

BATTLE FOR SCHOOLS

STRUGGLE OF THE POOR FOR THEIR ENTITLEMENT TO EDUCATION

India is in a mood of celebration as it makes strides in economic development and growth, winning accolade, world over for showing up a great performance in the global economy. The market in India is bouncing. Does it mean that children will no longer have to work? Is it the defining moment for the system to listen to the voices of the poor and make education a reality for every child. Can we seize this opportunity to give children freedom through education?

EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN AND BEING OUT OF SCHOOLS

Millions of children in our country do not go to schools. Instead, they become subject to untold misery and hardship, working at farms and in factories; in sweatshops and at homes. They live lives of drudgery, surviving against all odds-uncared for, unprotected and unnoticed.

It is necessary to appreciate that much of the lives of ordinary citizens in our country are so integral to the lives of poor children and their sweat and toil. It is their long hours of work, under conditions of total submission and servility, without any support, fear of abuse, insults and humiliation, risks to health they work for our upkeep. In fact the 'roti, kapda and makaan' (food, clothing and shelter) in our lives must have child labor at some stage or the other in the production chain which are local and global at times.

Young girls work under scorching heat, with blistering sore feet dug into the marshy land; these children do the sowing, weeding, harvesting of vegetables, lentils, cooking oils and all the food we relish. When they are not working in the fields they are burdened with the monotony of work at home cooking, fetching water, carrying siblings and doing all the domestic chores. Children are also engaged in tending to cattle, sheep, goats, in fishing and work in the poultry, contributing to producing milk and milk products, and all other food items. Children's labor is mixed in most of the food we eat in our country.

The clothes we wear too breathe child labour. Hundreds and thousands of children work in production of hybrid cotton seeds, wrapped in violence, embedded in worn out bodies, nausea of daily lives, knocking headaches, giddiness and mental depression, wasted childhood toiling relentlessly and getting burnt under heat and dust. The cotton ginning mills, handloom weaving looms as well as the spinning machines and power looms too employ children. The silk one wears, and the process of sericulture has an abundance of children working in damp, dark, poorly ventilated, and have loud, deafening music playing in the background.

Our homes, offices, business centers, entertainment places, in fact every building owes its creation to children and at the cost of their childhood. With growing demand in the building and construction industry, children leave their villages to work on sites without water, sanitation and shelter, around brick kilns lifting head loads, brick by brick on the head and piling clay moulds to bake under the blazing sun.

The homes of most middle and upper classes too depend on young girls and boys working as domestic servants. They are either full time workers trafficked from their homes or part time workers living with their parents in the same town. There is an undercurrent of suspicion about their honesty and they are rebuked more often than not for being lax and untidy in their chores.

Lacking a societal norm in favour of their right to education multitudes of children are in the work force as child labour.

There is a lack of societal shock or outrage that children are out of school and are at work. Tolerance of child labour is explicit in all arguments, beginning with the position that poor families depend on children for their livelihood. *“How can families manage without the income earned by the children?”* This question is repeatedly asked by almost every section in the society and also by policy making bodies — dealing with protection of children and child rights — operating at the local, national and global levels. It is even suggested that arrangements must be where children can work and learn at the same time. (A kind of win-win situation where both children and their families benefit.)

Elaborations of such a view can be seen in the kind of questions that often get raised: *“Aren’t poor children better off acquiring skills on the job? Schools are bad and the quality of education poor, is it not a waste of time to go to schools?”* In fact, it is also stated that being in schools would only alienate children from their surroundings and render them useless to the community that they belong to. *“Would they not be better off if they had a learning process that reintegrates them into their society and culture?”* In a way, such arguments imply that children can continue to work till solutions are found to resolve all the issues.

A poor parent’s decision to send the child to school is predicated, and pre-decided, by an atmosphere that repeatedly states that they are too ambitious and impractical in intending to do so. These values and attitudes seep through all layers of society with such ease that they are internalised by the parents themselves. Parents cannot take education of their children for granted and have to, in fact, even offer explanations for sending their children to school, something that is otherwise considered normal.

PARENTAL DEMAND FOR SCHOOLS

Poor parents are sending their children to schools and we are witnessing an explosive demand for education in the country today with 75% of all school-going children in India attending government schools. In fact in nine States of India over 90% of all school-going children attend government schools.¹ Almost all these States are regions that are considered backward in all respect. They are the ‘Hindi belt’, the tribal pockets, the dry land monsoon fed agricultural zones and so on. With unwavering faith in education, they persistently send children to school, making enormous sacrifices in the process.

¹ Punjab 99.9%, Bihar 99.3%, Tripura 97.3%, Jharkhand 96.5%, Assam 96.2%, Orissa 96%, Haryana 95.7%, Himachal Pradesh 90.2%, and Sikkim 90%

There are innumerable examples of poor children who have persisted in schools even though schools were inadequate both in terms of infrastructure and sensitivity. This yearning among the poor parents to send their children to schools even if there are not enough classrooms or schoolteachers, even when there is no drinking water or toilets, and even if the children are not treated well is never adequately explained.

In fact, several millions of them are literally paying through their nose to get what they consider a proper education in the English medium private schools. Those who cannot make this are content with sending their children to the government schools.

What is important therefore is to pose the question why even today many children belonging to poor families go to schools, the same schools that are castigated as being ill equipped and providing irrelevant education? They do so because they value education. They realize that they can beat the cycle of deprivation, marginalisation and poverty only if their child is in school.

It is in understanding the answers to this question that the true insight into the thought processes that govern the parents in poor families emerges and a measure of the latent demand for education can be made. The view that the poor cannot send their children to schools results in distracting attention from the often heroic attempts made by parents to send their children to schools and in retaining them there..

SCHOOL GOVERNANCE- AND EXCLUSION OF FIRST GENERATION LEARNERS AND CHILD LABOUR

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 new books, school uniforms shoes, school bags, lunch boxes, and arrangements for transport. It means new resolves to do well this year and give children all support to see them through as good students. For the poor children, who have never been to school before but studied through the residential bridge course camps, or those who have long absented from school and want to get back, and those withdrawn from labor 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 be in schools. It is a wait for the defining moment to be in a school as a student.

It is far less complicated for the ten to twelve year olds to defy local authorities and power structures and be released as bonded labour than to be accepted as students in the present education system. It seems that even for the girls rebelling at home using all the weapons of resistance they have, like sulking, crying, not eating and not talking virtually offering individual *sataygraha* was relatively uncomplicated than having the school accommodate them. Schools are unmindful of the difficulties the girls had to endure to escape getting married, even seek divorce through community, combat gender discrimination and assert their rights to education. Instead of supporting older children to embark on a journey of self-discovery, the schools often think of them as a burden and work out ways of pushing them out of the system. They are just not ready for the backlog of children aspiring to join schools.

Thus, once they enter the portals of the schools there are innumerable pressures on them for payment of all kinds of charges to the school, for school fees, maintenance, sports, library and so on. Many of them being poor can ill afford such expenditures. 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 and circulars 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 into schools. If they did not qualify the rigors of such tests, the schools have unceremoniously rejected them to fend for themselves, instead of taking the children and preparing them for the class they ought to be in. Added to this, the language the children speak, their cultural background and family circumstances are all considered as being unsophisticated and therefore these children are made to feel unwanted.

There are many ways in which schools make it difficult for a child to survive in the system. All the rules governing the procedures at the school level including admission, transfer and so on have been developed for a situation where all children come to school as a matter of habit. Since the poor are culturally not equipped to handle schools, the formal and informal systems of school management, which have evolved over a period of time, seem intricate to them. For example, the poor lack the skill to get birth certificates, medical certificates, income and caste certificates, which need dealing with more than one government department. They are much less familiar with the rules of examination, attendance, promotion, procurement of transfer certificates and so on. Thus poor parents are easily intimidated and often even the most benign rules and regulations appear deviously intractable and seem to have been formulated for the sole purpose of preventing the child from joining or continuing in school.

It must be the responsibility of the education system as a whole to give support to the child to enjoy her right to education and remove all barriers in the process of children's journey for completion of school. Barriers are to be removed to enable a smooth transition from one class to the next until children complete class ten. No child must be allowed to get pushed out of school.

WINNING THE BATTLE FOR SCHOOLS

A programme for universalisation of education must include preparation of the entire education department at all levels to accept the backlog of millions of children in full time formal school with their complex backgrounds. The education department must define the role and responsibility of all its functionaries at the national, state, district, block/mandal level for reaching out to all out of school children and to ensure that all children enjoy their right to education. All planning must be for the universe of children in the age of 6-14 years in an area for children both in school and out of school. It must strengthen the capacities of all classes from 1 to 10 and not focus on primary school alone, in the name of being 'practical'. Simultaneously there has to be clear message sent across the nation that children have a right to education and so must not be engaged on work.

1. Social mobilisation to create a norm that children must not work and attend schools.

The entire program of bringing out of school children into schools must be taken up in a campaign mode at the national level. Messages must be sent that the system means to reach out to all children out of schools setting a tone for a normative as well as a policy framework resonating with the aspirations of the poor at the lower level. There is a need to involve a large band of youth in the campaign to identify children, draw up their lists, negotiate with employers, convince parents, involve gram panchayats to resolve conflicts in favour of children's right to education and so on. Out of school children would thus become visible through a process of campaign and public debate and discussions on children's rights.

2. Continuous process of physical verification of children.

The data on the numbers of children actually enrolled and retained in school is often exaggerated. All planning must base itself on an honest assessment and record of the actual retention of children in schools. Underestimation of out of school children results in denial of children their right to education. For example many girls who are in the ages of 12 to 14 years, children as migrant labour and in trafficking, children working as full time domestic workers in houses and apartment complexes are just not accounted for. They are neither in the list of school going children or out of school children. Physical verification of attendance registers by the local bodies and the School Education Committees and their authentication of this data before it is passed on to the next level of authority is absolutely necessary. They have also to be given training for this.

3. Preparation of older children who have been withdrawn from work

There is unevenness in the educational attainments of *out of school* children. Some may have dropped out of school in the early stages of primary education and seek to comeback after a long gap of four to five years while some others may not even have been enrolled in schools. Arrangements for residential bridge course camps, motivation centres and any other local initiative that emerges in the process of campaign and mobilization needs to be taken up. None of these are to act as substitutes to schools or even as transitional institutions. They are to be regarded as 'arrangements' to encourage older children join full time formal day schools. Simultaneously a message is sent that no child is so old that he/she cannot get back to school.

4. Provision has to be made to save older children the embarrassment of joining in class one by introducing special coaching classes and bridge courses enabling their smooth transition as students and into classes according to their age.

There must be a policy to accommodate late starters, older illiterate children or school dropouts who desire to join schools. Rules such as fixing the last date of admission, insistence on standards and quality even before the child has been admitted act as a deterrent. An instruction that no child is denied a seat at any given point of time is a must.

5. Provision of residential facilities for children in difficult circumstances

Special efforts such as providing residential facilities must be made for children of migrant labour, children belonging to disadvantaged groups, street children, orphans, child labour and adolescent girls.

6. Modification of school governance systems to address the backlog of children joining schools, to respond to the needs of the first-generation learners and also to ensure retention of all children in schools.

Poor parents are easily intimidated if they have to deal with schools, with which they are unfamiliar. They lack the skill to get birth certificates, medical certificates, income and caste

certificates, which need dealing with more than one department. They are much less familiar with the rules of examination, attendance, promotion and procurement of transfer certificates and so on. Schools should take up the responsibility of transferring the students from one school to another and not the children or the parents. An institutional arrangement of this nature would go a long way in seeing that there is no disruption in children's studies.

7. Involvement of gram panchayats and interface with community and the department of education

Local bodies are to be involved in all the exercises of Annual Work Plans and given training for the same. The local bodies must review the status of out of school children through periodic meetings in consultation with education department, and take up critical bottlenecks regarding children's rights and school related issues to higher level authorities. Lists of children who have been absent for more than a month are to be handed over to the gram panchayats and read out in the gram sabhas. An enquiry into the cause of absence and resolution of the problems has to be made immediately allowing for the reintegration of the child into school. The department of education at all levels must respond immediately to all such petitions by issuing appropriate circulars and government orders, as well as providing supplies and infrastructure.

8. Officials at all levels should take up the responsibility for ensuring that children are retained in schools

Currently the department is prepared to meet the demands of families that are fully aware of the principles that govern schools. In order to access out of school children, the entire school system and the education department at all levels must be trained to modify procedures just so that they accept older children in schools and help in making a smooth transition from one class to the next.

9. Co-ordination with other departments

Mobilising children back to schools is a complex task and there needs to be an active coordination between the labour, revenue, police, welfare and education departments facilitated by the education department.

FULL TIME FORMAL SCHOOLS FOR EQUITY AND JUSTICE

The function of schools in the context of developing societies where a large number of children remain out of school too needs to be redefined. When children are out of school they can never be reached out to. Their lives of tension and tribulations, their exploitative conditions of living, the violence and suffering they endure in the family and at work place, if the child is a girl, then their gender discrimination and the issue of early child marriages all go unnoticed. Once they are in schools they are in the reckoning and thus can gain access to all the rights they are entitled to as children.

Schools like any other educational institution is also instrumental in democratising distribution of all those resources [technical and social skills, certificates, general capacities] which help improve the life chances of those who survive in the system. Since it is only by going to schools that the children's capabilities are enhanced and eventually as adults there is a possibility of new choices and opportunities for them. Stated differently, schools become institutions that break the intergenerational cycle of poverty and deprivation. Children no longer grow up to become what their parents did as marginalized and vulnerable workers. In fact even during the process of their children

gaining access to schools the families of the poor witness a change in their lifestyle and mode of thinking and living their daily lives and these families cease to reproduce the same values and culture, which keep them marginalized. They begin to assert and question with greater confidence and take informed decisions. This gives them an access to cultural capital. Schools thus become the first step towards equity. Consequently the process of democratisation of schools results in the process of democratisation of the society.

It is only when children attend schools and are exposed to a world of ideas and knowledge they gain the power to negotiate with authorities, the confidence to bargain effectively for their share in the national resources and all the accoutrements that are necessary to live a life with dignity and self –esteem. School is a site for contestation of power.

In a more immediate sense schools are the only institutions, which can keep children out of work and abolish child labour. Thus schools perform a radical function as they become protector of child rights. In fact the right place for children to be in is the school. And therefore the battle for schools must be won!