

WHERE NO CHILD IS LEFT BEHIND

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A class at a government school in Erode in Tamil Nadu | Photo Credit: GOVARTHAN M.

It is alarming that India ranks 132 out of 191 countries in the 2021 Human Development Index, which is a measure of a nation's health, average income, and education.

The National Education Policy (NEP) of 2020 states, "A National Mission on Foundational Literacy and Numeracy will be set up... on priority... for attaining universal foundational literacy and numeracy in all primary schools, identifying state-wise targets and goals to be achieved by 2025, and closely tracking and monitoring progress of the same." How do we achieve this ambitious objective?

Ever since the 1990 World Declaration on Education for All at the Jomtien Conference, concerted efforts have been made to bring all children to school. Even before the conference, in 1987, the Shiksha Karmi Project was started in schools to tackle teacher absenteeism in remote villages in Rajasthan. Active involvement of the local communities was a crucial part of the project. By supporting and training local persons, the project succeeded in creating teachers. The premise was to focus on the basics of teaching through practice. Unfortunately, this lesson is given up when we work with regular teachers.

The Bihar Education Project was introduced in the early 1990s to give a fillip to the universalisation of primary education. It developed a 10-day residential in-service training for teachers, called the Ujala module. This proved to be a challenge as communities viewed understaffed and dilapidated schools only as election booths.

The Lok Jumbish, or Peoples Movement for Education for All, was launched in 1992 in Rajasthan. By providing a thrust to innovations and emphasising civil society partnership, this programme demonstrated successes, especially in tribal districts. However, the inertia of the mainstream continued to reign supreme.

In 1993, the Supreme Court ruled in *Unni Krishnan v. State Of Andhra Pradesh* that the right to education for children up to age 14 is central and fundamental. The District Primary Education Programme was started in 1994, to universalise and transform the quality of primary education. This too remained a project as Directorates did not own the initiatives fully.

Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, aimed at the universalisation of elementary education, was launched in 2001. While it has made a difference to school participation and has brought about improvement

in school infrastructure, uniforms, toilet access, water and textbook availability, classroom processes still remain a challenge.

We have still not figured out a systemic way of recruiting good teachers and establishing teacher development institutions. The recruitment of teachers, educators and administrators has to become a priority if we want to make a difference. The Central, State and local governments need to transform governance to ensure that everyone delivers their best. We should ensure that there are direct funds to schools, no teacher vacancies, fewer non-teaching tasks, and a vibrant community and panchayat connect for accountability.

While many efforts have indeed been made, we still need to work on community connect and parental involvement. Panchayats and community collectives with very high social capital, such as women self-help groups, can help ensure that local households own the initiative. Panchayats can leverage resources. Communities can both enable and discipline teachers if funds, functions and functionaries are their responsibility. The Panchayati Raj, Rural and Urban Development Ministries can work on community connect and make learning outcomes a responsibility of local governments. Providing decentralised funds to schools with the community overseeing such funds is the best starting point towards achieving the NEP objective.

It is poor governance that affects the effectiveness of face-to-face or digital teacher development initiatives like Nishtha. Pratham's Read India campaign and the Azim Premji Foundation's large-scale efforts to improve government schools by providing district-/block-level support to schools and teachers also suffer due to poor governance of schools and teachers.

There are many innovations in the civil society space, such as by Gyan Shala, Saksham, the Central Square Foundation, Room to Read, and Akshara, but many of them are not initiatives aimed at improving mass education. The Sampark Foundation provides some answers to the aforementioned challenges. The Foundation uses technology for teacher development. It uses audio battery-operated sound boxes and innovative teaching learning materials. It has also launched a TV, which helps teachers use lesson plans, content videos, activity videos and worksheets to make classes more interactive and joyful. While it is too early to comment on the success of these initiatives, these appear to be sound methods to overcome teacher incompetency through the use of technology.

The time between preschool and Class 3 can be transformational for individuals. It is time for everyone from the Panchayat level to the Prime Minister to ensure that all children are in school and are learning by 2025. Foundational literacy and numeracy are necessary to prepare a generation of learners who will secure for India high rates of economic progress and human well-being. The time to act is now.

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