

The concept of *Education for All* is the foundation for an inclusive society but it cannot be made possible just by extending the existing idea and system of education. A paradigm shift in thinking is required. That is why, it is essential to think about the beliefs, ideologies, practices and resources in the current system of education and assess whether these are appropriate or need fundamental changes.

The journey of a dream

The idea of *Education for All* is a dream in which every individual in the nation is educated for the simple reason that education has immeasurable value in an individual's and a country's growth. In itself, it is a lofty ideal to pursue; an invaluable tool for bringing about changes in society – from illiteracy to literacy. It can be a vehicle for social transformation, from exclusion to inclusion, from inequities to equality, from injustice to justice, from conflicts to peace. So, the dream is multi-faceted, with diverse expectations of impact and implementation. Initially, it was the lack of will to bring everybody into the folds of learning that ensured that education was restricted only to the upper echelons of a society marked by severe multi-layered class differences and the failure to change may have been the lack of thought, collective social conscience, shortage of infrastructure or a mix of all these.

The first five decades post independence did not see education reach the majority. This distance was not merely the physical distance from the school building, but the absence of a belief system and educational priorities which ignored the power of education to take the fundamental steps towards an inclusive society. Many areas had no schools and even where both, children and schools, were available, the resolve to include everyone was missing.

Universal Elementary Education (UEE) with free and compulsory education for all children below the age of 14 years was mandated as per the Constitution and the successive Five Year Plans kept this target in sight. But the arrows fell short of the mark: the Radhakrishnan Commission (1948-49)

and Mudaliar Commission (1952-53) focused on university and secondary education, respectively, and it was only the Kothari Commission (1964-66) which expanded its purview to include primary education, although universality still remained wishful thinking.

A smoother road

Then came the World Conference on Education for All (EFA, Jomtien, Thailand, March 1990) and the World Education Forum (Dakar, Senegal, April 2000), bringing international attention to India, with outside funding and private players forming synergistic private-public partnerships. The Government's District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) was initiated in 1994, the flagship *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA) in 2000, followed in 2009 by the Right to Education Act.

In the past three decades, there has been an exponential growth in the number of schools, teachers and students at the elementary level, bringing several communities, which were historically outside the domain of formal education, into its fold. These include a large share of unserved or under-served communities encompassing tribal and *dalit* communities living in remote locations or in difficult terrains and a significantly large number of girl children. All these initiatives caused an explosion of hope and aspirations among parents because many whose children entered schools during this period had either not gone to schools or could not pursue education beyond the primary classes.

Education for All: a lighthouse

The achievements of the DPEP, begun in the '90s, have been extraordinary. *Education for All* has transformed our society by creating equal opportunities and injected enthusiasm, confidence, thought and knowledge into many who even in current times are surrounded by hopelessness, misery, inequality and poverty. Today, a large number of children from communities irrespective of their social, cultural and economic backgrounds and their parents have benefitted from education.

And even though the idea of scholarship is not new to India, the idea of *Education for All* is relatively new. There has been a silent churning for societal transformation. This has been a chance for the long-cherished dream to become a reality.

Concerns: the roadblocks

Although the present-day approach is towards inclusivity, we have to ask ourselves: are we ready to see, accept and work towards an inclusive society with this expansion of the idea of education to all? Do we collectively aspire for a more equitable and just world?

The answer to both is *no*. The Jomtien Conference (1990), followed by the Dakar Declaration in 1997 created an urgent mandate and made available the financial resources to enable the nations to go for *Education for All*. This resulted in the launch of the flagship program of SSA. New schools got opened, new students were enrolled, and new teachers were recruited.

But improving and creating new structures for teacher preparation and academic support was and remains one of the key aspects that has been left unattended for a long time. This has resulted in the entry of unprepared/untrained teachers with either inadequate or completely absent academic support systems. There was a limited understanding of how to deal with such a huge student population flooding the schools, many of whom were the first-generation learners in their families. Children were unable to understand the language and culture of the school and teachers were unable to deal with the language or culture of mixed, large groups of children. For most teachers posted in government schools in the remote parts of the country the challenges of living in communities different from their own or commuting to distant schools was a challenge. Untrained and poorly paid teachers were handling the education of the most needy, disadvantaged children. Poor understanding of the entire range of issues resulted in the creation of a non-performing public education system, non-learning children, disconnected communities and demoralised teachers.

Time to evaluate

How can this be fixed? Is it possible to achieve the goal of education for all with the existing understanding, concerns, structures, sentiments and strategies or does it require new understanding, new concerns and sentimentalities, along with new

strategies, structures and criteria?

Big changes mean many small changes.

The first change was the admission of non-enrolled children from different communities and genders into government schools, at the same time, distancing the privileged, who shifted to private schools. As a result, government schools became schools for those from the poorest backgrounds who had no other choice.

The second change was the creation of space for NGOs to engage with the government education system. NGOs started playing different roles in schools and the Secretariat at the national, state and local levels. The contribution of organisations, like Teach for India (TFI), Kaivalya Education Foundation, Azim Premji Foundation and many more began to create an impact on the ground. The field now has more people and groups involved who are bringing in different kinds of discourses for consideration.

The positive side of all these developments is that those who were left out came into the fold of acquiring the most vital life skills of our time: reading and writing. Many scholars and socially aware people began sharing the responsibility of providing quality education. A lot of advocacy started to emerge around Early Childhood Education (ECE) to improve the health, nutrition and social foundations of children's early years. However, the other side of the story is that there were half-hearted commitments and political will; complete apathy from the larger part of the society, and; an absence of educational research and innovation to understand needs and demands. Therefore, the immediate effect and impact on the learning outcomes and the learning experiences of children are not encouraging. The first description, of the positive side, gives hope and helps in fighting pervasive despair but the second, consciously or unconsciously feeds more despair into an already frustrated society.

According to my understanding and perspective, the suggestion of education for all is a new and challenging social concept. The evaluation of older, existing standards against the new context is only able to bring out the problems inherent in the situation, resulting in an incomplete and misrepresentative picture. It could also further disappoint those engaged in the efforts of education. Therefore, finding new standards for this great project requires a new outlook.

Understanding changing contexts

Our country is not only full of diversities of all kinds, but also inequalities. Firstly, children, teachers and others working in the education sector come from a society which is traditionally patriarchal and feudal. Secondly, schools also function within these and many other social, economic and religious inequalities. The third dimension is that education would lose its meaning when seen as distinct from social-political equality, mutual sisterhood or tender-heartedness.

Let us look at this issue in the light of a few incidents. The Principal of a district institute of education and training (DIET) reached a school in Central India for inspection. While reviewing the attendance register, he felt that the names of some of the children were not correct. The principal discussed this matter with the teacher. The teacher said, 'Sir, what can I do? Their uneducated parents have named them like this.'

The Principal sent the children home to call their parents. The school was next to the village where most people were from the *Baheliya* community. Their occupation of catching birds was carried out in the mornings or evenings, so they arrived at the school shortly. The Principal, then, started changing the names of the children to more sanitised or 'civilised' versions, for example, *Chinta Bai* was renamed *Chetna Kumari*, *Kallibai* was changed to *Kalavati*. Whether the parents liked it or not, they did not raise any objections. They probably accepted this as a condition for gaining education for their children.

The changing the names of *Chinta Bai* and *Kalli* raises some vital questions:

- If the school has no space for the names of these children, would it give them space for their *life experiences*?
- Is education meant only for that class of the society that is represented by Chetna Kumaris and Kalavatis?
- Would a particular community be required to sacrifice their cultural identity to gain education?

Other examples can be cited.

It is common in schools to praise children who wear the cleanest clothes and punish those whose clothes are dirty. If we look at this carefully, our attention would be drawn to the emotional damage such incidents may cause the children. Language is also an important issue. Its standard form, appropriate pronunciation etc. create an

identity crisis for the first-generation school goer. Anybody who has experienced this knows that it is humiliating and can shake the self-confidence of the person. Teachers often place those children who are struggling with these concerns in the category of those who are '*not-able-to-learn*'.

All these instances raise questions regarding the understanding and sensitivity around education. The big questions are:

- Should children fit into a mould, or should educational systems be flexible enough to change according to their cultural backgrounds?
- How can we establish the interaction between the existing knowledge of the children and the process of knowledge construction in school as extremely important?
- How can such an understanding become a part of the educational process?

Let us look next at the teachers' preparation and autonomy. In this context, I am reminded of a thought-provoking incident from my teaching days. One day, children of my class were constantly complaining about a child called, Gundilal. I had given the children some work to do and was busy finishing some of my own work, so my complete attention was not in on the class. When it became difficult to ignore the complaints, I called Gundilal and sternly told him, 'You are being very naughty! Hold the ears.'

Gundilal did not respond, so I said it again in a raised voice. This time, he came forward and held my ears. My first response to his action was of surprise and anger and then I realised that my instruction was only to hold the ears. So, Gundilal was not at fault. He did not associate *holding ears* with punishment nor did he have any previous experience of such behaviour.

There are many such things which we assume that all children know, forgetting that the atmosphere and practices of school are new to first-generation school-goers and they may find them not just odd, but counterintuitive.

My journey...

The experience of working in a tribal village, situated in the middle of a jungle in the Raisen district of Madhya Pradesh taught me many things, but the one thing that I would like to mention here is directly related to the central idea of this article, *Education for All*.

When I started teaching the children from the Gond

Adivasi community, who for centuries have spent their days grazing goats, shoeing birds in the fields, collecting *tendu* leaves, or *mahua*, digging *moosri*, climbing trees, swimming in rivers, I realised very soon that making them sit in one place for four or five school hours would in itself be a major challenge. These children were used to walking many kilometres in a day and were habituated to physical labour.

How would it be possible for them to sit in one place for such a long time? Then, how would I manage to transact the competency of reading and writing? What was the significance of the Sunday off for people who had their weekly bazaar on Tuesdays? How did the role of children change in small peasant households when it was time to sow or cut the crops? What was the relation of such a context with the administration of a school? These questions should present themselves to all those working with schools at different levels. They necessitate viewing the school in a different way, making it essential for us to step away from the existing assumptions of school being a fixed place, the day divided into 45-minute periods structured in a timetable. A differing physical and cultural orientation of children, bearing in mind their habits and interests requires restructuring the whole education system, including autonomy for the teacher.

When I was working as a teacher, circumstances were favourable for me. The school was not a government school and did not require government registration. Also, the people of the village did not have a fixed notion of education in their experience or aspirations. Both these things provided me with the flexibility I needed to experiment with new ideas, keeping in mind the interests and context of the children. I utilised this suddenly gained autonomy as a teacher to the fullest. The results were better than expected. Most of the children transitioned to the world of literacy with a lot of interest and almost half of them continued their education beyond the school and, compared with the other children from their village and other nearby villages, they made significant achievements in education. There was no reason for these children to lose their self-confidence or cultural identity.

Changing the narrative - the way forward

No transformational social change has been achieved without building a positive narrative and countering the negative perceptions around the core idea. At the level of primary education (and

at certain levels up to the elementary level) the public education system has become a place that serves the children of voiceless, or choice-less communities. The shift of the elite and middle class from government systems to private schools is a shift from both the school as well as from the system itself. This has led to adverse criticism of the government education system with complete ignorance of the implications of such criticism on the parents whose children are in government schools, the larger teacher community as well as the Government itself. Such a defection, from the public to private schooling, gives rise to pessimism and widens gaps in society.

When a child crosses the threshold of school, she not only brings her bag, slate and chalk, books and notebooks, but also her complete social and cultural background: her full or empty stomach, her curiosities, her fears, hesitations, mother tongue and other facets. And if this child comes from a family that has not previously had a relationship with the structure of education, then the school and the teachers are required to be even more flexible. If the demands made by the teacher or the school are strict and if they are unwilling to bend according to the needs of the child, it leads only to one result – failure. And this result is viewed by society as the child's failure. For children like Gundilal, Chintabai and Kalli, who are already disadvantaged, to be successful in school would require the creation of opportunities which respectfully include their culture, experience and talents. Whatever happens in the school would have to pass the test of the needs and background of these children.

There is a long list of people involved in this task of *Education for All* – from ministers to officers, educationists and teachers. People from voluntary organisations have also now joined this list. But the most important role is that of the teacher. Ensuring thoughts, resources, autonomy and respect for teachers is primarily the responsibility of the government education structure. This includes policymakers, administrators and training institutes. We should ask this question before raising questions about teachers and the state of education in current times: is the understanding, resources and respect available to the teachers appropriate and adequate for a task like *Education for All*? According to me, the kind of preparation that a teacher needs to work in the context of *Education for All* is not being provided by either the government or society, though it is unclear

whether the reason is the lack of will or the dearth of resources. If the task at hand is challenging and new and the preparation to achieve it is incomplete, then how can one expect large scale positive outcomes? If we consider education for all as a fundamental step towards an inclusive society; then how can the concerns emerging from it be limited to our concerns of quality education in terms of language, mathematics and traditional teaching of other subjects and assessment? We need to redefine the expectations society has from

education and also look at curriculum and teacher preparation in a new perspective.

There is an urgent need for developing a shared understanding that on the one hand places *Education for All* in the collective conscience at the centre of the creation of a better society, motivates people who are working towards this social project and, on the other, provides respect, support and welcomes the teachers - the torchbearers of this project.



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