Enrolment Projections in School Education in India: Has it become the History?
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In the early 1980s, the focus of plan formulation for school education in India was on scenario building and enrolment projections. It was a practice to formulate both the annual as well as five-year plans under the aegis of the Planning Commission which was later abandoned in 2014 when the same was replaced by the NITI Aayog which was also the end of formulating Five Year Plans; 12th Five Year Plan (2012 to 2017) was the last under which Elementary Education Plan was lastly formulated. The approved plans were used to be treated seriously for which strategies were used to be adapted to implement the same. Pre-appraisal of plans with the Planning Commission Officers and state-level teams used to have intense discussion many times the same was used to be attended by state Chief Ministers. But still, at that time only state-specific plans used to be formulated and there was no emphasis on district-specific educational plans mainly because data below the state level was not generally available. Even educational data at the state level used to have had a time-lag of 7 to 8 years; thus indicating that the year 2000 annual plans were formulated based on data of 1993/94; thus plans were based on outdated data because of which enrolment projections and scenario building used to be in the focus. Renowned researchers, like Prof. M. K. Premi, Dr. A. B. L. Srivastava, Prof. Braham Prakash, etc, at that time, attempted enrolment projections but most of these exercises were still confined only to the state level. The work of these researchers was later carried forward by researchers at NIEPA, New Delhi which includes Arun C Mehta. In addition, the Education Policy and Data Centre and Educational Survey Department of NCERT, New Delhi (Vishal D Pajankar and Sridhar Srivastava, 2019) also recently attempted enrolment projections and. methodology development.

Before the launch of the nationwide World Bank assisted District Primary Education Project (DPEP) in 1994-95; states have had the experience of UNICEF assisted Bihar Education Project (BEP), SIDA assisted Lok Jumbish Project, IDA assisted Basic Education Project in Uttar Pradesh, ODA assisted Andhra Pradesh Primary Education Project, SIDA assisted Shiksha Karmi Project and Dutch assisted Mahila Samkhya programmes. Bihar Education Project was one of the early programmes which had provision of disaggregated target setting and enrolment projections with the emphasis on strengthening of EMIS in its district plans in seven-phase one

districts. It was the DPEP that again emphasized disaggregated target setting in its district plan formulation The genesis of DPEP was the above mentioned state-specific experiments which had the following objectives: i) to provide access to all children to primary education; ii) to reduce overall dropouts at the primary level; iii) to increase achievement levels, and iv) to reduce disparities of all types. DPEP was the first mega programme launched as a centrally sponsored scheme that could reach 272 districts spread over 18 states which had the focus on (i) Local area planning; (ii) Greater rigour and infusion of professional inputs in planning and appraisal (iii) More focussed targeting in the selected districts, and (iv) More focussed coverage on primary stage with stress on education for girls and socially disadvantaged groups.

The whole exercise of district plan formulation under the DPEP was rigorous which had an emphasis on data analysis, projection of enrolment, and construction of indicators at the disaggregated levels and its implications for universalisation of primary education for which several capacity building programmes were conducted by the national level institutions across the country which were reflected in the district plans formulated later. It was mandatory to have set the target on enrolment ratio, retention rate as well as dropout rate for which intensive enrolment projections were mandatory which was part of the district plans. In the process of target setting, district planning teams come across a set of indicators that were never used before at that level. Special planning modules including one on enrolment and population projections were developed. Incidentally, even though many nation-wide programmes were initiated later but neither new planning modules were developed nor the existing modules were modified to meet the requirement of these programmes. During the target setting exercise through the enrolment projections, both the state as well district planning teams come across indicators, such as intake or admission rate, grade-to-grade dropout, promotion and repetition rate, grade ratio, enrolment-based indicators, and a host of other indicators. DPEP was discontinued in the year 2000 before it could fully achieve its objectives. Following an article by Arun C Mehta on enrolment projections at the national level, the World Bank initiated a project on state-specific enrolment projections perhaps that was the last of such exercise which were not seen even the country had many unfinished tasks and had launched many more mega programmes, such as Sarva Shiksha Abhuvan & RMSA programmes. One of the other important benefits of DPEP was that it initiated the strengthening of EMIS in DPEP districts and states which was later become the basis of launching DISE. Nobody thought DISE would later attain such levels. With almost the

same objectives but extended to the entire elementary level of education and across the country, another nationwide programme in the name of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan was launched as a centrally sponsored scheme in 2000-01 which also initially had provision for disaggregated target-setting but couldn't maintain the legacy which it had inherited from the DPEP programme with the following objectives: (i) All children in school by 2003; (ii) All children complete five years of primary schooling by 2007; (iii) All children complete eight years of schooling by 2010; (iv) Focus on elementary education of satisfactory quality; (v) Bridge all gender and social category gaps at primary stage by 2007 and at elementary education level by 2010; and (vi) Universal retention by 2010.

Except during the initial period of SSA that too only in a few selected districts, the tempo of formulating district plans in a decentralized model with emphasis on target setting and enrolment projections couldn't be maintained. In the later period of SSA, it lost its focus and the whole exercise becomes more or less a monotonic exercise. During the later years, district plans used to develop even at the state level thus losing the focus in toto. Even after almost two decades of SSA, nobody knows how much of the SSA objectives have been achieved and what is the extent of the unfinished task. One of the significant achievements of SSA was a significant improvement in EMIS through the DISE/UDISE which has completely eradicated time-lag in the availability of educational statistics across the country and liberalization of educational data which was made available to users in a hassle-free manner at all disaggregated levels, such as from school to cluster, block, district as well as at the state and the national level. What is more, than that the state and the district's plans started developing by using the current years' data in formulating plans but the same has had no rigor for intensive data analysis and target setting? Not a single district and state could attempt target setting and enrolment projections in the later years of SSA. Enacting the Right of Education in 2009 was another important activity that took place during the SSA period because of which the emphasis on target setting on certain parameters further completely derailed. To tackle out-of-school children, the RTE Act advocates identification of the same and provides them special training duration of which vary from 3 months to two years and then make them sit in the age-appropriate grade because of which target setting in general and focus on enrolment projections completely lost. Since then there is no target date to achieve the goal of school education in India, there are no targeted dropout, retention, and transition rates all of which are termed important if the goal of universalization is

to be attained. During the SSA, another important programme in the name of RMSA was launched in 2007-08 which had very limited scope for enrolment projections and target setting; hardly any state could have had seen undertaking projections exercise. The complete lack of focus on target setting continued till the end of SSA in 2018-19, the year in which both the SSA and RMSA were merged into one programme, i.e. Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan guidelines of which even do not mention target setting. No significant methodology change has been observed in Samgara Shiksha from the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan apart addition of a few new components, such as pre-school education because of NEP 2020. Plans are still being formulated based on a set of EXCEL Sheets where there is no scope for target setting and enrolment projections.

Even after three complete years of Samagra Shiksha, the framework for the implementation scheme for school education is still in draft form. A cursory look at the document however reveals that under the results framework document for planning and monitoring outcomes of the Samagra Shiksha, baseline (2016-17) as well cumulative target values for three years, namely 2017-18, 2018-19, and 2019-20 were supposed to be provided under the Project Development Objective on a host of parameters including enrolment, GER/NER, and transition rate separately in case of elementary and secondary & higher education levels without details as to how these values will arrive and what methodology is to be adapted for the same. One gets the impression that the previously used results framework of SSA and RMSA have been too adapted in Samagra Shiksha. It would be of interest to know how many states have been imparted training to fix these values and what is the outcome of the values fixed in terms of achievement as the first two years of the implementation have already been over.

It may be further observed that school enrolment has declined significantly in the recent past which is truer for elementary level of education which had shown a decline of 6.82 million (primary, 5.2 million) during the years 2015-16 to 2016-17 majority of which was experienced in the states of Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal. Further, the Bihar government admitted in the state assembly that the enrolment of students in the government and government-aided schools had declined by 4 million in 2018-19 compared to 2014-15 (HT March 2, 2021). The Economic Survey 2018-19 placed in the parliament stated that a significant decline in enrolment in elementary schools over the next two decades and advised states to merge schools than build up new ones. UNESCO recently released a projection

covering 180 countries, estimating that 24 million children may not return to education in 2020 due to the pandemic including India (MINT August 2020). Significant decline in enrolment reiterated the importance of target setting and significance of enrolment projections in plan formulation in general and under Samagra Shiksha in particular. National level institutions, such as NIEPA must rejuvenate planning teams and initiate capacity-building programmes on plan formulation with emphasis on projections and target setting for both the district, as well as state planning teams.