

## DECENTRALIZATION IN ELEMENTARY EDUCATION IN INDIA

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### ABSTRACT

One of the most important strategies in the management of education, particularly elementary education has been mobilizing the community and its resources. More than anything else, today there is global consensus that for improving the system of education involvement of community is a prerequisite. The 73rd and 74th amendments to the constitution provided for decentralization and facilitated the transfer of power and participation of the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). However, it was not until 2002 that the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan assigned paramount importance for proper mobilization of community resources and the creation of an effective system of participative and decentralized decision-making. This has been taken further by the Right to Education Act 2009. It is undeniable that a sustainable system of education can only be evolved through local participation. This paper traces the history of community participation in elementary education in India, focusing on major schemes and their key provisions

**Keywords:** *Decentralisation, community participation, SSA, RTE, SMC.*

### INTRODUCTION

India is progressing in leaps and bounds across all areas. Today when there is unprecedented unemployment and recession across all countries, India still has a booming economy and it has its own position in the world. Indians with their technical expertise have elevated India to a remarkable global position and its citizens are placed in respectable positions worldwide. However, its progress on basic education is dismal irrespective of the fact that various committees and commissions have laid down various recommendations for the same. India is a young country with more than 50% of its population being young. However, ensuring good equitable education for all these young minds despite the large demographic dividends is a huge challenge in India. There is a huge disparity in growth and education among the population of India. Therefore, one of the roadblocks for sustainable development is not having growth with democracy and equity. This type of sustainable development can only be attained through education. Education after all is a great leveller, therefore ensuring good quality education that is accessible to all its children specifically up to secondary school is the only absolute step in the direction of democracy and bringing equity. However, even after the recommendations of various committees and commissions 70 years after independence, India still lacks equity and access to quality education. One of the greatest reasons for the lack of an equitable and accessible education system in India is primarily the 'ivory tower' approach of our policymakers. The education system of India, since the time of independence, has been perceived from the eyes of the administrators, policymakers, and leaders. Therefore, the subsequent educational policies and schemes have always had a top-down approach, without the actual involvement of the community for whom it is intended. However, in recent times,

there is a consensus that the involvement of the community by way of decentralized decision-making will help remove the problems and complexities in education.

The linkage between the school and the community is mandatory for realizing the objectives of the Universalization of Elementary Education. NPE (1986) and its “Programme of Action” (1992) recommended decentralized planning and effective management of primary education. The school is organically linked to the community for which it exists and it therefore cannot stay alienated from it. Similar views are reflected in the Right to Education Act, 2009, it has entrusted a wider role to the larger community through the establishment of School Management Committees. The intent behind this type of institutionalized form of community participation takes a long time to be achieved. If the goal of imparting quality education to all children, in a diverse country like India, is to be achieved, there must be optimum use of community resources. In the management of school education, decentralization, and participative planning are often used as cliché but rarely put into practice. Community can transform school and the quality of education it imparts. A Community-Driven Education System can overcome all barriers to access, equity, and quality and serves as an effective

mechanism for promoting education. The major premise behind community ownership of schools is that, if education is made the responsibility of the people, it can lead to sustainability in education, and the larger goal of “education for all” can be achieved.

The constitution of India in 1950 directed all states to elect local self-government bodies under the framework of the Panchayati Raj system. Article 40 of the constitution states that -the state shall take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government. Subsequently, the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957) was appointed by the Government of India to examine the functioning of the Community Development Programme of 1952. The committee submitted its report in 1957 emphasizing that the Panchayati Raj organization is an important measure of local self-government and community development. The essence of the report was on decentralizing all aspects of village development, viz, health, education, etc. The committee recommended that primary education must come under the Panchayati raj. It was because of the recommendations of this committee that many states adopted the Panchayati raj system. One of the recommendations of the Committee was- the establishment of three-tier panchayati raj in India: Zila panchayat, gram panchayat and panchayat samiti at the district, village and block level respectively. For the realization of the larger goal of Universalization of Elementary Education (UEE) and Education for All (EFL), the first phase of community participation in education in India largely focused on free and compulsory education.

There was fast-track growth of elementary education in the period after Independence but it was not until 1964 that the Government felt the need to take a comprehensive view of the Indian education system and thus appointed the National Education Commission (1964-66). Under the chairmanship of Dr. D.S. Kothari, the committee emphasized the urgent need to overhaul the system of education so that it upholds the constitutional values of “equity and social justice”. “Following the recommendations of the Commission, the first National Policy of Education (1968)

suggested for free and compulsory elementary education along with equalization of opportunities particularly for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and girls” (Singh1999). “This period also witnessed the decentralization of education where Ashok Mehta Committee (1978) strongly recommended for the transfer of powers to the local bodies for better participation of the community” (Rao, 2008). National Policy of Education (1968) suggested for strict measures for providing free and compulsory education for all children up to 14 years of age. For equal access to educational opportunities, the policy recognized the need for sustained commitment and the need to correlate good educational facilities with regional imbalances. The policy also recommended the establishment of a common school system to promote national integration and social unity. Through the common school system, the policy stressed the necessity for proper integration of different governments, local other voluntary organizations for proper school management. However, despite its far reaching recommendations, it was not implemented by many states as education fell under the State List. Later education was brought under the Concurrent List in 1976 through the 42nd Constitutional Amendment Act. Ashok Mehta Committee (1978) was appointed in 1977 to inquire into the causes of the poor functioning of panchayati raj and suggest measures for the same. The committee emphasized the need for involving Panchayats in local development and planning and viewed their role in terms of strengthening the planning process at the micro level. (Chaturvedi,2003). It also advocated the transfer of substantial powers and responsibilities (including salary of teachers, their transfers) to zila parishads. The zila parishad was made the executive body and the first point of decentralization responsible for planning at the district level. However, the Janta Government collapsed before the completion of its term, so no action could be taken on the recommendations of this committee report at the national level (Rao, 2008).

In the next phase the adoption of National Policy on Education (1986) was a significant development.NPE (1986) focused on the universal enrolment and retention of children up to 14 years of age. It stressed on community involvement in educational management as it would establish a close linkage between school and community and help in improving the quality of education, reducing absenteeism and irregularity. The policy visualized direct community involvement in the form of Village Education Committees. The revised POA (1992) also emphasized for community participation in educational administration. After the formation of the NPE (1986), a committee was set up under the chairmanship of Acharya Ramamurthi in May 1990 to review the policy. This Committee submitted its report in December 1990. Later, at the behest of the CABE, another committee was set up under the chairmanship of Shri N. Janardhana Reddy to consider the modifications in NPE as suggested by the Ramamurthi committee. The Reddy committee report was the foundation of revision in the National Policy of Education (1986) and was therefore endorsed by CABE and later adopted by the government of India. The POA (1992) assigned a major role to local communities and sought to involve them in issues of school development and management through appropriate bodies. This policy also emphasized that for activities related to educational development, there must be proper planning, monitoring, and evaluation of activities through efforts from civil groups and non-voluntary organizations. The

Policy keeping with the establishment of a participative educational order, strongly emphasized decentralization of educational management at all levels. (GOI, 1998)

In the next phase, the implementation of the Programme of Action (PoA 1992) was an important aspect. The reviews of National Policy on Education (1986) by the Acharya Ramamurthi Committee (1990) and the Reddy Committee (1992) laid the foundation for the Programme of Action (PoA) 1992. Both the National Policy on Education and its Program of Action has stressed on the importance of decentralized educational planning and administration. The Plan of Action (1992) states each Gram Panchayat may constitute a Village Education Committee (VEC), which would be responsible for the administration of the delegated programmes in the field of education at the village level (GoI, 1992). The structures for decentralized educational planning and management were to be known as Village Education Committees. These committees have been accorded the task of school mapping in the village by conducting household surveys and discussions with parents. The PoA emphasized improving enrolment, reducing dropout rates, improving students' attendance and learning achievements, and expanding access to all students. These goals can only be achieved if the community is considered as an equal partner in the learning process. Promoting parental and community involvement has been an essential aspect of school governance under NPE 1992 and the Programme of Action 1992 (GoI, 1998). The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts have further provided for the decentralization of authority and responsibility to the Panchayati Raj Bodies. As per the provisions of the Act, educational governance and management have been devolved to state and local bodies. This process of devolution of powers to the PRIs is a step towards decentralization. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act has identified as many as twenty-nine items for transfer to the Panchayats, including primary and secondary education. All states have enacted new Panchayati Raj Acts in order to realize the Constitutional mandate of decentralized democracy and development. (Rao, 2008).

The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), as an intervention program was started in 2001. The program is an attempt to provide education. It is an attempt to establish community-owned quality education. The committee focused on orienting community leaders for works such as the preparation of enrolment and retention registers, student progress reports, and registers for maintenance of school grants. It envisioned larger community ownership of the school and emphasized the formation and proper involvement of VECs, SMCs comprising of teachers, parents and women members, and members from disadvantaged sections. SSA also emphasized the development of certain quality indicators for maintaining and monitoring the quality of education through partnerships between various stakeholders including PRI, SMCs, and VECs. For all matters on elementary education, it suggests for formation of various committees under the Gram Panchayat (GP) as nodal bodies in the village. A link between these bodies for overall supervision has been recommended. SSA also entrusts a supervisory and monitoring role for all three tiers of the Panchayati raj district, block, and village. National Curriculum Framework (2005) as a

precursor to the Right to Education Act also stressed on community participation as a means of assuring both quality and accountability in education. It stressed on the following aspects:

- Decentralization in educational programs must be reflected in all aspects- from planning to implementation and evaluation.
- To make the system less bureaucratic, PRIs must be strengthened and given certain powers. Schools must be given more autonomy so that it can be responsive to the needs of children.
- The bottom-top approach must be adopted in education by enlisting the support of VECs, SSA bodies, and other statutory bodies for micro-planning and village-level mapping of school participation (enrollment, retention, dropout, CWSN, etc.) and community mobilization.
- An important component of all disciplines must be learning through participation in the immediate community.
- Curricular choices with legitimate stakeholders (community members/parents) to help them see the educational value of curricular decisions as including a “critical understanding of local realities of gender, caste, class, and religion that are oppressive and reaffirm social inequalities and hierarchies” (NCF2005).
- Local community must be treated as a rich and valuable source for transferring traditional knowledge, and oral history, and therefore their consent on inclusion and exclusion of these local knowledge in the curriculum is a must.
- An organic link local community and other stakeholders including the state and civil society groups must be established.

The decentralization envisaged by the both SSA and NCF (2005) owed much to the 73rd and 74th amendment to the constitution amendment acts. The amendments led to establishment of the three-tier Panchayati Raj system in the country. Elected bodies at the zila, block, and gram levels can enable the community to actively participate in developmental programs and ensure more effective implementation. The 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment act transferred 29 subjects to the panchayats amongst which education (primary, secondary, non-formal, vocational, technical, and adult) was paramount.

The Right to Education Act was enacted to keep up with this pledge of decentralization of educational management. It provides that SMCs be constituted for every government school with adequate representation of parents and a proportional representation for reserved categories and weaker sections. The act devolves certain functions for SMCs:

- Supervision of the daily functioning of the school.
- Planning and preparing the school development plans
- Monitoring and utilizing grants for school development.

## Discussion

One of the most important strategies in the management of education, particularly elementary education has been mobilizing the community and its resources. More than anything else, today there is global consensus that for improving the system of education involvement of community is a prerequisite. The policy-makers, educators, scholars, and civil societies across the globe have been working hard to realize the goals of universalization of education and community participation has been considered as the most crucial strategy in achieving these goals. The Declaration of the World Conference on Education for All, Jomtien (1990), and the UNESCO Delhi Declaration (1994) have provided for a necessary push to the movement of community participation across all countries. Community participation in education is not a new phenomenon in India. The community has always been thought of as an integral part of the system of education in India. The Kothari Commission (1964-66) stressed the need for decentralization of school education and as such involving the local bodies in the processes. One of the recommendations of the Commission was that there was an immediate need to associate communities with their schools. These provisions were taken further by the National Policy on Education (1986), and community participation as an important measure for ensuring decentralization in school education got another major boost. The policy emphasized decentralization and called for the planning and management of elementary education by local and state bodies. VECs for supervision and management of school education at the village level were visualized by the policy as an element of community participation. The Village Education Committees were further strengthened by the Programme of Action (1992) which entrusted the State Government to prescribe precise guidelines regarding the constitution of VECs.

The 73rd and 74th amendments to the constitution provided for decentralization and facilitated the transfer of power and participation of the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). But it was not until 2002 that the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan assigned paramount importance proper mobilization of community resources and the creation of an effective system of participative and decentralized decision-making. This has been taken further by the Right to Education Act 2009. The act also recognizes the role of local governance in school education by mandating the formation of a School Management Committee (SMC) in each school. Thus we see that community participation in education has been always emphasized in all the policy documents in India so that an organic synergic relationship between the community and the government can be established. This is also important for community ownership of schools. Whether community involvement in elementary education has brought about significant changes or not is a matter of debate and critical analysis but it cannot be denied that a sustainable system of education can only be evolved through local participation. The commitment of the immediate community can bring about significant changes in the functioning of a school. A school where local and global needs are met through local measures can produce citizens who have an immense understanding of the local resources as well as global needs.

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