Fault Lines in Government and the Trajectory of Education Programmes: Lessons from DPEP and SSA

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The District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) and the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA) that followed it, have been critical programmes for elementary education in India. DPEP aimed at making primary education universal, while the goal of SSA was to make elementary education universal. Both sought to reduce gender and social inequities in education and improve learning levels. As these programmes progressed, they were pivotal not only in implementing policy, but also in creating it and changing institutional structure. In DPEP and SSA, new schools and supporting institutions were set up, new policies regarding teachers evolved, and pedagogic practices, i.e. textbooks, teaching methodology, student evaluation etc. were impacted.

As an Indian Administrative Service officer, I was happy to work in the DPEP and SSA, because I was keenly interested in elementary education. But surprisingly, this experience led me back to a renewed interest in my core work: the working of government. As I collaborated with colleagues within and outside the government on pedagogic issues such as textbook writing, teacher training, student evaluation etc., various non-pedagogic 'events' took place, which eclipsed concerns about teaching and learning, and swept along our efforts in unexpected directions. It became clear to me that the quality of elementary education was at least as dependent on how the government worked, as it was on the curriculum, the quality of textbooks and teacher training and that government reforms were a necessary condition for the reform of education.

DPEP was launched in 1994, after the economic reforms of 1991. The economic reforms were taken up in the context of a foreign exchange crisis, for which the government sought an emergency loan from the Indian Monetary Fund (IMF). IMF conditions required not only that the economy be liberalised, i.e., licenses and quotas for industries be disbanded and tariff barriers be lowered, but also that government expenditure be controlled. This meant a financial squeeze on the social sector, including elementary education. There were fears among policy makers that such budgetary cut-backs would hurt the poorest sections of society and, in education, stall the universalisation of elementary education, which was mandated in the directive principles of the Indian Constitution. Moreover, at this time, India had become signatory to several international agreements to make primary education universal. Consequently, the government decided to seek financial assistance from external funding agencies such as the European Union, the World Bank etc for primary education, which came in the form of an externally assisted programme for making primary education universal in backward districts, i.e. DPEP.

DPEP differed from the government programmes of that time in several ways. To begin with, it was implemented through a project structure, rather than the departmental machinery. Project offices to manage the programme were set up at state and district level, separate from the offices of the government departments. This decision was driven by two factors. The practical reason was that, as DPEP was funded by various external agencies, a separate project structure enabled better tracking of expenditures and monitoring of the project by the funding agencies. But in a more long-term sense, the more important reason was a belief that the regular government offices and institutions were simply not capable of the type of developmental work envisaged in DPEP. Proponents of the project approach argued that the administrative structures of education were totally caught up in routine activities such as disbursing salaries, organising examinations, lackadaisical school inspections etc., and academic institutions lacked real expertise and willingness to innovate. In contrast, making good quality primary education universal required community mobilisation to get out -of -school children into school, with a special focus on girls, scheduled caste and scheduled tribe children and the disabled and an interesting and attractive classroom.

My own first exposure to DPEP as Director, State Council for Educational Research and Training (SCERT) in Madhya Pradesh showed, all too clearly, that these were very real problems of our existing institutions. SCERT was given the task of making new textbooks that promote activity-based learning and teacher training. In actual fact, SCERT had no one who could guide this process. SCERT routinely produced slipshod textbooks, which were dull, not based on any thought-out pedagogic strategy, and even full of printing errors! To make good quality, activity-based textbooks, intensive collaboration with NGOs and experts from outside government became necessary. And the SCERT faculty, rather than leading the reform, had to be coaxed to participate and not obstruct the new pedagogic practices. While some of the faculty joined in and worked hard, others continued to drag their feet.

This experience showed clearly that the state government had paid no attention to developing the SCERT as an institute of excellence. The people posted to SCERT were usually college teachers and were there not because they were interested in school education or had some special expertise, but because they wanted to stay in Bhopal and were in a position to manipulate their posting. Some were disinterested in work of any kind, some were happy to work as they always had, producing indifferent textbooks and teacher training modules and a few who were work oriented, lacked exposure and encouragement. Now, when the government attempted to improve the quality of primary education, its institute was of little help. This problem of human resources was visible not just in SCERT, but all through the system. The administrative offices lacked trained educational administrators, and experts in gender, community mobilisation, education of differently abled children etc. Making primary education universal required a radically different institutional support structure.

Given this situation, two approaches were possible. One, the government could have improved the existing institutions. Two, setting up a separate project structure, with better expertise and modes of working. The first possibility was never even seriously considered. The political need, as well as pressure from funding agencies was to act quickly, building new schools, changing text books, training teachers, etc. Transforming the system would have taken time. Moreover, it was difficult to do: it meant getting the right people in the right places. In the regular structure, favourites were posted in good positions, with little attention to merit, and changing this practice meant upsetting existing power equations. It also meant working in a more thinking and democratic manner, rather than the command -and -control style, which also affected those in power. Given these difficulties, DPEP was implemented through a project structure.

The project strategy appeared to work to a degree. Several activities, ie new schools, vastly improved textbooks, large-scale teacher training, community mobilisation, various types of strategies to enrol out of school children etc. were taken up.

Why did this happen? Why was the new project structure more vibrant than the old government structures? Notably, the DPEP staff included experts on gender, children from deprived groups, differently -abled children, community mobilisation etc., unlike the regular government offices and institutions, which were staffed with teachers who had been promoted, but never retrained to address their new tasks. In DPEP, efforts were made to recruit the best possible people in contrast to the patronage-based transfer and posting practices that characterised the regular system. In other words, human resource management in DPEP took into account the merit and the expertise needed, rather than patronage, as the criteria for positioning people. This was supported further by constant engagement with NGOs and resource persons, so that expertise from outside the government was also harnessed.

However, even as DPEP adopted new ways of working, no attempts were made to bring about similar changes in the regular departmental structure. In fact, the departmental structure was weakened further, as it was reduced to routine work, such as disbursing salaries and conducting examinations. People working in the regular departmental offices were not trained or exposed to new ideas and were de-motivated as they felt (and were) excluded from new initiatives. This exclusion was visible from the ground to the national level. Many of them became critical of DPEP initiatives and created difficulties for the project. More important, an opportunity to bring about long-term changes in the existing system was lost. What may have happened if the expertise hired in the project structure had been made part of the regular departmental structure, merit-based transfers and postings made mandatory and the whole departmental structure retrained in new ways, remains a hypothetical question.

When SSA replaced DPEP in 2000, there were some important shifts. First, as SSA was launched in 2000, the Indian economy had begun to grow rapidly and government revenues increased substantially. This meant that the government could spend substantially more funds on the social sector. Consequently, SSA was not externally funded, but was funded by the Central Government, with state governments providing a small share. Over the years, the funds available for SSA and, through it, investment in elementary education, increased exponentially. Yet today, though several new schools have been set up, the school infrastructure has improved vastly, and enrolment in elementary education is near universal, children's learning levels remain abysmal, and there is a continuous migration of wealthier children to private schools. In spite of huge investments, a well-functioning elementary education system remains out of reach. The reasons for this lie in the persisting fault lines government functioning that DPEP took short-term measures to counter but failed to address for the longer term. In SSA, the defences that DPEP had tried to create against the institutional malaise were undone.

SSA, as a national programme, could have done away with the project structure. However, though the proponents of the programme criticised the project structure of DPEP, it was retained in SSA. The reason for this was simply that the pros and cons and possibilities were not discussed in-depth. In fact, scant attention was paid to the lessons, positive and negative, from DPEP. This happened because in government, policies and programmes are formulated in a highly individualistic manner. The extent and depth to which past experiences are analysed and lessons learned are highly variable. As SSA was formulated, there was little exploration of the strengths and weaknesses of the DPEP project structures. In the end, they simply became the SSA structures and, as SSA moved beyond the DPEP districts, similar structures were set up in new districts. Again, there was no attempt to address long term institutional problems.

At the same time, many of the positive practices that had made DPEP structures effective were abandoned. As SSA was a domestically funded programme and not an externally funded one, manpower recruitment and placement processes were more aligned to the existing practices within government. Consequently, over time, the merit-based recruitment and posting that had characterised DPEP were replaced by patronage-based postings. Also, compared to DPEP, officials in SSA engaged far less with experts from outside the system, so that the flow of new ideas and practices declined too. As in the case of other government programmes, the focus shifted to creation of infrastructure. Consequently, much of the vibrancy that had characterised DPEP was lost.

In fact, DPEP and SSA contributed significantly to reducing the quality of teachers. An important development that took place with DPEP was that 'para' teachers, contractual employees, who were poorly paid, began to be appointed. This happened because many states needed large numbers of additional teachers to make primary education universal, but the finances of most state governments were in poor shape. As the pressure to make primary education universal grew, states attempted to bring down the cost of teachers so that they could hire more of them and began to appoint para- teachers. In Madhya Pradesh, regular teachers were declared a 'dying cadre' and were replaced by para -teachers as they retired. The 'Education Guarantee Scheme' of Madhya Pradesh promoted the concept of poorly paid, contractual community teachers as desirable and not just a response to strained finances and was admired by many. Not all states embraced the para- teachers as enthusiastically as Madhya Pradesh, but nearly all hired some para- teachers.

The appointment of para- teachers was a highly contested issue. Those who favoured the idea argued that the regular teachers became smug because they were permanent, were often absent, did not teach with any commitment and there was no need to pay them good salaries. A contractual, low paid teacher from the community was far more likely to be committed to the school. Those who were against para -teachers argued that teachers needed to be made more, and not less, professional. Hiring poorly paid, ill qualified para -teachers was a disservice to the poor children who attended government schools. Again, this question was rarely debated rationally. For instance, little attention was given to the fact that politicisation of teachers, patronage in postings, and lack of recognition of good work, rather than salary and permanence, may be the important issues. Again, policies were often simply changed overnight, with little analysis and reflection.

As SSA was launched, it tacitly supported para-teachers by providing payment for their salaries, and the number of para- teachers grew rapidly, in spite of the fact that the financial constraints that had propelled the appointment of para-teachers no longer existed. But, over time, para teachers formed unions and agitated for secure employment and better wages. Subsequently, state governments had to make several concessions, raising the salaries of para -teachers and making tenures more secure. This meant adopting the worst of both worlds: poorly qualified people were hired as teachers when low-paid, contractual jobs were advertised. But their salaries had to be increased, not on the basis of performance, but on the success of their agitations. Many para-teachers also became semi-permanent, with the consequence that the whole idea of removing a teacher because of poor performance became meaningless. In addition, the policies regarding teachers changed continuously and school system now functioned with a large number of dissatisfied, and often agitating, teachers.

Because the institutions remained fundamentally unreformed, there were setbacks in other areas too. For example, DPEP had promoted context-specific, decentralised planning and each year, district level plans were prepared with the goal of making primary education universal. The DPEP programme guidelines were very sparse, with only some 'do's and don'ts', as each district was expected to formulate its own strategies in the context of its own problems. For example, to enrol out -of -school children, the strategy could be to mobilise and sensitise the community, or start an alternative education centre, or initiate a bridge course so that children could join formal schools, etc. This was unlike the usual government schemes, where strategies were pre-decided. For example, the pre-DPEP scheme for Non-Formal Education (NFE) stipulated a single strategy to enrol out- of -school children, i.e. starting non- formal education centres with fixed costs. It did take into account that, in some cases, mobilising the community to send children to schools, or providing childcare to free older siblings to attend schools might be better strategies.

As district plans were prepared every year in DPEP, they were discussed and analysed in some depth at all levels. Several new strategies to enrol out -of -school children emerged. However, from the very beginning, the tendency was to take decisions at the state level, so that all the district plans of a particular state looked alike. This happened for two reasons. One there was the lack of capacity at the district level. The manpower at the district offices was limited. Moreover, district officials were not used to planning and often did not make very good plans. In such cases, state officials tended to step in. Second, this was how government departments usually functioned: state officials directing district officials. Consequently, state as well as district level officials were comfortable in these roles. However, there was constant pressure in the project to make decentralised plans, and this led to at least some context-based planning and strategising.

SSA retained decentralised district level planning and in fact sought to promote village level planning. But in practice, with SSA, planning became even more top-driven. To begin with, SSA guidelines were very different from DPEP guidelines. As stated above, DPEP guidelines did not indicate specific activities or prescribe fixed unit costs, which allowed for significant flexibility. However, SSA guidelines contained both these, as this was the usual government practice, and finance departments insisted on it. SSA was more flexible than the usual government programmes, in the sense that it allowed a wider range of activities, and also allowed districts to choose from among these activities. However, as the activities and unit costs were pre-defined, district plans simply repeated these activities and provided numbers. With greater control of the regular government system on SSA, the top-down practices were strengthened further.

Similarly, serious pedagogic reforms attempted in DPEP suffered too. In several states, in DPEP, new, activity-based textbooks were prepared. But this was an uphill struggle. Sometimes, the new textbooks attracted a great deal of criticism, as they introduced new and unfamiliar ways of learning. When teachers were trained for activity-based learning, they too had difficulty in grasping concepts. Since the capacities of SCERT faculty and education departments had not been built adequately, many officials and teacher educators remained hostile to these changes. Often, when governments or bureaucrats in-charge changed, the new textbooks were abandoned. With SSA, the focus on quality of education and pedagogy diminished further as posts were filled increasingly with the regular administrators and teacher educators, and consultation with experts

outside government declined. Teacher training programmes, once taken up with a great deal of care and commitment, often became routine, and even the source of corruption. In the end, establishing new schools, creating infrastructure, hiring new teachers and providing free textbooks, uniforms etc. to students became the focus of SSA. These were important, but as the classroom processes did not improve, a high-quality school system remained out of grasp.

The most important lesson from DPEP and SSA, to my mind, is about the working of government. There are deep problems related to human resources and working styles in government. The structure of manpower itself is problematic. Expertise that is needed in many areas is lacking. Further, the management of existing human resources is not based on merit. An official may be recruited on merit, but during the course of her career, for postings and even promotions, is more likely to do well by nurturing powerful godfathers than doing her job well. This promotes a lack of commitment to work, as the existing incentive structure simply does not promote good work. The processes of working, based on hierarchy and centralisation, block strategies suited to the needs from the ground from emerging. Thinking through and deliberation are optional, even at the top-most levels of government. As a result, poorly thought -out programmes and policies go unchecked, especially if they provide political benefits. Even the better formulated programmes are laid low as they are implemented through institutional structures that lack technical capacity and function in a rigid and hierarchical manner.

These characteristics impact every government initiative. All programmes are transformed and moulded in this pattern. DPEP attempted to bypass these problems by creating project structures, but failed to address existing institutional fault lines, and possibly deepened them. SSA carried them along, undoing the project gains of DPEP.

The lesson is clear. The increasing government revenues today have made good quality elementary education a very real possibility. But the manner in which government works is a major constraint. Unless there is deep and real institutional reform, success in creating a really high-quality school system will remain elusive.

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