

## THE QUEST FOR QUALITY IN SCHOOL EDUCATION: A FIELD EXPLORATION IN THE VICINITIES OF BASTAR, CHHATTISGARH

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### Abstract

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*There is a growing concern among the academicians, teachers, parents about the lack of access, participation, underachievement of learners in schools. This situation is bleaker in the case of the learners of tribal dominant areas who still lack the opportunity for quality school education. A pilot study for a case study of the Bastar region of Chhattisgarh state was planned with an objective of developing a comprehensive understanding of the attitudes and aspirations of the learners, the parents and the envisioned role of the teachers towards schooling. The study was conducted in two blocs of Jagdalpur district in Bastar region of Chhattisgarh. A random purposive sampling was used for collecting the data. It included ten students each from 6th to 8th class of Residential and Non-Residential schools. Observations, Group discussion, Semi-Structured, open ended interviews were used as the tool for data collection, distinctively, with all the stakeholders of the schooling system i.e. the students, the parents, the teachers, and the personnels of state school education. The enquiry was purely exploratory in nature, unfolded series of issues and challenges confronting the quality of school education system as a whole. It pointed towards the need for better prepared teachers capable of serving in tribal dominant areas, a more engaging experiences for the learners, concerned eagerness among the parents to send their children to school and thereby an intervention for quality school education.*

**Key words:** *Quality education, aspirations, attitude for education, tribal area.*



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**Introduction:** The discourse on quality school education is not something of recent concern amongst the academicians and pedagogues and has always been a matter of obvious concern amongst the parents for a decent schooling of their children. This is why it is so difficult to dislodge the belief of quality from school education. With schematic intervention of the

erstwhile Operation blackboard, DPEP, flagship programme of the government SSA and currently RTE a landmark proclamation thereby making education a fundamental right of all the children is sweeping the school education system across the country. The statistical data indicate a notable spatial spread and easy access by tremendous increase in the enrollment of the children to school. In the midst of all these interventions one feels hesitant to subject school education to so called 'quality' as standards because one assumes association of education per se with certain quality characteristics. As rightly stated by Kumar to which we all will undoubtedly share is "when we engage with the concept or idea of education, we feel emotionally aroused, for education does evoke the prospect of a better, improved life in the future" (Kumar 2008). With similar line of thoughts what has been expressed above, field exploration was started which soon gave ample opportunities for the wavering hope about school experiences and had to question why it is so bad? It is only such experiences when we might be forced to describe this characteristic aspect of an educational experience that we notice the first stirrings of the temptation to use the word 'quality' to distinguish minimum from maximum, or intermediary levels in characterizing the experience of education offered by an institution or system (Kumar 2010). Can schooling be devoid of quality? With this broad objective it was intended to develop a comprehensive understanding of the attitudes and aspirations of the learners, the parents and the envisioned role of the teachers towards schooling.

In this paper, I share my experiences of school education system, which were earned from the two blocks of Jagdalpur district of Bastar- Darbha and Bastanar blocks in the south of Chhattisgarh. The observations were purely exploratory in nature which included schools of both types residential and non-residential run by Department of Education, Tribal Welfare Department, Kasturba Gandhi Balika Aavasi Vidyalaya and Model Ashram school. The paper is divided into two parts. The first part conceptual understanding on quality is developed. Second, understanding the aspirations of the learners, the attitude of the parents and the envisioned role of the teachers towards schooling has been attempted.

### **Understanding of the concept of Quality:**

Quality is totally integral to education yet becomes complex when one fathoms out. In simple words it means the standard of something as measured against other similar things; how good or bad something is. Often quality as an expression is used as synonymous for standard and

efficiency. Where one might expect 'quality' to refer to a comprehensive or holistic view of education or to any of its component such as teachers, pedagogy, curriculum, textbooks, evaluation and so on, it can also be connoted specifically as a set of relevant issues about the quality in education encapsulated as 'ends and means'. Ends which examine the significance or the relevance of the goals of education from the point of view of the two overriding purposes education has to serve: a) the development of the individual in relation to himself, nature and society; and b) development of the society itself. Means that are as important as ends hence the methods used to achieve the goals of education will also be subjected to the same rigorous scrutiny (Naik, 1975). Another way of looking at quality education is in terms of the relationship between Outputs and Inputs which is a conceptual approach taken over from economics and manufacturing. In this one specifies fixed capital (machinery and raw materials) and variable capital (labour) as inputs and the product (including its quality and quantity) as outputs and one can measure the success or otherwise. But if one wishes to understand how certain outputs have been realized, then one needs to know the processes that contribute to them and this leads to a concern with inputs (Winch, 2010). By using the language Input and Output the intention is not to suggest that they are detachable from each other.

With the international influences particularly since the Jomtein conference of 1979 any discussion on quality of education has to do with the progress made towards universalization of access to primary education its progress being marked by certain 'indicators'. Thus, through these indicators which are a mix of input, process and output, quality has intended to be conceived not as what it actually is but how it can be measured. More suitable to home NCERT offered six dimensions of quality under quality monitoring tools (here after QMT) which included children's attendance, community support and participation, teacher and teacher preparation, curriculum and teaching learning materials, classroom practices and processes, learner's assessment, monitoring and supervision. In policy discourses to maintain the quality of education, the responsibility and the focus point has been different in various educational policies and programmes. Common school system was the central point of Education Commission (1964) and National Policy on Education (1968). In the New Educational Policy 1986, the responsibility of quality education was given to the teachers whereas the teaching-learning process was the core of RamaMurti Report (1990). National

Advisory Committee (1993) questioned the burden of curriculum. NCF (2000) emphasized on national integration and NCF2005 emphasized upon two focal point critical thinking and teaching.

In National Policy of Education (1986), it was accepted that, it was not possible for Indian state to provide elementary education to all children belonging to 6-14 years. Reviewing new educational policy (1986) RamaMurti committee (1990) stated that simply envisaged access of education cannot be regarded under the qualitative education. But it presented the dropout rate as an essential challenge for the qualitative education. SSA by taking universalization of elementary education to the next level promised universal access, enrolment, retention and achievement by improvement in the quality of education in all its aspect. Till now where education was for 'few', Right to Education Act 2009 by clarifying it as a 'compulsory education' has made it a privileged opportunity for many. The goal of free and compulsory education to all the children up to 14 years of age which was expected to be achieved by 1960s still remains elusive yet one has to admit that developments in recent years have made significant impact on the situation.

At present to provide school education in the rural area the Chhattisgarh government has primarily two types of state run schools –schools run by the department of education and Tribal welfare department. Being a tribal dominated region one can find more of the schools of tribal welfare department. In keeping with the requirement of the region the schools are largely residential in nature and fall under either Ashram schools run by Tribal welfare department or Balak/ Balika Chhatravas run by Department of education usually of 100 seater. Apart from this Rajiv Gandhi Shiksha Mission an autonomous body along with SSA is also working towards provision of quality school education, there by focusing quality interventions, meeting the complex needs of this stage in terms of teacher qualification, competency, subject specific deployment in schools, academic support through BRCs/CRCs (Block Resource Coordinator/ Cluster Resource Coordinator), training needs of teachers, classroom based support and supervision issues. Other two types of schools which were traced in the two blocs were Kasturba Gandhi Balika AavasiVidyalaya (KGBV) initiated in 2006 for addressing the educational needs of girls from marginalized communities and Model Ashram school which is yet another residential school of its own kind launched in November 2008. The scheme aims to provide quality education to talented rural children through setting

up of model schools as benchmark of excellence at block level at the rate of one school per block. It aims at to be a model in infrastructure, curriculum, evaluation and school governance. All these governmental efforts points towards the seriousness of the government in educating the learners in this region. But this has to be essentially understood from a child's side. Focusing on the availability, accessibility and affordability that has been the government's policy agenda can it be said that the school education system has been able to provide quality schooling to the learners in the tribal belts of Bastar? Statistical data which indicates sustenance of the learner into the system for a longer period of time, has it resulted into successful completion of the full cycle of basic education? Has the participation in the school education system, giving students opportunities to learn and benefit from it?

### **Exploring quality in the school experiences:**

It will be significant to delve in exploring 'quality' with the help of a case study.

**Case study:** *"Joga was making the learners of primary level do rote learning of mathematics tables from 2-10. The learners of primary classes Ist toVth accommodated in one room with some text books kept open on their laps. Joga completed saying aloud the tables from 2-10 and now it was the turn of another learner of upper primary to start from the beginning and the loud voices of the learners repeating after the senior student continued. After three rounds of such learning the middle school learners got busy with their self-study and the primary class students continued with their talks and play."* There are two teachers appointed, each for primary and middle school. For anyone associated with school education, it will be a really hard to witness an episode where a school is running without any teacher. The two teachers have not been coming to school since four days. In the absence of the teachers the middle school learners are instructed to teach the students of primary school.

The present case offers ample of space for our further discourse asking why the teachers are absent from school for past four days? Why the children come to school if teachers are absent? Do parents acknowledge such situation in the school? On conversing with the parents it was learnt that the both the teachers stay in the village itself as it is difficult to travel every day to school. The absence of the other teacher for a long duration probably hinted towards his transfer to some other place. The other teacher who is supposedly to be the headmaster of the school is often drunk during the school hours. Since consumption of the home brewed ale such as mahua, salphi are a part of daily diet as well as a part of tribal culture it's a normal

phenomenon in the region. However, this also clears the point towards the leniency in school inspections that the teacher is able to sit in such a condition or remain absent from school during school hours knowing the fact that there is no other teacher in the school. On one hand parents are largely illiterate or dropouts and cannot provide any kind of academic help to their children. On the other hand we have teachers who have not been dispensing their responsibility for which they have been appointed. In such a situation the learners who are largely first generation learners are denied the opportunity for learning at school. With the hope that the teacher will come today and teach is what keeps these learners motivated to come to school and inspires the parents to send their children to school. This regular school scenario was taken up by the parents to the cluster incharge and at the bloc office but all in vain. Many school students may be sharing the same experiences cited above but this picture of a real school, very much present in the records is alluring to ponder upon the certain essential aspects of schooling- teacher's attitude towards teaching, learner's aspiration towards schooling and parent's attitude towards schooling of their children.

Today teacher's cadre in many states is not monolithic as it was earlier. Chhattisgarh also has a cadre of regular teachers and para teachers in the state run schools. At present with the arrangements made by the state government the para teachers who are officially referred in vernacular term as *Shiksha Karmi* have outnumbered the regular teachers. The provision of shiksha karmi teachers started with the agenda for easy availability of teacher at the local level with minimum qualification of 12<sup>th</sup> class. But today they serve as three different groups- Shiksha karmi verg 3 (group 3) at primary level, verg 2 at upper primary level and verg 1 for higher secondary and senior secondary level. From this arrangement of teachers following issues emerge. Firstly, due to lack of adequate number of teachers the essential degree of D.Ed and B.Ed for teaching is compromised. The teachers who do not have the degree in teaching are provided teacher training in the first two initial years of joining. Second, continuing from the previous point there is lack of adequate number of teachers for Science and English subjects as bulk of teachers are from Hindi medium and from humanities background. As a result the teachers who are teaching at upper primary level ie. shiksha karmi verg2 (popularly known as TGTs) are not appointed for any particular teaching subject but are expected to be competent to teach all the subjects. *"It is expected that a graduate*

*should be able to teach all the school subjects till 10<sup>th</sup>. Also to meet the need of the large number of the teachers in the region such arrangement is made.”*

Further, at many instance the teachers shared that they are able to teach all the subjects but in subjects like mathematics and science when no solution is sought neither from the guidebook nor from the other member of the staff the particular topic or the solving of a particular sum is left out. How often such instance happens is a bigger question. Guide books popularly known as ‘*kunji*’ have replaced the regular school textbooks in the school among the learners and the teachers. (PROBE, 1999). Such an arrangement nearly kills the professional attitude of the teacher towards teaching and competency to deal with the learning needs of the learners.

Abiding by the provision every 1km there was a primary school and every 3km an upper primary school. However to contain the drop out at many places the primary and upper primary schools were held within one premises. This arrangement is also intended for the convenience that if one teacher is absent then another teacher will manage both the schools. The situation is worrisome in such schools where one teacher is appointed for primary and one for upper primary an arrangement often seen in the interior located schools and not in on road schools. This results in multi-grade teaching which often amounts to very limited teaching or no teaching at all. (NCF, Position Paper, 2005). The residential problem or travelling to school particularly those which are located in the interiors have always been a matter of absenteeism or as late comers among the teachers. The third issue offshoots from this point which is mostly seen among the lady teachers. Shiksha karmi are appointed on the basis of open competition across Chhattisgarh. Once the appointment is done and two years of probationary period is completed the teachers apply for transfer either on the roadside schools or if possible to their own local region.

NCF Position Paper, 2005 states “curriculum does not acknowledge the cultural rights of the STs who are denied their own culture and history. School curriculum fails to take account of tribal cultures as autonomous knowledge systems with their own epistemology, transmission, innovation and power.” Working in this direction and much influenced by the NCF2005 efforts have been made by SCERT to include those topics with which the learner can relate and lead to children self –pride. To name some, class 8<sup>th</sup> textbook Chhattisgarh Bharti contains 1/4<sup>th</sup> of its chapters presented in regional languages such as Chhattisgarhi, Gondi

and Halbi written in Devnagari script. It also includes chapter on regional importance such as 'Kutumbsar avum anya gufayen' (Kutumbsar and other caves). Such an attempt has not only been appreciated by the teachers but the learners too. However, still the matter of language problem takes its place in the classroom processes.

The fourth and the most crucial problem commonly seen in the schools is the language problem which acts as a barrier in the initial years of schooling. The primary school teachers in comparison to the upper primary teachers face lot of problem in interacting with the learners whose first language is the tribal language either Gondi or Halbi. By the time the learners reach upper primary they are able to speak Hindi but the teachers confessed that polishing the basic learning such as alphabets, *matra* to form words, sentences in the initial four- five months is a big challenge to work upon which further forms the basis for their class processes. A teacher who has no knowledge of the regional language is at a greater disadvantage in the classroom interaction and has to seek help from the learners in his own classroom teaching. Despite the pedagogic significance of initial instruction in the mother tongue, teachers do not bother to learn the tribal language even after several years at a posting (NCF, Position Paper,2005).

Due to the cumulative issues of the teachers as discussed above the teachers stated that they are not able to complete the syllabus each year. Some take the topics in sequential form others as per their convenience. Thus there is lack of uniformity in covering the syllabus.

Not only there is lack of uniformity in completion of syllabus but also in the execution of newly implemented Formative-Summative Assessment. From each school only one teacher has attended the training on Formative-Summative and it is expected that it will act as trickle down amongst other teachers. The teachers have admitted that they have failed to understand it and not been able to follow it as it demands lot of time and paper work such as learner's profile which cannot be maintained and the learner cannot be assessed when the learners are present on an irregular basis. With the policy of non-detention of the learners into force the teachers mark fictitious attendance and give assessment to the learner for the whole year. Many teachers ascribed that "testing procedures are also based on urban middle class values and that the competitiveness and system of rewards that examinations represent is often culturally anomalous to ST children who are brought up in an atmosphere of sharing" (NCF, Position Paper,2005). Providing access to school and sustaining the learners in the system for



a longer duration is the agenda or providing quality school experience is something which needs to be revisited here.

Parents take an important position in the triad relationship shared between the learner, home and school. Parent's views can be conveniently grouped into three. First there were parents (only male) who had the primary school experience and now they wanted to make their children continue their schooling till 12<sup>th</sup>. Second, there were parents who had never been to school but now they wanted their children to receive schooling. Third set of parents had no school experience and their children were also not going to school. In the first two set of parents the ultimate aim of getting their children to school was a good job (by good job they meant a government job). In the third set of parents the present school system had not been able to generate any consciousness towards the schooling of their children. Yet another subset within the third set of parents were those who would send their first child to school but would withdraw him/ her when the second child would start going to school. With the RTE making it obligatory for all the authorities, teachers as well as parents to get the children to school some parents opined "*ek ko to bhej rahe hain na!*" (we are sending atleast one child from our family). To this majority of the education authorities at bloc and district level had to say- *Awareness has come amongst the parents. Now parents have become inspired to send their children to school. Some are yet to get aware about schooling.* Teachers stated that those parents who have become conscious towards the schooling of their children send their children to school as compared to those parents who have not yet become conscious despite considerable awareness spread through '*palak –balak sampark*' (parents- children meet) by the teachers. Parents who have some schooling experience explained that now the children do not have to travel miles on foot as they did. Besides the 10am to 4pm timing of the school do the parents acknowledge what is taught to their children in every day class? A cumulative response to this was that if the teacher is coming to school then some teaching-learning must be taking place in the class. A culture of checking the child's copy or even asking what was taught today in class is not a prevalent practice among the majority of parents.

Learners are centrifugal to every aspect of schooling and it is this very reason that almost any question about quality of education can be answered with this magic compound word "child centeredness" (Dhankar, 2003). The seminal picture of the school that has been presented till now it becomes essential to ask how do the learners perceive schooling? Do they aspire to

come to school? Indeed, Mid-Day Meal has increased the presence of learners in school but their participation in the school as a learner is something difficult to define. Out of the observations made in schools of both the blocs what was largely witnessed was students come to school at 10:30 am attend the assembly after which half an hour is devoted for Advancement of Educational Performance through Teacher Support (ADEPTS) in which they are made to learn basic good habits based on health and hygiene, life skills, general awareness which are enshrined on the school entrance wall with the aim that the learners will not only memorize them but apply them in their daily life. This reminded me of *Freire's* 'Banking' concept in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor, makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. Such efforts of the teachers and the learners come to test when any official from Block office comes for visit and a learner is asked "Q: *what is the capital of India? And the students reply A: Raipur instead of Delhi. On this the teachers instantly reply- We tell them every day but they forget.*" Thus, teachers' teaching efficiency gets checked by the correct or incorrect answer of the learners and learner's knowledge gets assessed merely on the basis of memorization of the facts. Rest of the inspection is based on checking the daily diary of the teachers, number of pupil-teachers present and whether menu is being followed in Mid-Day Meal or not. Neither an effort is made to see what pedagogy is followed in the class nor any attempt is made to know the learning issues of the learners. If the teacher is teaching in a particular class the rest of the students in other class are engaged in self- study. By self-study it means to do silent reading of the text-book or revise what has been done in the last class which was some weeks back. Due to large gaps between two classes of a particular subject it is a natural tendency amongst the learners to forget what was done in the previous class. Do such class experiences able to generate critical thinking is something to be of the greater concern at this juncture of discourse.

Where the residential schools have their own set of problems and challenges ranging from hygiene to security (some have been cited above) Model ashram school which was found only in Bastanar block has set a standard for 'quality' aspect for the teachers, students and the parents. Basically a model school will have infrastructure and facilities of the same standard as in a Kendriya Vidyalaya and with stipulations on pupil -teacher ratio, ICT usage, holistic educational environment, appropriate curriculum and emphasis on output and outcome. On

one hand where it gives a promising school experience to a set of students, on the very next hand it clearly asserts that the other schools being run lag behind in many aspects which we have already discussed so far.

Today SSA and RTE have made the neighborhood school concept operationalized in the region.

But still, retention and completion of the elementary school cycle are also critical areas of concern before us. The interplay of socio-economic factors in the schooling of a learner cannot be completely ignored. Governmental efforts have reduced the burden of the schooling for the parents but at the same time the source of help from the family also gets reduced. Large number of student usually abstain from schooling at specific periods in the year due to chores such as collection of mahua flowers, cutting and harvesting, cultural festivals and also the weekly markets which serve as a source of entertainment for the people here. But learner's attendance has been indicated as one of the essential quality measures for schooling. To this what the block and district authority has to say- "*if attendance is maintained then no child will be able to come to school.*" At this juncture one realises that quality indicators are very context specific. Absenting from the school for long gaps is a regular phenomenon among the learners however it becomes dangerous when the learner gradually drops out of the school. This situation can be understood through the model of zones of exclusion which identifies those who never go to school (Zone 1), those who start but do not finish (Zone 2), and those who do participate but attend infrequently, are overage, and are low achieving (Zone 3). In addition there are those who fail to transit to secondary school (Zone 4), and those who drop out from secondary (Zone 5), or those who participate and learn little (Zone 6) (Lewin & Little, 2011). The concern becomes crucial particularly when the adolescents drop out of the school education system. Providing scholarships, free books, Saraswati cycle yojana and other provisions for bringing the learners to school do not ensure quality schooling and neither lessen the chances of drop out. Even for using reservation benefits in higher education and job opportunities minimum qualification is requirement. With the lack of access to quality school education intertwined with socio-economic reasons we already prepare many to move out of the school education system and thereby out of the competition for market force. Bastar has been denied the basic services in the past for long period resulting in the long waging struggle in the region. Development of

the region has been an age old concern among the policymakers and in itself a crucial issue. Education which can play a greater role in inclusive development must be taken as a serious concern for the region and the sheer non-provision of facilities leading to passive exclusion must be implored.

Collating from above and elucidating upon quality school education it can be said that it is a multidimensional concept and various issues are associated with it. Quality is a relative outcome and largely depends upon the balance between the input, process and the output of the schooling process. Quality education as a condition provides equal opportunities for overall development of an individual, without any prejudice.

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