

The More Things Change, The More They Don't Necessarily Remain The Same

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"Basic education links the children, whether of cities or the villages, to all that is best and lasting in India."

- Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi

"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."

- Nelson Mandela

The "half naked fakir" that Churchill referred to so contemptuously had an uncanny knack of getting things exactly right. Nearly a century ago, and long before most of the experts, Mahatma Gandhi understood the value of basic education as something that had the potential to unite us all, linking us to the best in our nation and our history. Many years later we are yet to redeem our pledge to our children completely, but it seems that there may well be reason to hope after all.

As in 2005 and 2006, this year's ASER exercise throws up interesting stories, each one telling us a little more about our school system and the children, parents and teachers who are part of it. To begin with, enrolments continue to increase, with the figures of out of school children in the 6-14 year age group down to 4.2 percent of the total number of children. This is good news and accords well with figures that the Ministry of HRD has recently shared with the six-monthly review mission, which indicate that the number of out of school children continues to stagnate at around 75 lakh. Clearly, programmes like *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA) taken up in the last few years have had a positive impact on school enrolments, as well they might, with 98 percent of the rural population now having access to a primary school within 1 kilometre. With drop out rates at the primary stage declining to about 10 percent as reported by the 6th SSA Review Mission², this implies that a significant majority of children entering school are likely to complete at least this stage of education.

A more interesting aspect of this increase is that it no longer appears confined only to the elementary school age groups; enrolments at earlier stages have also gone up, with nearly 79 percent children in the age group of 3-4 years being in pre-school classes or *anganwadis*, as compared to only 68 percent of children surveyed last year. As many as 93 percent of five year olds surveyed in 2007 were either in *balwadis*, *anganwadis* or schools, up from 85 percent last year, which augurs well for both enrolment and retention at the next stage.

As one looks at the other end of the scale however, things are not quite so encouraging. 19.4 percent of children between the ages of 15-16 years are out of school, even though this is down from 21.2 percent last year. Not surprisingly, the figure for out of school girls is higher than for boys, a trend that remains consistent at all levels of the school system, although the improvement in girls' enrolment is better than that of boys.

Enrolments in private schools would also seem to be steady, hovering around the 19-20 percent mark. Although ASER does not make this distinction, it should be pointed out that many private schools continue to remain outside the scope of the so-called "recognised" system. Several writers have pointed to the lack of reliable and accurate data about the numbers of such schools, particularly in urban areas. Both the District Information System of Education (DISE) and NCERT's All India Educational Survey (AIES) restrict themselves to collecting information about recognised schools, which means that data about a large number of private unrecognised schools is omitted³. Children reported to be in private schools here would no doubt fall in both categories, recognised and unrecognised, yet there may not be much to choose from when it comes to looking at learning achievements.

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² Aide Memoire of the 6th Review Mission of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Government of India, July, 2007

³ Kingdon, Geeta G (1996), "Private Schooling in India: Size, Nature and Equity Effects", *Economic and Political Weekly*, New Delhi, December.

On the provisioning front there are clear improvements with improved pupil-teacher ratios in visited schools, better availability of functioning toilets and drinking water facilities and a vastly improved availability of midday meals, although it would probably be worthwhile to probe the rather sharp decline in the receipt of school and teacher grants reported this year. All of these are no doubt factors that contribute to the increased enrolments that have been observed and the challenge now will be to continue with these improvements as well as to make sure that they have an effect on keeping children in school.

Sadly enough, learning levels remain a cause for concern. Nearly 40 percent children at class 5 level cannot read a class 2 text, while around 60 percent at that level are unable to carry out simple divisions. What should be more worrying though, is the fact that in class 2, only 9 percent children can read the text appropriate to them, and 60 percent cannot even recognise numbers between 10 and 99. This would seem to be consistent with NCERT's own learning achievement surveys that indicate a mean achievement level of 58.5 percent in language and 46.5 percent in Maths at the class 5 level. So although more children are going to school today than ever before, it is not necessary that they are learning very much. And the difference in these levels between government and private schools continue to remain more or less as reported in ASER 2006, with children in the latter being better by about 10-12 percent as compared to their counterparts in government schools.

But the most interesting stories coming out of ASER 2007 are the two that relate to private coaching and familiarity with the English language. At every level in the school system, be it government or private, additional paid coaching appears to be the norm, rising from 12 and 19 percent at the class 1 stage respectively to about a quarter by class 8. While it may be facile to assume a causal relationship between the two, one wonders if this might have something to do with the apparent increase in teacher absence that the report also seems to notice. With one in four teachers absent from school and only one half teaching, as researchers discovered during a nationally representative study of government primary schools, parents and children may all too often be left with no choice but to consider additional coaching⁴.

Many would recall Prof Amartya Sen's Pratichi Trust study of 2002 which found that of the class 3 and 4 children of government schools observed in West Bengal, nearly half were enrolled in private tuition classes. The conclusion drawn then had been that the relatively higher cost of private education was offset by a reduced dependence on private tuitions, since it was largely children from the government schools who were enrolled in coaching classes. In the present instance though, the percentage of children in private schools who are also enrolled in additional paid classes is higher (except in class 8), and one possible result may be the relatively better learning performance of these children that the report brings out. Either way, the fact that additional coaching exists at such high levels should be a warning flag that calls for greater investigation.

The demand for teaching English is one that has been articulated several times. Activists like Kanha Ilaiah hold that the school education system in India is squarely divided into two structures in terms of the medium of instruction, the regional language system and the English language system, and that in terms of the population, the former is meant for backward caste children, while the latter is reserved for the rich who constitute by and large the upper castes⁵. Indeed, he goes so far as to suggest that teaching in English would constitute a precondition for gradually reducing the existing system of reservations in educational institutions for the backward castes. Be that as it may, ASER 2007 seems to show that nearly two-third children in class 8 could read easy sentences in English, and

⁴ Kremer, Michael; Chaudhury, Nazmul; Rogers, F Halsey; Muralidharan, Karthik and Hammer, Jeffrey (2005), "Teacher Absence in India: A Snapshot" in *Journal of the European Economic Association*, April/May 2005, Vol. 3, No. 2-3, Pages 658-667

⁵ Ilaiah, Kanha (2007), "What Kind of Education Do Dalit-Bahujan Children Need?", in *Shiksha: The Challenge of Indian Education*, Buffalo Books, New Delhi, 2007

that 86 percent of these children could comprehend their meaning. The percentage of those who can read simple sentences starts increasing from class 5 onwards, reflecting no doubt the fact that many State governments choose to introduce the language at a later stage. Given that we are considering the situation in *rural* schools though, the relatively encouraging numbers of children who can comprehend English has implications for those planning vocational and secondary education initiatives, as well as potentially for the job market.

ASER 2007 reaffirms what many have been saying for the last few years—while we have had reasonable success in dealing with the provision of basic infrastructure, we need to take urgent action to improve quality in our schools. Although the prime role will always remain that of the government, given the vibrant and active civil society network that exists in India as well as the increasing realisation in the private sector of the need to contribute to social development, there is perhaps a case for more tripartite partnerships between government, NGOs and the private sector, particularly in helping to improve the quality of school education. Models of such partnerships already exist, and some of the more successful ones may well be usefully duplicated. If they should help in some small way to make a difference, perhaps then we would all truly be part of an *abhiyan*, one that changes the future of our nation and of our children.

