

What is 'Para' about Some Teachers¹?

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In 2003, towards the end of the fieldwork for a project in a North Indian state, I chanced upon a group of young men and women who were standing in front of the Block Education Officer's (BEO) office. They looked agitated. They were talking about non-receipt of salary for over six months and wanted to know why they should work. I started talking, and over the next two days, heard the story of Ramesar and his colleagues.

Ramesar's Story

Ramesar is a young man of about 30 years. He finished his high school several years back and subsequently completed a primary teacher-training course. He tried hard to get a job in the government but the concerned state government had (at that time) stopped recruiting regular teachers, having decided to recruit only contract teachers. When Ramesar could not find a job as a teacher, he started working as a shop assistant in the local market.

In 1999, there was a buzz in his village that the government was planning to sanction a school in the nearby tribal habitation. He was informed by the village *pradhan* that he had been asked to recommend names of local persons who could work as teachers. An overjoyed Ramesar put in an application to the village *pradhan*, indicating that he was willing to work anywhere—even in a remote habitation. He desperately wanted to be a teacher.

Ramesar was asked to report for an interview at the block headquarters and after a few rounds of tests and discussions, he was offered the post of a contract teacher in the remote habitation. Soon after his appointment, Ramesar attended the 20-day induction training in the district headquarters. He was then asked to report to the village *panchayat* that had identified a space for the school and had also prepared a list of 29 children who would enrol.

The first few weeks were rough. Ramesar had to clear up the space, meet the parents, and ask them to send the children to school. He was shocked to note that several children had been pulled out of the nearby government primary school and enrolled into his school. The children were all from extremely poor families. As the months went by, Ramesar was able to procure textbooks for them and also persuade the village *pradhan* to supply slates and chalk. Over the next year, a thatched-roof school building was ready and Ramesar settled into the routine of teaching. He attended the monthly meeting at the cluster and also collected his honorarium of Rs. 1,500.

¹ This write-up is based on a draft booklet by Ramachandran, Vimala; Bhattacharjea, Suman and Sheshagiri, K M, titled *Primary School Teachers - Twists and Turns in Everyday Practice* (Unpublished Mimeo, October 2008). This research was supported by Azim Premji Foundation, Bangalore.

The euphoria that surrounded the new school died down soon. Ramesar did not get his salary every month and the *pradhan* would ask the teachers to find out from the cluster and block why the funds had not been transferred to the *panchayat*. Several months went by and there was no salary. He then heard that an association had been formed and there was a daylong agitation in the state capital. Then one day – on the second last day of the financial year – Ramesar was paid for six months. The erratic payments continued over the years. He heard that there were tribal areas where contract teachers had not been paid for over two years and he also heard of instances where nothing was paid during the summer vacation.

In the three years that he was a contract teacher, Ramesar attended two training/ refresher programmes for two days each. These workshops focused on how to fill out the household survey and other forms that were routinely handed over to them. There were a few lectures on ‘joyful learning’ and during one training session, they had a one-hour session on making teaching and learning material for children.

Ramesar had just heard that all the *panchayat* schools were to be made ‘regular’ upper primary schools. But the system of contract teachers would continue. It had been almost four years since he had been appointed as a contract teacher. His salary had gone up to Rs. 2,500 per month. Ramesar is a disillusioned man. He now had to teach 35 children in the age group of 4 or 5 to almost 12 or 13 years. So, every year he starts off with the alphabets and numbers, manages to go up to simple addition and subtraction and maybe a few sentences, by which time the academic year is up. The next year he starts off again with alphabets and numbers. Many of his students have gone through this drill with him over and over again and have not been able to move beyond the basics in reading and arithmetic.

What does Ramesar’s Story tell us?

There is really nothing ‘para’ about Ramesar. He is qualified, having completed high school, and a diploma in education; he works full-time – meaning that he manages the school for six hours. He attends the monthly meetings held at the cluster level and sometimes even in the block office. He fills out the same forms as his peers who work in regular primary schools. He is eligible to attend refresher-training programmes like any other ‘regular teacher.’ He is also asked to participate in non-academic duties like national and local elections, Pulse Polio campaigns, and drought relief.

How is Ramesar different from his ‘regular’ peers?

His working conditions are much more difficult:

- He is appointed on a contract basis, which is renewed every year (in some states, it could be every three years).
- He is not a government servant.
- He gets Rs. 2,500 a month, while his peers who are ‘regular’ teachers take home almost Rs. 8,000 a month.
- His salary comes once or twice a year (roughly once in six months).
- He works in a remote rural area and cannot be transferred. He will remain in the same school as long as he and the government want.

- He is not part of the primary teachers' union—he is a member of an unrecognized association.

He also faces extraordinarily difficult teaching conditions:

- When he was first appointed, there was not even a school building—Ramesar had to push for its construction as well as for the provision of basic teaching-learning materials.
- Because he works in a poor, remote rural village, he works with first-generation learners. Family support for and understanding of educational processes are limited or non-existent. He has to persuade parents to send their children to school and keep them there.
- He has to teach in a multi-grade classroom, with students enrolled in Classes I to V and, in some areas, even in Classes I to VII, all sitting together.

He is thrown into this situation without adequate training and non-existent support:

- In remote areas, teachers like Ramesar can be appointed after completing Class X. In many states, para-teachers are not required to have a diploma in education.
- Ramesar received 20 days of induction training, by no means sufficient to teach children from Classes I through V, even under better circumstances. In some states, para-teachers receive as little as five days of induction training (for example, West Bengal).
- He received two days of in-service or refresher training a year. Even these two days were largely spent on issues unrelated to teaching and learning.

Ramesar's situation is by no means unique. Although details may vary from state to state, what is clear is that para-teachers are wholly unprepared and poorly compensated for what is, by any standard, an extremely difficult and complex task: bringing education to first-generation learners in remote, poor, and disadvantaged corners of the country.

Corruption makes the situation even worse. In Rajasthan, for example, a single (para) teacher school was opened in a Schedule Caste (SC) settlement under the erstwhile Rajiv Gandhi Swarna Jayanti Pathshala (RGSJP). An important political leader was appointed as the teacher. Although all the children from the settlement were enrolled, the school was almost always closed. In other villages also, RGSJP schools functioned irregularly as their teachers were 'too busy to teach' (Sharma and Ramachandran, 2008).

The para-teacher phenomenon is widespread and is expanding all over the country, although there is a wide inter-state variation in the policies with respect to their employment. In some states such as Kerala, for example, a few 'contract' teachers have been appointed, supposedly as a purely temporary and stopgap measure. At the other end of the spectrum, Madhya Pradesh had (at one point of time and the current policy is not clear) decided to discontinue the appointment of regular teachers and even declared regular teachers as a dying cadre. In between these extremes, we find Maharashtra, where all new primary level teachers are appointed on a three-year contract and with a low honorarium, even though their qualifications are the same as 'regular' primary teachers; after three years, they are eligible for appointment as 'regular' teachers. There is also Orissa, where on completion of nine years on contract, Sikhya Sahayaks can be appointed as regular teachers in primary

schools against vacant posts with regular scales of pay. This decision was taken by the State Government in 2007. Further, after completion of five years as para-teachers, their monthly remuneration increases to Rs. 3,600, which is equal to the basic scale of pay of a trained regular primary teacher with a diploma in education.

Table1: Number of Para-Teachers/Contract Teachers, Selected States (2006-2007)

	Primary	Primary with Upper Primary	Primary with Upper Primary and Secondary	Upper Primary	Upper Primary with Secondary	Total	% Women
Andhra Pradesh	24,355	21,045	3	0	17,920	63,323	44.85
Bihar	43,730	23,756	655	305	282	68,728	37.81
Karnataka	114	176	27	7	6	330	51.82
Kerala	736	987	215	255	240	2,438	74.45
Madhya Pradesh	75,597	20,794	3,499	17,910	1,403	119,212	30.56
Maharashtra	851	1,469	195	9	1,181	3,922	40.03
Rajasthan	24,384	6,700	647	37	404	32,172	26.87
Tamil Nadu	1,350	534	952	1,718	0	4,554	76.31
Uttar Pradesh	94,853	458	64	349	45	95,773	47.91
West Bengal*	1,345	26	135	746	6,942	9,221	49.42
India (All States)	330,389	94,810	9,285	32,610	31,444	498,944	38.68

Note: * Does not include *Shishu Siksha Karmasuchi* (SSK), *Shishu Shiksha Prakalpa* (SSP) and *Madhyamik Shiksha Karmasuchi* (MSK) as they do not come under the Education Department. (Source: Arun Mehta, 2008).

Table2: Status of Schools and Teachers in West Bengal, 2006-07

Level	No of Schools	Enrolment including SSK and SSP	Number of Regular Teachers	Number of Para-Teachers	Sahayika/Samprasarika	Crude PTR with Para-teachers	Vacant Posts of Para-teachers
Primary and Junior Basic	49,206	10,331,000	161,479	7,511	2,132	60.37	13,177
Shisu Siksha Karmasuchi	16,054						
Shishu Shiksha Prakalpa	1,066						
Junior High School	1,582	3,622,000	15,474	22,822	6,198	81.40	5,581
Madhyamik Shiksha Kendra	1,752						

Source: GoWB, Annual Report (2007).

States like Kerala and Maharashtra which require the same qualifications for para-teachers as for regular teachers are, unfortunately, exceptions to a frightening trend. Merely opening a school and providing a person who is given the label of 'teacher' is to make a mockery of the provision of an educational service. A growing body of research and policy recommendations point to the futility of expecting untrained and unsupported young people to even have the subject knowledge, let alone the pedagogical skills required to teach. The story of Jhumur, a para-teacher in West Bengal, is instructive:

Jhumur's Story

Jhumur is 45 years old and lives in a large village. There are different hamlets/settlements in her village and they are often segregated by caste and

community. There is one primary school in the main village but it is so overcrowded that children from her hamlet find it difficult to get admission. In 1999, she heard that a local community school would be created by the Panchayati Raj Department. As her husband was a member of the local CPM party cell, he had advance information about the school. She was told that they were looking for women above the age of 40 with a high school degree (Class X pass). She was expected to run a school in her habitation and the local panchayat was to help identify a space.

Soon after she was appointed as a *Sahayika* to the Shishu Siksha Karmasuchi (SSK), Jhumur was asked to attend a 5-day training programme, which was conducted by a few retired teachers. The five days were quite uneventful—Jhumur heard many lectures and was given the syllabus and a set of textbooks. On her return from the training, she was told that a group of ‘elders’ (actually the SSK Management Committee) would supervise her work in the village and that she would be paid an ‘honorarium’ of Rs. 1,000 per month. As she had a fairly large verandah in her house, Jhumur decided to run the school from her home.

It is now almost seven years since she started the school. Jhumur says that she has not participated in any refresher programme. The *panchayat* has increased her salary to Rs. 1,500 because she is dedicated and opens the school for four hours every day. A retired school teacher visits her school once every few months, talks to the SSK Management committee (the elders) and encourages Jhumur to carry on.

Reflecting on her work, Jhumur thinks that she is lucky to have got this opportunity—now that her children are grown up, she says this is good ‘timepass’—but immediately retracts her statement. When asked how much her students learn, she admits that they manage to come up to Class III level. She adds that her Maths is rusty and she just cannot go beyond simple addition and subtraction. Her language skills are good. She finds it difficult to teach Social Studies and Science—she showed me a chapter in the Class III textbook on feudalism and imperialism. Laughing out loudly, she said—this is party propaganda and I myself cannot understand these big words, quickly adding that some education is better than nothing and many of her students take private tuitions and enrol in the SSK only to be eligible to sit for the examination.

What sort of education are Jhumur’s students receiving? Let us remember that Jhumur has only studied till Class X, received all of five days of induction training, and has not participated in any refresher or in-service training. By her own admission, the content she is supposed to teach is far beyond her comprehension. How to teach first-generation learners, in different classes, of different ages, and of varying ability levels is not an issue she has even thought about. Further, as SSKs do not come under the education department, they do not get any ongoing academic support. Retired teachers and teacher educators who visit the school are encouraging, but do not address her needs.

Further, while the budget for SSK and MSK flows from GoI’s Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, there is no convergence at the state level. That is, there is no ownership of these schools by the Education Department. The *Sahayikas* and the *Samprasark/Samprosarika* do not see themselves as being part of the larger teaching force of the state. Although the Planning Commission of India and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) showcased the SSK programme as a

management innovation in 2005 (Planning Commission of India and UNDP, 2005), the reality is that these teachers are resentful, their morale is low, and they continue to work because other jobs are not available. One *madhyamik* teacher who has been trying to unionize them noted:

The teachers' union in West Bengal only safeguards the interest of formal school teachers in government schools – they are not concerned about para-teachers or sahayika or those working in private aided or unaided schools. You see 90 per cent of the regular teachers are members of the CPM-led teachers' union and therefore they do not bother about us – we are neither government employees nor do we have regular jobs.

Retracing the history

The big shift began in 1997 with the Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS) in Madhya Pradesh (MP), designed to address the issue of access. The idea behind EGS was simple. The programme guaranteed a school within 90 days of receiving a written request from a *panchayat*. The community, represented by the *panchayat*, was expected to provide space (building, tent, hut, etc.) and also to identify local people who could be interviewed for appointments as teachers. These teachers were paid a fixed salary and appointed for a fixed term. The *panchayat* formally appointed these 'contract teachers' and could also terminate their services for unsatisfactory performance.

Looking back, the euphoria that accompanied the launching of MP-EGS and the initial resistance by the World Bank and other donors to subsequently supporting (and even actively promoting) the idea was indeed an important turning point. While the Rajasthan Shiksha Karmi Project had already appointed local youth as teachers, the *raison de etre* of the scheme was fundamentally different from MP-EGS.

Several state governments saw in the MP-EGS programme's 'Guruji' a cheaper alternative to a formal schoolteacher. Given the budget constraints faced by many state governments and the fact that they were under tremendous pressure to expand the primary education system, appointment of teachers on lower salary and on contract was an attractive option. Howes and Murgai (2004) argue:

'Some states have been successful in the education sector in changing the hiring terms of new staff and offering lower pay and conditions. This has been done through hiring of parateachers, whose salaries are often 20%-50% of regular teachers (...). The parateacher experiment can perhaps be better understood as a cheap means of expanding low-quality education rather than as a way of radically changing the quality of education (...). While parateachers are typically thought of as providing informal education within an alternative community-led framework, several states have also used them in regular education institutions to fill vacancies, provide substitute teachers, and provide a second teacher in single-teacher schools.' Noteworthy among the states are Rajasthan, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh. Some state governments even declared formal schoolteachers as a 'dying cadre' and announced that all future appointments of teachers would only be on a contract basis.

This trend 'implicitly implies dismantling of the teacher service cadre at the state level. Gradually, this unevenness in service conditions of teachers within each state and across different states in the country has increased. Local Self Governing bodies within the state are given a reasonably free hand to decide on teacher recruitment at the local level, apparently operating within a broad framework provided by the state. While some teachers are employees of local village level bodies, the block level or district level bodies may employ some others; though the older ones continue as state government employees. The policy and practices related to para-teachers in different states essentially have their origin in this gradual liberalisation of control and the un-stated move towards dismantling state level teacher cadres' (Govinda and Josephine, 2004).

If we look forward from 1987 (when Shiksha Karmi was initiated), we find that the term 'para-teachers' was not used until after 1994. The word was first used as a generic term drawn from the health sector (paramedical workers) to denote teachers who were locally recruited on a contract basis and also to those who were appointed under different service conditions and drawing lower salaries (honoraria). In the first instance, *Shiksha Karmi* (a Hindi word) was used to denote a teacher with a difference, one who is dedicated to teaching (GoI, 2000). Qualifications were relaxed in order to find people who would be willing to live and work in remote and inaccessible areas. Even before Rajasthan, the Government of Himachal Pradesh had introduced the Volunteer Teacher Scheme in 1984 to improve the situation in single-teacher schools in remote areas.

Over the years, different terminologies emerged—*guruji*, *shiksha mitra*, *sahayika*, *shiksha sahayogi*. The moot point is that there is no agreement on the definition. The term para-teacher is used loosely, and the terms para-teacher and contract teacher are used interchangeably. The Madhya Pradesh government clarified that *gurujis* are not para-teachers and by mid-2000, they had regularized all EGS schools and converted them to formal schools. However, the contractual nature of teacher appointments was not changed. Rajasthan introduced the Rajiv Gandhi Swarna Jayanti Pathshala (RGSJP) in 1998 where local persons were hired as teachers. Again, like MP, the Rajasthan government also formalized these schools without necessarily changing the contractual nature of teacher appointments. West Bengal set up Shishu Shiksha Karmasuchi (SSK) in 1998. By the time the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) came to a close and the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan was launched in 2001, the Government of India introduced the concept of 'transitional schools' where teacher appointments were made on a contractual basis. The two states that resisted the appointment of para-teachers and contract teachers in regular government schools are Tamil Nadu and Kerala. However, Tamil Nadu permitted government-aided schools to hire teachers on a fixed pay and considered their regularization on completion of the 5-year tenure, (Howes and Murgai, 2004).

Practice Shift without Policy Sanction

This is an instance of a 'practice shift' without any policy level decision, which has received a lot of attention from teacher unions, educationists, and researchers. Discussions with teacher union leaders during the course of a study in Rajasthan were insightful (Ramachandran 2005a and Ramachandran, *et. al.*, 2005b). They were quite vociferous in their opposition to the notion of a para-teacher and contract teacher (they used these terms interchangeably). They were also critical of the efforts

of the government to create different layers of teachers—calling it a caste system within the teaching profession. Other scholars have drawn our attention to the long-term impact on the quality of education, the professional identity of the teacher, and the self-esteem of the teaching cadre. The government, on the other hand, argues that contract teachers are as qualified as regular teachers. It also argues that there is no discrimination when it comes to in-service training. Notwithstanding the justification made by the government, teachers across the country are disturbed but the teacher unions have remained silent. For example, in West Bengal, the teacher unions essentially represent the ‘regular’ teachers, just like the labour unions, which only represent the formal labour force. Daily wagers, contract labours, and workers in the informal sector remain outside the jurisdiction of formal trade unions.

There is another dimension to this debate. Educationists have pointed out that while the initial studies done in Rajasthan may have been positive with respect to motivation and dedication of the *Shiksha Karmi*, with the prevalence of the phenomenon of contract teachers, economics became the motivating force. One article points out that low salaries and insecure working conditions of contract teachers do not auger well for the education system; in fact, the quality of education has suffered (Kumar, Priyam and Saxena, 2001). Another study notes that the teachers’ absence rates do not depend on the type of contract: ‘parateachers are no more or less likely to be absent from work than regular school teachers’ (Muralidharan, 2004 cited by Howes and Murgai, 2004).

The total of some 2,20,000 parateachers (...) and the number is going to increase further with Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar having announced new schemes to hire parateachers. This phenomenal growth has occurred despite the finding recorded in this report that classroom transactions are of poorer quality under parateachers. The report says that low salary, combined with the contractual character of the job, has been the major source of discontent and lack of motivation among parateachers. The study suggests that the move towards parateachers runs counter to the DPEP's own resolve to concentrate on the formal system and to improve it with the help of better planning and management (...) Perhaps the biggest irony is that the parateacher policy has surfaced at a time when the Union government has barely begun to tighten the norms of school teaching as a profession. This process has been undertaken under the auspices of the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE), a statutory body set up with the specific purpose of raising the standards of teacher training, recruitment and supervision. The policy of appointing parateachers violates the NCTE Act, both in letter and spirit (Kumar, Priyam and Saxena, 2001).

Discussions with administrators, regular teachers, and para-teachers/contract teachers in different states also confirmed this.² Delays in payment of salaries (honoraria) and the tenuous nature of the contract were cited as factors influencing motivation. Para-teachers/contract teachers most often work in single or at best two-teacher schools and have to handle multi-grade classrooms. The overall infrastructure and facilities available in schools located in remote or relatively inaccessible areas is well known.

² Interviews and group discussions were held between February and July 2008 in West Bengal, Rajasthan, and Maharashtra. Detailed interviews and discussions were also conducted in two other research studies anchored by the principal author of this document—namely ‘Teacher Motivation in India’ (Rajasthan, fieldwork done in 2003-04) and ‘EE System in India – A Field-based Investigation into Institutional Structures, Processes and Dynamics’ (Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh, fieldwork done in 2005).

The government at the centre and the state governments are fully aware that the notion of a para-teacher or contract teacher does not have policy level sanction and that they have been brought in through projects. Later on, they have been formalized through a national level committee of state education ministers. In the last few years, contract teachers have challenged this in court and there has been a lot of debate within the government about the continuation of this practice. Unfortunately, the courts have not supported the cause of para-teachers and contract teachers and to date this remains a contentious issue.

What Implications Does this Have for Teachers as a Community?

As we have noted above, contract teachers/para-teachers slipped into educational practice without any policy-level sanction. DPEP project documents had referred to the idea of contract teachers and promoted the practice in project schools, but the first major reference to the issue can be found in the recommendations of the National Committee of State Education Ministers (1999) which was set up to recommend the approach to be adopted for achieving Universal Elementary Education (UEE). The Committee's views on the subject is worth reading:

Lack of community control over teachers, teacher absenteeism, and low teacher motivation is often cited as reasons for not recruiting new teachers but for only concentrating on reducing wastage and internal inefficiency of the educational system. Even after making allowance for enrolment in private unaided and unregistered private schools, the teacher shortages are very significant. It is on this account that the recruitment of parateachers has to be considered a priority if all vacancies have to be filled up in shortest period of time. The issue of teacher/parateacher recruitment has to be addressed by all states as the long-term implications are for the states (...) for meeting the demand for teachers in a manner that the state can afford. Appointment of pay scale teachers to fill up all teacher vacancies as per teacher-pupil norms would require resources that state governments are finding increasingly difficult to find. The economic argument for parateachers is that provision of teachers as per requirement is possible within the financial resources available with the states. The non-economic argument is that a locally selected youth, accountable to the local community, undertakes the duties of teaching children with much greater interest. The accountability framework is well defined and by making the local authority as the appointing authority, the parateacher's performance assessment is the basis for his/her continuance. The quest for UEE as Fundamental Right signifies a certain sense of urgency in doing so. This urgency calls for appropriate modifications in National Policy in order to respond to local felt-needs. The recruitment of parateachers is a step in this direction.³

A few years later, in 2001, the working group for the Tenth Plan warned: '... In the recent past, there has been a move to decentralize recruitment and to make the teacher accountable to the local community of parents (...) Some of the newly recruited parateachers may be ill-equipped to teach—particularly beyond Class III. There is yet no long-term career development plan for these teachers. Consequently, this situation could quickly deteriorate into low quality education...' (p. 102)

³ Government of India, Report of the National Committee of State Education Ministers under the Chairmanship of the Minister of Human Resource Development to Develop the Structure and Outlines of Implementing Universal Elementary Education in a Mission Mode, MHRD, New Delhi, July 1999: 22-23.

Notwithstanding the apprehensions expressed by eminent educationists and educational administrators, the number of contract teachers and para-teachers continues to grow.

So, we have an expanding teaching force that is demoralized, paid far less than their peers for doing the same job (thus violating the constitutional guarantee of equal pay for equal work), insecure, not sure if their contracts would be renewed, and poorly trained with little or no ongoing academic support. The quality of education has clearly taken a back seat. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that the political leadership of the country is so wary of notifying the Right to Education Constitutional Amendment and introducing the Right to Education Bill in Parliament. The first practice that will be challenged is the phenomenon of different kinds of schools with differential investments for children—effectively making sure that the poorer and more remote a child is, the greater the chances that she will be unable to access a school that can provide her with a meaningful education.

Teachers we spoke to were categorical in their assertion that the introduction of contract teachers has been a huge blow to the teaching profession. In the absence of a pedagogical strategy that helps teachers to deal with diversity in the classroom, we expect them to do the impossible and they are designed to fail. How can we expect the most poorly equipped teacher to deal with the most challenging of situations?

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