

The Question of Learning*

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It was just over a year ago, on Gandhi Jayanti 2014, that the schoolgirls of the Senior Secondary School of the town of Bhim, Rajasthan, went on strike. The young, fresh-faced and neatly groomed girls were far removed from anyone's idea of potentially rowdy protestors. Hundreds of them sat peacefully in rows on the road in front of the gate of the government school building, demanding something simple and straightforward: the opportunity to study. They claimed that for the last seven years, their schools had suffered a major shortage of teachers with no new appointments, to the point that at that point they had only three teachers for 700 students!

They chose October 2, because, as one of them points out in a [video recording](#) of some of that protest, Gandhiji had taught them to demand their rights and show they knew the importance of beginning their protest on that special day. "We have the Right to Education, but no teacher to teach!" they claimed as they marched. No Principal for 8 years, no teacher for Mathematics, Geography, Hindi, Computers, Sanskrit, or a host of other subjects that they would be examined on in their Board exams. According to them, their poor beleaguered teachers are so harried and overworked that they barely get time to eat during the day, let alone teach the children anything. They are able only to rush into different classrooms, get the pupils to open their books at a particular page and then rush off to the next class.

Some of them pointed out that they travelled 10-12 kilometres every day, spending about Rs 20 per day from surrounding villages just to reach and then attend this school, and yet were unable to learn anything. They asked why their school was being treated this way and is so much worse off than the boys' school in the same town: is it because they are girls and so their education does not matter? "We want to learn but there is nobody to teach us!"

The schoolgirls were determined: until the school got more teachers, they would camp out on the road and hold their "classes" there – and they appealed to their parents to similarly congregate outside the tehsil office for that purpose. As the protest stretched on and even expanded, the local administration promised that they would provide three more teachers by 7 October. If not, the girls were free to protest again. By 8 October, when no new teacher had arrived, the students were out on the road again. This time the authorities actually somehow hastily arranged for four more teachers to be transferred to this school within a few days (no doubt creating shortages somewhere else). The Sub-Divisional Magistrate promised the arrival of a Maths teacher the very next day. The staff strength would therefore be increased to 7 for the 700 students, with 14 posts still remaining vacant.

How could things come to this pass, in a country which has passed a Right to Education Act nearly a decade ago and in which all governments piously proclaim their interest in education? When our Prime Minister not only travels abroad to celebrate the achievers of that system who have gone abroad to succeed professionally but also promises to export teachers to other countries, like English teachers to Malaysia? What is happening in Rajasthan may be extreme, but it is symptomatic of a deep and cynical neglect of public education that persists in many

parts of the country, which is likely to have devastating consequences not only for the children but for the future of Indian society.

As it happens, the current state government of Rajasthan has been really niggardly in its approach to public spending. The budget for this year (2015-16) announces a surplus of Rs 557 crore compared to a deficit of Rs 4420 crore in the previous year, largely achieved through severe cuts in many crucial areas of public spending. However, the budget allocations themselves are not good indicators, since last year the state actually spent only around 60 per cent of its budget allocation on social sector expenditure, including on education.

The state government is also remarkable in that [according to reports](#), it has barely spent any money out of the Centre's Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyaan (RMSA) that is designed to make secondary education universal. Indeed, in 2014-15 only 6 per cent of sanctioned works under the RMSA, which had been cleared in previous financial years, were completed. Nor does the state utilize fully the money available from other schemes like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Mid-Day Meal programme, special grants for model schools or the Prarambhik Shiksha Fund. So even as the Union government has slashed allocations from its schemes like SSA by 21 per cent and on the Mid-Day Meal programme by 30 per cent in the Union budget 2015-16, the government of Rajasthan simply does not use even the money still available to it.

Indeed, total education budget outlay for Rajasthan in the current year is only Rs 21,788 crore for education in 2015-16, which is nowhere near sufficient either to meet the obvious gaps in infrastructure or teachers, or do anything to improve the quality of teaching and therefore learning outcomes. As a result, the state has not filled any of the approved teachers' posts in government schools in the past two financial years.

Enrolments in government schools have fallen sharply from 75 per cent of all enrolment in 2006 to only 58 per cent in 2014. This is not surprising, as teacher-student ratios and learning outcomes in the government schools fall behind due to lack of infrastructure and adequate numbers of trained teachers. The sheer numbers of vacancies of teachers are completely shocking: out of 4586 positions of Principal, 2027 are vacant; 3535 post of Headmaster have not been filled out of 9442; there are 20,908 vacancies for senior teachers out of a total of 69884 posts; for teachers, 6451 out of 12583 positions remain unfilled.

The outcomes are expectedly poor, given such low levels of government investment and apparent lack of interest. The percentages of girls and boys passing the Class X Board examinations in 2014 were only 69 per cent and 71 per cent respectively, lower than most states, including Bihar. The [ASER](#) surveys provide even bleaker assessments of learning outcomes. In terms of reading, in 2006 only 55 per cent of children in Class V could read a text of Class II level – but this proportion declined further to only 47 per cent in 2014. In 2006 only 37 per cent of children in Class V could do simple division – but by 2014 only 24 per cent of them could do so. In terms of comprehension, the capacity of children in Class V to read and understand sentences fell from 21 per cent to 15 per cent.

Clearly, something has to be done urgently before another entire generation loses out on educational opportunity. In this context, the [Shiksha ka Sawal](#) Campaign in Rajasthan provides a ray of hope. The campaign is a joint initiative of the Right to

Information Abhiyaan and the Right to Education movement, an umbrella of many local groups and organizations that have combined with the Rajasthan Patrika newspaper to find out whether the promises of the Right to Education Act are being minimally met. RTI applications are being filed in every government school in the state, across all districts in both rural and urban areas.

Six basic questions are being asked: How many pupils are enrolled and how many are actually attending the school? What is the number of teaching positions compared to students, and how many are vacant? Does the school have facilities for drinking water? Is there a playground with a boundary wall? Are there separate and functional toilets for boys and girls? Do the School Management Committee and the School Development Committee actually function? These are simple questions, easy to understand and to reply to, but they do provide important information about the ability of that school to fulfill the basic conditions required by the Right to Education Act.

The answers are predictably dire, but they are forming the basis of the ongoing campaign to improve the conditions of government schools in Rajasthan. Indeed, media coverage has ensured greater public knowledge of the conditions prevailing in schools and the associated public outcry has already forced the government to respond to some extent.

Not all the response has been desirable, though. The story told at the start of the piece does not yet have a happy ending. Of the four new teachers brought in after the protest in Bhim, three have already been transferred out again. At the same time, one of the senior teachers who had helped the students to protest has been punished by being transferred out to another district.

Meanwhile, in Chauru town of Tonk district in Rajasthan, an even more dreadful story is unfolding. The girls of the senior secondary school there had gone on a similar protest demanding more teachers in the face of very large shortages. On 30 September, police were sent to lathi charge the girls, at the very time when they were supposed to meet the District Collector and the District Education Officer to discuss their problems.

This is shameful and beyond belief. Young girl students who were peacefully demanding their right to quality education and protesting against the dismal situation in their schools have been met not with sympathy, understanding and an official urge to rectify matters as soon as possible, but with physical and psychological violence.

Unfortunately Rajasthan is not alone among state governments in this cavalier attitude to public education. And even the central government has indicated in its resource allocation how little it values this most essential item of spending. Obviously, implementing the Right to Education in both letter and spirit is going to be a difficult struggle. But the costs of not implementing it are too great for our society, and so it is important for every citizen, not just in Rajasthan but across the country, to be actively involved in securing it.

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