Decentralised School System through Community Participation
From Expectation to Implementation

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Abstract

Decentralisation plays a vital role in school management. It makes local community involved in planning and decision making in school affairs at grassroot level. After the commencement of Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE), 2009 the importance of School Management Committee (SMC) was seriously taken into consideration, though the community participation had earlier existed with different nomenclature. The emphasis on SMC at the school level has been laid to actualise the goal of Universalisation of Elementary Education (UEE). Despite growing emphasis on SMC, there is a gap between the planning and implementation process of community participation in real sense. The paper makes an attempt to examine the nature of challenges confronted by the SMC members from two broad perspectives; (i) set of external issues which are beyond the margin of members and (ii) set of internal issues which exist among them. In the last section, based on some empirical evidences the paper suggests some measures with policy implications for effective functioning of SMCs.

INTRODUCTION

India is the largest democratic country in the world with provision of some fundamental rights to safeguard the interests of its citizens. To actualise the vision of democracy and to promote equality, accountability, transparency and efficiency among

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the people the governance system has been decentralised. Post-independent scenario in the country is confronted with a number of challenges like illiteracy, hunger, unemployment, communal conflict. The then policy makers and great leaders of the country had realised that the real freedom was not achieved, and it was realised that education is one of the important means through which the developmental process can be accelerated. Hence, in the post-independent period, the major concern of the states and central government has been the development of education sector. Decades of policies and plans like National Policy on Education, (NPE) 1968, NPE, 1986; NPE, 1986 (Programme of Action, 1992), District Primary Education Programme (DPEP),1994; *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA), 2002 and Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE), 2009 have been implemented to achieve the goal of Universalisation of Elementary Education (UEE). These policies and plans have brought many positive changes in elementary education, consequently impacting upon secondary and higher education. In the last decades many schools have developed their school infrastructures, decreased dropout rates, increased enrolment and retention. The total literacy rate of the country has considerably increased from 1951 to 2011 (see Table 1). Though there is a gap between literacy rate among male and female population, the literacy rate of females has been increasing in both rural and urban areas since independence. But issues like quality of education, shortage of teachers, social exclusion on the basis of caste, class and gender, corruption and lack of adequate infrastructure are still lying within the education system. After the steady implantation of plans and programs, the progress

Table 1
Literacy Rates in India (Different Census Years)

Year	Rural (%)			Urban (%)			Combined (%)		
	F	M	Total	F	M	Total	F	M	Total
1951	4.87	19.2	12.1	22.33	45.6	34.59	8.86	27.15	18.32
1961	10.1	34.3	22.5	40.5	66	54.4	15.35	40.4	28.31
1971	15.5	48.6	27.9	48.8	69.8	60.2	21.97	45.96	34.45
1981	21.7	49.6	36	56.3	76.7	67.2	29.76	56.38	43.57
1991	30.17	56.96	36	64.5	81.9	67.2	39.29	64.13	52.21
2001	46.7	71.4	59.4	73.2	86.7	80.3	53.67	75.26	64.83
2011	58.75	78.57	67.8	79.92	89.67	84.1	65.46	82.14	74.4

Source: Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2016

in education was not found to be satisfactory as per the expectation. The Government of India has enacted RTE Act in the year 2009, with some strict guidelines to ensure free and compulsory education to all the children between 6 to 14 years in a safe and conducive environment. To monitor the overall activities of the school and to make the school management decentralised the Act has made a provision in Section 21 to constitute School Management Committee (SMC) in every government and government aided schools. The members of the committee are elected representatives of parents or guardians, members of the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), Health Worker, *Anganwadi* Worker, school teachers and students.

The SMC plays a very vital role in bringing positive reform in elementary schools. It identifies out of school children and enrols them in schools. It monitors overall activities of the school and assist the school management for effective implementation of RTE Act. In many states of India SMCs have developed school infrastructure, involved out of school children in mainstream education, narrowed students and teacher's absenteeism, monitored Mid-Day Meal Schemes (MDMS) and checked quality of foods, appointed voluntary teachers to solve the problem of unavailability of teachers in schools (Ramchandran and Naorem, 2013, Paltasingh, 2014,

Reddy and Devi, 2015, Chand and Kuril, 2018). The census data of India from 1951–2011 reflects that the total literacy rate of its population has increased over the last decades (Table 1). SMC may not take the exclusive credit for improvement in literacy rate, enrolment or infrastructure development, but certainly has played a significant role in overall school development and bridged the school-community association.

SCHOOL MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Decentralisation is one of the important forms of democracy. It is a process by which powers, roles and responsibilities are shared among the people. School is considered as a little democracy. Decentralised management system is promoted thorough community participation. The demand for decentralisation of school education had started during 1950s. After the emergence of *Pancchayati Raj* and *Gram Swaraj*, people wanted to devolve the power from top to bottom. It was realised that school and community must come together for mutual development. In 1966, the Kothari Commission recommended greater control of local communities over school education. During 1970–1980s, through the recommendation of NPE (National Policy on Education), 1986 the central government ordered the states to establish the Village

Education Councils (VECs) to look after the primary education. In 1993 the Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE) setup a committee to frame the strategies to decentralise the education system in the line of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment. It made VECs at the lowest level to enhance the quality of primary education. To make education more accessible, transparent and accountable, the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA), a centrally sponsored government scheme was initiated in 2002. It involved Village Education Committees (VECs) and Parent-Teachers Associations (PTAs) to monitor the overall activities (Pandey, et al., 2010). But when it was realised that the goal of universalisation of elementary education is yet to be achieved, the government of India made education as a fundamental right through the RTE Act. The Act had received the president's consent on August 04, 2009 and came in to force from April 1, 2010 and was implemented throughout country except Jammu and Kashmir. It ensured to provide eight years of free and compulsory education to the children of six to fourteen years. But mere declaration of the Act is not sufficient and it needs proper monitoring and implementation. To safeguard the rights of the children as well as to monitor school activities through community participation, the RTE Act has made a provision in Section 21 to form SMC.

Process and Formation of the SMC

Community participation has become an important part of the development process. It identifies the felt needs of the people, develops a sense of ownership among them and mobilises resources for development of a community (Sharma et al., 2016). School and community are interlinked with each other (Dayaram, 2011). School fulfil the needs of the community providing education, while community helps the school for its development. Keeping this in view Section 21 of the RTE Act, 2009 mandated the formation of SMC in all the government and government aided schools (Government of India, 2009). It is the local democracy where parents, guardians, teachers and local people are the members. The main idea behind the constitution of SMC is to decentralise the education system for bringing accountability, transparency and effective delivery of education. The other purpose is to involve local people in school affairs to achieve the goal of Universal Elementary Education (UEE), implementing the norms of RTE in an inclusive manner with representation from members of the disadvantaged sections like Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST) and Women. The Act has also mandated to include 75 per cent of the parents or guardians and 25 per cent of local authorities to constitute SMC. Total 19 members are elected to the committee, of them 12 members are the parents (6 males and 6 females), remaining 07

members include member of the PRIs, school principal, a class teacher, one Asha Karmi or Health worker, an *anganwadi* worker and two students members, i.e., head of the student cabinet and head of the *Meena Manch* (MHRD, 2014).

Expectation from SMC

The RTE Act has clearly outlined certain roles for the SMC to perform for school development. Members of SMCs have a role in planning and developing neighbourhood schools. With the support from school authority, they are expected to ensure the enrolment of never enrolled children through enrolment drive and their retention in school till the completion of elementary education (GoI, 2009). SMC should be monitoring the regular attendance of teachers and students in schools and should be in touch with the parents, in case of absenteeism. The committee is expected to facilitate the cleanliness and beautification of school environment, review and monitor the school health programme, organise *Sikshya Mela* (educational fair) and some school based competitions among children. Members of SMC are likely to ensure adequate infrastructure like drinking water, separate toilets for boys and girls, playground and so on (MHRD, 2014).

In a generic sense many parents and other stakeholders think that SMC is like a magic wand which can solve all school related issues. When RTE Act was implemented, parents thought that quality of education would increase all of a sudden and the country would achieve universal elementary education. It was also expected that SMC would play crucial role in fulfilling minimum infrastructure norms in all the elementary schools of the country. School teachers thought that they would get some relaxation from the burden of school management. But practically such instances may not be possible. SMC has been given limited power to work within certain guidelines. The members cannot do everything they want as most of the activities are rooted through a democratic process, which takes time and channelised through specified process to work out the plan. Research studies have revealed that school teachers are over-burdened with non-academic works as parent members included in SMC are not cooperating with them in monitoring and facilitating school activities. Many of them are not aware of the school activities as they are not attending SMC meetings (Kumar, 2018).

EXTERNAL ISSUES: BEYOND THE MARGIN OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

Implementation of RTE Act can be positively viewed in terms of increasing enrolment, attendance and developing infrastructure. SMC has no doubt contributed in school development and decentralisation process has brought productive partnership between the school

and the community. Still, there are many issues that need to be resolved. Despite these positive changes contributed by SMC, there are growing dissatisfaction among the teachers and other stakeholders regarding the school management (Rao, 2009). There are glaring gaps in planning and implementation of the Act across the Indian states (Maqbool and Rajaguru, 2015). Mere passing of an Act does not meet the objectives unless it is implemented in true spirit. The enactment of RTE Act has passed more than one decade but many of the commitments related to the Act are yet to be achieved. SMCs and schools are confronted with number of challenges in school management. These challenges include—growing preference for private schools, insufficient budget allocation, poor infrastructure, enrolment difficulties in age appropriate classrooms, diversities in school system shortage of teachers and related issues. Many of these are external issues and are not under the direct control of the school teachers or the member of the SMCs.

Growing preference for Private Schools

In the last few years there is a growing tendency among the parents to send their children to private schools. They are not even regretting to spend huge amount of money as they assume that government schools are no longer providing quality education. On the other hand RTE promises to provide free education, but stakeholders are not interested to take the benefit. Consequently, enrolment of students has increased considerably in private schools and decreased in government schools. According to the data released by the MHRD, the students' enrolment in government school has decreased from 19.9 crore in 2011–12 to 18.9 crore in 2016–17. Surprisingly, majority of the students who have opted for private schools are from underdeveloped states like Bihar, Jharkhand and Odisha (Sharma, 2019).

The permanent government school teachers get regular salaries and are not scared of losing jobs, which often affect the teaching-learning process (PROBE, 1999). Privatisation of education has become a serious issue in the contemporary scenario. As per RTE norm the school should enrol minimum number of students. Many neighbourhood schools having less than 30 students are about to close down due to the opening up of new private schools in the vicinity. Teachers in the government schools are appointed through a proper process having suitable qualifications, but as far as teaching-learning process is concerned, they need to be more committed (Goyal and Pandey, 2012). The growing interest towards private education does not mean that quality of education is better in such schools as there are number of unregulated private schools operating in different parts of the country. But privatisation is affecting the students'

enrolment in Government schools (Goyal and Pandey, 2012).

Insufficient Budget Allocation for Education Sector

Like health and economy; education is one of the important determinants which plays a vital role in country's development. That is why proper attention towards education sector is necessary and need of the hour. Better school infrastructure and school environment contributes to teaching-learning process, which is possible through adequate financial provisions. The need of sufficient financial allocation in education sector had been felt more than half century ago. As per the report of Kothari Commission (1968), the country should try to allocate the largest share of gross national product (GNP) for educational development. The committee during that time had recommended to have 6 per cent Gross Domestic Product (GDP) allocated to education. The share of spending in education as per allocation in Union budget has decreased from 4.6 per cent in 2014–15 to 3.5 per cent in interim budget of 2019–20 (Agha, 2019). Low budget allocation poses serious challenges in school development.

Poor Infrastructure

There is a positive correlation between school infrastructure and students' academic performance. That is why the RTE Act promotes that the school should be all-weather friendly and there should be office-cum store for head teacher, teacher's common rooms, and separate toilets for boys and girls, separate kitchen shed, drinking water facilities, a library and a playground. Section 18 of the RTE Act lays down that no private school should establish or can function without obtaining a certificate of recognition, and that such certificate of recognition would be issued to schools that fulfil the prescribed norms and standards. But the Act does not have such provisions for recognition of Government schools. In many states, Government schools do not have adequate rooms, toilets, drinking water and other basic facilities; there is shortage of teachers due to vacancies. Therefore, the requirement of the recognition of schools should also be applicable to all Government schools. That is why TSR Subramanian committee, is of the view that Government should in fact set an example by providing required facilities to all the schools before it takes punitive action against private schools for not doing so (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2016).

Enrolment difficulties in Age Appropriate Class Rooms

As per the RTE Act, the children above six years, who have never been admitted to any school, or even if they are admitted have not completed elementary education and have dropped out, they have the right to be admitted to school in a class

appropriate to his or her age. The Act also states to give special training to the children admitted on the basis of age appropriate class to enable them to be at par with other children. But this only has become a provision in several instances. Neither head teacher nor other teachers of the school are aware of the special training in many school of India (Ojha, 2013).

Diversities in School System

India is a country where government learns from the failures most of the time. That is why large varieties of government schools have been setup on experiment basis since independence. Currently, we have Model Schools, Central Schools, *Navodaya* Schools and other schools run by the state. There are also private schools, *Saraswati Sishu Vidya Mandir,* Aurobindo Schools across the Indian states. All these schools do not have a common syllabus and common infrastructure facilities. So the quality of education throughout the country differs and creates a huge gap between different types of schools.

Shortage of Teachers

Lack of sufficient teachers in elementary school is one of the main challenge. According to RTE students-teachers ratio norm must be followed and this is more crucial at elementary level. But till date the requirement of the teachers have not been fulfilled. In India, primary schools are managed with limited number of teachers. There are more than 80 lakhs teachers in elementary schools. About 59 per cent teachers are in government schools, and yet around 8 per cent of all elementary schools in the country are single teacher schools (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2016). It has been observed that the single teacher schools are facing a lot of challenges for providing quality education. The single teacher alone cannot teach all the subjects and handle the children from different standards at a time. Consequently, she or he takes combined classes and the attention gets diverted. Again due to the unavailability of subject teachers in schools the quality of teaching gets hampered. Sometimes, the science teachers cannot teach language appropriately and the language teachers may not be competent enough to teach science and mathematics. They take classes only because they do not have any alternatives. As long as the teachers' vacancies are not filled; problem will continue. Though the SMCs play a role in appointing voluntary teachers; in many schools they are not appointed due to lack of human resources in the locality. As the recruitment of teachers is decided by the state government, SMC has very little or almost no control over it.

Challenges confronted by SMC Members

There are many plans and polices which has been formulated for the welfare

of the people by the Government of India. Since independence a number of good initiatives have been taken to bring reform in education sector. Being the second largest populous country in the world and with its diversity and complexity, effective implementations remains a challenge. SMC members themselves confront a number of challenges, which question their efficiency to handle the school related issues.

Level of Education among SMC Members

Education plays a vital role in individual's life. It enables individuals to take crucial decisions in both personal and professional life. Hence, the level of education of the SMC members determines the effectiveness of the committee. It has been observed that in many schools even illiterate persons are elected as members as their children study there. Due to their ignorance they cannot take part in crucial matter of school effectively. They only play the role of a silent observer and feel hesitant to give their opinions. Consequently, other members who are literate and highly qualified play dominant role and take important decisions. Often, teachers or principals select illiterate persons to the committee deliberately who only may attend meeting without raising their voice. In such instances teachers take all the decisions regarding school development as per their choices. They conduct meeting, take crucial decisions, write minutes

and send it to the other members for signatures (Rao, 2009). The grassroot democracy is affected due to such practices. SMC members with less education may not actively contribute to school development and play a minor role in decisions making process.

Poor socio-economic Background

Many of the members of the SMC are from poor socio-economic background. The schooling system does not offer them anything nor does it make any promises to its members. The roles and responsibilities are purely voluntary in nature. People join in the committee to be a part of their children's development as well as for the development of their community. The school does not provide any financial incentive to its members. Several research studies have revealed that poverty is one of the main reasons of low involvement of the members in SMC meeting. Particularly, members who are economically not well off and work as daily wage labourer do not attend meeting in spite of several reminders by the school teachers because every day they have to earn a livelihood to feed the family. They do not have time to think about school development (Sharma, et al., 2016).

Conflict among Teachers and SMC members

Most of the developmental work of schools is half-done today because of the conflict of interest among

the members and school teachers. In many instances teachers are playing dominant role in taking decisions related to finance and not disclosing to SMC members which has been responsible for growing dissatisfaction among them. In some other cases parent members and local authorities are demanding share of the money which are being received for infrastructure development (Sharma, 2014). If the teachers refuse to provide the said money, member are not allowing any kind of activities to be done. That is why in some occasions teachers the members away from school related activities and from the decision keep making process.

Lack of Training for Capacity Building

Training provides knowledge regarding the roles and responsibilities and enables SMC members to work effectively. But in most of the Indian schools, training of the SMC members are not given importance. A large number of SMC members across the country are untrained and not aware of their roles and responsibilities. In 2006 a survey was carried out in Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh to measure the students' learning achievement, teachers' efforts and community participation. The survey had revealed that a large number of committee members in all three states had not received any training on their role and responsibilities. In

all these states, head teacher was the only person who was informed about the roles and responsibilities of the SMC (Pandey, et al., 2010).

Gender Related Issues

Indian society is patriarchal in nature and men play a dominant role in society. Women are socialised in such a way that they cannot understand the status of their subordination and accept it as a way of life. In many schools in different states women who are the members of SMC are not known as members rather their husbands are identified as the same. Women also depute their husbands to attend the SMC meeting (Sharma, et al., 2016). Gender related discriminations have also kept the females away from the various decision making process. In the real sense men are taking the opportunity to take part in school affairs actively. Women are just playing the role of passive observers. Their names are in the committee just in pen and paper. Record of the SMC and registers reveal that women are generally absent in the meetings. In Haryana, the females put veil on their heads and do not speak in front of their elders. This system hinders the women members to take part in crucial decisions of the schools (Narwana, 2015).

Caste Issues

Caste discrimination is one of the important factors which have become a barrier in implementing many

programs and policies in India. For many decades it has been alienating some groups from the mainstream of society. The caste system has also affected the education system of the country. In many schools teachers from lower caste are being humiliated by the upper caste teachers, and students of lower class are being asked to clean the school campus. Particularly, the caste based discrimination is being noticed during serving of Mid-Day Meal (MDM). In many schools villagers are not allowing lower caste people to cook and distribute food during school lunch. If the cook happens to be from lower caste, the MDM attendance is severely affected. In such situations SMC members are reluctant to intervene and they do not raise their voice (Narwana, 2015).

Suggestions and Policy Implications for strengthening SMCs

The smooth functioning of SMC can facilitate school development. It depends upon a number of factors. Bridging school-community linkage can be possible through different strategies.

Monitoring mechanism —Every plans and policies needs proper monitoring for its effective implementation. Research studies have noted that some of the SMCs are functioning only in pen and papers. Hence, the overall activities should be monitored by the school authorities or external members from the district administration. The SMC also can monitor the activities of the schools. It should ensure that the school is functioning as per the guidelines of RTE Act. If the SMC can notice any kind of issues that are violating children's right, it may be immediately reported to the standing committee.

Diversity in School System— Due to the diversities in Indian social system, the schools also experience certain amount of multiplicities. There are varieties of schools in the country and follow differences including the syllabus, pattern of examinations, teaching methods, infrastructure, and teachers' strength, etc., which vary from one another. It is very difficult to measure the quality of education among all children in a single yardstick. Hence, the Government should take care to provide minimum common facilities in all the schools as much possible.

Transparency in Schools—It has been observed that the principals of the schools and other SMC members hesitate to disclose the information regarding utilisation and receiving of funds before public. In many schools SMC, members are not aware of the received grants and their utilisation. The head teachers and other teachers spend it on their own ways without consulting the SMC, and take the signatures of the members in minutes and in other documents. Hence, to bring accountability and transparency in the school system the minutes and reports of the SMC should be

publicly available through websites or in notice board of the schools.

Education of the Members—Education plays a significant role in decision making process and expands the horizon and make individuals to think from diverse ways. The role of education in community development has widely been recognised. Illiterate rural women in local self-government are ignorant about the manipulation by elder males and relatives (Chatopadhyay and Duflo, 2004). They are also unaware of many developmental schemes and the financial procedures. The lower educational achievement in local self-government is the result of 73rd constitutional amendment which has made reservation of one third seats for women and included no educational entry point barriers at all. The same rule is also largely applied in selecting SMC, members and illiteracy among the SMC members is one of the important barriers to implement the RTE norms. Illiterate members in local government unintentionally involve themselves in corrupt activities (Kudva, 2003). Particularly, to encourage women's participation in school development a provision has been made in RTE Act to include 50 per cent women in SMC (Sharma, et al., 2016). But lack of education may restrict their true participation in school activities. Parental education affects children's educational outcomes in several ways (Dreeze and Kingdon, 2001; Chudgar and Shafiq, 2010). As 75 per cent of the members of SMC are guardians or parents of the children, care should be taken to include literate members during the formation of SMC.

Provision for Capacity Building—It has been observed that in some of the schools, SMC members as well as school teachers are not aware of roles, responsibilities and power extended to SMCs. Hence, there should be a compulsory provision for relevant training so that they may be able to make effective school development plans and the implementation in a time-bound period. The trainings should be imparted in simple language and made interesting for better participation, which can help in meeting the practical requirement of the school.

CONCLUSION

To bring reform in country's education, government of India has initiated a number of plans and policies since independence. Decentralisation of elementary education with the involvement local community is one of the noble steps. Involvement of communities or local groups in school affairs has benefited Indian schools in several ways. It has ensured enrolment, retention and regular attendance of teachers and students. It has been playing a crucial role in school infrastructure development, monitoring mid-day meal scheme and quality education. As discussed above, effective school management through SMC can be linked with school related issues

which are inbuilt within the school system. The responsibilities include monitoring the regular attendance of teachers and students, facilitating the cleanliness and beautification of school environment, reviewing and monitoring the school health programme and MDM, organising educational fair and some school based competitions and overall creating a child-friendly atmosphere. The policy as per RTE envisages that the local communities would directly be involved with the affairs of primary education and can solve many of the school related problems. But it again depends on a large number of external factors like, the growing preference for private schools, insufficient budget allocation for education sector, poor infrastructure and many related matters. Such challenges confronted by the school as well as by the SMCs can be addressed at the policy level, but not at the school or community level. So

SMCs cannot be accountable or held responsible for any inconveniences or limitations within a specific school or a community. The issues related to diversities in Indian schools can also influence the local schools and this again can be addressed in a larger context. Shortage of teachers in schools for instance is a state level query, which can affect the quality education at the same time schools and SMCs have very little role to address such questions. Those apart, SMC members themselves are confronting a number of challenges due to their poor socio-economic background, struggle for survival to meet the daily requirements, lack of education and training for capacity building, caste and gender based hierarchy. Community participation should be focused in the specific context and for effective school management through SMCs—both external as well as internal matters need to be taken into consideration.

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