

ACCESSING THE IMPACT OF EDUCATION INCENTIVE SCHEMES IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The literacy rate in India lies at 74.02% which is much less than the global average of 86.3%. Despite public education is free, the literacy rate has increased at a sluggish rate over the past decade. Social barriers that revolve around the caste system are considered to be responsible for the reluctance of communities in accessing free public education. This paper has analyzed the need for implementing education incentive programs to promote formal education amongst those communities that have experienced historical oppression and women. The central and state governments in India have adopted Education Incentive Programs in the form of the Mid-day meal scheme at the national level and schemes The Mukhyamantri Balika Cycle Yojana at regional levels. Even though these schemes have improved literacy rates, their impact has been restricted. This paper looks into problems associated with the implementation of these schemes that stem from the lack of transparency in state structures and overarching social structures present in India. Lastly, this paper has sought to provide policy recommendations aimed at enhancing the ability of these schemes to achieve their potential by solving targeted problems.

Keywords: Schemes, Education, Government, Literacy rates, Mission

INTRODUCTION

Literacy is key to the socio-economic development of a country. Not only does education increase economic productivity and enhances employment opportunities, but it is also key to social mobility and empowerment. As per the census of 2011, the literacy rate in India is 74.02%, much less than the world average of 86.3% and the literacy rates of other developing countries including China (96%) and Sri Lanka (93%). (UNESCO, 2019). The National Sample Survey Organization, which collects data on behalf of the central government of India has found that literacy rates in India are increasing at a very slow rate of 1.5 percent annually. The growth rate, which has reduced since the previous decade, is mostly restricted to areas with lower literacy, which indicates that these rates stagnate after a particular amount of growth (National

Sample Survey Organization, 2008). Public Education until the high school level is completely subsidized in India. Despite the presence of private schools, some of which are for-profit, the Government of India operates a wide network of Kendriya Vidyalayas, which are highly subsidized public schools. Moreover, the fee is completely waived off for those who come from weaker economic backgrounds. Effective literacy rates of men (80%) are much higher than that of women (64%), indicating a vast disparity in access to state-sponsored education.

Despite the absence of an economic cost, lower literacy rates are often attributed to sociological conditions prevailing in India. Indian society is one that mainly follows traditional patriarchal values and holds conservative beliefs. This creates social barriers and prevents women from accessing education, even when it is subsidized (Mahara, 2019). Moreover, the presence of the Caste System prevents oppressed castes including Dalit and Scheduled Tribe Communities from accessing all state structures, including government schools, especially in rural India. Lower literacy levels have had detrimental consequences on India's development. It has prevented the access of oppressed minorities to quality employment since the lack of formal education is linked with the absence of certain skill sets required to practice most formal professions. Not only has it added obstacles in the emancipation of women in a predominantly patriarchal society, but it has also hampered programs including family planning, which is considered to be the solution to many problems that arise out of India's high population. According to analytical studies, India will only be able to attain the standards set for Universal Literacy by 2060, according to the present rate of growth (Engelman, 2009). Moreover, The Right to Education is guaranteed by the constitution of India as a fundamental human right.

Low literacy rates in India prove the need for specialized government programs known as education incentive schemes that aim to give positive incentives to those who access education structures in addition to subsidies. These programs include campaigns that aim to increase awareness around the benefits of education, the provision of economic incentives such as tax deductions to families who send their children to school and other specialized programs including the Midday Meal Scheme. In India, these programs usually operate under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, which was launched in 2001 to ensure that all students attend school from the age of 6-14 and actualize their fundamental right to education. The National Literacy Mission, on the other hand, tackles the problem of illiteracy amongst adults aged 35-75. These schemes have led to the opening of more than 2,00,000 schools in India and the inclusion of informal education programs within the structure of formal education to enhance access (Basu, 2004). Studies have suggested that these schemes have increased access to formal education in many states including Kerala and the North East which has contributed to an increase in literacy rates (Talukdar, 2007). However, programs like the Midday Meal Scheme, which is central to the Sarva Shiksha

Abhiyan suffer from not only corruption and negligence on the part of state officials but also from structural problems that make them inaccessible to backward castes (Lee & Thorat, 2005).

BACKGROUND

Cultural Barriers to education trace their causes to social systems established centuries ago. In the early Vedic era, society was organized into groups according to the occupation practiced by people. Education was hegemonized by the most powerful caste - the Brahmins. By the later Vedic age, the segmentation of society became rigidified and came to be known as the caste system. The social hierarchy created by the caste system forced the Dalit and Bahujan communities to engage in occupations that 'served' upper castes. They were denied social mobility and access to public utilities and education. Practices including untouchability, which were prevalent in many Indian communities limited the scope of reform and social emancipation for oppressed castes (Ambedkar, 1936). Moreover, the caste system also assigned the role of the 'homemaker' to women, hence denying them the opportunity to actualize themselves professional through education. Gender roles were legitimized by other religions that became dominant in India by the 20th century including Christianity and Islam. By the time India became an independent country access to formal education was limited to men belonging to the Savarna or upper castes despite inclusive reforms initiated by the British Raj and progressive movements led by social reformers including Raja Rammohan Roy and Swami Vivekananda that aimed to make education more accessible to historically oppressed minorities and women (Gidla, 2017).

The government of Independent India, which comprised of leaders including Dr. B.R. Ambedkar recognized the need for focusing on the problem of restricted access to education for oppressed communities. Despite the subsidization of public education and the implementation of caste-based reservations in educational institutions as a method of affirmative action aimed at emancipating oppressed castes, social stigma and marginalization prevented many women and Dalits from accessing formal education. Being economically backward, children from the Dalit Community joined traditional forms of employment, which was seen as a more economically viable option than education, which did not yield any short term benefits. Therefore governments recognized the need for launching special incentivization programs to make education more accessible. A mid-day meal program was introduced in 1925 in Madras Corporation by the British administration and in the Union Territory of Puducherry by the French administration in 1930 to incentivize families to send their children to schools. In independent India, starting with Tamil Nadu in 1962, state governments launched a series of schemes that aimed to guarantee nutritious meals to all students who attended public schools (NIHFW, 2009). In April 2001, the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) initiated a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) that argued

that excess food produced in India should be used to feed students. In the case which is popularly known as the “Right to Food” case, the Supreme Court ordered all governments to make provisions for midday meals in public schools (Saxena, 2001). Governments at the central and state level have used other economic incentives including the provision of bicycles to female students to increase participation in formal education structures (Mahara, 2019).

International programs also seek to solve the problems of food security and lower rates of literacy existing in low-income communities by providing free or subsidized food to students. Sweden, Finland, and Estonia provide free school meals to all pupils in compulsory education, regardless of their ability to pay whilst Hong Kong, Italy and Japan provide Reduced price meals to those who need a degree of assistance with costs (Clare, et. al., 2018). The United States National School Lunch Program (NSLP) to provide low-cost or free school lunch meals to qualified students through subsidies to schools (Kosar, 2016).

DISCUSSION

The costs for the mid-day meal program are shared by the central and state governments. These programs are implemented in two ways. In the decentralized model, food is prepared in the schools where it is served to students. Not only does it create jobs in the area, but it also reduces wastage and enhances transparency as the process can be monitored by teachers and officials. However, in schools that have poor infrastructural facilities, the implementation of the decentralized system has caused health hazards and accidents, some of which have led to death (Srinivasan, 2004). In the centralized model, the government works with external organizations in a public-private partnership to cook and deliver meals to schools. This is more common in urban areas because the concentration of schools due allows it to be financially viable. Centralized kitchens are considered to be more hygienic as large scale cooking is done through largely automated processes (PIB, 2015). Studies by economists show that benefits that the mid-day meal promised, including attracting children from disadvantaged sections (especially girls, Dalits, and Adivasis) to school, improving regularity and socialization have indeed been realized. Studies have found that the mid-day meal scheme has a positive effect on student enrollment, learning efforts and nutritional inputs (Talukar, 2007). Beyond the mid-day meal scheme, states in India have pioneered unique incentive programs to increase participation in formal education. To incentivize students to attend school, the government of Bihar has promised a Rupee 1 per school-day grant to poor children who show up at school. The Mukhyamantri Balika Cycle Yojana was initiated by the government of Bihar in 2006. Under the scheme, every girl who enrolled in grade 9 would receive a cash amount to buy a cycle, which she would use to go to school. These schemes have significantly improved the status of literacy in Bihar, which is considered to be one of the most backward states of India, as enrollment rates have increased by

30% (Mitra & Moene, 2019). Kerala has championed literacy awareness programs called Sāksharata Pada Yātras which has contributed to its literacy rate of 94%, the highest in India. Media reports on the Mid-Day meal scheme also document the positive effect of the program for women, especially working women and its popularity among parents, children and teachers alike. (Singh, 2005).

To bring in greater community participation and promote education, state governments in India have encouraged local communities to celebrate important family events including the birth of a child, success in an examination, the inauguration of a new house, etc. by contributing to the mid-day meal served in the local schools. These voluntary contributions by families of students take several forms including specially prepared food in addition to regular mid-day meals, and contribution in kind such as cooking ware, utensils, dinner sets or glasses for drinking water. The concept has been adopted by different states with local nomenclatures like "Sampriti Bhojan" in Assam, "Dham" in Himachal Pradesh, "Sneh Bhojan" in Maharashtra, "Shalegagi Naavu Neevu" in Karnataka, "Anna Dhanam" in Puducherry, "Priti Bhoj" in Punjab, "Utsav Bhoj" in Rajasthan and Tithi Bhojan in Gujarat. International non-governmental organizations including the Church World Service, Care, the Food and Agricultural Organization and UNICEF have also partnered with states to provide food and other necessary resources to schools to strengthen the mid-day meal program (Angelique, 2007).

The mid-day meal program is monitored regularly at the school, local, district, regional and national levels by different officials to ensure effective implementation. However, the success and impact of the mid-day meal program have been hampered due to structural and social problems. Caste-based discrimination continues to occur in the serving of food which alienates students from historically oppressed backgrounds. Ignorance of caste on part of the government has excluded the most important stakeholders and beneficiaries of this program (PIB, 2012). Education incentive programs have been more effective in states like Mizoram and Himachal Pradesh, which do not follow the traditional caste system as most other states do. The absence of social stratification allows programs to be more inclusive of social identities. Reports have also highlighted several implementation issues, including irregularity, corruption, and hygiene. Delays in the disbursal of funds often cause meals to be irregular and of poor quality. There have been multiple instances of embezzlement of food required to be used for mid-day meals by state officials (Chetri, 2006). Other education incentive programs, including the Mukhyamantri Cycle Yojana, suffer from similar implementational problems. These barriers prevent the most oppressed communities in India from accessing their fundamental rights including the Right to Education and Right to Food which is key for their social and economic emancipation.

CONCLUSION

India became the 135th country to make education a fundamental right in 2009 by passing the Right to Education Act, which describes the modalities of the importance of free and compulsory education for children between the ages of 6 to 14 years in India. Even though this right exists as a constitutional right on paper, problems in implementation have led to the denial of this right to the most oppressed communities of the country. Barriers in accessing education directly translates to barriers in achieving social and economic emancipation for communities and self actualization for individuals. Governments of India, under pressure from social movements has initiated many reforms that seek to incentivize marginalized caste minorities and women. However the success of these schemes have been limited and restricted due to the operation of larger sociological forces and problems in implementation. In order to ensure the actualization of the Right to Education, especially for those who need it the most.

There is a need to inculcate a culture of transparency and accountability within the structures of the state responsible for implementing programs including the Mid-Day Meal Scheme. Instances of corruption and embezzlement have led to the depletion of state resources and have impacted the quality and quantity of food served in schools as a part of the program. Moreover, the lack of state infrastructure and negligence on the part of state officials which results in food being prepared and served in unhygienic conditions has caused health hazards in states like Bihar that have led to the death of dozens of school children (PTI, 2016). Placing higher accountability on state officials and making processes more transparent is imperative to increase efficacy. Solving the problems of caste based discrimination and untouchability in India require solutions that are much more comprehensive and impact people beyond the ambit of education. However, awareness and sensitivity campaigns and training targeted at school officials can also help in making school environments more conducive to students from the *Dalit* and Scheduled Tribe communities.

Media outlets have been particularly instrumental in changing societal perception in India. Partnering with and using traditional and social media outlets to launch sensitivity programs can have a positive impact on the level of social stratification in India. Partnering with Non-Governmental Organizations increases the outreach and enhances the acceptability at the grassroots levels. Teach for India, SEWA, *Saaja* and *Pratham* are some non-profit organizations that work at the grassroot level to educate women and students from marginalized communities. Bringing them into the fold of state welfare programs, as well as partnering with international organizations such as UNICEF and the Food and Agricultural Organization would improve the resources and expertise at the disposal of the government. Education incentive schemes are a unique way of targeting the problems of social exclusion and economic backwardness of

communities and individuals who have historically existed at the margins of society. However, the government needs to reform structures and approach problems holistically to ensure that the programs launched by it actualize their true potential.

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