

The paradox that is Rajasthan

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Why does the State continue to perform poorly across a range of social and human development indicators?

THE LAST quarter of 2006 saw the release of four important reports or data sets: the National Sample Survey 61st round, the National Family Health Survey Round 3, FOCUS on children under six, and the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2006 (a national sample survey facilitated by an NGO called Pratham released on January 5, 2007). Rajasthan stands out across all four on a range of social development indicators.

The NFHS-3 fact sheet tells us that only 22 per cent of rural children aged 12-23 months received recommended vaccines, 44 per cent of children under three years were underweight, 20 per cent were wasted (too thin for their height), and 34 per cent were stunted (too short for their age). This is not surprising given that 65.7 per cent of rural women were married before 18 years (the corresponding figure for rural men is 66 per cent), 54.9 per cent of married rural women in the 15-49 age group and 60.1 per cent of pregnant women were anaemic. The infant mortality rate in rural areas was 65 per 1000 live births, 61 per cent of women and 24 per cent men in the 15-49 age group have had no education.

The FOCUS (Citizens initiative for the rights of children under six, New Delhi) report of 2006 points out that Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, and Uttar Pradesh "have been relatively passive as far as ICDS [Integrated Child Development Scheme] is concerned. They have generally stuck to minimalist interpretation of central guidelines, without investing significant financial, human or political resource in the programme. The inertia is reflected in poor outcomes." This is when Rajasthan has fairly good infrastructure for the ICDS programme. Exclusion of the poorest children is another big issue in the State.

Insensitivity to children

Another issue highlighted in the report is the overall insensitivity to children. The nutrition supplement known as "murmura" (which is taken home) was observed to be consumed by adults and other family members, defeating the very purpose of providing it to children. In contrast, provision of hot cooked meals could have a greater impact in correcting malnutrition among children. Zero per cent of mothers interviewed received any nutrition counselling in the State, 19 per cent of women said they were visited by the Anganwadi worker and only 24 per cent said the child's growth chart was discussed with them.

The NSS 61st Round report reveals that 703 per 1000 rural households did not have any literate adult female and 326 had no literate adult; 783 of 1000 rural women reported they were not literate; 853 out of 1000 rural male and 681 out of 1000 rural female children in the 5-14 age group reported they were attending an educational institution. This number drops to 510 (male) and 218 (female) in the 15-19 age group.

ASER 2006 found that Rajasthan recorded the highest percentage of out of school children in the country, 10.82. What is even more revealing is that 25.22 per cent of children go to private schools. More boys are enrolled in private school than girls: 31.1 and 24.6 per cent respectively. The gap persists in the 11-14 age group where 23.7 per cent of boys and 17.1 per cent of girls go to private schools. Parents are willing to spend more on sons than daughters.

Coming to the learning outcomes in schools, ASER 2006 found that only 58.28 per cent of children in Standards 1 and 2 could read letters, words or more and only 45.62 per cent could recognise numbers. The situation gets worrisome in Standards 3 to 5 where it was found that only 52.01 per cent of children could read level one text and only 47.51 per cent of children could do subtraction.

The big story that emerges from ASER 2006 is that the situation with respect to the under-six children is also not encouraging. Seventy-one per cent of five-year-olds are enrolled in primary school. If we look at the age composition of Class I it is indeed revealing to note that 34.5 per cent are five-year-olds, 36.1 per cent are six-year-olds, and 14.8 per cent are seven-year-olds. This trend of close to one-third under-age and over-age children in primary classes makes the classroom quite complex. If we are to view this data in the light of the 2005 District Information System for Education (DISE), it is indeed revealing to note that only 4.78 per cent of primary schools are single room schools (meaning that a lot of investment has gone into school building). However, 40.1 per cent of primary schools are managed by single teachers. Only 13.48 per cent of schools have a pre-primary section (DISE, 2005). Little wonder that ASER 2006 found that 66.5 per cent of children in Class I could not recognise the alphabet. The situation does not improve significantly in Class 2 where 25.7 per cent were in the "nothing" stage and only 34.9 could read the alphabet and 26.1 could read words.

The situation in Rajasthan is indeed worrying because it was not only the home of a range of educational innovations such as Shiksha Karmi and Lok Jumbish; there has been a fairly high investment in infrastructure in ICDS and primary schools. It is a popular destination for donor support and also home to a vibrant non-government sector and the movement for right to information. Rajasthan is home to a very large number of reputed NGOs working in the field of education — with many of them wary of engaging with the system and thereby running parallel programmes. There is also a sense of complacency that pervades both the government as well as the non-government sector — one which is in sharp contrast to the harsh living conditions of the people.

It is time we started asking tough questions on Rajasthan. Why does the State continue to perform poorly across a range of social and human development indicators? It is indeed surprising that — unlike Bihar or Uttar Pradesh — the situation in Rajasthan rarely grabs the headlines.