

UNIVERSALIZATION OF ELEMENTARY EDUCATION WITHOUT PANCHAYAT RAJ IS AN UNFULFILLED DREAM: AN EXPERIENCE OF KASHMIR SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT: Elementary education is a public good- a pure public good and a merit good of high order, which produces huge externalities also widely known as benefits--- economic, social, political and cultural--- that accrue to the whole society. Secondly education is a basic need, a minimum need in need in the Indian development planning framework, like food, clothing and shelter. Third, elementary education is a constitutional mandate for the state to provide it to all in the age group of 6-14, free and compulsory. Elementary education is also considered now under the constitution, a fundamental right, a justifiable right, provision of which cannot be avoided on any account. The CRC adopted by the UN general assembly in 1989 and ratified by India in 1992, in its article 28 and 29 make it clear that it is the right of every child: "To get free and compulsory primary education". As the constitution of India was amended in 2002 to make education a fundamental right, The consequential legislation i.e. right to education (RTE) Act, which came into force with effect from April 1st 2010, brings in an approach shift, a rights perspective and a child centric perspective. It mandates a range of structural and systemic reforms. But unfortunately because of special status of Jammu & Kashmir under Article 370 of the constitution of India, Education has not still been made a fundamental right in the state till date. Even if there are other countless policies and programmes like SarvaShikshaAbhiyan, Mid Day Meal schemes etc to combat the menace of non enrollment and high dropout rates in Kashmir. Gallons of ink have been drawn to highlight the escapes and loopholes in programmes and policies and their implementation, but there is little discussion about the need for a change in society's attitude and community participation in educational interventions, to ensure that these issues do not arise any further. This study is a modest attempt in this direction, and tries to explore how effective and complete institution of Panchayat will make elementary educational structure functional and vibrant which is in shambles as of now. And how Panchayat members can help in changing the attitude of ignorant parents towards the education of their children, which is one of the dominant reason hindering the dream of fulfilling the objective of universalization of elementary education. The present study essentially is the first such research to apply qualitative techniques in order to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of obstacles that hinder children's education and the role of Panchayat institutions thereof. The study also involved collecting information from parents, community members, teachers, children and others stakeholders like village education committees and Panchayat raj members in order to draw the relevant inferences.

Keywords: Education, SSA, VEC, PRI, Social Challenges.

METHODOLOGY:

This study is a modest attempt to highlight and explore the challenges posed to elementary education without effective and complete Panchayat raj in Kashmir. The study involved survey of 50 schools (Elementary/ Primary/Middle) on case to case basis in remote rural settings of district Budgam. As district Budgam is one of the most educationally backward district of J&K state, so the remotest area of block khansahib in district was chosen purposively to gain an understanding of the challenges faced by the children who live on margins. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the problem in question in this qualitative research methodology, case study design has been employed, supplemented with interviews (structured/open ended questions with school going and out of school children), focus group discussions with teachers, parents, community and village education committee members, classroom and infrastructural observations and school profiling. A total of 50 classroom observations were made as a part of the study one in each school, preferably giving equal representation to all grades. 54 out of school children, 100 school going children, 30 Village education committees; 45 Panchayat Raj Members, 50 teachers and 65 community members were interviewed during the course of present study. This study has identified the factors like weak and incomplete Panchayat structure, familial support, family income or wealth, parental education, cultural restrictions, population explosion, conflict in Kashmir, uneven development, student passivity, migration for cattle grazing, empowerment and education of mother, gender, ethnicity, family size or care of younger siblings, absence of teachers, and inadequate educational infrastructure as determinants of enrolment and primary school completion. The study explored the role of institution of Panchayat in containing these issues and fulfilling the dream of universalization of elementary education.

INTRODUCTION:

Education in its broadest general sense refers to the (means) forms of learning in which knowledge, skills, and habits of a group of people are transferred from one generation to the next through teaching, training, research, or simply through auto didacticism (Dewey: 1-4). Generally, it occurs through any experience that has a formative effect on the way one thinks, feels, or acts. In contemporary societies "Education is the social institution through which society provides its members with important knowledge, including basic facts, job skills, and cultural norms and values (Macionis, 2010: 517)". So, in its narrow technical sense, education is the formal process by which society deliberately transmits its accumulated knowledge, skills, customs and values from one generation to another, e.g., instruction in schools.

Elementary education is a public good- a pure public good and a merit good of high order, which produces huge externalities also widely known as benefits--- economic, social, political and cultural--- that accrue to the whole society. Secondly education is a basic need, a minimum need in need in our development planning framework, like food, clothing and shelter. Third, elementary education is a constitutional mandate for the state to provide it to all free and compulsory, in the age group of 6-14. Elementary education is also considered now, a fundamental right, a justifiable right, provision of which cannot be avoided on any account. It is in this context that universal primary education assumes that all children irrespective of the caste, creed or location would complete primary education of comparable quality within the stipulated time frame. Therefore, all children should have equal opportunities to participate and succeed in primary education.

The state of Jammu and Kashmir has made significant progress in increasing enrolment and school completion over the past decades. The growth in enrolment has taken place in the backdrop of introduction of various centrally sponsored educational interventions. Examples of such schemes include SarvaShikshaAbhiyan (SSA), the Non-formal Education Program (1979-90), Operation Blackboard for small rural schools (1986), Total Literacy Campaigns (1988), District Primary School Education Program (1994-2002) and more recently the mid-day meal schemes. But in spite of the introduction of all these schemes, it is now 2015 and we are still not near to achieving universal primary education – and even we do not appear to be closing in on it. There are many social issues that plague our educational system and are responsible for non enrollment and higher dropout rates. Some of the social challenges which confront our educational system in Kashmir and act as a barrier directly or indirectly in the process of enrollment and school completion, explored during this study include;

- I. **Familial support:** Education and family has a direct relationship, from the attitudes a family holds towards formal learning and how much or how little a family supports educational goals. During the course of elementary schooling the range of familial support on day to day basis include help children with studies (Homework), provision of stationery, uniform and other essential materials, arrangement of tuition (usually during winters), and at times provision of pocket money for incidental expenses. However during the course of study it was observed that in the families where adults (especially parents) are illiterate, or are occupied and more interested in other household chores like agriculture and cattle rearing this support is not forthcoming. As 30 from the sample of 54 out of school children reported that disturbance due to domestic work, sibling care (mostly in case of girls), disinterest of parents towards their studies are important constraints which hindered their studies. Teachers and literate common people held that a vibrant institutional structure of PRIs can act as a bridge between school and community and may counsel these illiterate parents about the long term benefits of the education of their children.
- II. **Poverty:** All the 54 out of school children identified and interviewed during the course of this study were reported from B.P.L families, which clearly define close and intimate relationship between education and the economic strata a student belongs to. Growing up in poor homes has also adversely affected the emotional health of the school going children and this also lowers his/her performance at school. Panchayat in these remote areas if trained and empowered can link these poor households with various poverty alleviative schemes and programmes of government, so as to help them to get rid from absolute poverty.
- III. **Ethnic and Gender issues:** Children belonging to certain ethnic groups such as Gujjars are expected to be slower learners as compared to others. There are certain stereotypes that have been attached to them and, children belonging to this category suffer from low self-esteem. Teachers in one of the tribal village Ringzabal claim that these children are themselves more interested in cattle grazing than education. Another social issue in education is differentiation on the basis of sex. Girls have lesser opportunities, compared to boys for studying. It was observed during this study that drop out girls were involved in care of younger siblings, and facilitate family in agriculture and other day to day activities. Panchayat can keep a track of these children and link these dropout girls with various government schemes so as to ensure their permanence in education.
- IV. **Cultural Restrictions:** The culture and psyche of our tribal population has historically been averse to blessing the risky venture, so is the case with response to education. During the course of interview with one of the tribal family in village Ringzabal, they held that it demands much time to be in education, so it is better to engage their children in traditional occupation of cattle grazing and pasteurization to meet their day to day needs. The day to day needs of these families can be met by Panchayat through linking these households with alternate schemes like MGNREGA etc.
- V. **Population explosion:** The disaster of galloping population in these tribal hamlets is an impediment to meet the expenses of education for all. On an average in the village Ringzabal and Kunzabala couple bears four to eight Children. This in itself demands girl child to stay at home for the care of younger siblings. A complete and vibrant structure of Panchayat if in place would act as a central institution for promoting family planning programmes.
- VI. **Conflict and Education:** Social unrest compounded by armed conflict of last two decades, have taken a heavy toll of life and public property besides throwing normal life out of gear in Kashmir. Education could not escape from this tragedy as most of

the educational institutions in these rural areas of the valley were destroyed and loss of schooling hours immensely affected the learning outcomes. Our education has also been affected due to frequent shutdowns, curfews and armed encounters. It is because of the implications of the conflict that the State of J&K lags far behind in social sector i.e. education, public health, sanitation, and social welfare. Another impediment in the education of the children intimately linked with the conflict is the loss of breadwinner (especially parent) in the family, which compels the victim (child) to abandon studies in order to support his/her family. As present study identified 10 orphan children (whose father died during the period of conflict) engaged in traditional carpet industry to meet their familial day to day requirements. Panchayat can identify and link these vulnerable families and children with various social welfare schemes, so as to ensure their stability in education.

- VII. Uneven Development: Topography of the area comes in the way of developing adequate infrastructure, as the sample villages investigated for the present study are situated on the bank of Nallah Sukhnag, in hilly areas, adjacent to the forests of famous tourist spot "DOODH PATHRI". The only bridge connecting this range of about twenty villages with outside social environment couldn't be developed until Year 2005. And to sustain their education it is unavoidable for the community to cross this Nallah and attend the only nearest high school at Zonal level Hardpanzoo. That is why, in one of these villages (Ringzabal), the research identified only three children matriculate so far. A complete structure of Panchayat at block and district levels can play a vital role for immediate and holistic development of the area.
- VIII. Student passivity: Parents of school children during the course of this research alleged that blame for student passivity can be placed on television and mobile phone, which now consumes much of young children's time for watching serials and playing games. VEC members and teachers held parents (especially illiterate parents) who are not involved enough with their children responsible for the same. But, apart from this, schools too play a part since some educational system itself generates student passivity. As in these remote rural quarters school buildings are falling apart, furnishings are dilapidated; playgrounds are not so maintained. In short Infrastructure of schooling which children experience in these areas is near to the ground, which in itself generates student passivity. During the study village Panchayat members held that they are working hard to build the infrastructure according to norms in these schools, but the lack of institutional structure in place at Block and District level does not ensure the timely and optimum services.
- IX. Migration: Few communities like inhabitants of the village "Ringzabal, Kharian, Zagoo, Basantweder, Mujipathri and Kechwari" who involve their children in the seasonal grazing of cattle at higher altitudes report that it becomes difficult for them to attend the schools during summer; Even if there is the provision of mobile schools, they note that mobile schools do not function regularly, and cannot be depended upon. People of the area demanded that Panchayat members should be given responsibility to monitor and check the irregularity in the working of mobile schools.
- X. Teacher's Training: It is fact that no system of education can rise above the level of its teachers. Good teachers are invaluable assets for nation building and this fact has been recognized and highlighted in the National Policy of Education (1986). This emphatically calls for a drastic and urgent revision in the existing policies and practices regarding recruitment, training and retention of teachers based on well tried out programme of innovation, experimentation and research. Therefore, teacher education is in urgent need of reorganization so as to ensure the highest quality and standard. The system of teacher preparation or training in J&K has come under sharp criticism at the hand of both experts and public at large. Critics have termed our system of teacher preparation as "obsolete" "bookish" "ill concerned", impractical", "ill planned", "uninspiring" and "mushroom growth". As during our study we came across the issue of teachers handling more than one class at a time (because of shortage of teachers and teacher absenteeism), and they are least prepared to handle a multi grade system. Usually one class is neglected and is constantly made to wait for the teacher to attend to them. There is no preparation on the teacher's part to keep all the children meaningfully engaged. Classrooms observed were mostly didactic and one way, based on the textbooks and on a 'chalk and talk' approach to teaching. The virtual absence of teaching-learning material other than the textbooks also indicates that there is little happening beyond textbooks and blackboard based teaching. It is because of being short of training that these teachers lack pedagogical innovation, teaching and evaluation methodology, and professional development. Teacher's prior preparation to the class in terms of lesson plan and teaching aids etc does not exist in most of the classrooms observed. Even if there is the provision for training of teachers and they continuously attend these courses provided by cluster, zone or district level resource persons but, it is divorced from actual realities of the school. Methodologies that focus on learning by rote instead of developing appreciation and understanding in children have become the norm. So, these institutions, therefore, are need to be revamped to produce professionally trained teachers, fully equipped with both high academic standards, pedagogical practical skill, ethical and moral values and ground level experience. Teachers also need training to deal with the local level issues and hindrances and challenges for education, which may be communicated to them by Panchayat raj members.
- XI. School Infrastructure: The notion of obstacles in children's education is not limited to what prevents children from coming to school, but it must be extended to what happens inside the school as well, because obstacles crop up at different sites during the process of education. To provide a flavor of what the schools look like, we have collected data on a few aspects related to infrastructure and basic facilities from the 50 (Elementary/ Primary/Middle) government schools.

From the field research it appeared that there is a long distance to cover with respect to infrastructure and basic facilities in these government schools, as even the most basic facilities are not in place. The worrying figures are those related to drinking water, playground and toilet facilities. 76% of the surveyed government schools did not have separate classrooms for each grade, though single grade teaching is prescribed under SSA. Despite the quantitative expansion of schools and increasing enrollment of children these aspects have not got the attention they deserve. Further libraries do not seem to be a part of culture in most of the government schools we visited. The issue of toilets is a complex one, girl children while during interviews reported that the

absence of toilet facility in schools often result in their visits to home at least twice daily, which in turn disrupt their studies. Even if all the government schools were having sports materials, but sports and physical education still lie on the periphery of the schooling experience, because of unavailability of playgrounds. Parent teacher meetings does not seem to be a norm in most of the schools surveyed, while teachers held parents responsible for this lackadaisical attitude, but parents claim that these activities are often scheduled at times that interfere with their day to day work schedules or other obligations. Mid day meal is the scheme which definitely boost the attention of children towards school, But the management of the mid day meal solely rests on the teacher, thus a non-teaching activity leads to disruption in teaching atmosphere.

During the classroom observations it was recognized that classrooms did not come across as lively spaces filled with discussions and debates. Teachers seldom prepare lesson plan and use teaching aids which would have made the subject matter easily understandable. Teachers rarely check to see if they are being understood, Further very few teachers explain or elaborate a concept/idea, and only a small number take care to summarize what has been transacted in their class. Consequently, a teacher driven monologue was observed in most of the classrooms surveyed, which in turn in Indian context is totally contradictory to NCF 2005, wherein—no learner is to be viewed as a mere receiver of knowledge, beliefs, information etc; and effective teaching is not a one way delivery system.

In this regard we have put on board some of the views, perspectives and attitudes of children, community members and other stakeholders of education to gain their insight for the same;

a) Children's Perspective: 54 out of school children (32 cases of Dropouts and 18 cases of Never enrolled/admitted) were interviewed during the course of this study to gain an understanding of the impediments which they feel came in their course of education. Lack of parental interest, coupled with poverty emerges as a key factor that impedes the concerned child's participation in school. From our study we establish that the number of girls (39 out of these 54 cases interviewed) who thus get pushed out from school, or are completely blocked from entering it, is much larger than the number of boys, thus indicating that they are at a much greater disadvantage. As essentially patriarchal society like ours confers less importance on girl's education. From the socio-cultural perspective, demand for girl's education is considerably low. A family considers girls education as a financial liability. Early marriage, religious and cultural structures, conservative ideology of traditional submissive domestic role of women, superstitions, male preferences as future assets, infrastructural failure, derecognizing women as potential developers of society are key factors hindering girls education. Added to this the presence of exclusively male teachers, distance to schools (especially in rural areas), unhealthy sanitation, acute poverty, and absence of mid day meals are diagnosed as potential factors of disparity between male-female literacy. The other impediments recognized were death of a family member (especially breadwinner), health status of a close family member (especially mother), care for younger siblings and cattle rearing. Most of these girl children in district Budgam also stated poverty as key reason for disrupting their participation in schooling so as to support their family.

b) Community Perspective: The biggest challenge or difficulty reported by parents when it comes to sending their children to school is lack of financial resources. Where it concerns financial resources, notebooks, bags, stationery, uniforms, shoes do not come easily for parents who cannot afford them. Bad weather also has an impact on school accessibility because children have to walk over difficult and hilly terrain as in villages like 'kharian' and 'Chill' they have to cross stream en route. Reported from the discussion with other stakeholders like Village Education Committees and Panchayat Raj Members children tend to stay back at home for household work, cattle grazing, working in the fields, sibling care, and so on. Other common obstacles and impediments reported were lack of parental interest, geographical isolation of the area, Corporal punishment, teacher absentees, and schools being short of proper infrastructure, financial resources, teaching standards and teaching facilities.

CONCLUSION:

Non enrollment and high dropout rates in Kashmir are propelled by social issues in education. The government has to make certain policies and see to it that they are implemented properly, to tackle these issues. Anti poverty programmes and better child protection schemes should be set up to handle all forms of abuse against children. Besides programmes and schemes, a change in society's attitude with the help of an effective and complete institution of PRIs is needed too, to ensure that these issues do not arise any further.

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