



Educational Policies in Challenging Areas

Saswati Paik



As per the Right to Education (RTE) Act 2009 in India, every Indian child is eligible for 'free and compulsory education' from 6 to 14 years. Assuming that a child is in 1st grade at age 6, and reaches 9th grade at 14. During these 8 years of 'free and compulsory education', a child can get free books, uniforms and mid-day meal on school days from the government S/he does not have to pay any tuition fee for schooling. There are variations in terms of this policy from state to state, but in general, these are the common benefits expected from the government. But once a child reaches secondary level and costs increase, parents are supposed to bear the shortfall. S/he may become vulnerable to dropping out, especially if issues like poverty and resource availability Issues, access to school, teachers' behaviour in school, traditional practices within the society become additional constraints

Challenges with complications

The situation becomes remarkably complicated in

Direct impacts of natural disaster include (i) destruction of school building, (ii) damage of roads connecting the school resulting in uncertainty of reopening, irregular attendance ultimately impacting their learning process. Indirect impacts include long term closure of a school due to temporary conversion of school building to a rehabilitation centre, silent exclusion of children from school belonging to families in distress through displacement or migration, resulting into child labour, child marriage and child trafficking. Naturally this set of children lag behind expected learning outcomes levels by many years.. Their exclusion from the school system cannot be interpreted merely as poverty or lack of parental awareness: the roots go much deeper.

Schooling in unfavourable natural settings

Approximately 85 per cent of the Indian subcontinent is vulnerable to one or multiple natural disasters, 22 States have multi-hazard zones. The following table provides an overview:

Area and type of disaster	Estimated area affected as per National Policy on Disaster Management 2009
Earthquake prone areas	58.6 per cent of landmass
Land prone to flood, riverbank erosion	12 percent of land
Drought prone	68 per cent of cultivable land
Coastline prone to cyclones and tsunamis	5700 kms out of 7516 kms in total

Source: National Policy on Disaster Management 2009

challenging geographical and geo-political contexts such as natural disaster prone areas and armed conflict areas. Also, there are areas experiencing access related challenges. These challenges rarely attract adequate attention of policy makers and implementers, though there are isolated cases of good practices in a few such areas. The causes of dropout in these areas are complicated and not necessarily always associated with poverty. I will discuss a few areas of which I have got a broad understanding through visits about school related challenges and policies. The areas focused on here are: (1) Uttarkashi in Uttarakhand, (2) Barmer in Rajasthan and (3) Dantewada in Chhattisgarh.

Reality in Uttarkashi (Uttarakhand)

About 86% of total area of Uttarakhand State is located in a seismically active hilly zone with the region being prone to floods, flash floods, landslides and cloudbursts (Government of Uttarakhand, 2015 and Das, 2013). Uttarkashi District located in the northernmost part of Uttarakhand, borders Himachal Pradesh in the north and China in the north-east. This district was worst affected in 2013 during the flash flood of Rudra Prayag. Out of the six administrative blocks, the worst affected was Bhatwari. A geotechnical assessment of twenty villages of Bhatwari, Dunda and Barkot Tehsil was carried out by a group of geologists from Geological

Survey of India (GSI) at the request of the Uttarakhand government to assess the magnitude of damage, causative factors and short term and long term remedial measures.

This survey found sixteen villages badly damaged and it was suggested that eleven of these be partially relocated.

A study on some schools in Bhatwari Block conducted during November-December 2015 revealed the following:

- (i) Schools are categorised from A to F, depending on their access to main road, availability of transport facilities, health facilities, post office, educational facilities, commercial centres, telecommunication, general public amenities and altitude above sea level. Many schools in Uttarkashi are located far from the main road, the terrain is tough and access is a big challenge. One of the main reasons behind the existence of numerous single teacher schools is lack of willing teachers to serve the schools having access related issues. According to an Education Department estimate, in 2013 floods affected 29 schools, of which three were completely damaged, 26 schools experienced partial damage such as collapsed walls, roofs and gates, damage to the drinking water facility, washrooms, classrooms etc. Despite frequent disasters, schools do not have a structured plan for disaster mitigation.
- (ii) In numerous locations, increase in sediment load in Bhagirathi River, unplanned construction and inadequate protection measures have also aggravated the situation as mentioned in the report by GSI and also observed during the survey in the field.

Policy Initiatives and Good Practices in Uttarakhand

Some evidences of context specific policy initiatives and practices were observed which must be appreciated:

1. This State has taken some special measures to ensure continuity of education of children. The residents of areas experiencing snowfall for two to three months annually come downhill, arrangements for the schooling of their children is made in local schools. The schools located

at higher altitude also follow little different academic calendar with longer winter break and shorter summer break in keeping with prevailing weather conditions.

2. The District Disaster Management Office (DDMO) in Uttarkashi acts as the advisory to many departments on providing technical assistance. After finishing reconstruction of houses affected during the 2013 flood, DDMO has started assessment of public buildings which include schools.
3. The bulldozers used for levelling and repairing roads are generally stationed at regular intervals on the main road to ensure quick repair and regular maintenance.
4. The network of active NGOs is another unique practice in Uttarkashi which has reduced the duplication of work and ensured their reach to community. The NGOs work in multiple areas such as generating mass awareness regarding disaster management in villages and schools, providing expert consultation for farming and livelihood related aspects, co-operative buying and selling of raw materials and produce.
5. The Nehru Institute of Mountaineering (NIM) charts out paths for new roads and trains youth volunteers from villages so that they can act as first responders during emergency.





Public Schools in Rural Barmer in Rajasthan

From the state bordering China, we come to a state bordering Pakistan, namely, Rajasthan, where Barmer district is located. It comprises eight blocks, two municipalities, 380 gram panchayats and 1933 inhabited villages. According to the 2011 Census, literacy rate in Barmer is 56.5 per cent while the state average is 66.1 per cent. Both male and female literacy rate (70.09 and 40.6 per cent respectively) are lower than the state averages (79.2 and 52.1 per cent respectively). Within this district, Sheo block shows female literacy rate lower than that of district average (38.12 per cent) and very low sex ratio (863 whereas The district average is 902), both of which are quite alarming.

The challenges facing the school system in Barmer are associated with its geo-physical location, livelihood and educational policy.

1. Productive land and livelihood opportunities both are very limited here. 49.11 per cent of the total area in Sheo is cultivable, only 0.62 per cent of which is irrigated (GoI, 2014). Villages hardly receive water from planned Indira Gandhi Canal. Few schools have initiated rainwater harvesting, but rain is scarce, resulting in a perennial drinking water crisis.
2. Schools are located in isolated places, shops are rare. Despite having mid-day meal (MDM) menu fixed by the department, school children

mostly get only *daliya* or *khichdi*, so nutrition is at stake, It still remains an attraction as it is sometimes their only meal of the day.

3. The population is so sparse that establishing a school at every kilometre (as per RTE norm) does not make sense, therefore, a public school caters to multiple small hamlets (*dhanis*). Many schools are not connected by *pukka* roads and public transport, therefore students from distant villages have to walk barefoot on the sand. One can imagine the situation in summer when temperature can go above 50 degree celsius!
4. Caste hierarchy and practices of caste based discriminations are so strong that in the school children have their meals on plates meant for their respective castes and never ever mess up in that practice. Even the cook is chosen from the dominating caste of the community of the area.
5. Women of high caste families hardly get permission to work outside their households, therefore the cooks are often men, very poorly paid (usually Rs 1000 per month for making meals for 100-120 children per day for six days a week). As a result, there is frequent absenteeism of cooks and the teachers have to manage the cooking.
6. Lady teachers are rare in rural schools. The main reasons are (i) lack of women's education, (ii) remote location of schools, (iii) long distance from the main roads and extremely poor access. Therefore, girls usually dropout from the school after elementary education or even before that.
7. In few schools even the male teachers have to stay in the school premises as they are not able to drive bikes on the sandy terrain and the area lacks decent rented accommodation.

Policy Initiatives in Barmer

Some policy initiatives in Barmer are listed below:

1. To retain teachers appointed for Barmer (dark zone) Schools, the Government has restricted transfers.
2. The head teacher of a school is usually assigned the position of nodal officer who is

supposed to collect demographic data from the local community and update the local administration. This process is time consuming for a teacher. As per the policy, the number of educational functionaries is extremely low, there is only one BEO and one resource person in entire Sheo block which have more than 300 schools.

3. In public schools, only books are supplied by the State Department of Education. In the villages, where shops are rare, transport system is so poor, it is surprising to learn supplying school uniforms is not a priority.
4. The operational aspects expected in a decentralised set up of educational governance are missing. There is no functional School Management Committee (SMC) in most of the schools.
5. Considering the food crisis in the area during summer, schools arrange a mid-day meal during the summer vacation in keeping with government policy. But it is difficult to imagine a child walking four or five kilometres, barefoot, on sandy terrain at 40-50°C just to have lunch!!

Schooling in armed conflict areas

In most of the conflict-affected areas, 'the combination of poverty and conflict appears to be most potent with the highest concentrations of out of school children' (Smith, 2010). Although education is generally considered to be 'a force for good', research studies show that 'conflict can distort its benefits and introduce additional risks' (Nicolai, 2003). In a zone of conflict, schools may be unsafe as school buildings can be used as army or military shelters which are attacked during conflicts, thereby putting both children and teachers at risk. This is true of parts of few Indian states such as Jammu and Kashmir, parts of Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Orissa, West Bengal, Assam, Manipur and Tripura.

Schools and Policy Initiatives in Dantewada, Chhattisgarh

Dantewada district in Chhattisgarh is well known because of its socio-political issues. According to Census 2011, the literacy rate of Scheduled Tribes population for the rural part of this district is 29.33 percent. There are 138 villages where literacy

range is 11 - 20 percent, these villages constitute 23.39 percent of total villages and 23.91 percent of total population of Scheduled Tribes in this district. There are eleven villages where the literacy rate of the ST population is zero percent (Directorate of Census Operations, 2014).

Numerous villages in this district face the issue of armed conflicts where schools remain closed for most of the academic year. The state of education of the children in those locations can be imagined. Many children are orphaned due to the conflicts, while many get excluded from the school system. Recognising the fact of such silent exclusion and vulnerability of the children of school going age, the Chhattisgarh government has taken some unique policy initiatives. To name a few:

1. The State Government has installed separate pre-fabricated structures for residential schools for boys and girls, known Pota Cabin schools, which are portable and can be easily moved from one place to another. The government takes care of all the expenses of the children and after the 8th grade, moves them to nearby public schools for secondary education.
2. The Education City in Geedam *tehsil* (on NH 16) is another unique initiative here. The huge area meant for educational initiatives of the government surely will draw the attention of any visitor here.
3. Within the Education City, the school called *Aastha* brings different perspectives of education altogether. It is presently providing co-education for around 800 children who belong mainly to families affected by armed conflicts in Chhattisgarh. This school also provides all provisions for the children, but their infrastructural facilities and school practices are quite different from those of the Pota Cabin Schools. The medium of education is English with partly western style uniforms and technically well-equipped classrooms.
4. A few metres away from *Aastha*, is *Saksham*, a residential school for children with special needs, with an enrolment of 170. This school is well equipped with infrastructural facilities for the visually impaired and those with hearing, speech and mental health issues. These

children go to formal school for three days in the week and use the special classrooms in their own premises for the other three. The purpose of this school is to equip the children with special needs to cope up with the formal school setting. The school is well equipped in terms of infrastructure and facilities required for special needs children.

Concluding with Questions

1. In locations suffering from natural disasters or armed conflicts, disruptions in schooling are usual, but disruption remains unnoticed partially due to frequency of such incidents. As a result, the impact on the children's mental health and learning process in the long run remains unaddressed. Do these children, regularly suffering from disruption of schooling, ever experience 'equity' in education? Is their right to education limited to a maximum of 8th grade?
2. Lack of maps of schools showing their geographical locations, access roads, community surrounding and geo-physical environment associated with the area pose a major challenge in understanding the risk and vulnerability of the schools and the need for appropriate policy interventions. Deeper understanding about similar set of schools in different states may help to design possible educational policy framework to address context specific issues in such challenging areas. This may be possible with the use of the GPS in some areas, but will require manual mapping in others. Who will take the initiative to map these schools and when?
3. Researchers and civil society organisations hardly visit the schools in such challenging areas to understand the issues and there is a general lack of political will to focus on the school

-related issues caused by natural and man-made disasters. How can we draw attention of researchers and civil society organisations to such localities to ensure meaningful policy interventions to aim for long term benefits of children

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Saswati is a Faculty in School of Education, Azim Premji University. Her main areas of interest are educational policies and public school systems in challenging areas. She has started mapping some schools in challenging areas in India which suffer from physical access related issues, natural disasters and armed conflicts. . She may be contacted at saswati@apu.edu.in