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AN ANALYSIS OF PRIMARY EDUCATION IN RURAL INDIA

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An Analysis of Primary Education in Rural India

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Abstract – Last two decades have seen intense efforts by government to expand the provision and improve the infrastructure for elementary education in India, complemented by the emergence of increasing and diverse private sector provisions. The analysis shows that the number of children participating in elementary education has improved, and the improvements are more visible among children from rural areas, educationally lagging states, girls and those from the socially and economically disadvantaged groups.

Keywords: Primary Education, Rural, India

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INTRODUCTION

Education is the doorway to the wider world and an exposition on rural infrastructure is incomplete without an assessment of the extent to which we have been able to open this door for the children of rural India. We provide, in this study, an overview of the education system in India, its organization and the progress that has been made since independence. Different components that constitute rural education infrastructure are evaluated for their relative importance in the delivery of effective learning. We also examine the current status of rural education infrastructure in the country and gaps in the provisioning. This paper also includes a discussion of the roles of public and private actors in the rural education sector, particularly in respect of the Indian and international experiences of private-public partnership (PPP).

The Planning Commission's premise that the growth in India has bypassed the weaker sections due to their ineffective access to the basic services like primary education needs to be tested against the evidence. Traditionally identified weaker section on social criteria seems to have a similar or relatively better access to the primary education. However, there is no direct evidence available for the weaker section on the economic criteria or the population living below poverty line. The present study attempts to provide an empirical evidence for the premise of the Planning Commission from the household survey of BPL families in five states of India including the survey of primary schools for the same states and localities.

Our findings suggest that there is a problem of access of the primary education services in rural areas.

Primary enrolment ratios among the children of poor households are considerably lower than the respective state average and also the aggregate enrolment ratio of the country. Our findings also reveal that the incentives such as mid-day meals, free textbooks and cash subsidies given by government schools to the poor children do actually reach them. The problem of insufficient effective access of the poor to primary education still persists. It calls for a change in the policy level thinking. Qualitative aspects like school infrastructural deficiencies and functioning of teachers having a direct bearing on the quality and access of education in the rural areas need urgent attention.

India, with more than a billion residents, has the second largest education system in the world (after China). Experts estimate that 32 percent of its current population is under the age of 15. But counter to the image of India as a youthful engine of economic growth where many urban-based citizens work in some of the best technology-centered jobs in the world, males in India complete just 2.9 years of schooling on average, females just 1.8 years.² And for the small proportion who do persist through primary and secondary schooling, the quality of instruction varies widely, depending on the region of the country and whether one is enrolled in a State-supported public school or a fee-based private school.

We review the regulatory regime for education and consider the various outcomes achieved across states and within states in this context. Costs and financing issues related to rural education

infrastructure are reviewed. And finally, we set out an agenda for future action including:

1. Integrated Child Development Service (ICDS) and early childhood education (ECE),
2. Serva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), the Government's flagship programme for the universalization of elementary education,
3. National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005,
4. The planned expansion of secondary education and skills training under the 11th Five Year Plan, and
5. Further development of PPP and the need to achieve a literate environment in rural India.

Elementary education is a subject in the concurrent list of Indian constitution, but the major responsibility of providing education is with the provinces, which were at different levels of educational development to begin with and whose efforts and investments varied over time. As a result, the development of education outputs and outcomes varied across states and within states across regions and districts. Besides this, the benefits were accrued by different population in a varied manner. However, in mid-1980s, with the introduction of the New Education Policy in 1986 which recognized the inadequacy of investments in education sector, especially in the elementary education sector, it was envisaged to increase expenditure on education to at least 6% of GDP. At the international level, ever since the World Conference on Education for All held at Jomtien, Thailand in March 1990, importance of education for development was further upheld. Correspondingly there was a revival of commitment of the governments, international organizations and the societies at large to education in general and primary education in particular.

This intention was reaffirmed again by the Central and State governments in early 1990s in spite of the fiscal crisis that erupted that decade¹. Taking into account the differential revenue generating capacity of various Indian states, their varying levels of ability to spend the money on social sectors and the varying backlog of educational needs among these states, the Central governments also recognized the need to transfer substantial volume of funds from its kitty to the state governments through various general purpose transfers and specific purpose transfers. Thus, specific purpose transfers² for elementary/ secondary education, especially in the Indian context, was required to offset horizontal imbalances- specifically since the social sector goals ought to be equity oriented and in education, there is a need to ensure that all children get at least basic education with quality learning. Centrally Sponsored Schemes such as DPEP and SSA are such specific purpose transfers. The aim of such expenditures is to increase the impetus on creating infrastructure and other basic

environments to ensure participation of all children in the education process.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

In India, a major initiative which aims to improve nutrition standards, and raise enrolment and attendance is the Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS). It provides a cooked lunch at school to children enrolled in elementary government schools and in some states replaced an earlier scheme that provided once-a-month take-home food rations. Over time the scheme has expanded considerably, reaching almost 112 million students in 2008-09 (MHRD, 2003(a).2003(b), 2010). Evaluations of the MDMS indicate that it has had a decisive impact in improving enrolment and attendance. Jayaraman et al. (2010) find that it lifted firstgrade enrolment by around 17% and by a smaller but still significant margin in higher grades. Moreover, the delivery of nutritional supplements through a cooked meal under the MDMS appears to have had a larger impact on school attendance than earlier schemes that provided a take-home ration. Afridi (2010) finds that switching the delivery mode to the school lunch improved attendance rates amongst first-grade girls by more than 12 percentage points.

Although improving, health service provision is generally weak in India (Herd et al., 2011a, b) and a number of indicators suggest that the average health status of Indian children remains poor. Illness is one factor that is likely to have a significant adverse impact on regular school attendance with one survey reporting that over 40% of children were ill in the past three months such that they missed four or more consecutive days of school (Kingdon and Banerji, 2009). Moreover, the health status of Indian children has been found to be closely associated with long-term learning outcomes). Health interventions including those focused on deworming have been found to be a cost-effective way to lift student attendance and improve health status more generally (Miguel and Kremer, 2004). By reducing the incidence of communicable health problems such interventions can also generate positive spillovers throughout a community. Targeted programmes to reduce the incidence of preventable illnesses should therefore be considered as complements to the MDMS. More generally, international experience suggests that conditional cash transfers can be an effective instrument for improving health and education outcomes of the poor but these are little used in India (Herd et al., 2011b). Therefore consideration should be given to implementing such schemes to help the government meet its goals of universal elementary, and then lower secondary, enrolment and completion.

INDIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM:

Education is the most important lever for social, economic and political transformation. A well-educated population, equipped with the relevant knowledge, attitudes and skills is essential for economic and social

development in the twenty-first century. Education is the most potent tool for socio-economic mobility and a key instrument for building an equitable and just society. Education provides skills and competencies for economic well-being. Education strengthens democracy by imparting to citizens the tools needed to fully participate in the governance process. Education also acts as an integrative force in society, imparting values that foster social cohesion and national identity¹.

Before 1976, education was the exclusive responsibility of the States. The Constitutional Amendment of 1976, which included education in the concurrent List, was a far-reaching step. The substantive, financial and administrative implication required a new sharing of responsibility between the Union Government and the States. While the role and responsibility of the States in education remained largely unchanged, the Union Government accepted a larger responsibility of reinforcing the national and integrated character of education, maintaining quality and standard including those of the teaching profession at all levels, and the study and monitoring of the educational requirements of the country.

SARVA SHIKSHA ABHIYAN:

Launched in 2001 Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) is one of India's major flagship programmes for universalization of elementary education. Its overall goals include universal access and retention, bridging of gender and social category gaps in elementary education, and achieving significant enhancement in learning levels of children.

National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Level (NPEGEL):

NPEGEL is implemented in educationally backward blocks (EBB) and addresses the needs of girls who are „in“ as well as „out“ of school. NPEGEL also reaches out to girls who are enrolled in school, but do not attend school regularly. NPEGEL emphasizes the responsibility of teachers to recognize vulnerable girls and pay special attention to bring them out of their state of vulnerability and prevent them from dropping out. Both NPEGEL and KGBV are expected to work in tandem to complement efforts under SSA to ensure „inclusion“ of all girls and provide them „quality“ education. While NPEGEL is designed to work through the day schools, KGBV establishes residential schooling facilities for the girls in remote areas that are un-served by upper primary schools or in areas with educational disadvantage amongst certain social groups⁶.

MID-DAY MEAL SCHEME (MDMS):

In keeping with the Constitutional provisions to raise the level of nutrition of children and enable them to develop in a healthy manner, the National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education (NP-NSPE) was launched as a Centrally sponsored scheme in 1995. Commonly referred to as MDMS, this was expected to enhance enrolment, retention, attendance of children in schools apart from improving their nutritional levels. This was extended to upper primary (classes VI to VIII) children in 3,479 Economically Backwards blocks (EBBs) in 2007 and then universalised at the elementary level in the year 2008. The scheme is implemented through the States/UTs. MDMS is managed and implemented by School Management/Village Education Committees, Panchayati Raj Institutions, and Self-Help Groups. MDMS now includes madrasas and makhtabs supported under the SSA as well as children under the National Child Labour Projects.

CONCLUSION:

India, however, is still seen to be lagging behind in the field of primary education, characterized by irregular attendance, high dropouts and non-completion of primary education among children. The reasons for these lie in the socio economic conditions of rural India, marked by caste, class and gender inequalities. The role of the economic factors influencing schooling decisions is of primary importance. Studies reveal that factors such as higher income levels, land ownership, non-agricultural occupations, adult women's workforce participation, and the economic motivation in the son's education are positively correlated with high enrolment, attendance and continuation of children in primary education.

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