

TIME TO RAISE SOME RED FLAGS?

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The real message emanating from ASER 2010 is one that needs to be taken with a great deal of seriousness—notwithstanding The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, and the millions of rupees spent on elementary education through *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA) in the last ten years, the changes that can be discerned in the system as a whole are minor and often imperceptible. The concept of the “big stuck” propounded by economist Lant Pritchett appears to be affecting the system in its entirety, and not just in the case of learning levels. The only real silver lining lies in the form of a steadily rising rate of enrollment, with nearly 96.5 percent children between the ages of six and fourteen years enrolled in some form of school. Clearly, at least parents seem to have acknowledged the need to ensure that children join school, even if the system appears to be failing them.

Learning levels continue to remain stagnant, with nearly half the children in Grade 5 unable to read a simple text; even worse, this figure seems to have declined from 58 percent reported by ASER 2007 to 53 percent in the case of ASER 2010. Only 36 percent children in Grade 5 are able to complete a simple division sum, and here too, the percentage has declined from the 42 percent measured in ASER 2007. While some of these variations can no doubt be explained away by external factors, sampling error, differences in the timeline, etc., the fact that learning levels do not seem to be improving significantly should be a cause for concern.

This drop in learning levels is not confined to government schools and may be observed equally across government and private schools. While in government schools the percentage of children in Grade 5 who could read a Grade 2 text fell from 57 percent in 2007 to 50 percent in 2010, the corresponding percentage in private schools fell from 69 percent in 2007 to 64 percent in 2010. As a country, our children do not appear to be learning any better than they were four years ago.

Children’s attendance in the classroom also appears to mirror the general condition of the education system in each state. In those states where the system is relatively better off, attendance appears to be improving; on the other hand, in states where the system is less efficient, attendance seems to be dropping by the year. For instance, in Uttar Pradesh, the percentage of schools with more than 75 percent children attending has dropped steadily from 31 percent in 2007, to 20 percent in 2009 and 17 percent in 2010. Similarly, in Bihar the same figures have dropped from 21 percent to 16 percent, to 13 percent respectively. While in UP, the percentage of children in Grade 5 who could read a Grade 2 text has remained stagnant during this period at around 44 percent, in Bihar it has dropped from nearly 68 percent in 2007 to 58 percent in 2010. Similar patterns can be observed in other states.

Despite the stringent requirements of The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, the provisioning of infrastructure seems actually to be slowing down, with the percentage of usable toilets and drinking water facilities in most states declining, except in Chhattisgarh. One possible reason may be that a number of schools have been opened rapidly to meet the obligations of the Act, yet the fact that they are without the requisite facilities is in itself a sad commentary on our education system.

Increasingly, notwithstanding a small dip in 2009, more children appear to be opting for the private school system, with 24 percent children in the 6-14 age group in rural areas enrolled in private school; percentages for both boys and girls have increased over the last few years, particularly in some states, so that on an all-India basis, 26 percent boys and 22 percent girls are enrolled in private school, as opposed to 21 percent and 18 percent respectively in 2007. In states such as Punjab, Haryana, Manipur, Meghalaya, and Kerala, the distribution of enrollment between government and private schools is almost even. Even UP has now reached a point where 43 percent boys and 35 percent girls are enrolled in private schools.

Additionally, it may be observed that 27 percent children in Grade 5 and 31 percent children in Grade 8 of government schools opt for paid additional tuition, as compared to 24 percent and 22 percent respectively in private schools. These percentages for government schools have increased since 2007, indicating that more children are turning towards supplementary help.

Given that a similar pattern is clearly visible in urban areas (although not measured by ASER), this has implications for policy makers who continue to believe that the private sector has no role in school education. The truth is that a significant number of children attend the so-called unrecognised private schools, which will become illegal and unable to operate under the provisions of The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, forcing parents to find other alternatives for their children and potentially depriving several people of their livelihoods. Unless the State is able to provide a viable and functioning alternative to such schools, children who attend these private schools will be at risk of having their education disrupted.

The data emerging from ASER 2010 shows plainly that we are not making the kind of progress that should legitimately have been expected given the high priority accorded to education by the government. It is time to raise several questions, not the least of which should be around our strategy of ensuring a clear emphasis on learning outcomes. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, provides that all children will automatically progress from Grade 1 through 8 without detention for any cause; in light of the fact that the existing system is unable to guarantee learning by children, this provision is likely to exacerbate the situation. We need to urgently focus on ensuring adequate infrastructure, teachers, accountability and learning, if the next generation is not to be lost.

When the Constitution was being discussed in the late 1940s, the debate in the Constituent Assembly focused, among other things, on the link between democracy and education. One group of leaders was of the view that the protection of our fledgling democracy could only be ensured if the right to vote was restricted to educated adults. The other, which was unwilling to create further categories and divisions within newly independent India, was in favour of universal adult suffrage, but agreed that the population should be educated as early as possible. It was for this reason that elementary education was included in the Directive Principles of State Policy under Article 45, exhorting the State to ensure the education of all children below the age of 14 years within a time frame of ten years from commencement of the Constitution.

Any debate about education in India must keep this fundamental relationship with our democracy in view; this is not just about ensuring that we reap a “demographic dividend”, or equip young people with livelihood skills, or even enable national economic growth. The need to educate our children is intricately linked to the kind of society and country in which we wish to live, and to the greater idea of India. As of now, that idea might seem to be at risk unless corrective action is taken urgently.

