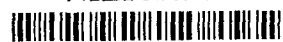# Para Teachers:
Their Role, Problems and Prospects

Yogendra Upadhyay
Bodh Shiksha Samiti, Jaipur, India

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Para-Teachers : Their Role, Problems & Prospects*

Bodh Research Team
Bodh Shiksha Samiti
AA-1, Anita Colony, Bajaj Nagar,
Jaipur – 302 015

The study on **Para-teachers: Concept, Practice and Prospects**, adopting case study method, makes an in-depth probe into five programmes/schemes of alternative schooling involving para-teachers, covering all aspects viz. socio-economic context, the community environment, village and school profiles, the children – their attitude and aspirations, teacher-community interaction, classroom culture and learning performance, with a focus on both, the contents and quality of education, being imparted in para-teacher schools. To provide a comparative perspective, regular schools and regular teachers too have been studied on similar lines.

By way of a background, the efforts at universalisation of elementary education in accordance with the constitutional obligations and the hindrances in the process of achieving this objective, have also been taken into account. The reasons for alienating broad categories of masses from the educational

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processes – the colonial policies and their continuation. despite claims to the contrary, have also been dealt with.

The overall objective of the study being "to research the role, problems and prospects of para-teachers in order to be able to make policy recommendations at the national level with regard to their efficacy in the universalisation of elementary education", a broad spectrum of para-teachers, with varied contextual situations and working conditions under different schemes of alternative schooling, has been taken into consideration while selecting the sample.

The following programmes involving para-teacher were identified for in-depth study:

1. Rajasthan: Shiksha Karmi Progrramme

2. Madhya Pradesh: Alternative Schooling

                               Programme

Education Gurantee Scheme   Shiksha Karmi Yojna

3. Himachal Pradesh: Volunteer Teacher Scheme

The total number of para-teachers included in the sample was 32. The number of regular teachers taken up from regular schools situated in the close proximity with para-teacher schools, was 27. Thus in total 59 teachers were covered through intensive investigations based on a comprehensive research design.

2

The data collected through fieldwork was analysed and interpreted at two levels. At one level case studies of each of the programmes were made with comprehensive treatment of each and every aspect effecting and affecting the role of para-teachers in a contextual framework. As carriers of rudiments of education to remote and inaccessible areas, to reach the unreached children living below poverty line, the role of para-teachers across the board was uniformly positive, and so also was their contribution in establishing a semblance of school- community and community-teacher relationship. Their low competence however, did not ensure quality in education and this again was a common feature despite differing nature of the programmes under study. Beyond these, para-teachers working under different dispensations entertained different perspectives quite in conformity with their own socio-economic status and cultural moorings.

At another level, the analysis has been done with a general framework taking into account those variables, which constitute a common thread running across all the programmes. The data in this context has been analysed by adopting a threefold methodology, wherein assumptions underlying a given information have been tested on the anvil of reality, observed by the investigators, in order to reach realistic findings.

Thus, the para-teachers have been dealt with in terms of their qualifications, characteristic features like their being local recruits, voluntary nature of their work, recruitment procedures, honorarium etc. Assumptions characterising all these aspects and realistic appraisal of the actual state of affairs as emerged through clinical observations and the findings accruing from this dichotomy of assumptions and reality have been well brought out.

The Para-teacher

Minimum educational qualification and other conditions of eligibility for the position of para-teacher:

Educational qualifications. In four of the five programmes under study the minimum qualification required for a para-teacher is Metric (ASP, Madhya Pradesh and VTS, Himachal Pradesh) or Higher Secondary (EGS and Shiksha Karmi Yojna, Madhya Pradesh). In Shiksha Karmi Programme, Rajasthan it is VIII class pass.

Assumptions. The assumption is that a Matric or Higher Secondary pass person possesses the academic competence to teach primary classes, which is also the case in many other states. However, the assumption held by SK Programme of Rajasthan is that even an eigth class pass person can be prepared or developed

4

into a competent primary school teacher over a period of four or five years by making available to him facilities for self improvement and by providing him inputs through regular trainings and workshops. In the pre-service training he will be prepared to teach class I and II.

Reality. The quality of the transaction of the curriculum content improves as the qualification level of para-teachers rises. It was observed that Higher Secondary pass para-teachers have a distinct edge over eigth class pass para-teachers. By and large, the transaction of academic content was poor in all the cases but more so with para-teachers of lower qualification.

Conclusion. It is important that a para-teacher possesses the academic competence necessary for teaching the primary classes no matter what his/her level of education is.

Localism. In four of the five programmes (Alternative Schooling Programme, Education Guarantee Scheme of Madhya Pradesh, Shiksha Karmi Project, Rajasthan and Volunteer Teacher Scheme of Himachal Pradesh) a para-teacher has to be a local person.

Assumptions. It is assumed that (i) if a para-teacher is a local person belonging to the same community, where the school is opened, he/she will have "an emotional attachment with the community" and the community will also trust him/her (Shiksha Karmi Project, Rajasthan); (ii) s/he will be punctual and regular

5

in school and the problem of absenteeism of teachers will be solved; (iii) s/he, being a local person can help realise the concept of ownership of the school by the community.

Reality. (i) In all the four programmes where a para-teacher has to be a local person, most of the para-teachers under the sample belonged to the same or close- by village/community; (ii) all the para-teacher schools even in remote areas were functioning with regularity almost in all the villages; (iii) community members spoke in favour of the para-teachers; (iv) para-teacher being a local person functioned as a strong link between the school and the community and could involve the community in the affairs of the schools at varying degrees in most of the places; (v) community members felt that since the para-teacher is 'their' person and speaks their language, s/he can explain things to children in their own language which would not be the case if the teacher were an outsider; (vi) in a couple of places (VTS, Himachal Pradesh and SKP, Rajasthan) it was reported by the Centre Head Teacher and Block level officials that para-teacher. being from the same village tends to neglect school work in favour of personal work in the family and/or on family farms, especially in the peak agricultural seasons. However, it was also observed that the use of local language most of the time in classrooms hinders the child in learning Hindi. This is evident from the class III Hindi tests.

Conclusion. The advantages that accrue from the fact that the para-teacher is a local person speak for themselves. A teacher from outside would be working in an alien social environment with alien children and the community, which may not be conducive to UEE and an effective educational process.

Where para-teachers are recruited from amongst the same community, where the school is located, and as most of the communities, where para-teacher schools are functioning belong to the marginalised sections of the population, the para-teacher and the school occupy a distinct position symbolic of progress and upliftment of the community itself.

Volunteerism. Para-teachers have been given different names by different programmes like *guruji* by Education Guarantee Scheme (Madhya Pradesh), Shiksha Karmi by Shiksha Karmi Project (Rajasthan) and Shiksha Karmi Yojna (Madhya Pradesh). In Himachal Pradesh the scheme itself is called Volunteer Teacher Scheme and the teacher is called Volunteer Teacher (VT). *'Guruji'* points towards the teacher of the *'gurukul'* system in which a teacher did function as a volunteer. Shiksha Karmi Project of Rajasthan explicitly says, "the teacher in the Shiksha Karmi Project is a voluntary worker. S/he is not employed in any job and belongs to the project village." S/he is treated as an 'agent of change.' Other para-teacher programes may or may not have

7

'volunteerism' as a basic feature in the conception of the programme, but SKP, Rajasthan has it.

Assumptions. The assumption of SKP, Rajasthan is that a para-teacher, who is a local youth and from the same community and therefore has emotional attachment to it, can work hard and with devotion and dedication if s/he fired with the spirit of volunteerism and '*Sewa Bhava.*'

Reality. Of the 11 para-teachers in the sample, not a single para-teacher was aware that s/he was doing voluntary work. Their volunteerism was limited to filling up forms, writing applications for villagers or giving them some advice when asked for, which they would have done otherwise also (if they were not para-teacher) as member of the community. All of them spoke of a salary and not honorarium and many complained that it was far too less for the work they were doing and hoped that after some time their post would become permanent and they will be absorbed as regular teachers. It may be mentioned that there is already provision of absorption after putting in a service of 8 and 10 years in Shiksha Karmi Project (Rajasthan).

Conclusion. Para-teacher of SKP, Rajasthan do not possess the spirit of voluntarism as conceived in the programme.

Honorarium. In the five programmes under the study the honorarium of para-teachers vary from Rs. 1000/- (Education

Guarantee Scheme, Madhya Pradesh) to Rs. 1800/- (Shiksha Karmi Project, Rajasthan).

Assumptions. The 'low' honorarium of para-teachers as compared to regular teachers reduces the cost of UEE and the local, educated but unemployed youth finds a gainful employment.

Reality. Before joining, para-teachers, most of those in the sample, were unemployed doing some odd jobs, (some of them were even working as casual wage labourers) or working on their own farm. They were young and aspiring for some kind of work in which their educational skills/competencies could be used. Para-teacher programmes provided them with this opportunity. However, the expectation that they will continue to be satisfied with the meagre amount of salary has proved wrong. All of the para-teachers under study felt that the honorarium they were receiving was far too less for the work they were doing and hoped that they would become permanent and will be absorbed as regular teachers.

The three old programmes Shiksha Karmi Project, Rajasthan, Volunteer Teacher Scheme, Himachal Pradesh and Shiksha Karmi Yojna of Madhya Pradesh, have already witnessed litigation moved by para-teachers of these programmes on various grounds of equality and social justice. These programmes

are reported to have succeeded in overcoming the problems arising out of litigations.

Conclusion. The 'low' honorarium however, does not seem to be conducive to long term sustainability of these programmes.

Recruitment Procedure. In three (Alternative Schooling Programme and Education Guarantee Scheme, Madhya Pradesh and Shiksha Karmi Project, Rajasthan) of the five programmes, the process of recruiting para-teachers start from the village level where the community is involved in identifying the deserving candidates. Candidates are then screened and/or given a test to examine the level of their educational achievements. Other factors which are considered are his/her, outlook towards caste, religion, gender etc. and above all, that he is accepted by the community. Appointment is made by the Zila Panchayat/Gram Panchayat (Madhya Pradesh) as the case may be or any other body (e.g. Shiksha Karmi Board in Rajasthan) responsible for it.

For the selection of Shiksha Karmis in Madhya Pradesh, there is a Selection Committee consisting of the representatives of the Janpad Panchayat, Zila Panchayat, the Education Department and experts nominated by the Standing Committee on education. The selection of Volunteer Teachers in Himachal Pradesh is done by the officials of the Education Department.

Assumptions. (i) The involvement of community in the selection procedure will ensure community's increasing role in the smooth functioning of school later; (ii) since Government Primary Schools and the Education Department do not seem to be very concerned about the community participation in the running of the school, the selection of para-teachers in these schools (VTS, H.P. and S.K.P., M.P.) is done by the committees constituted for this purpose and represented by officials of the Education Department and representatives of the block and Zila Panchayats as the case may be.

Reality. After excluding the Volunteer Teacher (4) of Himachal Pradesh and Shiksha Karmis (6) of Madhya Pradesh, the rest 22 para-teachers were selected according to the procedure laid down for it. In two or three cases, selection was reported to have been influenced by political heavy weights in Madhya Pradesh.

Conclusion. The community's involvement in all the decisions necessary for setting up a school inculcates in its members a sense of belongingness to the school, which is a first step towards realising the concept of community's ownership of the school.

Professional preparation and continuing professional support.

In two programmes- Shiksha Karmi Yojna (Madhya Pradesh) and Volunteer Teacher Scheme (Himachal Pradesh)- there was no provision of professional preparation or continuing professional

11

support until the DPEP appeared on the scene and started its programme of school improvement, among others, through training, workshops and academic support in the field.

In the rest three programmes there is a provision of professional preparation (pre-service teacher training) of varying duration: 37/50 days (Shiksha Karmi, Rajasthan), 18 days (Education Guarantee Scheme, Madhya Pradesh) and 21 days (Alternative Schooling Programme, Madhya Pradesh). Continuing professional support (in-service training, workshops etc.) is also available in all the three programmes. Shiksha Karmi Sahayogis are responsible for a unit of 15 schools. They solve the academic problems of para-teachers of these schools when they visit them (which has to be once in a month) and also in a 2-day monthly meeting at block or cluster level. Besides, workshops and meetings are held each year for the purpose. *Gurujis* of EGS school receive academic support from cluster academic coordinators when they visit the schools. Para-teachers of Alternative Schools are provided academic support by '*Paryavedshaks*' or Supervisors, each responsible for 10 schools, in a one-day meeting held each month. Apart from this, AS and EGS para-teachers are also provided with academic inputs in workshops/trainings, the duration of which is 10-12 days.

Assumptions. Pre-service and in-service training and academic support are provided to make a teacher professionally competent

and keep him/her abreast with improved and innovative methods of teaching, use of teaching and innovative teaching-learning material, school organisation and eliciting deeper community involvement. The assumption, therefore, is that the para-teacher will make use of what s/he has learnt in these trainings and workshops.

Reality. Almost all the para-teachers (32) under the study said that trainings have proved to be helpful in their work as they have learnt in trainings/workshop new ways of teaching children, how to make TLM and use them. Specifically these two were named by all besides other things such as *'bacche ko sahaj bhava se aur pyar se padhayen'*, *'baccho ko school se kaise joden.'* The reality is that in all of 20 para-teacher schools there was hardly any reflection of the fact that para-teachers had learnt anything in the training. Corporal punishment, the same old method of text book based teaching and rote learning and no or little use of innovative TLM were the characteristic features of all these schools.

In monthly meetings (SKP, Rajasthan and ASP, Madhya Pradesh) most of the time is spent on non academic matters, academic problems receive a back seat. Therefore monthly meetings have not been effective in discussing para-teachers academic problems and solving them.

13

The focus of trainings/workshops held each year (SKP, Rajasthan and ASP, Madhya Pradesh) is more on preparing the teacher for understanding the textbook materials of a particular class/level.

Conclusions. If teacher's training has to be effective the foremost question that must be addressed is what should be the minimum qualification of a para-teacher so that s/he is able to intellectually process the curriculum content of the training, make own judgement about its validity and applicability and imbibe it to translate it into practice. Another question that immediately crops up is what should be the duration of pre-service training for him/her to acquire basic skills and competencies and lastly what could be an effective in-service academic support system? Besides, the curriculum and quality of training and the nature of in-service support call for serious review and improvement where needed.

Community' participation in school affairs

Since the para-teacher belongs to that very village (where the school is located) or a nearby village, s/he has in-depth understanding of the local beliefs, traditions, customs, taboos and cultural ethos of the community which a teacher from outside, from a different socio-cultural milieu can not have. Besides, as s/he has grown in that community, villagers know about his her nature, weakness and strength. 'Organically' s/he is an integral

part of the social history of the community. This fact places the para-teacher in a strategic position to elicit community's participation in school affairs and management.

Assumptions. With the 'ownership' of the school by the community will also improve the functioning of the school leading to conditions necessary for effective learning.

Reality. The participation of the community in school affairs is not as broad as it should be in any of the 21 para-teacher schools under the study. Their participation is limited to solving the minor problems like repairing of building by providing free labour (*shramdan*) or attending national functions of 26th January and 15th August at the school and making little contributions for sweets and prizes which are distributed to the children. The reasons for low involvement of the community amongst others, are that (i) *paryavekshaks* or supervisors do not interact with the community when they visit the school; (ii) officials at block and district level also don't interact with them on their visit to school.

Conclusion. The community's participation in school affairs is low and also is not broad based. If para-teachers belonging to the same village are not able to mobilise the community, it is indicative of a poor rapport between the para-teacher and the

community. The reasons for it need to be looked into and necessary steps taken.

The school

Classroom processes/Classroom culture

Classroom processes and/or classroom culture include teaching-learning environment in the class, sitting arrangement, interaction and discourse between the teacher and pupils, teaching method, use of TLM, peer/group learning and other aspects that might constitute a classroom culture. Learning achievements in fact are the end-products of classroom processes and culture.

Assumptions. Classroom processes and culture provide a stimulating environment which promotes teaching and learning. Therefore the way the classroom culture is created is critical.

Reality. In most of the 21 para-teacher schools classroom culture did not provide a stimulating environment which could ensure interesting and effective teaching-learning. This is evident from the characteristic features of the classroom culture prevalent in these schools: (i) an appropriate sitting arrangement contributes tremendously to the quality of teaching-learning processes. It appeared that most para-teachers were not conscious of this fact with the exception of two teachers in Mia Ka Padla (Rajasthan) and Kunjra Khodra (Madhya Pradesh) (ii) corporal punishment

was used in all the 21 para-teacher schools and by all para-teachers with an exception of one or two; (iii) teaching-learning process was largely text book based; other activity or material was seldom used; (iv) only very few teachers felt the necessity of drawing upon information or knowledge children bring into the class. The rest were not even conscious of it even when an opportunity presented itself; (v) most of the time it was teacher who spoke in the class. Children spoke only when they were asked some questions. Children were not seen putting queries to the teacher- the entire transaction sounded like a monologue; (vi) emphasis on rote learning was clearly visible in most of the teaching-learning activities; (vii) generally, no independent learning activity was offered to children except copying from the blackboard; (viii) some teachers were found giving more attention to bright students than to weaker students; (ix) there was no attempt on the part of teachers to promote peer learning in the class; (x) often teachers did not know what and how much children understood of a lesson; (xi) no attempt is, generally, made to make classroom attractive by displays, charts and such other things.

(xii) given the fact that in many PT schools teacher-child ratio is high and there is no space for holding classes separately, it becomes necessary that in such situations multi-grade teaching is employed. With the exception of a few para-teachers it was not

effectively practised because para-teachers did not possess this technique; (xiii) to create an interesting and effective teaching learning environment, it is essential that lessons and teaching strategies are planned in advance. In one programme (SKP, Rajasthan) teaching plan is centrally prepared in a 2-day monthly workshop for the next month and for each class and subject. It was observed that there was a tendency to push through the teaching plan as scheduled without paying due attention to the fact as how much of the content was followed by how many students. With the exception of five para-teachers, other teachers of the five para-teacher programmes come to the class unprepared and without a lesson plan; (xiv) no record of child's progress is kept for evaluating her continually on daily or weekly basis; (xv) where there is a provision for a children's library (SKY, Madhya Pradesh, SKP, Rajasthan and VTS, Himachal Pradesh) it was not used by children (SKP, Rajasthan) as they didn't have access to it, whereas in other places they did make use of the library.

Conclusion. The teaching learning situation as observed in the para-teacher schools under the study was unsatisfactory. Para-teachers cannot create a classroom culture of effective learning unless and until they are educated and trained in the basics of classroom processes and were willing to use them.

In most government primary schools teachers knew very well various methods and the basics of 'good' teaching but didn't use

them. Their teaching-learning processes also suffered from the drawbacks mentioned above. Although corporal punishment was the regular feature of almost all the schools but, it appeared that it was more frequently used in government schools than para-teacher schools.

School management

In the para-teacher programmes there has been a great emphasis on the formation of local level committees for creating an environment for schooling and school management at the village level. At block and district level school is managed by BEO, BDO and the Panchayat Samiti and at district level by DEO, PO, DPEP and DEO.

Assumptions. The formation of VEC will ensure in raising people's/community participation in various school activities.

Reality. Village Education Committee has been formed/constituted in all the schools under study. This was also confirmed by the records (register indicating the names of VEC members and the meetings) available in the school, as well as discussions with community's members and para-teachers. However, in all the schools the VECs were constituted after the inception of the five programmes under study.

In all the schools it was either the para-teacher or the Sarpanch who identified the members of the VEC. The number of members

19

VEC varied from 11 to 14. In all the VECs there was adequate representation of different castes and women. The procedure followed for the constitution of the VEC was however not in conformity with democratic norms and therefore such VECs often had members not necessarily interested in education.

Although VEC members were expected to meet once a month, but no signal pattern was observed for the frequency of the VEC meetings. In some places it was mentioned that VEC meetings are organised when the need arose. The study clearly indicates that the participation of women in VEC meetings is a mere formality. Not only they do not attend or participate in the meeting but do not have any role in decision making. Some of them who do attend meetings do not express their opinion.

The role of VEC was limited to providing infrastructural facilities, addressing issues of enrolment and drop-out and retention of children and participation in national festivals. In some places, however, such participation was not forthcoming. VEC members were not involved in either assessing teacher's performance or the educational levels and performance of the children.

Most VEC members did not undergo any training. Those members who participated in training often saw it as a mere

formality and lacked clarity on their role and responsibilities as VEC members.

Conclusion. The study indicates that VEC committees even though have been formed in most villages, have yet to play an active role in school management and teaching-learning process. There is evidence to suggest that the programmes and district level officials have not visualised the full potential of VEC's role and responsibilities and what could be done to make full use of it.

Learning achievement

To assess learning achievement level of students in various PT/government schools this research study adopted various qualitative and quantitative techniques like classroom observations, interaction and discussions with teachers, students and parents and written and oral tests in Hindi and Maths for the class III and class V children.

All the schools selected for this study took part in the test programme with the exception of government school Karauli where the teacher was not available and a school in Madhya Pradesh where teachers and students were reluctant for such tests. It was decided to take random stratified cross section of students (inclusive of girl students) for the tests in Hindi and Maths from class III and class V.

Test questions were designed keeping in view of the skills and competencies class II and class IV pass children would have acquired. In Hindi, skills and competencies like listening, speaking, reading, writing and comprehension were evaluated. For Mathematics, competencies in number sequencing, place value, addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, application of maths were tested.

Findings

1. the performance of both boys and girls in all the four para teacher projects, SKP Rajasthan, Alternative Schooling, Madhya Pradesh & VTS, HP & Shiksha Karmi Yojna, MP (where para teachers are working alongwith regular teachers) is a matter of concerned. Their performance is poor or very poor.

2. In almost all the para-teachers schools the overall performance of class V showed a downward trained in comparison to class III performance. Girl student's overall performance declined more sharply than boys.

3. If we compare the performance of student's of government school with that of para teacher school, government school student's have performed slightly better.

22