

# DECCAN Chronicle

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## The battle for schools must be won

### Rights Angle: By Shantha Sinha

For those of us who have taken education for granted and send our children to school as a matter of habit, a new academic session means giving our children all the support to see them through as good students. But for the poor children, who have never been to school before, or those who have long been absent from school and want to go back, and those withdrawn from the labour force, a new academic year is a nightmare. It is full of anxiety and fear, having to cross hurdles, convincing the school authorities that they too deserve to study.

For instance, see how the children in Adilabad district of Andhra Pradesh battled for schools. When the tribal children went to school in Raiguda Ashram after the schools reopened, they were promptly given transfer certificates because the school felt that not all these children were fit for education.

Four tribal girls received a similar treatment from the Utnoor Ashram High School and were given transfer certificates on the first day of their admission in the new academic year. The school authorities, on the plea that they were not good enough for studies, unceremoniously shunted them out. In some schools, they insisted on conducting tests for children because they did not want to be burdened with erstwhile "child labour" and "slow learners." This, in spite of the fact that the children were eligible for admission in Class VIII after having passed the Class VII board examinations.

There are several instances all over the country where children are insulted and humiliated to such a point that they are forced to give up education. They are subjected to innumerable pressures for the payment of all kinds of charges to the school. In spite of the fact that most state governments have issued orders that no child be denied admission for want of birth certificates, caste certificates, transfer certificates, income certificates and so on, the schools have not taken such government orders seriously.

Schools continue to throw them out because of inadequate documentation. This is more so in the upper primary and high school levels. In many instances, older children have been asked to take entrance and eligibility tests to qualify for re-admission in schools. If they did not qualify the rigors of such tests, the schools have unceremoniously rejected them. Added to this, the language the children speak, their cultural background and family circumstances are considered unsophisticated and these children are made to feel unwanted.

The insensitivity of the schoolteachers to such children who courageously defy local authorities and power structures to be released from bonded labour is appalling. Their indifference to the girls who rebel at home and fight domestic labour and farm work, escape getting married and combat gender discrimination to assert their right to education, is inexcusable.

That they have thought of them as a burden and systematically worked out ways of pushing them out is simply callous. Every time plans are drawn up, the demand for education beyond Class V is not recognised. It is anticipated that only 10 per cent of children who have joined Class I would reach up to Class X. Therefore, provision is made only for 10 per cent of children.

This results in several upper primary and high schools having hundreds of children but not enough schoolteachers. Consequently, children are pushed out of the school system after Class V. In fact the number of children who survive up to Class X settles down to the proportion of schools that are actually available. Nor is it anticipated that older children who have been school dropouts, or even illiterates, would join schools and plans have to be made to absorb them.

Unable to handle such pressures, schoolteachers prefer to bring pressure on the poor children and mercilessly push them out instead of putting pressure on the school authorities for better facilities and conditions of work. The school authorities at the higher level pretend that they have no responsibility to sort out the problems encountered by these poor children. Thus the school system is not designed to retain the older children, or to accept all those who have been left behind.

The poor will continue to send their children to schools. They will do so even if schools are overcrowded and lack teachers, have no water or toilets, do not respect their children and subject them to corporal punishment. The poor will silently struggle and fight for schools as they have greater faith in the system than the system has in itself. This they do because they value education.

They realise that they can beat the cycle of deprivation, marginalisation and poverty only if their child is in school. They recognise how completing school education would give them the strength to bargain for their share in the resources as a matter of right. They see how their children can gain confidence to deal with the authorities and the power structure with school education.

Our society cannot be insensitive to this crying demand for education. Education is still not on the agenda of any political party in the country. The political elite must have the conviction that India's children deserve to be in schools and not at work and design policies to democratise schools and make them instruments for bridging disparities. They must realise that a common school system alone can bring justice to all children.

The bureaucracy must be less cynical, listen to the voices of the poor, repose faith and trust in their capacities and give legal and administrative support and genuine financial commitment to see that the schools are governed properly. The authorities cannot abdicate their responsibilities and put the entire pressure on the schoolteachers.

They must define how they would support the school and community to meet the demand especially at the upper primary and high school levels. Schools have to be gauged on the basis of the number of children they have been able to accept and integrate and not on the basis of the percentage of children who have passed the board examinations.

The challenge is in bringing all those children who have been excluded from the education system back to schools and in the process keeping every child who is already in school without being pushed out. The battle for schools must be won.