

# Teaching troubles

*Unless the government puts its money where its rhetoric is, no scheme devised to educate India can succeed*

## GUEST COLUMN

geeta  
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**education**

FOR several years now, education — or the lack of it for a majority of our population — has become the subject of major initiatives, both government and non-governmental. From the New Education Policy, the Navodaya Vidyalayas, the Total Literacy Mission, Operation Blackboard and the Mid-day Meal Scheme, to the latest Education Guarantee Scheme suggested in the latest budget, every possible scheme has been devised to educate India.

Yet, these schemes have either failed or have met with partial success. Why? There are no easy answers, just as there is no magic formula to achieve total literacy. As has been obvious from budgets down the years, the rhetoric on eliminating illiteracy has been accompanied by a reduction in allocations for education by state governments. But that is only part of the story.

The Public Report on Basic Education (PROBE) in India, brought out by a team of independent researchers, has sought to fill in the blanks, detailing the years of monumental neglect, the crushing combination of the inequalities of caste, class and gender, the irrelevant content of the 'education' imparted and the new breakthroughs in this morass.

PROBE is an investigation conducted by the Centre for Development Economics at the Delhi School of Economics. Over 200 villages in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh, covering 1,376 households, were surveyed in an attempt to uncover the myths and problems afflicting the school system.

Region-specific problems notwithstanding, the report puts a face to the issue, and a voice, through a record of the sentiments of parents, teachers and children. In fact, apart from Himachal Pradesh, which presents a positive picture overall, the status of education in the other states is dismal, to say the least.

Universal adult education, the report says, is now being talked of as a fundamental right, and the 83rd amendment to the Constitution (intended to ensure just this) has been pending for some years now. But this will remain mere rhetoric if unaccompanied by any initiative to resolve the problems in providing for education.

The PROBE report does make a distinction between education and basic literacy. The status of basic literacy is depressing in the extreme: 61 per cent of adult Indian women and 36 per cent of adult men are illiterate, as are one-third of this country's children (23 million boys and 36 million girls). In other words, less than 30 per cent of adults have completed school.

Also interesting are the myths and misconceptions that the report pinpoints. While admitting that there is a grain of truth to some of these perceptions, the report feels that they are highly exaggerated and provide a ready excuse for policy makers to, well, make and execute their policies!

- The first myth: that parents are not interested in educating their young. The PROBE survey states that the proportion of parents who answered 'yes' to the question: 'Is it important for a boy to be educated' was 98 per cent. The grain of truth: that parental indifference still governs education for girls.

- The second myth: that child labour is the main obstacle. According to the Coalition Against Child Labour, India has between 70 and 80 million child labourers, working an average of 12 hours a day. PROBE states that only a minority of children are full-time labourers who have no time to spare to acquire an education. While this in itself is deplorable, the sorry situation endures, both due to the corruption of law-enforcement agencies and the poverty that forces such children into the workforce. Yet, a majority of child labourers are family labourers. With them a more imaginative initiative on the part of school managements — adjustments in school timings, for instance — could work.

- The third myth: elementary education is free. Though admission fees in government schools, says the report, are negligible or non-existent, other costs are prohibitive. In the states surveyed, a family spends, on an average, Rs 318 a year per child on fees, books, slates, uniforms etc. In one instance, a child dropped out of school because she did not have an Her younger siblings were more fortunate; by the time their turn to attend school arrived it was no longer compulsory to wear uniforms.

Again, when there are more children in a family money can be scraped together to educate the first or second child. This can be seen even in urban areas. Given the general proclivity for education in the English medium, parents incur major expenditure putting children into private schools. The second or third child is usually put into a government or municipal school in the vernacular medium.

- The fourth myth: that schools are available. PROBE provides a depressing account of the real picture — schools are conducted in the open, without basic facilities like a blackboard; teachers make guest appearances; children have to travel long distances over rough and inhospitable terrain to get to school; if there are primary schools, there are no middle schools; parents are reluctant to send girls to schools in villages other than their own; and even that lower caste students are discouraged from attending school.

What of content? Some of the examples the PROBE survey gives about the irrelevance to what is taught would be laughable if they weren't so pathetic. Children living in rural areas with no roads, hospitals or fire brigades are taught and forced to repeat, by rote, traffic rules and regulations — where should one avoid blowing the horn? When crossing a road, what must you keep in mind? These children are even taught about zoos and animal hospitals!

Teachers must be highly motivated in make the best of such situations. Some teachers do make a difference, but they are the exception. As a rule teachers look upon their task as both thankless and useless, albeit one that gets them a regular salary. Their efforts are, therefore, perfunctory.

The report does look at the alternatives — at experiments like the *shiksha karims*, who are from the village but are not fully qualified teachers, alternative schooling and private schooling, non-formal educational centres set up by the central government (there are at least 2.4 lakh such centres, a majority of them non-functional). But most of these are, what the report terms, soft options.

The situation can only be corrected, the report argues, if we succeed in making education compulsory. If education is a fundamental right, if it becomes an issue for political lobbies, if more funds are set aside for it, then perhaps universal education will come close to becoming a reality.