

That all children can learn is the truth. Learning can happen in any space and at any time. Learning opportunities for children vary due to several reasons. There are places where children have access to all modern learning equipment and access to schools that facilitate learning in an interesting manner. At the same time, there are places where children do not have the privilege to have such access because of the context, many such children are first-generation school-goers. For them, the school essentially plays a big role in learning in many ways. One such area is the Shiv block in Barmer district of Rajasthan where a research study has been conducted for three years. This article is mainly based on that research and highlights the following:

- The issues in the context that obstruct the children's learning in a place where the status of social development parameters, including illiteracy is alarming.
- The systemic issues that pose a big hindrance to the children, who are keen to learn but do not get enough opportunity and consequently, lag behind for decades to come.
- The tentative areas to be prioritised by the government and/or other agencies to enhance the learning of such children.

### **The context that obstructs children's learning**

If you visit a school, the children studying in elementary classes (classes I to VIII) may ask you to teach 'something' in the classroom, saying *kuchh padha do*, despite even not knowing you. This, I experienced repeatedly in the schools of the Shiv block, located at the fringe of the Thar desert in Rajasthan. These schools are in remote villages consisting of small hamlets (locally known as *dhani*), where transport and communication are poor, electricity is frequently cut or not available, internet is still a dream, many children have illiterate

(or semiliterate) parents, female foeticide and child marriage are common, *Anganwadis* hardly function and there is no library at all.

Why do these children request a stranger to teach them *something*? One of the reasons is that in many such schools, there is no teacher in the class, sometimes, even for the whole day. Teachers might be 'busy' with some other work, not necessarily teaching, during the school hours. When this situation prevails for long periods of time throughout the year, the children do not get an opportunity to learn in the school. If someone argues that learning can happen anywhere, I would surely agree, but learning through exposure in formal education spaces remains questionable because of the context-specific limitations in this location. At home, parental support for formal education is almost nil. What they often learn are based on patriarchal traditions of their society, belief systems that nurture all practices like gender discrimination, child marriage etc. For most of the villages in this block, the nearest government degree college is available only at a distance beyond 50 kms, so education beyond class XII often remains a dream.

As per the Human Development Index (HDI) of the districts in Rajasthan, Barmer ranks the lowest having an HDI value of only 0.4035 while Jaipur, the top-ranking district of the state, shows 0.7308 as its HDI value (Singh and *Keshari*, 2016). The literacy rate in Barmer district was 56.5 percent in 2011 while the state average was 66.1 percent. Gender gap in the literacy rate was 30.3 percentage points in Barmer. Census 2011 indicated the high percentage of adult illiterates in Barmer as shown in the table below, which is quite alarming for the learning space of children in their immediate families.

**Table 1:** Adult illiteracy as per 2011 Census

Areas	Age group	Total	Male	Female
All areas	15-34	35.89	18.93	55.83
	35+	70.99	53.91	88.67
Rural	15-34	37.68	19.88	58.69
	35+	74.23	57.34	91.63
Urban	15-34	15.27	7.71	23.73
	35+	34.24	15.98	54.10

**Systemic issues as seen in policies**

Educational governance has three main pillars: provisions, regulations and funding. In India, education is a subject in the concurrent list and therefore, such pillars must be maintained by both central and state governments. Let us look at a few of the most important parameters indicating the huge need for paying attention to children and their learning in remote locations, such as Barmer, which is not an isolated case. They are there in many states where children are victims of the negligence by the governance.

The Right to Education (RTE) Act 2009 has set the pupil-teacher ratio as 1:30, a mathematical calculation. The education departments of many states, including Rajasthan, have removed support staff from government schools. There are huge implications of such decisions. If one school has 30 students, the school gets only one teacher, but with an increase in enrolment, the number of teachers may increase as per the sanction of the higher officials. In many primary schools in Shiv, there is one teacher, or at the most two teachers. Subject specific teachers are often missing in middle school. The children of such schools are keen to learn, therefore, they ask any stranger who seems to be educated, to teach in their class.

Let us look at two assumptions of the government: One, that the teacher can take care of 30 students and their school-related activities and development and second, since there is no support staff in elementary schools, perhaps the system wants teachers and students to take on the entire maintenance process as their responsibility.

If we analyse these assumptions, they seem to be unreasonable. Imagine yourself as a primary school teacher with 30-40 children who are in different

grades and need different kinds of attention. They can learn if the teacher can facilitate that. What will you do as a single teacher? You have to maintain all records of the school, take care of the midday meal and therefore, will have to coordinate with the cook, at the same time, you have to teach in a multi-grade classroom. What best can you do throughout the academic year given all these responsibilities?

- If we assume that these teachers are eligible to take care of multi-grade teaching, we need to understand their academic qualifications and work experience. As per the government requirements, primary school teachers (teaching up to class IV) are either graduates (though not necessarily with specialisation in any school subject) or class XII pass with a diploma in teaching. Are they mature enough to handle multi-grade classrooms while taking care of other administrative responsibilities?
- Who will maintain the school premises when there is no support staff? Of course, the teachers and students. This means the maintenance of the toilets, midday meal space, classrooms, playground, teacher's room (if any). In such a place, children of lower castes often have to take charge of the cleaning work. Are these legitimate expectations?

For middle schools, all these issues, in addition to the lack of subject-specific teachers, prevail.

Somehow it gives a sense that all these assumptions are based on the typical mentality and understanding of government schools, to which many people feel only under-privileged children go and any effort to improve these schools is unnecessary. A few days back, a person working in one such school, with children from extraordinarily challenging situations, told me, 'Madam, they get the opportunity to

come to school and have food, isn't that enough for them? Why can't they clean the premises and toilets in exchange?' I couldn't digest this argument. Is it a valid reason for treating children in this way in the name of Right to Education? Will the policy makers and implementers send their children to a school without adequate teachers and no support staff, where their children will have to regularly clean their own toilets, teachers' toilets, classroom, school premises and even mid-day meal utensils?

### **Systemic issues as seen in practices**

A very recent development (2019-'20) is the introduction of an Integrated Teacher Training Programme called, NISHTHA under the Centrally Sponsored Scheme of Samagra Shiksha. This is a national mission launched by the Department of School Education and Literacy to improve learning outcomes at the elementary level. The Government portal states that this is a capacity-building programme for 'Improving the Quality of School Education through Integrated Teacher Training': NISHTHA is the world's largest teachers' training programme of its kind and aims to build competencies among all the teachers and school principals at the elementary stage.. The basic objective of this massive training programme is to motivate and equip teachers to encourage and foster critical thinking in students. The initiative is first of its kind wherein standardised training modules are developed at a national level for all States and UTs ([www.india.gov.in](http://www.india.gov.in)).

This programme can definitely provide a good platform for teachers to socialise with each other. The modules are well-designed, and the efforts made are visible. The programme is meant to be 'conducted in customised cascade mode, in which National Resource Group of Experts will train Key Resource Persons (KRP) (identified by the state/ UT for further teacher training) and State Resource Persons (SRP) (identified by the state/ UT for further training of school principals and other functionaries). These KRPs and SRPs will directly train teachers and school principals' ([itpd.ncert.gov.in](http://itpd.ncert.gov.in)). It has been said that this training will help in reducing the high percentage of communication loss which, due to many layers, existed earlier. Despite all these promises, some issues need to be recognised and appropriately addressed. These are discussed below.

#### *Large scale target showcasing of big numbers*

The government website claims, 'All the teachers,

principals, block resource coordinators, cluster resource coordinators working at the elementary stage will be covered for training on learner-centred pedagogy, learning outcomes, improving social personal qualities of children, school based assessment, new initiatives, school safety and security and pedagogies of different subjects, etc.

It is indeed a tough task to cover so many areas for the capacity building of 4.2 million teachers as per the promise made so far. When the target is big, the achievement remains questionable due to the huge complications in the accountability framework, more so because of the involvement of numerous stakeholders. Also, the 'one size fits all' approach is problematic. It might be better to go phase by phase rather than targeting a big number. For this to be successful, careful prioritisation must be done. Remotely located schools, which rarely have the luck to get CSR or NGO support, must be prioritised for this and the plan for such school teachers must be made differently.

#### *Approach missing the concept of 'surrounding circumstances'*

Such training often happens in a common place as per the convenience of the employees of NGOs and educational functionaries. This comfort and relief from the hardship of daily school life may be welcomed by a few teachers, but many, especially those who are self-motivated and genuinely committed, find it inconvenient. As a result of such trainings, teachers lose their teaching days for many weeks in a year and the children, who are so keen to learn, suffer equally. The training organisers need to understand this issue.

One of the NISHTHA Training modules quotes Mahatma Gandhi's speech, 'True education must correspond to the surrounding circumstances...' Following the same thought, such training programmes must be arranged in schools only where demo classes can be taken along with students by experts involved in training. For better logistic arrangement, four or five schools can be identified, and the teachers clubbed together in any one of the cluster schools for not more than a week. Thus, the venue of training will change on a rotational basis and each teacher can get at least one day training in her own school in each phase with proper demo classes. Before doing this, single teacher schools must be provided with more than one teacher to ensure that schools operate even if that one teacher attends the training for a week.

### *Ensuring benefits reach the classrooms*

NISHTHA training targets to make teachers reflective practitioners, therefore it is essential to make the trainers well-equipped with module transaction. The modules are not very easy to grasp for many teachers having very little, or no teaching experience. For example, here is a reflection question from the Environmental Science Module:

‘Identify some exercises in the NCERT, EVS textbooks where teachers are asked to discuss with children some of the critical concerns in order to develop awareness and sensitise them towards the issues.’

A teacher needs to do thorough homework to transact this in the classroom as per the expectation. Here, the charisma of a teacher comes into play. Teachers must build a regular practice of self-learning to utilise the modules. Only then can the benefit reach the classrooms. Can they do it in schools in remote areas similar to those in Shiv block where teachers struggle and juggle with many things other than teaching on a regular basis?

#### **Suggestions for prioritisation**

If the human development parameters are considered important for the development of the country, Barmer and its blocks, like Shiv which are visibly lagging should have got special attention for improving development scenario as per the context specific requirements. Unfortunately, that kind of focus has remained a dream here for decades. In such a context, despite having both the need and the desire to learn, children are deprived of the

same because of the lack of space created for their learning. There is huge potential among the students of this area where children face hardship in daily life. There are also extremely committed teachers in some schools who, despite all odds, are ready to guide students with their limited resources. It is important to identify such ‘sparks’ among teachers and utilise their leadership quality as functional leaders with due recognition in various forms. It can surely add value to the quality of education and some of the best sports personalities, engineers, social scientists, lyricists, doctors and all kinds of professionals can be readied in these schools to make our country proud. To achieve this, here is a brief checklist of provisions to be considered by the government:

- Support staff for these schools.
- Teachers in every school according to the requirement of grades, not as per the pupil teacher ratio.
- Transport facilities for teachers and students in remote areas to commute to the schools.
- Regular visits of teacher trainers to encourage good teacher leaders and take demonstration classes in respective schools (instead of spending unnecessarily on venues and food in unconnected areas, depriving school children of regular classes).

Let the sparks of promising teachers and students in remote schools light the torch of hope for Shiv in Barmer and many other such places.

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**Dr Saswati Paik** is faculty at the Azim Premji University, Bengaluru. A geographer by academic training, Saswati has completed MPhil and PhD from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi before joining this university. Her research interest lies in two areas: (i) adult education and its relevance, (ii) exploring realities of schools in challenging areas, especially those prone to natural hazards and relevance of current educational policies and practices in such areas. She has many publications and presentations based on her research, to her credit. She may be contacted at [saswati@azimpremijifoundation.org](mailto:saswati@azimpremijifoundation.org)