

Wiping the slate clean

Reforming primary education requires fresh energy and a new law

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THE new government has before it a list of education agenda items that it must consider early in its tenure to make a substantial difference. Many of these were on the agenda in the last term too but they remained unfinished or unattended because there was no will to drive the required changes.

The first and probably the most important matter of political will is the Right to Education Bill. A Bill was first drafted under the NDA, which the UPA government trashed as soon as it came to power. The next five years were simply wasted in directionless redrafting and the editing of a new draft of 2005. After much pulling and pushing with inactivity in between, a draft was hurriedly finalised and tabled in the previous Lok Sabha in its final session. Today, there could be a temptation to pass the same Bill in a hurry to harvest a low hanging fruit. However, the Bill is extremely poor in addressing some of the most obvious and critical questions of elementary education. The Bill appears more focused on mostly Delhi-centric problems of 25 per cent reservations and less concerned about the larger issues such as quality of learning, accountability of the system to the child or the parents, academic support systems, and decentralisation. It is a case of a lot of detail with a lot of vagueness, which suits the bureaucratic mindset very well. What we need is a simple bill that indicates what is to be provided and what is the outcome expected with simplicity and clarity. Let the states work out the details that are consistent with such a Central law.

There is a need to restructure Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) until a new law makes it redundant. It should be possible for SSA to move from the current norms-based funding, which is restrictive in many ways. Currently SSA funds states on an annual basis, which does not allow the states to create a long term plan. It may be good to provide 3 years of assured funds for a set of goals to achieve and to monitor half-yearly progress.

The academic support systems around the country are highly ineffective for a variety of reasons. They are too bureau-



cratic, ineffective, and have no sense of urgency, whether at the national level, or at the village cluster level. Restructuring these institutions and making them responsible for improvement in quality is a major challenge.

Governance under SSA is another matter that needs to be looked into. Right from the governing council chaired by the prime minister to the village education committee, most bodies are just show cases. The governing council met only once at the time of its inauguration in 2006 and never again. At the other end, there is enough evidence to show that most village education committee members do not know that such a body exists. Either we should make these bodies function as intended, or find other structures that will work.

The mid-day meal programme is said

to impact enrollment, attendance, and retention in schools. There is no serious proof of such an impact. The outcome of mid-day meals should be the nutritional status of children, and not education.

Another matter that the government must seriously consider is the high level of enrollment of 5-year olds in Std I. This is encouraged by state laws while the 'right to education' begins at 6. Also, early enrollment of children is not necessarily good for the child. With over 50 per cent of 5 year-olds already enrolling in schools, it is high time that the government adds a pre-school class to each school rather than leaving it to the *aanganwadi*, which has time and again been proven to be extremely weak in delivering education.

The budget 2009-10 may not give indications of the government's thinking

on reforms. Frankly, at this point how much money is to be spent is not important but how it is spent, and how effectively. The President of India has declared in her speech that the government will bring out five annual reports on education, health, employment, etc. It has to be assumed that these reports will be brought out by external agencies that are at arm's length from the ministry. Setting up goals, planning to achieve them, monitoring progress through external mechanisms is what is needed to be done.

Many of the SSA problems arise from the fact that it remains a government programme run by an ineffective machinery. Making it a people's mission will help energise it. If there is a will, ways can be found.

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