

BOOK REVIEW

## *Public Report on Basic Education in India*

by

**The Probe Team**

Oxford University Press, 1999, Price Rs 150, pp 156

**Review : ○ Harsh Mander**

It is of paramount importance to bring issues of public policy into the sphere of open and informed public debate. This is even more critical in spheres related to equity in which there is manifest and sustained failure of the state. Unarguably one of the most grave of such miscarriages of public policy is the utter failure in India even in 50 years of planned development to universalise elementary education. The 1991 census revealed that about half of the country's population (61 per cent of women and 36 per cent of men, aged 7 and above) was unable to read and write. Less than 30 per cent of all adults had completed eight years of schooling. One-third of all children aged 6-14 years (about 23 million boys and 36 million girls) were out of school. If present trends continue, it may take another fifty years before India achieves the constitutional goal of universal education until the age of fourteen.

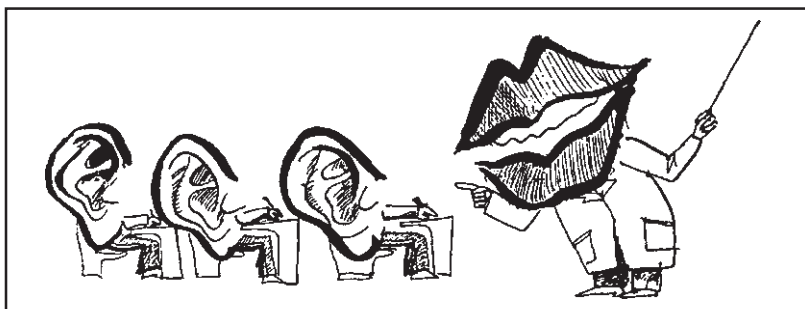
A very significant attempt by a group of concerned individuals to seek both a diagnosis and a cure of this malaise is in PROBE (an acronym for *Public Report of Basic Education in India*) (Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1999). The importance of the report is not merely the outstanding credentials of its authors

(Anuradha De, Jean Dreze, Shiva Kumar, Claire Noronha, Pushpendra, Nanita Rampal, Meera Samson and Amarjeet Sinha), but it is also vital due to its reliance on a wide range of accurate, representative and reliable rural field data. It is enriched with realistic reports of the viewpoints of scores of parents, teachers and children, including those excluded from the system of elementary education, from the five states covered by the study (Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh). An authentic picture of the dismal situation of the schooling system in these states emerges from the report with a rare richness of detail and authentic portrayals of the voices of the disadvantaged.

The central article of faith, in support of which there are persuasive arguments throughout this report, is that elementary education must be

universalised and made compulsory, without any further delay. It is argued that the right to elementary education as a fundamental right was already recognised by the Supreme Court in 1993. The case for universal elementary education, as argued by the authors of the report, goes beyond only the concern for building 'human capital' for advancing economic growth. It is seen as vital for a child's joy of learning, for individual well-being, for social progress, for political participation and for social justice.

The report dismantles the myth of widespread and stubborn parental resistance to schooling, and documents instead that there is today a popular demand for education. However, it confirms the persistence of a gender bias against educating girl children. Ten per cent of parents interviewed stated that education is not important for girls,



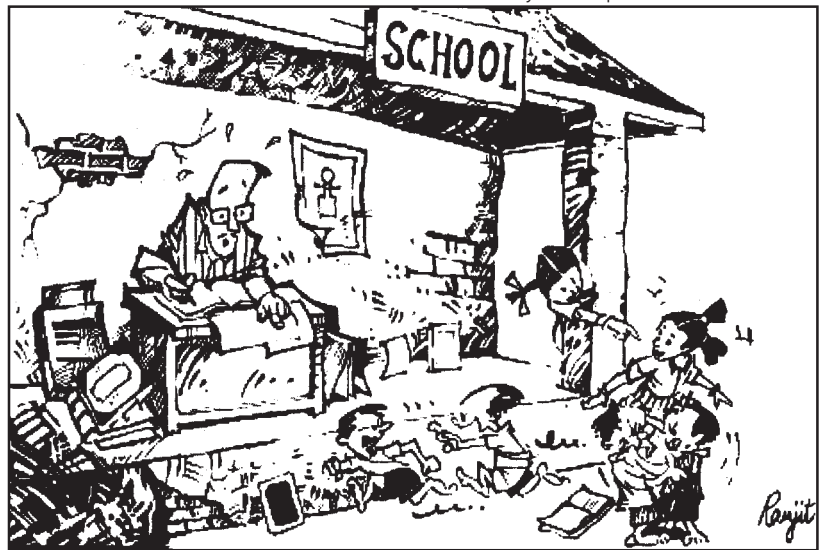
*Courtesy: Public Report on Basic Education in India*

starkly in contrast to the only one per cent of parents who felt it was not important for boys. The report also shows that even most working children would be able to find time, and motivation, for schooling if it was sensitive to their needs.

The report clearly demonstrates that the major problem in universalising elementary education is not on the demand side, which is the most common alibi of policy-makers, but in supply. It portrays a dismal, even shameful picture, of dark and dirty classrooms in which little children are crowded together 'like herds of sheep and goats.' In the PROBE states 29 per cent of the schools are still held in huts, tents and open spaces. In 27 per cent of the schools only a single teacher has been appointed for five classes and 26 per cent are without a usable blackboard. PROBE found a depressing child-teacher ratio of 68, unimaginative and uninspiring teaching methods, and even social discrimination and gender bias in the classroom.

The report not only looks at the truant teachers, but also at the concerns and problems of sincere teachers. Even those teachers who come into the profession with high levels of motivation, find their morale battered by the poor infrastructure, paralysing curriculum, expensive paperwork, unsupportive management, and their frequent divergence to non-teaching duties. They are handicapped also by poor training and frequent lack of institutional support from the local community.

Particularly effective is the chapter which documents the problems within the classroom. An endearing story is told about a class in progress in a municipal school in central Delhi. Students are mechanically being made to recite a lesson on the properties of air. The researcher visiting the



classroom asks the children in a friendly way, 'Air is everywhere. Is it, really? Is there air in your bag?' The response of the students to this question is described as follows :

'Most deny emphatically, quite possessively confident of the details of their own belongings. However, a few curious and enterprising ones do innocently peep into their school bags to see if this unknown elusive element somehow entered unnoticed!'

It is in nuggets like this that the truth of the report comes through in sharpest relief. The report documents the overwhelming bias of textbooks to the lives of urban, privileged children (such as the textbooks in a village school without roads teaching traffic rules appropriate for drivers in cities), the information invasion, the tedium and the pressures of examination.

The report examines the mixed achievements of some more recent policy innovations such as school meals, village para-teachers and alternative schools. It refers to some positive NGO experiences, such as those of Eklavya in Madhya Pradesh, Lok Jumbish in Rajasthan, and MV Foundation in Andhra Pradesh. But the most under-rated achievement highlighted in the report is the quiet

leap forward of Himachal Pradesh in elementary education, which is understood by the report writers in terms of state initiative, public response and greater gender equality in hill societies.

It is from this singular achievement that the report derives hope for other Hindi-speaking states covered by the study. It reaffirms that 'change is possible' if state inertia is broken and the political 'blind-spot' against elementary education is overcome. It recommends concerted citizen action to build a political lobby for education.

It is precisely the need for such direct citizen action that this report most effectively highlights, and to this process it itself is a signal contribution. With painstaking documentation, with empathy and insight, the authors of the report make a powerful plea for public and citizen action to universalise education. As the constitution of India, which made universal education a constitutional directive, approaches its fiftieth year, we can only hope that the urgency of the PROBE report is heeded. □

*Harsh Mander is an IAS officer of the 1980 batch. Currently on a sabbatical, he is working actively to lend support to people's empowerment.*