

# Status of Elementary Education in Bihar

A Study by

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and**

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Yudhisthira, if asked today, would have been a bit confused to choose the correct answer of the Yaksha's question – what is the greatest wonder? His answer - despite being fully aware of the inevitability of death people don't want to die - would have been competed by a single word, Bihar. It's the land where flourished during 5<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century CE the world centre of excellence Nalanda, it is the land where scientist of Aryabhata's stature carried out his mathematical and astronomical pursues, and more so, it was the kingdom where the royal massages were conveyed to the public through edicts, which, according to Jawaharlala Nehru, "speak to us in a language we can understand and appreciate."<sup>2</sup> Despite the destruction of Nalanda, the connection of the land with literary activities seem to have continued: even though a one liner, "Good paper is here [in Rajgir] manufactured", a mention in Abul Fazl-i- Allami,'s momentous work the *Ain-i-Akbari*<sup>3</sup> proves the strength of this connection. Would not it make Yudhisthira wonder that this land that

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<sup>1</sup> The study was led by P.P Ghosh of Asian Development Research Institute (ADRI) and Kumar Rana of Pratichi (India) Trust. The fieldwork was carried out during June-October 2010. It received many different supports from Shaibal Gupta, member secretary, ADRI, Antara Dev Sen, Managing Trustee, and other research team members of the Pratichi (India) Trust.

<sup>2</sup> Nehru, Jawaharlal (2003[1934-35]), *Glimpses of Worls History*: Oxford University Press, New Delhi, pp 64-5

<sup>3</sup> Abul Fazl-i-Alami.... *Ain -i-Akbari, Volume II, Bibliotheca Indica*, The Asiatic Society, Calcutta.... pp....

had such profound literary connection is now reduced to a state where more than 50 percent of its population is simply devoid of letters? Even painful is to see more than two third of the women suffer from a basic infirmity – incapability of reading, writing and arithmetic calculations.

At the same time, however, as a devotee of knowledge, Yudhhisthira, would have been pleased to see that Bihar has been trying to improve the status of education in the state. Public commitment towards an improved delivery of elementary education has at least received sincere recognition from the government. Opening of new schools, appointment of teachers, declaring newer incentive schemes, etc. are the initiatives that seem to have sent a message to the parents and others about this public commitment.

The intentions of the government was first expressed through the constitution of a Commission on Common Schooling System in August, 2006, with the objective of preparing a plan of action for implementing a such a System which will ensure universalisation of elementary education by 2012-13. Unfortunately, the state government did not accept all the recommendations of the Commission, mainly because of its financial constraints. But starting from 2006-07, it had made a number of interventions in the elementary education system to improve its functioning.

One has to wait till 2011 census how the programme has impacted the elementary education in Bihar, but in the meantime, it was thought desirable to undertake a study to know not only the current status of elementary education in Bihar, but also identify some of its crucial deficiencies. The Pratichi (India) Trust and the Asian Development Research Institute (ADRI), Patna had conducted such a study in Bihar during July-September, 2010. The specific objectives of the study were

- (a) prepare an operational profile of primary and upper primary schools in Bihar in terms of their resource base (physical and person-power) as well as reach and quality of their services,
- (b) identify the organisational, social and infrastructural constraints that are operating on the elementary education system, and
- (c) analyse the role of various stakeholders of the system of elementary education.

The study was conducted in five districts of Bihar— Bhojpur, Bhagalpur, Gopalganj, Madhubani and Katihar. In each district, 6 villages were chosen for collecting data on village characteristics (30 villages), schools (31 schools) and household information on educational practices (900

households). A draft report of the study has already been prepared. Pending its finalisation, the important conclusions of the study are presented below.

## **Background**

With a population of 83.0 million in 2001 (projected to be 103.3 million in 2010), Bihar is the third most populous state in India, next to Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra. As regards the social composition of population, the three specially disadvantaged social groups (Muslims, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) account for 33.1 percent of its population, compared to 39.8 percent in Uttar Pradesh and 53.7 percent in West Bengal, two of Bihar's neighbouring states. From this, however, one should not conclude that the burden of specially disadvantaged social groups is relatively less in Bihar, since such groups are even more disadvantaged in Bihar than their counterparts in Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. For example, the literacy rate for SCs is only 28.5 percent in Bihar, much less than in Uttar Pradesh (46.3 percent) and West Bengal (59.0 percent). The Muslims in Bihar are also more disadvantaged than in those two states (one of the major reasons behind this is probably the land-relationship and subsequent occupational pattern: among the Scheduled Castes in Bihar, UP and WB, of the total workers cultivators form 7.9%, 31 % and 20% respectively. The corresponding figures for the agricultural labourers for Bihar, UP and WB are 77.6%, 42.5% and 38% respectively).



But thanks to the recent interventions, the elementary education system now seems to have covered nearly the entire child population in Bihar, including those from the disadvantaged sections of the population.

### **Recent Interventions in Elementary Education**

The most important intervention of the state government was to increase the number of schools and teachers. For schools, the intervention had two components — first, establishment of new primary schools in unserved areas second, upgrading some of the primary schools to start upper primary classes. Thus, within three years, the availability of schools was just doubled — number of schools per 1 lakh population had increased from 60.2 in 2005-06 to 114.3 in 2008-09. Between the primary and upper primary schools, the expansion was larger for the latter — compared to 2.1 thousand upper primary schools in 2005-06, there were 27.2 thousand of them in 2008-09, implying a thirteen-fold increase. The expansion of primary schools, in contrast, was only 48.4 percent, from 51.7 thousand in 2005-06 to 79.8 thousand in 2008-09. The urgency for upper primary schools was to prevent large dropouts between Standards V and VI, because of non-availability of such a school within a manageable distance in many villages.

Along with the expansion of schools, the state government had also decided to recruit 1.50 lakh additional teachers in elementary schools. By 2008-09, 1.18 lakh teachers were already appointed, bringing their number from 2.05 lakh in 2005-06 to 3.23 lakh. By now, it is very likely that the state government has recruited the remaining 0.32 lakh teachers, bringing their strength to 3.54 lakh. Assuming that each school has at least one teacher per class, the total requirement in elementary schools in Bihar is about 4.80 lakh teachers, **indicating the present shortfall of about 1.26 lakh teachers.**

Initially, the incentive for elementary education in Bihar included absence of tuition free, provision of free textbooks and scholarships for students belonging to scheduled castes/tribes. The Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS), which was operational since 1995 as a form of distributing dry ration, was launched in 2005 as a real Mid-day Meal programme to serve cooked food in the primary schools. **However, the implementation of the programme, as we shall see below, is yet**

**to be fully satisfactory.** To promote elementary education further, the state government, has introduced yet another scheme in 2005-06 which provided for free uniform to all the students in Standards III-V (Rs. 500 per student per year) and to only girl students in Standard VI-VIII (Rs. 750 per girl student per year). This scheme has become extremely popular.



Mid-day Meal in progress at schools

### **Child Enrolment and Attendance: Achievement and Concern**

The immediate consequence of the expansion of the schooling system was enhanced enrolment of children (6-14 years). The official data records that the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for primary classes has increased for 92.1 in 2005-06 to 95.9 in 2008-09. In case of upper primary classes, the enhancement in GER was even higher — from 32.0 percent (2005-06) to 92.7 percent (2008-09). The enrolment ratio, as obtained from the **present survey**, is found to be even higher — 98.1 percent for all children (6-14 years). The share of three different types of schools in the total enrolment is as follows — government schools (94.1 percent), private schools (5.7 percent) and Madarsas (0.2 percent). It should be noted here that, considering the high level of poverty in rural Bihar, a share of 5.7 percent for private schools is quite significant. If this is a concern this is no less an opportunity: for it shows a high inclination of the parents towards their children's acquiring "quality" education. As happens elsewhere section of parents evaluate the quality of education delivered in the public primary schools to be poor and opt for private schools; indeed this is a phenomenon that percolates down from the urban to the rural areas. English medium education is also a major attraction of the private schools.

The enrolment of children, however, does not necessarily mean their regular attendance in schools. Based on schools records, it was found that the average attendance in a day is only 61.6 percent of

enrolment. A proper implementation of the Mid-day Meal scheme should contribute to a greater level of attendance – as has been the case elsewhere.

As regards the reasons for absence, the teachers blame parental indifference (25.8 percent) and inadequate infrastructure or poor functioning of MDMS (46.9 percent). The parents, on the other had, identify domestic work (22.5 percent), lack of interest of the child (32.1 percent) and illness (88.3 percent) as major reasons for children missing the schools. (The parents were allowed to mention multiple reasons). That illness is a major reason for irregular attendance is indeed alarming.

Because of several limitations, the learning achievements of the students are rather limited in Bihar. According to one indicator of learning, viz., number of students passing the highest class, it was found that the average for such students was only 23.6 for primary and 42.4 for upper primary schools. With an average enrolment of about 60 students in Standards V and VIII, the approximate pass out rates are 40 and 65 percent for primary and upper primary schools respectively. These rates are indeed low and demand further strengthening of elementary education system in Bihar

### **Social Segmentation of Education**

Many children are born to parents who are seriously disadvantaged, both economically and socially. At one hand, poverty implies inadequate financial resources to support children's education; on the other, the social disadvantage in the form of parental illiteracy means that the young children are wholly dependent on learning inputs from the schools. This obviously leads to considerable social segmentation of education where, even with same educational infrastructure, children from different households are able to obtain varying educational opportunities.

For perpetuating the social segmentation of education, what probably matters most is the parental education status of children. It is observed from the present survey that, for 42.9 percent of children, both of their parents are illiterate. There are about 34.3 percent of children at least one of whose parents (generally father) is literate. Assuming that about half of them are not able to help their children in studies (after all, many of them are only very modestly literate), the proportion of effective “first generation learners” in Bihar will be around 60 percent of the total school-going children. This is one of the most difficult challenges in Bihar.





The economic and social disparities among the parents, besides implying varying endowments, sometimes also imply attitudinal differences. For example, regarding the level of education that parents desire for their children, one observes considerable difference between illiterate and literate parents, both for girls and boys. To begin with, it is first observed that elementary education (i.e., passing Standard VIII) is considered to be insufficient by all parents, be it for boys or girls. But the gender discrimination is displayed thereafter even by literate parents. Consider, for example, the fact that while 36.9 percent of illiterate parents would like their sons to be at least a graduate, for the daughters, the figure is much lower at 15.2 percent. Similarly, while 63.7 percent of the literate parents would like their sons to be at least a graduate, for the daughters, the figure is again much lower at 38.5 percent.

One of the principal factors, perpetuating the social segmentation of education, is the availability of learning inputs at home for young children. It was found from the survey that 61.1 percent of the children did not receive any help at home: of them 30.1 percent, however, were “fortunate” to have received help from a private tutor. Combining the above observations, it emerges that nearly 40 percent of all the school-going children are in need of some teaching help at home, but are not able to receive it – either from parents or relatives or from private tutors. Such deficiencies for the disadvantaged social groups are most likely to widen the social segmentation of education. Unfortunately, the present elementary education system in Bihar does not allow for learning inputs at schools which are so adequate that it compensates for absence of similar inputs at home.

## **Gender Discrimination**

In case of desired level of education for their children, discussed earlier, the parents had shown considerable gender discrimination in favour of their sons. Those responses were indeed related to their attitudes, not behaviour. From the responses related to their behaviour regarding teaching help provided to their sons and daughters, one again observes much gender discrimination, both for teaching help provided by household members and engaging the services of a private tutor for such help. At one end, while 57.8 of the boy students did not receive any teaching help at home, the corresponding figure for girls was a higher at 65.4 percent. In the next step, about half (45.6 percent) of the boy students, unaided by any family members, had the privilege of a private tutor; in contrast, only 14.3 percent of the similarly placed girl students had a private tutor. Again, combining the above figures, it emerges that almost every 1 out of 4 boy students in elementary classes has a private tutor, but for the girls students, it was available for only 1 out of 10. This gender discrimination is indeed very wide. Finally, when one considers the private expenditure on children's education, it emerges that the annual expenditure on boy students (Rs. 1456) is 23.1 percent higher than the for girl students (Rs. 1183).

Gender discrimination is probably a major reason for Bihar's educational backwardness: though in 1951 Bihar started at par with the Indian average of 16 percent literacy the gender gap of literacy in Bihar was much higher than the all India rate, and this trend continued to contribute negatively to the educational progress of Bihar. In 2001, the all India female literacy rate went up to 54 percent – which is still lower – but Bihar's female literacy rate is still struggling at 33 percent. So, the present government's priority for the girl students may yield some good result; but that would address only the lower age group; there perhaps a strong need for addressing the issue of adult female (also male) illiteracy.

## **Functioning of Schools**

The educational progress of children depends on the environment at their homes at one hand and then on the educational facilities available to them at their schools. The present survey has, therefore, also collected a number of relevant information on the functioning of the schools.

## Pre-School Education



Pre-school education is a critical component of any effective education policy; by inculcating some desired habits and values, the pre-school education significantly contributes to retention of children in schools and raises their educational achievements.

In Bihar, the only programme through which the task of pre-school education is addressed is the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) which also has a nutrition component. According to the latest official data, relating to the year 2008-09, for the targeted child population about 86 lakh in the age-group 3-6 years, there were 91.6 thousand Anganwadi Centres (AWC) in Bihar. Since each AWC is expected to serve only 40 children, the total capacity of the existing AWCs is about 36 lakh, **implying a coverage of only 41.8 percent.**

**As per the present survey, it is found that the coverage of AWC is 48.7 percent** of children, which is fairly close to the official estimate. In response to the enquiry about why some children were not attending AWCs, it was found that in about half the cases, it was because of non-availability of AWC in the neighbourhood. Another important reason, mentioned by about one-fourth of the respondents, was irregular functioning of the centres.

### School Infrastructure

Because of substantial increase in the number of schools in Bihar since 2005-06, the children in the age-group 6-14 years are now fortunate to have a school within a reasonable distance from their residence. But the hope that is raised because of wider availability of schools gets diminished when one finds that the existing infrastructural facilities in the schools are very inadequate. For the primary schools, not less than one-fifth of the buildings are not owned by the school and an equal proportion of schools function in non-waterproof buildings. Indeed, in extreme cases, some primary classes are held not in a building, but just under a tree or a make-shift shed. Some of the other major infrastructural deficiencies found in the survey are schools (i) without drinking water facility within the premises (30 percent), (ii) without toilet (60 percent), (iii) without separate toilet for girls (100 percent), (iv) without blackboards in all classrooms (20 percent) and (v) without adequate teaching kit (85 percent). The average number of classrooms in the primary school is only 2.8 for 5 classes. The students of Standards I and II almost everywhere share a single classroom and such sharing is necessary by students of Standards III and IV in many schools. Finally, it should be noted that in all the primary schools, there is no furniture in classrooms; the

students have to sit on the floor which is generally dusty. The average number of students enrolled in a class is about 60. Thus combining two classes in a single room demands space for about 120 students. The average size of a classroom is never big enough to accommodate all of them. But if the schools are able to function even with such limited space, it is mainly because of large number of students are absent from the school on a typical day.

In case of upper primary schools, the existing infrastructure is certainly better, but some essential facilities are also wanting in many of the schools. For example, about one-fourth of the upper primary schools do not have a boundary wall and about one-third of them cannot be safely locked. A few other figures indicating serious infrastructural deficiencies in upper primary schools are — schools without drinking water facility within premises (18.2 percent), without toilet (45.5 percent) and without separate toilet for girls (81.8 percent). As regards classrooms, an upper primary school has an average of 5.4 of them to accommodate 8 classes. Here again, students of lower classes are required share their classrooms.

### Teaching Personnel

A school can possibly function properly even without a completely satisfactory physical infrastructure, but there cannot be any substitute for the teachers in a school. Unfortunately, the present survey shows that the strength of teaching personnel for the elementary schools in Bihar is very inadequate.

To begin with, the average number of teachers in a primary school is only 3.6, against the average number of sanctioned posts of 5.4 teachers. With nearly one-third of the teachers' posts lying vacant, multi-grade teaching is very wide which is an obvious deterrent for quality learning inputs. In case of upper primary schools, the average number of teachers per school is 7.1. Since an upper primary school has 8 classes, this teacher strength may appear to be relatively better. But the number of teaching periods in upper primary schools is more and no teacher can afford to engage classes throughout the schooling hours; as such, the teacher strength of 7.1 again implies serious teacher shortage in these schools. Against the sanctioned strength of 12.1 teachers per school, the teacher shortage in upper primary schools is more than 40 percent. To make the situation worse, the average attendance of primary school teacher was found to be 83.3 percent and that of upper primary school teachers was even lower at 76.7 percent. Applying these ratios on the average

number of teachers, it emerges that the average 'effective' teacher strength on a working day in schools are — 2.9 teachers in primary schools and 5.4 teachers in upper primary schools. This inadequate teacher strength in elementary schools is therefore seen to be the result of government's inability to recruit more teachers at one hand and wide absenteeism among the employed teachers.

Considering genderwise distribution, the present survey found that female teachers now account for close to 40 percent of the total strength of teachers, their presence being slightly higher among the teachers in the primary schools. During the appointment of additional teachers since 2005-06, 50 percent of the posts were reserved for females and this has greatly helped in ensuring a reasonably high proportion of females in the total teacher strength. Considering their religion and caste background, it emerges that the dominance of the upper caste Hindus in the elementary schools in Bihar, a phenomenon that was present in the not too distant past, is now considerably reduced. Presently, only about one-fifth of the elementary school teachers in Bihar belong to the upper caste Hindus, and this share is only a little more than their share in the overall population.

From the distribution of teachers by secondary occupation, it is observed that cultivation or animal husbandry is a secondary occupation for no less than 39.4 percent of teachers. In addition, there are another 28.4 percent teachers who have other kinds of secondary occupation, including social work. This leaves only 32.2 of the teachers who pursue their profession without any distractions. Between the teachers of primary and upper primary schools, it is the latter group among whom a secondary occupation is more common.

Yet another limitation of the elementary school teachers in Bihar is their inadequate academic qualifications. One would normally expect graduation to be the minimum qualification of a teacher in both primary and upper primary schools. But, in the primary schools of Bihar, only 43.4 percent of the teachers are graduates; even in upper primary schools, the share of graduate teachers is only 58.1 percent.

### Teachers' absenteeism

The average degree of absenteeism among the teachers, in the week prior to our visit, was 17 percent and 24 percent respectively for the primary and middle schools. Inspection:

Another important aspect of the functioning of the schools is the weak inspection system: of the total schools visited 10 percent of the primary and 18 percent of the middle schools were not at all visited by any inspecting or other official during the year prior to the survey.

### Extent of Private Tuition

In view of the unsatisfactory functioning of the schools and the social disadvantages that many students suffer from, the practice of private tuition is fairly wide in rural Bihar. We had earlier found that nearly one out of every four boy students and one out of every ten girl students in rural Bihar receive private tuition. On being asked about their opinion about the practice, 45.5 percent of the teachers in upper primary schools thought it to be desirable, and 54.5 percent were indifferent to the practice, none of them considering it to be undesirable. In contrast, the opinion of the primary teachers was more divided — desirable (65.0 percent), indifferent to the practice (15.0 percent) and undesirable (20.0 percent). It, thus, appears that these teachers are quite aware about the inadequacy of learning inputs that the students are able to acquire at their schools.

The survey also revealed that 6.6 percent of the primary school teachers and 10.4 percent among those employed in upper primary schools offer private tuition. These proportions are indeed low, compared to the proportion of students receiving private tuition, as reported earlier. This leads to the conclusion that a large number of private teachers are probably moderately educated unemployed youth in rural Bihar.

### Incentive Schemes

Now, there are four incentive schemes for the students in elementary schools in Bihar — Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS), Free Textbooks, Free Uniform and Scholarship. The first two are for all students, Free Uniform is for all students in Standard III-V and girl students in Standards VI-VIII, and finally, the Scholarships are for students belonging to scheduled caste/tribes. The coverage of the first two schemes is more than 70 percent, but the coverage of the MDMS has shown some decline in recent years. In most of the surveyed schools the programme was launched but stopped. In most of the schools it was served irregularly and there were lots of complaints about the quality of the meals served. Indeed, according to the state government's own presentation before the Mid-day Meal Programme Approval Board, Government of India, in 2009-10 there was a difference of

43 days between the approved days of serving the meal and the actual days it was served on.<sup>4</sup> Of the total allotted foodgrains for the programme only 19 percent was lifted in the first 9 months of the year (as on 31.12.2009)<sup>5</sup>.

Among the eligible ones, free uniform and scholarship are available to about half the students. A wider coverage of these schemes could promote more regular attendance of the students in the schools, now that enrolment is found to be near universal.

### Participation in School Governance

The constitution of a Vidyalay Shiksha Samity (VSS) is mandatory for all elementary schools in Bihar. As per the statute, it should have 15 members — parents (9), non-parents (3), representative of local PRI (2) and the headmaster (1). Nearly all the schools in the sample had a VSS, but most of them have completed their term of three years. In the absence of fresh elections, these bodies are now dysfunctional. In addition the VSS, the Gram Panchayats (GP) are also assigned some responsibilities to monitor the working of local elementary schools. The newly recruited teachers popularly known as Panchayat Teachers, are also paid their salary by the GPs. But because of their other numerous responsibilities, the Mukhiyas are not able to pay any attention to the local schools. In fact, most GPs do not even care to form a Committee on Education, as mandated by the state government. However, the headmasters of about one-fourth of the sample schools reported that parents often provide help to the schools through ensuring attendance of students and even improving school infrastructure.

### **Conclusion**

With the substantial expansion of elementary schools in Bihar since 2006-07, in terms of both number of schools and teachers, the enrolment of students in the age-group 6-14 years is now nearly universal. But unfortunately, the attendance of the students is very irregular and their learning achievements are also low. The most important constraint faced by the elementary schools is the shortage of teachers, followed by their inadequate infrastructure. When these constraints are removed, the teachers will hopefully display more professional commitment,

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<sup>4</sup> [www.educationindia.nic.in/elementary/mdm/PAB\\_2010-11.htm](http://www.educationindia.nic.in/elementary/mdm/PAB_2010-11.htm)

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

raising the quality of education in the schools. Towards wider participation of people in the governance of elementary schools, fresh election should be held for the now defunct VSSs and, secondly, the Gram Panchayats should also be instructed to monitor the functioning of the local schools. Another important and urgent policy intervention could be a committed move towards enhancing adult literacy, particularly adult female literacy, which could certainly give a boost to translating the parental aspiration into actual achievements.

The previous government has recently been re-elected for another term. Their performance in the previous term has paid them valuable political benefits and one, therefore, hopes they will make further efforts to strengthen the elementary schooling system in Bihar and free the state of the evils of illiteracy.

