

The missing children

By Shantha Sinha

“Sir, we are from village Gorlapalli, Vemanapalli mandal, Adilabad district in Andhra Pradesh. We convinced our parents not to burden us any more with domestic chores and tending to goats and buffaloes. They agreed and we now seek admission into the Residential Bridge Course camp at Chennur”

(February 7, Andhra Jyothi, Adilabad edition)

The authorities rejected the above plea by Srujana, Rajita, Tirupatamma, Janakka and Lakshmi, 12-13-year old girls, on the ground that their names did not appear on the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) list of out-of-school children. SSA is the government programme to implement universal elementary education in India. These girls are amongst the poorest of children from the remotest of tribal villages and similar stories come from those in urban pockets. Will anyone pay attention to the pleas of these children?

On February 21, 2005, the Prime Minister addressed the first meeting of the Governing Council of the National Mission for “Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan.” He declared passionately and with a sense of urgency that, “Our country must become fully literate. I do not want to specify a time frame for this as we have done so many times in the past. Slogans like ‘Health for All,’ ‘Education for All’ and such like have been given deadlines — ‘by 1980,’ ‘by 1990,’ ‘by 2000’ and so on. We name dates that have lost their meaning. We need education for all today (February 21, Hindu).”

How serious is the government in implementing its promises and in ensuring that the Prime Minister’s candid acknowledgement is translated into concrete action? The goal of universalisation of elementary education is still elusive and only 47 per cent of children who enter Class I stay on in school up to Class 8. The figures are even lower when the children from the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and girl children are examined.

What must be done if the children’s right to education is to be assured? First of all, the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) must verify that the statistics provided by each of the states to the government of India on the number of children who are in schools and those who are out of schools, are accurate.

The numbers consolidated at the government of India level show that there are only eight million children out of about 200 million children in the age group 6-14 years who do not go to school as on December 2004. The State Project Directors of SSA submitted this data. This means that only 4 per cent of all children are out of school according to the SSA estimate. Furthermore, the total number of children accounted for by the SSA does not match the number of children enumerated in the 2001 Census of India. For example, in the state of Andhra Pradesh, the SSA has declared that there are 1.53-crore children of school going age while the corresponding figure according to census data is 1.77-crore. The figures simply do not add up.

Where have these missing children gone and who accounts for them?

When the issue of incorrect data is brought to the attention of the authorities at the state level, the response is often non-committal and it is said that one should not heed these numbers and data as they have no “meaning” in reality. The officials proceed to offer suggestions about the importance of working at the grassroots level to get every child into school and not to get involved in “unnecessary details.”

Are they really unnecessary details or the basis on which plans, allocation of funds and programmes are decided at the local level? For example, when children seek admission to the Non-Residential Bridge Course Centres or Residential Bridge Course Camps, they are asked to produce a certificate from the school headmaster or the educational officer at the mandal or block level that their names are not on the attendance register as school-going children. Unless such a certificate is obtained, the children are denied access to such facilities. Poor children and their parents are often intimidated by the bureaucracy and often find it extremely difficult to contact the officials in order to negotiate the issuance of such certificates.

In addition to this, the school headmaster would find it difficult to provide a certificate of non-attendance, especially if the name of the child has already been entered in the attendance register of the school. These attendance records are passed on to the block level, district level, state level and subsequently to the national level. It is this information which informs the consolidated data on enrolment of children in schools in the country.

One reason for providing incorrect data is to help the school to get extra teachers on the basis of the teacher-pupil ratio. It also has implications for the assistance given for the midday meal schemes and others. At the national level, it shows, perhaps, that our country is doing remarkably well in implementing the goal of education for all. In this way, the manufacturing of false data becomes a structural issue.

There have been many exercises conducted by NGOs to “clean” or verify the data at the grassroots level. In the process, they discovered that there were names of children on attendance registers who were not in school and who actually attend private schools. Sometimes there were names of children who were not even in the village and had left school on migration along with their parents. Some names continue in the same class for years even after the children had moved to higher classes.

In fact, it has been found that the names of girls who are over 12 years of age and have attained puberty do not appear on the attendance register or on the out-of-school children list. When pursued on this subject, the teachers have promptly responded that such girls are “over aged” and that it would be “a waste to include their names because they would not come to school in any case.” Young girls who are married and below 14 years of age are also seldom mentioned on the lists, as if they do not exist.

It seems that falsifying data has resulted in a gross violation of the children’s right to education. Further, the unpardonable error of not listing names of children on any list is tantamount to abdication of the state’s responsibility towards the child and declaring them non-existent. This is an extremely serious issue and unless the

system learns to value truth and not underestimate the number of children who are un-enrolled, it will neither honour nor fulfil the promises made by the Prime Minister.

It is absolutely necessary to create structures which encourage the schoolteachers to give correct information. For they alone actually know what the truth of the local situation is. If they have not provided the correct information, it is not necessarily their fault, but that they are responding to the authorities who have not provided the space and the processes to respect truth. I

f only the policy-makers and those in the helm of bureaucracy are genuinely interested in the protection of children's rights they would understand the indispensability of correctness of information on children, work towards ensuring that all of them come to schools and not just pretend that every child is already in school.

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