
REVISITING THE PERTINENT PROBLEMS OF SARVA SIKSHA ABHIYAN IN KERALA

Article Particulars

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Abstract

Schooling is ubiquitous in the world, making education a major institution in societies. Indeed it is difficult to imagine any industrialized or industrializing society without a system of schools, from preschool to graduate level. Social institutions such as education constitute the major structural components of any society. Fewer and fewer students fit the mold of the “typical” student. In fact, “atypical” to some degree is becoming the norm. Although this creates issues for schools, the positive result of this reality is that the educators have to view each child individually and take into consideration individual strengths and weaknesses. Today’s students present many differences; some of the most obvious are present in those with identified disabilities, those who are classified as gifted and talented, and those who are “at risk” for developing problems. Another group of students experience a degree of disability that is not significant enough to result in special education eligibility. Still other students need special attention because of poverty, difficulties with language, or other at-risk factors. Adding all of these students together, plus gifted children, who are considered to be an additional 3 to 5 % of the school population, shows that 20 to 30 % of all students in public schools have some special needs. Although many of these students do not meet the specific criteria to be classified as “disabled” and are therefore not eligible for special education. For public schools to be effective with this growing diverse student population, school personnel must address the needs of all children, including children with special needs. They must be able to identify these students and help, develop and implement effective programs; this requires teachers to be able to understand the types of students they need to serve.

Keywords: *Social institutions, educators, disabilities, education eligibility, poverty, special needs, public schools*

Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan (SSA) is a flagship programme of Government of India and is implemented in the State with the objective of universal access and retention, bridging of gender and social category gaps in education and enhancement of learning levels of children in the age group of 6 to 14. The programme is implemented in the State by Primary Education Development Society of Kerala (PEDSK). The programme was launched in the year 2000-01. In Kerala its implementation was started in 2002-03. SSA also focussed on providing Inclusive Education to all CWSN in schools. SSA ensures that every child with special needs, irrespective of the kind, category and degree of disability, is provided quality Inclusive education. The programme also aimed at identification of Out of School Children (OOSC) and developing context specific

strategy to provide special training for them. The programme seeks to open new schools and construction of additional classrooms, toilets and drinking water facilities to strengthen existing school infrastructure. It envisages enhancing the capacity of teachers by providing periodic teacher training and academic resource support. It also provides textbooks and adequate support for learning achievement. After the enactment of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (RTE Act, 2009), the SSA framework for Implementation was revised to align various provisions under SSA with the legally mandated norms, standards and free entitlements mandated by the Act.

The State followed a four year primary education cycle from class 1 to 4 and a three year upper primary cycle from class 5-7. While Standards 1 to 4 were categorized as Lower Primary Section, Standards 5 to 7 were categorized as Upper Primary Section and Class 7 was attached to High School Section. The 2011 census ranked Kerala first in the country in total literacy rate (93.91 percent) and female literacy (91.98 percent). The gap in literacy rate between male and female which stood at 6.34 percent as per the 2001 census, when the SSA was launched was reduced to 4.04 percent during 2011 census.

The programme is implemented in Kerala by a State Implementation Society viz., PEDSK. At State level, the State Project Director was responsible for implementation of the programme. The district level functions were implemented by District Project Officers. Teachers were provided academic resource support by 168 Block Resource Centres¹ and 1385 Cluster Resource centres².

Finances of the Programme

The expenditure of the programme was to be shared between Government of India and Government of Kerala in the ratio of 60:40 during 2009-10 which was later revised to 65:35 during 2010-14. The Government of India's share was released directly to PEDSK in the State in two installments. Government of India would release an ad-hoc grant in April every year up to a maximum of 50 percent of actual funds utilized by PEDSK in the previous year, pending approval of the Annual Work Plan & Budget. The ad-hoc grant was to be adjusted while releasing the subsequent instalment due to the State, as per approval of the Annual Work Plan and Budget for the year. The State share was released to PEDSK by the Local Self Government Institutions and Government of Kerala. The expenditure against approved outlay during 2009-14 was 73.48 percent and the expenditure against total receipts was 76.15 percent. The expenditure during 2010-11 was low as additional allocation obtained could not be utilised due to non-issue of order for appointment of substitute teachers by Government of Kerala and non-notification of RTE rules which was a condition for purchase and supply of school uniform. Similarly, the expenditure during the year 2011-

12 was low due to delay in issue of order, for appointment of substitute teachers and part time teachers by Government of Kerala.³

Findings

1. Bridging of Gender and Social Category Gaps

Though bridging the gender and social category gaps in elementary education was one of the major objectives of SSA, District Project Officers in test checked districts⁴ stated that no study or survey to assess the gender or social category gaps in education has been conducted. SSAK in its Annual Reports for the years 2009-10 to 2013-14 reported that enrolment of SC/ST children was at par with general category. It was stated that there was no gender gap or social category gaps as evidenced from enrolment, retention and dropout rates. The studies conducted by the ST Development Department and SC Development Department of the State revealed that 23.93 percent of ST children either dropped out or discontinued studies. Among SCs, the report of the department stated that 9.75 percent of the children dropped out at the school level.⁵ In order to retain children in schools, activities like vocational training, sahasava⁶ camps, training in martial and folk arts, exposure trips, training in bicycle riding, personality development camps, padanaveedu⁷, parental awareness, etc., were conducted in the test checked districts. Despite SSAK implementing these initiatives, the high percentage of children remaining out of school among different disadvantaged and social category groups at the elementary level of education is an issue of concern.

2. Inclusive Education for Children with Special Needs

The term 'Children with Special Needs' (CWSN) refers to children who are challenged with various problems such as that of vision, hearing, speech, orthopaedically impaired, learning, cerebral palsy, mental retardation, autism and multiple disability. Inclusive Education (IE) is intended to enable CWSN to attend regular schools like other children. Besides it was also important that these children receive all the support they need to learn adequately. The key thrust of SSA was on providing IE to all CWSN in general schools. The SSA manual for CWSN, April 2003 stipulated that expenditure up to Rs 1200 per year could be incurred on a child with minimum of 40 percent disability in line with the Persons with Disabilities Act 1995. (PwD Act 1995). This was later revised to Rs 3000 per year, per child from 2010-11 onwards.⁹

3. Projection of higher number of CWSN

Since the budget allocation for Inclusive Education was based on the number of CWSN, Audit noticed a tendency to inflate the number of CWSN in the Annual plans formulated by SSAK as explained below:

- As per the 2011 census, there were 5377882 children in the State in the age group 5 to 14 with 66519 disabled children (1.24 percent). The number of CWSN covered by SSAK during the years 2010-14 was 1.84 to 2.68 times of 2011 census data.
- The Directorate of Public Instructions had furnished the number of students in Government and aided schools with 40 percent or more disability in the category of Visually Impaired, Hearing Impaired, Orthopedically Handicapped and Mentally Retarded. The number of Children reckoned as CWSN by SSAK in the above category was 2.3 to 3.2 times more than the CWSN reported by the DPI during the period 2009-14.¹⁰

The Project Approval Board of Ministry of Human Resource and Development while approving the Annual Plan of SSAK for 2014-15 also expressed concern on the data on CWSN and advised sample check. On sample checking, it was found that children with mild problems like those using spectacles had been included resulting in the number of CWSN being inflated. The Secretary, General Education Department admitted in the Exit Conference that a sample check of 5 percent of CWSN by SSAK led to the reduction of CWSN in the year 2014-15. It was stated that instructions had since been given to follow the screening process meticulously. As the sample check has resulted in the reduction in the number of CWSN from 178201 during 2013-14 to 136206 during 2014-15, it is reckoned that SSAK had irregularly obtained Rs 5.08 crore on 41995 nonexistent CWSN at Rs 1210 (average expenditure per CWSN during 2013-14) per CWSN. As similar instances of obtaining ineligible assistance on non-existent CWSN in the preceding years cannot be ruled out, the issue needs to be investigated.¹¹

4. Lacunae in medical assessment of CWSN

The SSA Manual advised adoption of standard tools for the purpose of initial identification of CWSN. Model checklists were to be used for initial screening of children. The Manual also stipulated that the extent of disability of a child was to be decided in an assessment camp or in a government hospital by a competent medical board. Each child identified in the initial screening was required to be assessed to determine the extent and type of disability, the development level of the child, the nature of support services required, assistive devices required and the most appropriate form of special training to be given to the child. BRC's in test checked districts failed to produce to the Audit, medical assessment records of all children stated to have been taken to these camps. Audit was therefore unable to obtain assurance that all identified children were indeed examined at assessment camps.¹²

The wide variation between the number of CWSN identified and the number of CWSN for whom medical assessment records were available indicated that children were included in SSA programme without proper assessment as observed below:

- Seventeen of the 21 selected BRC s (Block Resource Centres) reported that assessment camps for Learning Disability were not conducted. Even though four¹³

BRCs stated that they had conducted camps for assessment of Learning Disability; there was no case sheet to confirm that the children were indeed examined in these camps.

- The details collected from 21 test checked BRC's revealed that medical assessment records in respect of 41.91 percent to 56.85 percent of Visually Impaired Children, identified during the years 2009-10 to 2013-14, were not available.
- During 2013-14, there were 4213 identified MR children in 21 selected BRC's. However, medical assessment records were available only for 1214 Mentally Retarded Children.
- The beneficiary survey of CWSN conducted by Audit confirmed that out of 792 children covered in the survey, medical assessment records of 460 children (Learning Disability 210, Low Vision 205 and Hearing Impaired 45) were not available in the BRC's. Model checklists as stipulated were also not used for initial screening of these 792 children.¹⁴

The reply of SSAK was that children who were supplied assistive aids and children not requiring assistive aids were not usually taken to assessment camps every year. Hence, there was variation between the number of CWSN and the number of children in respect of whom medical assessment records were available. The reply is not tenable in view of the fact that assessment camps for Learning Disability were not conducted in 17 of the 21 BRCs test checked and even Mentally Retarded children requiring regular medical attention were not taken to assessment camps resulted in failure to determine the extent and type of their disability to assess the change in degree of their disability over a period of time. Children were thus denied the appropriate support services and special training required by them.¹⁵

5. Preparation of Individualised Education Plan (IEP)

Individualised Education Plan (IEP) is a statement stating the needs, special services required and the possible achievement of a child having special needs within a specified timeframe. It should also state the most appropriate learning environment of the child. The SSA Manual required preparation of the IEP jointly by the special teacher as well as the general teacher and constantly reviewed by the district/block level functionaries to monitor the individual performance of each child. No IEP was prepared in any of the 792 cases of CWSN covered in the beneficiary survey conducted by Audit. Data collected from 21 test checked BRCs revealed that IEPs were prepared in 0.76 to 2.27 percent of CWSN during 2009-14.¹⁶

6. Assistance to Visually Impaired

The SSA framework for Implementation stipulated that all children requiring assistive devices should be provided with aids and appliances, obtained as far as possible through convergence with the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, State

Welfare Departments, National Institutions, ALIMCO¹⁷, voluntary organizations or NGOs. It was also stated that SSA funds could be used if aids and appliances could not be obtained through convergence. Braille is the most important literacy tool for early childhood students who are blind or severely vision impaired. In the absence of Braille, children have to learn by listening to lessons and clear grades with the help of scribes who can read out to them and write exams. The probability of children without access to proper Braille reading and writing skills dropping out of schools are greater as they are dependent on external assistance.¹⁸

The audit noticed that the blind CWSN in the above districts were not provided with Braille Books, Braille Kits and audio equipment during 2009-14. Braille kits and Braille textbooks were not supplied by SSA to any of the 14 blind children covered in the survey. SSAK admitted that it was not providing Braille kits and books under the impression that the blind children received these materials from Kerala Federation of Blind through DPI and that steps have been initiated to make available the materials needed. The reply indicates the failure of SSAK to efficiently coordinate with other agencies to ensure that the blind children were provided with Braille assistive aids.¹⁹

7. Engagement of Resource Teachers for CWSN

Resource Teachers were specially qualified teachers capable of teaching children with special needs in all settings. Their main role was to provide remedial assistance to a child in those content areas in which he/she is having comprehension problems in a regular classroom. These teachers were expected to assess CWSN, teach the use of aids and appliances, prepare teaching material, design specific teaching activities, provide remedial teaching, prepare individual education plan, monitor the performance of CWSN etc. Resource Teacher's also advise the general teacher on how to cope with the needs of special children in the regular classroom. It was envisaged that these RTs would travel from school to school in a block/ cluster according to need.

Audit noticed that SSAK failed to offer CWSN resource support as envisaged in the SSA Manual. In the 21 test checked blocks, 23650 CWSN were provided resource support by 189 RTs with reference to the various categories of CWSN in the 21 selected BRCs during the year 2013-14 and observed as follows:

- There were 9 Resource Teachers to attend to 9880 Visually Impaired in the test checked BRC's. In 15 of the 21 BRC's, 7041 Visually Impaired was not provided the services of trained Resource Teachers. IN BRC Chavakkad, only one Resource Teacher was deployed to provide resource support to 834 such children. Beneficiary survey conducted by Audit also revealed that 10 out of 14 blind children were taught by resource teachers without Braille trained.

- None of the 3990 children suffering from Learning Disability and 310 children suffering from Autism were provided with the services of qualified Resource teachers.
- Children suffering from Cerebral Palsy (294) in 18 of the 21 selected BRCs were also not provided with services of qualified RTs. In 12 of the 21 BRCs test checked, 1699 children classified as Hearing and Speech Impaired were denied the services of qualified Resource teachers.
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From this it's clear that SSAK failed to adhere to the stipulations contained in the SSA Manual which required appointment of RTs from each area of disability viz., visual impairment, hearing impairment etc. Failure of SSAK to draft norms for determining the appropriate disability wise CWSN-Resource Teachers ratio resulted in its inability to provide academic support to large number of CWSN is inexcusable.

8. Functioning of Resource Teachers

The problem of inadequate number of resource teachers to attend to the requirements of CWSN was further compounded by the fact that out of 161 resource teachers for which the school visit details were available at BRCs, 139 resource teachers did not utilize even one third of the school working days for providing resource support to CWSN attending schools. While 15 resource teachers made school visits for only one to 20 days, 74 visited for 21 to 40 days and 50 resource teachers for 41 to 60 days during 2013-14. Failure of resource teachers to make regular school visits deprived CWSN of the much needed support and resulted in payment of remuneration to resource teachers for services which they had not rendered.²¹

9. Enrolment and retention in Schools

According to the RTE Act, 2009, which became operational from 1 April 2010, every child in the 6 to 14 age group shall have a right to free and compulsory education. SSA aims at universal access and retention. NER²² is an achievement indicator that reveals the level of enrolment of children of the age group in schools. In its Annual Reports for the years 2009-10 to 2012-13, SSAK reckoned the NER of children in the age group 6 to 14 in Kerala as 100 percent. NER of 100 percent was indicative of the fact that all children in the eligible group were enrolled in schools. However the annual report of SSAK for 2013-14 reported a lower NER of 85.48 for primary section and 82.26 for upper primary section. Since SSAK did not possess verifiable data on the actual population in the age group 6 to 14 and their school participation status, audit could not get an assurance about the accuracy of NER claimed.²³

10. School Mapping

The presence of a school at appropriate locations is an essential prerequisite to universal elementary education. Universal access to elementary education requires a school within the reasonable reach of all children. Rule 6 of the Kerala RTE rules, 2011 defines the limit of neighborhood schools²⁴ as one kilometer and three kilometers for children in Class 1 to 5 and 6 to 8 respectively, in order to obtain a clear picture regarding the availability of schools and to identify the gaps and areas where new schools need to be opened. SSA Framework for implementation requires States to map neighborhoods and link them to specific schools. It was envisaged that school mapping would include environment building in the village, conduct a household survey, preparation of a map indicating different households, the number of children in each household and their participation status in school, preparation of a village/school education register, presentation of the map and analysis to the people and preparation of a proposal for improved education facilities in the village which would form the basis of the School Development Plan mandated under the RTE Act, 2009. The following were noticed in this regard:

- During 2009-14, SSAK attempted school mapping twice; once in June 2010 by a Non-Governmental Organisation- Maithri, which failed to provide a clear picture on the need for establishing more schools. Again school mapping was conducted during 2013-14 by SSAK themselves reckoning distance to neighborhood schools from a ward²⁵ as the criterion for identifying un-served areas. However the annual plan for 2014-15 prepared on this basis and submitted to MHRD²⁶ was found defective as the number of wards with no schools which was stated to be zero in 2011-12 and 2013-14 annual plan proposals, rose to 1107 and 1948 respectively in the annual plan proposals for 2012-13 and 2014-15. The MHRD, in the State Plan Appraisal Report also observed that the change in status of 'Access to school' as reported by SSAK was sudden and inexplicable. Thus the failure to conduct an effective school mapping exercise resulted in failure to possess accurate data on un-served habitations in the State.
- Audit observed that in areas where schools were not viable, SSA norms provided for alternative provisions like residential school and transportation facilities to enable children to obtain full time schooling. As per the Annual Plan 2014-15, SSAK proposed to provide transportation facilities for easier access to schools to 3641 children who were living in un-served habitations. The proposal was not approved by MHRD citing the reason that the State had not defined the area/limits for children eligible to avail this provision. This has resulted in children being deprived of transportation facility making it difficult for them to reach school.²⁷

Suggestions

1. SSAK has to take immediate steps to conduct medical assessment of CWSN.
2. Prepare norms for engagement of Resource Teachers based on the number of CWSN.
3. Focus on enhancing the quality of teaching to ensure higher learning levels among children.
4. Engage only qualified BRC Trainers and CRC Co-ordinators and deploy them as per norms.
5. Take stringent measures upon those officials who are failing to do their duty.
6. Conducting household surveys which will help in proper monitoring and evaluation.
7. Collaborating with other Professionals in identifying and making maximum use of exceptional children's abilities.

Conclusion

By going through the Audit Reports, other associated data and interviewing concerned officials it can be understood that the objective of providing Inclusive Education to CWSN in general schools was not met. The CWSN was not even medically assessed. Blind CWSN were not provided with Braille books, Braille kits and audio equipment. The resource teachers to train CWSN were also found to be unqualified. The resource teachers also failed to monitor the individual performance of each CWSN which was very important. Tests on learning levels of children also revealed very poor learning levels indicating the necessity for preparing them adequately for the next grade. The governmental authorities need to consider all these facts and take immediate steps to rectify the faults.

References

1. Block Resource Centres- Unit at block level (In the state the unit is at sub educational district level) to provide training and on-site support to schools and teachers. In urban areas, BRCs are called as Urban Resource Centres.
2. Cluster Resource Centres- Unit at Cluster level to provide training and on-site support to schools and teachers.
3. Year-wise Annual Report of SSAK 2009-10 to 2013-14.
4. The testchecked districts include Ernakulam, Kasargode, Pathanamthitta, Thiruvananthapuram and Thrissur.
5. Report published by the SC/ST Development Department of the State during 2008-10 and 2009-10 respectively.
6. Sahavasa camps are camps conducted to help children to mingle with others and to face different life situations. Moral values were conveyed to them in camp through games and activities.

7. Padanaveedu: Neighbourhood learning centres organized to focus on SC/ST and minority students who lack learning environment at home. Under the guidance of education volunteers these students get a space and help to improve their studies.
8. Report No.2 of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India on General and Social Sector, 2015, p.15
9. Chart showing the total number of children identified as CWSN and expenditure per child during the years 2009-14.
10. Op.cit. p.16, Also refer Indian Education Structure and Process, M.S Gore, Rawat Publications, New Delhi, 1994.
11. Interview with Anil Sir, Assistant Accounts Officer, Audit Wing.
12. ibid, For further readings vide. A Guide to Educating Children with learning Disabilities, Anupriya Chadha, Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd, 2001.
13. The four places include Chavakkad, Chittarikkal, Palode and Wadakkanchery.
14. Interview with Mahesh Sir, Accounts Officer, Audit wing.
15. Op.cit. p.19, For further readings see National Policy on Education, Digmarti Bhaskara Rao, Anmol Publications Pvt Ltd, Vol.1, New Delhi, 1996.
16. Chart showing the details of survey conducted in 21 testchecked BRCs during 2009-14.
17. ALMCO is the short form of Artificial Limbo Manufacturing Corporation of India.
18. Year-wise details of blind children (in Thiruvananthapuram, Pathanamthitta, Ernakulam, Thrissur and Kasargode) under SSAK from the District Project Offices of SSAK.
19. Op.cit., p.20, For more references see Contemporary Auditing, Kamal Gupta, Tata Mc Grawtill & Publishing Company Ltd, New Delhi, 2005, pp974-985.
20. Interview with Ravi Sir, Senior Accounts Officer, Audit wing.
21. Op.cit., p.21, For more references vide Exceptional Children : Their Psychology and Instruction, Sterling Publishers, New Delhi, 1992.
22. NER means Net Enrolment Ratio is calculated by dividing the number of students enrolled who is the official age group for a given level of education by the population for the same age-group and multiplying the result by 100.
23. Annual report of SSAK for the years 2009-14.
24. Neighbourhood schools –a school located within the defined limits or area of neighbourhood, which has been notified by the State Governments under the State RTE Rules.
25. Ward is the name called for the territorial area of a Local Self Government Institution for the purpose of election of a member.
26. MHRD-Ministry of Human Resource Development.
27. Op.cit. p.22, For more references vide Schools and Society : A Sociological Approach to Education, Jean.H. Ballantine & Joan Z.Spade, Pinforge Press, 2008.