

## Ensuring elementary education for all

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*Indian society regards children not as a collective responsibility but as a parental burden. Few realise that the nation loses when children do not attend school.*

THIRTEEN-YEAR-OLD Sapna and her younger sister Savita can now continue their education. The unauthorised colony located in the heart of Delhi where they had grown up was bulldozed three years ago and resettled some 50 kilometres away. Their labourer father continued to send them to their old school but he could not afford it, so they sought admission to the government school closer to the resettlement colony. This school initially refused but will now follow the order given by the Delhi High Court on a petition filed on behalf of the two girls by Social Jurists, a remarkable voluntary initiative of advocate Ashok Aggrawal. He won the case on the basis of the Constitution amendment making elementary education a fundamental right. It is evident from this case that the amendment will not get implemented on its own. Unless it is backed by legislation to make adequate provision for children's education, the amendment will stay as ineffective as the Directive Principle did for half a century. This is because children on their own cannot protect the right they have been awarded. If a society has the conscience to give children a fundamental right, the onus is on the society to honour it by using the state to provide conditions that might enable children to enjoy their right.

There is plenty of evidence to say that India's present-day society lacks the desire to see every child at school. In certain parts of society one sees such a desire, but it is too weak and casual to lead to sustained pressure on the state. We may well ask why the state does not fulfil its constitutional obligation. To ask such a question is to get caught in a language game. Isn't the state an expression of the mind of the society it serves? To distinguish between state and government invites a similar fallacy. Indeed, so long as we analyse the problem mainly by searching for the culprit, we won't get very far. Grasp of the situation and energy to act upon it require that we take a comprehensive view and situate ourselves in it. This is what Professor Shanta Sinha did the other day when she spoke on 'the battle for school.' In a lecture organised by NCERT, she drew upon the work done by her MV foundation in Andhra Pradesh to explain how uncertain and tough a life awaits children of the poor who try to get into school. An employer, she said, asks

no questions; nor does he demand the transfer certificate and proof of residence. He straightaway gives the child a job. The school, on the other hand, does everything it can to keep the child out. It makes demands that no poor parent can easily fulfil.

With grit and help, if the parents do manage to put the child into school, its internal dynamics, which are just as hostile, get into action. These dynamics have to do with teachers' attitudes towards the poor and the stodgy pedagogy employed to translate a thoughtlessly organised curriculum into daily reality. Children of the poor cannot cope with these negative forces and sooner or later leave the school, usually with the stigma of failure. The scale at which this process operates can be judged from what is known as the 'drop-out rate'. It stands at about 53 per cent for Classes I-VIII, which means that more than half of India's children who enrol in Class I do not complete eight years of school education. We need no special imagination to guess that these children belong to the poor and deprived sections of our society. As Professor Shanta Sinha pointed out, the harsh treatment meted out to children of the poor begins as soon as they somehow manage to enrol. In schools that have no more than one or two teachers, the focus stays inevitably on the higher primary classes, and Class I is left to fend for itself. This is in sharp contrast to the developed world where Class I receives the best possible attention that a school can provide and the teachers who specialise in teaching this class are given high respect in the system and society.

The general picture of school education is glum, but the saddest part of it is occupied by slum children. A radical redesigning of urban India is going on in preparation for processes euphemistically lumped under globalisation. We get a glimpse of this vast phenomena in a recent article on Chennai by Pushpa Aurobindoo in the illustrated monthly *Marg*. She shows how the renamed city of Madras is undergoing a spatial division aimed at providing protected luxury and pleasant sights to the global investor. She concludes that "Divided geographies heightened by divided names tell the tale of an exclusionary city practising forms of segregation worse than those known during colonial times."

The story of Chennai is unfolding in every city. The 'tale of two cities' in Delhi as Amita Baviskar had called it in an article published in *The Hindu* two years ago has made fast progress, making poverty invisible in several parts of New Delhi. Over the summer when

I was working on the report of a committee appointed by the Delhi Government to suggest ways of implementing the High Court's order to provide for seats for the poor in private schools, a principal told me with genuine innocence that the problem of poverty has been solved in Delhi. In a sense she is right; the emotional problem caused to visitors and civic authorities by the visibility of the poor has been solved by shifting the poor far away. In a report published in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, Kalyani Menon-Sen has sketched the horror of a vast resettlement colony where the poor who had lived for decades along the banks of the Yamuna were packed away. Women and children suffer unspeakable humiliation and pain on a daily basis even as livelihoods become geographically inaccessible. The teachers responsible for educating these children call them '*jhuggi-jhonpdi ke bachche*'. They neither have the training nor the attitudes necessary for serving the children who have suffered the trauma of displacement.

Why India can't do better in education is a question many people who praise our economic growth rate frequently ask. There is no obvious reason why every child cannot be put into a school for eight years as the Constitution desires. We have the resources; we have the expertise to plan. The draft bill that would have led to legislation to facilitate the implementation of the Constitutional amendment was discussed by the Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE) last year. The Ministry of Human Resource Development had calculated the cost and for a while it seemed as if the draft would move towards presentation in Parliament. That, it now appears, will not happen, and the reason one gathers is that the required financial expenditure is deemed to be unaffordable. So, instead of Parliament discussing it, the draft bill has been sent to the States as a model for them to draw up suitable legislation. Anyone familiar with the larger picture of children's welfare can guess what will happen now. An already neglected sector will slip farther away from national-level attention. Patchwork solutions such as project-based funding, invitation to private and voluntary agencies to alleviate the misery of the poor, and para-teachers will be tried out. A great chance of systemic rebuilding will be squandered away. It has been like this since Independence. Little children slip to the bottom of state priorities and end up as targets of cheap solutions. Decent schooling of the kind the government provides in its Kendriya Vidyalayas continues to be a privilege restricted to those whose good fortune it is to be born in a central government employee's family.

There is no legal or civic answer to the curiosity why other children must suffer a resource crunch. Scarcity of funds encourages a culture of corruption, which, in turn, provides ground for doubts about the state system's ability to deliver, granting support to the advocates of privatisation and the voucher system. In no country has universal elementary education been achieved without the state assuming the primary responsibility. Why is the state in India so reluctant? The only convincing answer is that Indian society does not regard children as a collective responsibility. We tend to look upon children as a parental burden; so we pursue the debate on compulsory schooling by assuming that if a child is not at school, it is the parents' lookout. Few of us realise that the nation loses when children don't attend school. It does not matter whose children they are in a biological sense.