

# DECCAN Chronicle *On The Web*

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## Let's educate India!

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Today, April 1, 2010, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2010 — a historic step — will become a reality. Each one of us must welcome this constitutional mandate that guarantees education to children of our country as a fundamental right. The act makes it a compulsion on the state to guarantee right to education and “ensure compulsory admission, attendance, and completion of elementary education by every child of six to 14 years”. By implication, the state is violating the law if any child is out of school, or is a school dropout. The act promises free education, which means that no financial constraints can “prevent” a child from completing elementary education. In other words, if a child lives in a remote area, providing free transportation (or residential facility or some other facility) will be part of the child’s entitlement to education. These include special aids for children with disabilities. The act paves the way for bringing equity and social justice and enhancing the democratic texture of India’s society and polity.

### Defining standards and norms

It is necessary to highlight some of the rights of children as spelt out under the act. The act provides for school teachers at 1:30 teacher-pupil ratio at the primary school level and 1:35 at the upper primary school level within six months and insists on having only trained school teachers in five years’ time. Indeed, there is a detailed schedule of standards and norms for schools in the act — one room for every teacher, subject-wise teachers, toilets and drinking water, a library, and a playground among other. These entitlements have to be met within three years.

### Sensitivity to first-generation learner

The act is important because it recognises the difficulties faced by poor children and first-generation learners and makes it easy for them to continue in school without disruption. The provisions in the act ensuring that no child is pushed out of school for want of birth certificate, transfer certificate or other admission procedures are to be internalised by the entire system and its functionaries. This means that children — street children, child labour, whether rural, urban or domestic, or others — can no more be deprived of education, whatever the situation: migration, being in areas of civil unrest, being displaced due to natural calamities, or being caught in the illegal nexuses of drugs and other illicit activities. This implies that children must be in schools and that schools are safe zones for children where they enjoy childhood. To meet the challenge of the huge backlog of out of school children and school dropouts, the act mandates that the schools prepare children to an age-appropriate class through special trainings. This means that a 10-year-old child is not just admitted to school but is also guaranteed that s/he would catch up with his/her peers.

Local communities have been given a sense of ownership of the mission through the mandated school management committees.

### Quality education

When every child enjoys the right to education, the challenge is in providing quality education that must have equal standards, regardless of diversities in location, culture, or levels of development a particular society is embedded in. Many debates, such as what kind of education, how much of standardised curriculum, the medium of instruction, and the need for local-specific knowledge to comfort the children and enhance their horizons become real issues of discussion. The act provides for quality of education and ensures that children are not detained in the same class. Evaluation of children is to be on “comprehensive” performance of a child, reflecting all facets and talents of the child and not be based on just a few subject areas. This continuous evaluation must include music, theatre, leadership skills, social skills etc, as well.

### What is to be done?

The challenge is really in believing that it is possible to achieve this goal, especially since it resonates with the yearnings and aspirations of millions of poor parents in our country who want to educate their children. When

yearnings and aspirations of millions of poor parents in our country who want to educate their children. When utmost faith in the community is reposed by the state, local actions emerge which often go beyond the expectations of the government. In fact, it has been seen time and again how a community can take ownership of the idea, spread its wings and offer all that it has to make education happen, including breaking down many exclusionary barriers, as if it was waiting for this call from its government leaders.

Since several of these ideas challenge normative ways of thinking and doing things, they do question the existing social and cultural hierarchies and power structures. It seems that at this point taking sides becomes inevitable.

Active support from one and all to local consensus building in favour of the democratisation of schools is necessary at this juncture. All of us, rich and poor, must join together in taking such movements forward and help in institutionalising the ground swell of local action.

We must question in an institutionalised fashion all violations of children's rights and create energy for the state to respond to avoid ad hoc schemes and commit to long-term inter-generational policies. We must think beyond the family and our immediate circle and stand by the right of all children to education.

It must be an ethical leap of faith and an arousing of national conscience where we take pride in what we have attained for our children in full awareness that every right attained sets new norms, new cultures and traditions, new experiences, and increases our ability to empathise across social classes — and in actualising the fact that “we are all equal” — a principle that is coterminous with democracy.

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