

# Assessing Progress on Universal Elementary Education in India

## A Note on Some Key Constraints

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The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 promises free and compulsory education to all children in the age group of 6-14 years. But the way this critical entitlement is being implemented leaves much to be desired. Apart from there being glaring gaps in the provisions of the Act, its implementation challenges have plagued the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, the programme that is aimed at ushering in quality elementary education for all. The problems are many, and this paper observes that most of them can be connected to inadequate funds. It concludes that the best way of ensuring that the Act's aims are fulfilled is to bring in a common school system based on neighbourhood schools that replaces the bewildering variety of indifferent institutions we now have.

The State shall endeavour to provide, within a period of ten years from the commencement of this Constitution, for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years.

– Article 45, Directive Principles of State Policy, Constitution of India

Our Constitution fathers did not intend when they enacted Article 45 that we just set up hovels, put students there, give untrained teachers, give them bad textbooks, no playground and say we have complied with Article 45 and primary education is expanding. The compliance intended by our constitutional fathers was a substantial compliance. They meant that real education should be given to our children between the ages of 6 to 14.

– Excerpt from the address of Education Minister M C Chagla to the Central Advisory Board of Education in 1964

Nearly half a century ago, India's first education commission (1964-66; Kothari Commission) in its report, noted, "We should strive to allocate the largest proportion of gross national product (GNP) possible to educational development". The time was then opportune for the country that had transformed itself into an independent republic to assess critical gaps and address these concerns in right earnest. It was proposed that universal primary education be made a goal and recommended that the government increase its spending on education to 6% of the GNP in the next 20 years – by 1985-86. In August 2009, concerted pressure from education rights activists saw India join 135 more countries in providing its children with a justiciable right to education (RTE).<sup>1</sup>

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (RTE Act) that came into effect from 1 April 2010 committed free and compulsory education to all children of the age group 6-14 years. But the way this critical entitlement is being implemented leaves much to be desired. While a welcome move, we have already noted some of the glaring gaps in most of the provisions in the Act.<sup>2</sup>

We highlighted basic concerns related to defining a child; the ambiguous provisions on teacher eligibility and neighbourhood schools; the omission of critical parameters to gauge the quality of education; and unclear terms of reference on the sharing of financial responsibility between the centre and state governments in implementing the Act as some of the critical areas meriting attention. We also engaged with the question of fixing accountability for the implementation of the Act, and suggested examining the extent to which it had made a dent to the education rights of children in the country after three years of implementation.

The authors have drawn from a couple of reports published by the Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability, New Delhi, with which both of them have been associated.

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We also proposed reviewing the overall education system in the light of the recommendations made to bring in a common school system (css) in the country, where neighbourhood schools would ensure access, equity, and inclusion of all children. The css was first suggested in the Kothari Commission report (1964-66) and then in 2007 by a Bihar government commission that was set up to review the mechanics of implementing it.<sup>3</sup> With 2015 declared as the year for accomplishing the World Education Forum's six education for all goals, it is timely to comment on India's progress on this.<sup>4</sup>

A number of challenges and problems continue to constrain the progress of the RTE in the country. There is substantial literature, both by academics and activists, pointing to several critical concerns. Some of these relate to the absence of physical and social infrastructure of the appropriate quality and accountability mechanisms; not covering children in the age group 0-6 years; the sanctioning of a discriminatory system in public education; the absence of a complete ban on child labour; and, in general, an overall absence of political will. Many of these issues are organically connected to adequate public provisioning to facilitate effective implementation of the Act, and the focus of this paper is on the adequacy and efficacy of public provisioning.

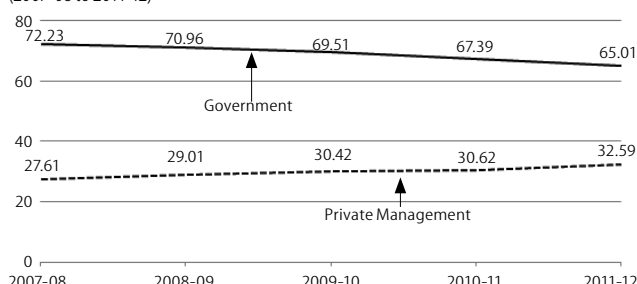
The paper begins with a brief overview of how shortfalls in critical inputs have led to poor outcomes over time. We also look at the operational design of the Act, which compounds the problem of inadequate outlays. This is substantiated with field-level findings from previous research carried out to assess constraints in the implementation of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (ssa). We conclude with a set of recommendations for overhauling the state apparatus through increased outlays towards education, and addressing the constraints in the implementation of the ssa to facilitate the elusive right to elementary education for all.

### Shortfalls in Key Education Inputs

Before embarking on a discussion on specific input provisions, let us see what India's total outlay on education has been. The country's total public spending on education at 4.17% of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2011-12 (budget estimate) was nowhere near the promised 6%.<sup>5</sup> A comparison of the level of spending on education in India with some developed and developing countries reveals the need for greater government spending.

It is also useful to note that in the last five years (and two years after the RTE Act came into effect), enrolment patterns reveal a shift away from government schools to private-run schools (Figure 1). Whether this is directly related to the gradual but steady decline in adequate financing of the government apparatus, which has made it perform poorly, is debatable, and will be explored in subsequent sections. It is also worth underscoring that the RTE Act was specifically meant to address shortfalls in education inputs in government schools. Apart from government and private-run schools, there are three more categories of schools – private unaided, private aided, and unrecognised (such as madrasas) – with overall lower shares of enrolment.<sup>6</sup> Of these, private unaided schools corner have 20% to 24% of the enrolment.

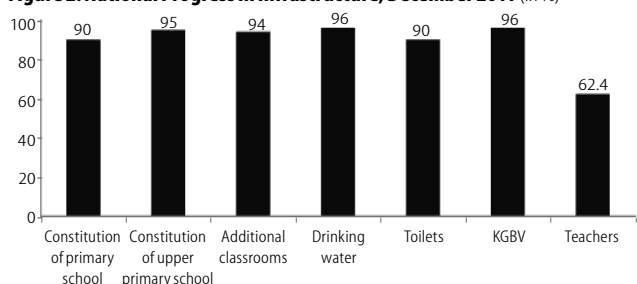
**Figure 1: Share of Enrolment in Government and Private Schools (2007-08 to 2011-12)**



Source: Elementary Education in India: Progress towards UEE, Flash Statistics, DISE data for various years, NUEPA, Government of India.

Moving on to shortfalls in education inputs involves two major components – teacher-related inputs, and other amenities falling under infrastructure. Gaps persist in both. A snapshot at the national level, although encouraging, does not reflect regional disparities and uneven progress at the state level (Figure 2). Even here, the situation with regard to teachers (with more than 37% vacant positions) does not evoke confidence in attaining the RTE requirements.

**Figure 2: National Progress in Infrastructure, December 2011 (in %)**



Source: Parliamentary Standing Committee Report on HRD, 2012-13.

The state-level scenario substantiates this apprehension. Fifteen states/union territories reveal a declining trend in setting up elementary schools and teacher recruitment. They are Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Dadra and Nagar Haveli, Daman and Diu, Delhi, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Lakshadweep, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu.

State-wise data compiled by the department of higher education reflects wide regional disparities. In terms of progress made in setting up primary schools, Chandigarh (with 8.33% completion), Himachal Pradesh (11.25%) and West Bengal (59.25%) are poor performers. With regard to opening upper primary schools, Himachal Pradesh (with 0% completion of its targeted 20 schools), Meghalaya (29.94%), Nagaland (34.56%) and West Bengal (44.99%) show that regional progress has been skewed. The progress in providing drinking water and sanitation facilities also reveals a similar skewed trend at the state level.

At the district and block levels, many states are yet to fill positions such as district project officers and block resource centre coordinators, apart from employing key finance management staff. Having missed the deadline for compliance to the RTE requirement of ssa infrastructure development or creation – 31 March 2013 – one can conclude that shortfalls in allocating the necessary resources have also translated into inadequate infrastructure development.

The RTE Act not only envisages universal access to education to all children between six and 14 years, but also proposes quality education, for which trained teachers are a prerequisite. With more than 8,00,000 inadequately trained teachers, quality education does not seem to be a priority. Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and Assam report a large proportion of untrained teachers (Standing Committee Report 2012-13). Focusing on teacher-related inputs, we find continuing deficits in some of the specific commitments made as part of the RTE Act, such as doing away with single-teacher schools; maintaining a pupil-teacher ratio (PTR) of 30:1; providing regular training to teachers, including in-service training; and non-involvement in non-teaching assignments (Tables 1a, 1b, 1c).

**Table 1a: Shortfalls in Key Educational Inputs**

Percentage of Single-Teacher Schools						
All Schools			Primary Schools			
2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	
9.33	8.86	8.31	12.26	11.80	10.80	
Average Number of Teachers Per School						
All Government Schools			All Unaided Schools			
2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	
3.8	4.0	4.0	7.3	7.6	7.3	

Source: Elementary Education in India: Progress towards UEE, Flash Statistics, DISE 2011-12, NUEPA, Government of India, 2013.

**Table 1b: Shortfalls in Key Educational Inputs**

PTR > 30 at Primary Level			
All Schools		Government Schools	
2010-11	2011-12	2010-11	2011-12
42.44	40.84	42.81	40.97
PTR > 35 at Upper Primary Level			
All Schools		Government Schools	
2010-11	2011-12	2010-11	2011-12
31.32	30.77	33.20	32.03
Distribution of Professionally Trained Teachers (%)			
Regular		Contractual	
2009-10	2011-12	2009-10	2011-12
78.66	79.58	49.37	62.02

Source: Same as Table 1a.

**Table 1c: Shortfalls in Key Educational Inputs**

Distribution of Teachers Receiving in-Service Training during Previous Academic Year (all schools, %)		
2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
35.03	29.59	34.23
Teachers Involved in Non-Teaching Assignments to Total Teachers (Including Contractual) during Previous Academic Year (%)		
2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
9.55	9.06	10.13

Source: Same as Table 1a.

As can be seen from Tables 1a, 1b, and 1c, while the average number of teachers in a government school in 2011-12 was four, the corresponding number for unaided schools was 7.3, clearly revealing inadequate attention to government schools. Over 40% of all schools continued to register a PTR of more than 30 at the primary level in 2011-12. Further, with just 34% teachers receiving in-service training in 2011-12, it becomes clear that the revised target of having professionally trained teachers in all schools by March 2015 may not be met. The engagement of teachers in non-teaching activities also remains a concern.

Moving to the second category of inputs, we find that there is a long way to go before many of the identified gaps in infrastructure can be filled. Without having basic inputs such as adequate classrooms, assured drinking water, toilets, boundary walls, ramps, playgrounds, kitchens, electricity, and so on, the quality of education will remain uncertain and uneven. Other additional components that have been incorporated in the RTE Act such as providing computers to all students remains a distant dream for most schools in the country today (Tables 2a, 2b).

**Table 2a: Shortfalls in Key Educational Inputs**

Average Number of Classrooms	All Government Schools			All Private Schools		
	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
	3.7	3.8	3.8	7.8	8.0	7.9
Schools with Drinking Water (%)	All Schools			Primary Schools		
	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
	92.60	92.71	94.45	91.51	91.12	93.15
Schools with Computers (%)	All Schools			Primary Schools		
	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
	16.65	18.70	20.53	6.99	7.59	36.80
Schools with ramps (%)	All Schools			Primary Schools		
	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
	47.09	50.39	53.43	45.86	49.71	53.28
Schools Having Electricity (%)	All Schools			Primary Schools		
	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
	27.70	32.20	36.34	38.98	43.14	47.1

Source: Elementary Education in India: Progress towards UEE, Flash Statistics, DISE 2011-12, NUEPA, Government of India, 2013.

**Table 2b: Shortfalls in Key Educational Inputs**

SCR >30 at Primary Level	SCR >35 at Upper Primary Level	Schools Providing Mid-day Meal (Government and Aided) (%)	Schools with Boundary Wall (All Schools)		
2010-11	2011-12	2010-11	2011-12	2010-11	2011-12
36.74	37.16	34.42	33.17	88.24	92.06
51.45	55.41	58.16			

Source: Same as Table 2a.

To compound matters, having the infrastructure in place does not mean that it is always functional. As government data reveal, although 81% of all schools had toilets for boys (in 2011-12), only 65% were functional (Table 2c).

**Table 2c: Shortfalls in Key Educational Inputs: Percentage of Schools with Toilets (2011-12)**

With Toilets for Boys		With Functional Boys' Toilet in	With Toilets for Girls		With Functional Girls' Toilet in
All Schools	Primary Schools	All Schools	All Schools	Primary Schools	All Schools
81.14	78.10	65.87	72.16	65.40	84.68

Source: Same as Table 2a.

**Table 2d: Schools Meeting RTE Norms According to Annual Status of Education Report Surveys (2010-12)**

Schools Meeting the Following RTE Norms (%)	2010	2011	2012	
Pupil-teacher and classroom-teacher norms	Pupil teacher ratio (PTR)	38.9	40.8	42.8
	Classroom teacher ratio	76.2	74.3	73.7
Building	Office/store/office-cum-store	74.1	74.1	73.5
	Playground	62.0	62.8	61.1
	Boundary wall/fencing	51.0	53.9	54.7
	Drinking water	No facility for drinking water	17.0	16.7
	Facility, but no drinking water available	10.3	9.9	10.4
	Drinking water available	72.7	73.5	73.0
Toilet	No toilet facility	11.0	12.2	8.4
	Facility, but toilet not usable	41.8	38.9	35.1
	Toilet usable	47.2	49.0	56.5
Girls toilet	No separate girls' toilet	31.2	22.7	21.3
	Separate girls' toilets, but Toilets locked	18.7	15.0	14.1
	Toilet not usable	17.2	18.7	16.4
	Toilet usable	32.9	43.7	48.2
	Library	No library	37.4	28.7
	Library, but no books being used by children on day of visit	37.9	42.2	43.9
	Library books being used by children on day of visit	37.9	42.2	43.9
Mid-day meal	Kitchen shed for cooking meal	82.1	83.7	84.4
	MDM served in school on day of visit	84.6	87.5	87.1

Source: ASER Report, 2012.

Independent surveys corroborate this. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) reveals gaps in terms of actual provision and proposed entitlements.<sup>7</sup> A three-year comparison from 2010 to 2012 shows that the situation did not change much in terms of adhering to the RTE norms on basic provisions such as building, drinking water, toilets, library, and mid-day meal. The same gaps continue to prevail even in input indicators such as pupil-teacher ratio and classroom-teacher ratio.

This brings us again to the financing question – whether the funds provided for these basic inputs for a decent standard of education in all schools are adequate and whether they follow some minimum standards or benchmarks.

### Financing of the RTE Act

The government mandated the SSA to be the vehicle to operationalise the RTE Act. The SSA is a centrally-sponsored Plan scheme that has been in operation since 2001. Launched on 16 November 2000 across the country, its primary objective is universalising quality elementary education through community ownership of the school system. The Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) scheme, which was launched in August 2004 to focus on educating the girl child, was merged with the SSA as one of its components in April 2007. The SSA had set out to provide useful and relevant quality elementary education to all children in the 6 to 14 age group by 2010. It also aimed to bridge social, regional, and gender gaps.

It is critical to underscore that the SSA accounts for only 20% of the total education budget. Additionally, it is worth noting that at the union and state levels, the share of Plan spending is only about 35%, while the remaining 65% comprises non-Plan expenditure that takes care of recurring expenses related to maintenance and upkeep, salaries of regular staff, and operation and maintenance of assets. The government approved a total outlay of Rs 2.31 lakh crore to implement the RTE Act through the SSA over a five-year period from 2010-11 to 2014-15, as shown in Table 3.

**Table 3: Financing the Implementation of RTE Act (2010-11 to 2014-15 in Rs crore)**

Item	Last Two Years of Eleventh Plan (2010-12)	First Three Years of Twelfth Plan (2012-15)	Total
Child entitlements	28,852	21,535	50,387
Teacher-related costs	38,307	82,584	1,20,891
Infrastructure	17,544	23,417	40,961
School-related costs	5,351	5,566	10,917
Research, evaluation and management	5,540	9,533	15,073
Total	84,408	1,46,825	2,31,233

Source: Working Group Report on Elementary Education and Literacy, Twelfth Five-Year, 2012-17, MHRD, Government of India, October 2011.

The Thirteenth Finance Commission provided a grant of Rs 24,068 crore for 2010-15, representing 15% of the estimated SSA expenditure of each state to cover the difference between the targeted state share of 50% by the terminal year of the Eleventh Plan under the SSA and the state share of 35% in 2008-09. This grant amount was deducted from the overall approved outlay of Rs 2.31 lakh crore, bringing the amount provided for implementing the RTE in the five-year period from 2010-11 to 2014-15 to Rs 2.07 lakh crore.

The government acknowledges that adequate resources have not been provided to implement this critical legislation in the last three years of the Eleventh Plan period (2009-12). The Twelfth Plan working group report notes that total government expenditure on the SSA for the Eleventh Plan period was Rs 70,870 crore (till August 2011). Going by its own target of spending more than this in just the last two years of the Eleventh Plan period (that is, Rs 84,408 crore), there is clearly a gap between commitment and reality.

Further, as recommended in the report of the Twelfth Plan working group, the first three years of the Plan should have allocated Rs 1,46,825 crore, making it Rs 48,941 crore a year. But in the Twelfth Plan dispensation, the significantly watered-down allocation proposed for five years for the SSA is Rs 1,92,726 crore, making it Rs 38,545 crore a year. It would have been desirable if the planning commission had accepted the Twelfth Plan working group's recommendations by at least incorporating the suggested outlay for the SSA and not diluting it any further.

The parliamentary standing committee report on human resource development observes that 2012-13 (the first year of the Twelfth Plan) saw a shortfall of about Rs 14,500 crore in terms of what was allocated (Rs 25,555 crore) to the department in place of what was demanded (Rs 40,000 crore). This gap would affect not just time frames but also the quality of output. The committee also notes that given that the SSA is a central government initiative, it is the union government that must bear the responsibility of resource mobilisation given the poor fiscal condition of most state governments. States that continue to seek additional resources for the SSA are Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh (all with considerable education deficits and huge shares of child population).

An analysis by the Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability (CBGA) of the total budgetary allocations towards elementary education (by the centre and a majority of the states) deconstructs the myth propagated by the union government and the Planning Commission that state governments do not spend adequately on education. If anything, they spend much more than the centre despite being strapped for cash. Tables 4 and 5 (p 48) capture the total spending on elementary education by including spending through state budgets and spending through all centrally-sponsored schemes (such as the SSA) that are outside state budgets. Comparing the share of 25 states' spending on elementary education to the country's GDP to the corresponding share of spending by the centre reveals that the state governments spent as much as 1.17% of GDP compared to 0.38% of GDP spent by the centre in 2012-13 (BE).

Another indicator through which the adequacy of spending on education can be judged is the public spending per student at constant prices. For this, the data reflect inadequate spending at the elementary stage. An approximate estimate of the per child spending through the SSA by the union government works out to Rs 646, which is substantially lower than the government spending on a child in a Kendriya Vidyalaya at approximately Rs 8,600.<sup>8</sup> When we consider that there are high

**Table 4: Allocations for Elementary Education from the Union Budget That Were Routed Outside State Budgets** (2009-10 to 2012-13 in Rs Crore)

Items	2009-10 (BE)	2010-11 (Actuals)	2011-12 (RE)	2012-13 (BE)
A Union budget allocation for all elementary education schemes	21,705.24	29,310.00	32,027.15	38,298.14
B Union budget allocations for elementary education schemes in which union funds are routed through state budgets				
Mid-day meal scheme	8,000	8,932.43	10,380.00	11,937.00
Scheme for providing quality education in madrasas (SPQEM)	50	101.47	150.00	175.00
Scheme for infrastructure development in minority institutions (IDM)	5	22.98	50.00	50.00
Total	8,055	9,056.88	10,580.00	12,162.00
C Union budget allocations for elementary education schemes in which union funds bypass state budgets (C = A-B)	13,650.24	20,253.12	21,447.15	26,136.14

Source: Compiled by CBGA from union budget documents for 2010-11, 2011-12 and 2012-13.

**Table 5: Combined Budgetary Allocations for Elementary Education** (2009-10 to 2012-13 in Rs Crore)

Items	2009-10 (BE)	2010-11 (Actuals)	2011-12 (RE)	2012-13 (BE)
I Total for 25 states **	73,379.6	87,391.8	1,04,906.5	1,17,449.1
II Union budget allocations for elementary education schemes in which union funds bypass state budgets	13,650.2	20,253.1	21,447.1	26,136.1
Total (I + II)	87,029.8	1,07,644.9	1,26,353.6	1,43,585.2
GDP at current market prices	64,57,352	77,95,314	8,974,947	1,00,28,118
Combined (centre + 25 states) budgetary allocations for elementary education as percentage of GDP	1.35	1.38	1.41	1.43

Combined spending refers to spending by the centre and by the 25 states included in this analysis; \*\*Data compiled by CBGA, New Delhi.

Source: Compiled by CBGA based on the data in Table 4.

**Table 6: Comparison of Elementary Education Spending by Centre and 25 States** (2009-10 to 2012-13 in Rs Crore)

	2009-10 (BE)	2010-11 (Actuals)	2011-12 (RE)	2012-13 (BE)
GDP at current market prices	64,57,352	77,95,314	89,74,947	1,00,28,118
I Total budgetary allocation for elementary education by 25 states	73,379.6	87,391.8	1,04,906.5	1,17,449.1
I as % of GDP	1.14	1.12	1.17	1.17
II Union budget allocation for all elementary education schemes	21,705.2	29,310.0	32,027.1	38,298.1
II as % of GDP	0.34	0.38	0.36	0.38

Source: Compiled by CBGA based on the data presented in Tables 4 and 5.

out-of-pocket expenses incurred by individuals on education, the union government's spending on elementary education is seriously inadequate. According to last recorded estimate of out-of-pocket spending on elementary education (National Sample Survey 64th round, 2008), per capita out-of-pocket expenditure by an average parent at the elementary level was Rs 1,413.

This also brings us to the concern of the increasing role of the private sector in not only secondary and higher education, but also elementary education. The Twelfth Plan document is replete with recommendations that encourage the "legitimate" role of the private sector in elementary education. To illustrate, the Plan suggests that even at the pre-primary level, communities hire educated local young men and women on contracts to impart preschool instruction, and calls for devising more pragmatic tax concessions to encourage private investment in education. The Plan also encourages partnerships with panchayats and municipalities, as well as with other non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to ensure that good-quality and nutritious food is regularly supplied to all children.

Recent reports of 23 children dying in a school in Bihar after eating the school meal and cases of children falling ill due to the poor quality of mid-day meals across Tamil Nadu, Odisha, Maharashtra, Punjab and Goa are but the tip of what may be a major systemic malaise. Blindly encouraging private interests to ensure that services are provided to the most disadvantaged

sections of society on a par with the better-off sections is incongruous, to say the least. Despite historical evidence from developed countries on the need for public spending in sectors such as education and health, India fails to see the merit of ensuring basic quality education (and health) for all based on public spending.

As already highlighted in Figure 1, there has been a gradual increase in the number of private-run schools in the country. The ASER 2012 rural findings reveal that 23% of all schools are private-funded (for children in the age group 6-14 years) and government schools are not being preferred due to various constraints and poor learning outcomes. While the report seems to point to the poor quality of education in government schools as a strong "push" factor for children to study in private schools, we contend that it is the inadequate attention paid to government schools by starving them of sufficient financial and human resources, as also problematic institutional mechanisms, that has led to their gradual and continued disintegration. To compound the problem, poor utilisation of available funds is seen as a reason to curtail outlays. But poor fund utilisation is actually a manifestation of the constraints in implementing ill-designed and financially starved schemes, which, if addressed, could bolster the government apparatus. The next section examines this in some detail.

### Operational Design and Constraints

In this section, we highlight problems in the basic design of the scheme that has been designated the vehicle to implement the RTE Act, and also document some of the key challenges constraining its effective implementation.

### Design Flaws in SSA

Any attempt to understand the operational design of the RTE Act is incomplete without examining the SSA's guidelines and norms. The financial norms of the scheme do not promote equity as they are supposed to, and they also do not allocate adequate resources for critical components.

The government subsidises private schools to provide education to 25% of the children from economically weaker sections at Rs 9,190 per child and also provides additional funds to pay for textbooks and uniforms. The rates are much higher than what it sets aside for children in government schools. While the government subsidises an unaided school Rs 1,750 for textbooks and uniforms for a primary school-going child and Rs 2,500 for an upper primary school-going child, the figures for a child going to a government primary school are Rs 750 and to an upper primary school Rs 950. The government school-going child gets two sets of uniforms (summer and winter) from the princely sum of Rs 600 for the primary and Rs 700 for the upper primary level.

The unit costs seem to have followed an almost clinical approach without actually taking into account the need for favouring some components over others. For instance, the unit cost for building a separate toilet for girls, including provision for the disabled, is the same as that for building a toilet/urinal for boys in urban areas. Further, in residential schools for scheduled tribe (ST) children, the scheme does not budget for maintenance costs at all. Seemingly, residential schools for tribal children do not need any repairs.

The lack of adequate provisioning for key components is evident from many the examples mentioned. Additional illustrations can be found in the underfunding of salary costs of key implementing personnel such as cluster resource centre (CRC) persons, who are in charge of 18 schools in a block, and accountant-cum-support staff at the block resource centre (BRC) level who cater for 50 schools. Vital support in the form of maintenance costs gets reduced to Rs 2,000 at the CRC level from Rs 10,000 at the BRC level. Similarly, addressing the needs of children with disabilities is inadequately budgeted for with Rs 3,000 to cover providing an accessible education system to children with various kinds of disabilities.<sup>9</sup>

### Implementation Bottlenecks in SSA

Such design flaws are compounded when we see some of the implementation challenges that have plagued the SSA since the beginning.<sup>10</sup> These can be categorised as related to (i) the underutilisation of funds; (ii) the quality of fund utilisation; and (iii) the institutional and budgetary processes that constrain fund utilisation.

**(i) Fund Utilisation in SSA:** With regard to fund utilisation, although the SSA is significantly better in spending than other schemes, concerns regarding adequacy of spending persist. At the national level, the extent of fund utilisation under the SSA as a proportion of total funds available hovers at about 61% (2012-13).<sup>11</sup> Table 7 reveals that this trend has largely been unchanged in the past few years. A closer look at the state-level scenario reveals that several states are unable to utilise funds adequately – the major ones being Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Punjab, Uttarakhand and West Bengal.

It is useful to note that under the SSA, until 2009-10, disbursement of advances to the subsequent level of programme

implementation was treated as expenditure by the union government. While some states such as Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Chhattisgarh and Uttar Pradesh show a noticeable increase in their fund utilisation level, a breakdown of the expenditure data reveal that this is largely attributable to two factors – the recruitment of a large number of para-teachers, and better utilisation of funds in civil works, while comparable utilisation in other components is still not very high.

**Table 7: Fund Utilisation in Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (2008-09 to 2011-12)**

In Rs Crore	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
Total approved outlay	24,608.74	27,588.43	45,705.48	61,775.49
Total funds available	18,947.91	20,166.38	37,241.81	34,170.88
Total expenditure	19,043.09	21,038.19	31,353.44	27,140.40*
Fund utilisation as % of total funds available	100.5	104.3	84.2	79.4
Fund utilisation as % of approved outlays	77.4	76.3	68.6	43.9

\* Expenditure on the SSA in 2011-12 up to December 2011.

Source: Compiled from database at the SSA website, <http://ssa.nic.in/>

**(ii) Quality of Fund Utilisation in SSA:** To assess the quality of spending, we define some parameters of quality, such as skewed spending across financial quarters in a year, skewed spending across components, and skewed spending on non-wage components. In the case of the SSA, as in most other centrally-sponsored schemes (CSSS), most of the spending is in the third and fourth financial quarters. It is found that fund utilisation is better for components that are more in the nature of disbursements, such as teachers' salaries, school grants, maintenance grants, and teacher grants, while the expenditure is low for training and non-wage components such as monitoring and supervision, maintenance, and so on.

Another vital measure to judge the quality of spending is the distinction between wage and non-wage components. While wages/salaries are a critical component in the social sector, non-wage components such as communication, transport, or equipment are required to keep the system functioning smoothly. It has been observed that there is a tendency among the states to cut back non-wage spending to contain fiscal deficits. Low allocations under components such as monitoring and evaluation (M&E) also reflect poor trends in utilisation.

The BRC coordinator is a nodal officer at the block level for monitoring and supervision, who has to manage several expenditures such as towards electricity, conducting meetings, stationery, communication, and transportation within the stipulated amount of Rs 10,000 a year. With no provision for the BRC to have a telephone, a basic component to ensure effective monitoring, funds are underutilised, constraining effective implementation of the scheme. Similarly, the average workload of a CRC coordinator involves evaluating the needs of about 20 schools in a month with just 22-23 working days, irrespective of the distance, terrain, and other factors (for example, the district of Rajnandgaon in Chhattisgarh is in an area with social unrest and conflict). For this, the coordinator gets an annual maintenance grant of Rs 2,000, which translates to Rs 166 a month.

(iii) **Institutional and Budgetary Factors Constraining Fund Utilisation:** To facilitate drawing up recommendations for corrective measures, the major factors can be clubbed together under deficiencies in the process of decentralised planning; bottlenecks in budgetary processes; and systemic weaknesses.

(a) **Deficiencies in Planning:** In a district, owing to multiple plans being formulated and implemented, the true spirit of decentralised planning continues to be more of a concept.<sup>12</sup> Related to this is the problem of low community involvement. Since panchayat-level functionaries are responsible for the overall implementation of other schemes at the district level, such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme and the Ambedkar Gram Vikas Yojana, a sense of ownership of the SSA is absent among the staff. Delays involved in the planning process also derail the smooth implementation of the scheme.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the district plans do not often reflect the actual demands from the field, as they are mostly submitted in English and are the result of cut-and-paste jobs (so say officials in the state project office).

(b) **Bottlenecks in Budgetary Processes:** Several hurdles in the existing budgetary processes in the SSA impede effective fund utilisation. Weak reporting of financial information by the financial management staff is a vital gap.<sup>14</sup> Instances of irregularities in financial reporting, based on reports of internal audit and accounts, at the state level (Chhattisgarh) and at the district level (Rajnandgaon) for two years revealed the following gaps – delay in settlement of advances provided for procurement and other activities; mismatch between the fixed assets register and physical verification of assets; transfer of funds under school grants, teacher grants,

maintenance grants, and teaching learning equipment (TLE) grants to the accounts of BRCS and CRCs instead of directly to school accounts.

The capacity of the programme staff to undertake the financial processes related to the scheme are woefully inadequate. In this context, although village education committee members (VECs) are provided a few hours training that includes financial and accounting matters, it obviously is insufficient. To add to this, the programme delivery and accounts staff are overburdened with multiple reporting requirements. This is compounded by staff shortage and untrained staff. Overburdened accounts staff seems to be engaged most of the time in managing money in transit and ensuring that it is reported. The programme delivery staff, that is, the teachers, also have multiple non-teaching responsibilities that keep them away from providing quality education.

Further, problems related to weak monitoring and supervision also lead to ineffective implementation. The number of schools falling under the purview of one CRC is unwieldy and unmanageable.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, rigid norms and guidelines in the scheme also lead to poor fund utilisation and concomitantly poor outcomes. Stipulations under the SSA such as the need for the implementing agencies to provide a completion certificate to the accounts division, failing which money is treated as an advance in the records, compound the problem of utilisation. With an unsound monitoring mechanism and poor implementation at the grass-roots level, fund utilisation is poor.

The delay in fund transfers from one level of government to another is key to the discussion on ineffective implementation and inadequate fund utilisation. Illustrations from the field on the time taken for funds to move from the state headquarters to the district and further down to the implementing agency reveal that most of the money travels in the third and fourth

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quarters and remains parked for considerable periods in the district office account despite having been officially disbursed.<sup>16</sup> This substantiates the well-known problem of overburdened accounts staff engaged most of the time in managing money in transit.

**(c) Systemic Weaknesses:** Apart from the problems outlined above, a strong government apparatus is vital to the effective utilisation of funds and proper implementation of any programme.

Staff availability, a critical indicator to assess the progress of any scheme, remains a challenge. This is true of both the programme and accounts staff.<sup>17</sup> Related to the issue of staff shortage is the poor capacity of the available staff. The absence of adequately trained personnel to implement the programme is also reflected in the low priority given to this component in terms of finances.<sup>18</sup> Another aspect related to human resources is the short tenure of the key implementing officials of the programme. Findings from Lalitpur in Uttar Pradesh show that the tenure of many important government officials was short, with frequent transfers of key staff such as basic *shiksha adhikaris*, block development officers, and district magistrates – some had been in office for periods ranging from only 15-20 days to two or four days.

The second critical aspect related to systemic weaknesses is poor infrastructure. Lack of basic infrastructure, that is, buildings for schools, BRCs, CRCs and district institutes of education and training (DIETs), is one of the important factors responsible for the poor education indicators of states. The shortage of infrastructure leading to slow progress of the scheme remains

a concern (Table 2a and 2c). The delay in beginning civil works is another factor stalling scheme implementation. Many of the deadlines for compliance to the RTE norms expired on 30 March 2013 and it becomes clear that with inadequate financial provision, skewed progress on outputs, a flawed design that attempts to “subsume” the Act within the confines of rigid and unrealistic unit costs, and scant regard for inclusion, the fulfilment of this critical entitlement for so many children remains a distant dream.

The words of Chagla echo our fears. His apprehensions in 1964 remain as real today as they were almost half a century ago. We are still struggling to ensure the schools students go to are not hovels, with untrained teachers and bad textbooks, and no playground. Further, although we have not engaged with this theme in any detail, it is our considered view that the best way of ensuring the RTE is providing a good quality CSS, instead of the mind-boggling range of institutions we now have both in the government and private school systems. A graded and hierarchical approach to this extremely important right fundamentally violates it, and is reminiscent of the caste system.

The vision of a CSS as outlined in the report of the Bihar commission in 2007 holds the key to replacing multiple tiers of schools with a common system that will provide a level playing field to children from every socio-economic background.<sup>19</sup> The CSS vision translates into ensuring universal quality education to all children not only between the ages of six and 14, but also up to 18 years. This is what the country should strive towards in the name of the RTE for all, and not what is now almost like a charade of providing an important entitlement.

#### NOTES

- 1 EFA Global Monitoring Report (2010), “Reaching the Marginalized”, UNESCO, Paris.
- 2 Praveen Jha and Pooja Parvati (2010), “Right to Education Act 2009: Critical Gaps and Challenges”, *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol 45, No 13.
- 3 See <http://www.educationforallindia.com/CSSReport.pdf>
- 4 The Dakar Framework for Action (2000), “Education for All: Meeting Our Collective Commitments”, World Education Forum, Dakar, Senegal, 26-28 April, UNESCO.
- 5 Analysis of budgeted expenditure on education 2009-10 to 2011-12, Ministry of Human Resource Development, department of higher education, planning and monitoring unit, New Delhi, 2013.
- 6 There are three types of private schools in India. There are private aided and private unaided schools. Private aided schools are privately managed, but have teacher salaries and other expenses funded by government. Their teachers are paid at government teacher salary rates directly from the state government treasury and are recruited by a government-appointed education service commission rather than by the school. Private unaided schools are entirely privately managed and privately funded, and are of two types, recognised and unrecognised. These schools run on their revenue from fees.
- 7 ASER is an annual survey conducted since 2005 that aims to provide reliable annual

estimates of children’s enrolment and basic learning levels for each district and state in India.

- 8 Taking the union government allocations for the SSA in 2010-11 (Rs 15,000 crore), we divide the total projected population in the age group 5-14 years for 2011 as provided by the census (23.2 crore) and arrive at Rs 646. Since the SSA caters to the child population in the 6-14 age group, the figure would have to be adjusted accordingly. Kendriya Vidyalayas are government schools that specifically cater for children of union government employees who are posted in different parts of the country. They are meant to ensure that a minimum standard of quality schooling is available when employees are transferred from one place to another. A calculation of the costs for a Kendriya Vidyalaya versus government school was carried out by the author and is available at [http://cbgaindia.org/files/charter\\_of\\_demands/Charter%20of%20Demands%20for%20Union%20Budget%202010.pdf](http://cbgaindia.org/files/charter_of_demands/Charter%20of%20Demands%20for%20Union%20Budget%202010.pdf)
- 9 Data relating to unit costs for select components in the SSA can be obtained from the Working Group Report on Elementary Education and Literacy (2011): Twelfth Five-Year Plan, 2012-2017, Ministry of Human Resource Development, New Delhi, available at [http://planningcommission.nic.in/aboutus/committee/wrkgrp12/hrd/wg\\_elementary1708.pdf](http://planningcommission.nic.in/aboutus/committee/wrkgrp12/hrd/wg_elementary1708.pdf)
- 10 The analysis of the constraints impeding effective implementation of the SSA draws significantly from the findings of a UNICEF-supported

study, “Constraints in Effective Utilisation of Funds in the Social Sector: A Study on Rajnandgaon (Chhattisgarh) and Lalitpur (Uttar Pradesh)”, that was conducted by the CBGA in 2008. The findings have been published as a working paper and it is available at [http://www.cbgaindia.org/files/working\\_papers/SSA.pdf](http://www.cbgaindia.org/files/working_papers/SSA.pdf)

- 11 See [http://www.academia.edu/2948921/Sarva\\_Shiksha\\_Abhiyan\\_SSA\\_2013-14](http://www.academia.edu/2948921/Sarva_Shiksha_Abhiyan_SSA_2013-14)
- 12 In 2008-09, there were more than 125 Plan schemes implemented in Chhattisgarh while there were 336 Plan schemes operational in Uttar Pradesh.
- 13 Field observations reveal that the state project office (SPO) was left with just five months to implement the entire year’s plan in 2008 as the approval from the project approval board took more than six months to come through.
- 14 For details, see the UNICEF study cited in note 11.
- 15 According to the norms, one CRC caters for 10-12 schools. However, in Mohala block in Rajnandgaon district, there were 10 clusters and 400 schools, making each CRC cater for about 40 schools, making it impossible to do any effective monitoring.
- 16 The SPO Lucknow released funds to the DPO Lalitpur in a total of 29 instalments in 2007-08, but the DPO released this money in 19 instalments.
- 17 For details, see [www.cbgaindia.org](http://www.cbgaindia.org)
- 18 For details, see [www.cbgaindia.org](http://www.cbgaindia.org)
- 19 Report of the Common School System Commission, Government of Bihar, June 2007.