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## **Universalizing Elementary Education in India** *Achievements and Challenges*

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Alternatives for and from the Global South

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## Acronyms

ABL	Activity Based Learning
ASER	Annual Status of Education Report
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
CCE	Continuous Comprehensive Evaluation
DISE	District Information System for Education
DPEP	District Primary Education Programme
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HP	Himachal Pradesh
IAS	Indian Administrative Service
MGML	Multi-Grade Multi-Level
NAFRE	National Alliance for the Fundamental Right to Education
NCF	National Curriculum Framework
NDP	No-Detention Policy
NREGA	National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005 [later renamed “Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act” MGNREGA]
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PTR	Pupil-Teacher Ratios
RTE	Right to Education
SC	Scheduled Castes
SDP	School Development Plan
SMC	School Management Committees
SSA	Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan
ST	Scheduled Tribes
TARL	Teaching at the Right Level
UEE	Universalization of Elementary Education
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund
UNRISD	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
UPA	United Progressive Alliance

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## **Abstract**

Despite the promise in the Constitution of India (1950) to establish universal elementary education within a decade, for many years this goal received neither the attention of politicians nor the resources for its achievement. This began to change in the early 1990s with several innovative programmes—notably the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, introduced in 2001—and then with the passage of the Right to Education Act in 2009. Much has been achieved in this time. School infrastructure has been greatly improved, and enrolment is now virtually universal among girls and boys, and is nearly universal among members of historically marginalized groups in Indian society, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Nevertheless, education in India is still under-resourced, and there remain problems of retention and of the quality of education, which has deteriorated since the Right to Education Act came into effect. In addition, the numbers of children being educated in private schools has increased to about a third of the total. Analysing reasons for the continuing problems of elementary education in India—in which the needs for focus on learning, for attention to the training and accountability of teachers and for deepening of parental involvement are all generally recognized—this paper develops the argument that there has to be extensive innovation in the ways in which schooling is managed. In a sector that involves both very large numbers of transactions and high levels of discretion on the parts of the service providers, most importantly teachers, an administration that only follows rules will not do.

*It will not be an exaggeration to say that our education system is in disarray.<sup>1</sup>*

*There is no guarantee that the Right to Education Act will lead to a major breakthrough in the quality and equity of education in India. However, it is at least an opportunity—a tool that can be used in various ways to bring about further change.<sup>2</sup>*

*The landscape of education delivery has changed ... Far from focusing on ensuring schools are built and students show up, the next generation of education delivery reforms will need to contend with learning, teacher accountability and deeper parent engagement. This requires an administration that does more than follow rules.<sup>3</sup>*

## Introduction

Successive governments of independent India have long failed to honour a commitment to the education of children that was made in Article 45 of the Constitution promulgated in 1950. The Article appears among the Directive Principles of Part IV of the Constitution, which are in effect statements of good intention and are not justiciable—unlike the Fundamental Rights specified in Part III. These are mainly civil and political rights, while possible social and economic rights—including a right to education—were relegated by the authors of the Constitution to the Directive Principles.<sup>4</sup> Article 45 mandated the state to endeavour to provide free and compulsory education to all children up to the age of 14 within a period of ten years (that is, by 1960), but successive governments failed to allocate sufficient resources, or attention, for the achievement of this goal. Over the last twenty five years, however, there has come about a significant shift in policy and practice in regard to elementary education, most strikingly with the establishment of the Right to Education in an act passed in 2009. This has made basic education a justiciable right, for the first time.

The Right to Education Act (RTE) followed on the formulation of the second National Policy on Education of 1986, revised in 1992, and then the establishment in 2001 of India's most ambitious educational programme, the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)—which drew in part on the experience of the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), established in 1993-94, and aimed at universalizing primary education. DPEP brought international funding for education into India on a significant scale for the first time, most of it from the World Bank and the Department for International Development of the UK Government (then the Overseas Development Administration). At the same time, DPEP engaged Indian scholars and planners very substantially in its implementation, and had the effect of heightening the status of primary education as a policy domain within the state. It is described in the Report of the Committee for Evolution of the New Education Policy (also known, after the name of its chairperson, as the T. S. R. Subramanian Committee), in 2016, as having been “for many years, the flagship programme of the Government of India in elementary education.”<sup>5</sup>

The Subramanian Committee Report was submitted to the Ministry of Human Resource Development in May 2016, and entered the public domain a little later in the face of the reluctance of the Ministry either to release or to respond to it. The five-member committee was appointed late in 2015 to help “evolve a draft New Education Policy”,

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<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India (2016): 3

<sup>2</sup> De et al. (2011): 113

<sup>3</sup> Aiyar and Bhattacharya (2016): 69

<sup>4</sup> Jayal (2013)

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India (2016): 23

more than 25 years after the formulation of the second National Policy on Education. Much of the content of the report is not particularly new, but it offers the candid assessment of the state of the education sector in general that is expressed in the first epigraph to this paper. Further reference is made, below, to the report.

The aim of the present paper is to review the changes that have been brought about in recent years, as a result of the introduction of DPEP, SSA and the RTE, and their success or failure in achieving their objectives. The paper first sets out the conceptual framework that informs the argument, then, in Part 1, offers a brief overview of the current state of elementary education in India, in the light both of historical trends and of international comparison. This highlights the progress that has been made in India, in improving infrastructure, pupil-teacher ratios and enrolment, but also the major problem of the quality of education, which—according to what is generally regarded as authoritative monitoring, for the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), produced by the non-governmental organization (NGO) Pratham—has declined in recent years from already low levels. Part 1 also includes discussion of the argument, widely accepted among scholars and activists in India, and most recently reiterated by the Subramanian Committee, that elementary education, even now, is underfunded by the government, and considers evidence both on the politics of the historical neglect of these lower levels of the education system, and on the reasons for the apparent turnaround after about 1990, asking, what have been the drivers of the new directions in education policy? Part 2 then examines the content of the key policies and programmes, their achievements and their limitations. Part 3 reviews evidence and arguments about what are considered by some to be ways ahead and means of tackling current problems, but by others only as inadequate “quick fixes” for the persistent problems of the elementary education system: the employment of contract teachers; privatization, and increased reliance on community participation and management. Consideration is given as well to the arguments of the Subramanian Committee. Part 4 examines current debates over the controversial concepts of No-Detention and of Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation that are introduced in the RTE, and over pedagogy. It concludes with the argument that what is required to bring about desirable changes in the education system of India is effort and experiment in teaching according to children’s specific needs. This “bottom-up” approach will require what has been described as an “innovative state-building project”, calling for extensive bureaucratic reform and the empowerment of parents as citizens in the management of schools. As the authors cited in the third epigraph have argued, what is needed is “an administration that does more than follow rules.”<sup>6</sup>

The paper refers generally to elementary education, since this is the terminology widely used in India. It refers to the levels of primary education (grades 1-5) and upper primary (grades 6-8), which together are expected to engage a child from the age of six to 14. These are the years over which the state is now obligated, under the RTE, to keep a child in school and to provide him/her with the requisite education. It should also be noted that education in India is on what is called the Concurrent List. This means that it is a responsibility shared between central government (henceforth the Centre) and the governments of the individual states in the Union of India. The Centre can provide policies and guidelines—as in legislation such as the Right to Education Act—and it can influence funding, but the states have the primary responsibility in regard to implementation. Over the last 25 years, about 80 percent of social sector spending, including elementary education has come from the state budgets.<sup>7</sup> The significance of

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<sup>6</sup> Aiyar and Bhattacharya (2016): 69

<sup>7</sup> Dongre and Kapur (2016)

the division of responsibility between the Centre and states is considered below, particularly in connection with the impact and implications of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan.

## Conceptual Framework: When bureaucracy is not the solution

The conventional approach to public service delivery has been that such services are best supplied by a civil service operating according to the principles of modern bureaucracy. But as Lant Pritchett and Michael Woolcock have argued in a paper with the intriguing title “Solutions When the Solution Is the Problem”<sup>8</sup>, the conventional bureaucratic approach (the solution) does not always work well. This is not only because actually existing bureaucracies do not function according to Weber’s ideal type, but also because bureaucracies—even those that approximate the Weberian template quite closely—may not be very good at dealing with certain types of problems. Pritchett and Woolcock distinguish between the many types of services for which governments are commonly held responsible, in terms both of the degree of discretionary decision making that they involve, and of the numbers and frequency (the intensity) of transactions that they entail. Some functions of government involve a high level of discretionary decision making—setting the interest rate, for example—but very few transactions. In this case a small number of experts can operate very effectively. On the other hand, there are services that can be highly routinized and so require very little in the way of discretionary decision making, but that are “transactions-intensive”. Examples are those of a vaccination programme, or the provision of school lunches. Such services may be delivered very well by a centralized bureaucracy, supplying a top-down and uniform public service. The really difficult cases, however, are those of services—of which classroom teaching is a particularly important example—that involve both a lot of discretionary decision making and large numbers of transactions. The conventional bureaucratic approach very often fails in regard to services such as these—“the solution”, as Pritchett and Woolcock put it, may become part of the problem. This is what is argued in the present paper, in regard to the provision of elementary education in India.

Studies of the ways in which elementary education is delivered in India confirm the general findings with regard to education that are reported by Pritchett and Woolcock. They say that the bureaucratic approach has “led to schools with standardized curriculum, teachers with little training, low local commitment to the school ... excessive devotion of recurrent expenditure to wages, little real learning, and high dropout rates”<sup>9</sup>—a statement that fits the Indian experience very well. A whole range of

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