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Let's talk of a collective vision of education... access will follow

Prajayatna documentation unit

Can we involve ourselves in a meaningful dialogue of the purpose of education and the action that follows therein?

The lack of access to education is traditionally understood as barriers - physical, financial, or sociological - that prevent a child from participating and benefiting from the existing educational process. These barriers are commonly manifested as:

- ◆ Non-participation of girl children in schools due to societal prejudices and misplaced notions.
- ◆ Inability of children from minority and tribal communities and in border areas to participate effectively in the learning process, due to language issues.
- ◆ Absence of adequate number of higher primary and secondary schools close to the child's home. In several districts of Karnataka, access to only primary schools compels children to drop out when they reach higher primary or secondary levels due to various logistical problems.
- ◆ Inadequate infrastructure of the existing schools (insufficient rooms resulting in overcrowding) making the school unaccommodating for the child.
- ◆ Lack of adequate number of teachers and acute shortage of good quality teachers, making the school irrelevant and unattractive to children.

Notwithstanding the need to address these barriers, critical to the deliberation on improving access to education is the need to consider the efficacy of education being offered in the government schools.

In several instances, the dismal condition of government schools (primarily attended by children from low-income communities) and the inefficacy of education received translating into a meaningful life support tool or means of livelihood for the children has compelled parents to see little functional advantage of such schools over work. Quality in education is hence synonymous with access.

A key reason for this situation is the absence of engagement of the community with the school system. There is effectively no process or structure that enables the engagement of various stakeholders (parents, teachers, educationists, education bureaucracy, peoples' representatives, etc) in a transparent and equitable manner towards school development.

Though the issue of elementary education (and its various aspects including access) has been significantly deliberated upon over the last few years, the consequent 'solutions' have predominantly assumed the form of schemes and programmes 'for' the people. Seldom has it been looked upon as a *development* issue requiring to be jointly determined by all stakeholders.

It is only in recent years that community participation in school is being considered a 'good idea'. It is in fact a good idea, provided the community is perceived as a co-creator of a system; however, if regarded only as a superficial ingredient to disguise the inadequacies of a system, it will remain just an *idea*. Even now, the government retains the responsibility to initiate schools, appoint teachers, decide the curriculum, prepare textbooks, ensure dissemination, formulate and execute financial plans, etc;*did someone say community participation was important?!*

If education continues to be a massive bureaucratic exercise of administering to thousands of schools - then access will remain an issue of initiating new schools, to fulfil the goal of universalisation. On the other hand, if education is regarded as an understanding of life and the environment around us, developing abilities to analyse issues that confront communities, focussing on skills, values, and perspectives that encourage collaboration and collective decision-making, then access will be about communities partnering in efforts to establish schools and finding real meaning in the content and process of schooling.

The basic question here is, to whom do the schools belong? Are we ready to involve all stakeholders in a more engaging way, and how? How equipped are we to involve ourselves in a meaningful dialogue of the *purpose of education* and the action that follows therein? How do we work beyond 'civil society' or 'state-based' approaches, to focus on their intersection, through new forms of participation, responsiveness and accountability? Are we also prepared to depart from a common state-wide policy for uniform financial allocation for infrastructure, pre-determined teacher training modules, uniform norms for opening of schools, homogeneous textbooks across regions, standardized 'community participation' training programmes?

If so, then we have a better chance to lay out the basic framework for access and related parameters. The result would also be a more binding platform for communities and

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the Government to jointly plan efforts not only to address physical access but also to strengthen the access to relevant learning. The perceptions of society about what constitutes learning in the classrooms would redefine itself as they gradually learn to engage with the education system. This certainly does not imply communities now writing textbooks; rather, communities trying to understand and make sense of the institution called schools - that develop their children's capabilities to understand their inner self and the environment around them.

Prajayatna, the education reform programme of MAYA working in eight districts in Karnataka and two in Andhra Pradesh evolved as a response to the fundamental question of who owns the school. It was recognised that communities, had no engagement with the system of which they were the primary stakeholders. Prajayatna facilitates processes by identifying structures for communities to participate, institutionalising the process of ownership, building their capabilities as accountable structures. These processes involve a certain kind of social mobilisation that creates the necessary environment for change.

In the districts where Prajayatna works, the stakeholders (parents, teachers, elected representatives, other civil society institutions) have jointly, through the various processes of Shikshana Grama sabha, SDMC network at the Gram panchayat level, made significant efforts to address the issue of access. This has been the result of a consistent and

progressive engagement with each other and the education system.

Being an empowerment driven initiative, Prajayatna aims at a systemic impact; the emphasis is to facilitate conditions where stakeholder groups own and steer the process of education reform. It strengthens community governance structures at various levels wherein processes leading to structural changes facilitate a constructive environment for multi-level dialogue and movement towards altering learning practices.

Facilitating processes towards ownership of a vision manifests sometimes as improved infrastructure, or addressing teachers issues, or even enriching classroom learning processes. All these responses organically lead to the communities planning, implementing and reflecting on what they think about their school, what they can do, starting from where they are, leading them to ask questions of why and what they want to learn.

Though in several instances where communities' involvement in issues of access has translated into addressing physical, geographical and sometimes sociological barriers (for instance greater enrolment of girl children) the real challenge to access is the evolution of a schooling system that is empowering and inclusive of community decision-making where they are not merely participants but are the drivers of the entire educational process.

Let us therefore begin by asking, 'who owns the schools'?

SUNTNOOR

In a Shikshana Grama sabha and a Gram Panchayat network meeting organised by Prajayatna....

The High School in Suntnoor GP headquarters, Aland taluk, Gulbarga district did not have a building of its own and had been functioning out of the Higher Primary school. 150 children from the high school were sharing the 9 rooms of the with 350 children from the HPS. Due to lack of space, smaller children were forced to sit out in the open. Following a Shikshana Grama Sabha (village level meeting on education) on this issue, the SDMC members along with some members of the community took the initiative in identifying a place (govt. land) and getting it registered from the gram panchayat for the high school. The high school has since been constructed and this has created a more conducive environment for learning of children in both the schools.

In the same GP, the Urdu school though initiated in 1999, had been functioning out of a temporary shed given by the Muslim community. Due to lack of space, a building had not been sanctioned for the same. The school was lacking in basic infrastructure due to which retaining children in the school was also becoming difficult. Following the Shikshana Grama Sabha, in a meeting with the Gram panchayat and the SDMC members at the Gram panchayat level (SDMC network meeting), land was allotted by the Gram Panchayat for the purpose of building a school structure. This has now been initiated and the land has been registered in the name of the school.

Prajayatna, or "Citizens' Initiative", is a statewide citizens' movement for creating systemic change in the educational system. Prajayatna seeks to enable community ownership of elementary education in Karnataka. Prajayatna works with communities, school committees, teachers, bureaucracy, elected representatives and officers of the Education Department across seven districts of the State of Karnataka to build lasting institutional structures that will facilitate community control over education.