

Education in India, 2008

Education in India is subsidized by government, which has recently made great efforts to improve standards. However, additional money is needed by students for fees, for books and writing materials, tests and examinations (of which there are many).

Fees are required for tests and out-of-school 'tutorials' – which, although illegal in theory, are a common method for poorly-paid teachers to augment their salary.

Small private schools abound, but these are very often of low standard. Schools far from city centres, or located in sub-standard housing 'colonies' and villages, suffer from poor quality teaching. Rote learning, substitute teachers (usually family members). Demands for 'tutorial' fees, are common.

The grade structure follows the 10 plus 2 pattern; Nursery/Primary/Secondary to age 15 but the two grades of Higher Secondary are usually beyond the means of disadvantaged families, the girls being married by then and the boys being strong enough to work.

Teaching will be in the local language (Telugu in most areas of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil in the south, Lambada in the tribal villages, Urdu in the muslim schools) but all schools teach English (because it is the language of commerce and, increasingly, of government. Hyderabad has one Hindi newspaper and five English newspapers).

It is the aim of all parents to get their children (or at least, their sons) into an English-medium school in order to enhance their job/marriage prospects. MS Foundation School aims to become an English-medium school, which seems unlikely in the near future.

All Higher Education is in English (and in some Universities the students are fined if they are heard speaking in Telugu or Hindi).

Young people from Scheduled Castes and Tribes (SC/STs) and Other Backward Castes (OBCs - official terms for them, but effectively it includes all Dalits/Untouchables and certainly covers the MS Foundation School community) no matter how clever, are at an automatic disadvantage for employment or further education because of their poor English.

It is important always to bear in mind the enormous gap between middle-class, upwardly-mobile city dwellers, with their reasonable English skills, and the billion or so land-dwellers and caste-ridden poor. In 2009 caste discrimination, ignorance and extreme poverty, are as strong as ever.

Tom Holloway
tom@holloways.org

Date: 21/09/2008 URL:

<http://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/mag/2008/09/21/stories/2008092150070300.htm>

The art of not learning

Is it really too much to ask of a nation with big aspirations to invest in primary education?

Sad neglect: A Primary School in one of our villages.

Photo: M.A. Sriram

Even as we ponder the randomness of life and death as serial bomb blasts hit our big cities, and we live with the chilling reality that India stands second only to Iraq in the number of people killed in terror attacks since 2004, we also cannot forget that every day people, including little children, are dying because of the terror of poverty. That people are being killed just because they belong to another religion. That women and girls are dying because they bear a triple burden of work and have little access to health care. These too are perennial Indian realities — a constant state of teetering between life and death.

Perpetuating inequality

Another reality is the entrenched system that perpetuates inequality. Thus, while mention of reservation for schedule castes and tribes and OBCs in institutes of higher learning leads to demonstrations and heated debates in the media, the pathetic state of primary education continues virtually unnoticed and unaddressed. And millions of Indian children still go to schools without buildings, without books and without teachers.

Filmmaker Umesh Aggarwal has made a brave attempt to balance the reservation debate in his documentary



“Divided Colours of a Nation” that premiered at the Open Frame International Film Festival in Delhi last week and will be shown shortly on Doordarshan TV. Whether he has actually managed to strike a balance between the extreme positions on this contentious issue could be debated. He has tried to push home the point that the question is not whether reservation is right or wrong but whether the “creamy layer” within these disadvantaged groups should continue to claim the benefits of reservation.

However, the most striking footage in his film is of the village schools he visits. By focusing on the disheartening state of primary education, he has actually struck the right chord. For, whether there are seats reserved at higher levels for the disadvantaged matters little if they continue to be deprived of quality education at the entry level.

Aggarwal takes us to a rural school in Barmer, Rajasthan. There are just two teachers for five classes. One of them is also the principal. On the day the filmmaker goes to the school, neither of the two teachers is present and only 25 out of the 188 students are at school. Not far away in a Bhil village, he goes to a government school. There are 90 students in Standards I to V but only one teacher. Yet another school on the Indo-Pak border in Rajasthan is deserted at 12.30 p.m. There are no children and the only teacher has been missing for eight days. Little wonder then that 50 per cent of students in Rajasthan have failed the Standard 10 examination in the last 10 years.

While this is the situation in distant villages, things were not very different in a government school not far from the national capital. Here, there were 18 classes, but nine had no teachers. Half way through the term, the children still had not received their textbooks.

Millions of deprived children in India are supposed to learn reading and writing under these impossible circumstances. Also, despite campaigns for a law that guarantees right to education, nothing has happened. And even as targets are set by every State to increase enrolment of children in primary schools, little is done about the conditions in these schools so that the children that go there actually learn something.

These facts have been repeatedly highlighted by Pratham, an organisation that focuses on the right to education, through its Annual Status of Education Report (ASER). The data for 2006 had revealed that in rural India, half of the children in Standard I cannot read the alphabets, half the children in Std II cannot read words, half the children in Std III cannot read Std I level texts, and half the children in Std V cannot read Std

II level texts. Hardly 20 per cent of children in Std III at the all-India level can read Std II level texts and in 15 States, this falls below 20 per cent.

The conclusion reached by the ASER survey is that there is a serious problem with the way children are taught in most schools — that is, where there is someone to teach them. Suman Bhattacharjea, a researcher, rightly points out in the ASER discussion series "Learning to read": "The surge in attention towards and investment in the educational system in recent years becomes a complete waste of resources unless it helps to ensure that children in primary school around the country learn to read."

No incentive to continue

Also, if children learn little in the first five years of school, is it surprising that their parents, if they are poor and need additional hands to work, pull them out of school? Under these conditions of learning, or rather un-learning, it would be virtually impossible for a child to complete 10 years of schooling. If children excel despite this system, they certainly need a boost to go further, through reservation or any other means. But how many of them can actually make it to a level where they can exploit the special provisions designed for them at the level of higher education?

The eyes of the children in those village schools in Aggarwal's film shone with hope and expectation, despite the conditions in which they were seeking to learn. When we can contemplate investing in nuclear arms and energy, in highways and airports, in oil fields and mines, in industry and the market, why can India not build schools?

Email the writer:

sharma.kalpana@yahoo.com

© Copyright 2000 - 2008 The Hindu