

Evaluation of Gender and Equity Issues Under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan

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Vimala Ramachandran
Prerna Goel Chatterjee

Abstract

In the last 50 years, India has made significant progress in the field of education. Yet, there are huge challenges, especially when it comes to bridging gender and equity gaps in education. In 2001, the Government of India (GOI) had launched Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan (SSA) with the specific purpose of achieving universal elementary education (UEE). One of the main goals of SSA is to bridge gender and social gaps. Even though the SSA programme is primarily financed by the GOI, three external Development Partners (DP) also contribute funds towards SSA, namely: World Bank's International Development Association (IDA), the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) and the European Union (EU). Being a partnership programme, a six monthly review is carried out by the GOI and DP, which is known as the Joint Review Mission (JRM). This desk review was conceptualised with the purpose of doing a thorough review of monitoring and evaluation processes of SSA JRM reports in order to understand how gender and equity goals have been tracked and addressed by the government and donor partners. More specifically, this study also explores how equity and gender have been understood within the SSA framework; whether the SSA JRM mechanism focuses on input indicators, process

Vimala Ramachandran is Professor at the National University for Educational Planning and Administration, Aurobindo Marg, New Delhi 110016, India. E-mail: vimalar.ramachandran@gmail.com

Prerna Goel Chatterjee is Project Consultant at the National University for Educational Planning and Administration, Aurobindo Marg, New Delhi 110016, India. E-mail: prernagoel14@gmail.com

indicators and/or output indicators; and what are the various gender-related issues that have been flagged in SSA JRM reports and recommendations made over the years?

Keywords

Elementary education, gender, equity, evaluation, monitoring, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan (SSA)

Introduction

India has made significant progress in the field of education in the last 60 years. Almost 96 per cent children between 6 and 14 years are currently enrolled in schools (ASER, 2012). There has also been a remarkable decrease in the number of out of school children (OOSC) and an exponential growth in school infrastructure and provision of facilities. Many schemes have been introduced to increase retention of students including a Mid-Day Meal Scheme, providing free textbooks, uniforms and bicycles to students, bridge and remedial courses for OOSC. More teachers are getting recruited and trained and new teaching methodologies are increasingly being adopted. Yet, there have been persistent gaps in achieving universal elementary education (UEE). The situation is particularly worse for girls and children from socially disadvantaged communities who attend government schools. Therefore, in order to understand how the Government of India (GOI) has been tracking achievements of gender and equity goals in elementary education, this desk review was conceptualised with a particular focus on Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan (SSA) for implementing UEE.

Launched in 2001 by the GOI, a chief goal of SSA was to bridge gender and social gaps at primary education levels by 2007 and at elementary education levels by 2010. While the SSA programme is primarily financed by the GOI, three external Development Partners (DP) also contribute funds to it, namely: World Bank's International Development Association (IDA), the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) and the European Union (EU). Being a partnership programme, a six monthly review is carried out by the GOI and DP, known as the Joint Review Mission (JRM).

This study is a review of 17 SSA JRM reports and research studies commissioned under SSA from 2004 to 2013. The main purpose was to review how gender and equity goals have been tracked and addressed by the government and donor partners in SSA JRM. In addition, the following questions have also been explored in this study:

1. How are equity and gender understood within the SSA framework?
2. Is the focus of JRM on input variables, process indicators and/or output indicators?
3. To what extent does it include the teaching–learning process and curriculum-related issues?
4. Does it also look at teacher deployment, teacher attitude and practices, and teacher training? If yes, in what ways?
5. Is the experience of schooling taken into consideration? In particular, are issues of caste/community-based inclusion and exclusion, child abuse (physical, emotional, sexual), and corporal punishment addressed?
6. What have been the various gender-related issues that have been flagged by the SSA JRM and what recommendations have been made over the years?

In order to get in-depth information on the SSA JRM mechanism, all SSA JRM reports, along with various research studies commissioned by SSA were critically reviewed. Additionally, some key people from the GOI and DP who have been an integral part of SSA JRM process were interviewed in order to get a perspective on how gender and equity issues have been discussed under this scheme. The next section gives a brief overview of gender and equity issues and of how some important indicators have been addressed within these parameters. The last section essentially deals with some pertinent gender and equity-related issues that are missing from the JRM mechanism and the main problem areas with the mechanism itself.

Gender and Equity

In a country as disparate and divided on the basis of caste and socio-economic inequalities as India, education requires a framework that can

capture heterogeneous gendered realities and multiple disadvantages. These are influenced by factors such as:

1. **Location**—rural/urban, remote/desert/mountains, international borders, inter-state borders, conflict areas;
2. **Identity**—caste (Scheduled Caste [SC]; Scheduled Tribe [ST]); religion (for example, Muslim minorities); specific occupational groups within the caste/community; language spoken at home;
3. **Economic status**—those who live below the poverty line or the lowest economic quartile, permanent or seasonal migrants;
4. **Type of school**—what type or kind of school they are enrolled in such as government (including municipal/local body schools), private, aided and unaided and private unrecognised schools;
5. **Ability/disability**—within all of the above, children living with physical or mental disabilities face huge challenges that may vary across different locations, different castes/communities and between boys and girls;
6. **Gender**—within all of the above categories gender relations have a strong impact and it is important to acknowledge that these may affect boys and girls differently.

All these factors intermesh with each other and not only influence formal access to schools but also, more importantly, how children are treated within the school, their ability to learn as well as be energetic participants in school activities and the kind of support they get or do not get at home and within their community (Ramachandran and Naorem, 2012). Therefore, in order to effectively bridge gender and equity gaps in education, it is important to take into consideration the following factors:

1. Equal access to a functioning school;
2. Enrolment of all children and their regular attendance in school;
3. Adequate recruitment of teachers and ensuring that they come to school regularly and are conscientious;
4. Remedial/supplementary/focused support for children who need it;
5. Provision of adequate school infrastructure, functioning toilets and drinking water facilities, safe buildings and protection from extreme weather;

6. Access to books, stationery and other teaching–learning material;
7. Creating curriculum and teaching–learning material that is free from any discrimination and stereotypes;
8. Provision of uniforms, especially to the very poor and among them, girls;
9. Friendly, positive and non-discriminatory teacher attitude towards all children;
10. Absence of all forms of violence and abuse (physical, emotional, sexual) and corporal punishment;
11. Provision of nutritious and good quality Mid-Day Meals;
12. Providing regular assessment and feedback to children, monitoring their learning levels and giving necessary support, when needed.

The above indicators, if delivered and monitored with care, could lead to meaningful access to education. Consequently, it would be fair to say that achieving equity goals in education requires work simultaneously on several fronts and cannot be one-dimensional. Keeping these points in mind, the next section focuses on various indicators that have been discussed in SSA JRM reports and how these have looked at gender and equity issues.

Various Indicators under SSA JRM Reports

One of the main goals of SSA is to bridge gender and social disparities in education. To achieve this goal, the SSA programme has been focusing on various aspects such as school infrastructure, recruitment of additional teachers, strategies for inclusion of vulnerable groups of children including those who are out of school, improving the quality of education by providing training to teachers, revision of curriculum, improved supervision and greater involvement of the community. After scanning 17 JRM reports, we found that the following indicators have been discussed in most JRM reports (Table 1). Below, most of these indicators have been analysed in detail including what aspects have been covered under the JRM and what elements are missing.

Table I. Indicators and Information Presented in Most JRMs

Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enrolment—class-wise as well as level-wise (primary, upper primary) disaggregated by social group and gender; • Sample survey findings on out of school children (OOSC); • Information on average dropout; retention; attendance and transition; • Opening of new schools and school infrastructure.
Learning process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student assessment carried out by NCERT; • Curriculum- and textbook-related information; • Purchase and use of TLM; • Pedagogy and classroom processes—for example, activity-based learning (ABL), child-centred pedagogies.
Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hiring of teachers—regular and contract teachers; • Number of female teachers; • Pupil teacher ratio (PTR); • Teacher attendance; • Teacher training; • Academic support system.
Role of community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whether School Management Committees (SMC) and Village Education Committees (VEC) have been constituted; • Structure of SMC and VEC; • Role of community, SMCs, VECs and civil society.
Programme management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convergence with different departments and NGOs for community mobilisation, enhancing school quality and providing school facilities; • Civil works and infrastructure.
Finance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finance—allocations of the GOI; • Allocation of state-government share; • Expenditure.

Source: Authors' own.

Access

Providing universal access is one of the basic tenets of education. However, it is widely acknowledged that access without equity and quality is meaningless. As stated in the Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transition and Equity (CREATE) website*, 'access

*<http://www.create-rpc.org/about/access/>

to education has to include judgments of educational quality and process (what children have access to); and of educational outcomes (what competencies and capabilities are acquired and how they are valued)'. Consequently, a healthy discussion on universal access is possible when it moves beyond the realm of enrolment and physical infrastructure and includes other dimensions of schooling experiences such as availability of teachers, quality of books and teaching–learning processes and whether schools are functioning effectively.

Yet, as highlighted in Table 2, in most JRM reports, discussions on access are limited mostly to data on enrolment, OOSC, dropout rates, retention, attendance, transition from primary to upper primary school and school infrastructure. Within these, information is mostly limited to the presentation of overall state, district or national data. Only occasionally, these data are further disaggregated according to gender, social groups (mostly SC, ST, Muslims) and location (rural and urban). As a result, we know that almost 199 million children are enrolled in schools (DISE, 2011–2012); dropout rates are highest from grade 5 to grade 6; almost 50 per cent of OOSC are girls; the retention rate at the primary level is 75.94 per cent (17th JRM, 2013) and there has been a steady increase in private school enrolment. We also know from JRM reports that school infrastructure has improved, especially with respect to an increase in the number of schools and classrooms, drinking water facilities, toilets for girls and ramps for children with special needs (CWSN). Many incentives are also being provided, especially to girls and children from disadvantaged backgrounds to increase enrolment and retention rates.

However, there are a lot of issues on which JRM reports are silent. For example, location is an important determinant of equity because it determines the quality of schools that is available to children. According to the latest District Information System of Education data (DISE, 2011–2012), more than 57 per cent primary schools and 56 per cent upper primary schools (UPS) in rural areas are located more than 10 km away from a Block Resource Centre (BRC). We also know that remote locations have adverse Pupil Teacher Ratio (PTR) and almost 71 per cent of all single teacher schools are located 10 km away from a BRC. It would, then, be a fair assumption that these schools are most likely catering to the disadvantaged groups and are also likely to have higher dropout rates. But connections between location, access, quality of schools and teachers are hardly made in JRM reports.

Table 2. Access (summary)

Indicator	Main Observations made Under JRM	What is Missing from JRM Discussion
Enrolment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in overall enrolment rates across gender and social groups; • Narrowing of gender gap in enrolment; • Low enrolment rates in upper primary schools (UPS); • Decrease in enrolments in government schools; • Enrolment data on CWSN, urban poor and children belonging to migrating families. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion on local enrolment trends and differences between schools that are located in remote locations with those that are well connected; • Juxtaposing enrolment data with attendance and dropout rates to get a more realistic picture by location, social group, gender; • Reasons for low enrolment rates in UPS and which children are not going to UPS? • Reasons for increase in enrolment in private schools. • Which children have more access to private schools and which children are going to government schools? • CWSN-among them the situation of children with different kinds of disabilities and who is being left out
▪ OOSC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall rate of OOSC including girls, CWSN and various social groups such as SC, ST, Muslims; • Various strategies to target most vulnerable groups; • Existing discrepancy in OOSC data, because there is no uniform definition of OOSC. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which children are completing elementary education? • Location specific presentation of data on OOSC, especially with respect to areas that are remote, inaccessible or conflict prone; • Reasons for not being in school; • No information on profile of students who are being admitted to Special Training Centres; • Challenges of urban poor, migrant children etc.
▪ Dropout	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall dropout rates disaggregated by gender and social groups; • Dropout rates are highest from grade 5 to grade 6; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Areas where dropout rates are highest in-depth analysis of reasons for dropping out of schools including teachers' attitude towards students, unable to cope with failure etc;

- No uniform definition of dropout;
 - Reasons for dropout—poverty, domestic work, sibling care, migration.
- **Retention**
 - Overall retention rate;
 - Retention of girls, SC/ST and Muslim children remains low
 - Retention of students, especially in upper primary is a challenge
 - Growth of unrecognised private schools is making it difficult to determine actual retention rate.
- **Attendance**
 - Overall attendance rate
 - Sporadic and persistence absenteeism
 - Reasons for absenteeism—migration, ill health, distance, discrimination, irrelevant teaching methods.
- **Transition**
 - Transition rate from PS to UPS;
 - Main reason include non availability of UPS and socio-economic reasons, especially for girls.
- **School infrastructure**
 - Access has been understood mainly from the point of view of physical access;
 - Emphasis on overall growth in school infrastructure;
 - Functioning toilet for girls and CWSN continues to be a challenge;
 - Ramps for CWSN.
- Dropout rates in government versus private schools;
 - Linking dropout rates with learning outcomes.
 - Reasons for low retention rate according to gender and social groups
 - Factors that facilitate or impede successful transition and retention.
 - Detail discussion on reasons for absenteeism according to gender and social group, by location and seasonal issues such as monsoons
 - Reasons missing—inadequate facilities in schools, teacher shortage, overcrowded classrooms, household work, sibling care, child labour.
 - Reasons for low transition rate by location, social group, gender etc.
 - Huge variations in school facilities in areas where there are high proportion of children from disadvantage background;
 - Quality of ramps, toilets and drinking water facilities;
 - No. of schools complying with RTE norms.

Source: Authors' own.

Similarly, JRM reports have mentioned that dropout rates are highest among girls, SC/ST and Muslim children. Even though reasons for high dropout rates have been mentioned in some JRM reports, there is little analytical discussion on whether these reasons are universal or vary according to gender or location. To illustrate, in the last four years, dropout rates among girls have come down, while dropout rates among boys have gone up slightly (De et al., 2006). However, there is almost no reference and discussion on reasons for this trend in JRM reports.

Likewise, we know that private school enrolments have been increasing but we do not know who has more access to private schools. It is a prevalent assumption that private schools provide better quality education compared to government schools and that boys have more access to private schools (De et al., 2006; Goyal and Pandey, 2009). If such was the case, it could create gender imbalance in both government and private schools. Again, there is no mention of either a strategy to counter this phenomenon or a debate on this issue in JRM reports. Similarly, CWSN, children of the urban poor and migrant labourers have been identified as the most challenging groups. But discussion on them is mostly limited to data on enrolment, OOSC and some strategies that have been implemented in some areas to increase enrolment within these groups. Beyond that, we do not know much. Admittedly, SSA JRM reports have flagged some important issues in various missions, but most reports do not go into inter- and intra-state variations and within them equity issues related to gender, location, socio-cultural profile and economic status.

I. Learning and Teaching

Along with improved access, equity and retention, quality of schooling experience is also closely linked with improved learning outcomes. As the 11th JRM (2010) succinctly states:

Universal enrollment, attendance, retention and inclusive education are necessary components to ensure equity in education, however, it is ultimately the quality of the schooling experience for the children, the classroom processes and activities and improvement of learning levels that are of essence in achieving education of equitable quality and moving towards the goals of Education for All.

While the statement holds true, ironically, in most JRM reports, the approach to learning and teaching, as a main component of quality, has been extremely fragmented (Table 3).

On several occasions, JRM reports have highlighted that learning levels are low among children, particularly, from vulnerable groups. However, JRM reports are largely disappointing when it comes to tracking data on why the levels are low. One possible reason could be that apart from NCERT's National Achievement Survey (NAS) data, there has been very little documentation of learning levels in government schools. In addition, there is an unwillingness to refer to data from independent studies. Consequently, JRM reports lack cohesive discussion on reasons for low learning levels among students, even though other studies have highlighted factors such as socio-economic status of the family, education level of parents and gender that have bearing on the education outcomes of a child (De et al., 2006; Reardon, 2011).

Again, the JRM mechanism is quite robust when it comes to reporting various programmes and interventions that have been introduced under SSA to improve learning achievement levels. But we do not know which children are being targeted for such interventions, how many children have been benefitted and what impact there has been on learning levels. Similarly, all states are required to incorporate gender and equity issues in their school curriculum and textbooks. But, JRM reports are weak on demonstrating ways in which gender and equity issues have been inter-linked with the curriculum or in what ways gender and SC/ST stereotypes have been removed from the textbooks.

A major part of student learning and achievement largely depends on the effectiveness of the teacher and one of the first steps to map this effectiveness is recruitment of teachers. According to norms set by the Right to Education Act (RTE), there should be a minimum of two teachers in a school with a strength of 1–60 students. However, according to DISE (2011–2012), 11.47 per cent primary schools in rural India are single teacher schools and as stated earlier, about 71 per cent of these schools are located in remote areas. This has quite a few implications: (i) these schools will probably have poor facilities; and (ii) the number of female teachers will be low in these schools, leading to huge equity gaps in schools. In fact, it has been acknowledged in JRM reports that low female teacher ratio is a problem in many schools, especially those that are situated away from the main roads. Schools situated in

Table 3. Learning and Teaching (Summary)

Indicator	Main Observations & Concerns Raised in JRM	What is Missing from JRM Discussion
Student assessment and learning outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large-scale evidence of rote learning; • Increasing use of Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) as a continuous assessment tool. However, there is confusion regarding CCE itself and how it is being rolled out; • Learning levels are low, especially among disadvantaged groups; • Various learning interventions that have been implemented to increase learning levels. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reasons for low learning levels; • In what ways various interventions have increased learning levels of students; • Learning levels of students in government versus private schools; • Analysis of learning levels by location and triangulating it with single teacher schools/two teacher schools, PTR etc. • Not acknowledging independent learning assessment surveys.
TLM, curriculum, textbooks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most states are changing their curriculum according to principles of National Curriculum Framework; • Increasing use of bilingual languages in textbooks. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not much discussion on the status of inclusion of gender and equity issues in curriculum; • Are textbooks being delivered on time?
Classroom processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Innovations such as Computer Aided Learning (CAL), ABL, pictorial dictionary, mobile libraries etc. • Traditional methods of teaching largely employed by teachers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What kinds of inclusion and exclusion practices are prevalent in schools and classrooms?

Recruitment of teachers

- No. of single teachers schools continue to remain high.

Female teachers

- Steady increase in the number of female teachers over the years;
- Proportion of female teachers in educationally backward areas is not known.

PTR

- Low PTR ratio, especially in remote and tribal areas;
- High PTR in the most populous states where PTR could go to over 100 students per teacher.

Teacher training

- Data on no. of teachers who have been trained and yet to be trained;
- Extensive use of traditional methods in teacher training programmes;
- Poor content of training programmes
- Lack of focus on equity and gender issues in training programmes.

Attendance & accountability

- No analysis of whether the accountability and effectiveness of regular and para teachers are different or same.

Source: Authors' own.

these areas also have high PTR. Almost 40 per cent primary schools and 30.58 per cent UPS in rural areas are struggling with adverse PTR ratios (NUEPA, 2011–2012). It could be quite possible that schools with high PTR also have students coming from disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, are first generation learners, and are facing language barriers. However, PTR has not been looked at through a gender and equity lens in JRM reports and there is limited discussion on the condition of schools that are located in remote areas.

Teachers are one of the main determinants of quality of education. Encouraging teachers to perform well is a complex process that not only involves teacher recruitment and distribution but also includes working environment, training, professional development and remuneration (17th JRM, 2013). A major issue observed in regard to teacher training is the didactic nature of the training process and as pointed out in the 6th JRM (2007) report, there is a persistent use of lecture-based training methods with little focus on participation, reflection and skill development. This style of teaching eventually gets transferred to the classrooms, and as a result, very little time is spent on child-centric activities (Time-on-task study, 2006). In addition, most training programmes lack focus on equity and gender issues and challenges of multi-grade classrooms. Even though JRM reports have repeatedly emphasised that content for teacher-training programmes need to be revised, in reality, there is hardly any evidence of change.

Finally, there is no information on teachers' attitude and behaviour towards students. If we look at JRM reports, we do not know what is happening inside the classrooms and how teachers' own prejudices and biases interplay with teaching in the classroom, although there have been numerous research studies that have highlighted such prejudices, especially towards SC/ST children (De et al., 2006; Nambissan, 2006, 2009; Ramachandran and Naorem, 2012). In conclusion, we know how many teachers are getting recruited and trained, but we do not know what role teachers are playing towards creating an inclusive classroom.

Other Indicators

As evident from Table 1, indicators such as the role of school management committees (SMC) and communities, programme management

and finance were discussed regularly in JRM reports. Even though these indicators have not been analysed at length in this paper, there are two observations, which we feel are important for a discussion on gender and equity. Community participation and SMC involvement have been positioned as important strategies to achieve the equity goals of SSA. The belief is that involving people, especially women and parents from disadvantaged groups, would help bridge the gap between the school and the community. Having said that, while it has been mentioned that women and parents from minority communities do not participate actively in SMC meetings, there is a lack of seriousness on gender and equity issues that influence how SMCs are constituted, how meetings are conducted and whether members are oriented and trained to function effectively. The focus is mostly on formal constitution of SMCs. In fact, some JRM reports have suggested that in order to help SMC members perform their roles effectively there is a requirement for intensive training. Along with information on the functioning of SMC, training programmes should also include issues of CWSNs, bullying, discrimination, corporal punishment, understanding RTE norms, how to monitor teacher effectiveness and learning levels of children, etc. However, there has been little follow-up on these recommendations in JRM reports.

Similarly, the section on finance is dedicated mainly to allocations made by the GOI and the state governments and overall expenditures incurred annually. There is not much information on the status of allocation of funds according to districts that are grappling with low PTR, high rate of OOSC, inadequate infrastructure facilities etc. or impact of expenditure on various innovations and strategies that have been implemented for children from disadvantaged and vulnerable groups.

Other Concerns and Issues

A major problem with the SSA JRM mechanism is that it looks at gender and equity issues superficially. This is partly due to limited understanding and articulation of equity under SSA. Equity is mainly understood as creating 'equal opportunity' under SSA (MHRD, 2010). The definition itself is inconclusive because it does not specify what 'equal opportunity' means. Does it mean that all children will have equal access to a physical school, all resources and basic minimum facilities, be treated

fairly and equally in classrooms and most importantly, that all children will get an equal opportunity to learn? It remains unclear.

Input indicators like enrolment, number of schools, infrastructure, number of teachers etc. remain important indicators to measure progress towards achieving equity goals of SSA. Even when SSA does look at other indicators like retention or teacher recruitment or single teacher schools, they are mostly discussed individually and not as a part of the quality and equity continuum. Additionally, issues such as diversity in the classroom or the social gap between teachers and children and issues of exclusion and discrimination are not integrated with an analysis on equity and quality.

It has been long established that gender, social and economic status have a strong influence on the education level of a child (Table 4). A child is at a greater disadvantage if he/she is living in rural areas and belongs to a poor family. This situation becomes worse if a child is a girl and especially an elder girl.

Other factors such as caste, family income, parent's occupation and education level of parents also contribute significantly towards educational inequalities (Ramachandran and Saihjee, 2002). Similarly, first generation learners are at a greater disadvantage because of limited support in schoolwork at home. All these factors exert a significant influence on access, attendance, completion and learning achievement. Yet,

Table 4. Different Children, Different Chances: A Summary of Findings

Rural/Urban	Less likelihood of rural children enrolling in pre-school and completing primary school.
Income	Poor children have lower chances across location, gender and caste. This includes children from urban slums.
SC	Lower chances than non SC/ST children for all measures including pre-school and regular school enrolment.
ST	Even lower chances than SC.
Gender	Disparities increase as girls grow older and affect completion and repetition rates.
State	Children from northern and eastern states are less likely to enrol in pre-school, and primary school and completion.

Source: Taken from World Bank (2004). *Reaching out to the child: An integrated approach to child development. Report No. 29695* (p. 34).

JRM reports are weak in analysis when it comes to making connections between learning achievement and various socio-economic factors.

Likewise, discussion on CWSN, the urban poor and children belonging to migrant families remains superficial in most JRM reports. We know very little about these groups or who constitutes them. With respect to CWSN, JRM reports are largely restricted to the number of children identified and enrolled in schools and various incentives that have been provided to them. JRM reports have also acknowledged that identification of children and training of special educators continues to remain a major challenge. However, we do not know the gender and social group composition of CWSN, we do not know which children among CWSN have more access to schools, what are various inclusive practices in place for CWSN and what is the attitude of teachers and other children towards CWSN.

Similarly, we know that children belonging to migrating families and the urban poor are hardest to reach. Beyond some isolated initiatives that have been introduced to address the educational needs of this group, not much is known. Finally, there is absolutely no discussion on the issues of street children, children with HIV/AIDS, child labourers (full time, seasonal or part time), children living in areas of conflict or children affected by war or natural disaster and those who have been victims of physical, mental and sexual abuse. A possible reason for limited discussion on these groups could be due to the fact that there are no visible policies or guidelines in place under SSA. Equally, there is a hesitation to talk about the workload of children, even those who are enrolled in schools but are frequently absent due to seasonal or after-school work.

Going further, access and quality intermeshes with equity, but again, these indicators have been addressed individually. Admittedly, it has been indicated in many reports that there is a need to link quality with equity, but so far inputs on gender and equity remain isolated from other goals. A possible reason could be the absence of a concrete definition of 'quality' within the SSA framework. Consequently, from SSA JRM reports, there is no way of discerning:

- Who are learning, what are they learning and at what level?
- Who does not have access to UPS and why?
- Reasons for low learning levels of children in different circumstances and different kinds of schools;

- What systems are in place to measure teacher accountability;
- Composition and qualification of teachers in remote and tribal areas;
- Quality of school infrastructure and facilities in remote and tribal areas;
- How various discriminatory practices towards children and women teachers are being addressed by schools;
- What is the behaviour of teachers towards students from various social and economic backgrounds and CWSN;
- And within all of the above, how gender relations, stereotypes and prejudices play out.

JRM Mechanism

As mentioned in the beginning, the SSA JRM mechanism was introduced to inform both the GOI and DP about the progress being made under each SSA goal. The mission is held twice a year and consists of members from both the GOI and DP. Showcased as an intense monitoring mechanism, it therefore becomes important to assess the methodology adopted by the SSA JRM process to evaluate how successful it has been in tracking and addressing SSA goals. Most donor agencies believe that the JRM mechanism brings in some degree of rigour in the monitoring and evaluation processes. They also agree that the JRM offers a good opportunity to highlight and showcase good initiatives and practices. However, there are some major flaws in the methodology that has resulted in lack of in-depth analysis of various indicators (already discussed in preceding sections).

Field visits are undertaken by every alternate JRM and the GOI, along with DP to identify states to be visited each year. However, it is up to each state to decide which districts and blocks will be visited. During interviews, some key informants had commented that due to time constraints, most school visits are a planned exercise. In some cases, districts are informed beforehand about the visits. Hence, observations made during school visits may not be a true representation of the reality. Further, in general, schools that are easily accessible by good roads are visited.

Another weakness of the JRM mechanism is that it is mainly data driven. There is more emphasis on input indicators and implementation processes, and outcomes do not receive adequate attention. Consequently, discussion on gender and equity is reduced to data on enrolment of boys and girls, closing such a gap and listing of quantitative achievements in special schemes for girls.

Third, recommendations made by the JRM are not binding on the state governments. Over the last eight years, some issues have been raised over and over again. To illustrate, JRMs have repeatedly asked for a rigorous study on the impact of teacher training on teaching–learning processes and ultimately, the learning outcomes of children. It has also been recommended that all data presented by the JRM need to be disaggregated by location, social group and, within these, by gender. There has been a demand to expand the coverage of all private schools under DISE. These issues are yet to be tackled with the rigour and seriousness that it merits.

Equally significant is the fact that over the years the JRM has recommended many in-depth studies such as a study on inclusion and exclusion in the classroom; a study on effectiveness of the Village Education Committee (VEC) and SMC; a study on contract teachers etc. However, we were informed that even though most studies are presented in the mission report, issues raised in these studies are often passed over after formal presentation. In fact, there is hardly any reference to these studies in JRM reports.

Finally, there is reluctance on the part of the JRM to look at data from different sources. The GOI is comfortable with using DISE data and is also willing to look at data generated by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO). But, triangulation of information on socio-economic indicators and caste/community with education participation of children remains a challenge (Sankar, 2008). Despite the fact that DISE collects information on equity indicators such as location, there is no analysis of data on PTR, multi-grade classrooms and single teacher schools. Similarly, data generated by other independent reports are often ignored. Even studies that other government departments accept such as NCAER's Human Development in India survey or the Right to Food campaign studies on the Mid-Day Meal, are not discussed by the JRM because they have not been 'officially sanctioned'.

The Way Forward

There is no doubt that exploring gender and social equity issues is not easy in a diverse country like India. We perhaps know a lot more today than we did at the start of SSA in 2001. But data used in JRMs, the manner in which research studies are discussed and lack of attention to processes do not do justice to the goals of SSA to bridge gender and equity gaps in education. In order to address equity and gender issues more seriously under the JRM mechanism and to create a stronger monitoring and evaluation process, we feel that it is necessary to re-think the whole JRM methodology. Keeping this in mind, we propose the following recommendations:

1. Research studies commissioned by SSA, as a follow-up to JRM, need to be taken more seriously as evidence that informs evaluation. In addition, the team needs to start looking at data from other independent studies, both national and global, for an informed discussion.
2. Instead of a six-monthly mission, an annual exercise for a longer duration could result in in-depth examination of various issues. It would give the team an opportunity to spend more time in a district, visit randomly selected schools and interact with teachers, parents and the community, and hence gain an insight into the real situation. It is equally important to involve people who are working directly with schools, teachers and communities (for example, researchers or NGOs) in the JRM process. It would provide greater insight into field realities.
3. Finally, in order to create a more effective mechanism, rather than exploring all the issues, each JRM could agree on a theme. For instance, social equity can become a theme for a mission and various indicators such as access, learning, teaching, finance, programme management and role of community can be discussed under the aegis of the larger theme.

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