The Problems of Primary Education in the Modern Context

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Abstract:

Primary education is the foundation of educational and social progress of any nation. In a developing country like India, continuous efforts have been made to make primary education accessible, qualitative and inclusive, but in the modern context, this education is facing many complex problems. Despite the implementation of the Right to Education Act, teaching quality, lack of resources, non-availability of trained teachers, high attrition of students and socio-economic disparities are still major impediments. One of the major reasons for the decline in the quality of education is the lack of trained and dedicated teachers. The situation is even more serious in rural and tribal areas where educational infrastructure is incomplete or dilapidated. Despite the spread of digital education, the problem of digital divide is also depriving poor and rural students of education. This gap has deepened after the Covid-19 pandemic. Child labour, gender-based discrimination and lack of education awareness among minority communities also affect primary education. Despite government efforts such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan, these challenges have not been addressed at the desired level. Today, there is a need to make primary education qualitative, participatory and practical, and not just limited to enrolment data. Making teacher training practical and innovative, making technical resources inclusive and ensuring active participation of the community has become very essential in the present context. The paper will analyse the various dimensions of these problems and propose suitable solutions so as to provide a robust, equitable and inclusive form of primary education.

KeyWords: Primary Education, Education Policy, Teaching Quality, Educational Infrastructure, Digital Divide, Teacher Training, Child Rights, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan

Introduction

Education is not only the medium of development of human personality but also the foundation of overall upliftment of society and nation building. Primary education is the foundation on which the mental, intellectual, social and moral development of an individual rests. It not only inculcates useful knowledge, skills and values in the individual but also prepares him as a conscious, responsible citizen. Therefore, primary education is given top priority in the educational planning and policies of any nation. Primary education refers to the elementary education usually provided to children between the ages of 6 and 14. It focusses on fundamental aspects of life such as language, mathematics, envi-

ronmental studies, moral education and social behaviour. As per Article 21A of the Constitution of India, free and compulsory education for children between the ages of 6 to 14 years is acknowledged as a fundamental right. The aim is not only to increase the rate of literacy but also to make children self-reliant, creative and morally competent. Primary education in India has its roots in the ancient Gurukul tradition. In the Vedic age, the education system included grammar, mathematics, the Vedas and moral knowledge at an early stage. In the mediaeval period, the nature of education became religious and class-based, limiting the opportunity of education to limited classes. Under the British rule, government funding for formal education system was first raised through the Charter Act of 1813. The Woods Dispatch of 1854 proved to be an important document for Indian education, laying the groundwork for primary education.

Many revolutionary initiatives were taken in the field of education in independent India. In the National Education Policies of 1968, 1986 and 2020, many schemes were launched considering primary education as paramount. Programmes like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (2001) and Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (2018) not only succeeded in increasing enrolment but also attempted to reduce gender, caste and regional disparities. But the complex social, economic and technological problems that primary education is currently grappling with demand an in-depth research. In the modern context, many multifaceted challenges have arisen regarding primary education. On the one hand, there is an increase in the rate of enrolment, and on the other, there is an acute shortage of quality teaching. Issues such as availability of trained teachers in schools, timeliness of curriculum, lack of technological resources, and post-COVID-19 digital divide have emerged as new challenges. The physical conditions of schools in rural areas, such as lack of facilities like toilets, libraries, drinking water, etc., also affect the attendance of children. The solution to these problems is possible only when there is a thorough study of the schemes, implementation processes and policy decisions related to primary education. This requires researchers to analyse aspects such as the changing socio-cultural milieu in the modern context, the effectiveness of digital education, the quality of teacher training, and parental involvement.

Structure of the current primary education system

The structure of primary education in India is characterised by a complex and heterogeneous system, where different types of educational institutions - government, private, aided, and unaided - function collectively. An in-depth study of the internal structure, policy implications and curricular approach of these institutions is necessary to understand the pervasiveness and multifaceted nature of this system. Primary education in the country is governed by a three-tier administrative structure - central, state and local bodies. Providing free and compulsory education to children in the age group of 6 to 14 years has now become a constitutional obligation in India, which is ensured by Article 21A of the Constitution. Under this system, on the one hand, a large range of government schools are functioning, while on the other hand, the private sector has also made deep inroads into education, which makes a comparative review of both systems necessary. At present, there is a marked difference in the status of government and private schools. Despite the large number of government schools, the enrolment rate in them is declining, especially in urban areas. On the contrary, the trend towards private schools is growing rapidly, even though they are expensive. Several factors are at play such as better academic environment, convenient infrastructure, low student-teacher ratio and teaching in English medium. Government schools often face problems such as teacher absenteeism, lack of resources, and administrative neglect, which affect the reputation of these schools.

However, the Right to Education Act (RTE) 2009 attempted to correct this imbalance. The Act mandated private schools to reserve 25% of their seats for children from economically weaker sections. At the same time, standards were set by the government on aspects such as teacher qualification, pupil-teacher ratio, infrastructure facilities and equivalence of curriculum. However, there were many challenges in its implementation. Many private schools resort to technical excuses to circumvent the RTE norms, while government institutions fail to deliver the required quality in the absence of necessary resources and administrative oversight. A review of the curriculum and pedagogical framework

is also necessary, as education cannot be limited to bookish knowledge. At present, most of the states follow the NCERT curriculum which incorporates linguistic, mathematical, environmental and social knowledge. The curriculum prescribed by the National Council of Educational Research and Training gives priority to the conceptual clarity and practical knowledge of the students. But when it comes to the implementation of this course, many inconsistencies emerge. Issues such as timely availability of textbooks, training of teachers, classroom facilities and access to technology prevent effective implementation of this curriculum in rural areas. Moreover, digitisation of education and lack of innovative teaching methods also hinder the all-round development of children.

Social issues

Social problems in the field of primary education have roots that not only impede educational progress, but also pose serious obstacles to the overall development of children. In a diverse society like India, where deep differences exist in social class, gender, caste and economic status, equality in education is limited to policy-making. Though the Constitution and education policies have accepted the concept of equitable and inclusive education, the ground reality is far from these goals. First of all, if we talk about gender discrimination, even today in many rural and semi-urban areas, the education of girls is considered secondary. There is a perception in families that girls don't need to be taught much, as they "have to get married eventually." Due to this thinking, many girls do not even reach the primary level. This trend is particularly seen in Muslim, Scheduled Caste and tribal communities, where cultural and religious beliefs stand in the way of education.

Caste discrimination is also a deep-rooted social problem, affecting the psychology and participation of children in primary schools. Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe children face discrimination not only by classmates but also sometimes by teachers. This discrimination makes them feel inferior, which hinders their learning. This disparity is evident in many places such as food distribution, seating arrangements and classroom participation.

Child labour and child marriage are also problems that take children away from education. In poor families, children are put to work early so that the family's income can increase. Particularly in agricultural areas, children are employed in the fields, while in urban areas they are employed in household chores, dhabas or factories. Marrying off girls at an early age further complicates child education. Due to these social practices, the dropout rate of children is increasing, due to which the goals of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan remain unfulfilled. In addition, there is a marked disparity in the rural and urban primary education system. While education facilities are more in urban areas - smart classes, libraries, trained teachers, technical media, etc. - rural schools also lack basic facilities. In rural schools, toilets, drinking water, proper seating arrangements and books are not available on time. Also, there teachers are often absent or the responsibility of many schools is on one teacher. On the contrary, the awareness of parents in urban schools, the abundance of private schools and the atmosphere of competition motivate children towards education. Although the government has implemented many schemes to promote inclusive education, such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Mid Day Meal Scheme, RTE Act, Balika Shiksha Protsahan Yojana, etc.

Economic problems

Economic factors have had a profound impact on the availability and quality of primary education in India. Education is supposed to be the basis of social transformation and self-reliance, but when it is itself grappling with economic crises, its reach is limited to the most vulnerable sections of society. Economic problems create such barriers in primary education which not only affect enrolment and attendance but also hinder the overall educational development of the students. A large section of India's population lives below the poverty line. In such a situation, education is often taken as an additional expense instead of being seen as a primary need. For poor families, it is more important than sending children to school to engage them in domestic or wage work, so as to contribute to the family income.

This is the reason why continuity of primary education is not possible in rural, tribal and deprived communities. Moreover, the condition of schools remains poor as the government does not invest the required share of GDP in primary education. It is a matter of concern that only a limited part of the education budget is spent on meeting the basic needs of primary education.

Another serious impact of poverty is on the daily needs of students. The provision of nutrition, uniforms, textbooks, stationery, shoes, socks, etc. for children studying in schools is beyond the capacity of their families. Though the government has implemented schemes like mid-day meal scheme, distribution of free uniforms and supply of books, there are serious lapses in their implementation. In many places, the quality of food is poor, uniforms are not received on time or there is no transparency in its distribution. This affects the attendance of children, especially those who come to school in the hope of these facilities. In the case of girl children, non-availability of uniforms, hygiene and health facilities have a more negative impact on their attendance. The condition of schools is also very bad. Many government primary schools do not have adequate classrooms, do not have drinking water facilities, do not have toilets or are not suitable especially for girls. Facilities like libraries, playgrounds, science and mathematics labs, digital education system are almost negligible in most of the rural schools. The National Education Policy and the Right to Education Act declare these facilities mandatory, but the level of implementation is far from satisfactory in most states. Often the same teacher in a school is obliged to teach several classes. At the same time, due to economic crisis, the appointment of teachers is not regularised or they do not get proper honorarium, which affects their motivation and commitment. In many states, appointments are made on low salaries under the contractual teacher system, which affects the quality of teaching.

Administrative and policy issues

A number of schemes and policies have been implemented to strengthen primary education in India, but their desired impact is possible only if transparency, efficient management and effective monitoring are ensured at the administrative and policy level. Ironically, even today there are many administrative bottlenecks and policy inconsistencies that undermine the roots of primary education, without which holistic reforms are not possible. The biggest problem emerges as the lack of transparency in the teacher recruitment process. Appointments in primary schools are often marred by allegations of political interference, nepotism, irregular selection processes and corruption. In many States, appointments were made bypassing standards such as the Teacher Eligibility Test, which completely lacked transparency. In addition, postponement of recruitments for years, pendency of cases in courts, and confusion over reservation rules lead to the alienation of deserving candidates from the education system.

The second major problem is the lack of trained and qualified teachers. In many rural, tribal and backward areas of India, schools are still functioning where either teachers are absent or their number is negligible. Many times the same teacher has to take charge of more than one class or subject, which affects the quality of teaching. At the same time, training of trainers is also a matter of serious concern. In most of the states, the training curriculum required for teachers (D.El.Ed, B.Ed) is either incomplete or substandard. Teacher training institutions, especially in the private sector, have become mere certificate providers. As a result, teachers are neither familiar with modern methods of teaching nor with the deeper aspects of child psychology.

Another important aspect is the weakness of the educational monitoring and evaluation system. The administrative machinery that supervises schools, such as the block education officer, the complex in-charge, or the district education officer, often treats inspection as a formality. Assessment of schools is limited to occasional or only review of documents. There is no objective assessment of the quality of teaching and no concrete analysis of the progress of the students. Assessment methods are also mostly score based, which do not test the real understanding or creativity of the student. The National Education Policy (2020) has made provisions for teacher training, flexibility in curriculum and improvement in assessment, but its success also depends on administrative will and commitment of policymakers. As

long as vacancies in the education department, budgetary disparities, and politics in the implementation of policies dominate, it is not possible to change the quality of primary education.

In addition, the lack of education management at the local bodies and panchayat level also reflects administrative weakness. In many schools, School Management Committees (SMCs) are only nominal, with limited participation of parents in the meetings. Policies are made at the central and state level, but their effectiveness depends on local implementation - which is still very weak.

Issues related to the quality of education

The quality of education is the key to the success of any educational system. Especially in the context of primary education, quality teaching is the element that sustains curiosity, creativity and continuity of learning in children. But in the present system of primary education in India, this quality is being affected by many reasons. This crisis is deepening due to the absence of many aspects such as the functioning of teachers, availability of educational resources, methods of classroom management and administrative support. The most prominent problem is the absence of child-centered teaching methods. Both the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) and the National Education Policy (NEP) emphasise on making education child-centric, focussing on the interests, abilities, environment and experiences of children. But on a practical level, the teaching in most schools today remains teacher-centric, rote-based and textbook-dependent. Despite the presence of children of different levels in the classroom, the teaching is done in a uniform manner, due to which the weaker children do not get proper benefit. Child-centered activities, group work, project-based learning, education through games, etc. are neglected. This has a direct impact on students' creativity and interest in learning.

Another serious problem is the imbalance in the teacher-student ratio. As per the Right to Education Act, 2009, a teacher-student ratio of 1:30 should be ensured at the primary level. But this ratio is highly imbalanced in most states of the country, especially in areas like Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Odisha. The number of single-teacher schools is still at an alarming level. This not only brings down the standard of teaching, but teachers also become physically and mentally fatigued, affecting their efficiency. When a teacher has to simultaneously take charge of several classes, administrative work, meal planning, enumeration reports, etc., it is natural for the quality of teaching to be affected.

The third problem is related to multigrade learning. This situation is especially seen in schools in rural and border areas, where the same teacher has to teach classes from 1st to 5th simultaneously. This teaching system can be effective only if the teacher is specially trained in its methods and appropriate teaching materials are available. But in most of the cases neither the teacher is properly trained in multigrade teaching, nor the teaching resources are made available. As a result, learning becomes superficial and the individual needs of children are not met. This lowers the standard of education and also leads to dropout in children. To improve the quality of teaching, it is first necessary that the teacher becomes a trained and motivated 'teacher' rather than just an 'appointed worker'. For this, methods of child-centred learning should be incorporated in the training curriculum. Regular and transparent recruitments should be made to balance the teacher-student ratio. At the same time, multigrade learning should not be seen as a compulsion but as an empowering strategy that requires proper training, planning and resources.

New Education Policy and Challenges of the Digital Age

The new chapter of transformation in the field of education in India began in the year 2020 when the Central Government announced the National Education Policy (NEP 2020). The policy marks an important step towards making the Indian education system inclusive, equitable, innovative and at par with global standards. Primary education, in particular, was placed at the centre of this policy, with a 5+3 + 3+4 structure adopted, thereby integrating early childhood care and pre-primary education into the formal framework. Under the National Education Policy 2020, many positive changes were pro-

posed in the field of primary education. The policy set a target of achieving foundational literacy and numeracy (basic literacy and numeracy skills) by 2025, which is essential for improving the quality of teaching. Efforts have been made to make the intellectual development of children smooth and effective by giving priority to education in mother tongue or local language. Along with this, importance has also been given to teacher training, evaluation process, flexibility in curriculum and education based on life skills. But the success of this policy is beset with many practical challenges, especially when seen in conjunction with the ground realities of the digital age.

The concept of digital education and e-learning suddenly became the main medium of teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic. While this allowed education to continue, it also made clear that digital mediums have many limitations, especially at the primary level. Children in this age group are not only dependent on technology but need physical presence to explain, guide and encourage them. Online classes reduce attention span, limit interaction, and affect children's physical, mental, and social development. At the same time, it becomes an additional challenge for parents to monitor the studies of children, especially when they themselves are illiterate or not technically proficient.

Further complicating these limitations of digital education is the uneven availability of technological resources in India and the depth of the digital divide. Most of the rural, tribal and deprived communities in the country do not have access to essential facilities like smartphones, tablets, laptops, internet connections and electricity. According to the National Family Health Survey and ASER reports, more than 60% of households in rural India do not have basic facilities for online education. Also, many families have only one smartphone, which has to be shared with other family members. Due to this, regular attendance and teaching of children is not possible continuously. Along with the lack of technical resources, digital efficiency of teachers is also a significant challenge. Teachers in most government schools are not trained in the use of digital devices and educational apps, making online teaching limited and ineffective. Some efforts like DIKSHA, e-Pathshala, SWAYAM etc have been made to provide digital content, but their impact will be meaningful only if both teachers and parents get proper training and resources to use it. In view of all these challenges, it is clear that for the progressive vision of the National Education Policy 2020 to reach practical success, not only the expansion of digital resources is necessary, but the policy-making and implementation should be done keeping in mind the local language, social situation and economic limitations.

Conclusion

The landscape of primary education in India has undergone many changes in the last few decades. On the one hand, while policy makers and governments have implemented many schemes for universalisation of education, it is also clear that the ground reality of primary education is still far from satisfactory. Efforts such as the Right to Education Act, National Education Policy 2020, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan paved the way for structural changes, but the complexity of problems remained at the practical level. An integrated assessment of the state of primary education shows that while enrolment rates have increased, basic dimensions such as quality of education, inclusion, access to resources and social justice still remain neglected. Lack of child-centred teaching methods, disparity in teacher-student ratio, complexity of multigrade teaching, social barriers of child labour and child marriage, digital divide, lack of basic infrastructure and lack of transparency in teacher recruitment and training - all these factors emerge as major impediments in the proper development of primary education.

Moreover, the administrative complexity of the education system, the inadequacy of monitoring and the lack of local involvement in policy-making also deepen the crisis. The post-pandemic period is proof that when education became dependent on the digital medium, millions of children were completely cut off from education due to lack of technological resources. This is a sad picture of unequal access to education in the digital age, without addressing which the impact of any policy cannot be sustainable.

A pragmatic, local and participatory approach is required to address these challenges. First, invest-

ment should be made on a large scale, linking primary education to socio-economic policies. Regular, transparent and merit-based recruitments are imperative to balance the teacher-student ratio. Training for teachers should include innovation, child psychology, technical literacy and multilingualism rather than being a mere formality. Schools should not be confined to buildings and classrooms; they should also be linked to educational innovation, child communication, sports, health and nutrition. Facilities like mid-day meal scheme, free uniforms and books, digital devices like tablets or smart boards should reach rural schools and not just urban ones. The policy approach should promote decentralisation, role of local bodies and participation of Panchayats. By re-empowering the School Management Committees (SMCs), their role should not be limited to mere paperwork. Sustainable, inclusive and quality primary education requires that every policy, plan and programme is inspired by the core principles of children's rights, social justice and quality of teaching. Inclusive education does not mean only enrolment but educating every child according to his / her ability, interest and environment. Quality is possible only when interactivity, innovation, co-learning, value-based learning and creativity are given prominence in education. For this, teachers, parents, community, and government have to redefine education as a shared goal.

Author's Declaration / Disclaimer:

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