

Achieving Universal Elementary Education in India Expanding Access with Equity[#]

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The Indian Constitution guarantees equality and social justice in all walks of life including education. In fact, policy pronouncements have viewed provision of free and compulsory elementary education for all as a critical prerequisite for achieving this end; successive policy statements have pledged to initiate special measures to rectify the historically inherited inequalities in education that have hindered the progress of such groups as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and minority communities. Where are we after endeavouring to implement this policy for sixty long years? Recent assessments do not present a very positive picture of the situation. It calls for serious self-reflection not only by the State but also by professional groups and civil society organizations. Education infrastructure has been expanded multifold in recent years with a view to improving access to education and making it mass oriented. However, it is often observed that even if it is unintended, the impact of the way the education system has grown seems to be contributing to further social divisions in the country. In fact, even a cursory study of the social disparities in education reveals that exclusion of specific social groups from education is endemic and pervasive all over the country even if it differs in its degree and nature. It is urgent that the system is restructured to stall the damage being caused to the basic social fabric of the country; it is necessary to ensure that education as it expands brings with it a greater sense of pluralism and harmony, and cooperation and security in the country. What kinds of actions are required for this to happen? What strategies have worked to take us closer to the goal and what are those strategies that have not? The present paper attempts to explore some of these critical issues related to social exclusion in education and the policies and actions required to making educational expansion more equitable.

Introduction

India made a Constitutional commitment to provide free and compulsory education to all children up to the age of 14 nearly sixty years ago. The goal, which was expected to be achieved by 1960, has remained elusive even now. Yet, one has to admit that developments in recent years have made significant impact on the situation, raising the hope that universal basic education could be a reality within a reasonable period of time. Three factors seem to be making a distinct difference in the growth trajectory of elementary education in the country. The first factor is the increased direct involvement of the Central Government in strengthening infrastructure and delivery of elementary education following the adoption of the National Policy on Education 1986 (NPE 1986) that stands out as a landmark innovation in educational policy making. NPE 1986 placed the Central Government as the prime mover in designing and implementing development initiatives in elementary education in many states, though the situation is non-uniform across the country. The second factor has been the adoption of district as the base for planning development inputs for elementary education and concurrent move to decentralize the governance set up by empowering the local self-governance mechanisms through *panchayati raj* institutions. This second factor has added a new dimension to the

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multi-layered planning and implementation framework and created a new dynamics at the grassroots level. The third factor that has begun to significantly reshape the elementary education scene in the country in recent years is the massive social mobilization drive taken up during the last 10-15 years within the elementary education sector and under the auspices of the National Literacy Mission. This has resulted in increased demand for elementary education, on the one hand, and substantially enhanced the role of non-state actors in provisioning of elementary education and support services in the country, on the other. Almost all official documents, in particular the successive Five Year Plan documents at National level, acknowledge these factors as significantly impacting the progress of elementary education. While this increased demand and massive expansion during recent years have brought more children into the folds of schooling, the task is far from complete. Still, large groups of children are found excluded from schooling due to various reasons jeopardizing equity in accessing elementary education. This inequity in provision is further accentuated as the quality of education provided remains quite unsatisfactory, particularly disfavours the progress of children from disadvantaged groups. This raises the question of ‘who benefits from the expansion process?’ What kinds of actions are required in order that expansion of the school system brings with it a greater sense of pluralism and harmony, and cooperation and security in the country? What strategies have worked to take us closer to such a goal and what are those strategies that have not? The present paper attempts to explore some of these critical issues related to social exclusion in education and the policies and actions required to making educational expansion more equitable. The paper begins with an overview of present state of elementary education followed by an analysis of the nature and magnitude of the problems of access, transition and equity. Subsequently the paper attempts to capture profiles of the varying groups of children responding to the questions of who are excluded from schooling and why are they excluded. Finally, the paper identifies the gaps between policy and practice and delineates the actions required for addressing the critical issues emerging from this discussion.

State of Elementary Education in India: An Overview

The Indian scenario is too complex and varied to be effectively captured through aggregate national figures in relation to availability of schooling facilities across the country and their optimum use for educating all children. At one end of the spectrum, there is Kerala with practically every child completing elementary school and transiting to the secondary level; and almost every school having at least five teachers and five classrooms. At the other end, there is Bihar where only one out of two children in the relevant age group is in the school; majority of children entering school fail to complete the elementary cycle; many schools are invariably understaffed; and teachers are untrained and barely have any academic support mechanism.

On the whole, there has been a phenomenal growth in the number of schools in the country alongside a rapid increase in enrolment and number of teaching staff in primary and upper primary level during recent years (see Table 1). In 1992-93 (according to Sixth AIES of NCERT), 83.36 per cent of habitations in the country had primary schooling facilities within or at a distance of 1 km. Percentage of habitations served by upper

primary schools up to a distance of 3 km was 76.15 per cent in the country. In about ten years time, according to Seventh AIES (NCERT, 2003), the corresponding figures became 87 per cent and 78 per cent habitations, respectively. Expansion of schooling facilities has continued as according to the Annual Report of MHRD (GOI) of 2006-07 shows that 1,07,539 schools were constructed and many more were under construction. However, during the same period, substantial number of primary and upper primary schools were closed down in Kerala, probably due to demographic changes.¹ Further, rapid increase in number of schools, teachers and students seems to be accounted to a great extent by increase in number of small schools particularly single room and single teacher schools which invariably have inadequate physical and academic infrastructure. For instance, the Seventh AIES showed that 15 per cent of all primary schools in the country were single teacher schools

Table 1: Progress in Education Since 1950

Indicators	1950-1951	2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003	2004-2005
No. of Elementary Schools	223600	845007	883667	897109	1042251
No. of Teachers in Elementary Schools (in millions)	.624	3.22	3.39	3.49	3.75
Enrolment in Primary Schools (in millions)	19.20	113.83	113.90	122.4	130.8
Enrolment in Upper Primary Schools (in millions)	3.00	42.81	44.80	46.9	51.2
Enrolment in Elementary School Stage (in millions)	22.20	156.64	158.70	169.3	182.0

Sources: GOI, *Selected Educational Statistics: 2003-04 and 2004-05*, MHRD, New Delhi; and GOI, *Education in India*, MHRD, New Delhi.

Enrolment and Participation of Children in School

According to average data available at the national level, the country has achieved near universal enrolment in most parts as indicated by the Gross Enrolment Ratios (GER). According to Annual Report of MHRD, 2006-07, as many as 2.2 million children were enrolled in the schools by December 2006. As a result of this, GER of 6-14 age-group increased to 108.56 in 2004-05 from 96.30 in 2001-02 at the primary level and to 70.51 from 52.09 at the upper primary level during the same period of time.

Overall increase in number of children in elementary schools also includes those who are enrolled in private schools on the one hand and in small schools like the schools run under EGS/ scheme. Although Government and local bodies continue to be the main providers managing around 91 per cent of the primary schools and 73 per cent of upper primary schools, ASER (Pratham, 2006) has reported that there has been a significant increase in private school enrolment. There is also a gender variation in private school participation as more boys (20.4 per cent) are enrolled in private schools as compared to

¹According to 61st Round NSS (2004-05, 19), "During the five years separating the present survey from the last quinquennial one, a small shift is visible in the population, especially among the younger groups. A decline in the share of the youngest age-group (0-4 years) as well as of the children aged 5-14 years is noticeable in all the categories in both rural and urban areas".

girls (16.8 per cent). Similarly, the recent 61st Round NSS (2004-05) found a substantial share of students attending private aided and unaided schools. It highlighted that higher proportions of students in urban area were attending private institutions than their counterpart in rural area.

A relatively small number of children are also enrolled in NGO-run schools, some of which are functioning under Education Guarantee Scheme/ Alternative and Innovative Education (EGS/AIE) scheme of Government of India. In 2005-06, over 111,000 EGS centres were found reaching out to more than 4 million children and over 3 million children were also benefited by different activities conducted under AIE scheme. Expansion of these small schools might have contributed substantially to steep reduction in number of out of school children in recent past. However, functioning of EGS depends on the ability and commitment of the instructor and the local governing body namely, the *panchayat* in most cases. One has to admit that while these centres have enrolled more children, they would not be able to take the students beyond 2nd or 3rd Grade. Thus, while the strategy has increased access and enrollment, it also raises questions of quality and equity. What happens to these children as they complete initial years of the schooling? Who are the children getting admission in formal schools after completion of their education in EGS centers and what are their learning experiences once they get access to formal schools.

Exploring the Problem of Inequities in Elementary Education

Access and equity go together for making UEE a reality. Almost all programmes and plans aim at bridging gender and social gaps in enrolment, retention and learning achievement at the primary stage. As mentioned earlier, special interventions and strategies have been adopted to include girls, SC/ST children, working children, children with special needs, urban deprived children, children from minority groups, children below poverty line, migratory children and children in the hardest-to-reach groups. These are indeed children who have historically remained excluded from education and are at high risk of dropping out even after enrollment if special attention is not paid.

Recent years have witnessed some positive developments with respect to girls' education but despite these positive trends, gender disparity does not seem to be getting reduced significantly over the years. Even the GER for girls does not touch the 100 per cent mark at the lower primary stage. If one reduces around 18-20 per cent of this as due to presence of over-age and under-age children, the proportion of girls in the age group 6-11 who are enrolled in primary schools would be less than 80 per cent. The overall difference in the enrolment ratio between boys and girls continues to be at around 10 percentage points. The situation is even more disturbing at the upper primary stage where the enrolment rate for girls falls below 60 per cent. A similar problem of inequity in coverage and participation could be observed with respect to different social groups traditionally identified as under-privileged. Despite special provisions in the Constitution to meet the educational requirement of such groups as SCs and STs, the situation has remained far from satisfactory (Table 2).

Table 2 Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) by Social Groups

Year	GER of Scheduled Castes (SC)			GER of Scheduled Tribes (ST)		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
2000-01	97.3	75.5	86.8	102.5	73.5	88.0
2001-02	95.7	74.6	85.5	99.8	77.3	88.9
2002-03	87.1	74.4	81.1	86.7	73.9	80.5
2003-04	88.95	77.15	83.35	90.58	81.10	86.06

Source: Selected Educational Statistics: 2003-04 MHRD, GOI, New Delhi, 2006. (Provisional)

This gets compounded if the children live in rural areas and are female. The tribal girls in rural areas are in the most disadvantaged position, since only 51 per cent of them are found in schools, whereas around 80 per cent of all girls could manage to attend schools in urban areas (Sedwal and Kamath, 2007). As far as primary education is concerned, the Gross Enrolment Ratios of children from SC and ST communities were 77 per cent and 81 percent respectively while for all girls it was around 96 per cent in 2003-04.

The situation with respect to some religious minorities is also quite disappointing, though no systematic and comprehensive data at the national level are available in this regard. In fact, as the recent Sachchar Committee report has pointed out, the situation of children from the Muslim minority community seems to be even worse than that of SCs and STs. (Government of India, 2006). As can be seen from the Census 2001 data presented in Table 3, despite efforts during the last six decades, spread of education among the Muslims has remained quite unsatisfactory. While the rural-urban differences exist across all social groups it is significantly unfavourable to Muslim population in both rural and urban areas. This also gets corroborated by independent observations in other studies. For instance, a survey of out-of-school children reported that the estimates of children out-of-school are highest among Muslims at 9.97%. The situation is even more pronounced for Muslims in rural areas at 12.03% which is the highest among all social groups (SRI, 2006).

Table 3: Distribution of Literates (%) by Education Level among Muslims

Areas	Category	Literate	Literate without education level	Below Primary.	Primary	Middle	Secondary	Hr. Sec. below graduate	Graduate and above
All areas	All	100	3.6	25.8	26.2	16.1	14.1	7.5	6.7
	Muslim	100	4.5	31.9	29.0	15.1	11.0	4.9	3.6
Rural	All	100	4.0	30.4	28.3	16.2	12.1	5.5	3.4
	Muslim	100	5.2	37.5	28.9	14.5	8.7	3.2	2.0
Urban	All	100	2.7	17.5	22.3	15.8	17.7	11.0	12.8
	Muslim	100	3.6	24.6	29.0	16.0	13.9	7.2	5.6

Source: Census of India, 2001.

Some special initiatives are currently under implementation to bridge the gap between boys and girls and also between different social groups and between rural and urban areas. For instance, Government of India has recently identified more than 3000 educationally backward blocks that need greater attention while implementing different educational schemes including the National Programme of Education of Girls at Elementary Level (NPEGEL) (Annual Report MHRD, 2006-07: 21). Also, 354,000 *anganwadis* and 50,000 ECCE centre are being supported in non-ICDS areas to help free

girls from sibling care in order that they attend schools regularly. Free uniforms have been provided to about 20 million girls in Educationally Backward Blocks. Another Scheme launched in 2004, namely *Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya* (KGBV) involves providing residential schooling facilities for girls at upper primary level, mainly in areas with predominantly under-privileged communities. 2,075 residential KGBV schools have been sanctioned in SC/ST and minority dominated areas. According to the *Annual Report* of MHRD (2006-07: 22) 428 KGBVs have been set up in Muslim dominated blocks and 441 in ST dominated blocks. Thus, some efforts have been made to minimize the gender and social inequity by introducing some schemes targeting the disadvantaged children across the country. One has to wait and watch what impact could these make on the existing inequities in education development.

In almost all states, trained teachers with higher qualifications are generally concentrated in urban areas. Several factors, including political and bureaucratic interventions, non-availability of qualified local teachers in backward and remote areas, lack of proper database on the status of teachers at the school level, low motivation of urban teachers to serve in rural areas, come in the way of rational deployment of teachers. Apart from this, teacher transfer is highly influenced by extraneous considerations, and more influential teachers are more likely to be found working in urban schools and schools located in habitations well connected with road or rail transport network. Lack of basic facilities, for instance, residential facility in remote rural areas also acts as a de-motivating factor for female teachers to serve in rural areas. It is probably because of this that the average PTR is higher in rural areas than in urban areas despite the fact that rural areas also have a large number of schools with small enrolment.

A further compounding factor is that increasingly more para-teachers are being appointed in rural primary and upper primary schools on contract basis and in much lower salary as compared to the regular teachers in some of the states. According to the Seventh All India Educational Survey (2003), there were 104,894 para-teachers at the upper primary level, 37,950 at the secondary level, and 33,911 para-teachers at the higher secondary level. It is also found that the states in the northern parts of the country are recruiting more and more para-teachers than in the southern states. It is needless to say, that, incidence of educational deprivation is comparatively more pervasive in northern states and as PROBE finds, the outcome of such a scheme is a pattern where deprived children are taught by poorly-qualified, low paid *Siksha karmis* (*para teachers*) while those from privileged families are more likely to be taught by a regular teacher (PROBE, 1999). As Govinda and Josephine (2004, 42) argue, “The schools, which are targeted for employment of contract teachers are those where children from the poorer sections of the society study. Thus it would exacerbate inequity in the society by creating classes of government schools with different kinds of teachers for different classes of population.”

Analysis presented above clearly points to significant improvement in access and participation of children in elementary education, particularly in lower primary schools. It can also be safely concluded that certain programmes and strategies adopted in recent years have helped bring in more children to school and improving the quality of education provided. However, large number of children are still finding it difficult to

access schooling due to variety of reasons and some more face threat of being withdrawn from school after being enrolled or are forced to discontinue their education not only due to social and economic reasons or lack of parental support but also because of school related factors including kind of teachers and teaching available in the school.

Delineating Zones of Exclusion²

Exclusion of children from formal school framework effectively denying their right to education requires careful analysis. Children who fail to benefit from formal school education do not constitute a monolithic group. For some of these, school is genuinely outside their reach in physical terms. Some others fail to join school, even if it is available in the neighbourhood, due to social and economic reasons. Some join school, but never physically participate in the education process. Yet, some others leave school without completing even the lower primary cycle of five years. Some complete five years of schooling but do not move into the upper primary cycle. There are some who are officially on the rolls of school but precariously placed; they remain largely absent and are unable to benefit from the schooling process. There are also those who complete the lower primary or even upper primary schooling in physical terms but hardly benefit in terms of acquiring cognitive capabilities. It is obvious that one cannot place all these children in a single basket as failing to benefit from school. Rather, one may wonder, whether it is children who are failing to benefit or it is indeed the school system that is failing to reach education to the children. Without sounding polemical, one could say that there is more to school participation than merely counting who is in or out of school. Different categories of children who are out of school would possibly be from different socio-economic background and bear different personal profiles, and interact with the school system in unique fashions. Understanding the underlying dynamics that defines this interactive process between the school and the child requires a disaggregated analysis of the phenomenon of school participation by different categories of children attempting to benefit from schooling under widely varying circumstances. Conversely, one has to address the questions of: 'What is the actual nature and magnitude of exclusion of children from schooling in different categories? Who and where are the children who are excluded from schooling?' With this purpose in view the present section will attempt to configure different zones of exclusion and assess the magnitude and nature of exclusion in each of the zones.

First category (**Zone 1**) of the excluded consists of those children who are not enrolled in primary school at all. This would include those for whom the school is inaccessible due to physical location or other kinds of inaccessibility. It would also include those who have not been enrolled even though a school exists within a walking distance. This could be due to family circumstances or due to rejection by the school though the latter would be exceptional in India given the policy of universalisation and unrestricted admission to Government schools at the entry stage. These children could also be referred to as 'never

² The concept of 'zones of exclusion' has been developed for studying the phenomenon of primary school participation under the project of the Consortium for Research in Educational Access, Transition and Equity. See for more details. See Keith Lewin, "Improving Access, Equity and Transitions in Education: Creating a Research Agenda", for an elaboration of the conceptual model on 'Zones of Exclusion'.

enrolled' children; current official documents refer to them loosely as 'out-of-school' children. The number in this category has been falling fast. What was around 29 million out of around 200 million children in 2002-03 has come down to around 9 million in 2006. Demand for schooling does not seem to be a serious issue any more. Yet, those who are still unreached either due to non-availability of schooling facility or due to their inherent inability are those who are highly disadvantaged and need special strategies to be incorporated into the school system. **Zone 2** consists of children who are traditionally referred to as 'school drop outs'. These are children who are enrolled in primary schools but either never attend the school or leave the school without completing even five years of schooling which corresponds to the lower primary stage of education. These children may acquire some literacy skills but are largely unsustainable if no provision for continuing education is made available. There are also other kinds of exclusion. For instance, even while attending the schools children face social and cultural barriers and discriminatory practices in admission and evaluation as well as adverse teaching learning conditions in the school defeating the very purpose of universal education. Therefore, **Zone 3** can be called the zone of silent exclusion consisting of children who attend the school but do not benefit from their participation and therefore are constantly at risk of leaving the school. This would include also those children who are not regular in attendance or even if they attend the full cycle, do not acquire learning competencies commensurate with their age and Grade. **Zone 4** includes that group of children who complete the lower primary cycle but do not join the upper primary either by choice or due to inaccessibility. **Zone 5** consists of children who complete Grade 5 and join Grade 6, which is the first year of the upper primary or middle school cycle and ends with the completion of compulsory education age group, but leave the school without completing the full cycle. Considering that children by then would have grown up, moving from pre-adolescent to adolescent age group, the dynamics of participation or dropping out would be probably different from what is observed at the lower primary stage.

Zone 1: Never Enrolled Children

The National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) in its survey conducted in 2004-05 (61st Round) precisely asked the question if the respondent had ever got enrolled in a school at all. The findings of the survey showed that 35 per cent (17 per cent in case of urban males and 47 per cent among rural females) of 5-29 years old had never attended any institution in their life. Table 4 suggests that more boys than girls, both in rural and urban areas, reportedly could not attend school as they had to work and contribute to household income; this is more pronounced among older age group, whereas more girls than boys typically reported that they could not attend school because of their engagement in domestic chores. "Education considered not necessary" has been the more important reason for non-enrolment of girls in rural areas since 17 per cent girls of 5-14 years age group were found not attending any educational institution due to this reason; as against this only 10 per cent of their counterpart in urban area could not attend school due to the same reason. Further, only 8 per cent boys of 5-14 years age group were found to have never attended school due to this reason in urban area, showing a clear bias against female participation in schooling.

Table 4: Per 1000 Distribution of Persons of Age of 5- 14 Years Who Never Attended School

Reasons	Category and Age											
	Rural Male			Rural Female			Urban Male			Urban Female		
	6-11	10-14	5-14	6-11	10-14	5-14	6-11	10-14	5-14	6-11	10-14	5-14
School too far	63	37	55	54	26	43	31	8	18	11	7	22
Has to support household income	17	66	30	11	35	19	38	94	52	10	21	14
Education not considered necessary	173	156	124	234	184	172	138	86	83	135	117	102
Has to attend domestic chores	11	22	12	40	73	44	9	7	7	27	63	36
Others	631	289	579	482	702	482	602	222	520	659	278	519

Source: 61st Round Survey, NSS, 2004-05

The National Family Health Survey (NFHS) (II) (1998) among 6-17 year old children reported that cost of schooling has been the main reason for largest proportion of boys and girls of 6-17 years for being never enrolled in school. Half of the boys who never attended school cited the reasons like either high cost of schooling or ‘not interested in studies’; work at home or outside for cash or kind has been the other predominant reason. For 13 per cent never attended girls, ‘education not considered necessary’ has been the main reason while this was the reason in case of only 6 per cent to 8 per cent boys. Thus, education of boys is more favored than girls both in rural and urban areas. Highest proportion of never enrolled girls (even slightly higher than boys) in urban area mentioned high cost as the reason for their not attending school. The percentage of rural girls citing same reason for never attending school was around 24 per cent. For another 24.5 per cent rural girls working outside or at home prevented them from attending school.

The analysis presented above unambiguously highlight two reasons for children never getting enrolled in schools. First, poverty and cost of attending school is an important reason; this has to be viewed alongside the large proportion of children who quoted ‘work at home or outside’ as the reason for never attending school. Secondly, ‘not interested in studies’ which can be read conversely as school not found relevant or interesting by the respondents comes out as a significant reason. This, even though could be a combination of the perception of the individual respondent and the biased notion of the parents (as reflected in the response ‘education not considered necessary’), is a clear indication that school related factors in terms of how they function and what they provide continue to hinder enrolment of children in schooling, particularly among the poor. ‘Schooling facilities not easily accessible’ does not appear to be a major reason for non-enrolment as only 4.4 per cent boys and 5.2 per cent girls in rural area were found never enrolled due to this reason and their proportion was much less in urban area. The proportion of such children remains more or less same in 2004 as revealed by 61st NSS (GOI, 2006). However, the fact that girls particularly in rural area continue to be at disadvantage is clear because the high proportion of children who never attended school are girls. While in 1998, around 26 per cent girls were found never-enrolled, the share of such girls was 23 per cent in 2004. The share of such boys has been comparatively much less in rural as well as in urban area at the time of NFHS II (1998-99) as well as 61st Round NSS (2004-05).

An independent national level sample survey conducted by SRI-IMRB in 2005 estimated that about 13.4 million children in the 6-13 year age group were out of school, constituting around 7 per cent of the total number of children of the relevant age group (Table 5). While the overall reduction in number of out-of-school is substantial during the last few years, problem of social inequity has remained unaddressed effectively. Further, even though the situation with respect to SCs is somewhat comparable to the overall scene, both STs and Muslim minority children continue to remain quite marginalized.

Table 4 Out-of-School Children aged 6-13 years: All India 2006

Categories	Out-of-School Children			Percentage Out-of-School Children		
	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban	Total
All Children (6-13 years)	11353597	2106137	13459734	7.80	4.34	6.94
SC Children	2706025	398841	3104866	8.55	6.25	8.17
ST Children	1585833	71145	1656978	10.11	4.21	9.54
Muslim Children	1567717	685535	2253252	12.03	7.17	9.97

Source: SRI- IMRB Survey, 2006

In addition to above categories, the SRI- IMRB report (2006) estimated that around 38 per cent of disabled children are also out of school; special measures are needed for such children ranging from appropriate school infrastructure to special training for teachers, and provision of suitable learning material, aids and appliances etc.

On the whole, the journey of a child through the age-grade ladder of the formal school is a complex one punctuated by a number of cracks and crevices that children tend to fall through and barriers that they fail to climb over. While some succeed in traversing the course successfully several seem to lose out at various points and for a variety of reasons. It is also disheartening to see a sizeable proportion of the eligible age group, so far, could not even enter any educational institution. The following section throws some light on this aspect.

Zone 2: Children Dropping Out at the Primary Level

Though most States of India have done well in enrolling more and more children in recent years, inability of the schools to retain the children has continued to be a serious problem. Table 6 present the progress made in this regard during the last decade and a half. Highest reduction in drop-out seems to have been achieved during the decade 1980-81 to 1990-91, both at primary and upper primary stages. Surprisingly, only marginal change was recorded during the following decade of 1990-91 to 2000-01, which, in fact, witnessed unprecedented level of developmental action in the field of primary education, first through Operation Blackboard and then under the banner of DPEP. However, the situation seems to have drastically changed in recent years showing a reduction of 10.54 percentage points to 28.49 per cent in 2004-05 from 39.05 per cent in 2001-02. It is even more impressive for girls as during the same period drop-out rate for girls declined by 15.08 percentage points.

Table 6 : Drop Out Rates in General at Primary Education

Year	Primary (I-V)		
	Boys	Girls	Total
1990-91	40.1	46.0	42.6
1995-96	41.4	43.0	42.1
2001-02*	38.4	39.9	39.0
2002-03*	35.9	33.7	34.9
2003-04*	33.7	28.6	31.5
2004-05*	31.8	25.4	28.49

Source: *Selected Educational Statistics*, 2004-05

It is found that while drop-out rate for girls was higher than boys till the year of 2001-02, the trend got reversed showing lower drop-out rate for girls than for boys in 2004-05; the drop-out rate for girls became 25.42 per cent and for boys it was much higher at 32 per cent. However, during the same period, drop-out rate among SC and ST girls continued to be higher than that among SC and ST boys. Similarly, drop-out rate of SC/ST girls were also much higher than the drop-out rates of 'all category' girls. Even with substantial reduction in drop-out phenomenon, as mentioned earlier, the situation with respect to SC and ST children is really alarming (Table 7). In these cases also, the situation dramatically improved just in two years. Yet, even with substantial improvement between 2001-02 and 2003-04, not even two out of three SC children stay to complete five years of schooling. Further, not all of them transit to upper primary stage. Only four out of ten children in the corresponding age group are in the upper primary stage.

Table 7: Dropout Rates for Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Children at Primary Stage (I-V)

Year	SC children			ST children		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
1990-91	46.3	54	49.4	60.3	66.1	62.5
1995-96	43.7	48.5	45.7	55	58.9	56.6
2001-02	43.7	47.1	45.2	51	54.1	52.3
2003-04	36.8	36.2	36.6	49.1	48.7	48.9
2004-05	32.7	36.1	34.2	42.6	42.0	42.3

Source: *Selected Educational Statistics 2003-04*, Government of India, 2006.

The situation is even worse with regard to children belonging to Scheduled Tribes. The survival rate among ST children is only around fifty per cent at the lower primary stage and only around 30 per cent children of the corresponding age group survive upper primary cycle of three years. There is no significant difference in the drop-out rates for boys and girls among STs.

Reasons for dropping out of school without completing the primary school were explored in the NFHS II, 1998 (Table 19). It was found that the predominant reason mentioned both in rural and urban area was "not interested in study". Engagement in wage labour was another major reason. It is evident from the 61st NSS that the problem of children dropping-out before completion of education is continuing as before. A substantial number of children particularly of 6-11 years were found dropping out because education is not considered necessary for them and also because they have to support household income (this proportion is highest in case of urban boys). For girls of 6-11 years age

group, engagement in domestic chores has been another important reason for dropping out of school. Thus, participation in wage labour or domestic work continues to prevent children from attending school.

Zone 3: Children at Risk of Exclusion

Apart from the never-enrolled and drop-out children, there are children who continue attending school but are at risk of dropping out. Some may even complete the whole cycle but may barely learn anything and, therefore, face the risk of not moving further in education; these are victims of silent exclusion – physically participating but with no cognitive benefits. These children are generally first generation learners and many of them live in an environment that does not encourage them to study. Irregular attendance, low learning level, repetition, distance between home and school environment etc. cause gradual exclusion of these children from the education system. Many of them get characterized as ‘not interested in studies’ and eventually drop out from school after attending school for some time. According to NFHS 1998, 32.6 per cent of boys and 28.4 per cent of girls cited ‘lack of interest in studies’ as the reason for dropping out from school. The NSS Survey of 1998 too has recorded ‘child not interested in studies’ (24.4 per cent), ‘unable to cope with or failure in studies’ (22.5 per cent) as the predominant reasons for children dropping out of schools. The PROBE Report (1999), like the NFHS, 1998 and the NSS, 1998 surveys also found ‘lack of interest in studies’ as the main reason for dropping out of school. These groups of reasons, which relate to lack of interest among children or not interested in studies essentially signify school related factors acting as barriers for children to learn effectively and to move further in the ladder of education. It is indeed the responsibility of the school system to make the experience pleasant and interesting to the children. What is required therefore is to reform the contents and processes and make them more relevant to the life of the children and linked to the environment in which they live.

Several studies have also demonstrated poor quality of the teaching-learning process resulting in extremely low levels of learning with children not acquiring even basic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic after attending school for five and even eight years. It is quite common to find parents withdrawing their children out of disappointment and frustration that school has not been able to impart even basic knowledge and skills. Recently the Annual Status of Education Review (ASER, 2006) conducted a household survey based on an all India sample of rural areas and found the learning levels to be abysmally low in most areas even though there were considerable variations across different states. The ASER study revealed that in states where large numbers of children did not recognize alphabets or numbers in Grade 1 and 2, reading and arithmetic ability in later years was poor. The study concluded that it is not lack of parental demand that kept children out of school; in fact, the process of entry to school actually begins in most cases even before the official school going age of six years. Reasons for children not staying in school or being pushed out were inadequate infrastructure, insensitive teachers, and uninteresting (or irrelevant) curricula.

Zone 4: Children Who Complete Primary but Do Not Enter Upper Primary Level

Systematic data on annual basis with regard to student flow from Grade 5 to 6 which marks the beginning of the upper primary cycle of three years is not available. However, time series data compiled for the period from 1991 to 1999 throws significant light on the state of entry into upper primary schools. For recent years, data are also available from DISE on examination results for end of lower primary cycle which even though does not exactly indicate transition could be a useful proxy. At the all India level, the transition rate from primary to upper primary level was 89.4 per cent in 1991-92, which declined by 3.42 percentage points to 85.95 per cent in 1998-99. Thus, around 14 per cent of children belonged to Zone 4 as they completed the primary stage of schooling but did not transit from primary to upper primary level. The situation varied across states.

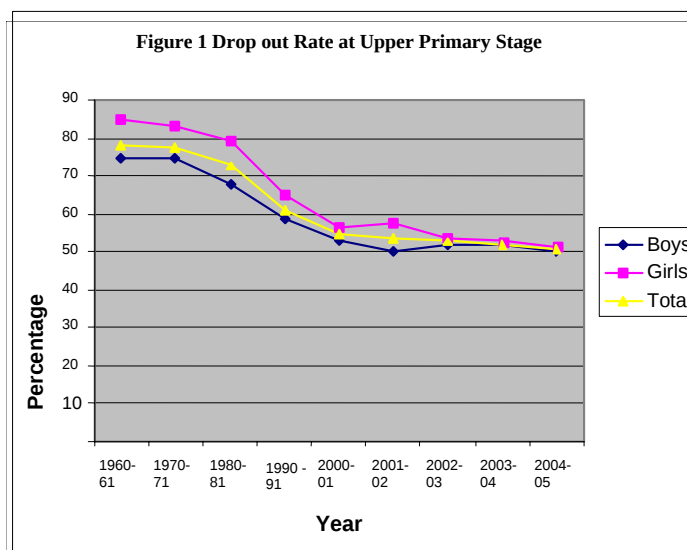
According to DISE, the trend remained more or less declining and it was reported as low as 74 per cent in 2003-04. However, according to DISE 2005-06, there has been a substantial increase in transition rate from primary to upper primary level during 2003-04 and 2005-06. It increased from 74 per cent in 2003-04 to 78 per cent in 2004-05 and it became 83.36 per cent in 2005-06. States like Bihar (66.28 per cent), Uttar Pradesh (67.87 per cent), Madhya Pradesh (73.21 per cent), Meghalaya (77.69 per cent), Haryana (80.26 per cent) and Orissa (82.46 per cent) have reported lower transition rate than national average. Considering that some of the States like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh already are far behind in terms of enrolment and drop-out levels, transition of only 66-68 per cent from lower primary to upper primary should be a cause for serious concern. This clearly indicates that very large proportions of children attending lower primary schools in these states do not learn even the basic competencies, leading to failure and, therefore, face permanent exclusion from the school system beyond grade 5.

Zone 5: Children Who Enter Upper Primary but Drop out

Almost all data sources indicate that dropping out of school among older children of 11-14 years is much higher compared to those of lower age group. In fact, the situation is quite alarming as despite the claim of substantial decline in drop-out rate during the last few decades, more than half of the children who enroll in upper primary schools do not complete the upper primary cycle. Time series data given in the Selected Educational Statistics (Government of India, 2006) show that over a period of 45 years, drop out has substantially come down from 78.3 per cent in 1960-61 to 50.84 per cent in 2004-05, but it is far from satisfactory as it even now leaves out one out of two children from the compulsory education framework. One can observe from the data presented in Table 22 and Figure 1 that the decrease is essentially due to improved retention of girls in the school system. This is clearly evident from the fact that between 1990-91 and 2004-05 the drop-out rate changed by nearly 15 percentage points for girls. Gender disparity has practically disappeared, even though it is no solace that one out of two children, irrespective of gender fails to complete 8 years of schooling.

The situation is really serious with respect to socially under-privileged groups as is evident from Table 8. The rate of drop-out of SC children which was 67.8 in 1990-91 came down to 57.3 per cent in 2004-05. There has also been considerable decline in drop-out rate of ST children during the same period of time which came down from 78.6

per cent in 1990-91 to 65.9 per cent in 2004-05. But it is very clear that the development programme carried out in education during the last several decades has not been able to make a significant impact on the participation behaviour of children from SC and ST groups.



Source: *Selected Educational Statistics, 2004-05*, Government of India, 2006

It is, however, encouraging to note that drop out rates for girls belonging to all categories, including SC and ST have declined steadily at the upper primary stage during the period from 1990-91 to 2004-05. Yet, the data also suggest that the drop-out rate for girls continues to be much higher than that for boys among both SCs and STs.

Table 8: Drop-out Rates for Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Children at the Upper Primary Stage (V-VIII)

	SC Children			ST Children		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
1990-91	64.3	73.2	67.8	75.7	82.2	78.6
1995-96	64.7	70.5	67	62.3	71.2	66
2001-02	58.6	63.6	60.7	67.3	72.7	69.5
2003-04	57.3	62.2	59.4	69	71.4	70.1
2004-05	55.2	60.00	57.3	65.0	67.1	65.9

Source: *Selected Educational Statistics 2004-05*, Government of India.

Why do children drop-out of school during upper primary classes?

One observes from the data in Table 9 that more boys than girls of 10-14 years old had to drop out from school on the ground that they have to support household income. At the same time higher proportion of girls than boys left school due to their engagement in domestic chores. In contrast, smaller proportion of children belonging to 6-11 year age group was found leaving school due to the above mentioned reasons. Apart from this, large proportion of girls of 10-14 years old had to leave school due to 'other' reasons which could include socio-cultural factors including early marriage.

Table 29: Per 1000 Distribution of Persons of 5-14 years who Ever Attended but Currently not attending any Educational Institutes in 2004

Reasons	Rural Male		Rural Female		Urban Male		Urban Female	
	10-14	5-14	10-14	5-14	10-14	5-14	10-14	5-14
School too far	3	2	16	8	0	0	5	3
Has to support household income	171	72	70	36	231	116	57	36
Education not considered necessary	73	33	21	53	116	14	98	56
Has to attend domestic chores	12	5	109	54	15	10	177	95
Other Reasons	170	89	142	88	221	129	176	118

Source: 61st Round Survey, NSS, 2004-05

In comparison to these findings, the NFHS II (1998-99) survey found that 38 per cent of boys and 32 per cent of girls dropped out because they were engaged in some work at home or outside. According to 52nd NSS, 1998, an important reason for dropping out of boys was "paid work" or "required for outside work for payments in kind or cash". Thus, as children grow older, chances of their participation in labour force become more prominent which prevent them from attending educational institutions.

Examining Transition from Upper Primary to Secondary

As noted earlier, the free and compulsory education period corresponds to the eight years of elementary schooling, generally divided into lower primary and upper primary. Availability of facilities for accessing secondary education could, in some cases, have a significant backwash effect on the participation behaviour of children in the elementary stage, particularly at the upper primary stage. This is because some parents are likely to view elementary schooling as inadequate and in the absence for further schooling, the opportunity cost involved in sending a child to upper primary may be considered not worth bearing. It was found that, in 1998-99, around 30 per cent students at upper primary level did not perform well enough in their final examination or found it difficult to get entry into a neighbouring school and consequently, failed to pursue their education beyond 8 years. In 1991-92, transition rate from upper primary to secondary level at the all India level was 77.93 per cent, which declined to 72.3 per cent in 1998-99. This shows that merely increasing enrolment in lower levels of schooling is no guarantee that participation in higher levels will improve. It is essential to reducing the vulnerability of children from dropping out and ensuring that the time they spend in school is qualitatively beneficial; and that it is contributing to meaningful learning outcomes.

Profiles of Marginalization: Who Goes to School and Who Does Not?

The previous section presented the picture of exclusion from schooling under different zones characterizing the nature and magnitude of exclusion from primary and upper primary classes in India. The present section takes forward the discussion and attempts to focus on who these excluded children are and the factors and processes contributing to their exclusion by reviewing the findings of existing researches and reports on the subject. The main observations emerging from the analysis are organized under seven subsections, namely, (a) Health, nutritional status and school participation; (b) Poverty, child labour and elementary education; (c) Children of Illiterate Parents: The First

Generation Learners; (d) Children from SC and ST Communities; (e) Disadvantaged Girls; (f) Children in Difficult Circumstances; (g) Children with Disabilities.

Health, Nutritional Status and School Participation

The Indian Constitution guarantees ‘Right to Education’ from the time the child reaches the age of six years. However, for many children primary school age may be too late to realize that their right to education is ensured. Action for inclusion in schooling has to probably begin much before the child reaches the school going age of six years, as the quality of life of the children in early years may already dispose the child to be excluded from benefiting from schooling. Thus, an understanding of the predisposition factors that facilitate or hinder children’s ability to access primary schooling are of critical value.

Recognizing the critical relationship between quality of life of the child in early years and its impact on their later school participation behaviour, Report on the State of the World’s Children (UNICEF, 2003) rightly pointed out that health and nutrition are not only components of this concept of ideal childhood but are also prerequisites for ensuring effective participation in schooling. The Report points out that of millions of children under five who die each year from diseases easily preventable by vaccines, many live in India. Only 64 per cent of one-year-old children in India are fully immunized against DPT which is much lower than the coverage achieved in China (79 per cent) and even Nepal (72 per cent). Apart from this, hunger, starvation and malnutrition are prevalent to varying levels among young children particularly in the poor families. Notwithstanding the reports of self-sufficiency and increase in food production, and reduction in poverty levels, India still has around 40 per cent of world’s malnourished children (Sood, 2007).

The incidence of malnourishment among children in India has been associated with many factors such as the “parents’ level of knowledge about infant feeding, hygiene and care of a sick child; quality of health service and its delivery; gender related socio economic issues” and so on (UNICEF, 2004: 9). Further, along with poverty many other issues are closely linked to prevalence of malnutrition, which include food insecurity, poor delivery services, distribution of poor quality food through public distribution services (PDS), inadequate care and unsafe water. Malnutrition also has gender dimension and it can persist if it is not addressed in early years of life. Because of low social status and ignorance more than 90 per cent of adolescent girls are found malnourished and the children of illiterate mothers most likely face the threat of malnutrition. The high prevalence of malnutrition among children also highlights the importance of providing balanced diet in the form of food supplements in schools and also education in health and hygiene.

With persistence of high levels of malnutrition and poor health and hygiene, reduction of infant mortality rate is now becoming hard to achieve. While it reduced by 17 per cent during 1986-1990, it declined by only 7.5 per cent during 1991-95. Children in about 13 states are presently suffering from malnutrition to large extent where more than 40 per cent of children below three years are underweight as per weight for age indicator. The UNICEF Report (2004: 9) indicates that malnutrition is common in whole of India but

the situation is alarming in the states of Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh.

Malnourishment of children is found to be positively correlated with social background as one finds incidence of malnourished children to be much higher among SCs and STs as compared to the general population. Around one third of SC children in Chhattisgarh and ST children in Bihar and UP were found malnourished in 1998 as per NFHS-II. At the same time one fourth of SC and ST children in Rajasthan and Orissa and 30 per cent children each from SC and ST groups in Madhya Pradesh were found severely malnourished. Malnourishment is also prevalent among the OBCs in these states as per the estimation given by NFHS-II. In addition to nutritional disadvantage these children also experience poor living conditions, low home stimulation, poor access to health and schooling. These multiple disadvantages of social and economic factors coupled with nutritional problems are likely to impact their school participation, significantly. Examining the Indian scene one finds that 74 per cent of children under the age of three and more than 90 per cent of adolescent girls are suffering from anemia caused by iron deficiency with serious impact on learning capacity. Iodine deficiency, which reduces learning capacity by about 13 per cent, is widespread because according to NFHS-II over 30 per cent of households use salt without iodine. Some studies have shown that malnutrition can also cause deficiency in Intelligence Quotient (Liu et. al, 2003; Levinger, 1996; Politt, 1990 cited by Sood, 2007). WHO study (1997) clearly shows that iodine deficiency is the single most common preventable cause of mental retardation and brain damage of children. In nutshell, these children suffering from malnutrition are either excluded from mainstream education and development programmes forever or are facing the threat of exclusion in later stage of life.

However, malnutrition can be reduced by taking effective intervention for providing nutritional inputs along with educational and health facilities to the children in early childhood and also during school years. In India, while supplementary nutrition is given to the young children below six years through ICDS programme, the school going children of 6-14 years age group are given nutritious food in school under Mid Day Meal scheme of Government of India currently covering all children attending primary schools (grades 1 to 5). However, it is argued that, more attention is needed to improve the quality of life of children in a more comprehensive manner since many of the children are not covered by ICDS service and many children are still not attending school particularly in poverty stricken areas and pockets in backward states. Micro level researches are also needed to explore the magnitude of the problem of malnutrition and its impact on school participation.

Researches suggest good quality ECD programmes can yield significant short and long-term benefits, particularly for children from underprivileged sections. Gragnolati, Shekar, Das Gupta, Bredenkamp and Lee (2005) have studied the prevalence of child under-nutrition in India and found that ICDS programme appears to be well-designed and well-placed to address the multidimensional causes of malnutrition in India. Further, a study of Ramachandran, Jandhyala and Saihjee (2003) explores on children, their family, larger community, the available education and health services in an effort to understand the

causality and social processes that affect, partially or wholly, children's full participation in schooling. According to them, amongst others an effective pre-school education component within the ICDS programme can make a substantial difference in health and nutritional status and school participation of all children irrespective of their socio-economic background.

The National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education also referred to as Mid-day Meal Scheme launched in 1995 envisages to contribute towards increased participation of children in schooling and towards improving the nutritional status of children in government, local body and government-aided schools. This has been subsequently extended to cover children of EGS and Alternate schools also. The Supreme Court order in 2001 made it obligatory for States to provide cooked meals instead of dry rations provided earlier. Following the Supreme Court directive, most of the States have switched over to giving cooked meals. With a recent revision of the Scheme norms in mid 2006, per child cost has become Rs. 2 per day of which Rs. 0.50 is to be borne by the State Government and the rest by Central Government, providing 450 calories and 12 gm. protein per child every day. However, implementation of the scheme suffers from several inadequacies everywhere. Jain and Shah (2005) found that in Maharashtra, Mid-Day Meal scheme has resulted in considerable increase in enrolment in schools but along with some other researchers (Blue, J. 2005; Afridi, F. 2005; Khera, 2006) they also point to several shortcomings faced by the scheme in terms of coverage and quality of services.

Poverty, Child Labour and Participation in Schooling

India is home to 19 per cent of the world's children and every year around 26 million children are born in India. As discussed in the preceding paragraphs, a large number of these children struggle to survive without adequate food, proper hygienic shelter and health care facilities and ill health from preventable diseases, predisposing them to be excluded from the education system. Further, even though education is now a fundamental right for 6-14 years old children, in order to survive in remote areas many children from poor families work rather than attend schools; some others migrate to urban areas either along with parents or as displaced and destitute. It is generally observed that children who are excluded or those who are about to face exclusion from schooling largely belong to these categories. The following subsection presents a brief characterization of such children.

Education of Low Income Group

Relationship between income levels and educational attainment may be obvious, but does poverty really hinder children from school participation and even if it is so, what is the absolute level of income poverty when it begins to influence school participation, negatively. While this could be the subject for a scholarly study, the findings are not likely to be of much help in fine tuning a public facility like schooling in order to insulate it from the influence of income levels. One has to depend on a broad characterization of poverty indicators to identify those who are vulnerable to exclusion from schooling. In the Indian context poverty line could serve as a useful benchmark to explore the issue.

Indeed, there has been a reduction in poverty levels in recent years though there are contesting positions on the nature and extent of reduction (Mahendra Dev and Ravi, 2007; Himanshu, 2007). Yet according to current estimates, around 250 – 300 million people in India could be categorized as poor. According to NSS (2004-05), although there has been a decline in percentage share of poor during 1999-2000 and 2004-05 based on both methods of mixed recall period (consumption pattern over last 365 days) and uniform recall period (consumption pattern over last 30 days), still around more than one fourth of total population can be considered as poor at present. Corresponding figures for the percentage of population below poverty line are 28.3 per cent and 25.7 per cent in rural and urban areas, respectively. In 1993-94, rate of poverty was much higher at 36 per cent for the country as a whole. Thus despite reduction in poverty level, India is still the home for a large number of poor people.

Correlating, the income levels with education attainment, the National Sample Survey 61st Round (NSS, 2004-05) found that the proportion of non-literates was highest in the bottom Monthly Per capita Consumption Expenditure (MPCE) classes and it decreased gradually as the MPCE increased. There has been considerable difference between rural and urban areas. For instance, while the proportion of non-literates was 69 per cent in the bottom MPCE class in rural areas, it was 18 per cent in the top MPCE class. The corresponding proportion in the urban areas was about 51 per cent and 2 per cent only. The lowest proportion of non-literates was found in the households of regular wage/salaried employees (13 per cent) in urban area. Another important feature was the wide gap persisting between male and female in rural as well as in urban areas. In rural area, around 68 per cent of rural female labourers were not literate as against 44 per cent of rural male labourers. Around 56 per cent of female self-employed in rural area were not literate against 28 per cent of non-literate self-employed male.

Children Affected by Migration

Due to poverty and lack of employment opportunities, a section of landless poor people periodically migrate to nearby urban area or other agriculturally productive places in search of livelihood. Often entire family migrates resulting in educational deprivation of the children who migrate with their parents. According to UNICEF Report (2006, 56), roughly 20 per cent of the Indian population is considered migrant, of whom 77 per cent are women and children. They are often at greater risk of exploitation and tend to accept jobs at unfair terms. Deprived of family and community support networks at the site of migration, women and children tend to suffer most and are denied access to basic services including education. Children accompanying their parents generally work for more than four hours a day in unorganized sector and face extreme exploitation and humiliation, and even sexual abuse. Wadiker and Das (2004) have reported that seasonal migration within Maharashtra is a very common phenomena and Maharashtra occupies the third place in India as far as employing child labour is concerned. Poor people migrate, every year during lean agricultural seasons, to the sugar factories in western Maharashtra, the brick kilns in Thane district, quarries in Ratnagiri and various construction sites which are the main centers of seasonal migration, in order to earn livelihood. Women and children form a high proportion of these migrants. It is found that

such migration often involves longer working hours, poor living and working conditions and poor access to basic facilities like access to education, health, food distribution system etc. As mentioned by Wadiker and Das (2004), main problems faced by migrant children in sugar factory sites could be summarized as: (a) Children of migrant labourers do not attend school in their villages from October to the end of the academic year since they migrate with their family. (b) There is no provision for allowing these children to continue their term in another school near their place of migration. (c) Existing schools like Zilla Parishad Schools do not have the capacity in terms of infrastructure and teachers to take on this additional burden even if they so desire. (d) Sugar factories do not look upon this as their responsibility since they do not employ their labour directly.

Non-participation of children due to such distress seasonal migration has hardly received any attention in the entire discourse on educational access. Describing the educational deprivation that children face when they migrate in search of livelihood with their parents, Smita (2007) points out that “with the collapse of rural livelihoods in many parts of the country, hundreds of thousands of families have been forced to migrate every year taking their children along, making them drop out of schools and closing the only opportunity available to them for an alternate future. Such migrations are large and growing, and the number of children below 14 years involved in it could be around six million.” The incidence of such migration is reportedly high in “industrial sectors such as brick making, salt manufacture, sugar cane harvesting, stone quarrying, construction, fisheries, plantations, rice mills, etc. Agriculturally rich areas also attract large numbers of migrant labour for sowing, harvest and other operations. Industrial migrations are for long periods of 6-8 months once a year. Agricultural migrations are of short duration and take place several times a year”.

The problem has attracted the attention of several NGOs in recent years.³ The significance of recent NGO effort lies in the fact that it has captured migration at both ends – it has taken the individual components of seasonal hostels and site schools and strung them together into a continuum linking work in sending areas with work in receiving areas. An additional component of bridge courses has also been included for children who get covered neither in hostels nor at work sites. It has stressed the critical importance of revamping Government schools in the migration-prone areas, so as to motivate children and parents towards education, and make schools and the different levels of administration responsible for migrant children. But these are small-scale efforts; understanding the underlying processes and identifying workable propositions in a sustainable manner would require both large-scale programmes and in-depth empirical studies.

Education and Child Labour

The issue of linkage between child labour and elementary education has received enormous attention during the last two decades. The issue received increased focus with

³ For example, Janarth in Maharashtra; Setu – Centre for Social Knowledge & Action, Cohesion Trust, Yusuf Mehrally Centre in Gujarat and Vikalpa, Lok Drishti, Adhikar and Jan Mukti Anushthan in Western Orissa are paying attention on wellbeing of migrant children and their education.

the publication of Myron Weiner's seminal work: "The child and the state in India." (Weiner, 1990)⁴ Now after more than fifteen years, the situation is still not satisfactory as large number of children continue to languish as child workers instead of attending school regularly. The practice of employing child labour is persisting in every corner of the country. According to the MICS (2000) conducted by UNICEF (UNICEF, 2004: 57) there are more than 12 million (5.2 per cent) child labourers and the Census of 2001 estimated the number to be 11.28 million.

Poverty is invariably quoted as the reason for the perpetuation of child labour and consequent exclusion of the children from school education. However, many scholars have blamed the Government for non-implementation of Child Labour Act with seriousness and also for failure in providing equitable and universal access to education to all the children of eligible age group. This, it is argued has resulted in swelling of the number of child workers who had no other option except joining labour force. Although some observers suggest that changes in labour market because of globalisation and liberalization contributes to the problem of child labour, it is generally argued (Burra, 2003) that in India, the problem of child labour "lies largely in the collusion between government officials, local politicians, big landlords and industrialists in ensuring the perpetuation of child labour." (cited from Kabeer, 2003: 19). Bajpai (2006), examining the cases of child labour, argues that child labour legislation is inadequate in its understanding of the situation. A large number of activities in which children are engaged remain untouched by legislations since it has listed certain activities as hazardous and gave legal protections to the children who are engaged in hazardous works. Children engaged in domestic work or such other activities are not protected by this law as it is not recognized as hazardous work even though many child domestic workers are abused, exploited by employers and do not attend schools.⁵ Moreover, since legal framework and National Policy and Child Labour Act, 1986 allow child labour in non-hazardous occupations, a large number of child workers remain out of purview of laws governing child labour. Whether poverty is the cause for child labour or not, experience and all evidences indicate that it is the children of poor parents who always face difficulty in attending school.

Many studies also suggest a strong relationship between poverty, development and child labour, use of traditional technology, agricultural impoverishment, availability of non-farm activities in nearby areas, nature and pace of economic development etc. determining the practice of child labour at large scale.⁶ One cannot deny the fact that the economic status of a family is a powerful force shaping its behaviour in many aspects of

⁴ M. Weiner (1990) pointed out, "Primary education in India is not compulsory, nor is child labour illegal. The result is that less than half of India's children between age six and fourteen – 82.2 million are not in school" and he also stated "depending upon how one defines 'work' (employment for wages, or full time work whether or not for wages), number of child labourers in India varies from 13.6 million to 44 million or more"

⁵New legislation has recently been enacted making engagement of children in domestic labour a punishable offence; but yet to be tested legally for its effectiveness.

⁶For detail discussion see Kabeer, 2003; Reddy, 2000; Chaudhari 1997 a&b; Chandra 1997; Duraisamy, 1997; Gupta and Voll, 1999. However, in developed areas and urban contexts, child labour is generally associated with poverty rather than wealth.

life including the engagement of their children in productive labour thus restricting their participation in schooling. However, recent trends in enrolments clearly indicate that poor parents are increasingly sending their children to school, even private fee charging schools. Further, Government has had to launch several supplementary measures to educate the children, particularly of older age group, who could not attend schools earlier as they have been engaged in work. Based on field studies of organizing such programmes, Sinha (2006) argues for arranging residential bridge course camps and motivation centers for children currently engaged in labour, providing them with appropriate educational inputs, and subsequently mainstreaming in a gradual manner to formal schools after completion of their courses.

According to Census 2001, there has been a sharp decline in proportion of child main workers from 4.3 per cent in 1991 to 2.3 per cent in 2001, but at the same time number of marginal workers increased from 2.2 million to 6.89 million; in effect, the total number of child workers increased to 16.35 million in 2001 from 12.86 million in 1991. Most of these children were engaged in agricultural activities on part time basis. Burra (2006) refers to a substantial decrease in number of child workers combined with increase in school enrolment and reduction in percentage of out of school children. According to the figures given by Burra (2006) there has been dramatic change in the situation in Andhra Pradesh, in addition to Kerala and Tamil Nadu, with regard to participation of children in workforce and school as well. In contrast, percentage of child workers increased from 5.5 per cent in 1991 to 8.6 per cent in 2001 in Himachal Pradesh, even while school enrolment improved. MICS (A survey conducted in 2000) by UNICEF (2004, 57) also throws light on the state level situation of child labour and school participation. According to MICS the proportion of child labour presently is more than 15 per cent in Rajasthan (20.3 per cent), A.P. (25.2 per cent), Tamil Nadu (21.6 per cent), Chattisgarh (19.2 per cent), Jharkhand (20 per cent), Orissa (15.4 per cent), Arunachal Pradesh (23.3 per cent), Sikkim (16.4 per cent). In Maharashtra, Karnataka and Chhattisgarh, Manipur their proportion is varying between 5-15 per cent. According to the same UNICEF report (2004, 60), over 20 per cent of India's working children are from Uttar Pradesh, most of whom work at odd jobs, in factories and in the carpet industry for meager wages. They are found in some of the districts like Bhadohi, Mirzapur, Jaunpur, Varanasi, Allahabad and Sonbhadra that account for over 85 per cent of the country's total carpet exports. One of the main reasons for the high prevalence of child labour in these areas is the burden of debt, which forces families to send their children to work and low literacy rates further compound the problem (UNICEF, 2004, 60-61).

Drawing reference from different researches Bhatta (1998) has argued that poverty is a highly inadequate explanation of regional variations in educational achievements. While some parts of the country despite economic prosperity are still lagging behind in terms of educational progress, in some other parts even abject poverty could not stop parents from sending their children to school. For instance, states like Haryana and Punjab which are considered economically progressive have still lot to do to achieve the goal of UEE. Dreze and Gazdar (1997) found that despite showing economic prosperity literacy rate and school participation of children in western Uttar Pradesh are far from satisfactory. Further, refuting the traditional argument, Bhatta (1998) based on a review of many

studies (Maharatna, 1996: 16; Unni Jeemol, 1996: 8; 135, Majumdar, 1997; Jabbi and Rajyalakshmi, 1997: 5) points out that the opportunity costs do not forbid schooling and many unschooled children are also found not working anywhere. In fact, children start participating in workforce after attaining certain age. For example, the study of Kanbargi and Kulkarni (1991: 137) reveals that “working for wages is significant among children in the 12-14 age groups.” Thus, Bhatta found that “labour driven drop out rates are more likely to be low in the early grades and to rise significantly around the ages when children become more productive.” This is a significant observation as largest proportion of drop out takes place in the early grades of lower primary cycle.

It is clear from the discussion that more studies are required to establish the interconnection between poverty, child labour and schooling. Studies have to explore the question of how much poverty compels children to work and whether only working children are not being able to attend school or dropping out is caused only when children start working. In the opinion of many scholars, the direct cost involved in educating children is one of the important reasons for non-attendance and drop out. Being unable to meet this ‘direct’ cost many poor parents withdraw their children from school (Mehrotra, 1995; Sinha and Sinha, 1995; 42nd Round NSS 1986-87, Tilak, 1995: 57; Panchmukhi, 1990). Based on all these evidences, Bhatta (1998) has stressed that instead of putting exaggerated emphasis on child labour and inadequate motivation among poor parents as the major obstacles to universalisation of primary education, it is necessary to consider the direct costs of schooling that reduce the child’s chances of participating in education.

The discussions above highlight the complex relationship between poverty, child labour and exclusion from schooling. While some poor households may withhold their children from school, some others with similar conditions ensure education for their children. Child labour which effectively blocks school participation is indeed a complex issue, dependent on extraneous factors such as implementation of adult wage labour policies and not so much on the conditions and intentions of the children and their family. In all these, school related factors also play a critical role influencing the parents to decide in favour of or against continuation of their children in schools as they reach an age when they could be effectively engaged in remunerative work. While macro level data on the issue of child labour and poverty can be found, very little empirical evidences are available on the underlying interaction between, family economic circumstances, engagement of children in remunerative work and exclusion from schooling.

Children of Illiterate Parents: The First Generation Learners

Many children, excluded from education system are first generation learners as their parents are illiterate. According to the 61st Round NSS (2004-2005), although there has been considerable progress in alleviating extreme forms of educational deprivation over the years, the problem of illiteracy is still pervasive. In rural areas 37 per cent of the households did not have even one literate member of age 15 years and above in 1993, the proportion decreased to 32 per cent in 1999-2000 and to 26 per cent in 2004-05. The corresponding proportions were about 14 per cent, 12 per cent and 8 per cent, respectively in urban areas (NSS, 2004-5: 22). . Amongst many things absence of adult

literate in large number of households has considerable impact on the life and education of children. In such community setting with predominantly illiterate population characterized by rigid norms of social behaviour, universalizing primary education is not just an education endeavour. During 2004-05, as 61st NSS, 2004-05 has reported, in as many as 26 per cent households in the rural areas and 8 per cent in urban areas, there was none in the age-group 15 years and above who could read and write a simple message with understanding. In other words, all the adult members in those households were illiterate. Further as high as 50 per cent of rural and 20 per cent of urban households had no literate female member.

Evidence from Ranga Reddy district of Andhra Pradesh, which is home for substantial number of first generation learners and child workers is quite illustrative of the actions required to improve participation levels of children. Results of this innovative effort in the *Sankarpalle mandal* of this district, suggests that problem of non-enrolment, drop-out, low attendance among such communities could be reduced. The effort also illustrates the value of pursuing positive measures over a long period of time instead of taking up short term measures that yield quick results but dissipate over a period of time. As described by Sinha and Reddy (2007), in *Shankarpalle mandal* of Ranga Reddy district in Andhra Pradesh, a campaign⁷ launched for abolition of child labour and their enrollment in schools had a significant impact on the way in which schools were governed. When the experiment began in 1994-95 the *Mandal* Education Officer was allowed to follow a policy of admitting children to school at any time during the academic session; this facilitated reentry and participation of older drop out children. This, in fact, became a State policy subsequently. It was found that on several occasions transfer certificates were not issued and many children could not get admission in middle school even after completion of primary education. In order to rectify this situation, Government of Andhra Pradesh issued an order that no child be denied admission for want of a certificate and the responsibility for obtaining the same would be that of the schools.⁸ It also issued an order that primary schools that had classes up to class 5 could be upgraded to class 7 to prevent children particularly girls from dropping out of schools. The result of these simple moves was emphatic changing the whole pattern of student flow in the village school and also on several other administrative practices adopted by the school.

Children from SC and ST Communities: Poverty and Social Discrimination Nexus

Data presented in the earlier section gives a macro-level description of the educational deprivation experienced by the SC and ST communities. It was noted that despite

⁷ The campaign was started by M.V. Foundation for a total abolition of child labor and ensuring that every child went to full time formal school as a matter of right.

⁸ No. 272/B4-1/2001 Dated 19/4/2001, "In order to prevent a number of children dropping out of school after class V, partly because of the shortage of upper primary sections and partly because of the unfamiliarity of the children with the new school it was suggested that the Headmaster of the primary school concerned will first prepare a list of all children in class V due to go to class VI and will communicate this list personally to the headmaster of the nearest Upper Primary School or High School. The Headmaster of the Upper Primary School or High School as the case may be will automatically admit the child in the school. It shall be the responsibility of the concerned primary school to ensure that school based certificates such as transfer certificates and so on is given."

progress in enrolment, 53 per cent of children drop out at the elementary level itself and this percentage is particularly high among the SCs/STs and minorities. It was also noted that levels of school participation correlate negatively with levels of poverty. It is also known that a large proportion of these poor are from SC/ST categories. According to the NSS data (2004) 36.5 per cent of SCs in rural areas and 38.47 per cent in urban areas are below poverty line. The corresponding figures for the STs are 45.86 per cent and 34.75 per cent.

Studies also show that the school system is inequitable and discriminatory towards these groups. For instance, reviewing the experiences of SC and ST children in the school system, Ramachandran (2004: 27) observes, “the process of increased universalisation is accompanied by growing segregation by class, caste and gender”. Some scholars believe that poverty is not the ‘proximate’ cause of child labour or poor levels of school participation. Poverty intersects with other forms of disadvantage like caste and social marginalization. “Intersection between caste and economic disadvantage is evident if we examine the social composition of wage labour, one of the poorest paid occupations in the economy” (Kabeer, 2003: 356). Majority of work force of wage labour is drawn from SC and ST communities. In 1995, according to a government survey 66 per cent of bonded labourers belonged to the SC and further 18 per cent were ST. Drawing reference to NSS findings, Thorat (1999) found that the proportion of child labour was two to three times higher among SC and ST groups than in the rest of the population. Consequently, factors like caste, religion, ethnicity and gender act in conjunction with poverty, as well as independently of it, to explain variations in the incidence of child labour as well as children’s absence, or irregular presence, in the educational systems (Kabeer, 2003: 382).

Quite often it is found that poor and SC and ST children, particularly girls, have very little option than getting a low quality education in a single room, single teacher school. Even if they are mainstreamed in a school with better physical and academic facilities they face multiple discriminations as children belonging to SC and ST families, invariably, have lower grade attainment than children from other household (Duraismy, 2004: 504). Venkatanarayana’s study in Andhra Pradesh (2004) points out that girls belonging to SC/ST groups in rural areas are the most disadvantaged in terms of education. The study also points out a more complex interaction between location, gender and caste that crucially influences school participation. He found that even though a few districts from backward regions of the State have improved their position “historical legacy of educational development or backwardness still holds”. It also has close association with classroom practices that keep these children isolated and do not allow them to participate in learning activities effectively. While introduction of many initiatives and innovative practices have brought in some positive changes in classroom practices, still a long way has to be covered to ensure full participation of all children in classroom processes without any discrimination. This is because, even while the teaching processes have become more child friendly, the discriminatory practices and attitudes of teachers continue to persist. Social attitudes and community prejudices play an important role in determining the ability and willingness of teachers to empathize with children. Studies on classroom processes done under the aegis of the DPEP also confirmed the prevalence of caste and community prejudices (Ramachandran, 2005: 2142).

Reviewing recent researches and reports, Sedwal and Kamath (2007) highlight a number of issues confronting the education of children from SC and ST communities. While the SC children face different forms of ‘untouchability’, tribal children face the problem of physical and cultural isolation. For example, some tribal groups still are living in dense forest or hilly or desert area and are engaged in primitive mode of occupation as hunting and gathering etc., while some of them have become settled agriculturalists; a large section of the tribal group continue to be severely exploited, earning their livelihood in tea garden, mining and industrial areas. Nature of deprivation and discrimination vary in these contexts and so does the educational needs of the children. Recognizing this situation, the approach paper for the 11th Five Year Plan (2007-12) summarizes, “Development and empowerment of socially disadvantaged groups is a commitment enshrined in the constitution and education is the most effective instrument of social empowerment and change. Schemes for educational upliftment of SCs/STs and minorities have fallen far behind the national average in education. It would be necessary to go to the root of the problem and examine the reasons for the divisions so that remedial measures can be taken during the Eleventh Plan” (Government of India, 2006)

Gender and Social Background: Double Disadvantage for Girls

It has already been noted from earlier discussions that girls in India are in a more disadvantaged position than boys and the girls from poor, SC, ST and Muslim communities are doubly disadvantaged in every sphere of life including education. They are prone to exclusion at the entry point as still a larger proportion of girls than boys are denied access to school at the primary and upper primary levels; they are more likely to be irregular in their attendance in schools than boys; and more number of girls than boys, particularly at the upper primary stage, are likely to drop out from school. These and other related issues based on the data on the levels of their inclusion as well as exclusion have been discussed in greater detail in an earlier section.⁹

Going beyond macro level analysis, many researchers in recent years have dwelt on the subject of educational backwardness among females in the country. While some studies have focused on the magnitude of the problem of gender inequality and its interface with social inequality in terms of caste, class and location, some others have focused on the factors that contribute to perpetuation of gender inequality in education. Velaskar (2005) examined the implications of the interaction between caste, class and patriarchy for educational access of *dalit* (SC) girls in Maharashtra and tried to find out whether women and *dalits* continue to remain excluded or not.

Apart from the social background economic status seems to be determining factor in case of girls’ education. Whether girls would attend any educational institution at all or the type of institution she would attend, and the amount of investment to be made on her education etc. are decided in accordance with parental attitudes in addition to financial capacity. Ray (2000) also found that the chance of a child, particularly a girl, being in school or in labour market depends on awareness and educational level of adult members

⁹ For a detailed analysis of the issue see Bandyopadhyay and Subrahmanian (2007).

of the household, household size, its composition, and intra-household resource allocation. However, an overall increase in economic well being of the family could result in bridging the gender gap in enrolment at least partially as found in urban areas.

Are the barriers to girls' education insurmountable? Undoubtedly, transforming social attitudes and practices that militate against the education of the girl child requires a long drawn effort, involving many actors who are not directly involved in providing education. This is because contrary to traditional notions it is not merely parental attitudes that thwart the education of their daughters but the attitudes and practices adopted by teachers and other people concerned with education also has to under go change. However, studies have also shown that considerable reduction in gender disparities could be achieved with even simple readjustments in the way schools are located and infrastructure within the school are created. Further, Duraisamy's study in Tamil Nadu has shown that improvement in the parental education, particularly mother's education can contribute substantially to reduction in the gender gap in child schooling. If this is the case, would a carefully designed programme of adult education for mothers of school going children be a practical answer?

Conclusion: Issues and Priorities

The preceding section provides an understanding of the complexities involved in delineating the characteristics of children who are getting excluded from elementary schools. It emphatically points to a deeper nexus of several debilitating factors. While persisting gender disparity comes out as one of the serious factors affecting the goal of UEE, research studies reveal that its operation is more complex. Gender discrimination invariably combines with social and economic backwardness to place the girl child in multiply disadvantaged condition with respect to school participation. Well-recognized socially disadvantaged groups continue to stay behind in terms of educational progress. They are particularly crippled by discriminatory attitude on the one hand and their own handicap of poverty on the other. In addition, a large number of children who are getting enrolled are first generation learners - from families in which no one has ever gone to school and in particular the parents of the children enrolled in the school are illiterate. These children undoubtedly need special care and a sensitive handling. Retaining them in school and helping them to learn is a difficult task but that is critical to break the vicious inter-generational cycle of illiteracy. Unfortunately, these are also from families living invariably below poverty line and have no means of compensating for their handicap. Following section discusses the underlying dynamics connecting poverty, social inequity and gender discrimination with its serious implication on participation of children in school education.

Understanding Exclusion as a Process

Not getting the child enrolled in the school, leaving the school without completing the elementary cycle, or deciding to withdraw the girl child from the school midstream, or deciding not to go to upper primary school or secondary school – for statistical purposes these are just events and the children get categorized and counted as unenrolled, dropout

and so on. But in reality, exclusion from schooling where going to school is the norm is not just an event, it is not just a momentary decision but a complex process involving many factors in the personal life of the child and the family. When a child drops out of the school, many events precede shaping the life of the child – some located in the family, some located in the community and the peer group, and many located in the school where the child is supposed to be studying. Understanding exclusion demands exploring these turns and twists in the personal life history of the young child. Such an exploration cannot be done merely by asking questions to the parents and teachers or even the children themselves. It would demand following the life of the children over a sustained period of time and capturing the events that surround their lives. Such studies of tracking children individually and in groups as they join the school, move up the grades or leave the school would be critical for building a description of the complex processes involved in exclusion and delineating the underlying causes.

Need to Unravel the Nexus of Poverty, Social Inequity and Gender Discrimination

Analysis of data and findings of field studies bring forth four factors significantly influencing the patterns of exclusion. The first and the most significant factor influencing school participation behaviour of children is *gender*, as a girl-child continues to be more likely to be excluded than her male counterpart irrespective of her social extraction or economic status. There is no doubt that enrollment of girls has been growing at a much faster rate than that of boys and gender disparity in terms of enrollment has been reduced substantially in recent years. Apart from specifically girl-child focused programmes, gender concerns have been kept at the centre in designing various programmes and schemes in recent years. But the analysis shows that as the girl child moves up the ladder particularly in terms of retention and transition to higher levels of schooling, the situation invariably worsens leaving the gender gap unbridged.

Similar is the trajectory of progress with respect to participation in schooling of children from traditionally disadvantaged social groups, namely, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Many programmes have been in operation to bridge the gap and bring the children of SCs and STs at par in their educational progress with the rest of the society. In fact, positive discrimination measures have been guaranteed by the constitution recognizing the historical legacy that militates against their progress. Several special incentive schemes have been initiated in a target specific manner to benefit the children from these communities. Yet the figures reveal that the progress among them is quite unsatisfactory. Furthermore, a social group that has been added to this list for special measures in recent years, particularly after the Sachar Committee findings, is that of Muslim minority children, as studies have begun to reveal unusually low levels of educational attainment among the Muslims which has been discussed earlier.

The third factor that seems to inhibit school participation of children in schooling, particularly the girls consist of locational factors. Apart from generally observed rural-urban disparities, remoteness of habitations within rural areas seem to affect participation of children significantly. Further, this should be viewed in a micro local perspective as location of the school even within a village could benefit some and work against the

interests of others who are generally marginalized. This issue again has attracted the attention of the planners and special measures have been initiated such as EGS and Alternative Schools which specially aim at bringing such children into schools. The results also show that many children who had hitherto been left out have now joined the schools. But the task is quite complex. While small community based alternatives would help enroll the children at the entry level, will they survive the whole cycle? This has remained unanswered as there are few well designed studies to understand the long-term impact of such measures.

The fourth factor affecting school participation which has been highlighted by all macro level analysis is poverty. It is the children of the poor who are getting relegated to the margin of the system to be eventually pushed out altogether. At one level the relationship between the economic conditions of the family and the school participation behaviour of the children seem to be quite straight forward. However, a closer analysis shows that economic impoverishment itself is deeply embedded in social discriminatory practices. Further, it is almost impossible to disentangle non-participation of children in schooling from issues of child labour and poverty. There are again many measures initiated by the national and State Governments to compensate for the direct and indirect costs involved in sending children to school.

There are, in fact, a number of studies correlating each of these factors as decisively influencing access to and participation of children in schooling. These include analyses based on large macro level data bases as well as field based studies on small scale. A point that emerges from a scrutiny of these is that the Indian context is so diverse that issues of social and gender inequity or location and poverty variables cannot be treated as single factor causes in exploring their impact or while designing action strategies and programmes. Rather, the analysis shows that they act in consort forming a complex nexus. In fact, it is necessary to explore the possibility of a hierarchical nesting of the four factors in their influence on the process of exclusion, as the crisis seems to deepen as one examines the impact of gender, social and caste affiliations, urban-rural locational disparities and finally economic conditions. The case of the girl-child seems to illustrate the nesting phenomenon quite effectively in the Indian context. As noted earlier, the girl-child continues to be more likely to be excluded than her male counterpart irrespective of other contextual factors. The disadvantage due to gender increases as the girl-child moves down the social and caste hierarchy; in particular, the gender disadvantage increases among social groups traditionally placed at lower rungs of hierarchy. Recent data reveal that this need not be confined only to SCs and STs. The vulnerability of the girl-child to be excluded from schooling increases significantly when placed in rural areas – more remote the location more probable that the girl child is excluded from schooling. Further damage to the prospects of schooling takes place when the economic conditions of the family are in a poor state. Poverty seems to force the family into making invidious choices that directly affect the school participation of the girl-child. This is not to say that boys from socially disadvantaged groups do not suffer and poor boys do not face exclusion. Rather it highlights the need for exploring the issues in greater depth with hypotheses of more complex relationships. Also, mere macro analysis may not capture the complex interactions fully. It is necessary to conduct field based community studies

that dwell deep into unraveling the nexus between these seemingly hierarchical factors. Studies that help illuminate our understanding of such complex interaction among these variables would have to be carried out in multiple contexts carefully selected in terms of demographic, geographical and social characteristics. It would also require conducting longitudinal studies that throw light on the varying combinations that influence the behaviour of the child and the family to make choices in a particular manner. The focus has to be on understanding how the interaction unfolds at the local level and within the family for the education of a child – girl or boy. As the child grows and enters the upper primary classes, one has to recognize the emerging agency of the child. Equally important would be to capture the supply side dynamics in terms of what is on offer in the name of schooling, choices available, the nature of the delivery framework, compulsions on expenses, teaching, curriculum and certification processes as well as prospects for upward mobility in life.

Educating Children from the Margins that Remain Unnoticed

While the statistics as well as official programmes recognize large groups that are likely to be excluded, a substantial number of children seem to go totally unrecognized, practically not entering the registers anywhere. Many of these such as children of parents who are compelled to migrate for economic reasons on a seasonal basis, street children, children from unauthorized urban slums, permanently remain on the unnoticed margins. They are scattered and heterogeneous but their number is not small. Considering that the total number of children in the age group 6-14 in India is around 200 million, even half a percent would come to around 5 million. In fact, a large proportion of children who are physically and mentally challenged face similar problems. Studies show that only a very small proportion of mentally and physically challenged children who account for around 2 per cent of the total (around 20 million) have been able to access schooling. There has been some progress made in reaching these chronically underserved groups. But, neither the data nor empirical studies are adequate to draw conclusive picture of the situation.

Diversification and Disadvantage

Recent years have witnessed considerable variety in the delivery of schooling. In the context of efforts to making access to schools more inclusive, many new forms and structures have emerged such as alternate schools and EGS centres. Most of these schools are small with one teacher and one classroom with barely any academic infrastructure. Added to it is the phenomenon of appointing teachers on *ad hoc* basis from the local community. While one could view them as pragmatic measures helping to extend the coverage, it is important to carefully examine their long-term viability and impact on equity and quality of provisions.

Creation of temporary facilities including EGS centres or enrolling children in residential camps for mainstreaming should be viewed distinctly from developing a system according to acceptable standards and that are sustainable. It is quite clear that most of these alternate mechanisms would not be able to take the students effectively beyond grade 2nd or 3rd. What happens to these children as they complete initial years of the

schooling? Are these sustainable? Also, to what extent are such temporary measures contributing to improving access in quantitative terms? Since they are temporary measures, is there a roll back plan envisaged for such measures without disturbing long term development? How are state governments and local authorities addressing these issues? These are important research questions that need carefully designed field investigations.

Since these delivery structures have come up in small remote locations generally inhabited by traditionally marginalized communities, one has to find out who goes to such schools and what benefit do they get as many of them cannot take them through the full cycle of elementary schooling. In fact, it is important to examine the hypothesis that such efforts while serving well in short term would do damage to the children from the marginalized groups in the long run by permanently relegating them to the backwaters of school education. It is argued that such measures will only further entrench the divisions already existing in the society. Though these are legitimate social concerns, there are no empirical studies to examine the ground reality by tracking children who enroll themselves in such schools.

A related issue to be examined carefully through empirical investigation is that of small schools. It is evident from earlier discussions that the last 10-15 years have witnessed the establishment of a large number of small schools in many parts of the country. Consequently, the number of schools with sub-optimal levels of physical and academic facilities has increased substantially. Available data indicate that one-fourth of the total number of primary schools (around a million in all) are very small with only one teacher and/or one classroom and generally located in small habitations. While the process of establishing small and under equipped schools is likely to continue in many states, it is important that attention is paid to consolidating existing provisions. While the norms of 1 km and 3 km for establishing primary and upper primary facilities could form the general rule, it need not be implemented blindly. Careful analysis of the situation with school mapping and micro-planning are required to guide this exercise of consolidation. The demographic change taking place in several southern states with the cohort entering primary school gradually shrinking, many existing schools are likely to become unviable in terms of population size. Several policy propositions made in recent years need careful consideration in such contexts. In fact, demographic change patterns vary even within state. It is important to analyze the impact of these factors on the demand for school places through macro analysis at state and national levels as well as micro-level studies.

Even with consolidation of schooling facilities, it is imperative that small schools will continue in substantial number. It is important therefore to evolve more focused strategies for dealing with small schools. At present, apart from promotion of multi-grade teaching strategy, no special scheme has been worked out for addressing the problem of sustainability as well as quality of small schools. It should be worthwhile to delineate norms for providing physical and academic facilities in small schools with one or two teachers and ensure that the situation in all such schools is brought to that level. It is necessary to conduct empirical studies and action research programmes to assess the nature of requirements in different contexts keeping the broad norms specified.

Reexamining the Role of Private Providers

Policy documents refer to creating public-private partnership in implementing the programme of elementary education. However, no attempt has been made to define the nature of such relationship and consequently, giving rise to controversies on privatization and reduction of Government responsibility. It is important to give a clear shape to the involvement of private providers based on systematic assessment of the potential, need and appropriateness of increased involvement in achieving the goal of UEE. It is necessary to recognize that the education landscape is changing fast within the wider framework of transformation characterized by liberalization of the economy. It is important to understand these external forces and the ramification they bring to the education sector in the country, particularly in terms of equity and quality. At the same time, it should be remembered that the Constitutional commitment for free and compulsory education entitles everyone rich or poor to benefit from State support. Many observers have pointed out that the existing understanding of the producer-provider framework in elementary education needs to be reexamined. There is no reason why non-profit private providers (NGOs) could not be encouraged to participate in the process of both producing and providing elementary education. But figures clearly indicate that unbridled privatization cannot address the needs of universalisation. Rather such a move is likely to aggravate the problems of inequity. This would require identifying specific areas where such involvement would bring value addition without diluting the commitment of the State to provide free and compulsory education. Could civil society organizations be given a greater role in the implementation of educational activities in the formal school sector? One has also to more closely examine the claim of unutilized potential of the private sector in extending access and coverage. It is equally important to study the possible impact of such arrangements on the issues of equity and quality.

Breaking the Intergeneration Cycle of Illiteracy: Acting Beyond the School Walls

It is clear that endemic poverty along with illiteracy has prevented many children from attending school. The researches also point out that many of these children are first generation learners deprived of intellectual stimulation at the family level. It is in this context that one has to recognize the value of improving adult literacy which has close association with well being of children, increase in demand for education and better chance for attendance as well as retention of children in school. Literate parents are more likely to participate in school activities as compared to illiterate parents. As ASER and other researches under SSA such as those on MTAs have pointed out that parental education particularly mother's education have positive impact on the participation of children in schooling and also on their learning achievement. Therefore, simultaneous attention should be given to programmes of adult education programmes which perhaps have taken a back seat during last few years. Unfortunately, researches in the areas of school education as well as adult education in the country have gone on in isolated compartments, practically imitating the way Government run programmes typically operate. The real challenge for researchers is to explore the complex area of interface

between programmes of adult education and school education, on the one hand and with poverty and other background variables on the other.

To conclude, one has to note that providing access to education with equity in focus is not just a matter of opening more schools and investing more resources. It demands a change in the mindsets. Old notions of excellence and progress have to be replaced with new sets of values. Objectives of education will have to focus more on collective rather than individual intelligence that supports the position that all are capable rather than a few; intelligence is multiple rather than a matter of solving puzzles with only one right answer; imagination and emotional engagement are as important as technical expertise; ability to imagine alternative futures and to solve open-ended problems, and interpersonal skills are integral to the definition of intelligence. School performance is important but not the final benchmark of personal growth and excellence.

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