



## Policy Initiatives in the New Millennium

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A lot that did not happen for half a century, turned around at the turn of the new millennium for India on the education scene. There was a series of policy initiatives in education that the country witnessed; but it must be recognised that they all had decades of background work and people's movements and judicial activism.

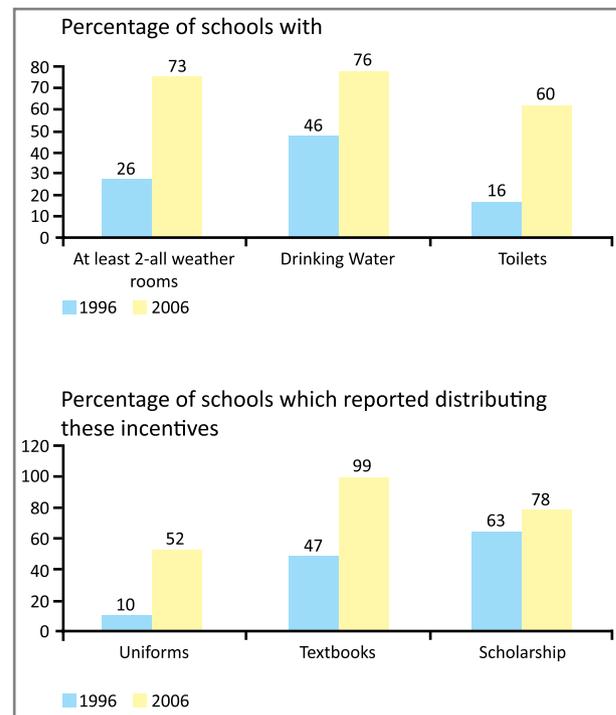
The policy initiatives of the new millennium, such as the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), the Mid-day Meal (MDM) Program, the National Curriculum Frameworks (NCF 2000 & 2005) as well as the Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (NCFTE 2009) along with the new Teacher Education guidelines based on the Justice Verma Commission recommendations and the Right to Education (RtE) reinvigorated school education in India. The turn of the millennium was indeed a turn for action on various fronts in the education space in India: it not only witnessed programmes and schemes getting launched, but also their implementation with the required legislations, unlike earlier decades when many things only remained on paper as a policy document or fell through the cracks in the attempt to implement.

The policy initiatives discussed above, unlike the previous decades, had action plans embedded with financial resources allocated and in many cases the apex Court directing the Government. Each of them were very different from the way policies usually get implemented, as neither were they diluted too heavily from the original idea nor were they delayed in their execution to the extent that they lost all meaning. This article may not be sufficient to tell the whole story and analyse why things happened the way they did post -2000. Instead, this piece will present a brief history and attempt to provide a background along with the key highlights of these initiatives which turned around our education landscape for the better; and in this, a reader may be able to identify factors that made things happen on the ground, whereas until then it was a hard struggle to get policy ideas off the table!

### Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (SSA)

The most popular among the initiatives, along with the RTE, is the SSA. The popularity is for a

variety of reasons, including its novelty given the large mandate of the initiative and the massive funding it came with that even enabled a parallel administrative structure, and thereby the overall impact it has had as well. Tens of thousands of crores of rupees has been allocated to SSA in every annual budget announced by the Central Government since the programme was launched in 2001. As the name suggests it was billed as a movement focusing on education for all. A glance at the data on some of the key education indicators of the time tell us that some of our key basic indicators were poor - the number of children in school, number of schools with a pucca building and toilets, number of teachers staffing these schools, etc., were all way off the mark.



Source: School Surveys: PROBE, 1996 and PROBE revisited, 2006 (graph extracted from 'SSA, budgeting for change series 2011, CBGA New Delhi, UNICEF India), December 2011.

Though enrolment was the focus in SSA, as the primary goal was towards universalisation of elementary education (UEE), it did work towards improving the root cause of poor enrolments such as lack of infrastructure, teachers and other resources such as uniforms, text books and scholarships. In

fact, the focus on building classrooms and toilets, particularly for girls, had a remarkable impact on the enrolment, especially of the girl child. The enrolment progress one sees is clearly indicative of the immediate impact the programme had on this factor, till it starts tapering off at the end of the decade – which in fact was the end-date for SSA, before it was decided that the scheme will be extended. From the start of SSA till 2014 the girls' gross enrolment saw a growth of more than 25%!! Infrastructure did go a long way in bringing these improvements - there were 1,73,757 habitations un-served by primary schools in 2001-02 when SSA was launched. Over the years, 2, 04, 686 primary schools were sanctioned. However, the fact that 347 were sanctioned in the 2014-15 also indicates that gaps continue to exist even after one and a half decades, but the staggering numbers also helps appreciate the deficit the country was in at the turn of the new millennium. At the upper primary stage there were 2,30,941 habitations not served by upper primary schools in 2002. Over the years 1,59,427 upper primary schools have been sanctioned in a radius of three kilometres.

SSA had for its original goals the bridging of gender and social gaps in education along with universal access, retention and improving the quality of learning for which a multitude of interventions were planned and executed. This policy initiative

was supported by World Bank, DFID & UNICEF and coupled with the Government machinery, it helped unleash a mammoth effort to address some of the basic issues that was plaguing our system. In fact, even on the toilet front, though at present nearly two lakh schools function without a toilet, nearly a million toilets were sanctioned under SSA (as we see in the graph, at the half way mark in 2006 though only about 60% of the schools got a toilet, the corresponding numbers at the start was less than 20%) which has contributed to retention of girl students in a big way as indicated by many research studies. An impact assessment of SSA will indicate that it has provided a tremendous boost for our school infrastructure and thereby increased the gross enrolment to over hundred per cent across both genders. The learning indicators are still much to be desired, but that needs other more fundamental policy level actions such as reform in teacher education, which though has begun, still has a lot to be done. The focus by the end of the decade has shifted to Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Andolan (RMSA), which aims to do for secondary education what SSA did for elementary education. Though the focus has shifted to RMSA, the SSA continues to be operational as the policy principles behind the programme are towards long term quality enhancement.

Plan / Scheme	12th Five Year Plan Outlay	Union Budget Allocation (in Rs. Crore)			Union Budget Allocation corresponding to 12th Plan period (in Rs. Crore)	% of outlay
		2012-13 (actual)	2013-14 (RE)	2014-15 (BE)		
SSA	192726	23873	26608	28258	78739	40.9
MDM	90155	10849	12189	13215	36253	40.2
RMSA	27466	3172	3123	5000	11295	41.1

Source: Has the Tide Turned; Response to Union Budget 2014-15, CBGA New Delhi, July 2014

### The Mid-Day Meal (MDM)

The next big policy initiative witnessed in the new millennium is the MDM programme. As we can notice in the budgetary allocations, it is a program that is well funded. And in most States,

MDM has the second highest budgetary allocation after teacher salaries. Though the very first meal program was introduced as early as the 1920s, first in Madras (now Chennai) Corporation and then in Kolkata and in many states by the mid-1950s,

the programme saw a large scale launch in select blocks across the country only by the mid-90s as a nutrition programme The National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education (NP-NSPE) soon extended to all blocks. However, it was only an interim Supreme Court order in November 2001 which finally led to the establishment of the ‘cooked meal programme’ – the present avatar of MDM. The Supreme Court’s interim order provided for the conversion of eight food security schemes into entitlements (i.e. rights) of the poor: these included the Antyodaya Anna Yojna, the National Old-Age Pension Scheme, the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Programme, the Annapurna scheme and several employment schemes providing food for work and the National Mid-day Meals Programme (NMMP). Though the Court even appointed two Commissions in May 2002 to see to its implementation, the programme did not get implemented in many states due to paucity of funds. This is when, in 2003, The Planning Commission suggested an amelioration of the situation by allocating a minimum of 15% from another scheme. Finally, in 2004, the Centre promised adequate funding to all States. This led to the world’s largest feeding programme running in nearly a million schools and feeding more than 100 million children which has continued for over a decade now!

This programme had multiple objectives – again focusing on enrolment and retention of children in school as well as improving the nutrition of the children. Once again deeply connected to policy goals of universalisation of elementary education. Research studies have clearly shown the tremendous impact it has had wherein the stated objectives have been met. Not only did it increase enrolments, it also improved attendance and studies have even indicated a positive correlation of MDM to better learning outcomes: this is over and above the obvious positive correlations on nutritional health. In fact, on a somewhat poignant note, the MDM has been observed to have given many children in our country their only meal of the day!

Entitlement norm per child per day under MDM		
Item	Primary (class one to five)	Upper primary (class six to eight)
Calories	450	700
Protein (in grams)	12	20
Rice/wheat (in grams)	100	150
Dal (in grams)	20	30
Vegetables (in grams)	50	75
Oil and fat (in grams)	5	7.5

Source: MHRD: Mid-Day Meal Scheme; <http://mdm.nic.in/>

### National Curriculum Frameworks (NCF)

In 2005, the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) was released. It revised and improved upon the 2000 NCF. This was another important step towards improving education quality. This was only a framework, but on all aspects connected to education, from the curricular to the co-curricular. There were twenty one position papers from the twenty one focus groups that provide the inputs for the NCF 2005. Each paper is a brief on what should be done in the name of education – be it math or art. These emerged from the policy postulations over the years, leading to a document that took things one step closer to the ground as it enabled the formation of appropriate syllabus. In fact NCF acted as a bridge between what policy said and what was expected in the classroom transacted through a syllabus. Till NCF 2005 came about, there was a mis-match between what got espoused in policy documents and the kind of syllabus that was formed; the framework however helped the central syllabus to be formed in a manner that the core education ideas such as child friendly and holistic approaches to education were taken into account.

The key ideas of NCF 2005 are based on those critical educational ideas presented in our earlier policy documents. The document has five parts, each as important as the other, beginning from ‘perspectives of the curricular framework’, it goes on to cover ideas behind ‘learning and knowledge acquisition’ among humans and delves into ‘stages of school, curricular areas and assessments’ in the third before focusing on ‘school and classroom

environment’ and closing with the section on ‘systemic reforms’.

- To shift learning from rote method.
- To ensure overall development of children.
- To integrate examination into classroom learning and make it more flexible.
- To identify and nurture caring concerns within the democratic polity of India.
- Nurturing an over-riding identity informed by caring concerns within the democratic polity of the country.

Though, the NCF is applicable to all schools, given that most schools are State Board based there were very few states who used the NCF as a mode; in fact very few states developed their own state curriculum which then could be used to develop an appropriate syllabus. However, this has changed with the RTE mandating that States develop their own frameworks based on the NCF. This brings out beautifully the inter-connectedness of the various Government policies and policy initiatives connecting to the same policy ideal.

### **The Right to Education Act (RTE)**

Of the initiatives in education that have taken place in the country, there has been none as path breaking as the RTE and the fact that it came at the end of the first decade into the new millennium made it the ‘icing on the cake’ filled with policy level initiatives.

In April 2000 at an education forum at Dakar, The Dakar Framework for Action emerged on the collective commitment of the countries present to provide education for all. A little over two years later, in December 2002, the Indian Parliament passed the Constitution 86th Amendment Act which mandated the provision of free and compulsory education, by inserting Article 21A in the list of Fundamental Rights: ‘the State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of 6–14 years in such a manner as the State may, by law, determine’.

Thus, the Constitution of India made education a fundamental right, but qualified it by adding that the manner of this right would be as determined by a follow up consequential legislation. It stipulated that, “It shall come into force from such date

as the central government may by notification in the Official Gazette, appoint”. This follow-up legislation referred to in the 2002 Amendment of the Constitution of India (the Constitution 86th Amendment) is the ‘The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009’, passed by Parliament in August 2009, and notified into force in April 2010. Based on this Act, a subordinate legislation, the Model Rules, was framed by the centre to provide guidelines to states for implementing the Act.

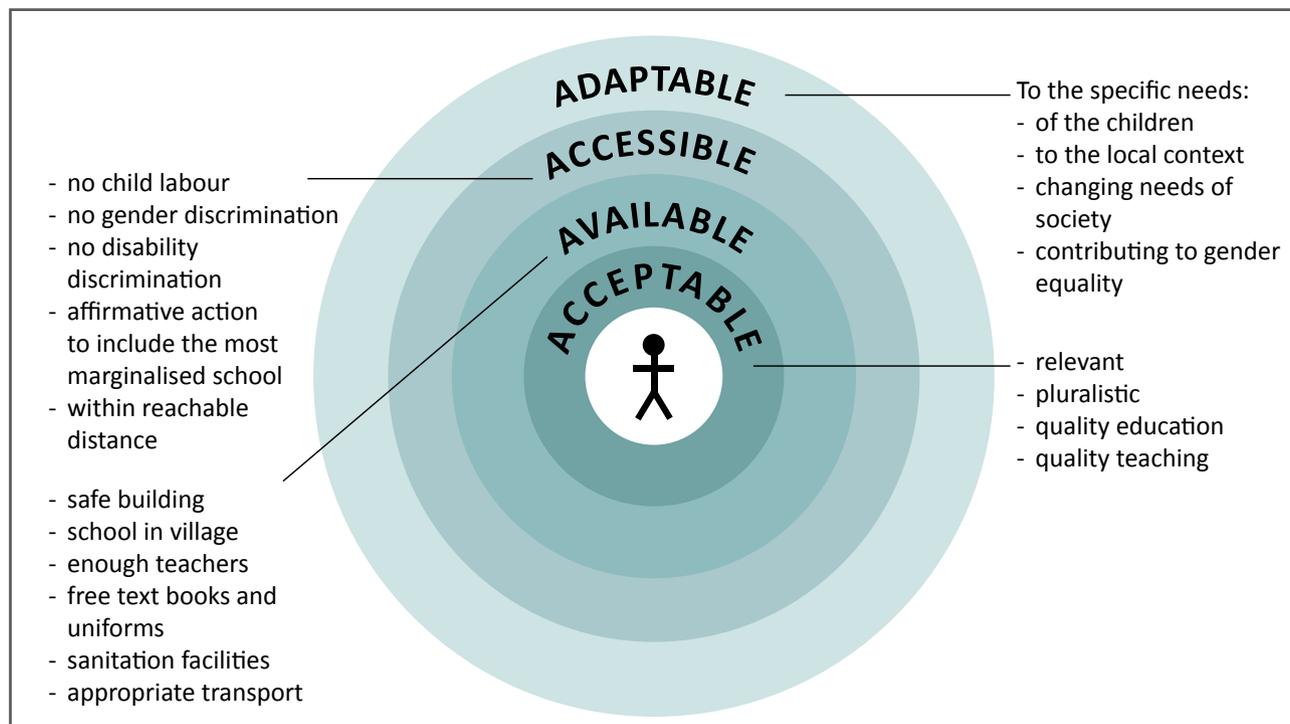
This progressive law was soon into litigation as its constitutionality was challenged by some schools. The Supreme Court faced two of them and by 2014 the Apex court had cleared the ground for the implementation of RTE by giving judgments in favour of the Act and reinforcing its legitimacy. It was clarified that every single child in this country has a right, a fundamental and justiciable one at that, to have an elementary level education and the onus on guaranteeing this was on the State.

Unfortunately, in popular imagination, RTE is seen through the narrow prism of one of its provisions which is reservation of seats in private schools for disadvantaged children. That this is only one sub-clause within the Act which has VII Chapters with a total of 38 Sections and a number of sub-sections is lost on most people. The law is a progressive one which moves our education space into a newer and better operating paradigm through a list of learner-centric and child-friendly provisions such as prohibiting detention of children due to poor learning outcomes and thereby placing the onus of this on the adults who are tasked with this, by prohibiting corporal punishment and thereby aiding the creation of a child friendly environment, mandating minimum levels of teacher qualifications at the entry level and thereby enhancing the learning potential in the teaching-learning space, establishing parental communities involvement in the schools and along with a Schedule -setting the norms and standards to be in place in schools,- the list is a long one!

The best way to understand the RTE is by using the framework of 4As developed by Ms.Katarina Tomasevski, a former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education. This concept explains the Act using an Action Aid template which states

for education to be a meaningful right it must be **available, accessible, acceptable and adaptable**.

The 4As are not definitive, but help in explaining the right in terms of tangible factors.



Source: Right to Education Project; <http://r2e.gn.apc.org/>

4 As diagram © Action Aid

**Availability** – that education is free and government-funded and that there is adequate infrastructure and trained teachers able to support education delivery.

**Accessibility** – that the system is non-discriminatory and accessible to all, and that positive steps are taken to include the most marginalised.

**Acceptability** – that the content of education is relevant, non-discriminatory and culturally appropriate and of quality; that the school itself is safe and teachers are professional.

**Adaptability** – that education can evolve with the changing needs of society and contribute to challenging inequalities, such as gender discrimination, and that it can be adapted locally to suit specific contexts.

This explanation of the RTE, elucidates how path-breaking this has been for the country as it moves the education space into an entirely new paradigm and introduces a rights based approach to education. This, however did not happen overnight and the history is interesting.

In post-Independent India, Article 45 of the newly framed Constitution stated that “the State shall endeavour to provide within a period of ten years from the commencement of the Constitution, free and compulsory education to all children until they complete the age of 14 years”. However, The National Policy on Education, 1968 was the first official document which attested to the Indian Government’s commitment towards elementary education, a commitment further emphasised in the National Policy on Education 1986. But it was only in the review of the policy in 1990, that it was recommended to include Right to Education as a fundamental right in the Constitution, on the basis of which National policy on Education 1992 was formulated. Meanwhile the Jomtiem Declaration had taken place and in 1992 India signed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and initiated the process of adopting legislation to make education a fundamental right of the child and inroads in this direction were already made in 1976 through an Amendment to the Constitution to enable the Government at the centre to also

make legislation for school education the power for which, until then, had been solely in the hands of the state governments. Along with all these developments, in the early 1990's Supreme Court gave two judgments where the Court held that 'right to education is concomitant to fundamental rights enshrined under Part III of the Constitution and that every citizen has a right to education under the constitution' and that, 'though right to education is not stated expressly as a fundamental right, it is implicit in and flows from the right to life guaranteed under Article 21 and must be construed in the light of the Directive Principles of the Constitution'.

Thus, understood in the context of Article 45 and 41 the right to education means that every child of this country has a right to free education until s/he completes the age of fourteen years. The RTE needs to be viewed from the perspective of the entitlements of the child and the institutional arrangements made to ensure that these entitlements are met.

Interestingly, by the time RTE was given the green signal by Supreme Court, the National Policy for Children (NPC) was adopted in 2013. The policy presented to the Nation by the Women and Child Welfare Ministry brought further clarity to interpreting RTE. The Preamble of the policy recognises that by definition a child is any person below the age of eighteen years and that childhood is an integral part of life with a value of its own. It also mentions that since children are not a homogenous group and their different needs need different responses, a long term, sustainable, multi-sectoral, integrated and inclusive approach is necessary for the overall and harmonious development and protection of children. The policy goes on to identify survival, health, nutrition, development, education, protection and participation as the undeniable rights of every child and it expects to guide and inform all laws, policies, plans and programmes affecting children. It further states that all actions and initiatives of the national, state and local government in all sectors must respect and uphold the principles of this policy.

The NPC is another progressive policy, which not only sets the path for State's role but also provides role for non-state stakeholders by encouraging the active involvement, participation and collective

action of stakeholders (thereby identifying a role for NGOs), in securing the rights of the child. Importantly it emphasises co-ordination at all levels stating that a rights based approach calls for conscious, convergent and collateral linkages among different sectors and settings. If there is one highlight of the series of policy initiatives since the turn of the century, it is this convergence across sectors and across different policy initiatives. Never had one seen initiatives in different sectors connecting deeply with one another and using our constitutional principles as the foundation.

### **Conclusion: Optimistic future**

This article has touched upon only a few of the series of policy initiatives in the new millennium. However, it gives an indication as to how we have got to where we have after years of struggle. Most of what we see on the ground today was envisioned in our Constitution seven decades ago – showcasing our constitution framers as progressive and visionary – and due to a variety of developments, including the international developments on human rights and our own political and judicial ones we reached a time period, which was further energised by the big calendar event of a 'new millennium', wherein things began to happen. All that was envisaged began to fall into place. Policy ideas got the projects and schemes it required, the political backing for it and the judicial activism that supported it.

A robust foundation based on constitutional principles has been laid down through these initiatives for building our future, particularly that of our children. It is with a lot of hope that we can look into the future and expect that all stakeholders, the State as well as the citizenry, will work hard towards building a better society by using the strong foundation of these policy initiatives. Hence, it is worrisome when one sees a demand to roll back the no detention policy or scrap the progressive assessment reform in the form of CCE (Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation) – if some of these progressive initiatives are faltering on the ground, one needs to work towards better implementation than discarding them – which is akin to throwing the baby out with the bath water. We must watch out, as it happens often, we do not dismantle progressive initiatives due to influence

of narrow ideologies or even at times popular demand and land into the 'one step forward - two back' syndrome that invariably afflicts our progress.

We in India today are witnessing a time when not only are there the right policies in place, but also initiatives that have been in place for over one and

a half decades which have withstood changes in Government a couple of times, initiatives that are bringing about monumental changes to the way we act on education. Let us progress faster by building on them and not think of re-building.

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