

**Nature and Extent of Teacher Absenteeism in
Primary Schools of India: A Case Study in
Educationally Backward Districts**

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Teacher absenteeism can be broadly defined as the absence of teachers from effective or involved teaching learning process. This absence could range from physical absence of teachers from the school to non-participation or even half-hearted or haphazard participation in the teaching-learning activities. According to the above definition and level of participation, teacher absenteeism can be categorised into the following types.

- *Complete Absenteeism* refers to teacher's complete absence from the school without taking leave. It is generally believed that this type of absenteeism is more prevalent in one / two teacher schools and schools which are not connected by road and/or are remotely located.

- *Partial Absenteeism* refers to absenteeism where the teachers are not completely absent, but their duration of stay in the school is much less than the expected duration. In this case, the teachers come to the school late and/or leave the school early. It is generally believed that this type of absenteeism is seen in villages closer to the cities where teachers travel from and to the urban areas and are at the mercy of public transport.

- In the third type of absenteeism, which is widespread, the teachers are physically present in the school or even in the classroom, but not involved in teaching-learning process for the expected length of time. Even if they are in the class for

the whole period, they are not focussed on content and contents of teaching.

- There can also be another kind of absenteeism in which the teachers are away from the most important duty i.e. teaching for they are entrusted with some other government duty.

In recent years, teacher absenteeism has been recognised as a major impediment in many areas, affecting school environment and education. However, no empirical study on the subject is available and this prompted the DPEP to sponsor a study on the subject.

2.0 PURPOSE & OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main *purpose* of the present study was to estimate the extent of teacher absenteeism in primary schools and to analyse the nature of absenteeism and the factors contributing to this phenomenon. The present study is limited to examining this phenomenon in primary schools functioning in rural areas of the selected districts.

The teacher absenteeism as defined in this study includes all types of absenteeism that keep a teacher away from school during the days / hours of its functioning. Given the central role that a teacher plays in imparting education to children, absenteeism of all these different types has a direct impact on the quality of education in primary schools.

The *specific objectives* of the study are as under: -

- 1) To undertake an extensive literature review on the subject of Teachers' Absenteeism.
- 2) To assess the nature and extent of teacher absenteeism.
- 3) To study various reasons for teacher absenteeism on account of (i) teacher related factors (ii) lack of monitoring and supervision of the school and teachers' activities, and (iii) various external determinants.
- 4) To ascertain the nature, extent and reasons for teacher absenteeism as perceived by the community, school going children, teachers themselves and education officials at block, district and state levels.
- 5) To study, understand and analyse teacher absenteeism in the administrative and policy related contexts with respect to (i) selection policy, (ii) transfer policy, (iii) monitoring and supervision mechanisms and (iv) introduction of panchayati raj and its effect on the school education system.
- 6) To suggest suitable interventions to minimise teacher absenteeism and its impact on the quality of education.

3.0 DESIGN & METHODOLOGY

3.1 Methods used

The following were the different methods employed in conducting the study.

- ◆ Literature Review
- ◆ Collection Of Secondary Data
- ◆ Discussions With State / District Level Officers
- ◆ School Observation

- ◆ Interviews With Headmasters / School Incharge
- ◆ Interviews With Teachers
- ◆ Focus Group Discussions With The Community, Teachers And Children

3.2 Research Instruments

The following instruments were developed, pre-tested in the field before finalisation and administered to different categories of respondents in the study. All the instruments were translated into Hindi to facilitate better data collection.

- ❖ School Observation schedule
- ❖ School information schedule (for headmasters).
- ❖ Teacher profile schedule
- ❖ State / district official interview schedule
- ❖ Discussion guidelines for FGD's.

3.3 Coverage

The study was conducted in two states namely, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. In each state, two districts were purposively selected for the study. The districts were drawn in a manner that they broadly have a similar development profile and are have different kinds of programmatic inputs. The districts selected were also such they represent a heterogeneous population profile in terms of social characteristics to understand its bearing on the teacher absenteeism. The four districts selected for the study are as under: M.P (Bilaspur,Balaghat) and U.P (Meerut,Saharanpur).

3.4 Sampling Procedure

A) Selection of Blocks

From each district, the blocks were stratified into four groups based on the criteria of

distance from the district headquarter, as follows. Blocks within a distance of 20 kms; 20-39 kms; 40-59 kms; 60 kms.& above. From each stratum, one block was randomly selected.

B) Selection of schools

In each block, the list of primary schools was obtained and this served as the sampling frame from which the requisite sample was randomly drawn. In all, about 20 schools were selected from each block.

3.5 Sample Size Achieved

About 80 schools were sampled in each study district and in all, 322 schools were covered in the study from the four study districts.

4.0 FINDINGS

4.1 School Facilities

- An overwhelming majority of schools (94 per cent) have their own building. In Madhya Pradesh, almost all the schools covered in the DPEP district, Bilaspur of Madhya Pradesh have their own building. The school infrastructure is somewhat lacking in Balaghat district where 15 per cent of schools have either no building of their own or are operating in rented / temporary premises. A very high proportion of schools (about 95 per cent) in the two study districts of Uttar Pradesh namely, Shaharanpur and Meerut have their own building.
- As regards the type of school building, the situation in the study districts of Uttar Pradesh is much better to that of the districts in Madhaya Pradesh. In Uttar Pradesh, the school buildings are mostly pacca in construction, while as much as half of schools in Bilaspur and a quarter of them in Balaghat have thatched roof.
- About one third of schools sampled in the study have just one or two rooms. The situation in different study districts in this respect is similar and 25 and to 35 per

cent of schools across the study districts have one to two rooms. Schools having just one room are significantly higher in study districts of M.P than in U.P. One tenth of schools in M.P have just one room. Less than half of schools (ranging between 35 to 45 per cent) in the study districts have four or more rooms.

- But, significantly, as much as half of the primary schools across the four study districts (ranging from 44 per cent to 54 per cent) have a separate office room.
- As much as 33 per cent of schools reported lack of adequate number of chairs for teachers. The situation in this respect was considered to be the best in Saharanpur district with only 12 per cent of schools reporting shortage of chairs. In other districts, the proportion of schools reporting inadequate chairs ranged between 37 to 54 per cent.

4.2 Teacher Strength in Sample Schools

- The number of teachers currently posted in the sampled schools ranges between 2.4 to 3.8 teachers per school. In Madhya Pradesh, the two study districts have similar teacher strength per school, while there is a significant difference between the two study districts in Uttar Pradesh. Saharanpur has 2.7 teachers per school, while Meerut has 3.8 teachers per school.
- The teacher pupil ratio in all the study districts is below the prescribed norm of 1:40. The ratio is the lowest in Balaghat (50 children/teacher) and highest in Saharanpur (1:68). There is a considerable variation in teacher pupil ratios between the study districts in both the states. Bilaspur in M.P and Meerut in U.P have more students per school.

4.3 Profile of Teachers

- An overwhelming three fourth majority of teachers in the four districts is males. This percentage was slightly higher in both the M.P districts compared to the U.P districts.
- In terms of age, a majority of teachers are above 45 years of age. Teachers who are below 35 years of age account only for 22 per cent of all teachers. There is a marked difference in the age profile of teachers in M.P and U.P. M.P has a younger teacher profile than M.P. Over 60 per cent of teachers in U.P are above 45 years of age; while just over one-third of teachers in M.P are above 45 years of age.
- As regards the highest qualification achieved by the teachers posted in the primary schools, as much as 30 per cent of teachers in the study districts have reported qualifications below class 12. This proportion was uniform across the four study districts. About one third of teachers (32 per cent) have completed class 12 and about a quarter of them are graduates (23 per cent).
- In terms of social background, over one-fifth of teachers (22 per cent) belong to the socially disadvantaged groups namely, the scheduled castes and tribes. There is a significant difference in the strength of these teachers between M.P and U.P districts, while the pattern is broadly similar between the study districts in each state. In M.P, about one-third of teachers belong to SC/ST communities, while this proportion in U.P is about 15 per cent.
- Given their age profile, an overwhelming majority of them are currently married and three fourth majority of ever-married teachers in the districts have three or more children.

- Across all the study districts, 15 to 20 per cent of teachers have working spouses, while over three fourth of them don't.
- Less than one fifth of teachers (18 per cent) in the study districts reside in the same village, while a majority of them come from villages farther than 4 kms. While over 1/4th of teachers in M.P districts reside in the same village, very small proportion of teachers in Uttar Pradesh reside in the same village.
- Similarly, while only 1/3rd of teachers come from distances more than four kilometres in the M.P districts, nearly 2/3rds of teachers in U.P districts come from distances more than four kilometres.
- A majority of teachers (53 per cent) use their own transport- mostly bicycle and scooter/motor cycle in a few cases- to reach school. About one fifth of teachers, mostly residing in the same village, reach school by walk. About one fourth of teachers are dependent on public transport. This proportion is significantly lower in M.P districts (18 per cent) than in U.P districts. Meerut has reported the highest percentage of teachers (40 per cent) availing public transport to reach school.

4.4 School Attendance of Teachers

An overwhelming majority of teachers (83 per cent) regularly attend school. The teacher attendance does not vary much across the four study districts—ranging from the lowest 78 per cent in Saharanpur district to the highest 86 per cent in Balaghat district.

The study findings are very encouraging, as various micro studies on the subject conducted a few years ago had presented a dismal picture of teacher attendance. For instance, Dreze and Nobel laureate Amartya Sen (1994) reported the teacher

attendance in U.P primary schools only as 33 per cent, based on a limited enquiry in 16 villages in different regions of Uttar Pradesh.

How ever, it is significant that the primary school teachers are frequently involved in a variety of non-academic activities like the poverty line survey, economic survey, literacy activities etc, affecting school participation and motivation of teachers. About 7 per cent of the teachers were reported to be away on *official duty* during school working days. This proportion was higher in U.P than in M.P. In Saharanpur, which had the school attendance rate at 78 per cent, as much as 15 per cent of all teachers were away on Official duty.

The involvement of teachers in various non-academic activities seriously affects their teaching involvement, leads to low morale and poor motivation. There was unanimous demand from teachers, education administrators and community representatives that this practice be stopped forthwith to improve the functioning of primary schools.

About 4 per cent of all teachers were reported to be on leave with prior approval. As this is authorised leave, it does not constitute absenteeism.

Only six per cent of primary school teachers were absent from duty without any valid reason and this proportion is no more than 9 per cent in any study district.

4.5 Teacher Absenteeism

4.5.1 Complete absenteeism

A small proportion of teachers (three per cent) were away on non-official work (like the panchayat work) and for personal reasons. This absence constitutes *complete absenteeism*. Teachers in some schools have reported that in view of the control exercised by the panchayat bodies in Madhya Pradesh, it has become necessary for them to perform these 'additional' duties.

Another three percent of teachers were absent without any prior information and approval. Inquiries in the villages and examination of school records showed that such unauthorised absence is common and constitutes complete absence from school's activities.

4.5.2 Partial absenteeism

As regards partial absenteeism of teachers from school, the study findings reveal an encouraging picture. Enquiries in the villages with the community and the schools revealed that teachers come to school on time in most cases. As most of the teachers come from nearby villages and have own transport, timely arrival in school is not reported to be a problem. However, in schools where the teachers coming from outside avail of public transport, late arrival in school has been widely reported. Also, female teachers in some schools have been reported to be irregular.

In some villages, it was reported that the schools close early when the attendance of children is poor or when there is a local festival. Schools do not function properly during the monsoon season, as a number of schools are reported to be leaking.

4.5.3 Disguised absenteeism

The third type of absenteeism where the teachers are physically present in the school, but not engaged in teaching-learning activities may be referred to as '*disguised absenteeism/ attendance*'. The study findings show that this form of absenteeism is the most prevalent as a large number of teachers was not involved in teaching-learning activities.

While a high majority of teachers attend school, in over one-third of cases, the teachers are not found in the classroom in the presence of children. This problem of non-presence of teachers in the classroom is more acute in Madhya Pradesh than in Uttar Pradesh. A simple majority of teachers in Madhya Pradesh and a significantly higher proportion of them in Uttar Pradesh were present in the classroom at the time of field inspection. The low proportion of teachers present in the classroom in Madhya Pradesh could be ascribed to the comparatively poorer school infrastructure in the Madhya Pradesh districts.

In about one-fifth of the cases in M.P, the teachers were present in the Office room doing some official work. In all other cases, the teachers were found involved in non-academic work / discussions.

While the proportion teachers present in the classroom is about the same in both the districts of M.P, the classroom presence of teachers is more Saharanpur district of U.P.

4.6 Unattended Children

The study findings reveal that at any given time, slightly above one-half of the sections in primary schools are unattended to by a teacher. This is the case as the number of sections in the schools exceeds the number of teachers posted in the schools. Together, while 854 teachers are posted in the sampled schools, there are as many as approx. 1,000 sections.

4.7 Profile of Absentee Teachers

The detailed profile of absentee teachers shows that three out of four teachers are male; half of them are above 45 years of age; mostly married and come from distances more than four kilometres. A majority of them have received both pre-service training and in-service training.

Most of the characteristics detailed here are equally common for teachers who are attending school. The only significant differentiating variable appears to be the distance of the residence of the teachers from the school.

4.8 Profile of Absentee Teacher Schools

As regards schools having absentee teachers, almost all the schools have own buildings. About 3/4th of the schools where the teachers are absent are three or more teacher schools. This is a very significant finding that the *probability of teacher absenteeism increases with the number of teachers posted in school*. More the teachers in a school, greater are the chances of teacher absenteeism. In such schools, the teachers have a perfect understanding and they support each other to indulge in unauthorised absence. As the infrastructure available is not commensurate with the needs of a large number of teachers and the attendance of the children tends to be much lower than the enrolment figures, the teaching of children is attended to by two

or three teachers while others take it easy. Only schools having sufficient infrastructure and sufficient number of children who are regularly attending the school should be sanctioned more than three teachers.

A regular school inspection is no guarantee against teacher absenteeism. In 60 percent of the schools where teachers were absent, the schools were inspected in the last year.

Distance from the block headquarters also does not have any bearing on teacher attendance. More teachers were found to be absent in schools located within a distance of 10 kilo meters than those located more than 20 kilo meters away.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS

The study findings reflect both positive and negative trends with regard to different facets and manifestations of teacher attendance and participation in classroom activities and provide clear signals and pointers towards tackling the problem.

From the study findings drawn from both the quantitative as well as qualitative methods of enquiry, it may be concluded that the following factors have contributed to the level of teacher absenteeism.

5.1 Lack of proper building and amenities

Teachers from both the districts complained about the poor condition of school buildings and lack of amenities in the schools. These factors lead to lack of teacher motivation and pose constraints in smooth functioning of schools. The situation in the study districts of M.P is more adverse over one third of schools have thatched roofs.

The school infrastructure is particularly lacking in Balaghat district, where 15 per cent of schools have either no building of their own or are operating in rented / temporary premises. The study teams came across even schools operating in Dhamsala premises. One tenth of schools in M.P have just one room in the school building premises.

While this situation is appalling, equally glaring is the widespread practice of using one of the few rooms in the schools for office purposes. This has not only deprived the children of more space for learning activities, but also provides an opportunity for teachers to stay away from the classroom. It is suggested that such a practice be discontinued.

5.2 Involvement of teachers in non-academic responsibilities

Teachers in all the study districts are engaged in a variety of non-academic official activities, which keeps them away from regular teaching responsibilities. As they are qualified and constitute a wide network of government personnel, the state governments and the district collectors on their own initiative find it convenient to engage them in all and sundry government jobs. As much as 43 per cent found to be absent in the study were engaged in government jobs, unrelated to school activities. This is a major source of de-motivation for the teachers.

The major works in which the teachers are engaged by the district administration are as follows:

- ✓ Poverty line survey
- ✓ Literacy survey
- ✓ Voter list preparation for all types of elections

- ✓ Pulse polio campaign in December and January
- ✓ Industrial survey
- ✓ Election duties

However, the teachers' grievance that they are overworked cannot be farther from the truth. In school, the teachers hardly work for 5 to 5 1/2 hours a day. Furthermore, the schools remain closed for a few months in a year on account of different vacations. It is this rather slow burden and pace of work, coupled with the low priority attached to the primary education that encourages the governments to engage teachers in all types of jobs.

That the teachers' main responsibility is to teach must not be lost sight of and the tendency to engage them in all types of jobs must be discouraged. All the same, there is no reason why the teachers should not be made to work for eight hours, as is the case with most government functionaries. While the teaching hours may continue as at present, the additional time may be devoted to performing other official jobs.

5.3 Poor monitoring & lack of punitive action

The study findings show that a majority of schools (58 per cent) were inspected during the present year. Seven per cent of schools were never inspected, while 10 per cent were inspected more than two years ago.

While only 45 per cent of schools have been inspected in M.P in the present calendar year, over 70 per cent of schools in U.P have been inspected. This shows that the inspection mechanism is more active in the study districts of U.P than in M.P.

Officials in M.P contend that the poor frequency of inspections can be mainly ascribed to be the 'dual control' and lack of authority to initiate action against erring teachers. They said that even when their ADIS recommends action against the erring teachers after a due inspection, the Village Education Committee does not take note of the complaint or the Janapad Panchayat takes no serious action.

Examination of school records showed that the school inspection, when it is carried, is undertaken as a routine matter and no suggestions are made for improvement.

5.4 Low school attendance of children

Poor attendance of children results in greater teacher absenteeism. In some study villages, school was closed early, as the attendance of children was thin. If the attendance of teachers in the school is full, the teachers are under pressure to come to the school in time. If the class has a poor attendance of students, the class is merged with another class for the day and the teacher of that class either leaves the school or if stays back, indulges in other activities than teaching.

Lack of attention of teachers leads to lack of interest in education and poor attendance, which in turn results in greater absenteeism. This is a vicious cycle. Children interviewed in the study said that seldom the teachers stay in the classes for the entire period. Most of the children said that teachers do come to the school, but stay away from the class for most part of the day. The children said that the teacher after spending a few minutes with them they get busy official or personal work.

Lack of basic educational facilities like the black board, chart, maps, chalk etc. also affect the learning process and lead to disinterest of children. Lack of regular parent

teacher meetings also contributes to low attendance and involvement of children in school activities.

5.5 Lack of effective community involvement

Active participation of the public-namely, Panchayats, parent-teacher associations, teacher unions, Village Education Committees and educational functionaries at the local level is necessary to ensure a smooth functioning of the primary schools. In M.P, the village panchayats have been vested with the power to oversee the day to day functioning of schools, while the Jan panchayats have the authority to recruit teachers in primary schools.

In many M.P villages, the communities reported that the involvement of panchayats has led to the politicisation and increased influence of caste in school matters. Enquiries revealed that if a teacher of a particular caste is absent from the school; the villagers of the same caste are willingly forgiving and lenient and thus try to scuttle any action against the erring teacher. The members of that particular caste in the village education committee are also prone to taking lenient of the teacher's absence.

The communities said that seldom action is taken against the teachers. And if at all, some action is recommended, the motive is a questionable one and has its origins in village panchayat politics.

5.6 Poor teacher motivation

The lack of active participation in effective teaching learning process could be partly attributed to the lack of motivation of teachers.

Some of the major complaints of teachers are as follows: -

- ✓ Involvement in non-academic official jobs
- ✓ Inadequate number of teachers
- ✓ No proper sitting arrangements for teachers, less number of tables
- ✓ Children do not have decent sitting arrangements
- ✓ School buildings are too old, have few rooms and no repair has been done for long
- ✓ Some classrooms do not have even a black board

5.7 Lack of training

Training has a significant influence on the teachers' instructional ability, their motivational levels and thus has an impact on their classroom participation and effectiveness. An overwhelming majority of teachers (86 per cent) in the U.P districts have received pre-service training, while the corresponding proportion in M.P was just 35 per cent and in Bilaspur, it was even lower at 20 per cent. Two-thirds of teachers in primary schools have not had any pre-service training. The officials in M.P pointed out that in the new recruitment policy the training part has been undermined.

The recruitment policy in the state does not stipulate teacher training as a pre-requisite for appointment as a primary school teacher. This is contrary to the spirit of the National Education Policy and is at variance with the practice in the other states of the country.

As regards the in-service training, an overwhelming majority of teachers 80 per

cent) in M.P have undergone training. This proportion is very high in Sharanpur (89 per cent), while it is considerably lower (55 per cent) in Meerut district.

5.8 Teacher characteristics

The study findings show that a large majority of teachers in the study districts are posted not far from their place of residence. Yet, the teacher absenteeism-both complete and partial-tends to be more in case of teachers who come from outside the village and are dependent on public transport to reach the school. Curiously, the teachers think such delays are unavoidable and a reasonable ground for absenteeism. This has implications for placement policy. The maximum distance of the place of residence from school may be prescribed and teachers may be encouraged to use own transport rather than avail the public transport. Teachers may also be given soft loans to buy personal vehicles for overcoming this problem.

5.9 School characteristics

The study findings show that schools having poor infrastructure and more teachers posted are likely to have greater absenteeism. The former aspect has been dealt with earlier in this chapter.

The teacher-pupil ratio is not encouraging in the study districts as it falls short of the prescribed norm. What is actually important is the number of school attending school. In some districts, the school enrolment is very high due to the food ration given to the parents of children and even the attendance data is manipulated for the same reason. The high enrolment, particularly in the U.P districts, has led to posting of more teachers. As the real attendance of children is rather low and the school infrastructure does not permit holding a large number of classes simultaneously, the teachers take their responsibility in turns.

It is necessary to monitor the school attendance of children while deciding on the number of teacher posts to be sanctioned. Also, where the number of children is very high, it may be better to sanction a separate primary school rather than sanction more posts in the same school.

6.0 SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The key recommendations of the study are summarised here below:

- Complete ban or limited involvement of teachers in non academic works during holidays paying a honorarium for such participation;
- Placement of teachers nearer to the place of permanent residence;
- Incentives for purchase of a two wheeler to obviate dependence on public transport;
- Opening more schools in the same habitat than appoint more than three teachers in the same school; and
- Continued emphasis on enhancing school infrastructure and facilities.

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