

## Challenging Bihar on Primary Education: Mother Tongue – ‘The Neglected Resource’

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The last few years have seen substantial and significant expenditure by the state government in primary education. There has been a concerted and accelerated attempt to fill huge glaring gaps in the provision of schooling that had accumulated over the last quarter of a century. Within a short period of time, over 3,00,000 teachers have been recruited, close to 1,00,000 new classrooms have been built, textbooks are being delivered in time, and mid-day meals are being served in school.

There have been special efforts made to enable girls across the state to continue in school past the elementary stage. The state government has distributed bicycles to girls going to secondary school. There are also special efforts to target the neediest children. All over the state, the very backward habitations have been identified. These habitations tend to be largely populated by “musahars” (one of the scheduled castes) or very backward minorities. The government’s concern with equity has led to targeted programmes being put into place to support enrolment, attendance and learning of children in such habitations. Overall, many programmes have been launched by the government to encourage children to go to school and stay in school.

An example is the number of out of school children in Bihar. This is a key indicator of change. National and international goals for universalisation of elementary education put a great deal of emphasis on access and enrolment. In rural India, girls above 10 years are the hardest to bring into and keep in school. In 2005, in poor and educationally backward states, such as, Bihar and Rajasthan, the proportion of girls in this age group who were not in school was well above 20%. Across all states, from 2005 to 2010, Bihar has seen the sharpest decline in the proportion of children still not enrolled in school. The proportion of children out of school in Bihar has dropped from 20.1% in 2005 to 6% in four years and now the numbers are below 5%. This is a very substantial achievement in such a short period of time. Bihar has come a long way towards meeting the target of universal enrolment.

In 2004, in an average district in Bihar, the allocation of funds for activities under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), the government programme for universalising elementary education was around Rs 10 crore. By 2008, this number had risen to Rs 100 crore. According to the *Economic Survey of Bihar*, in 2007-08, 67% of the state government’s social sector expenditure was on elementary education. The survey also highlights Bihar’s expenditure of almost 20-25% of its total state budget on education.

It is evident that there has been a massive infusion of inputs into the system at a very fast pace. Government expenditure on elementary education has increased enormously, basic educational indicators, such as, access and enrolment are rising and the student-teacher ratios are becoming more favourable. Compared to the situation that it had inherited, the current

government has worked very hard to “catch up” and wipe out the back log of schooling provisions that had accumulated after years of neglect.

However, an analysis of the premises behind the respective notions of the quality of education as transacted in the present schools (both government and private) illustrates the complexity and magnitude of the challenge involved in transformation of the school system. This anti-child framework, apart from other socio-economic factors, essentially marginalises or excludes almost two-thirds of the children from school education – largely SCs, STs, religious and linguistic minorities, Extremely BCs and the disabled, with the girl children in each of these groups being the worst affected.

The phenomenon of the so-called ‘drop-outs’ is thus institutionalised in our school system, almost as if it is part of the design. It may not be an exaggeration to maintain that there are no “drop-outs” at all but only “push-outs”. Rather, most of the children who quit school mid-way may indeed be “walk-outs” - walking out of the school in silent protest on a massive scale. In Bihar, the proportion of “walk-out” is apparently as large as 78% by Class VIII (Selected Educational Statistics 2003-04, Ministry of HRD, Govt. of India).

Several studies, including recent NSSO (National Sample Survey Organisation) reports confirm this alienating character of school education, apart from also bringing out economic factors as being partially responsible for children quitting schools. In Bihar, by Class X, almost 83% of the children have quit school – less than 10% of SC and ST children reach Class X (*ibid*). Bihar’s children (about 17%) who manage to stick to the end of Class X must have learned how to brave the negative aspects of the system in order to fulfill either their own or parental aspirations, deserve all the kudos, except for the damage that school may have caused to their psyche.

Clearly, this kind of education is neither conducive to holistic learning that is essential for surviving in modern society nor to making of citizenry for a democratic, egalitarian and secular India. Let us take the instance of diversity. The children of Bihar, apart from Hindi, are adept at a range of languages such as Bhojpuri, Maithili, Magahi, Angika, Urdu and Bengali – each child simultaneously knowing two or more languages. The present curriculum fails to build upon this social capital, that is, the multilingual competence of children. The curriculum planners hardly realise that, as per latest research, the most efficient pedagogy even for learning English would be to draw upon this multilingual richness that the children bring to the school. Nothing could be more alienating than the hiatus between the language of the home and the language of the school.

Bihar’s children belong to a number of oral literature traditions that reflect a treasure of knowledge of history, geography, astronomy, natural resources, agriculture, forestry, meteorology, ornithology and, of course, medicine. None of this finds its due place in the school curriculum, not even in Environmental Studies which begin in Class III. Nor does the school permit the children to construct knowledge and bring all their varied sources of knowledge into

curricular discourse in the school. Denial of this rich diversity among children amounts to denial of their inherent strengths, resulting in their alienation and ultimately their exclusion from schools.

Such a system of education clearly neglects the most powerful resource that a child comes to school with, that is, her mother tongue, and in the process fails to enable her to a life of choice; rather, it fails to develop the human resources and leads to cumulative disadvantages. Exclusion of mother tongues in education limits access to resources and perpetuates inequality by depriving language communities of linguistic human rights, democratic participation, identity, self-efficacy, and pride. In case of the disadvantaged groups, linguistic discrimination forms the core of their capability deprivation through educational and social neglect which contribute to their poverty in a vicious circle. As has been pointed out, their languages are weakened by marginalisation and exclusion from education and other instrumentally significant domains and then stigmatised as weak and inadequate justifying further exclusion. It is necessary to realise that mother tongue in education is not a problem; it is the solution.

Given such a character of the school curriculum, one does not even expect it to inculcate values such as equality, social justice or secularism. How do we prepare teachers who will transcend their class, caste, religious, gender or linguistic barriers to help catalyse the transformation of the present school system? A major shift is long overdue in the ways in which curricula, syllabi and textbooks for both the school and teacher education institutions are conceived, prepared and finally transacted.

At the very core of development in Bihar today, there are at least two critical elements. One is what the State does – its investment, intervention and input. The second is what people do – people's initiatives and engagement. State action is necessary, but it is not sufficient. State provisions are critical in a state, such as Bihar, if there is to be any chance of ever making accelerated progress. The provisions are not simply allocations at the state level, but include everything that it takes, through the different layers of the government system, inputs, processes, participation, to bring schemes and programmes alive to the ground level.

A ground level view of primary education in today's Bihar and an attempt to understand what it means to "demand" or "deliver" development show the state government keen to bring about a major educational change with an increase in allocations and inputs. But is this enough to turn around a system of behaviour in government and among citizens that has evolved over a long period of time? It is clear that inputs and incentives do not automatically translate into higher participation in education. Within the system, "business as usual" is accompanied by apathy, while new opportunities and innovations seem to generate energy and can activate both citizens and front-line government workers to behave differently.

Why is this happening? Why are new schools built with enthusiasm but old schools not maintained or repaired? Why is "business as usual" difficult to do well? It is possible that the

implementation machinery itself does not believe that change can come about. Perhaps because the change is coming from the top it is taken for granted and no ownership is assumed in the middle for delivery to the bottom. For the so-called beneficiaries too, participation in ongoing programmes seems low. Is it because of the feudal and colonial mindset which has habituated us to accept whatever is given by the sarkar (government) and not question when, what or how it should come and to what effect?

What about citizens? Do they consider themselves part of the system, part of the problem, or part of the solution? Government provisioning is increasing in many sectors. What real role does the government envision for citizen participation in the implementation of these programmes? While there has been considerable rhetoric on decentralisation of decision-making, the degree to which village groups have demanded and received better services is not well known. What role do citizens see for themselves in contributing to the development in their own neighbourhoods? Is it only entitlement or is it going to be engagement?

For the first time, Bihar celebrated “Education Day” in November 2008. Addressing a public meeting in Gandhi Maidan in Patna, the Chief Minister said, “one of the big constraints for development are people – people who believe that *kucho nahi ho sakta hai* (nothing will happen). These people – *nirasha ke masiha* – (messiahs of despair) – hold up the process of development.”

How then can we think, in the context of contemporary Bihar, about re-energising a whole government machinery that has been functioning at a low level for decades? Will a series of “innovations” jump-start this vehicle and help it to move to first gear and then beyond? Or will “innovations” simply play the role of a group of people pushing a car. When they push it the car moves but when they stop, the car stops moving.

What will it mean to “deliver”? What will it take to make “effective education” happen? These are some “nuts and bolts” of school functioning that illustrate the depth of the problems that need to be tackled. Perhaps top-down initiatives are insufficient for real change. But real democratic change needs to engage with this messy, middle area – within the functioning of the State, and at the complex interfaces between the State and citizens – if electoral democracy and long disappointed aspirations of citizens are to be channelled into genuine expansion in learning, opportunity and living conditions.

What do we see for primary education in the state in the future? There are massive challenges. Incentives need to be aligned to interests so that we can see initiative and energy inside the system. Schools are being built, children’s enrolment is rising, teachers are coming in but these must translate effectively into changed behaviours if they are to lead to big improvements in children’s attendance and substantive increases in learning levels. To a large extent, people must regain trust and faith in schools as places where transformations can happen. Without visible changes in outcomes, this faith or belief will not grow. In village after village,

people can see that inputs are increasing, but it should become evident that the school today is a very different place than it has been over the last several decades. We are not there yet...

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