Lessons in neglect

Though it is a tradition in India to tell children tales of the golden past when venerable sages taught their students in the shade of trees, deep inside the forest, everybody knows that today's schools or colleges cannot function like that. Students and teachers need classrooms, chairs and desks, libraries, laboratories, auditoria, hostels, gyms and computer terminals. These basic facilities are perhaps as important as teachers and, hence, a close look at the facilities available today will give a fairly good indication of the health of the country's education system.

PUCCA PROBLEM

First comes the building. According to data from the National University of Educational Planning & administration (NUEPA), nearly one-third of schools do not have a pucca building and classes are held in tents or under the open sky. This is not just true of schools in remote areas. Even in the national capital, an astonishing 43% of primary and middle schools do not have pucca structures. What is worse, the number of such schools is rising, presumably because the old buildings are slowly crumbling. Two years ago, in 2004-05, the proportion of such schools was less at 34%.

There is wide variation among different states, reflecting the priorities of the state governments, and the state of their finances. In UP, Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan and Karnataka over 90% of schools have pucca buildings. States with shockingly low proportion of pucca schools include Orissa (22%) and Assam (38%).

Just having the building is not enough. It has to be suitable for hundreds of energetic children to study in. Nearly 30% of classrooms were not in good condition. School buildings are better cared for in more prosperous states like Gujarat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Punjab and Haryana, but neglected in poorer ones like Bihar, Assam and Orissa.

Good or bad, are there enough classrooms in schools? On an average, there are 36 students per classroom in India, which is not bad. But, again there is wide variation among states. Bihar has the worst condition with 91 students crammed into each
classroom on average. Jharkhand, with 65 students is better, but still almost double the national average. West Bengal, UP and MP all have higher numbers than the national average. All these are high population states, but that only means that correspondingly adequate infrastructure is not being built. In fact, 16% of all schools in India, that is about 2 lakh schools, have over 60 students per classroom.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

It is almost seven years since providing cooked midday meals became mandatory in primary schools. That would imply schools need kitchens to do the cooking. Only in Tamil Nadu has attention been paid to this, as 80% of schools have separate kitchens. In West Bengal, 60% have kitchens. In most other states, 40-50% have no kitchen and cooking is done either in the open or in corridors and verandas. Punjab, Bihar and Haryana are the worst, with less than 10% of schools having kitchens. This is despite the fact that all that was being sought was a separate covered shed for cooking.

NOT A DROP TO DRINK

Over 85% schools have drinking water facilities, according to the survey. However, there may be many a slip between the tap and the lip. A recent report by Parivartan, a Delhi-based NGO, said that in a school in Delhi they found that although water lines were connected to the school, there were no taps, the openings were all plugged tight. Most states have reported that 80-100% schools have drinking water facilities. Some of the laggards are Assam with 38% and Jharkhand with 70% schools having no water.

LOO-MING ISSUE

The situation is much worse as far as toilets are concerned. About 42% of schools in India don't have even a common toilet for boys and girls. In Jharkhand, Assam and Chhattisgarh, nearly three out of four schools have no toilet. In Orissa and MP, more than half make do without toilets. Provision of separate toilets for girls was stressed to encourage girls — and their parents — to enroll in schools. However, only 43% of schools have them. In Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Bihar, over 80% of schools have no separate toilets for girls.

A CLICK AWAY

Since the country's IT prowess is receiving so much international attention, it is interesting that only 13% of schools had computers. In Kerala, 61% of schools had computers. About a quarter or more in Maharashtra, Gujarat, Punjab and Tamil Nadu have them. At the other end, in Bihar only 3% have computers. In Assam, UP, West Bengal, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh less than 6% have introduced their students to
Laboratories and teaching aids for science students are generally of very poor quality or even completely absent. According to a survey, about half the science teachers in schools complained of inadequate equipment and lack of emphasis on practical work.

COLLEGE CONUNDRUM

In colleges and universities, the situation is far better in terms of the basic necessities like buildings, classrooms, toilets and drinking water. All colleges have these, though maintenance is an issue. There are about 14,000 general colleges and about 3,000 professional colleges in India. General colleges can be recognized by the University Grants Commission if they meet certain minimum conditions of physical and academic facilities. Nearly 6,000 colleges have got such recognition. More stringent standards are laid down by the National Assessment & Accreditation Council (NAAC). About 20% of colleges and 40% of universities have so far been assessed and accredited by NAAC.

According to the NAAC, just 9% of colleges were of high quality, 66% were of medium quality and 24% were of low quality. Over 90% colleges have libraries. The number of books ranged from an average of over 15,000 titles in A grade colleges to about 6,500 titles among C grade ones. Since better colleges had more students, the availability of books per student actually was not that different — about 10 books per student in better colleges and 7 in bottom ranked colleges.

About 78% of colleges have computer centres. But even in the better colleges, a terminal is shared between 145 students, while in C grade colleges 546 students struggle to use one terminal.

Only about half the colleges have healthcare facilities and hostels. Only 10% have auditoria. Less than half offer welfare schemes for the more disadvantaged sections of students.

Better colleges organized 55 workshops and seminars for their students, compared to 17 such events in the poor quality colleges, on an average.

GOING THE DISTANCE

Given the severe constraints of funds and decline in physical infrastructure, policymakers seem to think that the problem can be resolved by distance education. According to the approach paper to the 11th Plan, it overcomes the infrastructure constraint. While distance education can be used to spread education, especially with the use of modern technologies, to make it the main plank of education just to save money would be disastrous. An indication of its limitation is the fact that despite enrollment of over 3.2 million students in the Indira Gandhi National Open University, the share of students...
passing out has dipped to just 18% in 2006. Among women, who make up the bulk of enrollment, only 2.5% passed.

(Courtesy: Special Reports, Times of India)