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# Universalisation of Elementary Education in India

Story of Missed Targets and Unkept Promises

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Council for Social Development

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# Abbreviations

AS	Alternative Schools
AIE	Alternative and Innovative Education
CABE	Central Advisory Board of Education
DPEP	District Primary Education Programme
EGS	Education Guarantee Scheme
EWS	Economically Weaker Sections
FYP	Five Year Plan
GOI	Government of India
IDA	International Development Association
LPS	Lower Primary School
MHRD	Ministry of Human Resource Development
MOE	Ministry of Education
NCERT	National Council for Educational Research and Training
NFE	Non-formal Education
NITI	National Institution for Transformation of India
NPE	National Policy on Education
OB	Operation Blackboard
OE	Open Education
POA	Programme of Action
RTE	Right to Education
SSA	Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan
UEE	Universal Elementary Education
UPS	Upper Primary School
UPE	Universal Primary Education
UPBEP	Uttar Pradesh Basic Education Project
UIPE	Universal Upper Primary Education



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# I

## Introduction

Universal literacy and basic education for all as the foundation for social change and economic development is an old dictum extensively researched and established through empirical studies. Traditional wisdom has also extolled education as the cornerstone for civilisational progress. No one has challenged the place of education as a fundamental human right. Yet, the goal of universal literacy and basic education has remained unrealised in many countries across the world. India occupies an unenviable position in this as the host to the largest number of non-literates and out-of-school children in the world (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2014). Through the decades following its Independence from British colonial rule, political leaders set specific targets and timeframes several times to reach the goal, but these remained unmet every time. Scholars have debated the cause of this unpleasant state of affairs. Is it lack of demand and public awareness on the value of education or lack of public provision and inefficiency of implementation? One would have thought that the elevation of education from being part of Directive Principles to the status of a Fundamental Right in the Indian Constitution would settle the issue once for all. It, of course, placed a lid on the debate in theoretical terms. It settled the issue by making the State responsible for ensuring that every child in the age group of 6 to 14 gets education as a Fundamental Right. But has the Right become a reality on the ground? The story of missed targets and timelines continues irrespective of the change of status—from Directive Principles to Fundamental Rights.

In a country of multilayered inequalities affecting the spread of education along regional, spatial, social and gender lines, the Constitutional mandate of providing universal compulsory and free education to all children upto the age of 14 has remained a mere aspiration. Through successive Five Year Plans since 1951, it has been a painful exercise for educational planners to assess the progress towards the target, measure the shortfall and reset the timeframe along with redesigning strategies for tackling the unaddressed problems affecting achievement. The paper attempts to capture this unsavoury story of missed targets and unkept promises; of an inordinately slow and inefficient process of reaching education to the children of poor and weaker sections and other difficult-to-reach groups as well as of the inability to address the more complex issue of an unequal learning environment through multiple layers of schooling.

Far from being smooth, the journey of Universalisation of Elementary Education (UEE) in India has, since Independence, been punctuated by more than a dozen instances of failure to achieve targets set up every time. It could possibly be viewed as a journey of not giving up but of persevering with the Constitutional mandate, with a broadened understanding of the requirements to be met and constraints to be plugged,

that impeded the achievement of UEE goal in every successive phase of target setting. It could also be seen as a continuous repositioning of the targets to mask the failures due to inappropriate policies and programmes, poor implementation and governance, and inadequate financial investment. In either case, the UEE target and timelines were missed every time.

Looking back, it would appear that the Constitutional directive on UEE, enjoining the State to provide for universal compulsory and free education to all children upto the age of 14, within 10 years from the commencement of the Constitution in 1950, was a revolutionary proposition prompted by the fervour of national reconstruction and the critical role envisaged for education in that task. It is probable that this premise of a 10-year timeline was not based on the awareness of all the requirements to be met in the revolution. The plan of Post-War Educational Development in India (1944), recommended by the Sargent Committee, forewarned that UEE would not be possible in less than four decades, and, for this, the lack of funds, viz., @ Rs. 200 crores per annum till 1985 (Annexure 1), was the least of the reasons. But India was not prepared to wait for four decades to achieve UEE, and the Kher Committee (1949), appointed to suggest a shorter duration, proposed a 16-year timeframe. It spelt out, on an annual basis, the various details like enrolment coverage, teachers and their training requirement, physical and other facilities as well as the estimated cost, on a 16-year timeline.

When Constitution-makers gave a call in 1950 to achieve UEE within 10 years, it was not converted into a 10-year educational plan, spelling out the requirements and modalities as done by either the Sargent Committee or Kher Committee. India did not achieve the UEE target in the 10-year period. That apart, at the time of every Five Year Plan (FYP), starting from the Second Plan, there was invariably a review of where India stood vis-à-vis the Constitutional mandate and a consequent revision of the timeline with respect to the coverage of different targets. This repositioning of the UEE timeline and the rationale needs to be examined to appreciate how the country viewed the progress made, the reasons for the shortfall and the newer dimensions of the UEE mandate that informed the discourse at the planning level. This would give a feel of Indian conscience at the recurrent shifting of the timeline for achieving the Constitutional directive as well as the nuanced understanding about what really UEE connoted at various stages of implementation.

## II

# Setting Targets and Timelines for UEE: Retracing the Journey

The paper attempts to analytically track the issue of ever-shifting timelines and promises for UEE as reflected in five year plan documents, recommendations of various committees and commissions, recommendations in the National Policy formulations, propositions made under the national programmes, such as SSA, and, finally, the timelines specified under the RTE Act. It should be recognised that the periods are overlapping; the propositions and recommendations are sometimes complementary though multiple target lines have flourished, sometimes simultaneously. It would be noticed that the trajectory of the Five Year Plans' review and repositioning of the UEE was periodically intercepted by national review of the education system and a fresh timeframe on UEE. Beginning from the plans of Sargent Committee (1944) and Kher Committee (1949), these revisions of the timeframe for UEE were evident from, firstly, with reference to the Five Year Plans, and secondly based on recommendations of education commissions/committees and national education policies like (i) Education Commission (1964-66), and its endorsement of its recommendation by the National Policy on Education in 1968; (ii) National Policy on Education, 1986 and its Programme of Action; and (iii) Review of NPE, 1986 by the Acharya Ramamurti Committee (1990) and its incorporation in the NPE's Revised Programme of Action, 1992. Besides clearly identifiable turning points in the revisions of UEE timeframes between the I to VIII Five Year Plans, such revisions in the Post-Reform era, especially through IX to XI Plans, the DPEP and SSA phases and the altered timelines under SSA and X Plan also serve as different phases to see the changed perceptions about the definition and connotations of UEE.

### First Three Five Year Plans: Realism, Not Fervour, Dictating the Approach

The Sargent Committee recommendations on UEE would serve as a useful backdrop for understanding the Kher Committee suggestions. The Sargent Committee visualised a national educational system, whose main features included: (1) Free and Compulsory Basic education of five years for all children in the age group 6-11; (2) Compulsory Senior Basic education of three years for four-fifths of the children in the age-group 11-14; (3) Secondary education, with a duration of six years, for the age-group 11-17 for approximately one out of every five children who completed the primary school. The cost of primary education for the 40 year period was reckoned to be Rs. 200 crores per annum. This was based on the population in 1940 and the educational requirements on

the number of schools existing around 1945 (Ministry of Education [MOE], 1964: 138; Education Commission, 1965) [see Annexure-1 for Sargent Committee Cost Estimate on UEE].

TABLE 1: Kher Committee (1949): Budget Estimate of a 16 Year Plan to accomplish UEE  
(Rounded in crores)

Year	Expenditure on Compulsory Education	Incidental Expenditure	Total expenditure
1949-50	9.38	4.69 50 % of Col. (2)	14.07
1950-51	19.03	7.61 40 % of Col. (2)	26.64
1951-52	29.26	8.77 30 % of Col. (2)	38.04
1952-53	39.85	7.97 20 % of Col. (2)	47.82
1953-54	50.84	5.08 10 % of Col. (2)	55.92
1954-55	77.15	--	77.15
1955-56	104.73	--	104.73
1956-57	133.33	--	133.35
1957-58	154.95	--	154.95
1958-59	177.87	--	177.87
1959-60	202.63	--	202.63
1960-61	226.34	--	226.34
1961-62	251.25	--	251.25
1962-63	263.48	--	263.48
1963-64	276.32	--	276.32
1964-65	288.36	--	288.36

Notes: These figures take into account only the provinces and exclude the states

Source: Government of India (1960) *Central Advisory Board of Education (1935-1960). Silver Jubilee Souvenir*, Ministry of Education, New Delhi, p. 208.

The perspective about development of education, adopted after Independence, was broadly in agreement with the structure and duration as suggested by Sargent Committee report, except that the 40 year period proposed to complete the free and compulsory education was considered too long and needed to be reduced. A Committee was, therefore, appointed, headed by B.G. Kher, to suggest ways and means of providing free and compulsory education in a much shorter duration and also to suggest ways and means of mobilising funds for the purpose. In its report (1949), the Kher Committee suggested that (i) universal compulsory basic education can be introduced within a period of 16 years by two five-year and one six-year plans. But unlike the Constitutional directive, it bisected the targets into two—6-11 and 11-14 age-groups and sequentialised the two. It proposed that the first five-year plan would aim at bringing such education to a major portion of the children within the age-group of 6-11. The second five-year plan would extend compulsion to the remaining children of the same age group so that at the end of 10 years, all children between the ages of 6-11 would be under compulsory

instruction. The six-year plan would then extend the scope of compulsion to 14 so that at the end of the 16 years, the programme of eight years' basic education for children between 6 and 14 years, as envisaged by the CABE, would be completely realised (MOE, 1960: 207-08). The Kher Committee calculated the population of children along 6-11; 11-14; 14-17 and 6-17 age groups for the years 1949-50 to 1964-65, and also estimated the costs involved.

Besides setting annual targets for coverage, the Committee also went into the question of finances and suggested that the Centre should provide 30 per cent of the expenses while the Provinces and local bodies should fund the remaining 70 per cent. It also estimated that the annual expenses of universal compulsory education could be about Rs. 200 crores, but starting from Rs. 14 crores in 1949-50, and with an annual increase of Rs. 10-12 crores till 1953-54; an annual increase of about Rs. 20-25 crores from 1954-55 to 1958-59; and an annual increase roughly of Rs. 30 crores till 1964-65 (MOE, 1960: 208). The Kher Committee further recommended that the Provinces should aim at introducing universal compulsory education for the children of 6-11 age-group within a period of 10 years but if financial conditions compel, the programme may be extended over a longer period but in no circumstances should it be given up. In setting the targets, the Five Year Plans, at least the first three, were more immediately concerned with the Kher Committee proposed targets than by the 10-year target warranted by the Constitutional mandate; there was no evidence of re-working the annual targets to be covered, state-wise, based on the 10-year timeframe.

The First Five Year Plan was frank to admit that considering the size of the population, the overall provision of educational facilities was very inadequate, and in its very design, the educational facilities were to be provided for only 40 per cent of the children of the age-group 6-11 and 10 per cent of the children of 11-17 age-group. It admitted, however, that the directive of the Constitution was that free and compulsory education should be provided for all children upto the age of 14 within 10 years of the commencement of the Constitution (Government of India [GOI], 1952: 526).

The Second Five Year Plan recognised the slow progress during the First Five Year Plan and set modest targets for achievement during the Second Plan. The Plan document estimated that proportion of children in the school to the population in the age-group 6-14 increased from 32 per cent to 40 per cent between 1950-51 and 1955-56, and proposed a target of 49 per cent to be achieved by 1960-61. The proposed target indicated a huge gender differential—the target was 70 per cent for boys and, for girls, it was a measly 28 per cent. It admitted plainly that “the goal set in the Constitution about free, compulsory and universal education is yet far away” (GOI, 1956: 526).

The Second Plan also made it clear that progress achieved and targets set were all-India figures and emphasised, “the position varies considerably between States and, in many States, the averages are much lower than those for all India. It is, however, necessary to make every possible effort to fulfil the directive of the Constitution *within the next ten to fifteen years*” [emphasis added] (GOI, 1956: 503). It may be noted that *the target deadline has already been pushed back from 1961 to 1970, given that it was the beginning of Second Plan*. It is also worthwhile to note that Second Plan implied the bisected and sequential approach and not the Constitutional directive of taking the 6-14 age-group in one go.

The Second FYP's realism behind a measured and staggered target-setting was quite evident as the problem of expanding educational facilities was quite complex. The enrolment of boys of 6-11 age-group was satisfactory, and enrolment of boys of 11-14 years was relatively meagre; in both the age-groups, the education of girls had lagged far behind. It referred to another aspect of "concern" viz., the 'wastage' which exceeded 50 per cent at the primary stage. Thus, out of 100 pupils who joined the first class at school, scarcely 50 reached the fourth class, the rest dropping out before completing four years at school, which was regarded as the minimum period for providing permanent literacy. The wastage was greater in the case of girls. Closely allied to the problem of wastage was that of stagnation, that is, a pupil continues in the same class for more than the normal period. (GOI, 1956: 504). It was cautioned, "a most urgent problem is that of girls' education. Public opinion in every part of the country is not equally alive to the importance of girls' education. Special efforts at educating parents, combined with efforts to make education more closely related to the needs of girls, are needed." It went on to remind that "if the directive of the Constitution, in favour of free and compulsory education up to the age of 14 years is to be fulfilled, Government's resources will have to be supplemented in increasing measure by local community effort" (GOI, 1956: 504-05).

The Third Five Year Plan clearly stated that "in the field of general education, as distinguished from technical education, the main emphasis will be on the provision of facilities for the education of all children in the age group 6-11" (GOI, 1961:573). This was justified on the ground: "The Constitution envisaged the provision of free, universal and compulsory education for children upto the age of 14 years. In view of the magnitude of the task, it was agreed early in the Second Plan that as a first step, facilities should be created for the education of all children in the age-group 6-11. This is one of the central aims of the Third Plan, to be followed by extension of education for the entire age-group 11-14 during the Fourth and Fifth Plans." (GOI, 1961: 578). It is worth noting that while the Second Plan in 1955 pushed back UEE achievement target by 10 years to 1970, the Third Plan revised the target to be achieved by end of Fifth Plan, i.e. by 1975. In both cases, i.e. Second as well as Third Plans, the staggered and sequentialised approach was preferred for reasons of feasibility, leaving aside the Constitutional mandate.

The Third Five Year Plan also discerned that it was necessary to locate schools in such a manner that almost every child can go to a school within easy walking distance from home. Apart from the poverty of parents, lack of properly qualified and trained teachers, defective curricula and insufficient appreciation of the value of education by parents were also identified as factors leading to wastage. Closely allied to 'wastage' was 'stagnation', which occurred in the case of children who continued in the same class for more than a year. Introduction of compulsion, appointment of trained and qualified teachers, improvement in the methods of teaching, greater understanding on the part of parents of the desirability of letting their children remain at school, and the planning of school holidays, so that they coincided with the harvesting and sowing seasons, were among the steps identified for reducing incidence of 'wastage' and 'stagnation' (GOI, 1961: 579).

## Education Commission (1964-66): Flexibility in Duration and Compromise on Constitutional Directive

When Education Commission reviewed the progress of UEE, the 10-year timeframe specified in the Constitution had already been missed by more than five years. Finding that the country was still far away from meeting the Constitutional directive, the Education Commission stated, "in view, however, of the magnitude of the problem, the uneven development of primary education in different parts of the country and the large financial resources needed for the programme, we think that the best strategy would be for each State, and even each district to: (a) prepare a perspective plan for the development of primary education to fulfil the Constitutional Directive as early as possible; (b) go ahead at the best pace it can, and the progress in no area should be allowed to be held up merely for want of essential facilities or financial allocations; and (c) while the Constitutional Directive may be fulfilled in some places such as urban areas or advanced States as early as in 1975-76, all the areas in the country should be able to provide *five years of good and effective education* to all the children by 1975-76 and *seven years* of such education by 1985-86" [emphasis added] (NCERT, 1971: 267-68).

The Education Commission had strong reasons for endorsing seven years of good and effective education to all children instead of insisting on eight years. First of all, the Constitution only indicates the end age upto which education should be provided. Therefore, eight years of elementary education to be made free and compulsory was based on the premise that the child enters class I at the age of 6 years. But the structure of school education prevalent at that time in different States had many variations on age at entry as well as in the number of years to be covered as lower primary stage (LPS) and upper primary stage (UPS), viz., 4 yrs. LPS+3 yrs. UPS; 5 yrs. LPS+2 yrs. UPS; 5 yrs. LPS+3 yrs. UPS or even seven years of primary education, without a separate higher primary level. Leaving aside the States which had eight years of primary education of 5+3 pattern, the Commission was inclined to view the seven year primary education as perfectly meeting and matching the Constitutional directive for the age at entry reason as in nearly half the number of States that had lower primary stage of five years (classes I-V) and upper primary stage of three years (classes VI-VIII), the age at entry was five years (NCERT, 1971: 54); and in more than half the number of States that had the lower primary stage of four years (I-IV) and upper primary stage of three years (V-VII), the entry age was six. In all such cases, the completion of VII or VIII Standard was at the age of 13 (Table 2 and Figure 1)

In the re-organisation of the education system suggested by the Commission, it visualised a flexible educational structure covering, among other stages, a primary stage of seven or eight years divided into a lower primary stage of four or five years and a higher primary stage of three or two years (NCERT, 1971: 48, 53). In the eyes of the Education Commission, this flexibility allowing for seven year elementary education cycle was not a violation of the Constitutional mandate. Moreover, it was considered that at the age of 14, those pursuing education further entered Standard VIII, which was part of the Secondary education and was, thus, outside the scope of compulsory education framework. However, while endorsing the Education Commission's recommendations in respect of UEE, the National Policy on Education (1968) merely reiterated the Constitutional commitment: "Strenuous efforts should be made for the early fulfilment

of the Directive Principle under Article 45 of the Constitution” (NCERT, 1971: xx). In effect, national plans for UEE followed the Education Commission’s timeframe and allowed the continuance of seven year model of UEE in several states of the country.

TABLE 2: Pattern of School Classes in Different States (1965-66)

State	Lower Primary	Higher Primary
Andhra Pradesh	5	3
Assam and Nagaland	5	3
Bihar, Gujarat & Maharashtra	7(a)	
Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab, Rajasthan and West Bengal	5	3
Kerala	4	3
Madhya Pradesh	5	3
Madras	5	3
Mysore	4	3
Orissa	5	2
Uttar Pradesh	5	3

Notes: (a) Integrated primary course, there being no separate middle schools.

Source: Government of India (1970) *Education and National Development. Report of the Education Commission, 1964-66, Vol. 1: General Problems*, NCERT, New Delhi, p. 41 (Internet/soft version).

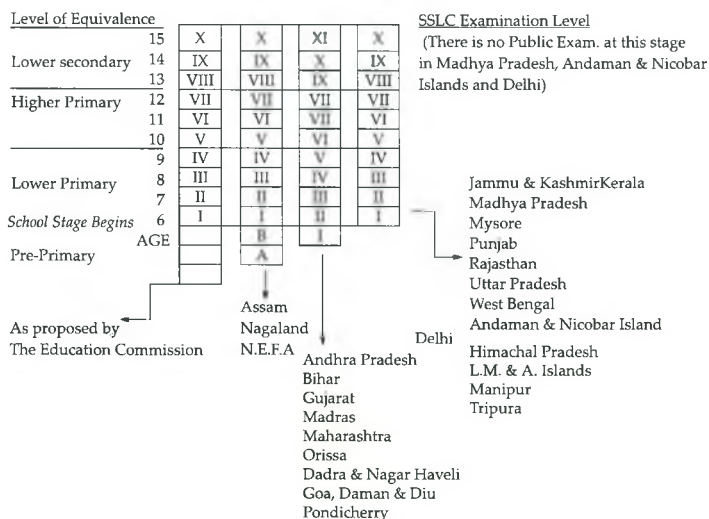


Figure 1: Equivalence of School Classes I-X, 1965-66

Source: Government of India (1970) *Education and National Development. Report of the Education Commission, 1964-66, Vol. 1: General Problems*, NCERT, New Delhi, p. 48, Figure 3. (Internet/soft version).



Taking a cue, perhaps, from Sargent Committee (MOE, 1964: 10) and the Second Plan (GOI, 1956: 504), the Education Commission viewed mere expansion of schooling facilities, based on population and distance norms, as an inadequate understanding of meeting the Constitutional directive, because of the large incidence of wastage and stagnation. It noted that “out of 100 children who enter class I, only about half complete class IV and only 34 complete class VII” (NCERT, 1971: 268). Thus, the Commission called upon the education system and those entrusted with it to ensure retention and successful completion of the prescribed course and provision of seven years of good and effective education as the full definition of meeting the Constitutional mandate.

Education, especially school education, being in the State List, Central Government made little effort to think through and share financial burden of the States in meeting the Constitutional directive of free and compulsory education. This was, perhaps, one reason why the Education Commission did not suggest a uniform eight years but preferred to go along the seven year primary education structure and pattern that was in vogue in several States. Consequently, while the duration of secondary and higher education was standardised all over India, elementary education continued to be different in structure and duration with serious compromise on the eight year free and compulsory schooling to Indian children.

### Legitimacy for Staggering Constitutional Mandate: Re-defining UEE

The Fourth Plan came in the immediate aftermath of the Education Commission which had suggested a 20-year timeframe for achieving UEE, i.e. UPE by 1975 and UEE by 1985, much like the approach advocated by Third Plan. Within this overall approach, the Education Commission suggested that each state and even districts should prepare a *realistic* UPE and UEE plan—realistic not only in provision of schooling facilities, participation of girls and children of ST/ST communities, but also addressing the wastage and stagnation (NCERT, 1971: 267-68). Implicit in the recommendation was the presumption that each State would prepare its own calendar of differential timelines for different requirements and that a national UEE plan would be a disaggregated State Plan of UEE without overstepping the UPE and UEE timeframes. But the Working Group on Education for the Fourth Plan unfolded a different timeline, viz., 1980-81 for universal primary education and 1990-91 for achieving universal elementary education for all children. This extended timeline was seen as necessary to ensure enrolment of girls and children of backward communities and for progressively eliminating wastage and stagnation (Planning Commission, 1968: 38-39). The Fourth Plan candidly recognised that the unfulfilled tasks are many, and much delay had already occurred in complying with the Constitutional Directive in respect of UEE as by 1968-69, only 62 per cent of children in the age-group 6-14 were going to school, i.e. 77 per cent in 6-11 and 32 per cent in the 11-14 age-group, and the corresponding percentages for girls being 59 and 19 respectively (GOI, 1969: 353).

Explicit emphasis was placed on “the provision of facilities in backward areas and communities and for girls” and set targets for primary and upper primary levels as proportion of the age group separately for boys and girls—85.3 per cent for total and 71.1 per cent for girls at primary level and 41.3 per cent for total and 27.7 per cent for girls at upper primary level by 1973-74. The problem of UPE and UEE, in respect of

planning, was not any easier, given that states like Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Orissa had the problem of low enrolment of girls and of children of SC/STs whose numbers in these States were quite sizeable. The Plan made a commitment not only for equitable provision of facilities, but also to focus on removing “the imbalances within States in regard to the provision of educational facilities at the elementary stage” (GOI, 1969: 354).

It is not difficult to see the apparent disjunction in the voice of the political leadership and the planning establishment. The FYPs pursued a disaggregated and differentiated approach to timeframe and target-setting in view of the diverse pace of progress in different states and among different sections of the population. However, the policy statements continued to merely reiterate the Constitutional commitment to achieve the goal of UEE. This divergence could be attributed either to lack of consensus among the political leaders or, dictated by political expediency, the top leadership was reluctant to endorse a disaggregated and staggered process as it tantamounted to admitting failure to meet the Constitutional guarantee given to the children of the country.

Meanwhile, the Mid-Term Appraisal of the Fourth Plan had a disturbing observation that the progress of enrolment reported by the States was “not based on actual enumeration of children enrolled in schools, but on the best estimates by the State Education Departments. In some cases, the States repeat the targets and show them as achievements”, which, in the ultimate analysis, would only lead to “considerable shortfalls” in the progress towards UEE (GOI, 1971: 194). This obviously complicated the process as national strategies and targets had to be drawn based on the inputs from the States.

In sum, the targets and timelines for UEE projected in the Fourth Plan were significantly different from those of the Education Commission. There was clear indication of focusing on problems impeding progress towards UEE and not merely on provision of facilities. In line with the Education Commission’s observation, emphasis clearly shifted to addressing the problems of wastage and stagnation, besides ensuring universal enrolment.

The Fifth Five Year Plan (1974-75 to 1978-79) did not present in any detail the progress achieved in UEE except observing “very high priority has been given to this programme”, viz., elementary education. In the same vein, it went on to assert that adequate provision has been made for additional enrolment in terms of teaching personnel and construction of class-rooms, especially in backward areas. It projected the target of enrolment by the end of Fifth Plan, viz., 771 lakhs at primary and 211 lakhs at upper primary level (GOI, n.d.: 75). The Fifth Plan also indicated the number of children—separately for boys and girls—to be enrolled every year and the likely position by 1978-79—463 million (m), 308 m and 771 m for boys, girls and total at primary level (which represented 111 per cent, 79 per cent and 96 per cent for boys, girls and total), and 140 m, 70 m and 211 m at middle school level which implied 59 per cent, 32 per cent and 46 per cent respectively for boys, girls and total. The Plan also hoped that about 1.6 million additional children would be covered with the strengthening of existing programmes of non-formal education (GOI, n.d.: 77).

Even if one concedes that there was a shift in approach from quantitative to qualitative concerns and increased focus on education of girls and children of SC/ST communities, the Fourth and Fifth Plans did not stipulate any substantive enhanced targets, save in

the case of UPE (namely 96 per cent) to be pursued by the end of Fifth Plan. Also, the Plans did not specify the timeframe to complete the coverage of the yet unreached target with respect to provision of UEE. This is clear from the fact that the target for Universal Upper Primary Education (UUPE) was pitched to reach only 46 per cent of 11-14 age-group children during the Plan period.

It would be useful to remember that several factors hindered a smooth course for implementation of the Fifth Five Year Plan which came soon after India's engagement in Bangladesh liberation war and passed through the turbulent years of Emergency rule. The Plan was finally abandoned mid-course with the change of government at the Centre in 1977. In fact, no Mid-Term Appraisal of the Fifth Plan was carried out as national planning moved into a period of rolling annual plans.

## Return to the Rhetoric of UEE within 10 years

The new Government of the Janata Party that came to power in 1977 decided to abandon the earlier Plan proposal and prepare a fresh Five Year Plan document. A Draft Five Year Plan (1978-83) took shape which declared that "a far greater priority will be given to the programme of universalising elementary education in the age group 6-14 which will be assigned about half of the total allocation for education in the Plan period" (GOI, 1978: 219). The Plan "proposed to accelerate the pace of expansion considerably and to fulfil the directive of Article 45 of the Constitution in about 10 years", and delineated the strategies for expansion of formal schools at primary and middle levels as well as introduction of a multiple-entry system and non-formal education (NFE) for grown-up children. It also laid stress on "special efforts" to enrol non-attending girls and children of other weaker sections, agricultural labourers, etc. (GOI, 1978: 220-21). But, with the change of Government in 1980, the Plan remained at the draft stage and the incoming Congress government took up the task of preparing the Sixth Five Year Plan beginning in 1980.

Reviewing the progress, the Sixth Plan candidly admitted that despite a network of over 0.65 million schools and colleges, over three million teachers and an annual budget of Rs. 3,000 crores, it had not been possible for the education system to achieve the Constitutional directive on UEE. It also recognised that despite nearly a four-fold increase in enrolment at elementary stage, from 22.3 million in 1950-51 to around 90.5 million in 1979-80, for every three children enrolled in primary and middle schools, one other eligible child was left behind, and over 80 per cent of the non-enrolled were confined to a dozen States, which were not in a position to allocate the necessary economic resources for UEE (GOI, 1981: 352). The Sixth Plan also recognised that the children of socio-economically disadvantaged SC/ST communities remained on the periphery of the schooling system, with about 38 per cent SC children (56 per cent of them girls) and 56 per cent of the ST children (70 per cent of them girls) yet to receive elementary education. Non-availability of schools, poverty, particularly in rural areas and among the weaker sections, and lack of essential facilities in schools were identified as some of the important factors contributing to the slow progress. Besides, factors like in-optimal use of existing facilities, around 20 per cent coverage and underage children in enrolment, and more than 64 per cent of dropout rate at primary level, accounted for the economic loss in resource utilisation, educational inefficiency and low productivity,

and the long-term social loss to the individual and the family on account of incomplete development of the children (GOI, 1981: 353).

The Sixth Plan assigned “the highest priority” to the UEE programme, which also continued to be a part of the *minimum needs programme* (implying entitlement in a rights perspective). Even though UEE continued to be the objective, division of elementary education into distinct stages continued and again a timeframe of 10 years was set as the target for achieving UEE. All the States yet to universalise the primary education were to strive for universalisation of primary education in five years, i.e. by 1985, and the other States were to achieve a substantial increase in the enrolment at the middle stage so as to move towards the UEE goal as fast as possible. To complete UPE goal by 1985, the Sixth Plan targeted 17 million additional enrolment i.e. @ 3.4 million per annum against @ 2.0 million in the Draft Fifth Plan; to achieve the target of 50 per cent level for VI-VIII grades, the target was 1.3 million per annum against 0.7 million in the Fifth Plan. Those states, which were already in 100 per cent category with respect to UPE, were to double their middle school level enrolment to achieve UEE by 2000. In order to achieve this, the six educationally backward states (EBSs) had to double and triple their annual enrolment targets (GOI, 1981: 354).

It is important to observe that the UEE target date was again pushed back from 1990 to 2000, and this, perhaps, was for the fifth time. It is surprising that every one of the FYPs was forthright in taking stock of the progress and recording inadequate progress, but continuing to set goals that remained unfulfilled. It is quite intriguing. Successive FYPs extended the time period for achieving UEE but never managed to reach the target during the Plan period. Were they being honest in stock-taking but unrealistically ambitious in target setting or were they merely being politically correct in setting short timeframe targets, knowing well that these could not be achieved?

### Juggling with the Concept but Missing in Action

Based on the observations of the Education Commission, the Seventh Plan Working Group for Elementary Education delineated the three components of the programme of universalisation of elementary education: (i) universal provision of facilities; (ii) universal enrolment, attendance and retention; and (iii) successful completion of the entire period of elementary education by all children enrolled. Pointing out that UEE has quantitative as well as qualitative dimensions, the Working Group cautioned that without adequate emphasis on quality, such a massive effort at universalisation could be infructuous and called for special effort during the Seventh Plan towards qualitative improvement as well (MOE & Culture, 1984: 4).

The Working Group further elaborated that while the three components provided what may be termed as physical indices of measuring the progress made in achieving the goal, they do not, by themselves, indicate whether those who leave school after seven or eight years of education attain the competencies required of citizens in the present-day world. Ultimately, success of any programme of universal elementary education will have to be measured in terms of the competencies that children attain without which they would not be able to function as socially-conscious citizens and contribute to increasing productivity. From the point of view of enhancing the instrumental value of education for social and economic transformation, it is necessary to ensure that children receive the

knowledge and skills of the type and level required in their communities. It is, therefore, necessary to insist that under the programme of universal elementary education, all children enrolled are enabled to achieve the desired levels of competencies. Assessment of competencies attained must become an essential component of the programme of universalisation of elementary education (MOE & Culture, 1984: 4).

With regard to the main thrust of the Seventh Plan, the Working Group recommended continuing elementary education as an integral part of the Minimum Needs Programme and presented a long list of action points: increase the investment for elementary education so as to enhance the quality, while endowing schools with facilities; provide schools in school-less habitations by adopting flexible standards in sparsely populated, remote and hilly areas, and thereby remove backlog in physical facilities; convert single-teacher into multi-teacher schools; expand coverage of incentives; continue and expand NFE in a big way; focus the scope of Central Assistance for spreading education among girls and children of SC/ST communities; encourage community participation and control in elementary education; pursue curricular reform in elementary education; introduce a five-year cycle of teacher training programme; and improve existing teacher training institutions (MOE & Culture, 1984: 39-41).

The final Seventh Plan document emphasised the need for reorienting the “education system so as to prepare the country to meet the challenges of the next century” and marked achievement of universal elementary education as the first of the main thrust areas to be pursued while declaring that “overriding priority will be given to realising universalisation of elementary education for children in the age-group 6-14 years by 1990; this will continue to be part of the Minimum Needs Programme.” It further indicated that “for achieving the goal of universalisation by the end of the Seventh Plan (1989-90), over 50 million children will have to be additionally enrolled”. The Plan declared that “the emphasis will shift from mere enrolment to retention of pupils in schools and to the attainment by them of basic elements of learning. The objective is sought to be achieved through a combination of formal and non-formal methods, focusing sharply on the needs of girls and of children belonging to the economically and socially weaker sections” (GOI, 1985: 255).

## National Policy on Education 1986: Another Promise of UEE within 10 Years

The National Policy on Education, 1986 (NPE) was adopted in the middle of the Seventh Five Year Plan. There was considerable convergence between the two at the conceptual and strategy levels. NPE declared that the nation as a whole will assume the responsibility of universalisation of elementary education. Besides elaborating the measures to improve facilities, the NPE also referred to a “national resolve” to give highest priority for reducing dropout in the middle of the elementary cycle and to ensure the retention and completion of elementary education by all children. NPE came up with another 10-year timeframe for achieving UEE in a staggered and sequentialised fashion and declared, “It shall be ensured that all children who attain the age of 11 years by 1990 will have had 5 years of schooling or its equivalent through NFE system. Likewise by 1995 all children will be provided free and compulsory education upto the age of 14” (MHRD, 1986: 10). Introduction of Non-formal Education channel as an equivalent

and alternate means for achieving UEE was indeed a new perspective presented by the NPE. Unlike the NPE 1968, the new national policy was accompanied by an elaborate 'Programme of Action' which delineated the strategies and programmes to be adopted for achieving the UEE target. Launch of nationwide centrally sponsored schemes such as Operation Blackboard and District Institute of Education and Training marked a new beginning in terms of Central Government intervention in the largely State Government run programmes of elementary education. But as the programmes took shape, there was an interruption with the change of Government. The National Front Government initiated a review of the NPE 1986 and there was no assessment of the progress made in respect of the target of ensuring that all children, who attain the age of 11 years by 1990, will have had five years of schooling, as promised in the policy document.

### Ramamurti Committee (1990): More Analysis of Strategies

The Committee for Review of NPE, 1986, under Acharya Ramamurti (Ramamurti Committee, 1990), was quite elaborate in its suggestions, mildly critical and largely endorsing the propositions contained in NPE with regard to UEE. The focus was mainly on strategies and programmes. Besides endorsing the NPE proposal for supplementing formal schools with non-formal education centres, the Committee advocated non-formalising the formal school by shifting school timings to mornings, afternoons or late evenings, as per the convenience of the majority of children; adjusting school calendar according to the agricultural seasons; allowing working children and especially girls to *drop-in* to the school at any time of the day or year they want; and extending the *drop-in* provision to children of migrant families from other villages/towns (MHRD, 1990: 169). For the purpose of non-formalising the formal school, the Committee considered that it would be essential to restructure the appointment, placement and training of teachers by: (i) empowering the Head Master to recruit 'para-teachers' (Shiksha Karmis) for the early morning or evening classes and/or habitations/villages/mohallas still unserved by a school; (ii) paying the para-teachers emoluments not less than one-third of a regular teacher's salary; (iii) as far as possible, the 'para-teacher' should be recruited from the local community, with preference to women; (iv) if necessary, young persons with commitment, having even less than minimum qualifications could be recruited; (v) the regular school teacher and the 'para-teacher' shall be inter-changeable in terms of teaching responsibilities; (vi) and after 2-3 years of probation, para-teachers, who upgraded their qualification to at least class XII, should be absorbed as regular school teachers (MHRD, 1990: 170). This idea of para-teachers, in more ways than one, gave legitimacy to the disturbing phenomenon of recruiting teachers on short-term contract that severely jeopardised the development of a professional cadre of teachers. The proposal for para schools took shape as Education Guarantee Scheme schools, again distorting the basic framework of schooling and creating institutions with abysmally sub-minimal facilities to pass off as primary schools essentially serving children of the poor and the marginalised.

That even after 40 years of planning, the country was struggling to set a clear perspective on UEE is evident from the fact that the Ramamurti Committee also endorsed a two-phased move towards goal of universalisation of education -the first phase of Universalisation of Primary Education (UPE) and the second phase of UEE. The Committee wanted that UEE be allowed to grow organically out of the development of

Primary Education, based on micro-planning and community participation. The Committee recommended adopting the principle of differentiated or disaggregated targets and pluralistic educational strategies for achieving UEE so that planning process is guided by gender-specific, community-wise, Block and District level, and regional parameters. The national and State targets of UEE as well as resource allocation shall emerge from collation and integration of the disaggregated targets. The Committee remained vague with respect to determining a timeframe for achieving the goal of UEE. Instead, it was suggested that while broad goals like universalisation of elementary education have to be spelt out in terms of being achieved by certain deadline years, numerical target setting should not be an exercise flowing top downwards. Target should be fixed in a disaggregated way at the base level, keeping in view the levels of educational development and disparities reflected therein, and, thereafter, collated to state levels. Disaggregated target setting, besides being area-specific should even be for different socio-economic segments and ethnic groups, particularly in the context of fulfilling the Constitutional mandate for ensuring equality and social justice (GOI, 1990: 168-169).

The new Government that followed the fall of the National Front Government decided to review the NPE 1986 in the light of the Ramamurti Review Committee recommendations. The NPE (Revised) 1992 and the accompanying Programme of Action endorsed the Review Committee's recommendation of adoption of alternative channels of schooling like part-time, voluntary primary schools and NFE centres. The policy environment between 1990 and 1992 formed the basis of para-schools and para-teachers and the NFE channels as the 'practical' and 'feasible' route for education in unserved habitations for working children and girls. In its design NFE was invested with parity, implying eligibility to enter into the formal primary school, after NFE, at appropriate class levels. Similarly, part-time primary schools were positioned as feeders to regular primary schools, taught by para/contractual teachers as "without any compromise on quality and standard of education imparted" logic.

The timeframe for achieving UEE also got extended by another five years to the end of the Century but without reference to the two-phased specification. This was possibly to gloss over the fact that the country had failed to keep the promise that "all children, who attain the age of about 11 years by 1990, will have had five years of schooling." The revised 'Resolve' reworded the reference to timeframe in loose and vague fashion as, "It shall be ensured that free and compulsory education of satisfactory quality is provided to all children upto 14 years of age before we enter the twenty-first century. A national mission will be launched for the achievement of this goal". Unwillingness of the Government to tackle the issue, with adequate financial resources and within a pre-set time frame, was quite evident as it merely restated a broad observation by the CABE that the failure to universalise elementary education and literacy was not only a question of lack of resources but also of systemic deficiencies. "The additional resources that may be available under external assistance should, therefore, be used for educational reconstruction which should go beyond the conventional measures, such as opening new schools, construction of school buildings and appointing teachers. It is necessary to adopt a holistic approach, and to address i) the educational needs of the working children, girls and disadvantaged groups, and ii) issues of content, process and quality (MHRD, 1995 edition: 36).

While the focus was rightly placed on reaching the hitherto marginalised sections, this was sought to be achieved through an inferior option in the form of part-time primary school, taught by low-qualified, low-trained and low-paid para-teachers and NFE instructors in remote rural, hilly, forest, coastal and border areas. These alternated facilities were for those children, who could not avail of conventional full-time schooling, such as the working children and especially girls and children of migrant families from other villages/towns. As was noted earlier, this policy level compromise on regular full-time formal schooling with part-time schooling by para-teachers, and viewing them as good enough for the poor in rural areas and urban slums has had a long-lasting and, in fact, escalating impact on the development of an equitable education system.

## Beginning of Planning in the Post-Reform Era

The Eighth Plan (1992-93 to 1996-97) was formulated in the backdrop of the country struggling to come out of an economic crisis and embracing a neo-liberal policy accompanied by a programme of structural adjustment. Financial stringency, particularly with respect to social sectors, was quite evident. Reviewing the progress made during the Seventh Plan period, it was frankly admitted that “we are clearly far away from the goal of universal enrolment and retention, much less achievement” (GOI, 1992: 284). It was estimated that additional enrolment to be achieved during the Eighth Plan to reach universalisation was approximately 56.1 million children. Enrolment of about 43.8 million was to be achieved through formal schools, about 10 million through non-formal centres and the rest through the open learning channel of upper-primary stage. Even assuming that the alternate and supplementary channels could be made functional soon enough to absorb the numbers not covered by the formal schools, enrolling such a huge number, amounting to almost one-third of the total number in the age group, and reaching the goal of UEE within a period of five years would appear quite unrealistic. Yet the Eighth FYP contended that they were ‘within the realm of possibility, if the requisite will and mobilisation of organisational and financial resources were brought to bear on the task, and innovative schemes like voluntary primary schools and OE [open education] at the upper primary stage were introduced.’ It is difficult to infer if this was mere political bravado or optimism based on a realistic assessment of the available financial resources and past performance on the ground or it was one more occasion of official promise not to be taken seriously.

In keeping with the recommendations of the NPE, the Eighth Plan laid stress on retention, participation and achievement, rather than on mere enrolment. Special attention was to be paid to increase retention, improvement of quality, specification of minimum levels of learning (MLL) and their attainment by the learners (GOI, 1992: 285). Specific measures to be adopted to achieve the targets included expansion and improvement of formal school system; improvement, expansion and strengthening of NFE; and provision of primary schools or alternatives to primary schools like non-formal centres etc. to every child within a walking distance of one kilometre, with suitable adjustment for special cases; and encouragement to voluntary agencies, factories, cooperatives etc., to set up part-time primary schools to serve several groups of children belonging to hilly, desert, marshy, forest areas and nomadic tribes, seasonal migrants, urban poor etc., with freedom to adjust the number of school days, instructional hours and appoint teachers on contract basis (GOI, 1992: 287-89).



## Disruptive Influence of DPEP on National Planning of UEE

A major disruption in pursuing specific targets and timeframe to achieve UEE at national and state levels came with the launch of District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) in 1994, in the middle of the Eighth Plan and practically outside the national planning apparatus. DPEP was a Centrally Sponsored Scheme largely financed through external assistance, with major funding from World Bank as Social Safety Net Adjustment Credit to help India recover from a balance of payment crisis, which had forced reductions in government expenditures on social services (World Bank, 2007). The programme began in 42 districts, spread over seven states and expanded in a phased manner to cover around 275 districts. Uttar Pradesh already had initiated an exclusively IDA-supported project (UPBEP) covering 10 districts. Decentralised planning, with district as the basic unit instead of State-level consideration, cannot be a matter of contention. This was in line with the recommendations of the NPE and was a long-standing demand of development planners. However, the way the district planning was adopted and the Project unfolded at the field level is quite pertinent to the discussion on UEE targets and timeframe.

First, beginning from the Sixth Plan, the Central Government focussed on supplementing programmes in States identified as EBSs. Other States were expected to take forward the goals through State-level actions plans and programmes for UEE. This was viewed as necessary for correcting historically inherited disparities and for ensuring equitable resource allocation. Contrary to this perspective, DPEP began its operations in the first phase in several States that had already made significant progress in UEE such as Kerala, which had near universal participation of children in 1994. Second, DPEP led to the creation of a dual governance structure in the Project States. The DPEP Project Office was responsible for implementing district Plans in DPEP districts, using earmarked and enhanced financial resources directly received from the Centre bypassing the State treasury. Planning for UEE in the remaining districts had to be done by the State Governments based on a different financial framework with limited resources. Consequently, there was no scope for developing a long-term unified perspective at the State level with regard to targets and strategies for UEE. Even though the dual control system was presented as innovative financial flow mechanisms to overcome bureaucratic bottlenecks, it effectively precluded state-wide planning for UEE. A third factor was that DPEP remained focused only on lower primary schooling in its scope and operations. This meant that the State-level planning for UEE was fractured both horizontally and vertically as the responsibility for the upper primary stage continued to be with the State Governments even in the DPEP districts. Whether this fractured framework brought in by DPEP helped or hindered progress of UEE is difficult to conclude as even the goal of UPE remained unfulfilled in the DPEP districts as the Project completed its term.

## The Burden of Divided Attention during the Ninth Five Year Plan

For the Ninth Five Year Plan (1997-2002), DPEP, as an extra-budgetary operation at national and State levels, practically outside the framework of Five Year Planning cycle, was a fait accompli. Planning had to be done as though there were two parts to the UEE in India—DPEP districts and non-DPEP districts. State-wide plans did not have much relevance to the whole exercise. Even though the FY Plan document enunciated a set of targets and time-frame at the national level, these were to be negotiated within the

fractured setting of DPEP and non-DPEP districts as the resources available enormously differed between the two sets of districts.

Furthermore, notwithstanding the additional finances raised through external sources, the optimism of the Eighth Five Year Plan seemed to have evaporated as the Plan document stated: "The basic agenda for the Ninth Plan is to fulfil the objectives of Article 45 of the Constitution by charting out a clear course of action to make primary education free and compulsory upto Vth standard, though the ultimate object is to universalise upto VIIIth Standard. This phasing is necessary because of the resource constraint, on the one side, and enormous complexity of the problem, on the other." (Planning Commission [n.d.]: 112) para 3.3.106). It was admitted that the task would remain unfinished and had to continue in the Tenth Plan: "... Since the task of Universalisation of Elementary Education will remain unfulfilled in States like Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, J & K, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal, particularly at upper primary stage, it is obvious that there is need for a longer time horizon. The Xth Plan will continue to lay emphasis on a higher allocation for primary education so as to complete the unfinished task" (Planning Commission [n.d.]: 113). It should be noted that the Plan recognised that the problems were concentrated in the nine EBSs though no special attention was paid to them. Instead, DPEP was projected as a national-level flagship programme and its implementation took centre-stage in all discourses and policy pronouncements.

Did this dual governance mechanism and fractured focus at the state level, adopted under DPEP, jeopardise progress of UEE? This would require indepth historical analysis. Nevertheless, the parallel and dual system of primary education that was emerging and getting policy legitimacy and the backing in the FYPs could be noted. What the NPE 1986 viewed as temporary supplementary measures to ensure enhanced participation of children in education moved to the centre as legitimate alternatives to formal full-time primary schools. Multi-layered primary education to cater to different strata of the society emerged as a permanent marker of the system. One would wonder if the framers of Indian Constitution, while entrusting the State as the custodian of universal compulsory and free education, ever suspected that the State would look for inferior options instead of establishing an equitable common system of schooling for all. The official documents would, of course, argue that the alternatives were so designed that there was no compromise on quality and standard of education imparted. In fact, this shortcut to providing primary education to the areas and sections of the population un-reached by regular primary school education system was flaunted as more efficient, effective and of better quality than the regular formal primary schools. This aggressive posturing (Gopalakrishnan and Sharma, 1998, 1999) was seen by observers as a tactical ploy to sidetrack the popular misgivings against the dual primary education system nurtured and entrenched along rural-urban, social and gender disparity lines (Kumar, 2001; Kumar, et al., 2001).

## Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and the 10<sup>th</sup> Plan: Revival of National Perspective

The Ninth Five Year Plan, towards the end of its period, witnessed a major event with significant import to and enduring impact on UEE. This was the launch of SSA by

Government of India in 2001 as an integrated programme of elementary education on a nationwide basis. The main objectives of the national flagship programme were: (a) all children to be in schools, Education Guarantee Scheme Centres, Alternative Schools, 'Back-to-School' camps by 2003; (b) all children complete five years of primary schooling by 2007; (c) all children complete eight years of elementary schooling by 2010; (d) focus on elementary education of satisfactory quality with emphasis on education for life; (e) bridge all gender and social category gaps at the primary stage by 2007 and, at the upper primary level, by 2010; and (f) universal retention by 2010 (GoI, 2002, Vol. II: 30). In contrast to the vague statements of the 9<sup>th</sup> Plan document, SSA document came out with clearly stated goals and targets for UEE at the national level. However, the shadow of DPEP on the design of the new national programme was quite clear. SSA had no hesitation in adopting the multi-layered schooling system with unequal facilities and resources that went against the interests of the poor and the marginalised. Fragmentation of the UEE goal as five years and eight years got further entrenched with the endorsement given by the national programme. In fact, the SSA package looked more like extension of DPEP template to all the districts of the country under the same model of dual governance system at the State level. Surprisingly, while the decision was made to adopt the DPEP model throughout the country under the banner of SSA, independent evaluation of the Project, carried out on behalf of World Bank, rated the outcomes only as moderately satisfactory (World Bank, 2007).

The Tenth Five Year Plan (2002-07), coming closely after the launch of SSA, did not have much to add but only to endorse the SSA framework: "Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan programme will be the main vehicle for achieving the goals of UEE." In fact, the focus of the specific targets set by the 10<sup>th</sup> Plan was essentially for universalising primary education of five years: *Universal Enrolment*—(a) Enrolment of all children in schools or alternative arrangements by 2003; (b) All children to complete five years of primary schooling by 2007; *Universal Retention*—(a) Universal retention in the primary stage by 2007; (b) Dropout rate to be reduced to less than 10 per cent for grades VI-VIII by 2007. Did it imply that the planners had conceded that eight years of free and compulsory schooling was not within the Government's consideration? A more generous interpretation would be that the Plan endorsed the fragmented perspective of UPE and UEE and considered the task of UEE to spillover beyond the period of the Plan. The Plan also fully endorsed the multi-layered unequal schooling proposals of SSA. All these happened in the immediate aftermath of the Parliament adopting the 86<sup>th</sup> amendment to Constitution, making Education a Fundamental Right of all children in the age group 6 to 14. Endorsing SSA proposals and framework also meant formulating investment plans and strategies for the incumbent Plan not based on empirical assessment of the progress made during the previous Plan period, as traditionally done. In other words, rhetoric and compliance with political pronouncement overtook empirical reality. Even though a semblance of national perspective had been restored in defining targets and timelines, the Plan had to still contend with a divided framework for allocation as the DPEP was in progress in 272 out of 593 districts in 18 States of the country. All in all, DPEP covered 272 out of 593 odd districts in 18 of the States (Ayyar, 2016).

The Mid-Term Appraisal, which assessed the progress achieved on UEE during the Tenth Plan, noted that despite the inclusion of three of the eleven monitorable targets on elementary education, the progress achieved in respect of many of the goals of SSA

and Tenth Plan fell short of the target, necessitating their revision. One was the shifting of the target date for getting all children to school from 2003 to 2005; another was the revision of the target of universal retention at primary stage from 2007 to 2010 and so was completion (GOI, 2005: 52). Unfortunately, despite the revision of the target timelines, the goals remained unfulfilled.

## Targets and Timelines for UEE Pushed to Backburner

As the 11<sup>th</sup> Plan preparations began, SSA had got well entrenched as the sole all-encompassing programme of elementary education in the country. Beyond SSA, State-level activities dried up in many States or, at best, remained minor additions. At the national level, the focus came to be merely on implementation of SSA activities and the coverage achieved as against the programme specifications in the Annual Plan. The focus was not on the requirement of reaching UEE goal in a time-bound fashion, as enunciated in the Constitution.

In this context, national targets and timelines began to lose importance. District plans were expected to be prepared based on local surveys and estimate of requirements computed against the prescribed norms under SSA. Even if the surveys identified the unfinished tasks for achieving UEE, no timelines were indicated as the allocations came on annual basis from within the funds provided at the national level. The survey findings of districts never got collated to arrive at a consolidated picture at the State level or national level which could aid in assessing the distance to be covered and resources required for achieving UEE. Planning for UEE appeared to consist of more than 600 pieces of documents, supposedly based on locally collected empirical evidence, which remained disjointed even at the State level and never put together to arrive at the nature and magnitude of the task of UEE required at the national level.

Within the context described above, the Eleventh Plan articulated only broad statements as goals, targets and strategies. This included: Universal enrolment of 6–14 age-group children, including the hard-to-reach segment; all gender, social, and regional gaps in enrolments to be eliminated by 2011–12; and dropout at primary level to be eliminated and the dropout rate at the elementary level to be reduced from over 50 per cent to 20 per cent by 2011–12 (Planning Commission, 2012: 9–10). One could easily observe that analytical engagement with the issues was missing as the purpose seemed to be only to endorse proposals already worked out under SSA. For instance, while the 10<sup>th</sup> Plan had committed to bringing down dropout rate to less than 10 per cent, the 11<sup>th</sup> Plan set the bar at 20 per cent.

Meanwhile, the Parliament adopted the RTE Act in August 2009—legislation that gave effect to the 86<sup>th</sup> Amendment, making education a fundamental right. SSA was declared by the Government as the main instrument for operationalising the provisions of the law and the implementation framework was realigned accordingly. As the formal school was viewed as the main vehicle for accessing the Right to Education, the Act specified the entitlements of the child in terms of inputs and processes in the school. One would have expected that with this change in the Constitutional position, the State would feel increased pressure and commitment to pursue the goal as a matter of urgency within a set timeframe. Paradoxically, RTE has clouded the perspective, shifting the focus from the core mandate of achieving UEE within a timeframe to the nitty-gritty of

implementing selected sections of the law, such as no detention policy and admission of children belonging to Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) in private schools.

The 12<sup>th</sup> FYP, the first Plan to be formulated after the RTE Act, followed the precedent set by the previous one and just endorsed the strategies and proposals under SSA. The Plan document made extensive reference to the programmes implemented and the achievements made under SSA as well as to the enactment of RTE. The statements on goals and targets appeared only to meet the customary requirement of a Plan: Meeting residual access needs of disadvantaged social groups; Improving school infrastructure facilities, as per RTE stipulation; Increasing enrolment at upper primary level, and lowering dropout rates across the board; and Improving quality of education with special emphasis on learning outcomes (GOI, 2012: 50). In any case, the new Government that came to power in 2014 dissolved the Planning Commission and, with that, the idea of FYPs. The 12<sup>th</sup> Plan became a mere notional guide, with the task of planning fully shifting to MHRD and SSA as the sole vehicle to implement programmes related to elementary education.

### III

## Across Seven Decades: Trail of Distractions and Disruptions

Declining to accept the Sargent Committee projection of 40 years, the Constitution set a tough timeframe of 10 years for providing free and compulsory education to all children upto the age of 14 years. Contrary to this commitment, the Kher Committee, which worked almost parallel to the framing of the Constitution, set a 16-year timeline for achieving the goal of UEE. The year 1959 passed and the Constitutional promise did not materialise. Sixteen years passed by but the target of UEE set by Kher Committee was not met. Unfortunately, the story of UEE that began with such conflicting propositions, unkept promises and missed targets and timelines has continued thereafter with no end in sight.

Why should missing of targets and timelines be given so much importance? This could just be another case of inefficiency in public service which characterises the whole spectrum of services provided by the State in India. But elementary education is not just another public service. With the 86<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution, education occupies a unique place in public provisioning. But, recent figures, according to a survey sponsored by MHRD, showed that around six million children are still not on the rolls of any school. This number jumps up significantly to 20 million (around 10 per cent of the total elementary education age group population) if one accepts the figures given by Census 2011. The phrase used in earlier documents 'near universal enrolment' does not meet the RTE benchmark. As a Fundamental Right guaranteed by the Constitution, every child in the age-group 6-14 is entitled for elementary education and it is the duty of the State to ensure that this Constitutional requirement is fully met. Chart 1 attempts to capture a chronological picture of the scene, ever changing over the decades and across several key initiatives related to UEE policy and planning.

The Planning Commission, which was entrusted with the task of devising programmes and providing resources to achieve the Constitutional mandate, recorded failure of the country to reach the preset targets and kept shifting the goalpost every five years in a ritualistic fashion. Recommendations of various Commissions and Committees, and the National Policy documents further confounded the issue of targets and timelines. There was no dearth of analysis of the causes of failure to meet the timelines. Innumerable pages of analytical reviews have been generated in the form of Working Group Reports, Five Year Plan documents and Mid-Term Appraisal Reports besides several policy papers, evaluation reports and commissioned review papers on specific issues. The issue was not merely one of missing targets and timelines. With slippages in achieving the goal,

CHART 1: Shifting Targets and Timeframes of UEE

Sl. No.	Five Year Plan	Target & Timeframe	Status
1	1st Plan 1951-55	UEE 1961	No change
2	2nd Plan 1956-60	UPE-1965 UEE-1970	1 <sup>st</sup> change
3	3 <sup>rd</sup> Plan 1960-65	UPE-1965 UEE-1975	2 <sup>nd</sup> change
4	Education Commission	UPE-1975 UEE-1985	3 <sup>rd</sup> change
5	4 <sup>th</sup> Plan 1969-74	UPE-1981 UEE-1991	4 <sup>th</sup> change
6	5 <sup>th</sup> Plan 1975-79	No change	No change
7	Draft Plan 1978-83	UEE in 10 years	5 <sup>th</sup> change
8	6th Plan 1980-85	UPE-1985 UEE-2000	6 <sup>th</sup> change
9	7 <sup>th</sup> Plan 1986-90	UEE - 1990	7 <sup>th</sup> change
10	NPE 1986	UPE-1990 UEE-1995	8 <sup>th</sup> change
11	NPE Review 1990	UEE-2000	9 <sup>th</sup> change
12	8 <sup>th</sup> Plan 1992-97	No change	No change
13	NPE 1992	UEE-2000	10 <sup>th</sup> change
14	9 <sup>th</sup> Plan 1997-2002	UPE-2002	11 <sup>th</sup> change
15	SSA 2000	UPE-2005 UEE-2010	12 <sup>th</sup> change
16	10 <sup>th</sup> Plan 2002-07	UPE-2007 UEE-2010	13 <sup>th</sup> change
17	11 <sup>th</sup> Plan 2007-12	Splintered Targets	No timeframe
18	12 <sup>th</sup> Plan 2012-17	Splintered Targets	No timeframe

Source: GOI, 1956: 503; GOI, 1961: 578; NCERT, 1971: 268; Planning Commission, 1971: 39; GOI, 1978: 220; GOI, 1981: 354; MHRD, 1986: 10; GOI, 1985: 255; MHRD, 1991: 134; GOI, 1996: 36; GOI, 1997: 117; GOI, 2002: 32; GOI, 2002: 34-35; GOI, 2012: 50-51; Planning Commission, 2013: 51.

and with varying means and strategies adopted to pursue the goal, the meaning and scope of UEE also underwent revisions and distortions leaving a long lasting impact on elementary education in the country.

### Scheme-centric Focus Replaces Goal Orientation

During the initial decades after Independence, Constitutional commitment was the chief guiding post for educational planners. Serious attention was paid to periodically assess the gaps, redesign programmes and strategies to reach the goal of UEE, viz. providing free and compulsory education for all children upto the age of 14 years. As School Education was in the State List, there were no direct Central interventions. The emphasis

was on State-level actions to move forward towards the Constitutional commitment. Targets and timelines set at the national level were based on collation of Reports from State Governments. The situation changed with the amendment to the Constitution in 1976, moving school education to the Concurrent list. With increasing participation of the Central Government came the change in the focus of stock-taking. Plan documents became increasingly focused on implementation of Central and Centrally sponsored schemes. This became fully legitimised with SSA which subsumed all Central government efforts and also most of the State-level efforts under a single Centrally sponsored scheme. The 11<sup>th</sup> and 12 FYPs made only broad references to timelines for achieving the UEE goal.

## UPE-UEE Conundrum

While directing the State to provide free and compulsory education to all children upto the age of 14, the Constitution made no reference to the instrumentality for achieving the goal. It was a conscious choice made by the Government to define 7-8 years of schooling to be provided for children in the age-group 6 to 14 as the commitment. However, for operationalising the commitment, this period of eight years of schooling got splintered into UPE of five years followed by three years of upper primary, together constituting UEE. This obfuscation of Constitutional directive, by splintering it into two and staggering the efforts, has been a feature common to all the Five Year Plans and Policy statements. The first FYP stated: "At the conclusion of the Five Year Plan, educational facilities should be provided for at least 60 per cent of all the children of the school-going age within the age- group 6-11, and these should develop, as early as possible, so as to bring children upto the age of 14 into schools in order to cover the age-group 6-14."

On the consideration that development was highly uneven across different States, successive FYPs invariably ended up bisecting UEE and staggering the UPE and UUPE targets and timeframe, and kept pushing it back almost every time. For instance, the Second and Third Plans cited regional, social and gender imbalances and disparities. The approach got further legitimised by the Education Commission, 1964-66, when it advocated the staggered timeframe—UPE by 1975 and UUPE as well as UEE by 1985. It also recommended a supposedly more "realistic" approach by setting up the timeframe separately for educationally backward States; coverage of different targets for different clientele like girls, children of SC/ST communities; rural and urban areas; and different educational requirements, like provision of schools and other facilities, for primary and upper primary levels. The NPE 1986 also suggested a staggered timeframe for UPE and UEE. However, in all these instances, the proposals underlined the principle that 'the age group 6-14 should be regarded as an integral whole for the purpose of providing basic education.' This perspective was seriously disrupted with the implementation of DPEP, which exclusively focused on five years of primary schooling by allocating resources only for improving primary stage. The DPEP, which covered more than 250 districts over a decade and a half, virtually divided the country into DPEP districts focusing on primary schooling of five years and others focusing on UEE of eight years as part of national FYPs. How did this division of the country into DPEP districts and non-DPEP ones impact the progress of UEE in various parts of the country? This requires more elaborate analysis of corresponding data for the period and beyond. However, one



could safely say that it seriously disrupted the development of a shared perspective and a vision of treating education of the age-group 6 to 14 as 'an integral whole for the purpose of providing basic education', as emphasized in the first FYP.

## Institutionalising Unequal Schooling: School as a Malleable Instrumentality

Through the initial decades what a school should consist of, in terms of minimum physical infrastructure and academic resources, remained undefined. The attention was solely on creating additional schooling facilities. But the planners were conscious that reasonable facilities should be made available for facilitating effective teaching-learning in the school. In fact, as the deadline set by the Kher Committee was about to be crossed, the then Education Minister, M.C. Chagla, reminded in 1964: "Our Constitution fathers did not intend that we just set up hovels, put students there, give untrained teachers, give them bad textbooks, no playgrounds, and say we have complied with Article 45 and primary education is expanding... They meant that real education should be given to our children between the ages of 6 and 14". Even though several State Governments had created guidelines for establishing new schools, it was only under the Operation Blackboard Scheme that an effort was made at the national level to set benchmarks with respect to number of teachers, classrooms and other academic facilities that every school should be equipped with. The NPE 1986, which promoted the OB Scheme, also provided for opening a non-formal stream of schooling. Children were taught in the NFE centres by volunteer teachers and the centres were not required to meet all the benchmarks specified under OB Scheme. The centres were, of course, meant to cater to older children who had missed out on entering the formal school or dropped out without completing the full cycle of elementary education and who could thereafter be re-streamed into the formal system of schooling. Even while the NFE stream was seen purely as a supplementary arrangement for strengthening the system in Educationally Backward States (EBSs) to accommodate the special categories of children mentioned earlier, it did create a window for operating a parallel stream of primary education. However, it was categorical that the NFE stream would be temporary and would continue only till such time that all children were able to access full-time formal schools.

But this approach took a weird turn with the advent of DPEP, which actively promoted opening of EGS centres and Alternate Schools as equivalent substitutes for formal primary schools. Surprisingly, even States, which had already made good progress in UEE, also adopted these measures, perhaps due to cost-saving considerations. This policy, promoted under DPEP, set in motion the creation of unequal schools with variable levels of infrastructure and academic resources across the country in a widespread fashion. Unequal and unfair provisions that essentially deprived the marginalised groups from accessing reasonable quality education became the normal. For instance, the goal of eliminating single-teacher schools, one of the core objectives of OB Project, was sacrificed in favour of single-teacher and single-room schools that sprung up across the country. This approach, unfortunately, continued under SSA also though the nomenclatures were changed. Spawning of unequal schools within the Government school system has created unprecedented levels of inequality in the education sector as multiple layers of schools within the State system is visible across the country, leading to a hierarchy of schooling

(Ramachandran, 2004). It is not that all schools in the country had otherwise very good physical and academic infrastructure. But, undoubtedly, the goal was clear and there were consistent efforts over the years to improve the conditions for teaching-learning process in schools. Official promotion of EGS centres and ASs as equivalent to formal full-time schools derailed this process of gradual improvement, leading to high levels of inequity within the system. Unfortunately, these substandard structures were created in the periphery of the villages, inhabited by traditionally marginalised communities, resulting in social segregation and further marginalisation of the already marginalised. Consequently, the overall quality of education provided through the public system took a severe dent with loss of public trust in the capacity of Government schools to deliver quality education. A secondary manifestation of this phenomenon of spreading substandard schools is the fast increase in private schooling facilities and the migration of children from Government to Private schools that has further accentuated the problem of inequity within the education sector. In fact, the country is still struggling with the issue while implementing provisions of RTE, which gives a clearer definition of the entitlement of children and excludes scope for operating any substandard alternates for formal schools as equivalents. While the attention of official action in recent years has shifted to improving quality, can system-level improvement measures for improving quality work without addressing the problem of pervasive inequality that has come to characterise the school system?

### Fracturing the Teacher Community: Para-teacher Phenomenon

All policy documents have recognised the centrality of the teacher in our pursuit of providing quality education for all. The memorable opening statement of the Education Commission, “The destiny of India is now being shaped in her classrooms” was premised on the availability of capable teachers for every classroom. The Commission said, “Of all the different factors which influence the quality of education and its contribution to national development, the quality, competence and character of teachers are, undoubtedly, the most significant. Nothing is more important than securing a sufficient supply of high quality recruits to the teaching profession, providing them with the best possible professional preparation and creating satisfactory conditions of work in which they can be fully effective.” The message was clear that building a strong professional community of teachers is critical for achieving the goal of UEE. This was not an easy task in the early years of dismantling the elitist colonial system and establishing a programme of mass education. With only one out of five adults being literate and only one out of four children getting enrolled in school, it was indeed a struggle to find persons adequately qualified to teach in primary schools. But the commitment to gradually strengthen the position and engage qualified persons to teach was never in question.

Need for creating and nurturing a professional cadre of teachers did not require any special justification. Building such a cadre, governed by well-designed norms and standards, was considered an important task of the State Governments. One could see a reasonable level of success being achieved in this regard in several States, even though the problem of finding adequate number of trained teachers continued in many of them. The Education Commission was critical of the legacy left behind by the colonial rule with differential and discriminatory working conditions for school teachers within the State system. It was pointed out that it had ‘introduced an undesirable ‘caste’ system

among the teachers' and called upon the State Governments to 'eliminate these relics of the past'. This principle had guided the State Governments in their efforts to create a professional community of teachers for achieving the goal of UEE. But 30 years later, in the mid-1990s, the Government did a volte face and chose to wholly subvert the principle. This was precisely the recommendation of the National Committee of State Education Ministers (Government of India, 1999), with the Minister for HRD, Government of India as the Chair, set up to design the approach to be adopted for achieving UEE in a mission mode. Referring to the problem of teacher shortages, the Committee, interestingly, chose not to go into the problem of vacancies not being filled by State Governments, even though at that point of time there were several thousands of unfilled posts of primary school teachers, across the country. Instead the Committee pointed out: "Lack of community control over teachers, teacher absenteeism and low teacher motivation is often cited as reasons for not recruiting new teachers but for only concentrating on reducing wastage and internal inefficiency of the educational system. Even after making allowance for enrolment in private unaided and unregistered private schools, the teacher shortages are very significant. It is on this account that the recruitment of para- teachers has to be considered a priority if all vacancies have to be filled up in shortest period of time. The issue of teacher/para-teacher recruitment has to be addressed by all states as the long-term implications are for the states." With this policy, what was adopted under DPEP only for EGS and AIE Centres became applicable to all schools. Reiterating the approach, the Approach Paper to 10th Five Year Plan (Government of India 2001) reiterated, "Steps would have to be initiated to fill up all the existing vacancies of the teachers in a time bound manner, with defined responsibility to local bodies and communities, and to remove legal impediments in the recruitment of para-teachers" (GOI, 1999: 22-23).

The consequence of this approach was devastating and long-lasting. Teacher recruitment by State Governments was further stalled and the number of vacant posts spiralled up from thousands to lakhs in some states. With the lure of cost-saving, para-teachers came to replace regular teachers. As funds from DPEP and SSA were made available for this purpose, supplement became substitution with para-teachers and contract teachers becoming the mainstay of the system in many places (Govinda and Josephine, 2004; GOI, 1998; and Dayaram, 2002). Shortage of teachers piled up and development of a cadre of professionally trained teachers got practically abandoned. In fact, many states are even now struggling to set right the damage caused. Lack of attention to and investment in teacher education has compounded the problem as most of the teacher training establishments have come to function under a commercial self-financing framework. The Performance Report by World Bank (World Bank, 2007) belatedly cautioned in 2007 that there was an urgent need for strategic thinking and decision-making concerning the deployment of "para-teachers," taking into consideration equity issues, cost-effectiveness, sustainability and its long term impact on the teaching profession. But many States had gone ahead appointing teachers on contract as a cost-saving measure and subjecting them to work under exploitative conditions of service. This was particularly reprehensible as the schools, which were targeted for employment of contract teachers, were invariably those where children from the poorer sections of the society studied. Thus, it exacerbated inequity in the society by creating classes of government schools with different kinds of teachers for different classes of population.

The net effect of this regressive policy and practice was that it permanently damaged the progress of building a professional community of teacher which is vital for achieving UEE with equity and quality. That the effect of this damage continues is evident from the fact that, saddled with multiple layers of a fractured teacher community, the Government has been unable to implement the RTE requirement of ensuring that professionally qualified teachers are available in every school in adequate numbers. In the story of UEE, this disruption in the process of creating a strong professional community of teachers stands out as a demonstration of how short-term economic gains and political expediency was allowed to cloud the vision for establishing an equitable system of quality elementary schooling in the country.

## IV Conclusion

The provision of free and compulsory education evoked enormous interest and discussion among the members framing the Constitution inside the Constituent Assembly as well as outside. Debates and discourses that surrounded the subject, in terms of its scope, implications as well as placement within the Constitution, clearly showed that the UEE project was never visualised as a smooth and simple affair. As we became independent, only one out of four children were enrolled in school; adult literacy rate was a dismal 18 per cent; not even one out of 10 women were literate; population was galloping, making it a virtual race between literacy growth and population growth; disparities in development across regions and social groups were glaring; there were contesting demands on meagre State resources; newly-formed State Governments were still coming to grips with issues of governance, undoing or replacing the legacies of colonial rule. Setting any timeline or target for UEE at the national level was indeed a highly risky proposition. That was the kind of task on which the country embarked upon when the Constitution was adopted, directing the State to ensure free and compulsory education for all children within a period of 10 years. The long journey since then has witnessed several policy shifts and development initiatives in designing and implementing UEE programmes, both at national and state levels.

While reflecting on the seven decade long, yet unfinished, journey of UEE, it is pertinent to recall some of the major milestone events and periods that brought in new perspectives in the pursuit of UEE by redefining and enlarging both conceptual and operational aspects. The first major landmark was the Education Commission which, as the basis of NPE 1968, located elementary education within a common structure of school and university education. This helped viewing the task of UEE in a larger systemic perspective interlinked with secondary and higher education. The Commission also emphasised the need for setting distance and population norms while establishing schooling facilities. The Education Commission would also be remembered for another strand introduced in UEE, viz. part-time primary education of one year for 9-14 age-group out-of-school working children, especially girls. A sequel to this idea was the emergence of NFE, initially as a complementary measure with built-in parity with formal regular primary schools during the 1970s and 80s, and, later, as a parallel to it in the 1990s.

Around two decades after the Education Commission, came NPE 1986, which laid the foundation for more direct and increased involvement of Central Government in elementary education, even though small-scale central and centrally sponsored schemes had been initiated in the earlier FYPs, following the Constitutional amendment, making school education a Concurrent subject. The one common theme running across the UEE

narratives beginning with the Education Commission was the multi-layered disparities and the planners' ordeal to tackle it. Manifested in re-definition and revision of the timeframe in respect of UEE between the 1960s and the '80s, it included wastage and stagnation in primary and upper primary stages, the gap between educationally advanced and backward States as well as girls and children of weaker sections like SC/ST and minorities. Shifting the emphasis from enrolment to retention, participation and successful completion with assured levels of learning, NPE put forth a four-dimensional definition of UEE, covering access, enrolment, retention and achievement. This enlarged definition and recognition of more complex and intricate layers of inequities in respect of out-of-school children, such as agricultural labour, migrant families, etc. added a sharper edge to the notion of UEE and its finer connotations occupying the centrestage of FYPs' focus during Seventh-Eighth Plans. An important fall-out of this new definition was the specification of basic competencies to be acquired by every child as s/he progressed through primary and upper primary grades under the banner of Minimum Levels of Learning. This was, indeed, a major step of moving from mere quantitative targets of enrolment to quality of education to be provided under UEE.

Implementation of NPE 1986 initiatives for UEE in the form of major Central government programmes made an impressive beginning but faced serious disruption with the launch of DPEP, a programme that came with structural adjustment policies and acceptance of external funding, including a loan from the World Bank. Fragmented approach to dealing with UEE, with focus only on five years of schooling, and a fractured framework, dividing the country vertically as DPEP and non-DPEP districts, distorted the national perspective as well as the role of State Governments in moving towards the goal of UEE. In sum, the combined effect of the compulsions of structural adjustment policies, coupled with the trappings of external financing and the lure of saving public expenditure through cost-saving measures in teacher recruitment and school infrastructure, was too deep and damaging that the country is still struggling to come to terms with it. It would not be wrong to say that 1990s turned out to be a decade of serious disruptions in the national perspective, policies and programmes of UEE.

With the launch of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) in 2001, national targets, timelines, strategies and programmes returned to the planning table. In a way, SSA marked the revival and reconstruction of the national perspective as it stitched together a national programme encompassing the whole country and subsuming all national initiatives related to UEE under an umbrella Centrally Sponsored Scheme. SSA also took forward the steps initiated after NPE 1986 for increased involvement of Central Government in UEE. In fact, as SSA grew in size and coverage and, in particular, with SSA being declared as the main instrumentality for implementing the RTE, UEE has largely become a Central subject complete with programme and financing norms in great detail, leaving only implementation management to the State Governments. However, unfortunately, SSA took shape under the shadow of the previous decade, adopting many of the same ill-conceived strategies. Despite heightened public consciousness and increased civil society involvement, SSA seemed to be struggling to regain people's trust in the public system of education. This, at least in part, has led to the unprecedented growth of private self-financing schools and apparent migration of children from Government to private schools. The resulting impact has been the deepening as well as widening of inequity across the system within both public and private initiatives, thereby seriously

denting the progress of universal free and compulsory education as mandated by the Constitution.

The RTE Act, which became operational in early part of 2010 and which gave effect to the 86<sup>th</sup> Constitutional amendment, ushered in a radically different policy perspective by viewing elementary education as the Fundamental Right of every child in the age group 6 to 14. The legislation effectively codified the prevalent specification under UEE as the entitlement of every child. By specifying five years as the ultimate outer time limit for ensuring that all children begin receiving the entitlement delineated, the Act purported to put an end to the exercise of setting targets and timelines. By bringing private schools to participate in the provision of free and compulsory education, the Act created an opportunity for addressing the issue of increasing inequity without disturbing the prevalent equilibrium.

The expectation was that with the change in the Constitutional position of UEE from Directive Principle to Fundamental Right, the goal of UEE would be pursued with a sense of urgency to complete the tasks within the limited timeframe indicated in the Act. But that time limit has already passed. Unfortunately, the debates and discourses that followed the promulgation of the Act has shifted the focus from the core mandate of achieving UEE within a timeframe to addressing the problems of implementing selected sections of the law, such as no detention policy and admission of EWS children in private schools. Thus, the UEE duel continues, with RTE taking ownership of addressing the out-of-school difficult-to-reach groups as well as addressing discriminatory learning environment within the school. But the saga of missed targets and unkept promises continues with the incredibly slow and indifferent process of addressing the educational needs of those in the backward areas, as well as children of the weaker sections.

During the previous decades, FYP preparation had become the occasion for systematic assessment of the extent of achievement in the UEE endeavour. But, with the abandonment of the FYP process, there has been no comprehensive evaluation of the progress made during the last seven years since the RTE became operative. The three-year action plan (Government of India, 2017), brought out by the NITI Aayog, widely considered as successor institution to Planning Commission, makes no reference to the unfinished task of UEE. There is no reference even to covering the residual numbers as mentioned in the 12<sup>th</sup> FY Plan. The tone and tenor of its reference to UEE seem to imply that enough has been done to bring all children into the fold of schooling and now we have only to focus on quality and learning. Unfortunately, the number of children still outside the ambit of schooling, according to Census 2011, is as large as 20 million, constituting 10 per cent of the school-going age population. This has created an illusory feeling of achieving UEE, and the issue of bringing all children in the age group into the folds of elementary education has almost disappeared from all contemporary discourses on school education.

In conclusion, one has to concede that the country has, undoubtedly, come a long way in the last 70 years in the provision of universal compulsory education as directed by the Constitution. It would not be wrong to state that the goal is not far away; but it is not close enough yet to relax or even set a definitive timeline. Problems of UEE have not significantly changed—non-enrolment in school, dropping out without completing elementary cycle, poor levels of learning even after completing elementary schooling. The magnitude in quantitative terms has, of course, changed. Only around six lakh

children never get enrolled in any school. It is estimated that around 15 to 20 per cent children drop out without completing eight years of schooling, signalling a steep decline in recent years. In numbers, this is around three to four crores, even though there is no accurate assessment of the number. Measurement of learning outcomes on a national scale, which began only in recent years, shows that the problem is huge and complex.

There have been many challenges that the UEE journey has encountered, the most critical one being the fast increase in population squaring off with the progress made in creating facilities and enrolling children in schools. But the demographic changes in recent years have raised a sense of optimism. While the pressure on school places is relenting, the missteps taken in this long journey, stretching over several decades, has given rise to several problems besides new ones emerging due to the fast pace of change in technology and in the world of learning. Two of these issues that need immediate attention if UEE has to become a reality are the increasing inequality and unfairness within the system, and loss of trust in the public system due to deteriorating quality of educational outcomes. One would hope that the UEE goal gets more intense and consistent attention, building on the measures taken in recent years to consolidate the gains made in creating school infrastructure, improving school functioning and enhancing learning outcomes.



# Annexure 1

## Sargent Committee (1944)

Estimated Cost of a System of Universal Basic (Primary and Middle) Education for British India when in Full Operation

Schools	Age Range	Estimated No., of pupils (lakhs)@	No., of teachers required#	Average salary per teacher p.m.\$	Total salary bill per annum (lakhs)%	Other Expenditure (Lakhs)^	Total gross cost per annum (Lakhs)	Cost per pupil per annum
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Lower Basic (Primary)	6-11	360	12,00,000	Rs. 42.5	Rs. 80.00	Rs. 34.29	Rs. 114.29	Rs. 31.84
Senior Basic (Middle)	11-14	156	6,00,000	61.55	60.55	25.95	86.50	55.31

Source: Bureau of Education (1944). *Post/War Educational Development in India: Report by the Central Advisory Board of Education*, p. 10.

@ The estimate is based on Public Health Commissioner's Report, 1940. Of the 11-14 age-group, four-fifth are shown in senior basic (middle) schools.

#1 teacher to 30 pupils in junior Basic (primary) schools and one to 25 in senior Basic (middle) schools.

\$ Average salary on the basic scales in accordance with Government's actuarial calculation.

%Additions have been made for head teachers, higher scales in urban areas, house allowances, Government contribution to pension or provident funds, etc. Teachers' salaries are taken as accounting for 70% of the total gross cost.

^This includes (a) loan charges, 5 % of total cost, (b) special services, including school medical service special schools, etc., 10%, (c) administration, 5%, (d) books, stationery, apparatus and equipment, maintenance and report of buildings and furniture and miscellaneous charges, 10%. Other expenditure is taken as a counting for 30% of the total gross cost.

## Annexure 2

### Five Year Plans—Actual Years

<i>Five Year Plan</i>	<i>Years</i>
First Plan	1951-56
Second Plan	1956-61
Third Plan	1961-66
Third Annual Plans	1966-69
Fourth Plan	1969-74
Fifth Plan	1974-79
Draft VI Plan	1978-83
Rolling Plan	1978-80
Sixth Plan	1980-85
Seventh Plan	1985-90
Annual Plans	1990-91 to 1991-92
Eighth Plan	1992-97
Ninth Plan	1997-2002
Tenth Plan	2002-07
Eleventh Plan	2007-12
Twelfth Plan	2012-17

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Through the last seven decades, specific targets and timeframes were set several times to reach the goal of providing basic education for all. In this long effort, elementary education was elevated from being part of the Directive Principles to the status of a Fundamental Right in the Indian Constitution making the State responsible for ensuring that every child in the age group of 6 to 14 gets education. But has the Right become a reality on the ground? The paper attempts to analytically capture the continuing story of distractions and disruptions that have characterised India's efforts to universalise elementary education.



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