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“SCHOOL MERGING” - IS IT THE ONLY STEPIING STONE FOR ACHIEVING THE QUALITY EDUCATION?

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Abstract: With essence of ‘education is a fundamental right’ declared in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), most of the nations have adopted different measure to ensure the same. The quality parameter was added later by UNESCO as a part of the millennium development goals. Quality is reflected in RTE norm by a range of indicators including government’s expenditure on education, pupil teacher ratio, teacher qualifications, test scores, and the average duration of years students spend in school. But Indian Education system in Govt. School failed to maintain these. Thats why, Recently NITI AYOOG decided to shut down more than 40,000 government schools across India and merge with nearby government schools to ensure quality education through ‘few but good’ strategy. So, the paper purported to investigate the down fall of government schools and reasons behind the merger and possible adverse effect based on different parameters. The data collected from different govt. Report and the study is delimited with primary school only. The study helps to Govt. And policy makers for rethinking the school merging process from different aspect.

Keywords: *Quality Education, School Merging*

I. INTRODUCTION:

Education holds the key to change the world. It enables an individual to proceed towards light from darkness and towards immortality from mortality. It is achieved through the process of harmonious development of an individual in terms of cognitive, affective and psychomotor faculties. In the era of conflict, be it local vs. global or individual vs. social, without quality education, thinking of a developed nation is an impossible dream. Education not only enlightens our cognition, affection or conation, but also helps us finding the means of achieving our goals. It develops competencies in the individual which boosts productivity and income that eventually leads to increased sense of self-reliance, economic soundness and decision making that is very much needed to eradicate international poverty and hunger.

India is the largest democracy and the second largest populated country in the world with an estimated population of 1.36 billion(2020). Along with this India is a significant stakeholder in the global education industry. It has world’s largest population in the age bracket of 5-24 years (more than 500 million) (IBEF Report 2020). Our country has entered the demographic dividend in 2015 which will continue to last till 2050. An enormous possibility due to this demographic dividend is knocking at our doorstep which we must not miss at all. Since the implementation of RTE Act 2009, the government have left no stone unturned in the pursuit of achieving quality elementary education. As a result of tremendous and rigorous efforts from top to bottom of the administration, infrastructure and network of schools have been successfully established as well as enhanced but the claim of quality education is still a mystery, both at primary, elementary and secondary level(Panda, 2016).

Indian school education system consists of nearly 1.55 million schools, about 9.41million teachers and 247.8 million students including primary, elementary and secondary level(UDISE+, n.d.).According to UNICEF report, the number of school going children in India is 1.5 times greater than our neighbouring country Bangladesh. Pakistan, another neighbouring country of India is marked as the second-highest country of having ‘out of school children’ by UNICEF which is very unfortunate. Although, comparing with the figures of various SAARC countries in respect of school education, India still maintains a better position, showed a notable progress in last few years (Asia, n.d.), but does it ensure efficacy, quality and achievement of children as a part of the ‘Sustainable Development Goals’?

II. RATIONALE OF THE STUDY:

With essence of ‘education is a fundamental right’ declared in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), most of the nations have adopted different measure to ensure the same. The quality parameter was added later by UNESCO as a part of the millennium development goals. Quality is reflected by a range of indicators including government’s expenditure on education, pupil teacher ratio, teacher qualifications, test scores, and the average duration of years students spend in school. Although, the explicit goal of most educational agendas in India I.e. SSA, RTE act, mid-day meal scheme, is to ensure maximum access to education by the children, but lesser importance was given to the quality aspect and learning outcomes (Madani, 2019).The National Achievement Survey (NAS), ASER report and numerous other national and state level achievement surveys have

indicated this shortfall in the government schools in terms of competency achievement or learning outcomes. Eventually, parents have become inclined to send their children to expensive private schools even if it is located at a distant place in spite sending their children to the nearby government schools with necessary facilities to receive education at no or minimum cost.

In a situation like this, the administration has initiated minimizing the number of schools to fight with the quality issues of the government schools. Recently it has been decided to shut down more than 40,000 government schools across India and merge with nearby government schools to ensure quality education through 'few but good' strategy. Now, the question emerges, why the regulatory body of school education started squeezing the access to elementary education rather than expanding it? Is school merging necessary, where only two decades ago setting up new schools was a top priority under different education scheme of the government? The present study tried to find out the some facts and figures to justify the rationale behind this initiative.

III. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:

The paper purported to investigate the down fall of government schools and reasons behind the merger and possible adverse effect based on different parameters.

IV. DELIMITATION OF THE STUDY:

The present study is delimited to the following conditions:

1. The study was delimited to government primary schools only.
2. The study was delimited to only two parameters i.e. low enrolment rate and single teacher school.

V. FALL DOWN THE QUALITY OF SCHOOL EDUCATION:

Education is a fundamental right for all (6-14 years), and it is mandatory for the govt. To provide that. Even the govt. took various initiatives by different policy schemes and project for 100% elementary school enrolment which foster the sustainable development goal but till now it is a challenge for universal retention. RTE act provide eight years free and compulsory education with the ensure of meal facility, however the learning outcomes of majority of children continue to be disappointing, particularly in public funded school (ASER report). By providing quality education, is the only criteria for developing human capabilities and deal with the equal opportunities related issues. But which type of quality education we are giving our children? 56% of class VIII students cannot do basic maths, 27% cannot read (ASER, 2018). Many of the students from backward classes are first generation learner and they want to the qualified trained teacher. But there was more than 11 lakh elementary school teacher who don't have the minimum qualification (RTE amendment, 2017). After that the dropout rate at elementary education continues to be unacceptably high in several states.

After implementing PPP (Public Private Partnership) model, private profit oriented companies enter into the education sectors and make the education as a commodity. One who have the more money get the better quality education and poor people who don't have the money are segregated from the elite private institution. As we know that education is not a business, its a charity but due to poor quality of govt. Education, pupils are interested to entering private schools and the enrolment of the govt. School is rapidly fall down.

VI. SCHOOL MERGING:

Merging of schools is also characterised by cutting of staff or redundancies of staff programmes and resources, and eventual school closure (Jimerson 2006). Nitta et al. (2010) consider the word "merging" as it refers to the phenomenon of combining schools to achieve efficiency in administration and the improvement of social and academic experiences of learners in sparse population locations. In India There are more than 5 lakh schools which are running with very poor resources.

So, in this junctures NITI AYOJ which is popular by the name of think tank of govt. of India, launched a system reform project ,Sustainable Action for Transforming Human Capital (SATH) in three states of India, namely Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, and Orissa.

The primary aim is to create role model states for education by facilitating the quantitative and qualitative transformation of learning outcomes in elementary and secondary school education in the states.

Types of Merger

Based on the range of classes in the school or category of school to be merged, there shall be two types of merger. Horizontal (If schools with same range of classes shall be merged to form a single school) and vertical merger (Schools with different range of classes i.e one with lower class range and the other is higher class range shall be merged to form a integrated school).

Criteria for school Merging

- ✓ **Less enrollment-** Govt. elementary and secondary schools having enrollment less than and equal to 20 to be merged nearby school irrespective of distance.
- ✓ **Schools in same campus-** Govt. elementary and secondary schools located in same campus or within 100 meters irrespective of enrollment are to be merged
- ✓ **Standalone School-** Standalone govt. secondary schools with class range 9-10 are to be merged with nearby primary/upper primary and secondary schools.
- ✓ **Abnormal class range school-** School with abnormal class range such as i-iii, vi-vii, iv-x, viii-x are to be merged with other school of appropriate range.
- ✓ **Geographical and natural barrier-** In case of geographical and natural barriers such as rivers, mountain etc. Govt. may decide to relax the norm on a case to case basis.

Table- Distance and Enrollment norms of Merger

sl no.	school category	enrollment criteria		distance of nearby elementary school
		non scheduled area	schedule-d area	
1	any primary/up/secondary school	20 or less	20 or less	any distance
2	any primary/up/secondary school	any enrollment	any enrollment	100 meters
3	primary school	less than 40	less than 25	1 km
4	upper primary school (vi-viii)	less than 50	less than 40	2 km
5	upper primary school (i-viii)	less than 60	less than 45	1 km

From the above table it is clearly indicated that any primary, upper primary and secondary school which have 20 or less enrollment in non scheduled area and same enrollment in scheduled area at any distance, any primary, upper primary and secondary school within 100 meters distance with any enrollment, primary school, upper primary (vi-viii), upper primary (i-viii), with less than 40 and 25, 50 and 40, 60 and 45 enrollment in non scheduled and scheduled area within 1 km, 2 km, 1 km distance respectively can be merged with nearby elementary school.

VII. WHY SCHOOL MERGING NEEDED:

After the implementing of SSA scheme, RTE act govt. try to achieve the Universalisation of Elementary Education goals, and provide free and compulsory education as a fundamental right by made every possible effort to ensure 100% enrolment and access to school within 1 km distance. Private organisations also doing the activities with the govt. for expanding the access of education. Therefore a huge number of schools established and running for the fulfilment of RTE norms with no realistic planning. Owing to these factors, there has been over lapping in the opening of schools at some places or schools ended up being opened at such location where demand for government schools did not exist or locations where demand has decreased over the years. As a result, there are considerable number of schools with very less number of enrolled children or with zero enrolment and single teacher schools. Therefore, States are now increasingly realising that surplus schools, in excess of neighbourhood requirement, have somehow been established which are adversely affecting the provisioning of resources, teaching learning process and monitoring supervision (Singh.K J, 2017).

If we analyse different states education reports then we can found that, there are many schools was closed and many school still running with zero enrolment, a huge number of schools are running without minimum infrastructure, single teacher with huge enrolment and huge teacher with low enrolment. its create a question on quality education in govt. School by the continuously fall down the enrolment in govt school.

Different Years of UDISE data show a horrible picture of primary school education in India.

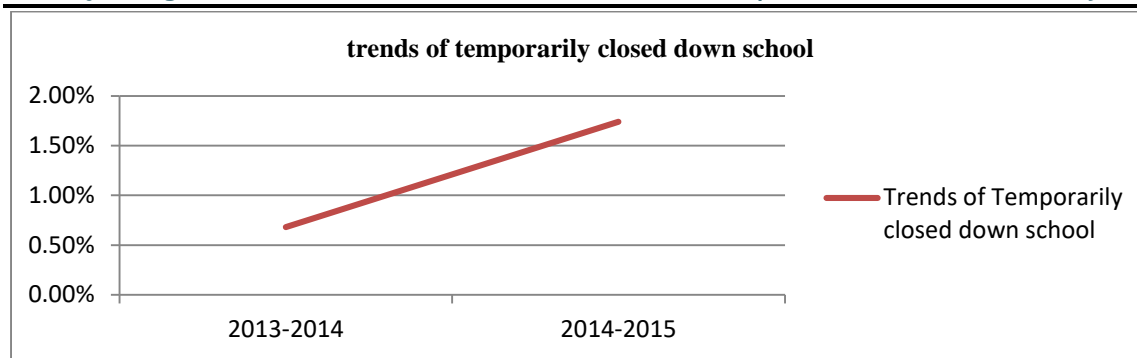
National data on Trends of Low Enrolment in Schools

Level	indicators	2012-2013		2015-2016	
		no.	%	no.	%
primary schools	zero enrollment	3314	0.48	4464	0.63
	less than 15 enrolment	41567	6.01	55996	7.32%
	less than 30 enrolment	150295	21.72	187006	26.46%
upper primary schools	zero enrollment	987	0.28	2702	0.74
	less than 15 enrolment	4991	1.40	22312	6.14
	less than 30 enrolment	18415	5.17	62988	17.34

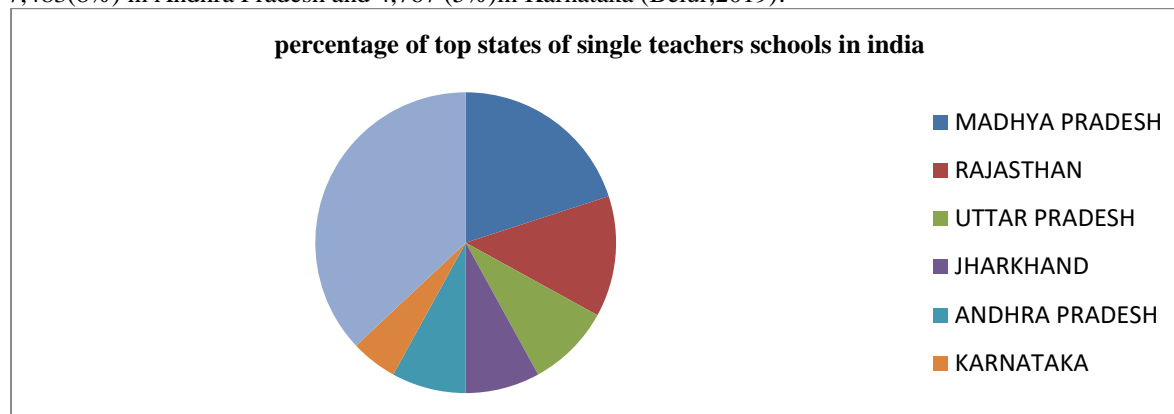
(Source- UDISE data of 2012-2013 and 2015-2016)

From the above table it is found that, 3314(0.48%) Primary and 987 (0.28%) Upper Primary Schools with zero enrolment in 2012-13. Thereafter 2015-2016 shows an increase in the number of schools with 4464 (0.6%) Primary and 2702(0.7%) upper primary schools being with zero enrolment. Simultaneously Less than 15 enrolment also increased 1.31%, less than 30 enrolment increased 4.74% in primary schools and 4.72% and 12.17% increased in upper primary schools respectively. So, the table clearly indicate, the enrolment rate in govt. Primary and upper primary school is rapidly decreased and zero enrolment school is rapidly increased year by year.

For the cause of zero enrolment a lot of school were temporarily closed down. The rate of temporarily closed down school was increased 1.06% in 2014-2015 (1.74%) against the year of 2013-2014 (0.68%).



On the questions of single teacher school, there are 92,275 single-teacher government schools at both elementary level and secondary level(UDISE,2016-2017).As per the data submitted, Madhya Pradesh has the highest number of schools, with single teachers at 18,307 (20%)schools, followed by 12,052(13%) in Rajasthan, 8,092 (9%)in Uttar Pradesh, 7,564(8%) in Jharkhand, 7,483(8%) in Andhra Pradesh and 4,767 (5%)in Karnataka (Belur,2019).



In this situation, NITI AYOJ took the school merging project for enhance the acceptance of govt. School and reform the whole education system. From all the above data, Keep in the mind that continuously fall down the quality of school education, they took this SATH-E project for the following reasons broadly-

- Ensure Achievement of grade appropriate level outcomes-
- Making school aspirational
- Improvement of pupil-teacher ratio
- Better infrastructure facilities in consolidated school
- Better academic environment with increased staff and larger peer group for students
- Vibrant parent communities as the enrolment increases
- Improvement the quality of monitoring of schools in the state
- Better utilisation public resources
- Better transition rate and school management
- Enabling school ecosystems to create future entrepreneurs and employers.
- To create as many integrated secondary school as possible hence provide education up to secondary level in one single campus, improving transition.

VIII. Critical analysis of Adverse effect of school merging

By this project more over 5 lakh schools with 3 crores children who are taught by the one or single teacher, will benefited. It is the very good decision to merge the consolated and so called low quality Govt. School, under the SATH-E project for better improvement of the standard which helps to proceeding towards sustainable development goal. If we compared with china, we found that china has the largest population in the world, it has 1/6th school of India, but when the question came about learning outcomes, Chinese students exists top five globally, but Indian child unfortunately exist bottom five. Actually we are going to take school to every child, rather than bring children into school. So, every state govt. Make school every corner, every village in our country (Bansal, 2018). NITI AYOJ says that there are excess number of primary govt. School and they don't maintain the RTE norms of quality education such as lack of trained teacher, low pupil- teacher ratio, unavailability of playground, and other facilities, that why govt. Merged those for maintain the quality education.

If we analyse the previous school merging related literature then we found that many countries improve their quality based education system by adopting school merging policy and got a positive results. In Rural china there is little effect of the process of merging itself on the overall academic performance of the students from merger schools. Primary school merger has not harmed the academic performance of students, as some have claimed (Chengfang Liu et al, 2010, Di mo et al, 2012). But in other hand some studies oppose it and proved that it have the negative effect on some aspects. School closings have a disparate impact on low-income students, students with disabilities, and minority students (Deven Carlson & Stephane Lavertu, 2015), student mobility rates—which can negatively affect achievement levels, graduation rates, etc.(Carlson & Lavertu, supra, at 2, 2014). At the individual student level, the harm is dependent on a number of factors, including the quality of the receiving school, whether the student has a disability, the student's support system outside of school(Gladson,2016).But in the context of India if we see the real situation education system, still we continue the struggle with 100% enrolment and literacy. It became the daydream for achieving this goals. So if we adopt the school merging policy, then it can be create the adverse effect on quality education system.

Increase the enrolment in nearby private school

In this globalisation era, The rapidly increasing of private school which give so called quality education by money taking is also be a reason of low enrolment in govt. School, even rural area also. The proportion of children enrolled in private schools in rural India has gone up from 22% in 2008 to 30% in 2018(ASER report,2018). Report also revealed that, private school students do the better result as compare to govt. School. If the govt. School is being closed down, as a result enrolment will increase by admitting the child to nearby private school.

Increase Dropout rate:

NITI AYOJ select three states (Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand) to make a role model of education system. These three states have socio political and geographical diversity with the 70% of tribal population of their total population. Census 2011 reveals that in those states dropout rates is very high comparing to other states. The data also reveals, need of serious attention towards the improvement of education and literacy in those states. Because, many deprived and marginalized communities are inhabited in Madhya Pradesh, who are not able to play a more productive role in society due to lack of education and inaccessibility of education services. So, as an adverse effect of school merging increase dropouts in those states due to the geographical and economical problems which creates another challenges by the dropouts and low educational problems.

Contradictory meaning of Quality Education by NITI AYOJ

According to NITI AYOJ perspective, written in their report that RTE as right to education should be looked at right to learning. It means that NITI AYOJ only assesses the learning outcomes and denying the classroom processes and inputs of quality education like teacher training, professional teacher employment, funding in education etc. So they create a contradictory meaning of quality education. They mixing up quality education with the learning outcomes, and starting to closed down the low quality govt. School. So here equity and equality related issues also face the challenging situation.

Must be focus on Quality of Teacher- Training

When school is running by a single teacher, NITI AYOJ must be took the initiative on producing trained teacher by improving teacher training institution rather than school merging due the problem of lack of trained teacher, because in India 80% of teacher training institution is running by private organisation, which are actually teaching shop.

IX. Future Suggestion:

So, in this context we must concentrate on quality outcomes by quality teacher from a quality teaching learning school environment. School merging is not only the solution, we should increase the enrolment in govt. School by create a attractive and joyful school environment like-

Increase the funding on Education-

Govt. should take initiatives for development the school infrastructure (Improving older buildings) as well as teaching learning environment like invest money for buying computer, smart board, projector, book, teaching learning materials etc by increase the funding on education. Along with these increasing funding for teachers, particularly in low-income areas. Since many teachers choose to work in urban areas or famous institution because of the potential for better pay or working conditions, the quality of teaching in poorer schools can suffer. If policy makers and school officials can work together to attract and retain teachers at such schools, students with greater educational needs will benefit from the improved teaching quality.

Success of schools depends on success of all students

If schools are focused on measuring their success solely by overall student achievement, students who bring down the average are more likely to be throw out. So, curriculum development and classroom priorities should focus on individual success of each student.

Teacher Training:

RTE amendment act (2017) also accepts that still Teacher training is one of the most important thrust for quality education. Unavailability of trained teacher always create a distance for reaching the quality education goal. So, govt. Should concentrate on teacher training rather than closed down the school.

Engage the community in the school activities:

According to John Dewey, school is a miniature society. But in the present day, school is detached from the community. Education system has moved away from teachers and local boards in terms of who makes decisions that affect classrooms and curricula. Consequently, student outcomes have suffered. Previous studies proved that a positive association between parental involvement in education and academic achievement (Pérez Sánchez et al., 2013; Tárraga et al., 2017), improving children's self-esteem and their academic performance (Garbacz et al., 2017) as well as school retention and attendance (Ross, 2016). So govt. Must give the power to make community-elected school boards, that have the power and authority to make decisions about how their students are educated.

X. Conclusion:

So with the analysis the context of school merging In this pandemic era time, when whole world as well as India facing a biggest public health risk, think on reopening the school, then process of school merging must be rethink in different way. School Merging is not only solution for improve quality education standard, with this govt. Should concentrate to create living and well psychology sound based classroom, where teacher can learn joyfully from qualified teacher and access the free education with all the RTE norms and facilities.

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