

Teachers' day out

Give Panchayats Right To Hire & Fire

THE government's Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (education for all) is in serious trouble. Many places have no schools and many schools have no teachers. A recent report in this paper shows that most states have failed dismally to reach their teacher-appointment targets for 2003-04. Bihar's achievement was 0%, despite which Laloo Yadav won the election handsomely. Clearly Biharis expect so little from the government that zero performance in education no longer constitutes non-performance. The achievement of teacher-appointment targets was just 21 % in West Bengal and 22% in UP. It was best in Orissa (79%) and Jharkand (69%) where appointments were decentralised to the panchayat or community level. In Bihar, power remains tightly centralised and that militates against flexible hiring. This drives home the need to decentralise education. Ideally panchayats and communities should have the authority and funds to hire, pay and fire teachers. That alone will ensure accountability to the community and end the current scandalous state of education where teacher absenteeism can be as high as 40 %.

Some think India has too many civil servants. Yet, a World Bank study showed that India had one of the lowest number of civil servants per million of population. India's problem is an excess of bureaucrats in the wrong place and gross inadequacy where they are needed, as in education. The Pay Commission award raised salaries and made most state governments bankrupt. Consequently, the latter virtually froze fresh recruitment. Many opted for para-teachers appointed by panchayats rather than regulars. The ostensible reason was to increase accountability and reduce teacher absenteeism, but a more compelling reason was bankruptcy. Para-teachers are not state government employees, and so can be paid a tiny fraction of government teachers' salaries. True, they cannot provide high-quality education, yet some education is better than none. But as long as they are appointed by state governments, they can always claim and get parity with regular teachers. To prevent this, they must be appointed by panchayats, not state governments.