

SCORING LOW: ON LACK OF POWER IN SCHOOLS

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Education and related issues

It should rank as an irony that as a founder-leader of the International Solar Alliance, India has not yet [electrified a significant number of government schools](#), while extolling the elegance and virtue of photovoltaic electricity to the rest of the world. The lack of power in schools is taken note of by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Human Resource Development in its latest report on budgetary grants for school education and literacy for 2020-21. Under the framework of concurrent powers, the Centre operates its own schemes and sponsors several school education programmes covering the States, notably Samagra Shiksha and the Mid Day Meal scheme. Yet, as the panel found from data for 2017-18, only 56.45% of government schools had electricity and 56.98% a playground, while almost 40% lacked a boundary wall. There are some high-performing States, but even in politically well-represented Uttar Pradesh, almost 70% of schools lacked electricity. Other depressing insights from the district information database as of end-2019, are: neglect of toilet construction for children with special needs, failure to build toilets for girls in a third of secondary schools and laboratories for higher secondary science students. The tardy progress on such important facilities, in spite of the projects having been sanctioned, shows the low priority that school education is being accorded.

One of the first things the NDA government did at the launch of its second term was a '100-day programme' for education, focused in part on training of schoolteachers and opening of central schools. It should be possible to bring the same mission-mode approach to infrastructure now, ensuring that no school is left behind. Solar power can be installed in schools and toilets built for all students in 100 days. Community participation can make sure that the objectives are satisfactorily met. It may be more challenging to find attached playgrounds, but that problem can also be overcome by identifying suitable commons that can be upgraded to accommodate students, while permanent arrangements are made. More fundamentally, the Centre and States must realise that their talk of a demographic dividend has little meaning, when they do not provide enough funding for proposals on the one hand and the administrative machinery fails to utilise even the amount allocated in some cases. As the parliamentary committee notes, the allocation to the School Education and Literacy department has suffered a cut of 27.52%, amounting to 22,725 crore in the Budget Estimate for 2020-21, although public expenditure on education has been rising. The government-run school sector needs a fund infusion. A public school system that guarantees universal access, good learning and all facilities has to be among the highest national priorities.

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