

“PROBE Revisited” Dissemination in Hoshangabad, Eklavya – A Report

The second “PROBE Revisited” dissemination workshop was held at the Eklavya center in Hoshangabad, Madhya Pradesh on the 22nd of February 2011. The purpose of the workshop was to share key findings that emerged from the PROBE Revisited study conducted in 2006-07—to put the spotlight on challenges that continue to dog the schooling of children in rural India. The PROBE Revisited study was conducted exactly 10 years after the PROBE study was conducted, in largely the same randomly selected villages in the states of Bihar, MP, Rajasthan and UP (later further subdivided into Bihar and Jharkhand, MP and Chhatisgarh, UP and Uttarakhand), and referred to in the report as the PROBE states.

Meera Samson and Rajeev Kumar made the presentations. Key findings on changes in the state of primary education in the decade between 1996 (when the PROBE survey was conducted) and 2006 (when the PROBE-Revisited survey was conducted) were presented by Rajeev Kumar. This was supplemented by a presentation on Schooling Choice based primarily on qualitative fieldwork done in one village in Rajasthan, which was made by Meera Samson.

The workshop was attended by about 50 participants. The participants comprised members of Eklavya from Harda, Pipariya, Bhopal, Shahpur and Hoshangabad; members of other NGOs working in MP, some government school teachers from Hoshangabad, and other neighbouring areas, and about 20 participants from Uttarakhand – teachers, BRC and DIET members – who were participating in a 10 day training programme at Eklavya.

While the PROBE Revisited study included certain elements which were not part of the PROBE study such as research on upper primary classes, as well as simple tests of literacy and numeracy with children enrolled in grades 4-8, these were not discussed at length at the workshop as similar work was not done in PROBE 1996, and a comparative picture could not be presented. The presentation instead looked at what has changed (or not changed) in primary education in rural areas in the PROBE states (Rajasthan and undivided Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh).

As in 1996, the 2006-07 study also included a survey of primary education in Himachal Pradesh to provide a contrast to the situation in the less performing states.

Before we discuss the presentations and the response to them, we want to mention that the entire audience actively engaged with the content of both the “PROBE Revisited” presentations. They were people actively involved in the field. Many were teachers with much experience on the job. There was great concern about the quality of education being provided.

The report hence brought out both a discussion, engagement, back and forth of views and also faced some element of ire from the audience.

Presentation on the quantitative survey, 2006

Rajeev Kumar explained that the presentation aimed to provide a comparative picture of changes that have occurred in the field of primary education since 1996.

Some teachers wanted more details about the background. In response Meera Samson gave a detailed account of the original PROBE survey in 1996 and the decision to revisit the same villages ten years hence. She also explained that the report was a collaborative effort of CORD (Collaborative Research and Dissemination, New Delhi), and ISST (Institute for Social Studies

Trust, New Delhi) with support and funding from IDRC (International Development Research Centre, Canada).

Rajeev Kumar continued with the presentation. He explained that the 2006 survey was conducted in 237 villages in the PROBE states, in all schools with pre-primary and primary classes, government and private. Through various research tools the educational provision in each school was studied – teacher and head teacher questionnaires, school and classroom observations to record level and type of teaching learning activities, and information on enrolment, incentives, student attendance, number of teachers appointed, present etc. was collected. This was supplemented by interviews in 12 households which had children in the age group of 6-12 years.

Major findings of the study included:

- Enrolment has shot up, even among girls from marginalized communities.
- The number of children enrolled in government schools and private schools has shot up, as has the number of government and private schools in the sample villages. Nevertheless the proportion enrolled in government schools vis a vis private schools continues to be as high as before. The private schools have a higher proportion of boys than girls.
- PTAs and VECs are in place in several villages now but while they have a role in disbursement of incentives and in construction of physical infrastructure, they have not been able to monitor levels of teaching activity in the school.
- Compared to 1996, requisite infrastructure and incentive schemes are in place in many more schools now. 84 per cent schools now provide cooked mid day meals.
- Compared to 1996, much higher proportions of contract teachers are in the system, more in some states than others. The contract teachers are younger, higher proportions are female, and have generally not had pre-service training. Contract teachers had marginally better attendance than regular teachers.
- There continued to be a mismatch between recorded and observed attendance of students.
- Levels of teaching activity were very low and sadly the same as in 1996, a serious concern, with even one teacher teaching being visible in only about 50 per cent of the schools.
- Teaching activity was still found to be confined to rote learning methods.

Parents' problems as reported by them were mentioned including those from marginalized groups who reported that they and their children continue to face discrimination and verbal abuse. Teachers' problems on how difficult it was for them to be posted to remote areas and how hard it is for them to travel back and forth, and to teach children who are mostly first generation learners.

It was qualified that these findings were based on averages, and hid the difference between the PROBE states, among which MP and Rajasthan had much higher indicators than Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

The somewhat exceptional case of Himachal was given, where observed and recorded attendance was almost the same. The enrolment trend from class 1 to 5 was steady as against the declining rate seen in the PROBE states.

Discussion on the presentation

The presentation was not made continuously as the lack of electricity made it impossible to use the projector for much of the time. There was continuous discussion in between.

Low levels of teaching activity observed in the school when the team visited unannounced led to heated debate.

Many in the audience were unhappy with the findings about the low levels of teaching learning activities. This led to comments being fairly acrimonious at times.

Although the research design and methodology were presented, clarifications were required about what was understood as teachers being absent from school (eg whether it included teachers being away for official work), and what constituted teaching learning activity. There was also discussion on the research tools. Clarifications were also required about how villages were chosen so as to give a picture which could be said to be representative of all the States. Some in the audience felt that the sample was too small.

It was mentioned in the presentation that the study averaged out differences in States which had performed very differently, that the study was designed at a time when the States of Bihar, UP and MP had not been divided, and that figures for Uttarakhand did push the data upwards for UP as a whole. Nevertheless visitors from Uttarakhand were unhappy with the study as a whole as they felt that the better performance of their State got obfuscated in the process.

The dismal figures on levels of teaching activity in schools disturbed several teachers. They found it hard to believe that the study found 32% head teachers absent at the time of their visit and that half the schools visited did not have any teaching activity going on at that time (a figure that was similar to the 1996-97 PROBE survey). They questioned the intention of the study. What exactly did the report intend to bring out, some asked, what 'interests' shaped it?

Teachers expressed their resentment against the spreading discourse around declining teacher commitment and delivery. While some acknowledged the realities of poor functioning within the community of teachers they also maintained that the maligning of the teachers position has made their job far more difficult. They expressed their unique position of feeling sandwiched between the expectations of the government, of civil society and of parents, expectations which they felt were often at cross purposes.

An area of deep concern for teachers was of a badly managed and undefined teacher transfer policy. Typically, policy demands that after a posting in a remote area a teacher is to be given a posting in a central area and vice-versa. However the reality is that teachers who are able to use their influence remain in comfortable postings and others remain stuck in difficult ones. Some participants felt that this explained why several of these teachers chose to be absent from remote schools for several days. Some BRC and DIET representatives from Uttarakhand however stressed that transfer policies in their state were quite functional and teacher vacancies were also as low as 2300. Given this situation teacher absenteeism was also much lower in their State than in other States.

Although the problems teachers face were discussed in the presentation, many in the audience felt that there should have been greater emphasis on this. In this context, they also felt that data on vacancies of teacher positions should have been presented.

Several among the audience asked that the presentation should have brought out more stories of good teachers and positive efforts being made by them.

Some members wondered aloud that if teaching activity levels are just as low as 10 years ago, learner achievements have not shown marked improvement then what are the reasons for such a leap in school enrolment? Why are children coming to school? Is it only for incentives then, some asked?

Some comments confirmed what had been found in the study and added further details to the picture. As regards distribution of incentives, members of the group said from experience that much pilferage happens in the processing of scholarships, and not just teachers but postmasters too can be involved. It is important to see whether scholarships are arriving in the form of cash or getting directly transferred into the family's account.

Some gaps in the presentation that were highlighted

- The audience asked for a discussion of the success story of Himachal and what kinds of problems were evident there.
- The presentation was criticized for its complete silence about children with special needs.
- A participant felt the presentation should have delved deeper into policy implications of the findings.
- It was felt that the fall in the proportions of girls out of school could be discussed in the context of the changing sex-ratios in these states.

Presentation on Schooling Choice

The fieldwork for this presentation was part of a set of village studies which were based on more in-depth research in a selected village in each of the 5 states of Bihar, Rajasthan, MP, UP and HP. The presentation focused primarily on the village in Rajasthan as it was most useful in bringing out the issue of schooling choice. The presentation tried to bring out the socio-economic and political dimensions that inform school choice in this village.

The presentation first gave a general background on methodological issues. Each village was chosen, from among the sample villages in the larger survey, such that it had both functional and dysfunctional schools, private and government schools, and a mix of caste-groups. This was followed by details of the selected village in Rajasthan -- on the caste groups and their relative numeric and social strength in that village.

Details on the four schools in this village were given-- a government upper primary Hindi school, a government upper primary Sanskrit school and two private schools of which one was up to primary, and the other the only school in the village with secondary grades. Total enrolment, enrolment patterns in each class, teachers appointed, fees, perceptions of parents about their quality were given to show the heterogeneity not just between the government and private schools, but also between the 2 government schools, and between the 2 private schools. The 5 main factors that were found to inform parents' choice of a school were supply, perceptions around quality, cost, gender and caste related factors. The presentation then looked at enrolment patterns in these 4 schools and outlined the dynamics that informed such preferences. These choices were then looked at in the context of Hirshmann's 'Voice' and 'Exit' model used by Shailaja Fennell. This model helped us understand how different social groups in the village used their socio-economic agency to move between schools or try to pressurize a school to function better.

It was brought out how the Hindi school had over the past years become quite dysfunctional and now caters mostly to girls and to children from historically disadvantaged groups. At present, the

Government Sanskrit School is the most functional school. The majority of the Brahmin children in the village were enrolled here. But the school's special focus on Sanskrit, further marginalizes children from dalit families who struggle even with schooling in the mainstream language, Hindi. There are a large number of SC children also enrolled in the Sanskrit school but they are primarily in grades 1 and 2, after which they appear to drop out. The Sanskrit school is reportedly not a preferred school for OBC groups, although there are children from these families enrolled here. Those who can afford the two private schools move to them, even as the quality of teaching and learning in these schools leaves scope for much improvement.

Discussion on findings of the qualitative village study

An initial question was posed about how the researchers decided that a certain school is functional or dysfunctional. It was felt that more specific parameters should have been set to make such a judgement. Some suggested that the learning achievements of the children in these schools could have been used as evidence.

They also asked what factors had made the Hindi school dysfunctional when it had been the only school for several years in the beginning and was reported to be much more functional.

Several also expressed the justified view that one week is too little to get the entire picture about the education dynamics in a village and what people say cannot always be taken at face value.

Looking at enrolment patterns from class 1 to 5 presented for the government and the private schools, the audience asked for greater clarity on why there was a sudden dip in enrolment in class 4 in most cases. What the more dominant cause and if they were moving what institution were they moving to? They also suggested that data collected on enrolment in the last 2 years in the particular school would reveal the trend of enrolment and retention in each school. It was however accepted that such data is difficult to glean from school registers.

Class, caste segregations in government schools have increased even since Scheduled castes have begun to enrol their children in schools in huge numbers. Government schools are being made to become lower quality options for these groups while the socially advantaged communities move to private schools.

Another teacher observed that if a child is seen to be performing well up to 2nd or 3rd grade he or even she is transferred to a private school. This is after teachers put a lot of energy into their 1st grade learning.

This was contextualised interestingly by another person who said that the purpose and the expectations from government schools and private schools are different. While private schools promise to prepare students for MBA, engineering, IT, exams like CAT or IIT entrances; government schools are supposed to create good, wholesome citizens. The former are not fulfilling the RTE Act's stipulations. Teaching of English which is an accepted need today is also not provided in several government schools. In this way he both critiqued the mandate of private schools and yet pointing to its marketability. Another also said that the teacher cannot be blamed if he or she is sending their child to a private school. "We too are social beings" and do not want to be told by others in our family or by our own children that we compromised on their education and tried to 'cut cost'.

Another participant qualified that private schools are actually not preparing children for the likes of IIT but only for coaching classes. She recalled that she and some of her classmates had got

government school education and went on to become successful engineers and doctors. The Old NCERT syllabus was amenable to this while the new one is not, she believed. She felt that this was actually part of successive governments' larger mandate to privatize education or introduce Public-private partnerships. Government teachers, it was felt have become victims of this larger trend.

The audience also asked for a clarification if Sanskrit was a medium of instruction in the Government Sanskrit School or only a language taught. If the latter was the case, then they wondered why OBCs and SCs did not prefer this school when it was functional as well as free of cost and instead preferred the expensive private schools.

The audience felt it would be useful to know whether children were coming from outside the village to study, or children from that village were going out to study. Some figures were needed for the same; which school were children moving to; were most girls in the Government Hindi school from poor and weaker castes, or were the girls of the powerful groups also being made to study in a dysfunctional school, and so on. They proposed that the total enrolment proportion of the village would tell how many of the students were in school, also that how many were from other villages.

They also wondered whether the private schools were owned by some influential OBC person (OBCs being the majority community in this village), as their experience with local/village level private schools had been that dominant community members were instrumental in setting up schools. If that was so, it would additionally explain the preference for these schools by OBC groups despite the expense involved.

Where else were Brahmin children studying? Why had they not chosen private schools if they could afford them?

They also asked if the courses taught in the schools were different and whether this had any implications. Was English taught in any of the schools, and was this a deciding factor too?

It was also news for them that Sanskrit schools are run under a separate department in Rajasthan and are set up in only some areas. They also wondered how many such schools are there in the state and how is it decided that which area will have them?

They also asked for a larger context of how many government schools are there in Rajasthan and how many government Hindi schools were there in particular.

They also wondered at the finer points behind the functionality of the Government (Sanskrit) School. Was there evidence of discrimination in the classes, such that Brahmin children got more access and visibility as against children from scheduled castes and other groups?

A member noted that the examples presented reveal that while voice and exit strategies were used by different groups they did not serve to bring any positive change in the quality or accountability of the schools – even the dominant OBC community of Swamis could not prevail over the influence of the OBC headmaster.

Another question that arose was where were the teachers sending their children? This they felt would reveal the perception of informed people about school quality in that region. This became linked later to a larger discussion and concern around the fact that the socially aspiring middle classes are increasingly moving away from the government schooling system towards private

schools/institutions. This has meant reducing accountability and little meaningful pressure on these schools to deliver quality education. Government schools are hence becoming a forced recourse for the poor and are increasingly seen as just another government provision or scheme rather than a matter of quality education. This obviously has cumulative effects on socio-cultural inequalities in Indian society and also has a direct impact on the self and social image of the teacher in these schools.

It was explained that the study also made use of DISE data which was found to be reliable in the case of this village. The issue of questioning reliability of DISE data was not liked by some teachers.

They asked the reason for trusting the statements of parents as against those of teachers. Parents give us little support or understand little of our work, they said and that most of the parent statements that the presentation quoted were cursory and predictable.

Presentations by others in the audience

Following this, members from the audience were invited to present some of their views and experiences. The first person to come forth was a female teacher from a government school in MP. She stressed strongly that the system of almost continuous collection of statistics that has become institutionalized in the system puts immense pressure on teachers. The teacher is kept busy providing data, filling registers. Apart from this examinations and maintaining a record of the results was now such a ubiquitous process. The system is putting less and less faith in the ability of a teacher to monitor the progress of the child and address his or her needs accordingly. The teacher is increasingly being forced to put into the action the diktats of the system. “We get a centralized examination input from the Rajya Shiksha Kendra. Teachers’ performance is being evaluated on the basis of centralized exams and curriculum”, she said. “Earlier we used to have local exams for classes 6-8, which allowed us to evaluate students according to our own understanding”, she recalled. There is in short she said, too much centralization and too much interference in the basic job of a teacher. Several centralized initiatives are put into place and before one is in place another one begins. “Teachers are not given sufficient academic support to meet the several expectations put on them, and this is rarely discussed”, another added. A culture of reward and punishment orients the child’s learning, underperformance means being on a ‘blacklist’. Today if the class does not do well the teacher is held back for trainings or additional classes in the vacations. Training sessions are planned out during the vacations. Each teacher needs to maintain 6 subject copies for each child and maintain a written continuous record for each child. Teachers being pushed into such monitoring zones are now adept at lying to the authorities, she argued. The child-centered evaluation system under the RTE Act is being seen as a punishment by most teachers. The obligation to not fail a child till 8th grade is being seen as a measure that will rob the teacher of initiative and the ability to direct a child to study.

She said that the problems the report has found are only symptoms. A flawed follow-up and monitoring system lies behind this and this needs to be brought out.

As mentioned earlier several participants said that parents’ views are not always the same as those of civil society or policy makers. Parents want their child disciplined, given homework everyday; else they feel nothing being done in school. Private schools make the right kind of noise in this regard, and it looks like teaching is happening, while concerns of quality are equally valid there too.

The 500 Rs. that a teacher gets for TLMs, have to be used to provide for library books, charts etc. and the teacher has to really economize. A parallel issue that emerged was that NCERT textbooks have also become expensive and their publishing is getting outsourced as part of public-private partnerships.

After this the perspective of a social worker was brought forth by Laurie Baker who has been working for the welfare of tribal groups in MP for the last 22 years. She strongly critiqued the attack that teachers make on parents. She said that much physical and verbal violence is still occurring in schools against marginalized groups and little worthwhile teaching was seen in the schools in her area. She recalled how their group had collected all the children of a village, helped them become neat and tidy, and mobilised the community to send the children to school. This was done because teachers complained that the children were too unkempt and smelly to teach. Even after this, we found teachers were hardly teaching and still beat the children if they did not perform. "I can vouch that the few children who end up doing well in such scenarios are doing it on their own steam", she argued. She asked teachers not to expect smartness or attention from children if they themselves are not doing their job. She also strongly felt that all the schemes that have come in the last decade have not come to facilitate learning but so the members of the system can make money. "As we have tried to bring out these issues some schools almost treat us like enemies and refuse to let us in", she revealed.

Mr. Ghanshyam from Eklavya, Shahpur then took the discussion forward with his observations. He expressed the view that the report has only done what regular reports do - collect numeric data but not go too deep into procedures. The numeric improvements in the system were natural given that DPEP and SSA had undertaken several initiatives in the last decade.

He said while he was not a government teacher, he sympathized with the fact that the maximum energy of teachers is spent in maintaining the system. The hierarchical nature of the system is at all stages. In MP, in his view there were about 20-25% good teachers, but the system rewards good teachers by promoting them to be BRC coordinators and so on. The job of actual classroom teaching is then left to less dedicated or less capable teachers.

In the bargain even as incentives and infrastructure have improved, learning achievements have come down, he added. The short lived trend towards decentralization in MP is over, he said and now the syllabus and month plan for Gurujis is made by seniors sitting in SCERT. "We need to go back and relook at whether BRCC and CRCCs are really fulfilling the mandate for which their post was made".

In this environment of low learning, a new kind of disability has emerged – '*mandbuddi*'. Children from marginalized communities or first generation learners are often labeled *mandbuddi* even before a genuine effort is made to overcome their learning barriers. When a teacher asks a question and the child looks back silently or just grins at him, the teacher assumes that the child is mentally disabled, because obviously the teacher can't be!, he said sarcastically.

There is too much training, he felt. Teachers are almost always doing training during vacation time and are too drained to care for teaching in the end. Teachers need time, not training he said.

Rashmi Paliwal of Eklavya asked that more clarity was needed on current policy and what the system really wants out of teachers and government schools. Wrong messages seem to be coming from the top, she felt.

C.N. Subramanian from Eklavya observed that it has been found that girls' government schools are much more functional than boys' government schools. An environment of learning is still visible and different social groups are still represented in the former's classrooms. Factors for this need to be understood he suggested, as they will help to know what conditions make for a more functional system.

The fact that teachers' own children are moving out government schools also means that the social distance between the teacher and student is increasing and this directly impacts the teachers' empathy towards their job.

A member suggested that that the PROBE Revisited report should have looked deeply into the factors that are weakening the school system. He felt the report needed clarity on what is quality education!

How the perceptions and policies around education have changed in this decade of 1996-2006 needed grater attention. With so many private schools getting recognition where does quality education stand?

In this context, C.N. Subramanian also asked to what extent was school quality a factor in determining school choice and how do parents measure it?

The comments and critiques that came from the workshop were very helpful in enriching the presenters' perspective and also help to identify areas that need more attention. It also helped to understand the perspective of teachers and local level education officers on the issues in education for all. It is of course to be noted that some of the responses stemmed from the fact that several teachers saw themselves as victims of the situation and hence were defensive towards the findings of the report. Moreover, the audience consisted of field based people who were more interested in matters of procedure and everyday occurring in schools, villages and education offices rather than large scale trends and findings. In this regard they were able to give very meaningful input on the qualitative findings.

The meeting concluded with a note of thanks to everyone for attending the session and sharing their views and experiences.