

THE SHIFT TO PRIVATE SCHOOLS

Amit Kaushik*

For the fourth year running, the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) has taken a snapshot look at children and schools in rural India. Carrying forward a process started in 2005, this year the Report covers 570 rural districts of the country, surveying various aspects of education in rural India, from enrolment and provisioning to learning levels.

As before, the good news is that the increasing trend in school enrolments appears to be holding; more children are enrolled in school than at any previous time in our history, with 95.7% of children in the age group of 6-14 years enrolled in some form of elementary school. However the official drop out rate of nearly 49%¹ implies that much will need to be done to keep in school those who have enrolled, and to retain the half that is likely to leave before completing the elementary stage of education. Rather surprisingly, this trend of increased enrolment is not observed in the 3-6 year age group, where on an all India basis, the number of children not attending either a school or *balwadi* has increased marginally in 2008 for each age, albeit staying lower than the numbers reported in 2006.

Sadly, even though most children are enrolled in school, they do not appear to be learning very much. In general, learning levels appear to be stagnant or declining, with for instance, only 41 percent across Grades 1 to 8 being able to read simple stories in 2008 as opposed to 43.6 percent in 2005. Similarly, only 27.9 percent children across grades could do simple division sums in 2008, as compared to 30.9 percent in 2005. This decline is observed in both government and private schools, even though the latter continue to maintain a marginally higher level than the government schools, at least on an all India basis. However, as has been shown elsewhere in this Report, in many States there is little or no difference in the performance of government and private schools, and in many the performance of the latter is far lower than that of government schools in some of the other, more educationally advanced States. In an uncomfortably large number of cases then, receiving a private school education would clearly seem to be no guarantor of acquiring any significantly better learning.

Despite this, one aspect of ASER 2008 that should cause policy makers some concern is the trend of increasing enrolments in private schools. The all India figure of children in the 6-14 year age group enrolled in private schools has increased from 16.4 percent in 2005 to 22.5 percent in 2008, with significant increases in many of the States. Given the large scale investment that has taken place in the government education system under *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA), partly financed through the collection of the Education Cess since 2004, the reasons behind this increase bear examination. This trend acquires added significance in the context of The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Bill, 2008, introduced in Parliament last month, which mandates all schools, including unaided ones, to provide for at least 25 percent allocation of seats to children from the neighbourhood who belong to economically weaker sections.

It is worth recalling that the number of private and unaided—and in an increasingly large number of cases, unrecognised—schools in India has increased rapidly in the last few years, yet data on these schools is hard to come by² (even ASER does not distinguish between private aided, unaided and/or recognised). A nationally representative survey of rural private schools conducted in 2003 found that 28 percent of the rural Indian population had access to fee-charging private schools in the same village³. Such schools provide an alternative to government schools, often perceived as low quality, to those who can afford them. Yet the quality of these private institutions is often questionable, particularly in the case of the hand-to-mouth establishments that have sprung up all over. While the phrase “private school” evokes images of upper crust Doon School-like clones, the fact is that a significant number are little more than teaching shops, run by poorly qualified and untrained staff for whom the school is the source of a meagre livelihood. Despite this, such schools continue to attract increasing numbers of children, leading at times to closure of existing government schools for want of students⁴. Also, many children enrolled in government schools are also going to private schools in clear cases of double enrolment, or as in West Bengal, to schools camouflaged as tuition centres,

* Director SRF Foundation, New Delhi.

¹ Ministry of HRD, Government of India (2007), *Selected Education Statistics 2005-06*, New Delhi.

² See for instance, Kingdon, Geeta G (1996), “Private Schooling in India: Size, Nature and Equity Effects”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, New Delhi, December.

³ Muralidharan, Karthik and Kremer, Michael (2006), “*Public and Private Schools in India*”, Harvard University, Boston.

⁴ See for example, “Low Turnout, Waning Popularity Push MCD Schools To Brink Of Closure”, *The Hindustan Times*, New Delhi, 26th December, 2006.

This trend of increased private school enrolments is also interesting for another reason. The five States that report the greatest increase in ASER 2008 are, in decreasing order, Nagaland, Kerala, Goa, Jammu & Kashmir, and Himachal Pradesh, with Punjab, Rajasthan and Karnataka not far behind. In the case of Kerala and Goa, nearly half of all enrolled children in the 6-14 year age group attend private schools. Four out of five of these States are considered to be reasonably educationally advanced, with significant investment in the public education system, financially and socially. In the case of Nagaland for example, in the immediate aftermath of the introduction of the Nagaland Communitisation of Public Institutions and Services Act, 2002, greater community ownership of schools was seen as having led to a reduction of drop out rates, improvement in teacher attendance, improvement in academic results, as well as a reverse shift of enrolment from private to government schools⁵. This trend now appears to have been reversed in the State yet again, with private school enrolments increasing from 10 percent in 2005 to 41 percent in 2008.

Similarly, Himachal Pradesh has always been considered one of the better performing States when it comes to education. In 2005, when the first ASER was released, the performance of government schools in the State in reading and math was higher than that of private schools; by 2008, this gap appears to have narrowed, with the performance of children from the latter almost equal in reading and better in math. Enrolments in private schools in the State during the same period have increased from 7 percent in 2005 to 24 percent in 2008.

The reasons for the shift to private schools will need to be investigated in some detail by persons more competent than this writer; they are however, likely to at least include any or all of the following: a perception that private schools are better than government ones, improved or enhanced disposable incomes, increased availability of private schools in the neighbourhood, and a demand for so-called English medium education, especially in the wake of the globalised economy. Schools under private management (both aided and unaided) rose from 15.15 percent in 2004-05 to 16.86 percent in 2005-06, and to 18.86 percent in 2006-07⁶, clearly reflecting an upward trend. Whatever the reason behind increasing numbers of parents preferring private school education, it would seem that privately managed schools are here to stay and will need to be addressed accordingly.

With nearly one-fifth of all schools in the country under private management, it would be useful to examine the manner by which their standards can be improved so that overall learning levels can improve. Part of the answer may lie in The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Bill, 2008, which could allow the government to bring back the concept of the aided school which has fallen into disuse in most States. But no matter what route is taken, it would appear that the role of private schools is likely to be of increasing importance in the years to come; how we make best use of them will determine the future of our children and our own future as a nation.

⁵ UNICEF (2004), "*Communitisation and Resurgence of Naga Social Capital: Impact Assessment of Public Institutions and Services in Nagaland*", ODEC, Chennai.

⁶ Mehta, Arun C (2008), "*Elementary Education in India: Progress towards UEE*", NUEPA, New Delhi.