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# Waiting to learn

By Kalpana Sharma

ONE OUT of every three girls in Maharashtra never goes to school. Only one per cent of women in the Katkari tribe in the State are literate. Yet, according to the latest census, Maharashtra holds the second position amongst major states (excluding smaller States and Union Territories) in levels of literacy with a 77.27 per cent literacy rate. Kerala heads the list with a literacy rate of 92.9 per cent.

Also according to the 2001 Census, Maharashtra has seen the maximum progress in increase in literacy in the last decade. Rural literacy is supposed to have increased by 15.23 percentage points and urban literacy by 6.56 percentage points. If that is the case, then why are so many girls still out of school?

"The State of Primary Education in Maharashtra", a report compiled by the Bal Hakk Abhiyan which has been agitating for the fundamental right to education, brings out the other side of the story. It illustrates that State averages do not reveal the dark spots that exist within the most advanced States. It also suggests that we have to look beyond numbers, and hear the voices of actual people — in this case of children — to comprehend the full dimension of the problem.

Each time attention is drawn to the pathetic state of affairs in primary education, most State Governments resort to the time-worn tactic of launching a new scheme. Maharashtra launched the Mahatma Phule guarantee scheme which is supposed to provide education centres where there are no schools. This was designed to cover areas where enough children — a minimum of 10 in tribal areas and 16 in others — could not be enrolled to justify setting up a school. But there is no data to indicate whether the scheme has made any difference.

Six years ago, the State Government launched a Plan of Action which promised free and compulsory education to all children up to 14 years of age. Yet, the gap between promise and performance continues to grow. This has been vividly captured in some of shots in a new documentary film, "Let me also come to school", by the Mumbai-based filmmaker, Ms. Simantini Dhuru. The film, which would benefit from tighter editing, depicts

what one has read in cold print for many years — locked school houses, collapsed school buildings, children learning in the open in the blazing sun or even during torrential rains, teacher-less schools, schools where children are given irrelevant and inappropriate education, children being forced to drop out of school.

Despite this, all the children interviewed on film speak of their desire to learn. Little girls compelled to leave school because their labour is needed in the field or at home talk shyly about how they dream of being in school, how they enjoyed going to school. Young tribal boys voice their hopes of finishing school and getting a good job.

## Even after 54 years of Independence, we have yet to summon the political will to ensure universal primary education.

Poor parents confirm their desire to educate their children.

Yet, the film also shows officials repeating misconceptions about the reason children drop out of school, specially in tribal areas. The parents are ignorant, they do not want to send their children, the children are inattentive etc., argue the officials. There is no mention of systemic problems that underlie the absence of children from classrooms or the fact that so-called "free" primary education actually has considerable hidden costs which poor families cannot bear.

Ms. Dhuru's film brings out the discrimination that children from lower castes face in school. A boy from the Pardhi (denotified tribe) community narrates the kind of treatment that is meted out to him when he goes to school. It also captures the problems of landless Dalit families who are seasonal migrants from the impoverished parts of Marathwada to the rich, sugarcane growing areas of western Maharashtra. According to the Government's figures, an estimated five lakh families migrate each year during the sugarcane cutting season. Even at a conservative estimate, there would be seven lakh children out of school just in this one community. Such children cannot hope to attend school unless their special circum-

stances are recognised. But this is not done. As a result, in Marathwada there are schools and teachers, but no children.

In the tribal areas of Maharashtra, on the other hand, there are insufficient primary schools. If there are schools, there are no teachers. As a result, another generation slips into illiteracy and officialdom blames them for lack of motivation. Officially, tribal languages such as Korku are recognised and there should be primers in the language as well as teachers who can teach in it. Yet, routinely teachers posted to these areas say they cannot teach because the children do not understand Marathi. There is no pressure on the teacher

to learn the local language and teach in it.

The State is short of 72,000 classrooms and 18,000 teachers. The Government has appointed several thousand shiksha karmis or para-teachers on contract. But these are temporary appointments and there is no guarantee either of quality or sustainability.

The usual argument put out by all Governments, State as well as Central, is the shortage of funds for education. But look at Maharashtra's performance on this count. Although the outlay for successive years for education has increased, only a fraction of it is actually spent. The Bal Hakk Abhiyan report outlines the discrepancy between plan allocations and actual funds made available in the annual State budget for education as well as the gap between the amounts allocated and the amounts spent.

For instance, in 1998, Thane district should have built 700 classrooms. Instead only 72 were built. In Akola, the target was 500. Only one classroom was built. In Washim too, only one was built although the target was 170. Every district had a huge shortfall between target and actual performance. In Chandrapur, not a single new classroom has been built since 1997. How can things improve if the deficit of physical spaces where children are sup-

posed to learn is so enormous?

Even funds provided by the Centre have not been utilised. For instance, Rs. 10.40 crores were sanctioned by the State Government in 1993-94 under a scheme sponsored by the Centre to buy 8,000 colour television sets for primary schools that are run by Zilla Parishads. But an audit inspection (December 1996 to October 1997) found that out of a total of 880 TV sets which were to be distributed in seven districts, 520 sets, costing Rs. 66.24 lakhs, could not be used. Here is what the report states: "The TV sets in 42 schools of Thane district were not used due to absence of electricity, 246 schools of Sindhudurg, Sangli and Ratnagiri were not in the limit of transmission, in 162 schools of Ratnagiri, Aurangabad, Raigad, Satara and Thane, the TV sets sent were defective or damaged. Further, in 70 cases in Ratnagiri and Aurangabad the sets were not used as the schools were not provided boosters." So much for audio-visual learning tools.

None of this, of course, touches on the quality of education where children are taught through syllabi which are completely inappropriate in their surroundings. Thus, slum children in Mumbai learn English nursery rhymes which they repeat by rote without an iota of understanding of the language. Similarly, tribal children are taught a level of Marathi which is completely beyond their grasp.

In 1998, the path-breaking Probe (Public Report On Basic Education) study created some ripples. It focussed on the state of primary education in five States and graphically illustrated the problems and suggested some solutions. There was a flurry of activity and discussion at the time of its release. But since then little progress has been made. Even the 83rd Amendment to the Constitution, which seeks to make elementary education a fundamental right, and which was tabled in the Rajya Sabha in 1997, has still to be passed.

Every policy-maker in this country recognises the crucial importance of universal primary education. Yet, even after 54 years of Independence we have yet to summon up the political will to push this through. The tragedy is that the issue of basic education is not just on the back-burner, it seems to have been removed off the stove completely.

## **ED1**

# **BILL ON THE FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT TO EDUCATION**