

Why India needs alternative schooling

As far back as 1978, non-formal education was proposed in India. It was seen as one way to meet the needs of children who are unable to go to formal schools because they have to work for a living or look after the home and younger siblings. But why has the concept failed to take off?

By Shushmita Dutt

The assumptions at the beginning of India's struggle for achieving Universalisation of Elementary Education (UEE) were that universal elementary education wasn't possible because there weren't enough schools. These assumptions, however, were soon questioned by educationists, because they did not take into account the socio-economic realities of the country. It was not long before it became clear that the question of enrolment in schools was not merely a question of supply of schools. In spite of the manifold growth of the formal school network in the post-Independence era, it has not been possible to draw all eligible children in the age group of 6-14 into school, nor even to retain all those who were initially enrolled.

The reality in many Indian families is that children work in the fields with their parents, babysit younger siblings so that mothers can work for wages, take on other household responsibilities or themselves work for wages. The educational system had to take this reality into account. The system of Non-formal Education (NFE) was conceived in 1978 to meet the requirements of those children who were unable to attend formal schools. The process was meant to be part of a micro-planning strategy, to reach out to every family and every child, and involve them in the process of education.

The ground realities, however, have proved that without absolute commitment and large-scale human resource input, the very characteristics which should have made NFE attractive have worked against it — flexibility, localisation and need-specific strategies have often been used as loopholes to offer sub-standard education.

Today it is becoming increasingly clear that the Indian educational system requires more than just an expansion of the school system and an inclusion of the NFE system if it is to be set right. It is also being accepted that without a parallel growth in economic activity and rise of other social development indicators, the true benefits of education will not reach the masses. Gradual disillusionment with the existing educational conditions has given rise to a concern that the very educational paradigm accepted by India may be unsuited to a large majority of its people. In an attempt to tailor the delivery system and content to the specific needs of various sections, there have been some small-scale experiments with educational structures, curricula, teaching strategies, teacher training, evaluation and certification, the teaching calendar and management.

The term 'Alternative School' is finding its way into the educational lexicon and beginning to gain respectability. The exact connotation of the term does not seem to have been

frozen yet, and attempts are still on to find an educational paradigm which may be satisfactorily pigeon-holed under 'Alternative School'. The NCERT concept paper on NFE and Alternative Schools (AS) defines AS as a system which has a delivery mechanism distinct from formal schools and NFE. It has been conceived as transacting the same curriculum and textual material as in the formal system but outside the structure. But the concept paper seems to further indicate that it is essentially the degree of flexibility in curriculum design and teaching-learning approach that makes the difference between the formal and the AS. The paper goes on to identify the Open School and Shiksha Karmi schools as examples of AS.

Some educationists struggling to explain what is meant by alternative schools have pointed to it being more economical in that it may be situated in places and for numbers where it is not feasible to have a formal school. (Then is it a NFE centre under another name?) Others claim that alternative schools have the qualities of being child-friendly and attractive. (What! Isn't the ultimate aim of a formal school the same?)

As is evident, the exact connotation of the term is yet to emerge. Or perhaps it is one of those chameleon terms which mean many things to many men.

The need for alternative schools

There still remain some fundamental questions that must be clarified with regard to alternative schools. The first of which is: why do we need them?

In answer to that question it may be said that there is a large component of children who have not found the education presently on offer to be sufficiently meaningful. A study undertaken by Mode for UNICEF in five states of India as recently as 1995 indicates that the vast majority of students attending formal government schools, their parents, as well as students who have dropped out and their parents, seem to hold unfavourable impressions of school. The same study records that the majority of SC/ST students and parents feel that only rich or high-caste families benefit from education. The perceived value of education among children who have never enrolled and their parents is also very low.

Prof Yashpal in the National Advisory Committee Report 1992 (*Learning Without Burden*) has commented upon those who refused to compromise with non-comprehensibility and preferred to drop out rather than submit to years of rote learning without understanding. Some interesting information is available from the National Sample Survey, 1986-87, regarding non-enrolment and drop-outs. Nearly 30 per cent of those

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surveyed, both in the rural and urban areas, gave the reason for non-enrolment as 'Not Interested'. A larger portion of the never-enrolled females gave this answer than did the males — 33.3 per cent as against 26.5 per cent. This could be interpreted as a demand-side constraint to enrolment.

However, some scholars have dug deeper and interpreted it as a supply-side constraint rooted in poor schooling facilities (water, separate toilets) and quality of education (curriculum content, essential learning). This point becomes more relevant when it is considered that relevant curriculum content should motivate students to complete their education and utilise their schooling to better their quality of life. In the same survey, 16.3 per cent of rural and 20.3 per cent of urban dropouts cited 'Failure to Pass Exams' as reasons for dropping out. Again, it would have to be clarified whether this is a demand-side constraint or a supply-side constraint because of irrelevance of curriculum content and poor quality of education or both.

Then there is the question of the curriculum for alternative schools: the need or otherwise for a desegregated, contextual and section-specific curriculum. Whereas some argue strongly for a curriculum that answers specific needs and is relevant to their lives, others see this as a perpetuation of social division. While the effects of the first suggestions might become visible immediately in higher enrolments and retention, the effects of the latter might be evident in the longer term when corrective measures will be too late. Alternative schools would need to consider the above issues very carefully.

The perfect AS teacher

Those who hold a brief for AS argue that the formal system is monolithic and mass-oriented, incapable of recognising individual needs and small but important differences between individuals. Formal schools are part of an enormous whole; in order to exist they have to adopt common curricula and instructional materials. Even the pool of teachers must be clones as far as possible, interchangeable and inter-transferable, with approximately the same qualifications and training. Wittingly or not, the result is a homogenisation of a heterogeneous, diverse population.

AS hopes to be responsive enough to desegregated needs, and provide the kind of schooling that children from various sub-sections of society (presently out of school) may relate to. The ideal AS teacher, even if less academically qualified than the formal school teacher (as in some AS experiments currently under way), would need to be far more resourceful and innovative while clearly keeping the goal of AS in mind if he/she is to be successful.

He/she should be able to draw upon the local culture (myths, legends, ethno-medicine, history, heroes) in the course of teaching and relate the curriculum to local environmental and socio-economic needs, hopes and aspirations. Such a teacher would almost certainly need to be local.

The question of control and certification

The extent of decentralisation indicated by the above expectation would argue for individual, evolving systems covering perhaps one agro-climatic or cultural zone. They may be local, specific systems built upon a single prototype. Or they may be absolutely individual systems loosely connected to other such systems. When considering any individualistic system it becomes the responsibility of the planners to ensure that individuals within one system do not lose their ability to reach out to another. The importance of cross-fertilisation of ideas and innovations depends on this. And so does the ability to access information, technology and even financial support from the mainstream.

Finally, the AS student has the right to expect that his/her education will be recognized by other parallel systems of education and allow the option of continuing education in such other systems. The question of a recognized form of certification, therefore, becomes important.

After AS, what?

So far there has been little serious thought given to adopting AS beyond the elementary level. Is it the aim of alternative schools to facilitate children who have dropped out or never been to school to make up for lost time and join the mainstream at some point? Or does it advocate that AS students accept elementary schooling as sufficient for their

needs? Or again, does the alternative system of education intend to provide alternatives to all levels of education? The entire issue of evaluation and certification is intertwined with this and would need to be sorted out. If alternative schooling is ultimately going to keep the option of mainstreaming open for its students, it will perforce have to toe some formal school lines. The question then is, how much and which ones?

Emerging issues of concern

With any innovation or experiment there are certain legitimate concerns which require thought. Some of these are:

- Does AS fulfil its requirement of attracting previously non-enrolled children?
 - How does the quality of education compare with what is available in formal schools?
 - Does AS offer anything not available in formal schools? Motivation, interest, joy in learning, greater confidence, leadership training, environmental awareness, a sense of responsibility towards the community, ownership?
 - What level of acceptability does AS have vis-a-vis employment, higher education and mainstreaming? How acceptable is the AS certification in other districts, other states?
 - Are AS structures sustainable? Can they be replicated?
 - Is the system of evaluation of pupil attainment effective?
 - Does the low academic qualification of AS teachers affect pupil attainment and quality of teaching?
 - Does the community continue to support and sustain AS in the long run? Does AS meet community aspirations?
- Other areas that need in-depth, longitudinal study are:
- The coverage and access of the AS network: can AS reach all/some/most of the unreached?
 - The management structures and processes of AS: are these efficient, sustainable, vibrant, able to change as per need?
 - Profile of the target population: what socio-economic, cultural, educational backgrounds do the students and parents come from?
 - The perception of the target population about AS, its value, its ability to fulfil their aspirations.
 - The participation and ownership/involvement of the community with the scheme, its planning and functioning.
 - The teacher profile and training: how does it answer AS needs?
 - The teachers' and other officials' perception of AS functioning.
 - The budgetary aspect and unit cost per child per se as well as compared with other systems.
 - The curriculum and instructional materials.

- The AS calendar
- The retention and dropout rates of students
- The profile of out-of-school children in the catchment area of the AS
 - Causal factors for non-enrolment of above group
 - The classroom processes and transactions
 - The learning achievement of the students. A detailed study and review of some presently ongoing experiments on evolving alternative systems of education is of crucial importance at this juncture in India's attempt to meet the goals of UEE. Many of the questions posed above would perhaps be resolved. Answers to all questions may not be available from one experiment — it is more than possible that findings from a number of such small-scale experiments will need to be collated for a meaningful learning experience to take place.

One such experiment, the Shiksha Karmi Schools under Lok Jumbish in Rajasthan, which has been ongoing for some years now has already been studied and evaluated at great length. Some subsequent experiments have also drawn upon the experience gathered there. It is now required that other experiments (AS under District Primary Education Programme or DPEP may be studied in-depth as there has been substantial progress in implementing AS) be documented in the same manner so that an eventual sharing may take place.

It would be interesting to see how the existing AS systems ultimately resolve such problems as certification and evaluation. These experiments will also provide important insights into problems that might occur with regard to the functioning and sustainability of a comparatively large network.

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