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Nature and scope of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) scheme in India: a critical analysis

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Abstract

Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) is a centrally sponsored integrated flagship scheme launched by the Central government of India in the year 2001-2002. The main thrust of SSA is on universalization of elementary education, community participation, decentralized planning and better quality of education. It covers the entire country in a mission mode and provides useful and relevant, elementary education to all children in the age group of 6 to 14 years including life skills. The objectives of the scheme are to enrol of all children in school, and retention of all children till the upper primary stage by 2010, bridging of gender and social category gaps in enrolment, retention and learning and ensuring that there is significant enhancement in the learning achievement levels of children at the primary and upper primary stages. The paper critically analyses the nature and scope of SSA scheme in India in the light of objectives and on the basis of data available.

Keywords: Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) Scheme, Critical analysis, Nature, Scope, Enrolment, Retention, Gender gap, India

1. Introduction

Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) is a comprehensive and integrated flagship programme of the Government of India (GoI), to attain Universal Elementary Education (UEE) in the country in a mission mode. Launched in partnership with the State Governments, SSA aims to provide useful and relevant education to all children in the age group of 6-14 years by 2010. The four SSA Goals are as follows¹:

- i. Enrolment of all children in school, Education Guarantee Centre, Alternate school, 'Back-to-School' camp by 2005.
- ii. Retention of all children till the upper primary stage by 2010.
- iii. Bridging of gender and social category gaps in enrolment, retention and learning.
- iv. Ensuring that there is significant enhancement in the learning achievement levels of children at the primary and upper primary stages.

SSA has effectively enabled to system of elementary education to expand itself by the recruitment of a massive number of teachers across the country. It has also reinforced the culture of in-service

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training as a professional need. The Mission reviewed the progress made in the context of recruitment, deployment and training of teachers, and noted that PTR in most districts in the country has improved. The tendency to hire non-career-path teachers has declined, with the exception of Bihar which has had to replenish its teacher workforce at a great speed, and Madhya Pradesh which has decided to keep its older cadre of career-path teachers closed. In the context of pre-service training, SSA faces several systemic problems, including the limited capacity of DIETs and the poor quality of private providers whose number has multiplied over the recent years. Stage-specific training which might address eight years of elementary education also remains an unaddressed issue, there being just one programme, namely the B. El. Ed., in this category. SSA components being undertaken by SCERT and DIETS need to be reinforced with academic support from universities and reputed NGOs.²

2. Progress towards the achievement of ssa goals

2.1. All children in school

Table 1 shows impressive, steady progress in this regard over the last four years, at both primary and upper primary levels. This section reviews information provided through DISE Flash Statistics 2008-09, and State-level household surveys conducted by teachers and VECs. Since 2002-03, 148,492 new primary schools and 133,277 new upper primary schools have been opened, and approximately 800,000 additional classrooms have been built, significantly expanding access to the elementary level. That said, the results of the independent household survey of out of school children were not available to the Mission, as data are still being analyzed. The mission recommends that the survey analysis be completed and shared as soon as possible. In addition, a meeting of key stakeholders could be held to analyze the results of the survey and draw key lessons for informing 2010-11 AWP & Bs³ (Annual work plan & Budget)

Table 1: Access and enrolment 2005-06

	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09
Primary Enrolment	125 million	132 million	134 million	134 million
Upper Primary Enrolment	43.7 million	47.5 million	50.9 million	52.3 million
Elementary Enrolment	168.7 million	179.5 million	184.9 million	186.3 million
GER Primary	104	111	114	113
NER Primary	84.5	92.8	95.9	97.0
GER Upper Primary	59	64.7	69.9	71.6
NER Upper Primary	43	48.4	52.6	54.5
Out of School Children+	7 million	7.6 million	4.5 million	2.8 million

Source: DISE Flash Statistics 2008-09

Growth in primary enrolment has slowed, which is to be expected as the number of out of school children drops, the primary NER nears 100 percent, the growth of unrecognized private school enrolments (not fully captured by DISE) continues, and the total number of children of age to enter Class 1 begins to decline. Meanwhile, the primary GER remains quite high (113), which indicates a

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large number of over-age children due to late enrolment or repetition. These children are more vulnerable to dropout. Interestingly, preliminary DISE 2008-09 Statistics actually show a decline in Government primary school enrolment, from 101.2 million to 97.9 million (this does not include approximately 1.5 million Government primary school students in Haryana). In addition, there is an issue of the plausibility of the out of school children figure reported in Table 1; DISE 2008-09 statistics regarding enrolments, dropout and survival to Class V suggest a far great number of children remain out of school. For example, calculations by the Mission,, which use the (yet to be fully confirmed) overall class-wise dropout rates reported in the recently completed Dropout Study and class wise enrolment data reported in DISE 2008-09, suggest that 2.7 million children drop out of school each year, which would indicate a much higher number of out of school children overall, once the never-enrolled children are included. GOI informed the Mission that the annual average drop-out rates derived from DISE consider only schools common to the last two years, whereas the drop-out study has tracked all school leavers during the year (recorded on the school register) and identified from the household whether the children are currently enrolled elsewhere or not and, if relevant, the reasons for dropping out. It also informed the Mission that since DISE does not cover un-recognized schools, EGS or AIE centres by and large and the data is for a different period, technically the two sources are not equivalent. New schools may also need to be considered.⁴

While very significant progress continues to be made at the upper primary level, much remains to be done. In just four years, from 2005-06 to 2008-09, GER and NER have gone up by more than 10 percentage points, a truly remarkable achievement for a country the size of India. There is, of course, huge variation at the State level, with some States (e.g. Tamil Nadu and Himachal Pradesh) reporting upper primary GERs above 100 and others (e.g. Bihar and Uttar Pradesh) reporting upper primary GERs of around 50. The ratio of primary to upper primary schools/sections has steadily improved (i.e. declined), from 2.45 to 1 in 2006-07 to 2.32 to 1 in 2007-08, thus approaching the target of 2 to 1, but some States such as West Bengal, Arunachal Pradesh, Bihar and Sikkim still have ratios above 3 to 1, and 11 States still have ratios over 2.5 to 1. Furthermore, even taking into account the large numbers of over-age children in primary school (reflected by the primary GER of 113), both the GER and NER for upper primary indicate very large numbers of children are dropping out of school before finishing Class 8. The Mission's own calculation of the Primary Completion Rate is 83.6 percent, while for Upper Primary it is just 47 percent for 2007-08. Of the 20 States where the terminal grade of upper primary schooling was Class VII, 9 of them are yet to decide on the policy to integrate Class VIII into the elementary level. In many respects, the upper primary level remains the unfinished access agenda for SSA and should continue to receive the highest attention. As the system moves towards universal transition from primary to upper primary, there needs to be proportionate numbers of upper primary classrooms per grade as in primary.⁵

According to MHRD's latest report on the number of out of school children (2.8 million), slightly less than 50 percent of these children were never enrolled in school and slightly more than 50 percent are dropouts. Boys and girls are equally represented among this group of OOSC. 25 percent of these OOSC are Scheduled Caste children (although they make up 20 percent of the overall child population 6-14), and this represents 1.7 percent of all SC children aged 6-14. 20 percent are Scheduled Tribe children (although they make up 10 percent of the child population); they account for 2.6 percent of ST children aged 6-14. 23 percent are Muslim (although they make up 13 percent of the population aged 6-14), which represents 2.4 percent of all Muslim children aged 6-14. It is clear that these social groups continue to need special focus to reduce their disproportionately high

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representation among OOSC. Indeed, the Mission notes that in 2008-09 there has been targeted provisioning of school infrastructure, teachers and overall financial outlays in those districts with high concentrations of SC, ST and Muslim children, which is encouraging. In terms of geographical focus, MHRD reports that the number of districts with more than 50,000 OOSC has declined from 48 in 2005 to just 1 in 2009, and the number of districts with more than 20,000 OOSC has decreased from 55 in 2005 to 24 in 2009, with most of those in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Orissa. The Mission notes that the 2009-2010 AWP & B (Annual work plan & Budget) for these States include continued focus on these remaining districts with relatively high numbers of OOSC.⁶

Adequate school infrastructure is a pre-requisite for access and quality. As per the data available from the MHRD, the cumulative progress of civil works since programme inception till 31st March 2009 is noteworthy. This is summarized as follows:

Table 2: Cumulative progress of civil works

Civil works Activity head	Primary school	Upper primary school	Additional classrooms	Drinking water facility	Toilets
Absolute numbers targeted	156,159	92,305	978,738	189,729	263,899
Absolute numbers completed	120,421	72,589	799,574	177,982	242,891
Absolute numbers in progress and to be made, with respect to targets	35,738	19,716	179,164	11,747	21,008
Percent complete	77 percent	79 percent	82 percent	94 percent	92 percent
Percent complete and in progress	94 percent	95 percent	98 percent	96 percent	97 percent

Source: DISE 2008-09, Flash Statistics

Hence, while in case of primary schools, upper primary schools and additional classrooms there are States which may have completed their targets to nearly 100 percent, the overall national average is about 84 percent. Drinking water facility is provided in 94 percent of schools, and toilets are in 92 percent of schools (as on 31st March 2009, data source TSG, MHRD). From the access perspective, it is important to note that 76 percent classrooms present are in good condition, while only 6 percent need major repair (DISE 2008-09, Flash Statistics).

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However, the major backlog of physical progress in the case of Additional Classrooms, Primary and Upper primary schools is presently seen in case of following States (arranged alphabetically. Only significant ones are mentioned):

Table 3: Status of additional classrooms

S. No.	State	Additional classrooms target	Additional classrooms completed	Additional classrooms completed (percent)
1	Andhra Pradesh	44,696	34,335	77 percent
2	Bihar	120,620	72,027	60 percent
3	Chhattisgarh	22,139	12,213	60 percent
4	Goa	227	33	15 percent
5	Jammu & Kashmir	5,572	4,380	79 percent
6	MP	66,200	41,622	63 percent
7	Manipur	1,312	886	68 percent
8	Meghalaya	2,634	1,691	64 percent
9	Nagaland	3,202	2,672	80 percent
10	Orissa	36,610	25,986	71 percent
11	Uttarakhand	5,885	4,237	72 percent
12	Andaman & Nicobar	143	56	39 percent
13	Dadra & Nagar Haveli	301	96	32 percent
14	Delhi	1,238	1,063	86 percent

Source: TSG, MHRD. March 2009.

Table 4: Status of primary schools

State	Primary schools target	Primary schools completed	Primary schools completed (percent)
Arunachal Pradesh	941	806	86 percent
Bihar	17466	3735	21 percent
Chhattisgarh	10050	7120	71 percent
Haryana	902	788	87 percent
J&K	8204	4075	50 percent
Jharkhand	17842	14084	79 percent
Kerala	511	305	60 percent
Maharashtra	10497	6427	61 percent
Meghalaya	1495	981	66 percent
Orissa	7568	4073	54 percent
Punjab	545	405	74 percent
Tripura	1094	976	89 percent
Uttarakhand	2406	1592	66 percent

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West Bengal	4124	3620	88 percent
Chandigarh	14	7	50 percent
Dadra Nagar Haveli	58	10	17 percent
Delhi	10	6	60 percent

Source: TSG, MHRD. March 2009.

Table 5: Status of upper primary schools

State	Upper primary schools target	upper primary schools completed	Upper primary schools completed (percent)
Bihar	544	474	87 percent
Haryana	1151	791	69 percent
Jammu & Kashmir	1119	591	53 percent
Jharkhand	8175	2339	29 percent
MP	16323	11718	72 percent
Meghalaya	1261	306	24 percent
Nagaland	80	57	71 percent
Tamil Nadu	4644	2707	58 percent
Uttarakhand	1974	1117	57 percent
West Bengal	3300	446	14 percent

Source: TSG, MHRD. March 2009.

A closer analysis of these States reveals that they may have insufficient supervision structure or weak capacity to implement a programme at the scale of SSA. It is important to note here that Student Classroom Ratio (SCR) is also among the highest in some of the following States due to gap in infrastructure (Source DISE 2008-09, Flash Statistics):

Table 6: Student classroom ratio

State	Percent of schools with SCR > = 60
Assam	21 percent
Bihar	54 percent
Chhattisgarh	6 percent
Jharkhand	23 percent
Chandigarh	14 percent
Uttar Pradesh	19 percent
West Bengal	18 percent

Source: DISE 2008-09, Flash Statistics

3. Bridging gender and social gaps

There are around 89 million girls currently attending elementary schools (64 million in primary and 25 million in upper primary grades) compared to 96 million boys. Girls now constitute 48.4 percent of

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primary enrolment and 47.6 percent of the upper primary enrolments). This is more than their share in 6-14 year population (47.1 percent) as per the household survey conducted under SSA. As observed in the previous JRM Aide Memoire, this could be due either to large numbers of overage girls attending schools or due to under enumeration of girls in the household survey. The mission noted that nationally, gender parity in gross enrolment rates in government schools was reported. The gender parity index has shown improvements from 0.90 at primary in 2005 to 0.94 in 2009 while at upper primary; the GPI has improved from 0.84 to 0.91 during the same period. However the Mission also notes from the PROBE presentation that there has been an increasing proportion of enrolment in private schools and this has implications for gender and social inclusiveness and has related quality dimensions. The fact that girls still constitute half of the out of school children (OOSC) – three percentage points more than their share in the population – is a pointer to the still existing gaps in gender wise provision of education. The focus on 44 districts with high gender gaps has facilitated targeting available resources to these districts. With the recruitment of around 27000 female teachers, 74 percent schools now have at least one female teacher. The construction of more than 43000 girls' toilets is another facilitating factor. The provision of free text books under has benefited more than 50 million girls every year. Efforts need to focus on boys in gender sensitization programmes so that they become aware of gender discrimination.⁷

Two notable interventions to improve girls' education have been the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBV) and National Program for Education of Girls at Elementary Level (NPEGEL).

4. KGBV

The importance of the KGBV Scheme in addressing the educational needs of girls from marginalized communities was underscored during this JRM as well. As of June 30, 2009, a total number of 188582 girls have been reached through this scheme. The community wise break-up of enrolled girls was as follows: SC (27 percent); ST (29 percent); OBC (26 percent); Muslims (7 percent); BPL (10 percent). The Mission commends the Scheme for improving its reach to Muslim girls. Of the 94 KGBVs opened in towns all are in Muslim concentrated areas. The Mission recommends greater emphasis on providing academic, monitoring and other support to these KGBVs as well as understanding classroom processes, and that the learning generated be systematically consolidated and shared.⁸

5. NPEGEL

The NPEGEL programme as of June 30, 2009 has met its proposed targets with respect to coverage - 423 districts, 3261 blocks, 40429 cluster (rural), 1098 urban clusters, 40386 model cluster schools (with an enrolment of approximately 20974470 girls). The Mission notes that NPEGEL by ensuring targeted resources over a number of years has contributed to the significant progress in the area of girls' education. As with other components, the Mission is concerned about the quality of these strategies, their context specificity and appropriateness. The Monitoring Institutions (MI) reports suggest that the implementation of the scheme is uneven in some States especially in relation to non-residential bridge courses (NRBCs). These States should be identified and necessary steps taken to improve quality. The reports also suggest that a certain amount of routine may have set in and activities need to go beyond the standardized list of indicative activities. Activities undertaken should not be seen as ends in themselves but part as of a coherent, cohesive strategy that has a lasting impact on the quality of girls' education. As mentioned by MS a positive aspect of the scheme is the flexibility and space it provides for local planning and should be used to its full potential.⁹

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A positive aspect of the scheme is the provision of resources for gender training. As many as 203178 teachers availed of this provision in 2009-2010 across several States. Urgent efforts should be made to ensure that gender concerns are not perceived as add-ons and there is a serious engagement within pedagogy, curriculum, disciplinary or subject knowledge from a gender perspective. Such concerns have been raised by NCF 2005 as well and needs to be worked on. Institutionalisation of gender issues within the regular pre and in service training must be ensured. The Mission recommends a systematic and rigorous review of NPEGEL, which will include a review of the trainings modules and other materials generated and documentation of good practices by appropriate organisations and experts. The capacities of the gender coordinators need to be strengthened. For this, a needs assessment should be conducted and skills upgraded accordingly. Another concrete step would be to make the content of the NCF Gender Focus Paper more accessible for teachers. Physical progress of infrastructure provisioning for NPEGEL needs attention. The cumulative targets were: additional classroom - 72 percent completed, toilet provisions - 74 percent completed, drinking water - 67 percent completed. This current physical progress needs to be reviewed and accelerated¹¹

6. School infrastructure and quality

It may be noted here that the focus of civil works under SSA was so far on fulfilling the infrastructure gaps. There has been focus on quality of supervision and construction, designing for safety of schools, equipping schools for seismic and other hazards. With focus on quality of education, it is now important to focus on the quality dimension of the spaces being developed under SSA from perspective of pedagogy and child friendliness. The Mission went through documentation of range of material developed under SSA at TSG and States on designs for Urban schools in AP, Maharashtra, Child friendly elements in Jharkhand, West Bengal, BaLA in Gujarat and Delhi, portable design using prefab bamboo structures in Arunachal Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh, Bamboo based designs in Mizoram, timber based designs in J&K, barrier free environment in Kerala, use of concrete and compressed blocks in Uttarakhand, Retrofitting of existing buildings in Gujarat, etc. While a diversity of state-specific interventions are visible from the data, it may need to be developed keeping in mind the pedagogical needs for diversity of situations - single teacher schools, multi-grade, gender-specific, CWSN, etc. The design briefs should be able to capture seating arrangements, storage and display arrangements, provision of learning elements, climatic comfort in different seasons, provision for expansion (e.g. a school may be upgraded from PS to UPS) or up-gradation (e.g. a school may like to move from floor based seating to furniture based seating, or school may be in a transitory phase to move from a single teacher school to more teachers). Such brief should be prepared in consultation with various stakeholders. There can be a generic pool of guiding elements of brief (a kind of a checklist) which the stakeholders can review while generating briefs for construction agencies. States in the North East need special attention on this, since the geo-climatic issues compounded with remoteness create a complexity of a special kind. Design of classrooms especially that of grades I and II also need special attention here since these are the most important formative years in child's education, where the transition from home to school environment takes place.¹² The unique physiological and psychological needs of this age must be addressed in the design of the classrooms. Significance of good natural light and ventilation with a range of design solutions should be explored to cater to variety of situations that exist across the schools. Reading corners in classrooms should be developed.

7. Conclusions

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Education is one of the most powerful instruments in shaping the human race. Education is the only answer to all our socio-economic problems. Several global organizations and nations have been emphasizing the need for universalization of primary education. In the world education conference held at Jomtien (1990), access to education was declared as a human right. The economics Nobel laureate Prof. Amartya Sen has also pointed out that for sustainable development, even the poorest of poor should be provided proper education. Accordingly, steps have to be taken to bring primary education to the doorstep of the rural people since more than 75 percent of Indians live in rural areas. There is an imperative need to change the education pattern to achieve universal primary education in India. Even after 60 years of independence India is facing obstacles in providing education for all. Thus, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan is premier program of the Govt. of India launched in 2001 to achieve the cherished goal of universalization of elementary education, a Fundamental Right.

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