

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOL MANAGEMENT: PERSPECTIVE AND PRACTICES IN ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

There are influence that favour attractive the participation of the community in the management of schools, mainly those that are government-controlled or aided. Such participation in education is seen as a way to boost resources, improve responsibility of schools to the community they serve, ensure a more commercial use of resources and, more importantly, be responsive to local needs. In fact such participation is expected to improve equitable access, retention, quality and presentation of schools. Community participation is not a new method or practice. Historically, communities have played an important role in the provision and management of schools in different parts of the world and these were mediated through church or caste/ethnic associations or civil society groups. In many parts of India too, parents or members of the community have provided property or other resources for the setting up of government schools. It is on the basis of this that development organisations are actively advocating well thought-out community participation in the management of schools.

Keywords:-Community, Management, Associations, Classrooms, Resources, Committees, practices, etc.

Introduction

There have been plentiful attempts in various countries to enhance the participation of communities in the associations of schools either through the School Management Committees (SMCs), the Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) or local governments. There is a sizable literature documenting these attempts. The overall experience in this regard is mixed in many developing countries including India. An comprehensive review of this literature can be seen in . It quotes studies which have noted that the devolution of critical decision-making in school development has produced certain desirable outcomes. These include, local government and communities taking up accountability for building classrooms, hiring contract teachers, or raising funds for school infrastructure development. This was found to be the case in Assam state too. Participatory management of school involves local communities which are recognized as vital at policy level. Community involvement has been a crucial strategy for providing quality in education in general and elementary education in particular. Community involvement is important for achieving the national goal of universalisation of elementary education. It is also important for maximizing the restricted resources, efficiently and effectively utilizing existing resources, improving relevant curriculum, learning materials, developing a good-natured climate for teaching and learning, utilizing the school funds properly, developing infrastructural facilities like school buildings, toilets, drinking water facilities etc. In most of the cases, the community

involvement is being obtained through participation of parents of the students and local members of the society. The present paper tries to examine the problems of elementary schools of Assam and also attempts to discuss the role of the community contribution in solving the problems to increase the quality of the school Education of Assam.

Community Participation in School Management

Studies have noted that in places where the communities do not participate in school managements, the demand for schooling is also lower. The major appearance of these parents or communities are shortage, poor parental attitudes, low literacy, irregular occupations, the use of non-school language at home and long distance to schools. There is poor community connection where the PTAs or the SMCs are not formed or are inactive despite the government directive. In summary, according to many studies reveal very little celebration of the positive impact of decentralization policy in terms of shifting responsibility for critical decision-making to lower levels of government, institutions and local people. The most sanguine outcome of the delegation policy in developing countries, according to them, is the creation of awareness and increase in local concern and action to address problems of education at the local level.

There have been attempts to explain the reasons for the differential piece of community participation in different contexts. According to studies, community participation in schooling works well in the rare instances where there is a good understanding and relation between schools, communities and local educational authorities, operating within a stable social context with a history of community enlistment and a genuine commitment to community decision-making. In this situation, this paper makes an attempt to see in Assam state whether such community contribution in schooling can lead to expected benefits given the kind of crumbling that exists in Indian society and also the differences in demand for schooling among various social groups. It will not be at all surprising if this analysis points to the fact that the community participation in schooling is not very effective in Assam. The crucial lesson is that the encouragement for community participation in the affairs of schooling should be based on a sound analysis of the local social structure, including the differences in the demand for schooling between different socio-economic groups.

Social involvement in School Management

In a situation where parents cannot afford but are interested in schooling for their children, others in the society could bear their cost of schooling. But in general, such cost sharing is only likely to be successful if it involves a wider society. For example, if 60% of the students in a village cannot afford schooling, it may be difficult for the remaining 60% to bear this cost, but it may be possible for a state government to mobilize resources towards attaining this objective.

In the other situation, where a large section of the society is not interested in schooling and encourages children to take up jobs of unskilled workers, there is also very little that the society can do. This is because these sections of the society that are not using schooling are either clustered together in a locality or are fragmented in such a way that the schooling achievements

of others fail to motivate them . It may, therefore, be unrealistic to expect the local community to address the issue of lack of demand for schooling. It will have need of the intervention of the state/national government (which may enforce a mandatory schooling policy) in involvement with national and international NGOs interested in this cause. How children learn, what they should be educated or what the methods of teaching (specific subjects) should be, are also matters that cannot be left to the discretion of the parents or the community. These require the intervention of the national or state governments. Given the multiplicity of our country in terms of its immensity, differences in social and economic development, culture and languages, it is desirable to have a national (or a state) level framework of education which may not involve the local communities.

The qualities and Demerits of Community- Owned or Controlled Schools

Community-managed schools can only meet the needs of people if they are in a position to demand what they need and if the demands are in consonance with 'quality schooling' as determined by the structure of education. Considering that a significant section of the Indian humanity does not have the full demand for schooling, it is more likely that their 'real needs' may be unnoticed in these community-owned schools.

Many communities may not be able to meet the full cost of schooling but it is expected that the national or the state governments will meet these costs partly or fully.

If teachers' salaries are given directly by the state, but the right to assign teachers is given to the community, the community they may not hold fast to the standards desired by the state government. This was the case with the panchayath-managed schools in Assam. So, either the state government has to make additional preparations to regulate the appointment of teachers or they have to take over this occupation in order to control the possible malpractices in these Schedule by the community managers.

Community schools are like not-for-profit schools, which have played an imperative role in the spread of schooling, but as is argued somewhere else that they should be seen as complementary to government schools. The principles of schooling in a local community need not be in tune with the objectives of the society at large. This is particularly so when the levels of human development in most parts of the country are lower than desirable. Parental ideas or norms about a desirable education are more likely to be predisposed by their socio-economic standing. Hence, the prevailing 'ideology' in a community may conclude the nature of schooling in community-run schools, and these need not necessarily be adequate to achieve the goals of the larger society with respect to education. . This may lead to a isolation of parents into those who can afford to pay and those who cannot. However, it has been noted that the communities which are credible to contribute financially to government schools are often those which cannot. Many parents may not be able to contribute even if it is for non-tuition purpose or if the contribution is voluntary. This inability to contribute may result in disaffection and dropout. On the other hand,

if the schooling is provided by the limited resources that can be mobilized by the local communities, it may have an impact on the quality of education.

So, it may be necessary for many community schools to get financial support from the state or external agencies. Even without such a financial support, there is a need for the government to regulate the performance of the schools. This may require some intrusive regulations or monitoring on the part of the government which may not be liked by the communities, which may resist it or slowly lose interest in the affairs of the schools.

Ways of Contribution of Communities

Based on the discussions in the previous sections, we know that it is not wanted for communities especially in countries like India to have a foremost direct role in the design of the education policy, prospectus development and teacher hiring. This is also true for the imbursement of teachers, textbook propose and teacher training. Certification is also a role which cannot be left to the communities. The desirable contribution of the community would include mobilizing minor resources; monitoring the construction of buildings and other infrastructure and their maintenance; the distribution of textbooks and other items. Another role for communities in Assam is to support all parents to send their children to schools on a regular basis until the completion of a final grade.

Social Division and Community Participation

For the purpose of the discussion here, I have divided the Assam society into three hypothetical groups.

Group-A The middle and upper-middle-class section of the society which wants education for their children and can afford, if necessary, to bear the full cost of it.

Group B: The lower middle-class and a section of the poorer households (for example, those in the urban areas) which see education as the main determinant of upward social and financial mobility; however, these parts may not be able to afford the full cost of a 'quality' private school.

Group C: The poorer people (mainly from the so-called defenseless social groups) and sections of peasants (or those who are involved in occupations such as cattle rearing). As argued in Santhakumar et al (2016), these people may not have the full insist for education, that is, no interest in either sending their children to school or ensuring that they complete all grades, learn and benefit from schooling. They do not seem to consider the completion of schooling or higher education as an advantage in earning livelihoods or in the welfare of their children. This group includes those parents who want their boys to be educated but not their girls.

Analysis

This is known to the parents who want their children to be educated. Hence, there is a partiality for a 'better' peer group along with the parents. In general, the category A would like to have peers from their own section of the society. The category B would wish to send their children to

a school, if possible, populated by the students belonging to category A. The nature of peers may not be a major contemplation for parents belonging to the category C, since they may not be concerned about the factors that have a positive impact on learning or education. However, parents belonging to the A and B groups may not prefer to have the majority of peers of their child from category C. It may create an intricate situation if the catchment of a school is a region where all three categories reside. It may create an inclination for the category A to prefer schools which cater mainly to their own children or needs. Given that government schools cannot have a policy of segregation, these parents may not opt for government schools and would prefer one or other kind of private schools in India.

Though the category B parents may prefer to send their children to those schools used by category A, there may be different results :

- some of the parents may do so, almost certainly with a severe strain on their finances;
- some may send their children to lower-rated, lower-cost private schools where most of the family come from category B;

another section of parents may send their children to government schools, but not too happily. The parents belonging to category C if at all they do, would send their children to government schools. In the situation of rural India, we would need to consider the following three promising situations:

1) areas where most parents come from category B

2) areas that have both B and C

3) localities which have only category C

Given the level of enrolment in private schools in Assam, it seems practical to think that most children belonging to category A have already shifted out of government schools. In cases of (1) there could be a higher incentive for the category B parents to participate in schooling not only because they have an attention in the education of their children but also because their participation is not affected by the lack of interest of the category C. On the other way, there could be different kinds of 'collective action' troubles in the other two situations. In places where both B and C use the government school, lack of full demand for education among category C may create a number of complexities. It may lead to the presence of a set of students (C category) who are not aggravated by their parents to be in school and this set could be less preferred as peers by the parents of category B for their children. There can be conflicts between these two groups on what needs to be done to improve the schooling on the part of parents, and it may lead to either non-participation and gradual marginalization of the category C and community participation getting limited to category B. This may reflect in the functioning of committees like PTAs or SMCs. These committees may become more active if people who participate in these fora want schooling for their children. Such participation then becomes part of exercising the 'voice option' to get better quality public service. It may also

encourage parents to contribute a part of their resources or their political/social capital to improve the facilities in the school.

Secondly, there could be some perverse incentives to participate if there are pecuniary gains to the parents, and such participation need not improve the learning environment in schools. Such incentives may exist for certain stakeholders, including the local politician. These arguments do not imply that there will be enough participation in schools where category A parents send their children. One does not always see much involvement of parents in many 'quality' private schools in urban Assam. The reason is that the number of such schools is less than the demand for admissions. Some of these schools may be well-known or providing excellence in certain areas, and hence the number of children seeking admission is significantly higher than the number of seats. The tendency of even the lower-middle-class parents in urban areas wanting their children to study in these private schools increases this demand. Exploiting this situation, some of these private schools tend to become monopolistic.

Local Politics in Community Participation in school management in Assam

The crash of local politics on the functioning of school management committees need not be always benign. Political affiliation and cronyism affect the institution and functioning of various school-community bodies. The local politics in the villages may take different forms, it could be one of selected capture or counter-elite capture or in certain cases, one can see a deepening of competitive democracy. In many villages, where the mainstream is yet to see the value of education, the local politics could be one of elite capture or where counter-elites are gradually asserting their rights. It is easy to forecast that in situations of elite capture, the local community's participation in schooling can be mediated by the elite sections of the society. These elites need not have the incentive to make the school accessible to all. There may be instances where local elites are benevolent and they make efforts to expand schooling to others, but these are rare cases. If these local elites send their children elsewhere they may still show an interest in the affairs of village school for political interests but whether it leads to the transformation of school to make it accessible and interesting to all parents in the village, may depend on the level of the demand for schooling there. Such a situation may not prevail if most parents belong to the group C.

In most parts of India, such mobilization is along caste/religious area. A class-based mobilization of the non-elites can be seen only in a few states like Assam and West Bengal or in some parts of other states. In fact, the parties with a base in the middle or lower caste groups that have emerged and become powerful in many states, have extended their authority to most villages in these states. Even in localities where most people are yet to show full demand for schooling, one can see political mobilizations of Dalits and other helpless social groups. However, such mobilizations have not substantially changed the status of demand for schooling among these sections of the society.

This lack of interest reflects in their not actively cheering their support base to acquire an education, unlike in the case of under-class parties or certain social movements which have focused on spreading education not only by supplying education but also through generating adequate demand.

Teacher versus Parents in community participation in school management
Teachers, particularly Head Teachers can have a determining role in the participation of the community in the affairs of schooling. The participation of the community in schooling and the behaviour and practices of teachers are interrelated. The teacher is much more likely to come from the group A or B mentioned earlier. A pro-active teacher/HT who is aware of the importance of bringing the community on board may take steps in this regard. However, the social distance between the teacher and the community may agree on the final outcomes. If the teacher belongs to the local elites, it may lead to a situation discussed as part of elite capture there; or a few benevolent teachers may be interested in spreading education and their social status may enhance their effectiveness in a top-down approach. Though this may lead to the persistence of a certain vertical relationship with the community, there could be some positive impact on education due to the efforts of such teachers.

Conclusion

On the other hand, if the situation is such that the teacher comes from the local elites, and the social perspective is undergoing a counter-elite assertion, it may lead to conflicts. This may not lead to better educational outcomes especially if the non-elites who emphasize are yet to see the significance of schooling. In the conclusion, the social degeneration and the resolution of a significant section of the society which is yet to demonstrate full demand for schooling may have implications for the effective involvement of the community in schooling. This needs to be taken into account in the advocacy for community participation in the affairs of schooling.

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