

Quality of Education: Assessing the Status of Government Schools in Odisha

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Abstract

Quality education encompasses all-round development of a child such as emotional, mental, physical, moral values and cognitive development. The goals of quality education go beyond basic access and incorporate the complex socio-cultural, health and wellbeing as well as orientation and aspirations of the learners. The government has implemented several educational development schemes to improve the access and quality since independence. Though India has done reasonably well in terms of access to school education but the quality of education is far from satisfactory. Odisha being one of the least urbanised states, a sizable section of children from rural and semi-urban areas are attending schools which lack basic facilities such as school buildings, toilets, drinking water, and insufficient and untrained staff and thousands of children were still out of school. Due to lack of resources, educational facilities and social capital the marginalised sections remain deprived of quality education. Given the importance of education in enhancing one's quality of life, it is imperative to focus on inclusive and quality education, which is one of the objectives of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4). The purpose of this study is to look at the state of quality education provided by the public school system in Odisha. It also examines and outlines the means to improve quality in education.

Keywords: *Quality, education system, school, rural, learner, teacher.*

1. Introduction:

Education plays a significant role in the all round development of an individual and the society at large. It enlightens our ideas, liberates our thoughts and enhances our knowledge and skills. Therefore, education is not merely a skill development or job training activity but it is the foundation of humanity. It familiarises learners to the socio-cultural, moral and economic issues facing humanity. John Dewey argued, education is not just a means of preparing for life, but instead a means of living. It is the process of progressively reconstructing one's experiences. It is the cultivation of each person's abilities that allows them to influence their surroundings and realise their full potential (Dewey 2004).

Quality education is one that focuses on all round development of a child such as emotional, mental, physical, moral values and cognitive development. Therefore, the aim of quality education goes beyond mere access and encompasses the complex socio-cultural, economic, health and wellbeing of the learners. The essence of quality education is the integration of body, mind and soul. A Healthy body, sound mind and supportive environment significantly influence the cognitive development of the child. Taking all these factors into account UNICEF has provided a comprehensive definition of quality education, involving learners, content, processes, environments and outcomes, following is the extended definition, quality education necessitates a safe, friendly environment, skilled and motivated teachers, and instruction in a language that children can comprehend (UNICEF, 2000). It also necessitates the monitoring of learning outcomes and the incorporation of feedback into instruction. Since independence both central and the state government has undertaken multiple initiatives to expand accessibility and improve the quality of education such as the flagship programme Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) aims at universalization of elementary education. Again, with the enactment of the RTE Act 2009, the government is obliged to offer "free and compulsory education to children" aged 6–14 as a fundamental right.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 stated that the policy needs to offer a quality education to every student, regardless of her/his place of habitation, with a special focus on marginalised sections. India's endorsement of the "Global Education Development Agenda for 2030," which was launched in 2015, aims to provide "inclusive and equitable quality education for all-by 2030" (NEP, 2020, p.3). Though India has done reasonably well in terms of access to school education but the quality of education is far from satisfactory. According to the World Bank, attending school is not the same as learning. Close to three-quarters of the children in class three in rural India are unable to perform two-digit subtraction questions. Tens of millions of students enter adulthood with deficiencies in basic abilities such as reading and numeracy (World Bank, 2019).

Indian education system is still far behind realizing its long-standing objectives of equity, quality and equality. India faces a serious challenge in improving the quality in education and in addition bridging the educational gap between different social groups.

Though the state is obliged to provide quality education to all children of school-going age under the RTE Act 2009 but to a considerable degree the educational inequality is produced and perpetuated through the hierarchical government school system. As Krishna Kumar argues, the existing system of education is highly unequal in terms of quality and access, and the universalization of education has "increasingly dichotomised 'quality' and 'equality' and heightened, a view of education which is essentially instrumental" (Kumar, 2010, p.7). Marginalised students have access only to poor quality education where the better institutions are monopolised by the well-off sections of the society. Students with low social and economic capital were pushed to the margin with the advent of the neoliberal state. This article examines the status of quality education in Odisha's public school system. The paper evaluates whether those schools have the necessary infrastructures and skills to provide quality education using primary and secondary data. Also the paper examine how successful have government measures been in providing high-quality education in state-run schools?

2. Assessing the Quality in Public Funded Institutions:

The need for quality education in the formative years of childhood is essential for the overall development of the learners. This has a lasting influence on the cognitive development in school-age children. According to UNICEF "Considerable consensus exists around the basic dimensions of quality education" includes learners, learning environments, content, process and outcomes and these "dimensions are interdependent, influencing each other in ways that are sometimes unforeseeable" (UNICEF, 2000, p.4). Krishna Kumar argued, without quality, there is no meaning of education as "there is a characteristic experience involved in an educative process which is essential and therefore non-negotiable" (kumar, 2007, p.1). NITI Aayog in his report 'The Success of Our Schools: School Education Quality Index' recognized that "Quality school education is a function of a targeted focus on learning outcomes, efficient governance structures, provision of necessary infrastructure and ensuring equitable academic opportunities" (2019, p.iii).

Odisha being one of the poorest and least urbanized states faces multiple pressing challenges where public education has been accorded limited priority. Education and human development are often ignored in the processes of dealing with pressing issues such as poverty, malnutrition and underdevelopment, the latter pulls sizeable state resources. The empirical evidence in Orissa suggests that education has been one of the most neglected areas in the State. Though the State has achieved a moderate literacy rate of 72.87 percent but the quality of education has been far below any conventional standard. In the Sustainable Development Goals Urban Index 2020–21, which was conducted for the percentage of school internet, schools with computers on hand, schools with functional electricity and drinking water, pupil–teacher ratio, and percentage of trained teachers at secondary level in 56 cities, the Odisha capital received a score of 50 out of 100 in quality education (Singha, 2021). Lack of basic infrastructure facilities, absenteeism and non-recruitment of vacant teaching and non-teaching positions and ad-hoc arrangements to run the schools are some of the significant issues behind the poor quality education in the state.

2.1 Quality Learners:

Health and nutritional status is a critical factor in determining cognitive development. Poor nutrition not just stunts the physical growth of a child but impaired cognitive development. Studies show that "sizable correlation between childhood nutrition and school performance" (Glewwe & King, 2001, p.81). A well-nourished child having the support of family and community and being ready to participate in learning are the important traits in making a quality learner. UNICEF underlined that "healthy children with positive early learning experiences and supportive, involved parents are thus most likely to succeed in school" (UNICEF, 2000, p.5).

Odisha is one of the most backward states with vast majority of rural population constantly encounter health and nutrition issues of epidemic proportion. In 2015-16, 1.29 percent of children aged 0-3 years and 0.86 percent of children aged 3-6 years in Odisha were severely malnourished, according to the state government (Odisha Economic Survey, 2017-18). Stunting and wasting due to undernutrition, malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies are widespread in the state especially among the ST/SC in Odisha. Suri argued that "almost half of the under-five children from tribal communities in Odisha are underweight, and 46% are stunted...Wasting is high in 25 out of 30 districts" (Suri, 2019). The health and wellbeing of children are both causes and consequences of multiple social-economic factors which have an enduring impact on physical, emotional and cognitive development.

2.2 Quality Learning Environments:

A quality learning environment includes physical, psychosocial and service delivery elements are essential requirements for quality education and positive learning outcomes. Government schools in the state lack basic facilities such as buildings, toilets, boundary walls, drinking water, etc. According to the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG, 2015), there were 2578 elementary and 904 secondary schools without toilets and 1714 elementary and 663 secondary schools without drinking water facilities in the State. Again, there were 2516 elementary and 11 secondary schools running without their own building. According to Nambissan, inadequate infrastructure, a lack of basic facilities, and a teacher deficit characterise schooling in remote rural and isolated tribal habitations. Wet flooring, leaky roofs, and run-down school buildings are all too typical, producing a depressing environment for pupils (Nambissan, 2000). According to Panchayat Raj Department, there are 18,851 villages in the state without primary schools and 32,008 villages without upper primary schools and the students have to make a long to attain schools. Poor infrastructure, the location and distance of the school from home significantly determines the enrolment, attendance and quality of education.

Safety, security and supporting environments are important constitutive of quality education. It is clear from the preceding discussion that there are thousands of schools without basic infrastructure which expose students to unsafe and insecure atmospheres. This has significantly impact students especially girls and contributes to the widening gender gap in enrolment. Sexual harassment of girls' student in and out of school setting is another important issue that impact girls' education. Such incidents are routinely reported in the media; for example, in Mayurbhanj in 2017, 100 girls walked 15 kilometres to the district collector's office to report sexual harassment. In Kandhamal district, a minor's pregnancy was reported by the media in July 2019 (Santoshini, 2019). In addition, the adverse consequence of absence of school in villages was suffered by girls as parents withdraw them from school for the safety of grown-up girls.

Within educational setting an open-hearted, inclusive and non-discriminatory atmosphere is significant to creating a conducive educational environment. But the pedagogical practices habitually validate the socio-cultural practices prevalent in wider society, such as caste and ritual hierarchy. Nambissan aptly underlined, "...despite active encouragement from impoverished family members, the apathetic treatment by teachers and school administrators largely shape the learning experiences of these socially disadvantaged groups" (Nambissan, 1996, p.1011). Incidences of discrimination and humiliation are widespread in educational institution, for instance, 20 lower caste students were "insulted, faced casteist slurs, were barred from offering prayers, and kept locked in the school for five hours" (Mohanty, 2015). During mid-day-meals SC/ST students are humiliated as Thorat and Lee highlighted that during the meal times, lower caste students were forced to sit separately from the dominant caste, refusal to eat from lower caste cook, served food from a distance and also strictly forbidden to move around the kitchen (Thorat & Lee, 2006). The exiting pedagogical attitude is unable to provide a non-discriminatory, inclusive and supportive environment to the learners which are essential for quality learning.

2.3 Quality Content:

Quality content is the planned and taught curriculum in the form of skill, knowledge value and attitude of educational institutions. According to the NPE 2020, the school curriculum will include information on human values, build tolerance for diversity, and reduce biases and prejudice by including material that is relevant to all communities (NPE, 2020). However the school curriculum and the pedagogical attitude have failed to recognized and appreciate the diversity, various cultures, identity and languages of the country. In fact studies show that the dominant culture, language and value system get priority in the curriculum and pedagogy over all other social groups especially lower caste and tribal (Bag, 2020a, 2020b; Gupta & Padel, 2018). Xaxa correctly asserted that the school curriculum was framed around the dominant community's culture, language, values, traditions, and histories and tribal communities had little choice but to embrace an education that was unfamiliar and hostile to them (Xaxa, 2021). In fact, in Ashram school which is specially meant for tribals not recognised their culture, language and "have ever used tribal languages in the curriculum, or if so, only as a way of drawing children into school in Standards I and II" (Gupta & Padel, 2018, p.31) despite the Indian constitution grants the right of every child to receive education in his or her mother tongue under Article 350A.

2.4 Quality Processes:

Educational process refers to the efforts of teachers and administrators to make a meaningful learning experience for students. In a teaching learning process, the teachers are important components and play an important role in quality education. However, the important reasons behind the poor quality education especially in the rural primary sections are lack of basic infrastructure facilities, absenteeism and non-recruitment of vacant teaching and non-teaching staffs, the large number of single teacher schools and ad-hoc arrangements to run the schools. The common feature of the government school system is shortage of qualified teachers including subject-specific teachers especially for upper primary level. NITI Aayog in his report states that Odisha have only 12.0 percent of their upper-primary schools meeting RTE prescribed subject teacher norms in 2016-17 (2019, p. 86). Kundu highlights that "in states like Bihar and Odisha, there have been no regular teacher

recruitments for a long time” (Kundu, 2019, p.35). Furthermore, according to Odisha Primary Education Programme Authority (OPEPA) there was a total of 1745 schools run with a single teacher during 2018-19. These single teachers not only handle all classes but also have to handle administrative work and the cumbersome work involved in mid-day-meals. In addition, such teachers were assigned census work and election duty and series of similar works periodically. The teachers are overburdened with non-academic tasks at the cost of important academic needs of the children. In addition to this, World Bank report claims that many government-employed teachers send substitutes who might not have the bare minimum of credentials to teach in their place (Swetashree, 2022).

2.5 Quality Outcomes:

Learning outcomes at educational institution signifies specific knowledge, skill and ability of the students to understand the subject, materials and classroom interactions. After having received the lesson whether the learners acquired the knowledge to solve the activities associated with it. Studies have found that there are huge disparities between what students actually have learned and what he/she was expected to learn at a particular grade and age. According to the Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) (ASER period 2018), in class-V, 3.2 percent of children cannot even identify single-digit numbers, while 14 percent do identify numbers up to 9 but not those greater than 99. Again, 33 percent can identify up to 99 but are unable to perform subtraction of them, 24.5 percent can subtract but cannot do division, and only 25 percent can perform division. Furthermore, 3.3 percent of children in class-V are unable to read letters, 9.3 percent are able to read letters but not words, and 13.5 percent are able to read words but not class-I level text or higher, 15.4 percent are able to read class-I level text but not class-II level text, and 58.4 percent are able to read class-II level text (ASER, 2019). The report highlights the poor learning outcomes in government schools. As a remedial measure, the government of Odisha have launched "learning enhancement programmes (LEP), namely Ujjwal, Utthan, and Utkarsh" focusing on subject-specific enhancement in Odia, Mathematics, and English for students who are lagging behind (Odisha Economic Survey, 2019-20, p.172).

A study to analyse the status of learning outcomes of government school students by NCERT found that “the learning standards of children in most of the government schools were found to be poor while there were several other challenges like shortage of staff, infrastructure problem, demotivated teacher and lack of administrative and academic support” (Singha, 2019). After a decade of implementation of one of the most ambitious policy of RTE Act, the quality of education in the state government schools fall short of expectations.

Conclusion:

Behind all the rhetoric, the commitments to quality education have been far from satisfactory. Quality education has the potential to stamp out of the historical and contemporary injustice and bridge the socio-economic gap between different social groups. To explore and maximise the benefit of education the government must actively seek out measures to upset the inequitable treatment against the marginalised sections. It must ensure sufficient resources for each student irrespective of institutional affiliation. Every child is unique and has different abilities and qualities however it is the substandard education that stunts their potential. Equitable allocation of resources to schools will improve the quality of infrastructure and teaching. Safety, security and a supportive environment are an essential part of quality education and the government is obliged to ensure it under the RTE Act. Imparting quality education required a robust education system and firm political commitment and actual implementation of various schemes.

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