

STILL TOO MANY CHILDREN OUT OF SCHOOL

Relevant for: Government Policies & Welfare Schemes | Topic: Welfare of Children - Schemes & their performance; Mechanisms, Laws, Institutions & Bodies

The official numbers of out-of-school children in India are either out of date or contradictory. According to the 2011 Census, the number of out-of-school children in the 5-17 age group was 8.4 crore. However, according to a survey commissioned in 2014 by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, the number of out-of-school children in the 6-13 age group was only 60.64 lakh. This is a gross underestimation. It is quite unlikely that the number of out-of-school children came down so drastically from 2011 to 2014, especially given that there were no significant changes in objective conditions, warranting such a miraculous reduction.

We recently calculated the number of out-of-school children in India on the basis of the 71st round of the National Sample Survey (NSS) carried out in 2014. We took into account the 6-18 age group, which we consider to be the most appropriate for estimating out-of-school children, even though the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act covers only the 6-14 age group. According to our estimate, out-of-school children in this age group were more than 4.5 crore in the country, which is 16.1% of the children in this age group. In big States such as Odisha (20.6%), Uttar Pradesh (21.4%), Gujarat (19.1%), Bihar (18.6%), Madhya Pradesh (18.6%), Rajasthan (18.4%) and West Bengal (16.8%), about one-fifth of the children in this age group were out of school. In Kerala, Goa, Sikkim, Himachal Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, the proportion of out-of-school children was lower than the national average. It is a matter of serious concern that nearly 10 years after the enactment of the RTE Act, and 16 years after the right to education was elevated to a fundamental right, such a large number of children are out of school.

Marginalised from school

We also found that the proportion of out-of-school children was higher in rural India (17.2%) than in urban India (13.1%). In rural areas, the proportion of out-of-school girls (18.3%) was higher than of boys (16.3%). The proportion of children from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SC/ST) was the highest, followed by Other Backward Classes (OBCs). Among religious groups, the proportion of Muslims was as high as 24.1% in rural areas and 24.7% in urban areas. On the whole, the data show that out-of-school children came mostly from the rural areas, and a high proportion of them are SCs, STs, Muslims and from other economically backward communities.

Recently, we completed a study on the extent, location (rural/urban), and distribution by social and religious groups of out-of-school children in the Fatuha and Bihta blocks of Patna district in Bihar. Our survey covered all those households in these two blocks which had one or more children in the 6-18 age group, the total number of households being 4,205. Our survey confirmed the national-level finding that out-of-school children came mostly from low-income, landless and marginal families — 99.34% of the families from which out-of-school children came were either landless or marginal. The annual income of the fathers of 58.19% of such children was less than 50,000. Also, fathers of 51.18% of out-of-school children and mothers of 88.45% of out-of-school children were uneducated. Moreover, fathers of 56.84% and mothers of 33.28% of such children were casual labourers.

Analysing the data collected from these two blocks, we found that the most important reason for boys to drop out of school was to take up jobs to supplement the family earning; for girls, it was the compulsion to participate in household work. There is sufficient evidence to conclude that this is an all-India phenomenon. According to the RTE Act and the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act, these out-of-school children fall under the category of child labour. It is, therefore, not surprising that the largest number of child labourers in the world is in India.

Several of the reasons given for the non-enrolment of children and their dropping out of school indicated the prejudice against educating girls that is prevalent in India. This prejudice has been

brought out more sharply in the Telangana Social Development Report, 2018, prepared and published by the Southern Regional Centre, Hyderabad, of the Council for Social Development. This report also draws on the data of the 71st round of the NSS. According to these data, a proportionately larger percentage of girls than boys was not enrolled. In the rural areas, the gender gap on this count was as high as 13 percentage points. A relatively lower percentage of girls was found going to high fee-charging private schools. Similarly, a relatively lower percentage of girls took private coaching, which involves costs additional to those incurred for schooling. Very few students in Telangana resorted to private coaching, but among those who did, the share of girls was only 2% of the total number; the share of boys was 6%. A much higher proportion of girls than boys dropped out of school after Class 10, after which education is not necessarily free. An additional collaborative evidence is that in Telangana, the average expenditure on the education of girls was less than that for boys. In Telangana, 50% of the children walked to their schools. Among these, the proportion of girls was higher than that of boys.

We would not have been confronted with this high proportion of drop-outs if all the provisions of the RTE Act had been implemented within the time limit prescribed in the Act (latest by April 2015). For example, the Act provided for the availability of a school at a distance of 1 km from the residence of the child at the primary level and 3 km at the upper primary level. If these provisions had been implemented, a major reason for drop-out (distance of school) would have been eliminated. If all the infrastructure facilities prescribed in the Act had been put in place during the period of implementation, another reason for drop-out (environment not friendly) would have disappeared.

The most important reason for drop-out (socio-economic conditions of the parents of the children) calls for a more comprehensive approach that is not reflected in the RTE Act. Until an adequate number of schools at the prescribed distances from the children's homes becomes available, it would be necessary to provide secure modes of subsidised travel to schools, particularly for girls. Another important provision which ought to have been included in the RTE is financial support to poor parents, adequate to enable them to send their children to school. There is incontrovertible evidence of a positive correlation between economic incentives and a lower drop-out.

The most important social reason for drop-out is lack of awareness of the importance of school education and of the fact that education is now a legal right. Ironically, education is the most important instrument for creating this awareness. Thus education is a quintessential example of being vested with intrinsic as well as instrumental value — being both the means and the end.

Muchkund Dubey is President, Ashok Pankaj is Director, and Susmita Mitra is Assistant Professor of the Council for Social Development, New Delhi

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