

A lot of noise is made about education being the primary right of every child. The 83rd amendment to the Constitution also supports this. But how many children are allowed to exercise this right? In reality, despite all the noise and amendments to the Constitution, many children continue to be deprived of education and many factors have contributed to this sorry state of affairs.

While the society as such has a significant role to play in ensuring that every child is educated, inherent social bias and segmented politicisation have rendered every effort of the state in this direction useless.

Dr A R Vasavi, a fellow of the National Institute of Advanced Studies, shared some of her thoughts on this issue at an open forum titled *Exclusion, elimination and opportunity - Primary schools and schooling in select regions of India*, organised by Sutradhar, a CEO. Dr Vasavi's research study on the subject documents and examines the social context of primary schooling in six states of the country -- Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. The study also notes the impact of exclusionary forces.

Even though the culture of exclusion continues to be a part of the education system it is heartening to note that the education system in southern states is far better than that in the northern states owing to the interplay of various factors. While some of the factors are region-specific the baseline is that children continue to be denied from primary education.

Caste-based discrimination and untouchability magnify the problem, with exclusive schools being set up for children belonging to the upper-caste and higher castes, especially in the north. The problem is not limited to the northern states of the country alone as we have to face that caste-based seclusion all over the country in a form or the other.

The inability of the teachers to overcome their bias and ingrained mentality has forced many children belonging to low-ranked caste and tribal groups to drop out. Dr Vasavi related an incident that she witnessed in a school in Rajasthan where a girl belonging to her observation was denied access to the well. According to which the faculty member pushed the child from the lower-caste well to the water pot seven

times for having used it.

While growing urbanisation and periodic migration have forced children either to be irregular or drop out of schools, increasing sanskritisation and emulation practices have compounded the problem. Size of the family too has a major role to play where older siblings have no opportunities to study as they are saddled with the responsibility of taking care of their younger siblings.

Gender discrimination is another factor that cannot be ignored as girls are, more often than not, subject to seclusion. If early marriage is one of the rea-

sons for girls to be deprived of education, sibling care is another.

But the importance of education and the empowerment it lends is slowly dawning on women with the result that they make it a point to send their children, especially daughters, to school. It is also surprising to note that this realisation is not restricted to urban areas only. For instance, women in a particular hamlet of Rajasthan force their daughters to attend school regularly at the cost of domestic peace.

Ironically, even as the state seeks to create opportunities for greater access to schooling, lack of

supervision makes matters worse. Most schools do not function regularly and teacher absenteeism is the order of the day. So even while the parents may be keen to send their children to school, lack of any constructive activity in school encourages them to prefer having their children help them in domestic chores than attend school and waste their time. Parents also criticise the teaching-learning time in school which is less than two hours per day. This seriously calls attention to the role of teachers in drawing children to schools.

According to Dr Vasavi, the tremendous mismatch between community schedule and school schedule is another factor that needs to be examined as absenteeism is always on the rise during the season of harvest. Though teachers are empowered to change the schedule to suit that of the community's, hardly do any of them take the initiative as a general schedule suits them better.

Though teacher participation, family background and social factors have a significant role to play, it cannot be denied that the greater onus is on the state as adequate funding, close monitoring and proper distribution of text books go a long way in ensuring that every child is educated.

Locating the lacuna

Amid attempts by the State to make education the primary right of every child, the problem of school drop-outs continues to be a glaring reality. Tremendous mismatch between the community and school schedules contributes greatly to this sorry state of affair, gathers CHETHANA DINESH at an Open Forum, organised by Sutradhar in Bangalore recently

