

## **Para Teacher Scheme and Quality Education for All in India: The Policy**

### **Perspectives and Challenges for School Effectiveness**

*Dr. Saroj Pandey,*

*Reader,*

*Deptt. of Teacher Education and*

*Extension*

*N.C.E.R.T., New Delhi-16 (India)*

Vygotsky's (1978,1987) socio-cultural theory of learning entails, that, learning occurs through social interactions as learners engage in culturally meaningful, productive activity with the responsive assistance of a more competent other. There is ample research evidence to indicate that teachers and students who share a common primary language, cultural understanding and experiences may be better able to develop inter subjectivity necessary for effective meditation. It is also empirically established that teacher's lack of knowledge of students' languages, cultures and communities result in deficiency perspective and inhibits in development of close relationship with students. The relationship between minority children and teachers have often been reported strained (Heath, 1983; Phillips, 1983; Valenzuela, 1999; Mc Quillan (1981). Valenzuela (1999) found that majority of the Maxican and Chicano students in her study believed, that, their teachers did not care about them because they failed to address the students' broader needs and social concerns. The underlying philosophy behind the appointment of para teachers in various countries and the para teacher scheme in India has been that a local person appointed as teacher is better able to establish good rapport with the local community. Monzo and Rueda (2001) working on Latino para educators found, that, sharing the culture, language, and experiences of their students helped them to relate with student in meaningful ways. These para educators are generally members of the same or similar community in which they teach, and therefore, share many of the experiences and cultural practices of their students, including their primary languages and cultural practices etc. In India, the state of Rajasthan has successfully been able to overcome the problem of teacher shortage and teacher absenteeism through these para professionals under the 'Shiksha Karmi Project' which is also the origin of para teacher scheme in the country.

The use of para professionals/educators in the field of education is not new as, both, developed and developing countries utilise the services of these professionals though the context and their service conditions differ widely. The report of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty First Century (1996) recommends using members of the community as auxiliary teachers or para professionals within the school system as one form of community participation. The report further highlights, that, the use of a teacher recruited from the community to work alongside a government appointed teacher has proved to be very successful in countries like Guinea, and Mozambican refugees in Zimbabwe. Para teachers are quite popular in developed countries like USA and UK also. But the context in which para teachers are used in developed and developing countries is entirely different even if the basic principle remains the same. The 'Project PARA' of the University of Nebraska Lincoln (UNL), for instance, defines para teacher as 'an individual who serves under the direction of a teacher as an assistant in the educational process'. The project considers para educators as a viable means for enriching services to students if programmes are systematically planned and personnel are properly trained. The use of the term para educators' by Monzo and Rueda (2001) indicates school personnel hired to directly assist students in the classroom. Often they are referred to as teaching assistants, para professionals, or instructional aides. Para educators in many developed countries are being employed in increasing numbers as a means of extending services to students, in addition to the teachers, and they have well defined roles and responsibilities. In UK for instance classroom assistants work alongside experienced and qualified teachers.

On the contrary, para teachers in India and other developing countries are appointed due to the compulsion of governments to provide basic education facilities to children in most economical manner. Para teachers in these countries are generally less qualified than the regular teachers, and are also less paid. These teachers work as full time teachers in schools alongside a permanent teacher getting full scale of salary for the same work. India at present has more than 500 thousand para teachers in a number of states, and in spite of serious concerns raised by different forums about the quality of education provided by these teachers the scheme has flourished and majority of states in the country have para teachers.

### **Para Teacher Scheme: The Evolution and Rationale**

Para teacher scheme in India has evolved in different states to meet the Constitutional obligation of free and compulsory education to each and every child of the country in the age group of 6-14 years. A quick glance at the primary education scenario in India reveals, that, it is 'a mixed bag of glaring gaps and remarkable successes'. While the literacy rate of the country has reported a sharp increase from mere 18.39% in 1950-51 to 65.38% in 2000-2001, even after 50 years of planned efforts in the sector of education, according to the Tenth-five Year Plan (2002-2007) document one third population, or nearly 300 million persons in the age group 7 years and above are illiterate in the country. 42 million children of the country, in the age group 6-14 years still do not attend schools. Besides, there are problems related to high drop out rates, low level of achievement, low participation of children coming from various under privileged sections of society such as Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and girls etc. Approximately 16.64 per cent habitations of the country still do not have the facilities of primary schooling. Besides, there are other systemic issues like inadequate school infrastructure, non-availability of teachers in remote rural, hilly, and tribal areas, high teacher absenteeism, large scale teacher vacancies, and inadequate allocation of resources on education to meet the expenditure.

In addition, inspite of impressive increase in the number of primary school teachers from 538000 in 1950-51 to 1809661 in 2002, the national average for the number of teachers in government managed primary schools has been 2.47 only. The Operation Blackboard Scheme (OB) initiated in 1987 envisaged the provision of at least two teachers at the primary level. But 16.29 percent school in the country still do not have two teachers. There are state wise variations in the average number of teachers also, and while Kerala has an average of 6.04 teachers in primary schools, in states of Bihar (1.93 teachers), Jharkhand (1.83), and Rajasthan (1.98) the average number of teachers is even lower than two. Uttar Pradesh which has the highest number of teachers in Primary Schools (0.27 million) which accounts for 17 percent of the total primary teachers in the county still faces difficulty to provide even a single teacher in 921 primary schools. Incidentally these are also the states which have low participation of literacy rate, high teacher pupil ratio and high drop out rate among students at the primary level. These states, therefore, consider para teacher scheme as a powerful means to overcome teacher shortage, and fulfill the promise of education for All.

The genesis of contract teachers at primary level, popularly known as 'Para Teachers' lies in these circumstances which were prevailing in different states, and the constitutional obligation of the state to make education accessible to each and every child.

Its origin may be traced to the 'Shiksha Karmi Project' in the state of Rajasthan undertaken in 1980s with assistance from Swedish International Development(SIDA). The State education department found it difficult to deploy qualified teachers in remote and difficult areas of the state. The outsiders, and city based teachers if posted in such areas, would give up their job on account of inconvenient living conditions in the remote areas, and if they managed to stay they found it difficult to establish rapport with the local community due to difference in their cultural backgrounds. This situation had arisen due to non-availability of qualified local youths in the remote areas. Therefore, the Shiksha Karmi project envisaged engaging local educated youths, though academically under qualified, and professionally untrained, as teachers. These teachers who were provided training of short duration after recruitment, received monthly honorarium at a fixed rate. Soon Himachal Pradesh also utilized the services of these local contract teachers known as 'Volunteer teachers (1984)'. However, the scheme was popularized by the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) implemented in selected states of the country in 1990s with international assistance, and the 'Education Guarantee Scheme' of Madhya Pradesh towards the later part of 1990s. These schemes served twin purposes i.e. overcoming the problem of teacher shortage and teacher absenteeism in rural and remote areas; and providing employment opportunities to local youths who were otherwise not qualified for a regular teacher's job. But the scheme soon caught the attention of other state governments and became so popular that almost every state, now, has para teachers working in regular schools.

*The Term "Para Teacher" is thus used as an umbrella encompassing, both, teachers working in formal institutions, as well as non-formal institutions. It broadly refers to the teachers recruited by the community (though not always) on a contractual basis and on a fixed honorarium to meet the demand of basic education. There have been varied reasons for appointment of para teachers in different states. Consequently, while in some states these teachers are appointed in small habitations in remote and tribal areas, which do not qualify for a formal school; in others these teachers are appointed in regular schools to ensure a minimum of two teachers in the school. Still in some cases para teachers are appointed to improve the teacher pupil ratio due to the shortage of teachers. This shortage arises either*

*due to non-availability or unwillingness of teachers to serve in schools located in rural or remote areas, or non-recruitment of teachers by the state government. Para teachers are appointed in these schools, as it does not put any significant financial burden on state exchequer in the financially starved state. Schemes like “Guruji” of Madhya Pradesh, 'Vidhya Sahayak' of Gujarat and 'Shikshan Sevaks' of Maharashtra consider the appointment of para teachers as the interim measure to meet the financial paucity of the State. Madhya Pradesh has even adopted the policy to recruit primary teachers on contract basis only, and no regular appointment is made by the government.*

The evolution and growth of para teachers in different states, therefore, is due to the compulsions such as:

- Providing universal access to all children to meet the challenges of Universal Primary Education.
- Providing an alternative mode of education for remote unserved habitation that do not qualify for formal school and has no school within an approachable distance of 1 Km.
- Overcoming the shortage of teachers in schools; for instance there are still quite a few single teacher schools in different states in spite of the efforts made under Operation Blackboard Scheme to provide at least two teachers in primary schools.
- Overcoming the problems of teacher absenteeism due to unwillingness of urban teachers to serve in rural or remote areas.

Failure of the state government to fill large number of vacancies for primary teachers inspite of availability of fully qualified teachers, due to, either financial reasons, or, their own apathy towards education.

The table 1 shows the state wise distribution of para teachers in primary schools of the country.

**Table – 1 : Teachers in Primary Schools**

S r. No.	State	<i>Full time teachers including Principals Head Masters (Excluding para teachers)</i>	<i>P ara teachers</i>	Pupil Teacher Ratio
	Andhra Pradesh	160357	1 9604	33
	Arunachal Pradesh	2833	3 85	27
	Assam	83848	2 264	30
	Bihar	76143	2 061	83
	Chhatisgarh	58348	0 0	43
	Goa	2523	0 0	21
	Gujarat	12309	5 899	31
	Haryana	38558	4 71	41
	Himachal Pradesh	26069	2 949	22
	Jammu & Kashmir	23843	2 496	19
	Jharkhand	29120	1 073	59

	Karnataka	58901	2 103	26
	Kerala	42039	4 58	28
	Madhya Pradesh	146766	0 0*	36
	Maharashtra	116604	6 788	36
	Manipur	8245	0 0	21
	Meghalaya	14220	1 77	22
	Mizoram	4557	7 1	19
	Nagaland	6865	1 46	12
	Orissa	79177	6 583	40
	Punjab	41524	0 0	38
	Rajasthan	90711	2 003	41
	Sikkim	2704	4 2	12
	Tamil Nadu	118196	5 173	34

	Tripura	8857	9 4	23
	Uttar Pradesh	345752	3 8853	55
	Uttaranchal	34635	2 288	29
	West Bengal	150329	9 26	53
	A&N Islands	782	6	17
	Chandigarh	299	1	34
	D&N Haveli	258	1 9	39
	Daman & Diu	258	1 9	39
	Delhi	22277	3 34	40
	Lakshdweep	36	0 0	20
	Pondicharry	1754	0 0	21
	India	1809661	1 03270	42

Source: Seventh All India School Education Survey. Provisional Statistics (As on September 30, 2002). NCERT, New Delhi, Delhi (2005).

It is note worthy, that, para teachers are not confined to primary and upper primary schools only, but, a good number of them have been appointed at other levels of school education also. According to the Seventh All India Survey (2005) there are 104894 para

teachers at the upper primary level, 37950 at the secondary level, and 33911 para teachers at the higher secondary level. Across the country as many as 198 thousand para teachers were appointed in 2003, and in 45,387 schools only para teachers were posted. The number of such schools was highest in Rajasthan (19,974) and Madhya Pradesh (15,704) as reported by Mehta (2003), which is 24.61 percent and 18.43 percent of total schools in these states. It is followed by Chhattisgarh (3662). Andhra Pradesh (2,641), and Himachal Pradesh (1039). Incidentally, the states in the northern parts of the country are recruiting more and more para teachers than the southern states. A high percentage of para teacher (to total teachers) in primary schools is observed in the states of Andhra Pradesh (11.11 percent), Chhattisgarh (40.57 percent), Madhya Pradesh (51.89 percent), Rajasthan (31.61 percent), and Himachal Pradesh (22.64 percent). Primary schools alone in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh have 36,593 and 80,509 para teachers respectively which accounts for 20.90 and 45.98 percent of the total para teachers in primary schools (Mehta,2003)..

### **Policy Perspectives on Para Teachers: A Critique**

The pivotal position of teachers in an educational system, in particular, and in nation building in general, is of tremendous importance. Delors report (1996) strongly observed ‘improving quality of education depends on first improving the recruitment, training, social status, and conditions of works of teachers; they need the appropriate knowledge and skills, personal characteristics, professional prospects and motivation if they are to meet the expectations placed upon them’. Similar sentiments had been expressed by the Indian Education Commission, way back in 1964-66, which felt, no system of education can rise above the level of its teachers. Making an unequivocal statement, the Commission asserted “A sound programme of professional education of teachers is essential for the qualitative improvement of education. Investment in teacher education can yield rich dividends because the financial resources required are small when measured against the resulting improvements in the education of millions. During the last half century of post dependence period all the Commissions and Committees on education-the University Education Commission (1948-49), Secondary Education Commission (1952-53), Indian Education Commission (1964-66), various visiting teams and working groups of NCTE and UNESCO, National Commissions of Teachers, National Policy on Education (NPE, 1986) and its Programme of Action (POA),

Ramamurthy Commission (1991), Janardhan Reddy Commission, and several state education commissions stressed the need of the professional preparation of teachers and continuous upgradation of their pedagogical knowledge, skills and attitudes for improving the quality of education. The National Policy on Education (NPE) maintains that 'teacher education is a continuous process, and pre-service and in-service are inseparable components of this continuum. The policy strongly recommended improving the working conditions of teachers in schools, including their social and economic status, leaving no scope for recruitment of any teacher on contract basis. Para teacher scheme, therefore, is the violation of very essence of NPE (1986) i.e. improving the quality and status of teachers.

It is noteworthy, that, education in India is placed in the concurrent list of the constitution meaning thereby, that, both State and Central Government can legislate on policies related to education, however, in the event of any conflict the central legislation shall prevail. In practice, school system in India has been considered a state government's responsibility, and the role of central government is confined to formulating broad policy frameworks in order to ensure quality, and setting norms for utilization of resources through various centrally sponsored schemes from time to time. Consequently, while the policies related to the academic and professional qualifications of teachers are decided by the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) – a statutory body established through an Act of Parliament in 1993 to improve the quality and standard of teacher education, the policies related to recruitment and service conditions of regular, as well as para teachers, are determined by the state governments. Therefore, variations are observed in the para teacher schemes of various states.

The scheme of para teachers has been promoted by the Central Government as a cost effective measure of overcoming the shortage of primary teachers, especially, in remote rural and hilly areas. The post Jometien summit developments in India witnessed a large number of interventions to achieve the goals of UEE, like, the DPEP, and the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan etc. DPEP popularized the practice of contract teachers on fixed honorarium and later on some policy documents at the national level like the 'Report of the National Committee of State Education Ministers' under the Chairmanship of the Minister of Human resource Development to develop the structure and outline of Implementing Universal Elementary Education in a 'Mission Mode' (1999) endorsed it. This document not only promotes the practice of para teacher, but also, tries to justify the adoption of the practice of para teachers.

Referring to the problem of teacher shortage this committee maintains. “Lack of community control over teachers, teacher absenteeism, and low teacher motivation is often cited as reasons for not recruiting new teachers but for only concentrating on reducing wastage and internal inefficiency of the educational system. Even after making allowance for enrollment in unaided and unorganized private schools, the teacher shortage is very significant. It is on this account that the recruitment of para teachers has to be considered a priority if all vacancies have to be filled up in shortest period of time. The issue of teachers/para teacher recruitment has to be addressed by all states as the long term implications for the states”. Interestingly the committee suggested appointment of unqualified youths as para teachers to overcome the shortage of teachers totally ignoring the fact that large scale vacancies of primary teachers are not being filled by the states, and thousands of trained and qualified candidates are available in states and waiting for a placement. The promise for quality education for all, therefore, has been compromised in the effort to impress upon the international community by raising merely the literacy percentage of the country.

The National Committee further ignored the suggestions made by an earlier committee, popularly known as the Majumdar Committee (1999), appointed by the same government to assess the ‘financial requirements for making elementary education a fundamental right which severely criticized the practice of para teachers as “some of the states have been experimenting with Shiksha Karmi or Para teachers. While promotion of local context and selection of personnel willing to serve in remote rural locations is to be encouraged, provision of para teachers only as a means to reduce costs of elementary education would not be fair. Ultimately, in the long run, the argument for equal pay for equal work would catch up. While the Group felt that para teachers could be useful in extremely remote locations, there should never be a national programme for recruiting para teachers”. The committee further felt that “Quality elementary schooling would require proper provisioning and a system of continuous human resource development for well trained, qualified, and well equipped teachers. Arrangement for improvement of educational qualification of teachers could be encouraged. The rigour of teacher selection, however, must be maintained with a high degree of community involvement in a transparent selection process.”

However, this concern had totally been ignored by the National Committee which rationalizes the para teacher scheme “for meeting the demand for teachers in a manner that

the state can afford. Appointment of pay scale teachers to fill up all teacher vacancies as per teacher pupil norms would require resources that state governments are finding increasingly difficult to meet. The economic argument for para teachers is that provision of these teachers as per requirement is possible within the financial resources available with the states. The non-economic argument for para teachers is that a locally selected youth, accountable to the local community, undertakes the duties of teaching children with much greater interest..... The quest for UEE as Fundamental Right signifies a certain sense of urgency in doing so. This urgency calls for appropriate modification in National Policy in order respond to local felt needs. The recruitment of para teachers is a step in this direction”. Hence the recommendations of this committee not only negates but also ignores totally the NPE 1986 which suggested the improvement of working conditions, and social and economic status of teachers.

The Committee was well aware, that, the appointment of para teachers on a lump sum emolument is sometimes agitated as an infringement of the principle of ‘equal pay for equal work’ inviting many litigations in different states, but, it suggested Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh models to resolve such problems. It is note worthy, that, while Gujarat appoints fully qualified and trained candidates as para teachers on a fixed pay who are absorbed as regular teachers after certain period of time, and as and when vacancies arise; Madhya Pradesh has stoped oppointing regular primary teachers, and appoints only para teachers called as ‘Guruji’ with lower qualifications. But since the state has abolished the post of regular teachers, the qualified unemployed youths are left with no options but to accept the position of ‘Guruji’ on a fixed honorarium.

Even the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) scheme also endorsed the appointment and training of para teachers, especially in remote hilly, rural and tribal areas. It stresses “there will be ‘no compromise on standards, even though payments of less than the State pay scale, as an interim measure, may be adopted in states with large scale vacancies.’ The SSA document emphasized decentralization, and involvement of local governments in the recruitment of teachers and recommended that “Gujarat model of recruiting fully trained teachers on fixed pay, as an interim strategy, could be adopted in states with large scale teacher vacancies. SSA would like to improve the accountability of the teacher vis-a-vis community without diluting the standards for selection of teachers as laid down from time to time by National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE).”

This statement indicates the unwillingness of government to pay full scale of salary to teachers even though they are well qualified and trained. This conclusion further derives support from the Tenth Five Year Plan (2002-07) which says steps would have to be initiated to fill up all the existing vacancies of the teachers, though in a time bound manner, with defined responsibility to local bodies and communities, and to improve legal impediments in the recruitment of para teachers’.

Therefore, the concerns of Majumdar Committee notwithstanding the para teacher scheme in various states are glorified and flourishing. This is also against the very spirit of National Policy on Education (NPE, 1986) which left no scope for any such scheme as it has strongly recommended for improving the working conditions including, the economic and social status, of teachers. But these teachers have become the integral part of the over all primary education system of the country.

### **Educational and Professional Backgrounds of para teachers**

Para teachers are generally local youths with prescribed minimum educational qualification, which in majority of states is Senior Secondary i.e. 12 years of school education except for the Shiksha Karmi Project of Rajasthan where the qualification is as low as eight years of education. Pre-service training is not necessary for these teachers, though Gujarat and Maharashtra are exception to this general trend where pre-service training is mandatory. These teachers are generally appointed by the Village Education Committee, and Village Head, and are therefore, accountable to them. They have to undergo a mandatory induction level training- duration of which varies from 20 to 40 days in different states. They are given a fixed honorarium through the account of Village Head, which is one fourth or one fifth of what a regular teacher is paid for the same work, and their appointment is contractual for a period of nine months to eleven months. In many states, they have to furnish an undertaking that they would not seek regular appointment on the basis of their present appointment. These teachers, called with different names in different states, are engaged in both formal and alternate schools, and have become the integral part of primary education system. Though each state has different reasons to appoint these teachers, yet there are certain communalities in all schemes across various states. These are as follows:

- These teachers are paid a fixed honorarium, which is much lower than the fulltime teacher’s salary;

- In all the schemes para teachers are appointed on a contract basis;
- Para teachers, working in formal schools, are required to work as full time teachers in the school even though they are paid less;
- In majority of cases the para teachers are appointed from the local community by the Gram Panchayats/Village Education Committees (VEC);
- Honorarium to the para teachers, in majority of cases, is paid through the local community.

In majority of para teacher schemes the essential qualifications are relaxed, and generally they are less qualified than the regular teachers. In a number of schemes the minimum qualification of para teachers is senior secondary (class 12). However, in Rajasthan the qualification for male-female 'Shiksha Karmis' working under 'Shiksha Karmi Project' is as low as class VIII and class V respectively.

Pre-service training is not considered essential for para teachers. But the states of Gujarat, and Maharashtra have made it mandatory for these teachers. In almost all the states para teachers are provided induction level training by Block Resource Centre (BRC)/Cluster Resource Centre (CRC)/District Institute of Education and Training (DIET). The duration of training however, varies from state to state. In Andhra Pradesh 'Vidhya Volunteers' are provided only 7 days induction level training, while the 'Shiksha Mitra', and Acharyaji' of Uttar Pradesh receive 30 days induction training.

In all the states the official documents describe these teachers volunteers who have joined the assignment with the desire to do social service and not to seek employment. The 'Guruji' scheme of Madhya Pradesh is the pioneer of this principle. However, field realities belie this claim, and the findings of whatever few empirical studies are available in this area suggest, that, unemployment forced most of highly educated candidates to join as para teacher (DPEP, 1998; Pandey & Raj Rani (2003), Mehta (2003), Govinda & Josephine, 2004).

Pandey and Raj Rani (2003) developed the profile of 373 para teachers of Uttar Pradesh and reported 45 percent para teachers having graduation degree, while 11.52 percent were post graduates. Mehta (2003) also arrived at similar conclusions and reported, that, para teachers were better qualified than regular teachers. According to Mehta, of the 198 thousand

para teachers of 461 districts of the country, more than half (56.02 percent) are graduate and above, compared to which only 48.56 percent regular primary school teachers are graduate and above. Only 2.44 percent para teachers are below secondary, compared to 4.25 percent regular primary school teachers below Secondary level. About 9.97 percent primary school teachers are post graduate as compared to 17.38 percent para teachers, and few para teachers are even M.Phil holders.

Again state specific variation has been reported by Mehta in the qualifications of these teachers. Consequently states like Assam (6.73 percent), Jharkhand (6.82 percent), Rajasthan (6.40 percent), Himachal Pradesh (7.45 percent) etc. have been reported to be having higher percentage of para teachers below secondary level than the average of 461 districts (2.44 percent), Chattisgarh (0.78 percent), Madhya Pradesh (1.02 percent), Orissa (1.48 percent), Uttar Pradesh (0.87 percent), and Uttaranchal (0.80 percent) have lower percentage of para teachers below secondary level. State like Orissa (48.22 percent), Andhra Pradesh (38.77 percent), Himachal Pradesh (38.17 percent), and Rajasthan (40.99 percent), have higher percentage of graduates working as para teachers, while Madhya Pradesh has about 24.05 percent post graduate para teachers .

This data reflects the plight of educated youths who are forced to work on a meager honorarium due to government's policies and apathy. The large percentage of highly qualified persons working as para teachers also nullifies two major arguments put forth by the proponents of the scheme, i.e., local educated youths are not available in rural areas; and highly qualified candidates do not want to serve in these areas. In reality, instead, the financially starved states find this scheme as powerful alternative to appoint teacher without putting much additional burden to state exchequers, and therefore, leave no opportunity to glorify, the scheme, and give fancy names, such as, 'Shiksha Mitra' and 'Acharyaji' in Uttar Pradesh, 'Guruji' and 'Shiksha Karmi' in Madhya Pradesh, 'Vidya Sahayak' in Gujarat, and 'Vidhya Volunteers' in Andhra Pradesh etc. These teachers are also presented as totally devoted to the cause of serving children, highly motivated, and dedicated to their work. Whereas the field realities suggest that the fundamental rights of these teachers are denied by the government itself in terms of non payment of equal wage for equal work, non payment of honorarium directly in they personal accounts, denial of any leave to them, including no provision of medical or maternity leave etc. as these teachers are appointed on adhoc contracts.

### **Para Teachers and Quality of Education**

The quality of education is determined by a variety of factors within and outside the education system, but, teacher and teaching-learning process in classroom plays a crucial role.

Indian Government has pursued a five fold strategy in 1990s to improve the quality of education in general, and of basic education in particular. These include- improvement in the provision of infrastructure and human resources for primary education; provision of improved curriculum and teaching learning material; improvement in the quality of teaching learning process through the introduction of child centred pedagogy; attention to teacher capacity building; and increased focus on specification and measurement of learners' achievement levels. Teachers and the quality of their teaching has been given high priority and importance in this context. One of the major objectives of DPEP, which popularized the scheme of para teachers, had been ensuring the quality of education. However, by appointing under qualified and untrained teachers, this objectives was seriously neglected at the very onset of the scheme of DPEP. Though the area of para teachers has yet to catch the attention of researchers to invite rigorous scholarly research study, yet, few attempts have been made to analyse the classroom processes, and quality of teaching-learning in para teacher schools. These research evidences does not provide any encouraging result. The studies undertaken in this area by PROBE (1999), Bodha Shiksha Samiti (1999), Dayaram (2000), Pandey and Raj Rani (2003), Govinda and Josephine (2004) lamented on the poor quality of these teachers. PROBE (1999) appreciated these teachers and reported, that, despite their lower qualifications and salaries, Shiksha Karmis sometimes (though not always) work distinctly harder than regular teachers. It concluded, that, there might be several reasons for better performance of Shiksha Karmis than regular teachers, as, the hope to get 'regularised' in the future; accountability to local community, careful selection of shiksha karmis, and their training and support. The report states some Shiksha Karmis reported quite frankly that their overriding hope was "to became regular teachers, so that they could relax ever after." This statement is quite revealing, and speaks out the real motive of these teachers for all their sincerity and hard work. PROBE, concluded that, when Shiksha Karmis are left on their own

devices, without a minimal support and accountability structure, they can be extremely slack, such as, those working in non formal education.

Bodha Shiksha Samiti (1999) had undertaken an in depth study of Shiksha karmi Programme of Rajasthan; Alternative Schooling Programme, Education Gurentee Scheme and Shiksha Karmi Youjana of Madhya Pradesh, and Volunteer Teacher Scheme of Himachal Pradesh. The study, conducted on a sample of 32 para teachers, and 27 regular teachers (included only as referral point) arrived at the conclusion, that, the performance of para teachers were uniformly poor, but more so in the case of para teachers having lower qualifications. In-service inputs also did not make any noticeable impact on the performance of para teachers. The study also belied the claim, that, these teachers work with feeling of voluntarism as it concluded that “of all the para teachers in the sample, not a single para teacher was aware that she/he was doing voluntary work. Their voluntarism was limited to filling up forms, writing applications for villages or giving advice whenever required, which they would have done in any case, as members of the community. All of them spoke of a salary not honorarium; many complained that it was not commensurate with the work they did; and hoped that eventually their post would become permanent, and they would be absorbed as regular teachers” (p.93). Though the sample, taken for this study, was too small to lend itself for any generalization, but, it reflects the reality and the mind set of people engaged in para teachers work. The aspiration to get regularized some day appears to be the chief motivating factor for these teachers than the sense of voluntarism.

Similar conclusions have been arrived at in the study conducted by Pandey and Rajrani (2003). Adopting a holistic approach, these researchers have comprehensively explored various facets of para teacher’s academic life -the professional support provided to these teachers, its quality, its impact on their classroom processes, and the problems they encounter in discharging their duties. The sample of this study was much more larger, including 373 para teachers, and observation of classroom processes of 45 para teachers.

The study found that the classroom transactions of these teachers remained dull and ineffective. The teaching-learning process was largely text book based and was neither child centred nor activity based. The whole teaching learning process lacked understanding of content and pedagogy, and the enthusiasm, involvement, continuity, and dynamism required for quality improvement of education. In the absence of any formal orientation on the

methodology of teaching classes III, IV and V, these teachers often evolved their own approaches which were not always effective.

The para teacher schemes are being propagated as voluntary with the keen desire on the part of para teacher to serve. However, the focused group discussions and personal interviews, undertaken by the investigators, with teachers reveal, that, these teachers aspired for a permanent and salaried job, and considered their present assignment as a stepping stone. This is natural keeping in view the high rate of unemployment in the country. The expectation to get regularized in future, motivates these teachers to be sincere, regular, and even tolerate the exploitations at the hands of village heads, such as, non payment of honorarium in their personal account, and non payment of honorarium in time etc. Besides, uncertainty of future has also been a demotivating and stressful factor for these teachers.

Ironically, while government goes on glorifying the scheme of para teachers, the government reports express serious concerns over the quality of education provided by these teachers. For instance, the para 3.11 of the Hundred Forty Ninth Report on demands for grants 2004-05, of the Department of Elementary Education and Literacy (MHRD) presented to the Rajya Sabha on the 20<sup>th</sup> August 2004 states:

“The Committee is concerned over the quality of education imparted under the Abhiyan. The Committee is little apprehensive about the feasibility of appointing education volunteer/para teachers for imparting quality education to the children. The Committee strongly feels, that, a child needs to be tended under well-trained hands to initiate him into the art of learning. The Committee is aware of the fact that there was problem in getting regular teachers in remote and inaccessible habitations. It, however, emphasizes the importance of trained teachers for child education. The Committee is happy to know that the Department had made a provision of pre-service induction/training as well as in service training of Education Volunteers even at block/cluster levels. But the Committee finds that due to shortage of teachers, not to speak of trained teachers/qualified resource persons at block and cluster levels, aims of the programme are not being achieved.”

The Committee further expressed its serious concerns and anguish on non appointment of teachers on 4,06,148 teacher's post, of which only 1,38,090 (30 percent) was filled in last two years. Against the fixed target for recruitment of teachers, states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal could achieve zero percent, 22 percent and 21 percent of the

target respectively. These are incidently the low literacy states with large population of children between 6-14 years. This reflects the apathy of states for teachers even if the funds are available. Later on the state of West Bengal expressing its inability to pay regular salaries to 70,000 odd teachers it needs, decided instead, to hire contract/para teachers at a salary of Rs. 1,000 per month against Rs. 7000 to 10,000 a month for regular teacher, even though the education minister of the state felt ‘having two sets of teachers doing similar jobs at such differential salary is not conducive to a healthy school atmosphere’. Therefore, appointing para teachers as cost effective measure under exploitative conditions of service is not only indefensible but also reprehensible.

The government is also fully aware of this as reflected by the observations made by Majumdar Committee (1999) and 149 Standing Committee Report; (2004) yet, its inclusion in the Tenth Five Year Plan and Sarve Shiksha Abhiyan clearly indicates that the quality concerns are compromised and subverted by the government itself. In case of Madhya Pradesh, the older policy of teacher appointment on permanent basis as regular government employees has now been substituted by appointment of teacher on contract by District and Block authorities. Since all the teachers are now appointed on contract basis in the state, and the cadre of regular teacher has been done away with, the contract para teacher system has become the regular system. The government of Rajasthan has also taken a similar policy decision. Other states are also following these foot prints.

Therefore, in the race to improve the literacy percentage, the quality issue has been seriously compromised and state governments put forth various arguments to justify appointment of para teachers ignoring all the concerns expressed by various committees from time to time and suggestions of research findings. It is worthwhile here to mention a finding of EFA Global Monitoring Report 2005, which should serve as reminder for us if we really intend to improve the quality of education. Analysing the education system of Canada, Cuba, Finland and the Republic of Korea, which achieved high standards of education quality the report concludes:

“The experiences of these four countries suggest three common characteristics. The first concerns teachers. High esteem for teaching profession, thorough pre-service training and sometimes restrictive admission, and a well developed constellation of in-service training,

plus mutual learning and teacher support are evident in all these countries. There are no concessions on teacher quality, even where teacher shortage exist.”(p.52).

It is high time, therefore, to review the policy of ‘para teachers’ and adopt a more effective way of teacher recruitment to overcome teacher shortage. The National Commission on Teachers I (1983) suggested ‘recruitment of untrained teacher with first class graduate/post graduate degree and then giving them on-the-job training to be followed by full training at the school’, which may be one alternative. We cannot ensure quality of education and effectiveness of schools until and unless we evolve a mechanism whereby teacher with merit and scholarship only are allowed to enter into the profession.

### **Conclusion:**

The promotion of the alternative measures of teacher recruitment promoted since early 1990s has pushed the issue of quality of education in the background. The scheme is being justified by the government itself on pragmatic economic and bureaucratic ground. Large scale recruitment of para teachers within the formal school system and an attitude of resignation towards pre-service programmes have become an integral part of state provisioning for elementary education which can create serious problems of quality and equity in education, besides, creating differential kinds of inequalities among teachers themselves. There is also a general sense of dissatisfaction among various stakeholders that second track options are being passed on to the poorer sections of the society, thereby, widening the gap between rich and well educated and poor and poorly educated children. By accepting the scheme of para teachers the Government is encouraging the states to evade their responsibilities of building a strong cadre of qualified teachers. The trend has diluted the identity of teacher as a professional and has led to considerable erosion in the faith of agency of teacher in bringing about change within government school system and communities. Para teacher scheme may serve the purpose of UEE in far flung, remote rural and hilly areas as viable option but adopting this scheme to replace the regular teachers is detrimental for the quality of education and effectiveness of schools and needs to be avoided.

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