor. Verghese (1995) stated that "There are many states and districts which have already achieved almost universal primary enrolment but they need to focus on programmes to improve the retention and levels of learner achievement".

Progress on the number of students enrolled in education, in particular at elementary level is creditable but behind that progress is a problem—one that grows with each additional child that walks through the classroom door. Behind the veil of such promising statistics of enrolment, the learning outcomes of India's children show little progress. The country ranked second last out of 73 countries participated in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) study in 2012, with some of its best schools ranked about average among those surveyed. Many children in elementary classes of government schools are learning nothing. Many more are learning a small fraction of the syllabus. Some of them complete primary school unable to read a paragraph, or do simple addition, or tell the time. They are hopelessly ill-equipped for secondary education or almost any formal employment. Annual Status of Education Report (ASER, 2012) facilitated by PRATHAM, an NGO, notes that the decline in learning is cumulative, which means that the "learning decline" gets accumulated because of neglect over the years. The poor quality of education from class I pull down their rate of learning progressively so that by the time they are in class V, their level of learning is not even comparable to that of class II. Moreover, the decline is more noticeable since 2010, when the RTE came into effect, indicating targets of

blanket coverage compromising quality and standards. An analysis of the students was done to find out dropouts and failure in four Elementary schools of Varanasi. Dropout rate between classes I to V was as high as 80 per cent to 86 per cent meaning thereby out of 100 students admitted in the class I only 20 to 14 students reach to class V level. Since no student were declared 'failed' in school records due to zero detention policy in primary classes; it was concluded that students left school because they were unable to read, write and thus making any sense of school learning (Kushwaha, 2012).

Annual Status of Education Report (ASER, 2014) reported that children's attendance in both primary and upper primary schools shows a steady downward trend. In 2009, attendance was at 74.3 per cent in primary schools and 77 per cent in upper primary schools as compared to 71.4 per cent and 71.1 per cent respectively in 2014. The report revealed low levels of learning amongst the 5-16 age groups in rural India since 2005. The worrying fact is that these are floor-level tests (basic 2-digit carry forward subtraction and division skills), without which one cannot progress in the school system. The percentage of class III children able to solve simple two-digit subtraction problems fell from 26.1 per cent in 2013 to 25.3 per cent in 2014. There is a sharp decline in the number of children in standard V who can read a textbook of standard II. The decline is from 56.7 per cent in 2007 to 42.2 per cent in 2014 and Arithmetic is also a cause for concern as the percentage of students who can do division in standard V has declined from 41 per cent in 2007 to 20.7 per cent in 2014 in rural areas.

These findings indicate that the country is in a serious crisis - its quality of school education is startlingly low and is in free fall. The learning outcomes at Elementary level across the country remained unsatisfactory and far below than the expectations. The efficiency of primary education system has direct implications on upper primary system to expand. Unlike primary enrolment, which is a function of 6-11 years population, upper primary enrolment is strictly a function of primary graduates. Hence, without achieving the goal of Universal Primary Education, the dream of Universalisation of Elementary Education is not likely to be realized.

4. FUTURE OF ELEMENTARY EDUCATION IN INDIA

Future is uncertain, still one can predict it. If we talk about the future scenario of Indian education it is no less encouraging. The way, in which the reformation in the education sector is being carried out, no doubt the education scenario of the country, will see positive changes. Providing basic education to all children was a mammoth task, time consuming and capital intensive. Despite all these struggles and limitations, the country has achieved significant milestones. India has done commendable work in universalizing primary education. It has near resolved the issue of access to schools and enrolment. It is now gearing up to face the challenge of quality of education. Being achieved universalization of primary education; the government is now taking various steps to universalize the elementary education in the country. Over the years, there are considerable achievements and these should not be regarded lightly given the scale of the Indian elementary education system –the largest in the world. These achievements highlight the fact that the Indian state does have capacity to execute on goals when undertaken in a "mission mode". A nationwide sub-programme to Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) 'Padhe Bharat, Badhe Bharat' is launched in 2013-14 for classes I and II with a twin track approach. The programme focuses on to acquire proficiency in early reading, writing and comprehension and early grade mathematics. A publication 'Including Children with Special Needs – Primary Stage' (2014) on curriculum adaptation development brought out by NCERT with an objective to help teachers to create an inclusive classroom environment for children with special needs. Rashtriya Avishkar Abhiyan (RAA, 2015) is planned to provide nourishing and nurturing support to and a platform for schools in a dual track approach to make Science, Mathematics and Technology exciting to children of age group 6-18 years. A scheme Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA, 2009) was launched with the objective to enhance access to secondary education and to improve its quality. The implementation of the scheme started from 2009-10. It is envisaged to achieve an enrolment rate of 75% from 52.26% in 2005-06 at secondary stage by providing a secondary school within a reasonable distance of any habitation. The other objectives include improving quality of education imparted at secondary level through making all secondary schools conform to prescribed norms, removing gender, socio-economic and disability barriers, providing universal access to secondary level education by 2017, i.e., by the end of 12th Five Year Plan and achieving universal retention by 2020.

Education in India has improved dramatically over the last three decades. Schools are accessible to most children; both student enrollment and access to school are at their highest level. The RTE Act guarantees a quality education to a wider range of students than ever before.

5. CONCLUSION

The quality of education determines the quality of human capital and a lot more effort needs to be made to improve the spread of education in India through enrolment and by improving the quality of education with focus on learning outcomes. The crisis of learning is both deep and widespread and there is a dire need to pay attention towards this. Moreover, it is a crisis for children, who leave school believing they are failures. At the elementary education stage, quality and quantity are complementary - we must have both- every child must be at school and he/she must have good education as the efficiency of elementary education system has direct implications on secondary and higher education system to expand and thus in nation's growth and development. Shri M.C.Chagla, the then education minister in 1964 rightly said "Our Constitution fathers did not intend that we just set up hovels, put students there, give untrained teachers, give them bad textbooks, no playgrounds and say, we have complied with Article 45 and primary education is expanding. They meant that real education should be given to our children between the ages of 6 and 14". Time has come to make decisive interventions to change this situation so that all children irrespective of their religion, caste, class, gender and location get an education of comparable quality. It should be taken care of that increasing access to education may not led to reduced efficiency, which detracts from the noble objective of 'quality education for all'.

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