

## ALTERNATIVE

# Off the beaten track

*An alternative and supposedly superior method of education in Kerala has failed. But it could have worked, some teachers believe, if adequate preparations had been made*

by Shwetha E George

In a dilapidated building sporting the board 'Government High School' in Alwaye, a prominent town in Ernakulam District, a few Class One students are trying to learn the tables of seven by counting the seeds of the *manjadi* plant. A few others are reading aloud an '*adukkalapaattu*' and a '*bhakshanapattu*' (songs on kitchen vessels and food) from charts clipped to a rope tied across the classroom. No text-books and no scribbling down meaningless information. The noise is deafening, the scene pure chaos. "The kids have never enjoyed learning better," says their teacher, "but an official order to cease this kind of teaching could come any day now."

This school is one of the many government-aided schools in Kerala that has undergone a curriculum revision under the DPEP (District Primary Education Programme) introduced by the Left government in the early nineties. A child-centred form of education that was intended to bring out total involvement of the child in the learning process, DPEP was completely alternative in its method. The concept was borne at the international seminar on education in Thailand in 1990 in which participating countries decided that education must be provided to everyone by 2000. The Central Advisory Board of Education approved the plan and decided to implement it with funds from World Bank (40 crores for each selected district) in 150 districts in India, six of them falling within Kerala state itself. Kasargod, Wayanad, Malappuram, Trivandrum, Palakkad and Idukki. Fearing that differences might crop up between DPEP and non-DPEP districts, the SCERT therefore agreed for a total curriculum revision in all government schools in Kerala.

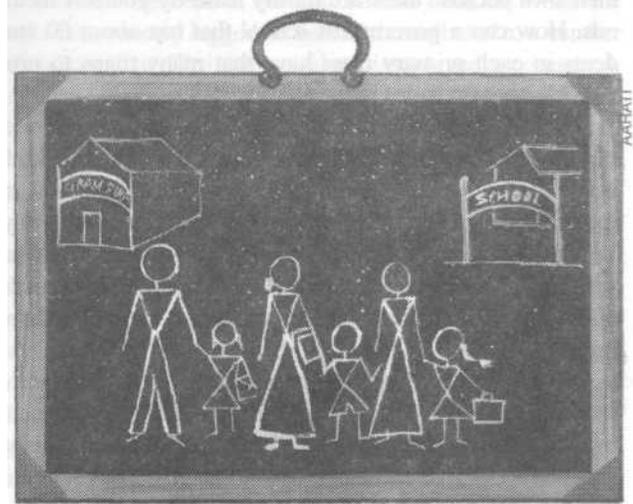
The need for an alternative system was never greater in the state. The National Institute of Education Planning and Administration's report on educational standards stated that although Kerala rated high in class quantity, it ranked only 18th in terms of the reading, writing and mathematical capacity of the student. In fact, for every 100 students admitted into primary schools, only 70 per cent reached the 10th grade and only 14 per cent of them passed the state examination without moderation.

The Yashpal Committee report on primary education was also an eye-opener. "Joyless learning — that was what he discovered about the education system in our country," says Jayasree, a government school teacher in Ernakulam. Teaching, he said, was made a product-oriented process in which getting the right answer proved a child's competency. "So

all he needed was a good memory. His inherent skills were unnoticed. Teachers played the dominant role and spoon-feeding went on for generations."

Therefore, the main objective of DPEP was to focus on each child's interests and how he learns instead of what he learns, reduce his work load (school bag should not weigh more than four kilos), increase the quality of education and teachers and reduce the number of drop-outs.

Therefore, text books were changed. Written content was minimised. Drawing, colouring, group activities, field trips and reading comers in classrooms were the new curriculum. Teachers were trained in batches by expert groups. Monitoring agencies comprising of higher-grade teachers and jilla officers toured schools to extend support and technical tips. But it bombed.



In just the fourth year of its implementation, the DPEP lost the complete faith of the public and was labelled the greatest fiasco of the Left government. Parents began complaining that their wards were not being given any written homework. They could not fathom how composing a song on kitchen vessels would help these kids pass the Tenth Board Exam. Anti-Left parties maintained that 'alternative education methods' are brainless schemes funded by the World Bank to keep backward countries more backward. The entertainment industry made films and street theatres showcasing the classrooms as venues of absolute mayhem, where kids use neither text books nor school bags.

So much so that the text-books for the eighth graders

have not arrived yet. But the newly-elected Congress government has not officially abolished the scheme either. In effect, however, schools are reverting to conventional teaching. What really went wrong?

"It was an excellent scheme. But it was implemented without any proper planning," says Chacko PI, a teacher in CMS High

**School in Pallom.** "No awareness campaigns prior to implementation." The whole scheme was decided, planned and implemented within just six years. Although teachers' training started immediately, nothing was done about existing school infrastructure. "Forget better laboratories, not even a file was bought."

Scrap books, story books, performance records, seminars and exhibitions are the must-haves of an alternative teaching system. "A DPEP-based Geography text-book requires every student to have a map of India and a globe of their own because these are mostly learn-by-yourself methods. How can a government school that has about 60 students in each primary class have that many maps to provide? "

What happened to the funds, neither the government nor the teaching fraternity has an answer. Even the 'road-side classes' that were conducted to convince the public of the need for an alternative system came too late in the day. By then criticism had mounted and the situation was irreversible. In addition, this kind of teaching calls for double effort from the teachers. They must be resourceful and innovative.

"For instance, 'three and two make five' is a standard teaching method," says Jayasree. "But in DPEP-based teaching, the child is given the result 'five' and asked how many ways he can arrive at that answer. So he calculates 'ten minus five', 'four plus one' and gets a better grasp of what addition is all about."

#### Continued from page 14

In the meanwhile, the girls shared their experiences with traders, shopkeepers and sometimes, even their teachers touching their hands deliberately. This was an important thread to explore. This complex phenomena however, could not be dealt with during the short interaction.

There was some discussion around their aspirations and the basic requirements to achieve them. How far it is acceptable/agreeable for them to continue their parents' occupations was discussed. It was important to stress that



Students of 'The Choice' school in Kochi enacting their chapter on Kashmir

The evaluation system under the DPEP was also a complicated one. In addition to a Q and A form, a student is also subjected to various curriculum statements. For example, the English-language teacher has to find out if he reads story-books, asks for the meaning of unfamiliar words, reads titles, headlines, signals, etc. As for

'Writing', is he able to write down names of his classmates, lists of things he uses daily, messages on greeting cards and so on? Not all teachers are willing to do that extra work.

"It was a very good scheme while it lasted," says Molly Cyril, principal of one of Kerala's most exclusive private schools, The Choice, in Ernakulam. In private schools where teachers are a law unto themselves, implementing an alternative mode of teaching is much easier. No dearth of money and no unions to root for rights, these schools arrange field trips, organize exhibitions, put up a fashion show to teach about textile industry, plant paddy crops in the backyard during their social science period and cook *bhelpuri* and *chaat* inside the classroom for their chapter on Mumbai.

However, a government scheme cannot survive without public support. "And we lost it because we rushed headlong into it" says Chacko. "Most teachers were only beginning to get the feel of it. Given a second chance, we can still make it work." With parents still clammering for ranks, a political system that will continue to interfere and a demoralised education department, can they, really?

*Some names have been changed to protect identities of the officers of the education department.*

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there were very few options directly after the seventh standard. They were given information about the three streams in college, and what it takes to become a nurse, teacher, doctor, lawyer, etc. in response to their queries. They felt reassured that Open Universities make it possible for school dropouts to catch up with education later.

*Vacha is in the process of modifying these modules further. They welcome further discussions and insights at [vacha@vsnl.com](mailto:vacha@vsnl.com) or at Municipal School, Ground Floor, Tank Lane, Santacruz (w) Mumbai- 400054.*