

*Essential Services*

# Elementary Education in India: Progress, Setbacks, and Challenges

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# Abstract

This paper provides a stocktaking of progress and shortcomings in India's march towards universalisation of elementary education (UEE), whilst addressing concerns of equity, inclusion, and quality from the central focus which looks into the dimensions of locational disadvantage, social exclusion, gender disparity, and special needs for children of other neglected groups. It focuses on gaps in enrolment, infrastructural provisioning, equity concerns in terms of being inclusive in the context of schools functioning, teachers (social group, training, motivation, transaction and so on), management, and governance issues. The extent and manifestations of non-inclusion or exclusion in the educational context is also related to the capacity of the State as reflected in the policy fuzziness and ambiguities. Six areas for public action are suggested. Apart from structural reforms, a much stronger public pressure backed by better and shared public reasoning is required for overcoming the challenges for attainment of compulsory and free education to all children

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## 1. Introduction

The Indian State is well aware of the importance of ensuring universal basic education. In 1950, the Constitution had resolved in Article 45 under the Directive Principles of state Policy that the ‘...State shall endeavour to provide, within a period of ten years from the commencement of this Constitution, for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen’. Since then, many documents including every Five Year Plan, the 1968 National Policy on Education, and the revised 1992 National Policy on Education have attempted to refine India’s efforts at Universal Elementary Education (UEE).

There have been important Constitutional amendments as well that were intended to give a boost to elementary education. The 42<sup>nd</sup> Amendment to the Constitution in 1976 brought education, which was largely a state responsibility, into the Concurrent List and made universalizing elementary education the responsibility of both the central and state governments. In 2002, Government of India took another significant step by making elementary education a fundamental right through the 86<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment. In 2009, India went further and passed the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009).

Many positive developments have been recorded, especially after the 1990s. Demand for basic education continues to grow with increasing recognition of the importance of educating children among parents and guardians. Infrastructural facilities have improved over the past two decades, gross enrolment is almost universal, dropout rates have declined even for girls at the primary level, and many more teachers have been appointed. More school incentives (such as free textbooks and the serving of cooked meals) have led to better outreach and coverage.

This paper addresses concerns of equity, inclusion, and quality in the context of elementary<sup>1</sup> education from the central focus which looks into the dimensions of locational disadvantage, social exclusion, gender disparity, and special needs for children of other neglected groups. It begins with a stocktaking of progress and shortcomings in India’s march towards UEE. It focuses on gaps in enrolment, infrastructural provisioning, equity concerns – social and locational, quality and effectiveness in terms of being inclusive in the context of schools functioning, teachers (social group, training, motivation, transaction and so on), management, and governance issues. It highlights the extent and manifestations of non-inclusion or exclusion in the educational context. Finally, as the way forward, a section is devoted to addressing some of the areas for public action.

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<sup>1</sup> This does not undermine the major challenge higher education poses in all these respects and probably more.

## 2. Progress and Setbacks

Reports of the Government of India often refer to 'significant strides', 'considerable progress', 'substantial increase', and 'major achievements' in the spread of elementary education. However, progress in the decade of the 1990s was slow and uneven. Gross enrolment ratios remained relatively static during the decade of the 1990s. This is particularly true for boys at the primary stage (6–11 years) though some improvement is noticeable in the case of girls too.

Table 1: Sex-wise Enrolment Ratios by Stages, 1990–1 To 2000–1

	Primary			Secondary		
	Grades I–V			Grades VI–VIII		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
1990–1	57.0	40.4	97.4	21.5	12.5	34.0
1993–4	55.1	41.9	97.0	20.6	13.5	34.1
1994–5	62.3	46.8	109.1	24.5	15.8	40.3
1995–6	62.4	47.4	109.8	25.0	16.0	41.0
1996–7	62.5	47.9	110.4	24.7	16.3	41.0
1997–8	61.2	47.5	108.7	23.7	15.8	39.5
1998–9	64.1	48.2	112.3	24.0	16.3	40.3
1999–2000	62.7	49.5	112.2	25.1	17.0	42.1
2000–1	64.0	49.8	113.8	25.3	17.5	42.8

Source: Government of India (2003), "Education for All, National Plan of Action 2003", New Delhi

The drop-out rates among primary school children fell by a mere 3 percentage points from 42 per cent in 1991-2 to 40.7 per cent in 2000–1.

Table 2: Drop-Out Rates at Primary and Elementary Levels, 1990–1 To 2006–7

	1990-1	1998-9	1999-0	2000-1	2006-7
<b>Class I-V</b>					
Boys	40.1	38.6	38.7	39.7	24.4
Girls	46.0	41.2	42.3	41.9	26.6
Total	42.6	39.7	40.3	40.7	25.4
<b>Class I-VIII</b>					
Boys	59.1	54.4	52.0	50.3	46.6
Girls	65.1	60.1	58.0	58.0	45.3
Total	60.9	56.8	54.5	53.7	46.0

Source: Government of India (2003), 'Education for All, National Plan of Action 2003', New Delhi; SES, 2006–7

Further, , the proportion of children starting Grade 1 who reach Grade 5 went up marginally from 55 per cent in 1992–3 to 59.3 per cent in 2000-1.

Progress accelerated since 2000, especially after the launch of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. Between 1999–2000 and 2004–5, for instance:

- (i) the number of primary schools increased from 642,000 to 767,000; and upper primary schools increased from 198,000 to 275,000;
- (ii) the number of teachers in primary schools went up from 1.91 million to 2.31 million;
- (iii) the number of upper primary school teachers went up from 1.29 million to 1.44 million;
- (iv) enrollment in primary schools went up from 114 million to 132 million; and
- (v) enrolment in upper primary schools went up from 42 million to nearly 52 million.

Girls' enrolment at both the primary and upper primary stages increased sharply.

Year	Primary (Grades I–V)			U Primary (Grades VI–VIII)		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
1999–2000*	64.1	49.5	113.6	25.1	17.0	42.1
2000–1*	64.0	49.8	113.8	25.3	17.5	42.8
2001–2*	63.6	0.3	13.9	26.1	18.7	44.8
2002–3*	65.1	57.3	122.4	26.3	20.6	46.9
2003–4*	68.4	59.9	128.3	27.3	21.4	48.7
2004–5*	70.1	61.6	131.7	28.7	23.0	51.6
2005–6	70.5	61.6	132	28.9	23.2	52.2
2006–7	71.0	62.5	133.5	29.8	24.6	54.4

Source: Selected Education Statistics, Ministry of Human Resource Development cited in Planning Commission (2007), "Report of the Working Group on Elementary Education and Literacy for the 11<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan" Government of India, New Delhi accessible at [http://planningcommission.nic.in/aboutus/committee/wrkgrp11/wg11\\_eleedu.pdf](http://planningcommission.nic.in/aboutus/committee/wrkgrp11/wg11_eleedu.pdf)

The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) at the primary stage that had stagnated in the 1990s went up from 94.9 per cent in 1999–2000 to 111.2 per cent in 2006–7. Also, the gap in GER between boys and girls at the primary level, which was 19 percentage points in 1999–2000, dropped to 7 percentage points in 2006–7.

**Table 4: Gross Enrolment Ratios at Primary and Upper Primary Levels**

Year	Primary (Grades I–V)			Upper Primary (Grade V–VIII)			Elementary (Grades I–VIII)		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
1999–2000*	104.1	85.2	94.9	67.2	49.7	58.8	90.1	72.0	81.3
2000–1*	107.3	85.8	96.8	76.2	53.3	65.3	97.3	75.5	86.8
2001–2*	103.1	82.3	93.0	80.3	57.7	69.6	95.7	74.6	85.6
2002–3*	101.4	89.4	95.6	63.2	48.6	56.3	87.1	74.4	81.1
2003–4*	100.8	95.7	98.3	66.9	57.7	62.5	88.0	81.5	84.9
2004–5*	111.4	105.5	108.6	74.8	65.8	70.5	97.6	90.6	94.2
2005–6	112.8	105.8	109.4	75.2	66.4	71.0	98.5	91.0	94.9
2006–7	114.4	107.8	111.2	77.4	69.5	73.6	100.3	93.3	96.9

Source: Selected Education Statistics, Ministry of Human Resource Development cited in Planning Commission (2007), “Report of the Working Group on Elementary Education and Literacy for the 11<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan” Government of India, New Delhi accessible at [http://planningcommission.nic.in/aboutus/committee/wrkgrp11/wg11\\_eleedu.pdf](http://planningcommission.nic.in/aboutus/committee/wrkgrp11/wg11_eleedu.pdf)

Note: \* Provisional

Drop-out rates show a marked decline, especially among girls over the past five years. *(this sentence should be carried forward to the next page to maintain continuity of the next table)*

**Table 5: Drop-Out Rates at Primary and Elementary Levels, 1999–2000 to 2004–5**

Stage	1999–2000	2000–1	2001–2	2002–3	2003–4	2004–5	2005–6	2006–7
CLASS I–V								
Boys	38.7	39.7	38.4	35.9	33.7	31.37	28.71	24.41
Girls	42.3	41.9	39.9	33.7	28.6	24.82	21.77	26.56
Total	40.3	40.7	39.0	34.9	31.5	28.49	25.67	25.43
CLASS I–VIII								
Boys	52.0	50.3	52.9	52.3	51.8	50.10	48.67	46.58
Girls	58.0	57.7	56.9	53.4	52.9	50.76	48.98	45.33
Total	54.5	53.7	54.6	52.8	52.3	50.39	48.80	46.03

Source: Selected Educational Statistics, Ministry of Human Resources Development

Physical provisioning improved as well.

**Table 6: District Information System for Education (DISE) – Key Indicators of Progress Towards UEE: 2003–4 To 2005–6**

	2003–4	2004–5	2005–6	2006–7	2007–8
Number of districts covered	539	581	604	609	624
Number of schools covered	931,471	1,037,814	1,124,033	1196663	1250775
Percentage of schools without building	3.8	4.0	4.1		
Percentage of school with pucca building	69.3	70.0	70.6	70.6	
Percentage if single-classroom schools	10.9	10.4	9.5	9.71	
Average number of classrooms in primary schools	2.6	2.6	2.7	2.8	3
Percentage of schools without classrooms	8.8	10.9	10.5		
Percentage of single-teacher schools	12.9	13.4	12.2	11.76	10.13
Pupil teacher ratio	39.0	38.0	36.0	34	
Percentage of primary schools having pupil-teacher ratio>100	8.4	8.3	5.9	5.21	4.11
Percentage of schools with boundary walls	50.6	51.4	50.7	49.26	50.22
Percentage of schools with drinking water facility in school	77.9	80.6	83.1	84.89	86.75
Percentage of schools having common toilet in school	41.8	46.8	52.4	58.13	62.67
Percentage of schools having girls' toilet in school	28.2	32.8	37.4	42.58	50.55
Percentage of schools without blackboard	9.5	7.9	8.0		

Source: National University of Educational Planning and Administration, 'Elementary Education in India: Progress towards UEE', New Delhi, (2007)

While such aggregate analyses show progress, a closer examination reveals many deficiencies in the move towards universalizing elementary education. In a nutshell, actions on the ground did not match the commitments made in policy documents. Going by the government's own accounts, India's achievements in the provisioning of elementary education were disappointing. Even today, despite progress, nearly all the problems admitted in 1950 are still waiting to be tackled. Physical infrastructure is inadequate, not all children are enrolled, retention is poor with girls lagging behind boys, drop-out rates remain high, children belonging to scheduled caste, scheduled tribe, and Muslim communities are largely excluded, inequalities persist, quality is poor, and learning achievements are low. The section that follows undertakes a more detailed description and analysis of some of these concerns.

### **3. Four Features**

Four features that have characterized India since Independence continue to characterize India's elementary education system: incomplete enrolment, inequalities, poor quality, and ineffective school performance.



## **Enrolment**

On the whole, there has been a steady increase in school enrolment starting from 1990. The acceleration in enrolment in recent years is plausible, given a number of schemes such as the recruitment of local teachers, increasing proximity of schools, serving of hot-cooked meals in schools, and incentives for girls do encourage children to enroll in schools. However, official figures on enrolment are often unreliable.<sup>2</sup> To begin with, the reporting of Gross Enrolment Ratios (GERs) exceeding 100 is explained as a technical aberration due to the enrolment of children in the primary stage who are outside the age group of 6-11 years. However, the large gap between such ratios and reports on actual attendance reduces significantly the credibility of the enrolment figures. In many instances, enrolments figures are fudged for a variety of reasons including the pressure to report universal enrolment, the opportunity to get additional allocations of food and other materials that can be siphoned out, and sometimes even the need to retain a teacher's post. Then to regard the increase in GER between 1999–2000 and 2006–7 among boys, from 104 to 114, and for girls, from 85 to 108 as a 'significant increase' is not justified.

Estimates of children not enrolled in schools have been a matter of contention. According to official figures, for instance, in 2000, there were an estimated 35 million children out of school across India—5 million children between 6–11 years and another 30 million between 11–14 years.<sup>3</sup> An examination of state-wise estimates of out-of-school children is quite revealing. According to official figures, there are no out-of-school children in the 6–11 year age group in Orissa and Rajasthan, whereas there are some in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Similarly, it is hard to reconcile that the number of out-of-school children between 11–14 years in Gujarat (1.12 million) is higher than in Rajasthan (0.54 million) and Madhya Pradesh (0.5 million).

On the matter of enrolment, parental indifference has often been identified as a major factor that keeps children out of school. Overwhelming evidence, however, suggests that such a perception or belief is completely mistaken. For instance, the PROBE (Public Report on Basic Education in India) survey found a high and growing demand for good quality basic education even among the poorest and socially disadvantaged communities. In response to the question 'Is it important for a boy to be educated?' the proportion of parents who answered 'Yes' was as high as 98 per cent; in the case of girls too, the proportion was high at 89 per cent, though not as high as for boys. If parents seem disinterested in sending their children to school, it is largely because many schools are dysfunctional and little teaching-learning takes place. There are other factors as well that suggest a high motivation among parents for sending their children to school. For example, it is commonly reported that most parents support

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, discussion in Probe Team (1999); also Dreze and Sen (2002)

<sup>3</sup> MOHRD and NIEPA (2000)

compulsory education for all children; and even poor parents are inclined to enrol their children in private schools especially when the local government school is not functioning. When the Government of Madhya Pradesh introduced the Education Guarantee Scheme (promising to start an educational centre in hamlets where there was no school), thousands of applications came in. Moreover, many statements made by parents explained why they considered education to be important. There is no need to worry if there is an educated person in the house; an uneducated person will always be in trouble; an uneducated person is likely to get cheated easily; and so on.

### ***Equity***

Despite aggregate improvements in education levels, glaring inequalities in basic education continue to persist. Disparities between regions (states) and across gender, caste, class, religious groups; and other marginalized sections of society continue to present the biggest challenge for policy makers and educationists.

To begin with, levels of educational attainment vary significantly across Indian states. Though the average literacy rate for India was 65.4 per cent in 2001, the proportion of population above seven years who could read and write varied from 48 per cent in Bihar and 91 per cent in Kerala. Such differentials are noticed in many indicators of school provision as well. For instance, whereas 12 per cent of the schools across India were single-teacher schools in 2005–6, the proportion varied from zero in Kerala and Lakshadweep and less than 2 per cent in Chandigarh, Daman and Diu, Delhi, Pondicherry, and Tripura, to 25 per cent in Madhya Pradesh, 26 per cent each in Rajasthan and Jharkhand, and 48 per cent in Arunachal Pradesh. Similar inter-state variations can be observed in several school-related indicators, facilities, and teacher-related indicators.<sup>4</sup>

Many states like Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan lag behind because they are caught in a 'vicious' cycle where non-egalitarian social structures continue to reproduce disparities through a kind of state complicity. Hence, in the states with high levels of disparities it is even more important that the State invest in social sectors with a special focus on marginalized groups so that deep-seated social inequalities of gender and caste can be addressed. Unfortunately, globalization is based on assumptions of homogenous social structures and its prescriptions for disparities of all sorts are based on economic mobility as the panacea. However, as is fairly well documented, income increases do not always provide solutions. In fact, sometimes they create newer problems, as is well known from the literature on 'Sanskritization' and its negative impact on the status of women and its attendant fall-out on education and

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<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, the detailed inter-state set of tables compiled and presented in NIEPA (2007)

employment.<sup>5</sup> In other words the Indian policymakers cannot afford to neglect structural imbalances as that would result in undermining the State's own efforts to bring about wide ranging change. Indian State capacity will, thus, have to adjust its agenda of globalization with an eye on social disparities.

Equally striking is the persistence of gender inequalities across India. Available data reveal, for instance, that girls fare worse than boys on most indicators of educational attainment. For instance, about 53 per cent boys complete primary education compared to 34 per cent girls. Recent interventions have helped in bridging the gender gap but the drop-out rate among girls, especially in primary classes, is still a cause for grave concern. This is reflected, for instance, in the differential in the median years of schooling—5.5 years for boys compared to 1.8 years for girls.

Why are Indian girls discriminated against with respect to basic education? <sup>6</sup> The PROBE (Public Report on Basic Education in India) survey revealed that while the gap in educational aspirations between social groups is narrowing rapidly, these common aspirations give very unequal attention to boys and girls. Most parents (mothers as well as fathers) expressed much stronger interest in their sons' education than in that of their daughters. To illustrate, the proportion of parents who said education is not important for girls was as high as 10 per cent as against only 1 per cent for boys. Similarly, when asked: 'How far would you like your son or daughter to study?' the responses revealed that parents had much higher expectations for their sons than their daughters.

Why are parents interested in the education of boys? The overwhelming reason is economic. A vast majority hopes that their sons, if educated, will have better employment opportunities. In the context of girls, parents' responsibility seems to end with marriage and the added factor of poor employment avenues for women serves as a further deterrent.

Marginalized groups such as the scheduled castes (SCs) and scheduled tribes (STs) as well as religious minorities like Muslims, continue to fall out of the loop of schooling. In addition, there are striking gender differentials in school attendance among children 6–14 years belonging to SC, ST, and rest of India. The gender differential is most pronounced among the ST communities—a gap of almost 12 percentage points.

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<sup>5</sup> The Association of Social Status with non-working of women that is often witnessed with increases in household incomes, may at times also work as a deterrent for pursuing girls education or investing in it, since there potential entry into employment is perceived to be low, see Berreman (1993)

<sup>6</sup> This discussion draws extensively on the PROBE survey reported in the Probe Team (1999).

Table 7: Gender Differentials in School Attendance Among Children 6–14 Years			
	Boys (%)	Girls (%)	Percentage Difference
Scheduled Caste	72	63	9
Scheduled Tribe	65	53	12
Others	77	70	7
All children	75	67	8
Note: Figures are rounded.			
Source: Computed from Census of India 2001			

A large proportion of minority groups—and principal among them, Muslims—remain deprived of access to basic education. The availability of census data by religion for the first time allows us to look at the trends in the education levels of religious groups such as the Muslims. In addition, the recently released Sachar Committee Report (2006) also provides a broad perspective on the education of Muslims in India. It points out that the ‘condition of Muslims is of grave concern....Despite overall improvements in educational status the rate of progress has been the slowest for Muslims (compared to other socio-religious groups).’ As many as 25 per cent of Muslim children in the age group 6–14 years are currently not enrolled in any school. ‘In some instances the relative share of Muslims is lower than even the SCs who are victims of a long standing caste system. Such relative deprivation calls for a significant policy shift, in the recognition of the problem and in devising corrective measures, as well as in the allocation of resources.’<sup>7</sup>

An important finding of the Sachar Committee is that while educational attainments of the Muslims have increased over time the rate of increase has been slower than for any other socio-religious community. Thus, the expected convergence has not taken place. This comparison with other groups—especially other marginalized groups—is important as it highlights the fact that improvements among SCs and STs for instance, might reflect the benefits of targeted government intervention, which are sorely lacking for the Muslim community. In other words, affirmative action may have an important role to play.

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<sup>7</sup> GOI (2006a)

**Table 8: Children Currently Studying as a Proportion of Population by Age-Groups, 2004–05**

Age Group (%)	Hindus			Muslims	Other Minorities
	General	Other Backward Castes (OBCs)	SC/ST		
6–3 years	19–(17)	36–(36)	26–(27)	14–(15)	5–(5.8)
14–15 years	24–(20)	36–(35)	21–(25)	12–(15)	6–(5.3)
16–17 years	29–(21)	34–(35)	20–(25)	11–(14)	6–(5.1)
18–22 years	34–(21)	31–(34)	18–(26)	10–(14)	8–(5.5)

Note: Figures are rounded. Figures in parenthesis report the share of each socio-religious group in the total age group.

Source: Estimated from NSSO (2004-05) 61<sup>st</sup> Round, Sch.10 cited in GOI (2006a).

Difference in educational achievements can reflect disparities inherent in the social fabric of the region. States where women have a lower social status, for instance, not only have a higher gender gap in education, they have lower aggregate levels of education as well. A similar situation prevails with caste. Interestingly, these imbalances are not rectified simply by improvements in economic status of the household or improvements in financial capacity of the state. For instance, Haryana with the highest per capita income level of all states in the country continues to have a high gender and caste gap in education.

There is an important link between social structures and policy priorities that is often neglected in analysing development performance. It is particularly relevant in understanding State capacity as pressures from within the society have a powerful influence on policy making. To take the Haryana and Himachal Pradesh comparison again, Haryana has a history of powerful land lobbies that have influenced State policy towards agriculture-led economic growth to the neglect of social sectors. This neglect was sought to be made good by a growth in private provision instead. However, marginalized groups like girls and Dalits remain excluded from private provision. Hence, despite having high per capita incomes, the non-egalitarian social structure that supported a skewed pattern of State engagement has meant that Haryana continues to have low female and lower caste literacy. In Himachal Pradesh on the other hand, which has a more egalitarian economic structure, a larger cross-section of the population has a stake in public provision of services like education. Hence, the state is 'coerced' into better provision of public goods, including education. Better government provision of education implies better access to all social groups, increasing aggregate education levels as well as reducing disparities.

The issue of girl's enrolment and attendance is more severe in middle schools since families are more reluctant to send older girls to school, especially if it entails leaving the habitation or village. The absence of a functioning toilet is a

more particular problem for older girls in middle school than it is for younger girls; and often acts as a discouraging factor. Teaching materials required need to go beyond blackboards and charts—the school has to provide for laboratories as well. Similarly, teachers need to become specialized especially in the teaching of different science subjects, as teaching methods assume a different significance. Many of these considerations have not yet fully come into the focus of attention. At a minimum, school facilities will need to be upgraded; library resources, aids, and equipment will have to be provided; and trained teachers will have to be made available. At the same time, attention will have to be paid to curriculum revisions, academic support, and learner assessment.

Children with disabilities and working children are two other categories that have not enjoyed the benefits of universal schooling. The education departments are not generally dealing with issues concerning these sets of children. Legislations for the disabled and for child labour form the concern of other ministries and departments which have very little coordination with the education department. One hopes that the new legislation on education would tackle this issue at least to some extent.

Another issue is concerning non-availability of data. While there are no reliable and specialized data, the official incidence of child labour appears to have declined from 1980 to 1997; however, the figures may be misleading since they tend to represent the full-time urban child workers rather than the rural child workers who constitute the majority in India. Research in South Asian countries show that higher Gross Domestic Product (GDP) does not translate into better wages or improved working conditions, and literacy or primary schooling does not help overcome the demand or supply of child labour in a largely poor economy in which export industries, subcontracting, and home based production dominate.<sup>8</sup> For instance, between 1991 and 1993 Gujarat received the second largest inflow of foreign investment, an impressive 15 per cent of total foreign investment in the country. However, a significant part of the new investment was in industries that employed children. A micro-study of 13,000 child workers in the city of Bhavnagar showed that 17 per cent were going to school while working. Although 50 per cent of children had completed primary school these did not yield any income gains, and moreover, most were illiterate.<sup>9</sup> Large-scale studies that examine the relations between economic reforms, quality of schooling and child labour are needed in order to produce a national perspective on this issue. At the same time, the experience of many non-government organizations (NGOs), in both rural and the urban areas has shown that child workers can be mainstreamed into education through camps that hook them on to good education after withdrawing them from work. Similarly, well-run residential schools in regions of extreme poverty keep the children from living on streets or railway platforms or joining the work force prematurely. The experience of developed economies in Europe and Asia shows that schooling has to be of

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<sup>8</sup> Dev (2004)

<sup>9</sup> Swaminathan (1998)

sufficient quality and number of years to eradicate child labour. In addition, labour laws have to be stringently applied and social security and decent working conditions in the unorganized sector must be guaranteed. Evidence from advanced industrialized countries shows that enforcement of quality free and compulsory primary and secondary education needs to go hand in hand with improving the social net and working conditions for poor adults in order to end child labour.

Again, even though global demand tends to be focused on higher education and technical skills, this has backward linkages with elementary education in several ways. On the one hand, achieving universal elementary education is expected to raise productivity and incomes and strengthen the domestic market, seen as a condition for continued economic growth. On the other hand, the growing concern with basic education is seen as limited in the current economic scenario as it does not adequately consider the education and skill requirements needed to enhance productivity and incomes in a changing economy. Catering to these dual influences is leading to a segmentation of the education sector in a way that places higher education and the technical sectors in a separate category where in some of the elite institutions effort is made to meet standards of global competitiveness. But, the elementary education sector, especially mass elementary education provided by the government school system, is not given the same preferential treatment. Hence, private schools that feed into higher and technical education institutions are encouraged and government schools whose students are unlikely to make it to these institutions are given short shrift<sup>10</sup>. This divide between mass and elite education has serious implications for society as higher education serves a relatively small section of the population while the majority of the population are still striving to access basic education. It raises concerns of voice. Poor parents may not be empowered enough to demand quality education and hold schools and teachers accountable to children. On the other hand, there are some who believe that the exiting of the 'better-off' sections of society will enable the government schools system to better focus on the education of the poor. Thus, the emerging scenario is one 'where reforms in the higher education sector are likely to be better coordinated with economic opportunities while the basic education sector remains poorly linked to opportunities for economic and social mobility'.<sup>11</sup> The implications for achieving greater equity in education, one of the main challenges facing policy makers, are obvious.

## **Quality**

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<sup>10</sup> The discussion leaves out an important link stage between elementary and higher education (see Chanana (2004)). It is relevant to recognize that most of the secondary schools in the country are in the private education sector, with or without financial assistance from the Government. There is no empirical study to find out who are the children getting admitted to higher and professional sector institutions in terms of the category of school attended to. There is perhaps some merit in the introduction of reservations to higher education in India, see Weisskopf (2004).

<sup>11</sup> Kamat (2007)

A serious shortcoming has been the failure to ensure good quality elementary education. While academic facilities in the school such as library, teaching-learning material, and so on all have a significant influence on the quality dimension, there is very limited systematic and specialized data on how much children learn in schools. However, studies indicate that states are rushing to achieve enrolment targets but providing substandard education in the process. The results of a recent effort to assess learning achievements facilitated by Pratham—a non-governmental organization—highlight the poor state of affairs.

Table 9: Levels of Learning Among Children		Standard V children	
		per cent cannot read level 2	per cent cannot solve division and subtraction
1	Dadra & Nagar Haveli	65	81
2	Karnataka	49	76
3	Orissa	44	70
4	Tamil Nadu	50	69
5	Uttar Pradesh	51	68
6	Daman & Diu	63	65
7	Madhya Pradesh	49	63
8	Maharashtra	34	61
9	Assam	46	59
10	Delhi	50	58
<b>11</b>	<b>India</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>57</b>
12	Goa	32	55
13	Rajasthan	41	54
14	Jharkhand	35	54
15	Punjab	40	54
16	Himachal Pradesh	53	53
17	Andhra Pradesh	40	52
18	Nagaland	21	49
19	Manipur	27	45
20	Kerala	19	44
21	Tripura	16	44
22	Chhattisgarh	25	42
23	Arunachal Pradesh	32	42
24	Uttaranchal	21	41
25	Bihar	29	39



26	Gujarat	30	37
27	West Bengal	26	27
28	Meghalaya	9	27
29	Haryana	11	25
Note: Figures are rounded			
Source: Annual Status of Education Report 2006			
–Rural 2005 facilitated by Pratham New Delhi.			

At the all-India level, almost 40 per cent of children in Class 5 could not read text that a child in Class 2 is expected to have mastered. Similarly 57 per cent of children in Class 5 could not solve simple arithmetic problems that children in Class 2 are expected to solve. The low levels of learning achievements point almost directly to deficiencies in teaching processes adopted across the country. For example, a striking feature of the data is that levels of achievements in simple arithmetic are consistently lower than in language across all Indian states. This reflects, among other things, the inability of teachers to explain even simple concepts in a manner that is comprehensible to students. It is also reported that school dropout rates are maximum in early grades. This indicates the need for dramatically improving the teaching-learning methods adopted in Grades 1 and 2, so that students are assured of at least attaining basic reading and numeric skills failing which, ensuring standards in higher grades becomes difficult.

Teachers have a pivotal role to play in schools, especially in rural areas where they are the sole representatives of the education system. Much of school quality in fact depends on the teacher. There are two aspects of the quality of teachers that are especially relevant in the present context. The first issue has to do with the role of teachers in the management of the school. The diligence with which records are maintained, incentive schemes implemented, infrastructure maintained, as well as the regularity of teacher attendance and teacher involvement are all important determinants of teacher quality that affect educational outcomes. Unfortunately, all too often most or all of these areas of teacher performance leave a lot to be desired.

Keeping good records may seem a trivial achievement but it serves many useful purposes, from facilitating the monitoring of the school system to curbing corruption. Similarly Tamil Nadu is an example of the benefits to be reaped from effective management of an incentive scheme—in this case the noon meal programme. Himachal Pradesh also showed that while infrastructural facilities were rudimentary they were well-maintained, suggesting a sense of ownership and involvement with the school. Similarly instead of teaching learning materials lying locked up in cupboards as is so often the case, in Himachal Pradesh they were in active use.

However, the other, perhaps more important, aspect of teacher quality relates to their role in enhancing or discouraging social accessibility of schools. In fact, the social attitude of teachers has a strong influence on universalizing education.

Teachers are expected to enrich a child's learning and schooling experience. But this is often not the case. For many children, the schooling experience is a nightmare. Studies have shown that teachers frequently beat children, terrorize them, and humiliate them publicly. Many forms of discrimination and biases enter the classroom. A recent survey of rural schools, for example, carried out in West Bengal found disturbing evidence of primary school teachers showing much less regard for the interests of children belonging to Scheduled Castes.<sup>12</sup> Teachers tended to perceive themselves as belonging to a different and higher class, often the result of earning much higher incomes than most parents. They rebuked children for not coming properly dressed to school, for being obviously dirty, for being stupid because they belonged to a certain community. Children were ridiculed for their eating habits. In some instances, they were made to sit separately.

In this respect too, the positive attitude of the teachers in Himachal Pradesh, towards the children as well as the parents stands out. As noted in the PROBE report:

In contrast with the antagonistic patterns of teacher-parent relations found in other states we noticed a good deal of positive interaction between parents and teachers in Himachal Pradesh. While complaints do exist on both sides, there is also mutual understanding, and even practical cooperation.<sup>13</sup>

It is worth pointing out in the context of Himachal Pradesh, that even though some forms of caste discrimination do exist in the personal sphere (such as taboos on inter-dining) public spaces and particularly schools have evolved as non-discriminatory spaces where participation by all groups is an accepted reality. This is, no doubt, related to the point made above about greater economic and social equality because of which the government school is not accessed only by those belonging to the lowest social and economic strata of society. Teacher attitudes are, thus, not dictated by class prejudices and social access of schools is greatly enhanced.

Many teachers are experiencing a growing disconnect with children. Old teachers are caught in the conventional trap of being overly authoritative, of discouraging students from asking questions, and of pursuing the rote method of teaching. There is also a growing class divide between teachers and students (of poor parents) especially in rural areas as teachers in many places are among the highest paid government employees in a village.<sup>14</sup> Many teachers, for instance, find it difficult to talk to the younger generation about sexuality and reproductive health. Similarly, older generation teachers in cities, for instance, find it difficult to use computers when many children are becoming proficient at

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, a discussion in Pratichi (India) Trust (2002).

<sup>13</sup> Probe Team (1999).

<sup>14</sup> See Pratichi (India) Trust, (2002)

tapping into different knowledge sources via the internet - not easily accessible to many teachers. Teachers also find themselves quite ill-informed about the many new emerging opportunities for children. They find it equally difficult to relate to the emotional needs of adolescents; and have little experience in handling 'difficult' situations that may arise in the lives of young people.

### ***Effectiveness***

Several systemic and structural deficiencies characterize the functioning of government schools. There are exceptions but by and large, the quality of rural and even urban schooling is abysmal. With few exceptions, the quality of public school infrastructure even in cities and urban areas is abysmal. The Approach paper to the Eleventh Five Year Plan notes that '28 per cent of our schools had electricity in 2005 and only about half had more than two teachers or two classrooms. Only 40 per cent of primary school teachers were graduates and 30 per cent had not even completed Higher Secondary.<sup>15</sup> For a large proportion of our children, school is, therefore, an ill-lit classroom with more than one class being taught together by someone who may not have completed her own schooling.' The Planning Commission's analysis suggests that high drop-out rates are the result of a combination of factors. 'A school that is far away or that does not function regularly fails to retain students. Similarly, a teacher who is absent or engaged in non-teaching work, is intimidating or uses uninteresting methods of teaching also encourages children to drop out. Often the need for children of poorer families to work also drives them away from school. With the Employment Guarantee Scheme adding to family income, these pressures are expected to somewhat reduce.'<sup>16</sup>

School performance is marked by absenteeism<sup>17</sup>, inadequately trained teachers with indifferent attitudes, non-availability of teaching materials, inadequate supervision, and little support. Many poor families, having lost faith in government schools, are forced to send their children to private schools even when they have access to 'free' public schools. Several cases of discrimination are reported – against girls, against children belonging to socially disadvantaged and minority communities, and against the poor. Corporal punishment is common and many children are afraid of going to school for fear of being beaten, if not publicly ridiculed or rebuked by teachers and other students.

Several suggestions have been made for improving school effectiveness. Schools need to become pro-actively inclusive and inspirational. Teachers and managers need to acquire a new passion for education and a professional

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<sup>15</sup> NIEPA (2006)

<sup>16</sup> GoI (2007)

<sup>17</sup> Studies have highlighted the problem of absenteeism among teachers as well as learners. This needs further elaboration as it directly impacts teaching learning process and learning outcomes, and in turn leads to exclusion of children from schooling, see Ramachandran (2009).

commitment to pride in teaching. Teaching should be child-centred. It should not become straitjacketed. The curriculum should be better integrated and made more relevant. It should encourage critical thinking and sharpen the ability of public reasoning. Teachers should be provided space and scope for innovation and adaptation of the curriculum. Good work should be recognized and rewarded. The community should be engaged in the functioning of the school, extending support whenever required. Corruption should be stemmed out and accountability should be improved. Proper systems of reporting and monitoring should be put in place. Quite clearly, while the education sector is overflowing with bureaucracy, it is sorely deficient in professional management capacity.

Decentralization of management is advanced as the solution for improving the performance of schools. Reports from across the country suggest the many benefits of decentralized management of schools. While the benefits of decentralization are more evident in financial and administrative decision making, it is less so in its impact on enhancing the quality of education. Moreover, when it comes to quality improvements, the answer is not that obvious. For instance, the Fourth Joint Review Mission of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) seems to hesitatingly suggest that there may be lessons to be learned from the “remarkable improvement in delivering quality results on scale in civil construction and financial management’. The report points out that

‘There was a clear central goals and standard setting coupled with capacity building and this was combined resolutely with local accountability... The same general principles can be applied for improvement of quality. However, an important caveat is that the process of improvement in quality of learning involves much greater and continuous human interaction. It is also much more context-specific requiring greater freedom to act and innovate, the need for which increases as one moves away from the state capital and into the classroom. It would also be important to integrate and converge various factors that contribute to a better learning environment and thereby the learning achievements of the child.’<sup>18</sup>

Notwithstanding the obvious advantages of decentralization, including deepening democratic participation and reduction in inefficiencies, the overall picture that emerges is mixed. Decentralization seems to have worked with construction of school buildings (according to the Fourth Joint Review Mission), but it does not seem to be equally effective when it comes to school maintenance. Most states are unable to fulfil the goals of improving quality of services by improving accountability, transparency, efficiency, and equality. On the other hand in states like Assam, ‘education structures lack managerial capacities’ to carry out the functions thrust on them by decentralization, resulting in poor implementation as well as corruption.<sup>19</sup> In some instances, decentralization has created an excessive bureaucracy at district and village levels and increased incidents of

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<sup>18</sup> GoI (2006b)

<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, Jhingran (2005)

corruption and elite capture of public resources.<sup>20</sup> The lack of empowerment among people especially the beneficiary communities compounds the problem. Others feel that the assumption that decentralization results in local democracy is misplaced, particularly in the context of India, which is characterized by sharp inequalities, feudal relations, and community power structures that are deeply prejudicial towards women and low castes. Ironically decentralization is most needed in such communities dominated by traditional power elites.<sup>21</sup> What such observations indicate is that the goals of decentralization cannot be realized without the support of social policies that address issues of livelihood, social security, land redistribution, and gender and caste inequalities.<sup>22</sup> Some also feel that while decentralization demonstrates the State's willingness to share powers, where it results in unchecked corruption and elite capture, it erodes popular support for decentralization and undermines the legitimacy of the State.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, scepticism about decentralization is well-placed in the context of power imbalances and fears of elite capture. However, there is reason for hope emerging from various forms of citizen engagement that can counter elite, corrupt forces. The growing realization that beneficiary citizens must hold governments accountable has led to many initiatives seeking to create spaces for greater peoples' participation. For instance, the involvement of citizens at all stages from the planning process to monitoring and implementation stage can be a powerful means of checking corruption and improving quality of service delivery. Using a 'Habitation' as the unit of planning in SSA is in recognition of this need for greater community participation. Other forms of institutionalized participation such as School Monitoring Committees and Mother Teacher Associations have also been constituted keeping the need for citizen involvement in mind. The relatively newer, though potent, tool of social audits and public hearings are being used to highlight the gaps in implementation bringing corruption to the fore and holding bureaucrats and politicians accountable. Social audits are also being used to monitor functioning of the local associations.<sup>24</sup>

Active use of the rights-based approach is another way of increasing citizen engagement that has been used effectively in various parts of the world. In India the Right to Education, Right to Food, and Right to Information campaigns have all had a powerful impact on the State by forcing responsibility as well as accountability in the provision of services. Such citizen empowerment initiatives are an important means of channeling civil society resources that can strengthen the process of decentralized delivery as well as improve the quality of services provided.

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<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, Vasavi (2004)

<sup>21</sup> See Dreze and Sen (2002)

<sup>22</sup> Ramachandran and Saihjee (2002)

<sup>23</sup> Jhingran (2005)

<sup>24</sup> Implementation of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme and the Right to Information Act demonstrate the usefulness of public hearings and social audits. Examples in the field of education are fewer.

Several other contentious issues relating to elementary education still remained unresolved. These include, for instance, the perpetuation of a two-track system of education for children, the adoption of a common school system, the introduction of English as the medium of instruction in primary schools, alienation of children due to class differences with the teacher, poor supervision, inadequate capacity in Cluster Resource Centres (CRCs) and District Institute for Education and Training (DIET), neglect of girls' education, the failure to ban child labour so that all children are in school, and so on. Many of the debates need to be resolved locally – and require serious introspection and evaluations to guide decision making. The absence of such informed discussions has little to do with globalization *per se*, and more to do with the structures of social and political systems that govern India.

#### 4. Main Findings of the PROBE Surveys

The 'PROBE Survey' on the state of primary schooling was conducted in 1996–7 in the Hindi-speaking states of north India. The same region was surveyed in 2006.

The Two Educational Surveys: 1996 And 2006		
The PROBE Survey was carried out in 1996 in Rajasthan and in undivided Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh. In 2006, we resurveyed the same states and regions; and revisited largely the same villages to find out what had changed in the delivery of basic education over the decade.		
	1996	2006
Number of households	1,221	1,418
Number of government primary schools	195	284
Number of private primary schools	41	96
Number of children (6–12 yrs)	2,363	2,805
Number of villages	188	277

Ten years later, much had changed.

**School participation:** In 2006, almost 95 per cent of children 6–12 years were enrolled in school—up from around 80 per cent in 1996. The near-universal enrolment has meant that social disparities in enrolment have reduced considerably. Enrolment rates among scheduled caste children (94 per cent) and Muslim children (95 per cent) are as high as the sample average for all children

(95 per cent). Enrolment among scheduled tribe children, however, is somewhat lower at 89 per cent.

**School infrastructure:** There has been a massive increase in the number of schools and classrooms built over the ten year period. Almost, 25 per cent of government schools in existence in 2006 have been set up in the last decade. The proportion of schools with at least two *pucca* rooms went up from 26 per cent in 1996 to 84 per cent in 2006. Nearly three-fourths of all schools now have drinking water facilities. Toilets have been constructed in over 60 per cent of all schools.

**School incentives:** The survey finds that school incentives are reaching many more children. In 1996, free uniforms were provided in only 10 per cent of primary schools. By 2006, they were provided in more than half the schools. Similarly, in 1996, less than half the schools reported distribution of free textbooks. Today, we find that almost all schools—99 per cent—do so. In 1996, the dry ration scheme was operational in 63 per cent of the primary schools. By 2006, the dry ration scheme had been replaced by hot cooked meals. These were being served regularly in 84 per cent of the schools we visited.

On the other hand, several problems continue to plague primary education.

**Low attendance:** Almost everywhere, children's attendance as noted in the school register was far below enrolment. Only around 66 per cent of children enrolled in the primary classes were marked present. The actual attendance, as observed by the field investigators, was even lower. Some children continued to be only nominally enrolled; others were enrolled in both government and private schools; and others still attend only irregularly.

**Low teaching activity:** The most disturbing finding was that nothing has changed with respect to levels of teaching activity in the schools. Half of the government schools had no teaching activity going on at the time of the unannounced visit in 2006 – similar to what was found in 1996.

This is because there is a serious shortage of teachers despite the large increase in the number of teachers appointed. The pupil-teacher ratio in the survey areas showed little improvement over the years. The proportion of schools with only one teacher appointed has also shown no improvement since 1996. It has remained at 12 per cent. The survey found that an additional 21 per cent of schools were functioning as single teacher schools on the day of the investigators' unannounced visit—due to teacher absenteeism.

**Low learning achievements:** Even in schools where teaching was going on, children were not learning much of what the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) assures them. Classroom activity was dominated by mindless rote learning, senseless chanting, and blind copying from the board. The survey

found that 80 per cent of children in classes 4 or 5 could do simple addition, and 60 per cent could do simple subtraction.

The analysis in the report argues that there are no quick fixes to the problem, and that here major policy moves remain deficient in several respects.

**Contract teachers:** The last decade has witnessed large-scale appointment of local ‘contract teachers’ (*shiksha karmis*, *shiksha mitras*, para-teachers, etc.) at salaries far below those paid to permanent teachers in the same government schools. The survey found that contract teachers account for nearly 40 per cent of all teachers in government primary schools. Local selection by the Gram Panchayats and the contractual nature of their appointment was expected to make these teachers more accountable. But this has clearly not happened. To begin with, many of them lack sufficient training and the requisite qualifications. They do not get the support they need to do a good job. A majority of contract teachers were from more privileged social groups—and so establishing accountability was proving difficult. They were also not sufficiently motivated as their continuation in service depended very much on the local Panchayat, and not how well they performed in school.

**Community participation:** The survey found that almost all schools—96 per cent of them – had such committees in place. In many cases, the committees have worked to improve physical infrastructure in the school, select contract teachers, and supervise midday meals. However, these committees have not been effective in ensuring teacher accountability or improving school effectiveness. This has much to do with the power structure within villages and the composition of the committees where poor parents still do not find it easy to make demands for corrective actions.

**Private schools:** Private schools have been a commonly advocated solution for the poor performance of government schools, stemming from the belief that private schools function better than government schools since they are accountable to parents. The survey found that this is not true. Classroom activity levels are often higher in private schools than in government schools, but the quality of private schools varies a great deal, and the ‘cheaper’ ones (those that are accessible to poor families) are not very different from government schools. Further, a privatized schooling system is fundamentally inequitable, as schooling opportunities depend on one’s ability to pay. It also puts girls at a disadvantage - boys accounted for 74 per cent of all children enrolled in private schools in the 2006 survey (compared with 51 per cent in the case of government schools). By perpetuating existing social inequalities, private schooling defeats one of the main purposes of ‘universal elementary education’— breaking the old barriers of class, caste, and gender in Indian society. It is also important to note that there was little change in the importance of government schools between 1996 and 2006: in both years, about 80 per cent of school-going children were enrolled in government schools.



Middle schools:

The PROBE Resurvey in 2006 covered middle schools as well. The main findings of the survey are summarized below:

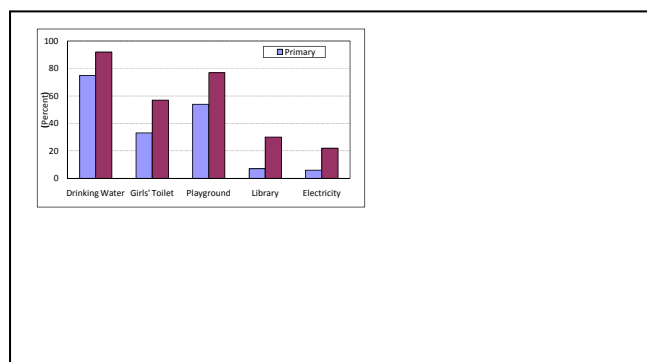
**Enrolment:** There has been a noticeable jump in school enrolment among children 11–13 years but India is nowhere close to achieving universal elementary education. In 2006, 49 per cent of children 11–13 years were enrolled in middle school— up from 30 per cent in 1996. Though girls still lag behind boys in terms of enrolment, the gap between boys and girls has narrowed. In 1996, only 25 per cent of girls and 35 per cent of boys 11–13 years, were enrolled in middle school. By 2006, these proportions had increased to 46 per cent for girls and 52 per cent for boys. Interestingly, the spread in enrolment between different communities is also relatively small. For example, among girls, 11–13 years, the enrolment rate was 42 per cent among the SCs, 43 per cent among STs, 46 per cent among OBCs, and 50 per cent in the general category.

Why is enrolment in middle schools so low? A major reason is that a large proportion of 11–13 years (39 per cent) are still in primary schools; and there is a high proportion of over-age children in middle school.

**Access:** Access to middle schools has increased since 1996 but remains inadequate. One-fifth of middle schools surveyed were set up between 1996 and 2006.

There are, broadly speaking, three types of middle schools: (i) Primary schools upgraded to Class VIII; (ii) Middle schools with only Classes VI–VIII; and (iii) Secondary schools with classes VI–X . On the whole, secondary and higher secondary schools fare better than stand alone upper primary schools and upgraded schools. For example, 93 per cent of the secondary or higher secondary schools had a pupil-teacher ratio of less than 40; the corresponding proportion was 27 per cent for schools that had Classes I–VIII.

**Infrastructure:** There have been improvements in school infrastructure and it is superior to that of primary schools.



However, as the data reveal, the infrastructural facilities in middle schools are still far from adequate.

**Teachers:** On the whole, middle schools had more trained and qualified teachers as compared to primary schools. However, like in primary schools, teacher shortages are endemic.

Very disturbing however, are the findings that (i) there were fewer female teachers - only 17 per cent; (ii) there was no major difference in teacher absenteeism; and (iii) there was no major difference in the levels of teaching inactivity.

The survey also identifies several reasons for children dropping out of middle school. These include (i) lack of parental support at home; (ii) higher costs – Rs 888 per year for middle school as against Rs 454 for primary schools; (iii) higher opportunity costs as drop-out rates increase with age—a reflection of how little children learn in schools; (iv) poor access to middle schools; (v) higher academic demands for which primary schooling does not prepare the child; and (vi) poor quality of teaching and low levels of learning. There are additional pressures on girls to drop out. This arises because (i) schools are not nearby; (ii) schools do not have toilet facilities; (iii) there is a shortage of female teachers. All said and done, ensuring that all children get eight years of quality education in schools by the time they are 14 years old remains a challenge.

## **5. State Capacity**

A review of progress shows that India is far from ensuring free and compulsory schooling of good quality for all children below the age of 14 years. Does this reflect an inability and unwillingness on the part of the State to deliver on its commitments? How have the pressures and compulsions of globalization affected the State's capacity to provide basic education?

### *Policy Fuzziness*

Several aspects of education administration suggest policy fuzziness and a reluctance to rapidly accelerate progress towards universal elementary education. One such area relates to the increasing privatization of schooling. Without getting into the advantages or disadvantages of the privatization of education, what cannot be denied is that it creates a duality in the system. In situations where the base levels of literacy and educational achievements have crossed a minimum acceptable threshold, this duality may not play a pernicious role and its advantages possibly outweigh its disadvantages. But, in societies which are nowhere close to establishing universal access to schooling, the consequences of privatization can be very different. In such societies, it not only increases disparities but also takes away State accountability to the poor and

marginalized. It is in this context of worsening social inequalities that the impact of globalization on State capacities needs to be viewed.

Despite the differential quality and costs of private schools, public opinion is weighted in favour of private schools. Government schools are uniformly condemned and only the very poor send their children to them. Anyone who can afford it prefers to send her child to a private school, even in rural areas, where they may have to bear a considerable financial burden. In fact, 'the benign neglect' of government schools has led to a systematic undermining of the public school system and this in turn has led to the unchecked expansion of private schools. The discourse on privatization has thus been skewed in a way that delegitimizes government school. The resulting explosion in private schools, both aided and unaided, has therefore led to greater market segmentation with serious implications for equity and universalization of elementary education.

Implications of privatization of schooling for inclusive education are equally relevant in this debate. Government schools are increasingly catering to girls and children of lower caste and disadvantaged families. Hence, improving the quality of these schools is crucial to have an impact on these groups and ensure universalization. But being the most 'voiceless', these groups are unable to have an impact on quality. Unfortunately, the situation is worsening with increased pressure to privatize as the exit of better-off groups serves to further marginalize the government schools. Even in low income families, priority given to a boy's education implies that within the same family girls are sent to the poor quality government schools while her brothers go to the private schools. The fact that private schools uniformly charge fees and have other criteria for exclusion marks an important distinction from government schools that do not charge fees and do not refuse admissions. Recent studies show that children from low caste backgrounds are also usually the poorest who cannot afford private schools. Similarly patriarchal mindsets prevent families from making the extra expenditures required for sending girls to private schools, even when their brothers are being sent there. The awareness about discrimination and social exclusion must take such equity implications of private schools on board when formulating a stand on privatization of education.

Another area of concern has to do with the future of the teaching profession. Concerns have been expressed that measures being taken by the government greatly de-professionalize the teaching profession. For example, a core strategy of the SSA is the expansion of the Education Guarantee Scheme to ensure rapid universal access to schools. As part of this strategy, states are hiring 'para-teachers'<sup>25</sup> or education volunteers on a contract basis. They are not certified

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<sup>25</sup> Some object to the use of the term para-teacher. They argue that there is no real difference between regular teachers and so-called para-teachers as the latter do as much work and produce learning outcomes that are comparable, if not better, than that of regular teachers.

teachers and are paid only a modest honorarium. The concept of a para-teacher or education volunteer was initially proposed as an aide to the regular teacher in single teacher schools. Himachal Pradesh is one of the pioneers in this area where a system of volunteer teachers was appointed to make good the shortfall in far flung areas with very low populations where the demand for education necessitated the setting up of a school. It was never an alternative to regular full-time teachers and was seen as a stop-gap arrangement or a means of providing additional support. However, the current trend is to hire para-teachers or part-time teachers in place of regular full-time teachers. This is clearly de-professionalizing the teaching profession and far from improving quality is leading to a decline in the quality of teaching. It cannot be denied that resource constraints especially at the state level have put pressure on them to adopt cost-cutting measures. However, it is hard to justify appointment of poorly trained teachers at modest salaries simply to overcome the state's fiscal crisis, if one is serious about universalizing elementary education. What was clearly an interim measure to mitigate the high student-teacher ratio and provide support for single-teacher schools in rural areas is being misused to cut costs.<sup>26</sup> Any gains in enrolment that may be had from appointment of such teachers would only be superficial as one cannot expect such poorly trained teachers to handle the demands of different grades in difficult conditions.

Proponents of the para-teacher model argue that some education is better than no education; and that the best should not be made the enemy of the good. This is correct. But then it is necessary to ensure that the para-teacher is empowered and equipped to perform his or her tasks effectively and efficiently. Complementary support systems for achieving this have not been put in place. As a result, the para-teacher model may be cost-effective, but it seems inappropriate for ensuring long-term quality improvements in the educational system.

Another practice that could de-professionalize the teaching profession has to do with the recent decentralization of teacher recruitment. Several studies point to low levels of accountability among school teachers most starkly captured in the high rates of teacher absenteeism in government schools. The solution proposed seems to be to decentralize recruitment and appointment of teachers as well as the payment of salaries. In some states, teachers are now appointed for a one year period; and depending upon their performance, their contracts are renewed every year. Such short term appointments may ensure better attendance and accountability but they rob the teacher of any sense of job security. It is not clear whether any profession can develop without security of tenure.

To the extent that globalization has given an impetus to privatization, it has contributed to the worsening of social inequalities in the education sector. And by giving credence to the idea of reduced State responsibilities towards public

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<sup>26</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Kamat (2007). Also Govinda and Josephine (2005)

provision of education, globalization has had a role to play in weakening state capacity.

### *Financial Commitments*

India spent 0.6 per cent of its gross national product (GNP) on education during 1951–2. By 1963–4, this had increased to 2.7 per cent of GNP. In 1964, the Kothari Commission recommended that the government should increase its outlays towards education to around 6 per cent of GDP. There have been quantitative increases in the government's financial outlays since then. In 2004–5, India spent 3.5 per cent of its GNP on education—well below the targeted level of 6 per cent.

The allocation of budget is often regarded as indicator of government's priority accorded to education. Here again, the trends are disappointing. In 1967–8, education expenditure of the central and state governments accounted for 11.9 per cent of the total budget. The proportion increased and hovered around 14 per cent between 1974–5 and 1977–8. But by 1990–1, education expenditure as a proportion of total budget had fallen to 10.6 per cent. Despite the new thrust given to education, it increased only marginally to 11.4 per cent in 1997–8. Similarly, the relative importance assigned to education has fallen over the years in the Five Year Plans as well. Expenditures on education declined from 7.9 per cent of Plan outlay during the First Five Year Plan to 2.7 per cent during the Sixth Five Year Plan. It rose during the Seventh and Eighth Plans.

Expenditure on elementary education declined from 55 per cent of the total for the sector in the 1950s to less than 35 per cent in the 1990s. Public expenditure on elementary education, which was less than 0.4 per cent of GNP in 1950–1 rose to 1.58 per cent by 1990–1. But despite the increased attention to elementary education in the 1990s, the proportion has been fluctuating around 1.4–1.5 per cent of GNP (see Table 10).

Table 10: Trends in Real Public Expenditure on Elementary Education in India

Public expenditure on elementary education		
	Rupees in millions at 1993-4 prices	% of GNP
1950-1	6,815	0.37
1955-6	11,264	0.67
1960-1	18,733	0.78
1965-6	18,652	0.80
1970-1	28,554	0.97
1975-6	35,807	1.04
1980-1	42,872	1.07
1985-6	71,026	1.39
1990-1	108,042	1.58
1995-6	127,361	1.44
2000-1	196,772	1.58
2003-4	214,131	1.44
2004-5R	218,457	1.56
2005-6B	-	1.58
R = Revised estimate; B = Budget estimate Note: Deflators are derived from 1993-4 series. Data based on Selected Educational Statistics: Analysis of Budgeted Expenditure on Education, Census of India, EPWRF (2003) and Economic Survey 2005-6 Source: Tilak (2009)		

The increase in budgetary support to elementary education between 1993-4 to 2002-3, when examined closely shows that most of that increase has taken place in revenue expenditure with the big jump in the year 1997-8 coming from the increase in teachers salaries following the Pay Commissions' awards. Capital expenditure that would go into expanding infrastructure to increase physical availability of schools has been very low. As the data reveal, the budget for elementary education was increased in the 1990s by correspondingly reducing expenditure in other sectors, especially in higher education resulting in stagnation and decline in the tertiary education sector.

Trends in expenditure on education in India reveal that between 1950-1 and 1997-8, there was a 'very small' increase in the real rates of growth in total per capita and per pupil expenditure. Expenditure on education increased during the 1980s at a 'reasonably high rate of growth... the decade of the 1990s

experienced the 'slowest rate of growth'.<sup>27</sup> Real per capita expenditure of education has been stagnant since 1999–2000 at around Rs. 420 per annum.

It is also important to note that the weak fiscal situation of most state governments is forcing many of them to cut back expenditures on the social sectors. As a result, even though Central Government allocations may seem to be increasing, there isn't a significant increase in overall public allocations for education.

Besides the overall inadequacy of public spending on social sectors in India, another problem that assumes enormous proportions is the inter-state divergence in terms of expenditure on social sectors. Worsening financial strength of the states has made them even more dependent on central transfers, especially for the social sectors. However, central allocations to the states have declined in the same period. Since 1990–1 to 2001–2 transfers to states as a per cent of GDP fell from 7.2–5.3. Hence, total expenditure by states on education declined sharply.

What do projected trends in expenditures on education and social sector suggest? There has been an improvement in tax collections in recent years. Gross tax revenues of the Central Government, around 10 per cent of GDP between 1990–3, fell to 8.2 per cent in 2001–2. They are however projected to increase once again to nearly 12 per cent by 2007–8.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, Government of India introduced in 2004 an education cess of 2 per cent that is levied on all central taxes to finance quality basic education. The collections are to be deposited in a special Prathmik Shiksha Kosh, a non-lapsable fund for financing primary education and the Mid-Day Meal scheme. In the Union Budget for 2007–8, the Finance Minister levied, in addition to the cess of 2 per cent on all taxes to fund basic education, an additional cess of 1 per cent on all taxes to fund secondary education and higher education. Combined with the projected increase in growth rates of GDP, it would be expected that the State will be in a better position to increase allocations to education. But even these measures are not adding up to much and additional resource allocations are nowhere close to reaching 6 per cent of GDP. Expenditure on social sectors as a percentage of GDP is not projected to increase by 2007-8 and on education is projected to decline from almost 3 per cent of GDP in 2001-2 to 2.87 per cent by 2007-8.

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<sup>27</sup> See Tilak, Jandhyala (2003)

<sup>28</sup> RBI (2007)

Table 11: Trends in Social Sector Expenditures

	Annual real growth rate of GNP at factor cost (%)	Expenditure on social sectors as % of GDP				Expenditure on social sectors as % of Total			
		Total	Education	Health	Others	Total	Education	Health	Others
2001–2	6.0	6.0	3.0	1.3	1.8	21.4	49.4	20.7	29.9
2002–3	3.9	5.9	3.0	1.3	1.7	20.6	49.9	21.7	28.4
2003–4	8.7	5.7	2.8	1.3	1.6	19.7	49.0	22.2	28.8
2004–5P	7.4	5.7	2.7	1.3	1.7	20.4	48.5	22.1	29.5
2005–6Q	9.0	6.2	2.9	1.4	2.0	22.0	46.2	22.6	31.2
2006–7B.E.		6.0	2.9	1.4	1.8	22.2	47.6	23.0	29.4

Source: Government of India, *Economic Survey 2006-07*, Ministry of Finance, New Delhi, (2007).

The following remark by the Finance Minister when presenting the Union Budget 2007–8 reflects the tensions between fiscal prudence and political determination to fund elementary education:

Our human and gender development indices are not low because of high growth, but because growth is not high enough...The UPA government has remained committed to economic reforms, fiscal prudence and monetary stability

It is evident that the growing pressure to minimize fiscal deficit, a cornerstone of the liberalization and globalization agenda, has added another dimension to the State's ability to expand public expenditure. Further, the package of economic reforms which include tax cuts (ostensibly to spur investment) reduces avenues for increasing State revenues. Hence, in adopting fiscal discipline in the manner prescribed, the State is tying its hands as far as public expenditure on social sectors is concerned. The adoption of the Fiscal Responsibility Bill is an indication, not just of the State's inability to resist conformity to neo-liberal reforms, but also of its reduced capacity to increase public expenditures. On the whole, it can be concluded that there has hardly been any improvement in the arena of public spending on social sectors in the post-reform period. It is also pointed out that it is not the poorer states that exhibit inadequate spending on social sectors: even economically well-off states display disturbing patterns of declining priorities for social sectors in their budget expenditures in the era of globalization.<sup>29</sup>

### *Institutional Capacity*

<sup>29</sup> For a full discussion, see Jha (2005)



Ultimately the State's response and its ability to achieve UEE are a function of its institutional capacity. Several weaknesses have been pointed out, including an inability to deal effectively with global pressures. It has been argued, for instance, that while the global push for basic education has had positive outcomes, there have been negative fall-outs as well. The aggressive promotion of primary education by international agencies led to a dilution in the provision of basic education by emphasizing the importance of UPE (Universal Primary Education of five years) over UEE (Universal Elementary Education of 8 years). At the same time, post-reform discussions have tended to focus on the management of fiscal deficit as a requisite for prudent economic governance. A consequence of this has been hesitation to allocate large sums to the social sectors despite recognizing that public spending by India is considerably lower than similarly placed countries. There has also been a gradual dilution in the responsibilities of the State—almost amounting to an abdication of State responsibilities. Discussions on promoting public-private partnerships, encouraging greater involvement of NGOs, and securing greater involvement of communities and community-based organizations tend to diffuse the burden of accountability on the State.

It is true that more financial resources are needed if the goals of UEE are to be achieved. But there are serious institutional bottlenecks to deal with, including corruption, lack of accountability, absenteeism of staff at local levels and lack of regulation of non-state actors. Institutional failure is increasingly cited as a reason for poor governance and State failure. However, while much has been said about the need to strengthen institutions, less thought is given to bringing about equality of participation within them. Unless institutions can function democratically they are unlikely to have the desired impact.

Tackling social and economic inequalities is important for improving institutional capacity. Inequalities interfere with institutional functioning in multiple ways. This can happen, for instance, through the 'capture' of institutions of collective action, inhibiting their evolution and effective functioning. Capture of institutions enables powerful groups to use them for private gain. In the absence of a countervailing force, the capture often continues unabated. A good example of the capture of collective institutions is the state of the Gram Panchayats. It is reported that, more often than not, Gram Panchayat meetings are routinely held without announcement and decisions are taken by a few influential members without proper consultation. In addition, elections are rarely held on time and reservation quotas for lower castes and women appear to be on paper alone. All of this is possible because society tends to be sharply divided and a small group of powerful people holds sway over the institutions of local democracy. In the few states, like Himachal Pradesh where this is not the case, Gram Panchayat elections are held on time and are well attended without violence or other disruptive incidents. Reservation quotas for women and Dalits are strictly adhered to. It is no surprise then that schools also function better in Himachal Pradesh.

Institutional capacity has also much to do with leadership. Unfortunately, public leadership for elementary education has been weak and continues to remain so despite the renewed push for UEE. Another important element pertaining to the poor institutional capacities relates to the rigidity of the institutions with regard to changing and adapting in line with changing demands and expectations. Despite successive Administrative Reform Commissions (several states have had their Commissions) very little effort has been made to reform institutional structures and their functions—from the secretariat level to the grassroots level. Absence of reforms in the managerial aspects within educational structures has also affected the capacity of the State to utilize resources.

### ***The Way Forward***

We discuss below **six** areas for public action which can contribute towards UEE.

**Advocacy:** On-going efforts need to be backed and strengthened with stronger advocacy for UEE. There are several areas where more needs to be done; and public attention needs to be drawn to these areas. Starting with a vision for basic education, it might, at some point of time, become necessary to advocate for ten years of schooling and develop a K-to-12 vision. Quality gaps need to be addressed by introducing uniform norms and regulation for all schools. It is equally important to keep the pressure on for enhanced allocation of financial resources for basic education, especially at a time when higher education is also beginning to draw much needed attention. Similarly, public mobilization is needed around the issue of inclusive education. At another level, comprehensive good quality school education must also have an in-built school health programme as well as counselling facilities for older children.

**Teaching profession:** Teachers form an important and integral component of school education. There is tremendous need to restore dignity to the teaching profession. The measures to address the shortfall in teaching personnel by recruitment of contract teachers as an interim mechanism has led to a debate on the educational quality dimensions, the significance of teacher training, and related issues. There are also the concerns with the new approaches to recruitment. Should these be centralized or decentralized with a role for local bodies and communities? A similar set of concerns relate to the newer ways of training for new skills, including assessment learning. Can teacher motivation and leadership development be imparted through the institutional structure prevalent? If not, then what is required to ensure appropriate impartation for teaching personnel? Can newer ways be evolved for assessments of both teachers' and students' performances?

**After school programmes:** There is a need to strengthen after school programmes and extra-curricular activities, especially for older children. These

may be designed for providing academic support, enhancing skills, and even building leadership.

**Not-for-profit school models:** The lack of schooling infrastructure in backward and remote areas which are dominated by tribals or minorities, for instance, is often associated with the demographic and habitation size issues. Exploration of not-for-profit schooling models in order to build a portfolio of effective public-private partnerships, preferably through low cost schooling options, can be sought out as an alternative.

**Learning achievements:** There ought to be greater emphasis paid to learning achievements. Is the current system of evaluation, followed through examinations the desired one? Or should there be a public discussion on alternatives to the examination system and the proposed grading-based marking?

**Research:** A lot more systematic research on a number of issues is needed, especially independent reporting and evaluations. There is a necessity to explore areas where knowledge is limited. A few of these may be good practices in government schools, namely, better insights regarding the children not in school: how children learn and the role of new technologies, in what ways teaching methods can be improved, and how to promote leadership. At the same time, more systematic data are needed on out-of-school children, children with disabilities, as well as working children. Similarly, more nuanced understanding is needed of the forms of discrimination and disadvantage faced by children within the school and classroom.

To conclude, the paradox of India's development is that despite rising incomes, the country's progress in establishing a top-rate system of elementary schooling that is free and of good quality remains poor. While the technical interventions seem obvious, there isn't sufficient political will and the backing of financial resources to attain the goal of UEE.

Several factors have impeded progress in the provision of elementary education. Inadequate State capacity is one of them; and the fuzziness in sorting out and redefining the role of the State vis-à-vis markets may have much to do with it. The state has simply not backed up its commitments to universalize elementary education with financial and human resources, even as the country's economic situation continues to improve. An equally important factor has been the failure on the part of the State to provide effective public leadership for educational reforms. Policy ambiguities continue to cloud thinking and distort the expansion of schooling. The State's resource crunch as well as the managerial deficiencies to enforce accountability in government schools has led to an unregulated expansion of private schools. While this may be consistent with globalization's push for competition, efficiency, and privatization, the motivation and capabilities of many private entrepreneurs to offer good quality education are questionable.

Equally worrying are the implications of a distorted school system with multiple providers offering education of varying quality, especially in a country where poverty, caste, class, and gender considerations severely affect equal access to basic education. However, it is only fair to assert that the neglect of quality and the many discriminating features of Indian society that deny equal schooling opportunities to girls and children belonging to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and minority communities, predate the debates on globalization and economic reforms. More structural reforms, greater policy clarity, stronger public pressure, and better public reasoning are needed to overcome the challenges and rapidly provide free and compulsory good quality elementary education to all children.

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