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Elementary Education in India: Besieged with many Issues of Serious Concern

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Abstract:
In a democratic welfare state like India, education is not only a means to an end but an end in itself. Among all levels and dimensions of education– elementary, secondary, higher, technical, vocational, professional, the elementary level of education happens to be the first step of education, the foundation stone or the real base of all attainments of a society. However, even after more than six decades of economic planning, the end of eleven Five Year Plans and experiments with a host of government sponsored elementary education schemes, the elementary education sector in India is still besieged with many quantitative and qualitative issues of serious nature. After a detailed analysis of the achievements and failures of India's elementary education sector, it emerges that while the quantitative issues are being gradually taken care of , the qualitative concerns are of much more serious in nature and are ultimately reflected in the poor learning outcomes of elementary schooling system in India.

Keywords: *(OOS) Children, Dropout rate, Elementary education, Gross enrolment ratio (GER), Learning outcomes, Out-of school, Private schools, Public schools, School infrastructure*

I. Introduction

In a democratic welfare state like India, education is not only a means to an end but an end in itself. It is one of the most important determinants or constituent components of economic development and social welfare. On the one hand it endows the country with a strong base of human capital for economic development and on the other it enables people to ensure all round development of their individual selves leading to fuller and more meaning full lives. "Education not only brings about a change in an individual's and even community's collective perceptions, aspirations and goals but also enhances capabilities to achieve them. Not only this , even it is a powerful tool for reducing poverty, unemployment and inequality, improving health and nutrition and promoting sustained human development led growth" (World Bank 2004).

2. Importance of Elementary Education for Individual and Social Development

Educated people play a crucial role in effecting a development oriented demographic, social and political transition of the economies of their countries. There is a strong correlation between lack of literacy (education) and poverty, both in economic sense and in the broader sense of deprivation of capabilities. (UNESCO, 2006) Education has an impact on all types of human development outcomes (Mehrotra and Delmonica, 2007) which is accompanied by the increase in the well-being of the individuals and economic growth of the country. This has been proved by the inferences drawn from different survey studies. India's education system is the world's largest education system. The elementary education preserves a nation's cultural traditions and hands them over to the next generation. It imbibes the spirit of patriotism, builds national characters, upholds democratic traditions, attempts to mitigate social inequalities of caste, class and gender and shapes a child's personality by offering opportunities to develop his capabilities. Therefore, elementary education has a great empowerment value. However, eminent sociologist Andre Beteille feels quite certain that

'even after elementary education has become universal, inequalities will remain in the quality of what is available to children from the different strata of society.

Even at the level of elementary education, universality does not mean equality'' (Beteille, A., 2001). "Even the act of going to school, in itself, is often an important challenge to traditional inequalities. This applies in particular to the schooling of girls" (Dreze and Sen, 2002). In India's literacy rate stood at 74 per cent in 2011 and it was well behind those of other developing counties in the region such as that of China and of Sri Lanka which stood at 95% and 91.2% respectively in the same year (Wikipedia, 2013). The Human Development Index (HDI) which is presented and used by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to measure the overall state of human and social development in a country in its annual Human Development Report 2012, India secured a low rank of 136 on HDI while many other developing countries like Cuba, Mexico, Malaysia, Brazil, China and Sri Lanka which are almost at a similar or even lower level of economic development as compared to India occupied much higher HDI ranks of 59, 61, 65, 85, 101 and 92 respectively. India's low literacy rate, as compared to other comparable economies, is also a major factor behind India's low HDI rank (UNDP, 2013).

Micro-evidence on the returns to education consistently finds positive returns to primary education in developing countries ranging from 7 to 10 per cent per extra year of schooling (Duflo, 2001; Duraisamy, 2002). Elementary education or basic education (Class IVIII), of which primary education (Class I-V) is the initial part, forms the foundation on which the entire edifice of education is erected. Therefore, in the Indian context the term elementary education, generally means the first eight years of schooling which corresponds to the constitutional goal of free and compulsory universal elementary education until the age of 14, and is divided in most of the States into two parts i.e. primary stage (Class I-V) and upper primary stage (Class VI-VIII).

3. Constitutional Provision for Elementary Education

Realising the importance of elementary education for the overall socio-economic development of the country, the founding fathers of Indian Nation, initially included the objective of free and compulsory elementary education for the children as one of the Directive Principles of the State Policy in Indian Constitution, in Part IV under Article 45. The purpose was to provide the right to free and compulsory education as the non- justiciable, socio- economic right of individuals, the progressive fulfilment of which depended upon the gradual accumulation of the economic capacity and resources at the command of the state. In order that the nationally accepted goals of education are achieved without hurdles, the subject of education has been included in the Concurrent List of the Seventh Schedule of the Indian Constitution by the Constitution (42nd) Amendment Act, 1976 (Basu, 1999). Through the 73rd and 74th Constitution Amendments Acts, 1992, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) have been empowered to take required measures for the progress of elementary education. However the watershed came in the form of the strengthening this right further by a historical judgement of Hon'ble Supreme Court of India in 1993. The Supreme Court, in the case of Unnikrishnan, J. P. Vs Andhra Pradesh ruled that, the citizens of the country have a fundamental right to education. The said right flows from Article 21st of the Constitution. This right is, however, not an absolute right. Its contents and parameters have to be determined in the light of Articles 45 and 41. In other words, every child/ citizen of this country has a right to free education until he completes the age of 14 years. Thereafter his right to education is subject to the limits of economic capacity and development of the state' (Ninth Five Year Plan 1997- 2002). Following the above mentioned judgment of the Supreme Court, the Parliament of India enacted Constitution (86th Amendment) Act, 2002 which added Article 21A to the Part III of Constitution, as one more dimension of Fundamental Right to life. This was a great leap forward towards securing the objective of education for all (EFA). As an affirmation of this Constitutional Amendment and addition of Article 21 A in the Constitution, the Parliament enacted the 'Right of Children to Free

and Compulsory Education Act' in 2009 which guarantees the right to free and compulsory education as the justifiable, Fundamental Right of every child aged 6- 14 years in India.

4. Public Policy and Schemes for Elementary Education

Public policy for elementary education has been framed to meet the **objective of strengthening the positive indicators** like enrolment rate (GER and NER), school attendance rate and learning outcomes of students and **weakening the negative indicators** like dropout rate and out- of- school-children rate and social and gender gaps in elementary education. The overall policy of the development of elementary education sector, put to effect through several schemes and programmes, has followed a **two pronged strategy of strengthening the physical and human infrastructure of elementary schools** on the one hand and **providing direct and tangible incentives** in form of free education, scholarships, free mid- day meals, school dress, books to children in order to increase their school participation, on the other. .

To bring about a massive quantitative and qualitative change in the elementary education scenario of the country, the Government of India has launched various schemes from time to time. **District Primary Education Programme (DPEP)** was launched in 1994 as a centrally- sponsored major initiative to revitalise the primary education system and to achieve the objective of universalisation of primary education. **Shiksha Karmi Project (SKP)** was launched in 1987 for universalisation and qualitative improvement of primary education in remote, arid and socio-economically backward villages by appointing parateachers in government schools. **Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)**, the flagship programme for elementary education presently, was launched in 2001 with the objectives of ensuring universal enrolments and universal retention, bridging all social and gender gaps in elementary education and ensuring satisfactory quality of elementary education. The National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education popularly known as **Mid-day Meal Scheme or MDMS** was launched in its optional dry ration/cooked meal form in 1995 and in its compulsory hot cooked meal form in 2004 with view to enhancing enrolment, retention and attendance and simultaneously overcoming classroom hunger and improving nutritional levels among children. **Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya Scheme (KGBVS)** was launched in July 2004 for setting up of residential schools with boarding facilities at upper Primary level for girls, predominantly belonging to SCs, STs, OBCs, and minorities in the identified Educationally Backward Blocks (EBBs). **National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Education (NPEGEL)** was launched in educationally backward blocks (EBBs) where the level of rural female's literacy is less than the national average and the gender gap is more than the national average.

5. Issues of Serious Concern for Elementary Education in India

Even after more than six decades of economic planning, the end of eleven Five Year Plans, huge public investment in elementary education sector and experimentation with a host of elementary education schemes and programmes; the elementary education scenario in India is still besieged with many issues of serious concern some of which are described below:

1. The first and foremost problem is that of **inadequate school gross enrolment ratio (GER)** for children in the age group of 6- 14 years (Class I-VIII) which has not yet reached as high a level as to indicate the enrolment of all the children in schools. Over the years the GER at elementary education has increased but the increase has been very slow and gradual. The Statistics of School Education data reveals that the GER for Class IVIII (6- 14 years) has improved from 97.1 (Economic Survey 2009- 10) per cent in the year 2006- 07 to 104.3 per cent in 2010-11. (Economic Survey, 2012-13). However given the very **high incidence of the cases of under- age enrolments, over- age enrolments and multiple- enrolments**, all the children can be taken as having been enrolled only when enrolment rate is around 150 per cent.

2. The fact of less- than- full enrolment of children in the age group of 6- 14 years in elementary schools is proven by a **very high prevalence of out- of- school (OoS) children** in 6- 14 years age group in India. Their number was estimated to be 8.1 million in 2009. A recent study estimated a total of 3.5 per cent rural children to be out of school in 2011. However, in a few States like Rajasthan and UP, the percentage of OoS girls in the age group of 11–14 years is as high as 8.9 per cent and 9.7 per cent respectively (ASER, 2012).

3. More than the issue of less- than- full enrolment and the prevalence of the problem of Out- of- School children, it is problem of **high dropout rate** and **low school retention rate** at elementary education level, which requires greater attention. The **dropout rate** at elementary education level in India is abnormally high. The percentage of students who stay in school till Class V is 61.2 per cent which is way below the global average of 83.3 per cent and on an average 42.39 per cent children drop out of education stream before completing Class VIII in 2011. In addition to this, SC and ST children are less likely to access their right to 8 years of schooling and their dropout rates are much higher than the ational average. The dropout rate for SC children is as high as 51.25 per cent and that for ST children is as high as 57.58 per cent in 2011 (Twelfth Five Year Plan: 2012- 17).

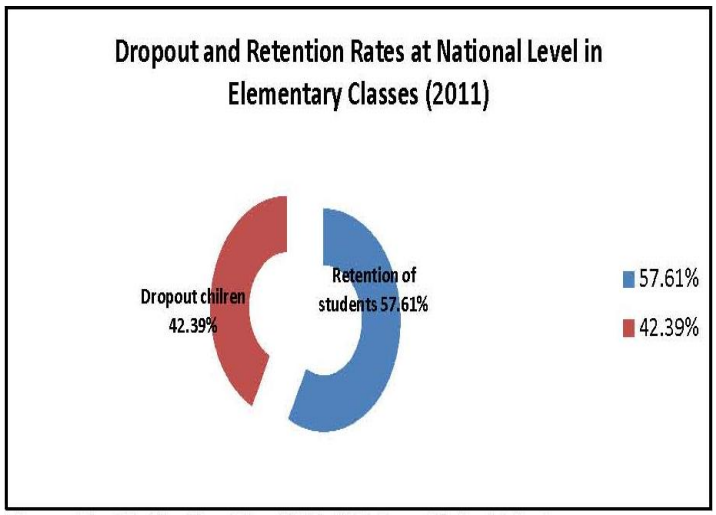

Fig. 1
Source: Twelfth Five Year Plan: 2012- 17 Volume III: Social Sector

4. Not only this**,** the **daily school attendance rate** among students of elementary schools is lso **less than desirable** and a large number of students who are already enrolled, do not attend the school on regular basis. Some of them attend the classes only when it is a time for distribution of any government incentive. Despite the enhancement of government incentives and gradual improvement in school infrastructure in recent years, children's school attendance rate has not shown any marked improvement and has largely remained stable at 73.4 per cent in 2007, 70.9 per cent in 2011, 73.1 per cent in 2012 and 71.8 per cent in 2013, in rural primary schools in India (ASER, various years). In India, all studies on measurement of school attendance rate have noted huge variations in school attendance across Indian States; ranging from 90 per cent on a random day in schools in south India to close to 50 per cent in schools in some northern States (ASER, 2013).

5. The **problem of inadequate school infrastructure** also needs immediate attention. There are many schools where facilities such as boundary wall, building, toilets, drinking water, electricity and teaching- learning equipments, kitchens and store rooms for midday meals are lacking. The Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007- 2012) underlined the fact that backlog of additional classrooms was about 6.87 lakh and opening of about 20 thousand new schools was required. The retention of girls in schools for full elementary schooling years is difficult and one of the reasons seems to be that over 63 per cent of rural schools have no usable toilet facilities for them. Lack of adequate classroom facilities compels the children from different age groups to sit in same classroom and taught by the same teacher at the same time i.e. teaching the students of Classes I, II and III together in the same room which leads to teaching boredom, disinteresting and monotonous for them.

During the year 2010-01, a significant percentage of schools suffered from the lack of basic physical infrastructure facilities, as is described below (Twelfth Five Year Plan: 2012- 17).

Table 1. Primary Schools without Basic Facilities (2010-11)

Facilities	Percentage of schools
Boundary walls	50.1
Toilets (girls)	19.3
Drinking Water	15.2

Source: Twelfth Five Year Plan: 2012- 17, Volume III Social Sector

6. The **paucity of required number of teachers** is another serious problem of elementary education. Teachers are the most important resources for elementary education, especially in rural areas where access to other types of teaching- learning materials is limited. Teacher's role is very important in imparting quality education and brings about a qualitative change in the learning environment. Shortage of teachers is the leading cause behind many quality concerns of elementary school system. The proportion of schools that comply with RTE pupil-teacher ratio (PTR) norms was only 45.3% in 2013 (ASER, 2013). Although there has been improvement in this direction due to the appointment of additional teachers as Para teachers, called Shiksha Mitras or Shiksha Karmis under the Shiksha Karmi Project launched in 1987, yet there are many schools that are being run by a single teacher and large numbers of vacancies of teachers are yet to be filled in many schools in many states. At all India level, 38.9 per cent schools are still facing the problem of unfavorable pupil- teacher ratio (ASER, 2011).

7. The elementary education system in India is **infamous for very poor levels of learning outcomes** among Indian students. Quality issues are the most burning problem of elementary school system in India. Reading abilities and basic Mathematical skills are two two most essential elements of learning imparted by any elementary schooling system and in this regard India's performance is dismal. Nationally, the proportion of all children in Class V who can read a Class II level text has declined from 52.9 per cent in 2009 to 47.0 per cent in 2013 (ASER, 2013). The lack basic Mathematical abilities in nearly half of the students are a leaning issue of still greater concern. The proportion of children Class V able to solve simple 'two digit subtraction problem with borrowings' has declined from 70.8 per cent in 2010 to 52.3 per cent in 2013 and that of Class V children able to solve a Class III/ IV division problem has declined from 36.2 per cent in 2010 to 25.6 per cent in 2013 (ASER, 2013). In PISA- 2009+ which is a recent study of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development- Programme for International Student Assessment (OECD- PISA), India has been placed at the tail end in international comparisons rating (Twelfth Five Year Plan:). ASER data suggest that not only are the levels of learning low, but that the trends in learning levels are in fact negative. Since basic reading and arithmetic are foundational skills, the low levels of learning are especially alarming since they suggest that the Indian education system is doing well at enrolling children in school, but failing when it comes to teaching them even basic skills (Pratham, 2012).

8. Last but not least, demand of **private school education is rising year after year** not only in urban areas but also in rural areas despite massive public investment made by the government in government elementary schools. Even though gross enrolment ratio (GER) for elementary education for all types schools has been slowly increasing yet gradual improvement in the school infrastructure facilities, provision of free education, scholarship and other incentives like mid- day meals, school dress, school books in government schools has not resulted in an increase in the demand for government school education at elementary level as intended. The share of rural private school enrolments at elementary level for the whole country have risen from 18.7 per cent in 2006 to 25.6 percent in 2011 and 29 per cent in 2013 (ASER, 2013).

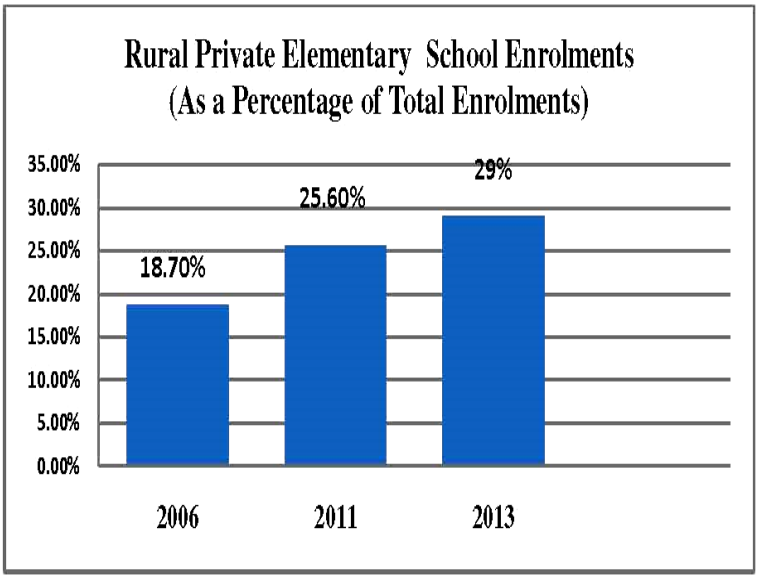

Fig. 2

Irony of the system is the students of private schools are coming for private tuitions to those teachers who are employed in government schools and even they teach them more seriously in their tuition classes and feel accountable towards their parents. Close to 25 per cent of students in Classes I-VIII in rural India pay private tuition fees for tuition classes (ASER, 2013). One possible reason behind the rising percentage share of private school enrolments is the **wide gap between the learning outcomes of** private and public schools. Although the learning outcomes in both types of schools are low but the learning outcomes in government schools are still lower and even more seriously, are showing continuously declining trends. Reading levels of government school children have sharply declined over 2009- 13 but those of private school children have remained constant and that too at a much higher level as compared to government schools. On the one hand, the proportion of Class V children in government schools who were able to read a simple Class II level text has declined from 50.3 per cent in 2009 to 41.1 per cent in 2013 but on the other, the proportion of Class V children in private schools who were able to read Class II level text has remained almost constant at much higher level, being 63.1 per cent in 2009 and 63.3 per cent in 2013. Similarly the proportion of government School Class V children who were able to solve Class II division problem in Mathematics was much lower at nearly 20 per cent in 2013 as compared to that of private school Class V children at nearly 40 per cent in the same year (ASER, 2013).

6. Concluding Observation

The elementary education scenario in India is presently faced with many serious challenges which are both quantitative and qualitative in nature. With process of economic development and persistent increase in Plan and budgetary allocation for elementary education, the quantitative challenges like inadequate gross enrolment ratio, a high prevalence of out- of- school children, high dropout rate of students and inadequacy of physical and human infrastructure in elementary schools are being gradually taken care of. However, the qualitative challenges, as seen in the form of low learning outcomes of students and gradual shift of students from government elementary schools to private elementary schools in rural areas, are issues of far more serious concern. In this regard measures like ensuring better teacher accountability, addressing the problem of teacher absenteeism and bringing about innovative changes in the conventional teaching- learning processes to make learning a far more interesting experience for students might provide a solution to this problem.

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