

Left behind: on the right to free, compulsory education

If there is one strong message from the findings of the Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2017, it is that the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act should cover the entire spectrum of 18 years, and not confine itself to those aged 6 to 14. Guaranteed inclusion will empower those in the 14-18 age group who are not enrolled anywhere, and help them acquire finishing education that is so vital to their participation in the workforce. The ASER sample study estimates that 14% of this age group — a total of 125 million young Indians in this category — are not enrolled. It is absolutely essential for all of them to get an education that equips them with the skills, especially job-oriented vocational capabilities, if the expectation of a demographic dividend is to be meaningful. Unfortunately, the state of rural elementary education is far from encouraging. To begin with, only 5% of the respondents in the survey, which was aided by the NGO Pratham, reported doing any kind of vocational course, and even among this small minority a third were enrolled for three months or less. Moreover, learning outcomes for those who had progressed to higher levels of schooling were shockingly low: only 43% of the youth could solve an arithmetic problem involving division of a three-digit number by a single digit; among those who were no longer in school, the percentage was sharply lower.

The insights available from successive studies point to progress being made in raw enrolment of children in school, but miserable failures in achieving learning outcomes. Also, enrolment figures often do not mean high attendance. It is not surprising, therefore, that a significant section of secondary level students find it difficult to read standard texts meant for junior classes or locate their own State on the map. There are also discrete differences among States on the number of youth who are not on the rolls in appropriate levels of schooling, with 29.4% of both boys and girls aged 17-18 not enrolled in a Chhattisgarh district, compared to 4.5% and 3.9%, respectively, in a Kerala district. The ASER data point to a massive digital divide, with 61% of respondents stating they had never used the Internet, and 56% a computer, while mobile telephony was accessible to 73%. Here too, girls were worse off in terms of access to computers and the Internet. Scaling up access to these can be achieved by bringing all children under the umbrella of a school, college or training institution. All expenditure on good education is bound to have a multiplier effect on productivity. What is needed is a vision that will translate the objectives of the RTE Act into a comprehensive guarantee, expanding its scope to cover all levels of education. This will remove the lacuna in policy that awaits remedy seven decades after Independence.

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