

Social diversity in itself is not the culprit but creates a deep-rooted predicament when combined with inequality



Panel Discussion of Report on Social Diversity and Learning Achievement: The Status of Primary Education in Rural Bihar, India, 2015

A panel discussion on the report titled, Social Diversity and Learning Achievement: The Status of Primary Education in Rural Bihar, India was held at IIC, Delhi on 22 April, 2015 and was organised by Deshkal Society in association with PACS, Poorest Areas Civil Society Programme, India. This discussion was an outcome of the study conducted by Deshkal Society on inclusive education in Gaya and Katihar districts of Bihar, India.

The issue of inclusive education in a diverse social space like Bihar and in India has been long debated and discussed. However, concrete data was needed to address the problem from a scientific point of view. Survey of schools in Gaya and Katihar districts was carried out to identify the key factors that influence the goal of inclusive

education. A more comprehensive analysis was required along with the need to map an effective strategy to take forward the findings of the report. Experts in the field of education were invited to initiate a dialogue based on the report.

While opening the discussion, Dr. Sudhirendar Sharma wondered why education was in the limelight, both for positive and negative reasons. Linking it with the issue of enrolment, he suggested the need for a multi-layered understanding of the data to analyse shortcomings and the further step ahead. Sanjay Kumar initiated the discussion with a brief history on the work of the Deshkal Society over the past decade. The need for developing such a report has been part of the society's focus on erasing marginalisation through advancement of human rights and social justice

The Panel

Sanjay Kumar, Secretary, Deshkal Society gave the welcome address whereas Prof. TK Oommen, Emeritus Professor of Sociology, Jawaharlal Nehru University chaired the panel discussion. Other panellists were Dr. Arvind K Mishra, Assistant Professor, Zakir Husain Centre for Educational Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University; Dr. Shushmita Dutt, Educationist and Consultant; Mr. Rajkumar Bidla, Head of Programme, Poorest Areas Civil Society Programme (PACS); Dr. S. Srinivasa Rao, Associate Professor, Zakir Husain Centre for Educational Studies (SSS), Jawaharlal Nehru University. Dr. Sudhirendar Sharma, Consultant, Author and Commentator moderated the discussion.

in school education. He further opined that an understanding of the report should improve school effectiveness and the quality of teaching-learning practices, resulting in enrolment and retention of out-of-school children.

Reflecting on the contents of the report, Dr. Arvind K Mishra elucidated that the report offers an in-depth analysis from the viewpoint of social psychology. Educational environment of the family, particularly of the parents has a direct correlation with the educational achievement of the children and the survey focussed mainly on first-generation learners. Social profile of these children — occupation of the parents, caste, economic and migration status, and so on — were concretised and linked to their academic standards. Through the gap created by social and hence, economic status, shadow-education or private tuition has crept in the existing system. Teacher-training should inculcate holistic views to nurture and preserve self-efficacy belief of the students. Advising against making a sweeping generalisation, Dr. Mishra concluded with the necessity of empirical study in other parts of the country to finally formulate policy regarding inclusive education.

Dr. Shushmita Dutt highlighted that if a student's dialect/ language conflicts with the medium of instruction used in classroom, then this failure of communication will be an impediment to the overall process of achieving inclusive education. Assessment survey is a diagnostic test

to locate defects in the system and pave way for improvement. Abandonment of stereotypical perception of intelligence will encourage the notion of multiple intelligence — emotional intelligence, kinetic intelligence, musical intelligence, intra- and inter-personal intelligence. Indian philosophers and educationists including Gijubhai or Rabindranath Tagore, had advocated ways in which children learn. Sociology of learning underlines that negating a child's knowledge background is enthusiasm to learn. Teacher training should thus incorporate intense counselling at multiple levels— to understand himself/ herself, the system and the student. Dr. Dutt also opined on gender disparity which inflicts all castes and economic classes and concentrates comparatively on education of male children.

Mr. Rajkumar Bidla stressed on the demand side rather than the supply side of the education system. PACS works with the demand side, collaborating with civil society organisations with the community-based organizations to create awareness about the national programme of the government. Children are the most receptive in an environment that is nurturing and accepting of all kinds of diversities, which includes social diversity also. Nevertheless, inclusion programmes should not be confined to mere addition of marginalised groups to the governance system but encompassed the compulsion for these groups to have a voice. There are deep-rooted stereotypes about socially-excluded groups and teachers should undergo training to deconstruct the concept of discrimination and deprivation in India. Schools in the rural areas are populated with students of such groups but the environment is not conducive to meet their needs. The introduction of Tola Sevaks has increased the enrolment but further steps to increase their network needs to be formulated. Capacity building and sensitisation of School Management Committee, as a statutory body, is crucial at the grassroots. Data of research should feed the government system and initiate advocacy in a wide range of area; either it is education, livelihood or health.

Dr. S. Srinivasa Rao examined the report from the viewpoint of sociology of education and relating it to pluralism and diversity. Emphasising the subject of quality education rather than enrolment and accessibility, Dr. Rao problema-

tised the concept of learning itself. Learning, in the context of formal school education, has numerous constraints and restraints. Homogenised definitions of learning perpetuate the theory that all learners are similar. Under such assumption, the teacher actually is a victim of this kind of perception. In a society where there are numerous kinds of hierarchy and inequalities, teacher training should incorporate these factors. Another important issue he highlighted was the failure of “one” standardized tests for assessing the learning ability of diverse students from varied backgrounds. Dr. Rao recounted his experience as an academic reviewer in discussing the shortcomings of standardized schooling. He said this was a case of the cultural capital that a child brings to school and the inability of teachers to address the differences in the various cultural capitals.

Prof. TK Oommen stressed the need to profile the universe of the study as representative for a larger area of analysis. He addressed the point that social diversity in itself is not the culprit but creates a deep-rooted predicament when combined with inequality. Hierarchy creates stratification and the condition is dismal when religious conversion has no affect on the caste status. Coming to the system of education in India, Prof. Oommen discussed the rise of a parallel system of private-tuitions which points to the dysfunction of Indian education system.

Answering to a question put forward by the audience, Dr. Mishra suggested that we have a tendency to blame teachers but teachers should not entirely bear the burden of system’s fault

lines. Teachers are governed by policy-makers who hardly take teachers’ needs and grievances into consideration while formulating policies. The challenges faced by teachers have increased as the numbers of students are more and diverse than it was a few decades ago. Referring to another question, Prof. Oommen gave an example of the state of Kerala, where enrolment is on the rise but it seems to feed only the statistical report but has no effect on the quality of education. Dr. Rao emphasised the need for a gender-specific survey to enhance reports on inclusive education. He also mentioned that shadow-system or private-tuition system, though widespread, does not necessarily upgrade the quality of education irrespective of the economic strata of the students’ family.

Panellists, experts and educationists present at the discussion agreed that mere enrolment is not a criterion for applauding the education system in the country. In a state like Bihar (and in the two districts, Gaya and Katihar) where stratification is rampant, inclusive education is a necessity but several factors are hindering its advocacy. The report is one of the first steps to achieve the goal of inclusive education. Panellists supported the idea of more studies and reports from other areas/states and then examine the system overall. The importance of teacher-training and the urgency to respect diversity in classroom were mentioned as a part of the recommendation. Among others, the loopholes in the system itself — from the inability to acknowledge multiple intelligences to issues of gender disparity — was examined.