

India begins to learn; Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan succeeds

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THE Sarva Shiksha Abhiyana has generated an unprecedented awareness about education. This intense school-community interface might lay the foundation for a sustained progress towards providing everyone with quality education.

The first joint review Mission that visited eight major sample states in February, 2005, found that the programme had generated considerable interest and commitment and put elementary education on the development agenda. The political executive, governmental functionaries, departments of education, are all involved in not only implementing the programme, but also moulding it to suit state-specific situations.

Enrollment drives, learning-achievement surveys, alternative learning situations like bridge courses and Shishu Shiksha Kendras illustrate how the states have adopted the national outlook. Additional teachers, bigger, better buildings; new teaching/learning material and PTA meetings have increased community participation in school development. The enrollments has also gone up, attendance of students and teachers has improved and accountability has been enhanced.

The SSA, according to the review, has improved access to schooling: Contextualised approach has helped establish schools in even remote areas and for hitherto unreached populations. Education guarantee scheme centres in deep forests, isolated islands and hilly terrain have changed the socio-cultural matrix of many communities.

The programme has also brought forth a dedicated group of educated youth acting as instructors in the interior.

Their knowledge of culture, language and the social mores of the communities has helped them establish a rapport with the groups of learners, resulting in the enrollment of a large number of first-generation learners.

In the eight states that the mission visited, the number of out of school children, nearly 12 million in January 2003 had come down to three million in just two years. New schools, EGS centres and early childhood education (ECE) facilities brought education closer to communities.

Barring a few exceptions like West Bengal, the pupil-teacher ratio is approaching a manageable 40:1. Schools have become more child-friendly and teachers have increasingly become aware of the efficacy of child-centred, activity-based pedagogy. Textbooks have now given way to workbooks and supplementary material.

The SSA has brought together an increasing number of NGOs and civil society partners into a collaborative relationship. Wider participation based on a shared vision and commitment to mission goals is perhaps the most crucial factor that can ensure sustainability of the national endeavour.

However, aligning all activities of the mission goals is central to accelerating reforms. Civil works, that absorb about one-third of SSA funding, should be treated as an integral part of the learning environment. With gross enrollment ratio reaching 100 per cent, the attention should now shift to attendance and prevention of dropout. The classroom processes hold the key for this, as considerable work remains to be done.