

# Learning In The Rural School: Of Chalk and Cheese

Are school systems, unresponsive to the real and growing needs of the rural population, rearing apathetic 'workers'? The Orissa states' efforts have, so far, missed the mark.

**W**hile the world is poised on the threshold of the 21st century, education remains a luxury for millions of people in our country. The pangs of hunger are much stronger than the thirst for knowledge, in the daily grind of making both ends meet. For the few who make an attempt to be schooled, the hurdles are many, forcing some to give up the struggle midway.

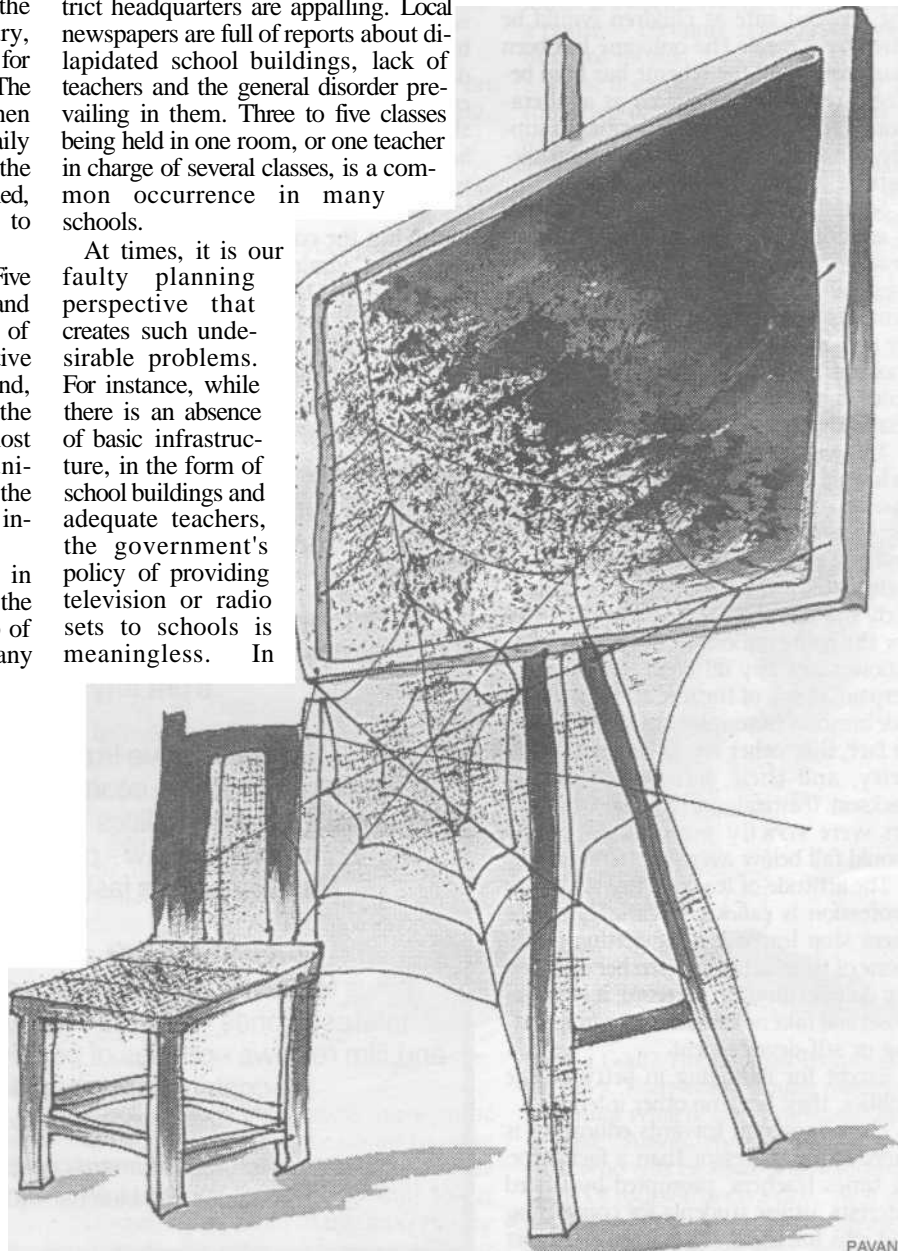
Fifty years of Independence, seven Five Year Plans, thousands of teachers and crores of rupees spent, yet the state of rural schools has remained as primitive and impoverished as ever. On one hand, we have the very small percentage of the population who are educated in the most elite institutions, including foreign universities. On the other hand, there is the vast majority which has not stepped inside a school.

Statistics of primary education in Orissa presents a dismal picture. Of the 48.97 lakh children in the age group of 6 to 10 years, 8.52 lakh do not have any access to schools. Among those who enter schools, 18.73 lakh drop out before reaching standard III. There are more than 9,730 villages in the state which do not have a primary school, and about 5,000 schools are single-teacher schools. While 8,117 schools do not have a building, 2031 schools can boast of only one room for educational purposes.

It is in such chaotic conditions that we expect our children to be schooled. It is therefore hardly amazing that neither teachers nor students enjoy the experience. Leave aside the remote interiors of the backward districts, the condition of schools in some of the dis-

trict headquarters are appalling. Local newspapers are full of reports about dilapidated school buildings, lack of teachers and the general disorder prevailing in them. Three to five classes being held in one room, or one teacher in charge of several classes, is a common occurrence in many schools.

At times, it is our faulty planning perspective that creates such undesirable problems. For instance, while there is an absence of basic infrastructure, in the form of school buildings and adequate teachers, the government's policy of providing television or radio sets to schools is meaningless. In



-H

Sarojini Nayak is a Bhubaneswar-based freelance journalist.

most cases, the village may not possess an electric connection. And in the absence of a school itself, where does one keep a television and in whose custody? If the teacher keeps it in his house he is blamed for misusing school property.

Another highly mismanaged and ineffective scheme is the state government's midday meal programme, that was launched last year. The scheme was implemented in 41,500 primary and upper primary schools at a cost of Rs 65 crore per year. It was felt that this scheme would check the dropout rate as children would be lured by a meal. The outcome has been disastrous, and the scheme has been besieged with problems such as adulteration of food grains, irregularities in supply, misappropriation of funds, and allegations of every kind.

Some teachers allege that the scheme is an unnecessary burden on them. In practice, it has impinged on the regular schedule. There are schools where students have to collect firewood, fetch water and, even make all arrangements for cooking. Class time has been drastically reduced, and the drop out rate has not changed.

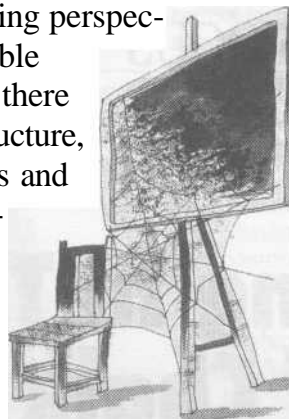
The plight of primary teachers, both in formal and non-formal schools, is well known. One finds them constantly agitating against non-payment of salaries, and the recent teachers' rally in New Delhi, where the demonstrators deliberately marched half-naked was shameful for the entire nation. In Orissa, the condition is not any different. Grossly underpaid, many of the teachers carry on a side business to supplement their income. In fact, this 'other work' becomes a priority, and their actual job takes a backseat. If attendance registers for teachers were strictly maintained, many would fall below average attendance.

The attitude of teachers towards their profession is callous. Invariably, all of them stop learning after getting a job. None of them attend a refresher or training course (though on record, it is otherwise) and take no initiative towards reading or self-development.

Except for indulging in petty village politics, they have no other interest.

Their approach towards education is more as an oppressor than a facilitator. At times teachers, prompted by vested interests, utilise students for completing odd jobs for them. A newspaper report

At times, it is our faulty planning perspective that creates such undesirable problems. For instance, while there is an absence of basic infrastructure, in the form of school buildings and adequate teachers, the government's policy of providing television or radio sets to schools is meaningless. In most cases, the village may not possess an electric connection.



that should have called for an investigation, but apparently caused little flutter, was that of school students being forced to carry bricks for the construction of a drainage channel. The work has been entrusted to a local contractor, but as a show of his clout with the powers that be, he threatened the students that they would be caned if they failed to carry out his orders. Several children sustained injuries, but the complaints of parents to the district administration did not get a response. And this incident occurred in a relatively advanced district like Jagatsinghpur.

As for text-books, the students are lucky if these reach them at all. Hoarding and black-marketing is a regular fea-

ture, and while private printers make a fast buck, the textbooks from the government press remain undistributed. The books are badly written and full of errors.

While the standard of education in the vernacular schools is deteriorating, there is a mistaken impression that the so-called English-medium schools are the best alternative. This conviction on the part of parents has encouraged the mushroom-

ing of English-medium nursery schools. Not only in urban the areas, but also in the rural areas, one comes across such schools which are purely business ventures. The quality of teachers is below standard, and although hefty fees are charged, the money is appropriated by the proprietor.

The introduction of non-formal schools with the aim of taking the school to the student has helped in a small way. The first job of the teachers is to dispel the notion that education will guarantee that everyone will be an officer (as shown in television advertisements).

It is against this dismal background that the present rural education scenario has to be reviewed. **H**