

## International Journal of Rural Studies April 2010 Editorial

It is 2010 and once more, for Indian education, change is in the air. Kapil Sibal, Central Minister for Education, is introducing a whole range of changes to be implemented throughout the country. Many of them look very promising. Perhaps at last something *will* actually change in the education system?

Sadly, this seems highly unlikely. Recommended changes are nothing new to India. The Education Commission of 1964-66 made some excellent recommendations; so did New Education in the 1980s; more recently, the 2004 World Bank Report on primary education pointed out a number of serious weaknesses that needed to be addressed urgently; there was also the DPEP (District Primary Education Programme) launched in 1994, an exhaustive and comprehensive re-training programme for teachers. In 2008, an action research report covering ten government primary schools in the district of Moradabad found, among other distressing weaknesses, that none of the schools opened on time or remained open for the whole of the school day; 20% teachers and 25% assistants were absent; not one teacher stayed for the whole day; and those staff who did turn up moved in and out of the school during the day without telling anyone. Interestingly, the midday meal made no difference to pupil attendance.

In the last few years, huge funds have been spent on school buildings and facilities like toilets and midday meals. There are grants and scholarships sufficient to enable every child to attend school.

Yet the reality is that in essence, nothing has changed. Teachers remain uncommitted, totally uninterested in the progress or development of their pupils, keen only to get their salaries at the end of the month. Pupils have no motivation to

attend school regularly; most of their teachers only turn up occasionally anyway. Exercise books are rarely marked. Old, outdated notes are written on the blackboard for students to copy and learn by heart but no attempt is made to explain anything.

Proposing change does not cause change. That is the frustrating, apparent contradiction keeping Indian education in a rut today. A commission or a report or a keen minister can make recommendations or even implement some of them, but until the sickness at the heart of the system is confronted and remedied, everything will remain dishearteningly the same.

The main problem is the indifference of teachers. There is no sense of worth in doing a good job, no concern for the welfare of the students, no fear of reprisals for poor work (a government job is a job for life) and no interest in playing a part in the general development of the country. Someone becomes a teacher for one reason only – a salary at the end of the month. And if they are lucky enough to work in a government school, then it is a vastly inflated salary, a job for life and a generous pension at the end.

Another serious issue making a mockery of education is the corruption that runs unchecked through every section of the system. You are setting up a new school and want it to be officially recognised? Pay a hefty bribe. You have opened a new college and need to be affiliated with a recognised university? Pay bribes to the clerks, the registrar, the vice-chancellor and anyone else involved in the paperwork. You would like your school to be an examination centre? No problem. Just pay a bribe. You want your students to attend a particular centre for their exams, one where you know cheating will be allowed? Couldn't be easier. Just pay a bribe.

Much appears fine on paper but in reality is very different. For example, teachers are not

supposed to give tuition to students before or after school hours. They are meant to teach the syllabus in the classroom. But I defy anyone to name a single government or ordinary private school where the teachers don't tutor pupils privately. In fact, tuition has become big business. Many private schools whose pupils come from very average homes (not the prestigious ones favoured by the wealthy), pay their teachers a mere pittance, knowing that they will supplement their earnings by offering tuition before and after school.

A third concern is the simple matter of supply and demand. With more and more pressure to get every child into education, there is a huge demand for teachers but a big shortfall in supply. The BTC (Basic Teachers' Certificate), a simple but practical and effective teaching qualification, is no longer offered. In its place, there is now only the B.Ed, a highly academic and expensive course. As more and more new schools and colleges open, it becomes harder to find competent teachers while class sizes increase from the recommended 30 to 40, 50 and even 60.

A recent report by Union HRD Minister Kapil Sibal's ministry says that the north east of India has the highest number of unqualified school teachers in the country. One school in Assam has 300 students but only four teachers. One teacher runs from one classroom to another to teach at the same time.

Education has become a business. All the new schools and colleges that are opening up on almost a daily basis have just one aim in mind – to make as much money as possible. Education has become just another way to make money. The private education market is estimated to be worth \$40 billion dollars and expected to increase to \$68 billion by 2012. Even then, with growing investment in education, 40% of the population remains illiterate and only 15% of students continue to high school. In 2008, there

were only enough seats in colleges for 7% of those of college-age. 25% of posts are still vacant while 57% of college staff don't have a master's degree or a PhD. (Wikipedia 2010)

Never mind what is happening in those few private schools that have a shining reputation both in India and abroad. They are for the elite and rich. We are talking about schools and colleges for the ordinary citizen who suffers on all counts. Even if lucky enough to find a school where the teachers arrive on time, attend regularly, teach in the classroom, mark books and treat the pupils with respect, the pupils still lose out.

Why? Because what they are being taught is totally outdated and irrelevant. The whole system remains based on rote learning. There is no attempt to understand, analyse, criticise or question anything in any subject. Nothing students learn at school has any bearing on their everyday lives. The consequence of this is that as they get older, students attend school less and less frequently. Instead, a short time before the yearly exam, they buy some guide books, learn a few model answers off by heart and regurgitate them in the exam. The better their memories, the better the grades they can achieve. Then they promptly forget everything they have learnt, apply for jobs for which they are completely unfitted and wonder why they can't get work.

So what can be done?

First, some basic questions need to be asked and the answers found.

- Why are staff and students so indifferent to education today?
- Why have none of the changes recommended in the last forty years been properly implemented?
- Why do teachers and students prefer to pass exams by blatant cheating rather than honest learning?

- Why students are only interested in just merely passing?

The present education system is highly examination-oriented. The most effective way to bring about genuine change is by changing the examination system. Previous education commissions have recommended this but nothing so far has been done. The reason for this is that it would mean a lot more work for teachers. At present, they can easily get by with the minimum of effort. Under an improved, updated and relevant system, the teachers would have to be actively involved with their pupils and put a great deal more thought and effort into their teaching.

So a crucial requirement is a change in the attitude of teachers.

However, you can't change attitude overnight. It is a difficult but not impossible task. The following are some suggestions:

- New teacher training must be introduced and must be at least 50% practical.
- There should be an element of entrepreneurship and competition in teaching
- Innovation should be actively encouraged
- NGOs should be involved in the orientation, training, monitoring and management of teachers
- The examination system should be drastically overhauled
- Wherever possible, examinations should be replaced by continuous assessment
- Where examinations are necessary, papers should contain more questions than any student can possibly answer and questions should be graded according to

difficulty. Thus, the first twenty questions should be fairly easy so that even the weakest students can answer them; then the questions should become increasingly harder. The idea is that all students, no matter what their ability, should be kept so busy in the exam that they have no time to look around, get help from the invigilator or cheat in any other way.

- Open book examinations should be introduced, particularly in professional examinations
- Syllabuses should be redesigned to be up-to-date and relevant
- Every possible encouragement should be given to opening rural universities which focus on the lives and livelihoods of the rural population
- Courses that teach simple lifestyles and sustainability should be supported and encouraged.

Can India really continue with the corrupt, outdated, irrelevant system it currently has? Or is the time now ripe to bring in genuine change, to make sure it is properly implemented and to produce students and teachers of the highest calibre who will make the nation proud?