

## Community participation in education: A changing pattern of educational administration in India

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### *Abstract*

Strengthening and better functioning of local administration have become prime concerns of educational reform by establishment of effective local administration in education for several years in many countries including India. It is now widely recognized that effective local administration considerably impacts on access to education as well as the enrolment, retention and learning experiences of children in school. In this context, this paper provides an overview of the changing pattern of educational administration and community participation in India. An attempt has also been made to examine the extent to which grassroots level functionaries and local bodies like Panchayat and VEC are able to get involved in decision making processes and different approaches that have been taken by different states with regards to primary education.

**Keywords:** participation; education; administration; local bodies; decentralization

## Community participation in education: A changing pattern of educational administration in India

### 1. Introduction

Decentralization is being recommended as an important means of promoting progress in mass education and the Dakar Framework of Action (UNESCO, 2000) explicitly calls for developing responsive, participatory and accountable systems of educational governance and management: The experience of the past decade has underscored the need for better governance of education systems in terms of efficiency, accountability, transparency and flexibility so that they can respond more effectively to the diverse and continuously changing needs of learners. Reform of educational management is urgently needed — to move from highly centralized, standardized and command-driven forms of management to more decentralized and participatory decision-making, implementation and monitoring at lower levels of accountability. These processes must be buttressed by a management information system that benefits from both new technologies and community participation to produce timely, relevant and accurate information (UNESCO, 2000, p.19). Establishing grassroots level democratic institutions for local self-governance has been an integral part of the Indian perspective on public administration for some time.

Efforts in this direction began even before gaining independence from British colonial control more than 60 years ago. The Constitution of the country adopted in 1950 made this explicit by directing all states to create local self-government bodies under the framework of *panchayati raj* through an electoral process. Article 40 of the Constitution of India states that ‘the State shall take steps to organize village *panchayats* and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government’. Subsequently, the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee recommended the establishment of the *panchayati raj* system as an inter-connected three-tier organizational structure of democratic decentralization at the village, block and district levels. In fact, following the constitutional directive many states enacted *panchayati raj* acts in 1950s, though not all followed the same pattern. The situation became quite uneven on the ground as not many state governments empowered the bodies effectively. Yet all state governments have continued to vouch for the policy of decentralization and a variety of political power sharing frameworks have emerged across the country, all under the common banner of decentralization and with the objective of enhancing community participation in governance.

In general, decentralization seems to mean different things to different people, depending on the political and administrative context in which the term is being used. Even though used extensively by policy-makers as well as academics, the public discussion on decentralization is often confusing, assuming the character of sweeping, cross-disciplinary claims about the effects of administrative measures on the quality and efficiency of both government and social interaction (Fauget, 1997). It is within this ambiguously defined framework of decentralization that one has to find meaning to governance reforms initiated in the education sector in India for transfer of powers and authorities to local level actors. With changing priorities across different Indian states, the contours of decentralization in education have also undergone a variety of transformations in different parts of the country.

This paper presents an overview of the changing pattern of administration in elementary education and community participation in India with focus on improving the children’s participation in schools. Based on a review of academic and government literature, this paper discusses changes and innovations to education governance in India. It examines initiatives that aim to strengthen local governance of education and the effects these have had on service delivery. Improved governance of education has been identified as one way in which levels of access, quality and participation in education can be improved (UNESCO, 2009). Improving governance of education has an important role to play in ensuring meaningful access to education for all children

in India.

## 2. Paradigm shift in policy framework

As India came into existence, bringing together territories with diverse historical, socio-cultural and linguistic contexts, educational governance received immediate attention. The responsibility for governance of school education was largely given to state governments. Thus, since then decentralization in public governance in general, and in education, in particular has consisted of moving decision making powers to structures and authorities at sub-state levels. For successful implementation of decentralization, the main issue seems to be the establishment of institutional mechanisms below the state level. It is in this context that the concept of *panchayati raj* and the community development frameworks were adopted in the years after independence. The local self-government system under *panchayati raj* is conceived to consist of three tiers of political-administrative structures beginning at district level through the block level and the village level. This is also viewed as facilitating the emergence of grassroots democracy involving people in local electoral process. While political decentralization was to follow this framework, it was deemed appropriate to designate block level as the main unit for development administration. Thus, a Block Development Office was established in each block consisting of 100-150 villages. The district, which was the revenue division created during the British period remained more or less intact.

Within the education sector, to begin with, the District Education Office remained the main center of governance of school education in the district. After nearly 25 years of this set up, a separate office of the School Education Department came into existence at block (sub-district) level in many states. This was partly due to the enormous expansion of the primary education system during the preceding two decades. The Block Education Office now deals with elementary primary education in many states, while the District Education Office directly governs secondary education. The rationale for decentralization in the early years was driven by the agenda to give power to the people by creating local self-governments through democratic elections. Empowering people through democratic institutions was seen as a value in itself. While, *panchayati raj* and community development gave the operational framework for decentralization, the contours of the discourse were largely defined by the liberation rhetoric that characterized most countries in the immediate aftermath of colonialism. In fact, the report from the Education Commission (GoI, 1964-66) recommended decentralization of educational governance to ensure better involvement of the community in school education. It was envisaged that community service would be made an integral part of education at all levels. At the primary stage, suitable programs were to be implemented to bring the school closer to the community with the focus on serving the community in suitable ways (NCERT, 1971, p. 22). It was argued that:

School education is predominantly a local-state partnership and higher education is a Center-State partnership. It is this basic principle that should guide the evolution of delicate balance between centralization and decentralization which our planning needs' (NCERT, 1971, p. 848). In the 1980s a revival of interest in *panchayati raj* was witnessed in some of the states. Significant developments took place in states like Karnataka. The state not only conducted elections of local bodies but also took initiatives for providing block grants and considerable autonomy to the local bodies in using the finances. This prompted many local bodies to allocate funds for educational development activities at the district and sub-district levels. Of course, some of these got reversed with changes in political leadership in the state, demonstrating the vulnerability of such measures to political vicissitudes. Interestingly, Andhra Pradesh moved away from the national pattern of a three-tier local governance system comprising district, block and village level bodies. Instead the state adopted a two-tier system, by and large following the recommendations of the Ashoka Mehta Committee (GoI, 1978) with local bodies at the district and *mandal* (consisting of about thirty villages) levels. However, unlike Karnataka, the reforms in Andhra Pradesh did not include any major move to decentralize governance of education sector. West Bengal also took up the task of strengthening the three-tier system for local governance and linking education governance with that set up. Meanwhile, the western Indian states of Gujarat and Maharashtra had decentralized educational management significantly to the district level, though not much progress could be observed with

regard to decentralization of authority to sub district levels. The National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986 (GoI, 1986) was a landmark event as it not only recommended the policy of decentralization but also gave a concrete program of action to implement the policy. The policy did not make any significant proposal to devolve powers to local self-governing bodies such as the *panchayati raj* except for oblique references and not much reform in educational governance really materialized, except for the establishment of Village Education Committees (VEC) and school complexes (Govinda & Bandyopadhyay, 2006).

The 1990s witnessed perhaps the most significant moves towards decentralization both in terms of policy reorientation and practical action in the field. Corresponding to efforts to reform public administration, fairly vigorous attention was paid to the management and control of education, both at the policy and implementation levels, and the need to involve communities in the process of school education through decentralization. At the policy level, the somewhat aborted attempt of the *Panchayati Raj* Institutions (PRI's) during the early period after independence was revived through the 73rd and 74th Amendments of the Constitution in 1992. This made the setting up of local bodies at the village, block, district and municipal levels, through a process of democratic elections, mandatory. This is arguably the most significant policy initiative for decentralized governance that India has formulated since independence. In nutshell, it can be said that, the impact of decentralization on education can be seen from two points of view, one, before the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments and another after the constitutional amendments. Before the amendments state governments were not under the obligation of adopting the decentralized structure of administration. However, the constitutional amendment has obliged states to adopt the structure. The act is a significant landmark in the Indian history of decentralization. It transforms representative democracy into participatory democracy.

Governance at the grassroots level has also opened up new vistas in educational administration, making PRIs directly involved in planning, implementation and monitoring of educational policies, programs and schemes. However, effective involvement of PRI depends on the effective implementation of the PRI Act. However, when the issue was revisited in the 1990s, a decade characterized by the government's eagerness to introduce market reforms, the emphasis appeared to have changed dramatically. For instance, the language used to describe the rationale for decentralization underwent significant transformation. Phrases such as 'empowering the people' or 'grassroots level democracy' almost disappeared from the discourse putting considerable emphasis on efficiency of system. Yet, the Moily Committee, set up by the Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE), argued: It is increasingly becoming evident that the bureaucratic systems are not able to manage the challenges in the field of educational development and people's participation is seen the world over as an essential pre-requisite for achieving the goal of education for all. It is in this context that the Committee perceives the entrustment of educational programs to institutions of local self-government as a step in the right direction (GoI, 1992, p. 14).

The move appeared to have been prompted essentially by the perception that involving the community could improve the deteriorating efficiency and effectiveness of the school system. India may not be alone in changing the contents of the discourse on decentralization. In fact, in line with increased open market reforms, a predominant view is emerging at the international level that centralized state control is responsible for the poor state of affairs of educational services and it is important to bring in decentralization and local community participation to improve services.

### **3. Initiative at state level**

In the Indian federal set-up, most structural reforms fall in the state sector. The center can only offer incentives and guidelines. Even where the central government has specific roles to play, implementation is by-and-large left to the state governments (Misra & Nataraj, 2002, p. 271). Notwithstanding the skepticism of the scholars, one has to recognize that many states have acted upon the recommendations and promulgated new acts to strengthen governance at local level. In Madhya Pradesh, though the roles and responsibilities of *panchayat raj* bodies in promotion of education have not been defined clearly in the PRI Act, executive orders

have been issued by the government from time to time to specify functions related to education to the local bodies. The state government has also introduced the system of District Government and more recently the Village Government System, further decentralizing the power of the state level administrative structure to the district and village level. Apart from this, recruitment and transfer of teachers, construction of school building and procurement of school equipment have become the responsibilities of *panchayat* (GoI, 2001). Subsequently, some of the provisions have been incorporated in the *Jana Siksha Adhiniyan* (People's Education Act, 2002).

In Bihar the role of *panchayat* has been confined to the construction and management of schools. The roles and responsibilities of PRI have been well defined by the Act introduced in Uttar Pradesh. However, a survey conducted by the Center for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) has concluded that a host of limitations were imposed on functioning of the *panchayat* in two districts of Himachal Pradesh, which resulted in erosion of power of *panchayat*. Village level bodies like School Committees, Mother Teacher Association, Parent Teacher Association, set up by the State Government, are bypassing the Institutions of *Pradhans* (head of the village *panchayat*) and other elected *panchayat* representatives (Issac & Franke, 2002, p. 3).

In comparison to all these states, the situation in Kerala is significantly different and this has been studied in detail (Isaac & Franke 2000; Mohanakumar, 2003; Lieten, 2002). A new *panchayat* act was enacted and a three-tier system of PRI came into existence in 1995. All the three tiers of the *panchayat* system were authorized to formulate local plans and to implement them with the active participation of people. Towards this, following the recommendations of the State Planning Board 40 percent of the State's budget was given to the *panchayat* system to execute these locally generated development plans. In addition to this, as informed by Joy (2001), a Government Order issued in 1996 transferred some significant powers related to primary education to the *gram panchayat* which included the supervision of routine functions of schools including the performance of teaching and nonteaching staff; providing necessary direction to the Deputy Director of Education if disciplinary actions are needed against any of these staff; the *gram panchayat* is authorized to monitor whether there are adequate staff in the school at the beginning of the academic year and it can provide necessary directions to the controlling officers to deploy staff either from Public Service Commission or through employment exchange; the *gram panchayat* is also made responsible for the supervision of the construction, repair and maintenance of school buildings, the supply of midday meals to children and distribution of scholarships and grants to students; as well as the provision of non-formal education etc. The *gram panchayat* can decide about remedial measures to minimize dropping out of children from school. In addition, is also authorized to supervise the workings of school complexes, conducting programs like *aksharapulari* and other programs implemented to improve quality. Similarly the district *panchayat* is authorized to supervise all the functions required to promote the quality of education in schools and is also responsible for the management of upper primary and high schools within the district.

In the case of Karnataka, which had a record of better performance with respect to the implementation of the PRI Act in the 1980s, the act was implemented in its diluted shape in the 1990s (Issac & Franke, 2000). However, the state government decided to adopt some significant measures following recommendations from the Task Force on School Education giving greater importance to block and village levels in school education. For instance, the block was made the main unit for teacher recruitment and also School Development and Monitoring Committees were created in all the schools giving them considerable power and authority. West Bengal has strengthened the PRIs since the act was passed in 1978, which gives a clear indication that state government can play an important role in promoting the involvement of PRIs in local governance (Mohanakumar, 2003).

On the whole, although most states have held elections for local bodies and have adopted revised legislation in this regard, until now, the involvement of *panchayats* in the functioning of the school system seems to be limited. In most cases *panchayats* have been responsible for constructing, repairing and maintenance of school building only and the lowest tier of *panchayat* has very little say in the educational matters of children and in the functioning of the local school. In addition, inadequate resources, the lack of participation of backward groups and women, and a lack of understanding about the roles, responsibilities and authority of *panchayat* members

have seriously hindered *panchayats* from functioning effectively. It is commonly perceived by education functionaries that undue political interference by local leaders or general indifference towards educational development is undermining the positive role *panchayats* could play in education and therefore is weakening the process of local governance as a whole.

Nevertheless, many recent studies have re-emphasised the need for democratic decentralization by involving *panchayats* in the education system. Based on a seven-state study, Mehrotra (2006, p. 39) strongly recommends that in order to improve teacher accountability, 'state governments (need to) genuinely decentralize decision making to the *panchayats* in respect of schooling,' and 'without any depth in decentralization, there is little likelihood that the pattern of accountability of school system will change' (Mehrotra, 2006, p. 40). Much research (e.g. Bray, 2003; Rose, 2003) suggests that the participation of community in schooling helps improve the relevance of provision according to need. Bringing schools closer to the community by developing an interface between school and community has been a major policy focus in India. The NPE, 1986 has an emphasis on people's involvement in education, and includes the role of NGOs and voluntary efforts in education management. It was envisaged that local communities, through appropriate bodies, would be assigned a major role in school improvement programs. The role of community was made clear in NPE, 1986 and became part of the Program of Action, 1992.

In a communitized school, the academic, administrative and financial management of the school substantially vest with the community which acts through an elected Village Education Committee (VEC). Salaries of government teachers are disbursed through these VECs who are empowered to control teachers in a variety of ways, including implementing the "No Work, No Pay" principle. Three months advance salaries of teachers are drawn and kept in the VEC account to be disbursed by the VEC to teachers on the first of the month. The VEC are also responsible for universal enrolment and retention of children up to the age of 14 years. The community receives funds for key purposes, such as purchase of textbooks, furniture, repair of school buildings etc. The village thus treats the school as its own, thereby contributing their best in cash, kind and labor. The Government continues to supervise, support and supplement the activities. Communitization thus augments the limited capital resources by making available the community's 'social capital' for betterment of the school and improvement of every facet of elementary education. The provision of a hot cooked midday meal is an important strategy not only to improve access and retention, but also to improve the nutritional status of children. Varying strategies have been adopted by State Governments to meet the requirement of cooking and distributing meals to school children. Several states such as Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh have used *panchayati raj* bodies and PTAs for this purpose; Chattisgarh has encouraged local women's self-help groups to take up the responsibility. Both these approaches have further contributed to the involvement and ownership in school management activities by local stakeholders. The SSA policy framework has placed considerable emphasis on the decentralization of elementary education and guidelines have been developed to establish linkages between the various levels of management.

#### **4. Initiative at district level**

In a large country like India with a number of federated units and with an expanding system of education, the issue of district and sub-district level action gains further significance as it also raises issues of flows of finances between the center and state governments on the one hand and between the state government and the lower level governance structures on the other. In many cases, issues related to the opening of new schools, deciding on financial allocations for school development activities, teacher appointments and posting become issues of contention. This section discusses the district level initiatives that have been undertaken for strengthening the management system. In this context, DPEP attempted to put in place a new framework for the management of primary education at the district level which would function with considerable autonomy and with the objective of actively involving the community. This has been adopted further while implementing SSA. As mentioned earlier, under DPEP and SSA, the district has become an important unit of planning, financial allocation and implementation although state and union governments have continued to influence all decisions

regarding program implementation<sup>18</sup>. The setting up of district level units with substantial roles for planning and management under DPEP had its precursors in at least two previous enunciations within the education sector. First is the explicit recommendation contained in the National Policy on Education of 1986, later reiterated in the 1992 statement, to make the district and lower level management organs to be fully authorized to plan and manage primary education. The second was the success of *Zilla Saksharata Samitis* (District Literacy Committees) created for literacy campaigns.

From the above analysis it can be understood that, as an intermediate structure below state level, the district level administration has a major role to play and for educational governance. District Education Officers have major responsibilities like opening new schools, financial allocation to schools, teachers' appointment and posting, and many others. The roles and responsibilities of DEOs have undergone considerable changes during implementation of DPEP and SSA with initiation of district level planning and management of education widening the capacity building needs of these functionaries. In addition, the creation of new structures like block resource centers and cluster resource centers at the sub-district level and convergence with other departments like social welfare department and NGOs has resulted in more complexities in educational management, further changing the roles and responsibilities of district level functionaries as well as those working at the sub-district level. The following section provides a brief account of the management initiatives introduced at the sub-district level.

### **5. Initiatives at sub-division and block level**

Although the district continues to be considered the unit for planning elementary education under SSA, attempts have been made to further decentralise the process. For instance, the Education for All Project in Rajasthan, namely, *Lok Jumbish* adopted the block with about 250 schools on an average as the unit for effective planning and decision-making for education development. It is argued that if grassroots level involvement through micro-planning as recommended by the National Policy on Education 1986 is to get integrated into the regular planning process, the block would be the best unit of planning, as the district level, with an average of 2,500 schools might prove quite unwieldy. Even during DPEP, block level planning was attempted in many states and District Annual Work Plans and Budgets began including block specific strategies in some of the states such as Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Madhya Pradesh. In addition, DPEP proposed making habitation the unit of planning and habitation level planning has been made mandatory at the pre project phase under SSA. However, the preparation of habitation level plans has not been attempted. House-to-house surveys have been conducted only for assessing the educational needs of the habitations and villages. Similarly, school mapping exercises proposed in the SSA guidelines have remained on paper only. Despite the absence of such sub-district planning, it has been observed that the involvement of sub-district level functionaries made it possible to assess the actual situation of the habitations as well as schools.

Community participation is considered as the single most effective means of improving the functioning of schools, with the education of children seen as the joint responsibility of home and school (Govinda & Varghese, 1993). Village Education Committees (VECs) have been set up in the majority of states as the interface between the school and the community. One can also observe a distinct shift from having informal parent teacher associations (PTAs) to the creation of formal School Management Committees (SMCs) as has been seen in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and some other states.

### **6. Emerging institutional arrangements: Widely different approaches**

Concrete measures for establishing a system of local governance in education have taken different shapes in different states of the country, resulting in different types of institutional arrangement. It is obvious that the way these institutional structures are created and the nature of such arrangements will significantly impinge on the actual empowerment and functioning of the education governance system as a whole. As the move towards decentralization of educational governance has picked up momentum over the last two decades, questions remain

over how a centralized system is dismantled to make way for effective decision making at lower rungs of the hierarchy. In so doing, state governments had two options: the first was to adopt a technical administrative approach, which involved top down transformation through the changing of rules and regulations with or without corresponding legislation. By implication the stakeholders at various levels of the hierarchy would be expected to practice the new roles and functions as explained in the rulebook; the second option, was a sociopolitical approach, involving building institutional structures from below through the direct and active participation of the people at the grassroots.

Attempts in most states follow the former approach though one could find explorations of the latter kind in some education development projects (Govinda, 2003). For example, the Annual Report (GoWB, 2004) of West Bengal mentioned that the *Paschim Banga Rajya Shishu Shiksha Mission* (PBRSSM) was established to function as a societal mission to supplement the efforts of the school education department in order to bring about fundamental changes in primary and elementary education. It acts as an autonomous and independent body which is responsible for the overall improvement of socio-economic and cultural circumstances. The district level project office (DPO) and cluster level resource centers (CLRC) function under this mission to implement the state education policies. In Karnataka, the establishment of school management committees in each school has been a part of state policy. In 2001, the government of Karnataka issued an order to establish SDMCs in each school. That set the stage for parents to have a direct say over school affairs and participate in school management. The order aimed at empowering SDMCs to target several managerial issues related to schools, and included attendance of teachers and punctuality.

Whatever the approach adopted for transforming the system, the basic principle seems to be to transfer the responsibilities of education governance to the democratically elected local self government bodies (*Panchayati Raj* bodies) and/or their counterparts at the school level. But this also depends on the seriousness with which state governments have been promoting local self-government which is quite uneven across the country.

## **7. Linking local management of schools with access and participation**

Attempts to bring schools and communities closer together has meant that increasing emphasis has been given to such bodies as Village Education Committees, Parents Teacher Associations and Mother Teacher Associations. State Governments have officially defined the roles and responsibilities of VECs or other similar bodies. Research (Ramachandran, 2001, Govinda & Diwan, 2003) indicates that that school functioning has improved significantly in places where communities have been involved actively. There are a number of examples of how communities can and have been involved in schooling in India. In most states, evidence is found that VECs are involved in a variety of activities ranging from *kalajatha* (cultural programs for awareness generation of the importance of education of children, about different educational program, and different schemes available for incentives etc.), VEC fairs, parental counseling, and community events for parental motivation. In some states, VECs are responsible for mobilizing and utilizing funds available from the government as well as from other sources. Under SSA, VECs in consultation with school authorities decide how to use school grants for the development of schools. There are many instances where community members have been involved in volunteer teaching and Teaching Learning Materials (TLM) preparation in addition to monitoring regular attendance of teachers and students. Special programs such as *praveshotsav* or enrolment drive, *mabeti mela* (*mother-daughter fair*) and teleconferencing have helped organize communities around schooling and also for creating demand for education. This has been particularly useful in promoting participation of girls in schooling (Ramachandran, 2001, p. 5).

The involvement of Mother Teacher Associations in the functioning of schools was part of the DPEP and in many states MTAs have started playing active role (Ramachandran, 2001). For example, in Himachal Pradesh MTAs were found actively involved in many villages leading to improvement in attendance and performance of children. Recently local school management bodies have also been taking part in cooking and the distribution of mid-day meal in many states. In some States, women motivator groups have been mobilized to promote girls'

education. In Maharashtra, *Sahayoginis* are appointed for a cluster of schools and in Madhya Pradesh *Sahayoginis* are appointed in each block (Ramachandran, 2004). Most states have encouraged alternative schools to enable out of school girls to access basic education. These special programs run with community support are also part of the larger strategy to mobilize the community (Ramachandran, 2001, p. 5). Also a special package has been designed under SSA called the National Program for the Education of Girls at the Elementary Level (NPEGEL) to reduce the gender gap in the blocks identified as educationally backward in terms of women's education. In view of the varying situation in gender relations that is attributed to social and cultural norms operating within a specific area, community support seems to be the most essential ingredient for running this program. Women's participation in local governance remains a critical concern across the states as generally their representation and effective participation even in *panchayat* meetings and VECs is found to be quite low. Drawing evidence from different states, Ramachandran (2001, p. 11).

Community participation is now the hallmark of various educational programs in the states but still there is a lot to do to ensure the effective participation of the community in school affairs. One such effort may be to improve trust with the community by involving them in different activities including financial transactions. One Government of India document states: To ensure effective participation, it is essential to have faith in the community ability without which all efforts to bring about their participation would be half hearted. The community is heterogeneous, stratified and has different sections with differing and sometimes antagonistic interest too. While eliciting community support, it is important that persons belonging to deprived sections get due representation in the form created for community participation (GoI, 1999, p. 13).

In view of this, more and more community-based activities have found their place in SSA plans. In some states, local self-government bodies have been given the authority to select and recruit teachers. For example, the Rajasthan Government has modified the procedure of teacher recruitment such that while regular primary school teachers are recruited by *Zilla Parishads*, (Ramachandran, 2001). *Gram sabha* and *panchayats* are entrusted with the selection of para-teachers. It may be mentioned that even though some aspects of this approach to teacher recruitment has been questioned, empowering local self government bodies with respect to the governance of elementary education has been one of the recommendations of constitutional amendments concerning the composition of *Panchayati Raj* bodies. Almost all states have taken this policy option to meet the challenges of increasing enrolment by recruiting more and more teachers at the local level. Uttaranchal (a new hilly state which was earlier part of Uttar Pradesh) has opened *Balwadis* to provide quality ECCE program to 3-6 years old children. This program was initiated in two villages in 1998 and has expanded to 321 villages. The community owns each center and provides a room for the centre while the members of the women's group maintain the centre. *Bal mela* (Children's fair) is also organized by a local NGO, the centre and community together.

The involvement of local organizations for ECCE is also evident in other states. In Bihar, Early Childhood Education centers (ECE) under DPEP are established by *mata samitis* (mothers' committee) while in Gujarat, the *Mahila Samakhya* program provides leadership in running the early childhood program in the villages where it emerged as a felt need among the women of the *Sanghas* (Women's collectives).

Under DPEP, many states have adopted different models to provide ECCE. Some states like Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat set up ECE centers to address the problem of non enrolment of children due to sibling care. In Uttar Pradesh, the state government passed an order such that wherever possible, primary schools would provide space for *Anganwari* Centres (AWCs) in their campus. In Assam, pre-primary classes were opened in the primary school precincts. These initiatives invariably involved the local community in the management of these centers through mothers' groups, VECs and other local organizations. While a separate resource group for providing support to ECCE program was formed in many states, the involvement of Cluster Resource Centers (CRC) and Block Resource Centers (BRC) was also considered important to provide academic support to the instructors of these ECCE centers. A strong emphasis has been placed on school readiness programs through these centers, the establishment of linkages between primary schools and AWC/ECE centers and making children familiar with the school. These are seen as important to improve enrolment and retention in primary schools. The Government of

Andhra Pradesh has given high priority to preschool education to reduce the problem of high enrolments of under age children in class I and also to relieve older children from the responsibility of sibling care that prevents them from attending school.

## **8. Decentralization of school and quality improvement**

The National Policy on Education 1986 promotes decentralization of teacher capacity building as an important measure for improving school quality. Initiatives in this regard have taken different shapes at the ground level. One significant step supported by the Government of India has been the creation of a decentralized teacher and school support system. Under this, District Institute of Teacher Education (DIET) has been established in all districts, as well as block and cluster resource centers at the sub-district level. A Block Resource Centre (BRC) caters for around 200 elementary schools while a Cluster Resource Centre (CRC) covers around 15-20 schools. In March 2008, there were 529 DIETs functioning in India (GoI, MHRD, 2009). 6,653 BRCs and 62,000 CRCs were functioning in 2004-05 (GoI, 2007, p. 59).

Over the years, three key roles for these sub-district level centers have emerged: teacher training, supportive visits to schools and monthly cluster meeting to discuss various issues related to teaching the curriculum. These sub-district resource centers have a significant impact on in-service teacher training and TLM preparation. Necessary infrastructural facilities are created at block level resource centers to conduct residential needs-based training in cost effective ways. Block level resource centers also allow for discussion of issues specific to that particular block or a few pockets located within the block (for example, multi-grade teaching, TLM preparation, continuous and comprehensive assessment, subject specific and content specific problems). Interactions and feedback from these sub-district resource centers have of the school head in improving overall school functioning (Mehta, 2006). In view of importance of the academic support provided by these district and sub-district level functionaries, Dyer (2003, p. 2) suggests 'paying closer attention to developing the professional competencies of those doing that support- the CRC and DIET staff.'

According to a recent report issued by DISE (Mehta, 2006) nearly 46% of all schools do not have a regular head teacher who can take responsibility for the internal management of school. There are other school level initiatives involving the community to help improve quality. School based management systems are intended to give schools greater autonomy. As Govinda (2004, p. 130) states: Individuality or uniqueness framework is beginning to replace the standardized framework applicable to all schools. In this, the school development plan has become a powerful instrument, not only for setting the direction of change and improvement within the schools but also for receiving recognition and support from public funds. Another component of school based management with far reaching implication is the establishment of school governing board with authority to oversee the functioning of the school and also give policy directions for school improvement.

From the analysis of the above literature it is quite evident that concrete measures for establishing a system of local governance in education have taken different shapes in different states. In general, state governments have gone for a technical administrative approach, which involves top down transformation through a change of rules and regulations with or without corresponding legislation. By implication, the stakeholders at various levels of the hierarchy are expected to practice the new roles and functions as explained in the rulebook. Local governance in education has taken different shapes in different states according to the policies taken up by the state. The earlier DPEP and the current SSA framework have strengthened the process of decentralization in education. Since then community participation in the administration of schools in the villages has improved significantly in many states. Many states have taken up their own policies to increase people's participation in the governance of education. However, it is also increasingly realized that India has long way to go to translate the policy of decentralisation of educational governance into action in any real sense.

It is thus discussed how local governance has imparted on access and schooling participation of children. Primarily it is focused on involvement of community which is considered as key to local governance and further

focused on the various roles of different agencies like VECs, teleconferencing, *ma-beti mela* and many others; to ensure the value of education and schooling. We can discern that states need to consider teachers' capacity building as an important measure for improving school quality from bottom to top which is broadly discussed in the National Policy on Education 1986. To do this, the Government of India created a decentralized teacher and school support system. Under this umbrella a multi structure system has been established at various levels of the district and sub-district level like DIET at the district level, BRC at block level, CRC at cluster level. Since their inception, they fulfilled major responsibilities in the area of education especially to impart training to the teachers, TLM preparation and allied activities for improving teachers' capacity and school quality.

In nutshell this paper has shown how through the effective involvement of parents and community organizations of different states are attempting to bring schools and the community closer in order to meet educational needs in a contextualized manner. This has no doubt introduced a sense of ownership and democratic participation among parents and other stakeholders in school management. Some studies have examined the involvement of VECs and found that regular interaction with communities can improve democratic participation. However, the major emphasis in these states has been on improving the efficiency of the system rather than empowering the local community to decide and take action on their children's education. Moreover, these school-related bodies have been established essentially through top down administrative processes without serious efforts towards grassroots mobilization and the organization of local citizenry in participative processes. Devolution of power and functions at the local level in most cases are far from complete resulting in weak community participation. It is generally the case that states that have adopted more community and local representation also have better access and retention rates for children; those states with weaker access and retention rates also have less community involvement.

## 9. Conclusion

Any meaningful discussion on governance of school education in the current context in India has also to examine the effects of the growing involvement of private providers which is clearly visible in the case of secondary and higher education and is fast becoming a significant factor in elementary education. Traditionally, the state and civil society have been the main providers of school education. With the emergence of the market as a powerful new arbiter for provision of education, questions of equity and quality have been further compounded. Policy makers have to recognize the downstream and intergenerational costs of seriously unequal learning opportunities, which are likely to emerge with unchecked marketisation of the education sector. Markets do not solve fairness problems. These problems are the natural responsibility of the public sector and have to be integrated into public education debate and policy (World Bank, 2000). Improvements in education require policy makers to face up squarely to their responsibilities. They cannot leave them to market forces or to self-regulation to put things right when they go wrong (Delors, 1996). Governance reform initiatives in school education, therefore, have to treat the issue in a triangular fashion, between the state, the community (represented by the local governance system) and the market.

### 9.1 Recommendation

Some of the following recommendations are suggested in terms of the educational reform system that will best address the concerns of educational administration in India. India may not be alone in changing the contents of the discourse on decentralization. In fact, in line with increased open market reforms, a predominant view is emerging at the international level that centralized state control is responsible for the poor state of affairs of educational services and it is important to bring in decentralization and local community participation to improve services. This view is often promoted at least implicitly by the conditionalities placed by international agencies involved in educational development. Some of the arguments underscore this line of thinking: (a) Since central governments are increasingly unable to direct and administer all aspects of mass education, decentralization of planning and programming will result in improved service delivery by enabling local authorities to perform tasks they are better equipped for. (b) Since mass education has placed an inordinate strain on state resources,

decentralization will improve economies of scale and will lead to more appropriate responsiveness to the particular needs and situations of different regions and groups. (c) By engaging active involvement of community and private sector groups in local schooling, decentralization will generate more representativeness and equity in educational decision-making, and thus foster greater local commitment to public education. It may seem unimportant to read too much into this transformation in the language or the increased emphasis on utilitarianism in reforming educational governance.

Many initiatives have been established by different state governments to bring the children of the urban poor into schools. However, this is not an easy task as these urban poor children are heterogeneous groups who require diversified approaches and strategies for their education. These might include flexible strategies like bridge courses, remedial teaching centers, residential camps, drop-in-centers and half-way homes. All strategies require extensive community mobilization and prior work at the local level with parents, children, NGO workers, employers and other stakeholders working in local governing bodies. This is the fact that there is a need to evolve initiatives at the subdivision and block level to strengthen further the process of decentralization making local governance more responsive and effective. On the one hand, service providers at this sub-district level need to understand the local context and respond accordingly, ensuring better service delivery, while on the other hand, an enabling environment has to be created for active involvement of community and civil society at the grassroots level, raising demand for education and also for enhancing the functioning of schools with its significant impact on access and participation of children in school. Different approaches have been taken for making decentralization work for strengthening local governance of education.

Further it is suggested that women need more training opportunities and access to adequate information and NGOs interventions. These will result in an increase in the participation of women and ultimately lead to an increase in girls' education. The above statement is supported by various models adopted by the government and NGOs in various Indian states. Various programs should be organized to create linkages between local governance with the existing government programs and schemes in various parts of the country with an aim to increase the access of education at the grassroots level. Besides these governance reforms have to be based on the long-term goal of empowering the people for self-determination. Education has a critical role to play in this process both as a subject of reform and more importantly as a promoter of the reform process in the larger socio-political relational dynamics. Convergence between the long-term vision from the centre and short-term transformative actions at the local level are essential for improving the effectiveness of the system of educational governance to achieve the goal of universal elementary education.

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