

Will the new Bill improve education outcomes?

Business Standard / New Delhi July 29, 2009, 0:40 IST

Unless the Right to Education Bill focuses clearly on making teachers accountable and has independent measuring mechanisms, it is difficult to see how it will help.



Vimala Ramachandran

Director, Educational Resource Unit

'Once education is a right, along with other laws - like the RTI and laws against child labour - we will be able to fight for the rights of children'

This bill has come 62 years late! We should have called our schools 'the temples of modern India' and made sure every single child went to school right from 1947 onwards. But, what did we do? We talked about the importance of universal elementary education, but did precious little to make it happen. If China, Vietnam, Cuba and so many other countries in the region were able to make sure all children had access to school and that they went to school, why could India not do it?

Now, when the bill has been tabled in the Lok Sabha and passed in the Rajya Sabha — after so many hiccups since 2002 when the 86th Constitutional Amendment was first passed (but not notified) — there are sceptics who still question the need for this. There is no doubt that we need a legislation that can be challenged in court — so that this right, combined with the Right to Information and existing laws against child labour, can help us fight for the rights of children. To my mind, yes, we need this more than ever. But this right and the associated bill will be meaningless unless we work through the modalities.

If the right to education is to become a reality, then the government has to put in painstaking effort to make sure that a minimum non-negotiable standard is adhered to in both government and private schools. Central to the success of this endeavour are three enabling mechanisms. We need an independent academic standard-setting regime, one that is outside the direct political and administrative control of the ministry or its ancillary bodies. All schools — private, government and aided — need to come under it. Standards need to be set for learning outcomes and processes, pre-service teacher education and in-service training. Compliance should be monitored through independent research/audit on learning outcomes, management audit of schools and the supervisory/academic support institutions. Citizens need to be educated and involved in monitoring the quality of education that our children get — not only in government schools, but also in private schools of all shapes and sizes.

Given that government schools primarily cater to the poorest of the poor, the per-child investment should be enhanced to ensure that we provide a level playing field to children who attend these schools. Children in tribal areas or those living in remote areas or from socially-disadvantaged communities cannot be relegated to alternative schools or para-teachers. I hasten to add that privatisation is not a panacea, as argued by many proponents of the voucher system. We just have to make sure that the thousands of government schools turn the corner.

Bringing about change requires re-orientation of teachers, their grasp of subject knowledge and pedagogic practices, their attitude/behaviour towards the poor and marginalised groups. We have to provide educational opportunities, need-based training and a rigorous system to monitor their work in the classroom — this is central to creating and nurturing teachers who can then work with confidence, self-respect and autonomy.

Above all, sincere implementation of the right to education in letter and spirit needs courage to tackle issues at all levels. The government has to take on entrenched vested interests and free education from their clutches. Hard

decisions are called for and piecemeal and one-off formulas (like doing away with class 10 examinations) will just not do.

Parth J Shah

President, Centre for Civil Society

'The Bill believes that if you have buildings, education will happen automatically. There is little on making teachers accountable — that is the bane of our system'

The biggest problem with the Bill is that it focuses on inputs and not on education outcomes. Schedule 1 of the Bill talks of infrastructure requirements, the size of the class rooms, the number of class rooms, playgrounds and so on. Sure, it is not as detailed as, for instance, the Delhi Education Act, but all this is very much there. And now that it is in the Bill, you can be quite sure that when the Rules for the Bill get drafted, they will have all these aspects. There are different infrastructure requirements for classes I-V and different ones for classes VI-VIII. So, in a sense, despite the fact that the first draft was made seven years ago, there has been little improvement in terms of getting the Bill to focus on education outcomes. The premise of the bill is that once you have the infrastructure in place, the educational outcomes are guaranteed.

The Bill talks of the concept of School Management Committees and that's a good idea. But there isn't enough clarity on this. Half the members are to be women, and the rest are to be parents and appointed members. Who is going to appoint these members and, moreover, what are the various powers that these committees possess? Without a clear description of their powers, the committees will be just another group of people who has no power to deal with anything.

An earlier draft, ironically, had mentioned teachers' accountability — this one doesn't address that even remotely. So, how are we hoping to address the issue of outcomes when we know the problem with our education system is that of rampant absenteeism of teachers and, when they're there in schools, it is that of not teaching.

Another important issue is that of discrimination against private schools. Private schools are required to get recognition after fulfilling various infrastructure norms. But government schools are automatically recognised. So, a government school can function from a tent and still be recognised, but a private school has to have all the infrastructure to be recognised. We thought there was a plan to fix this even at the time when Arjun Singh was the education minister, but nothing has happened. And, within the category of government schools, a higher autonomy is enjoyed by elite schools such as Kendriya Vidyalayas.

You would have thought that with the government talking of Public Private Partnerships in almost every infrastructure area, the Bill would at least talk of some guidelines for handing over government schools to the private sector — for maybe a second shift in the afternoon, to start with — but there is nothing on this either. The Rules could have spelt out the details, but the Bill needed to at least talk of this. Since the Bill hasn't mentioned this, nor will the rules.

While evaluating the Education Bill, ask yourself this question: What has changed since the Bill got introduced? The answer is: Nothing. The same bureaucracy is in charge today, there is nothing on governance standards or on the use of independent assessments of learning outcomes. So, it is difficult to see just what the new bill hopes to achieve and how it plans to improve education outcomes in the country.

(As told to **Sunil Jain**)