

Decentralization of Education

Education system in India in the post-independence years was heavily influenced by the colonial legacy. The British had imposed on the existing Indian education system centralized control by the colonial administrator.¹ The system of centralized official control eroded teacher's autonomy by denying her any initiative in matters pertaining to curriculum, whereas earlier teachers mostly went by conventions, but they had the freedom to make choices. Norohna (2003) talks about the spontaneous community involvement in education in school systems in the nineteenth century Bihar and Bengal, before British influence extended to the interiors, instances of schools that were collaborative ventures between teachers and community.

The system of education expanded enormously since independence. It was, however, not able to shed colonial policies of prescriptions of textbooks and examinations, bureaucratization and centralized management (Kumar, 1992). Rather the tendencies were strengthened in a drive towards universalization of education. From the 1950s and 1960s, the government(s) effected a takeover of the educational establishments as well as of the cadre of teachers. Teachers were now recruited from across the state, instead locally. Teacher's post was made transferable. This marked the beginning of professionalization on the one hand and distrust of teachers on the other.

While the process of universalization was painfully slow in its progress (Table 5.1, the decadal literacy rates in India), almost unnoticed the education system became divided into two subsystems: the common and the exclusive. The first subsystem consists of children who depend on the state for school education, and second of those whose education is paid for by the parents. Private schools professed a 'quality' advantage and carried assurances for upward socio-economic mobility so that parents, not only the elite, overextended themselves to gain admission to these institutions.

The educational reforms in India have, thus, to be understood against the background of a centralized bureaucratically controlled and managed public

¹ See Sir Charles Wood's Dispatch (1854) and the decisions taken by the colonial administrator during the period cited in Kumar (1992).

education system that still excluded vast masses of children at the bottom (the out-of-school and the drop-out children), at the same time that it was faced with rising competition from the private schools that offered 'better quality', effective accountability and greater choices to parents. Both these factors called for the transformation of the educational system to be more dynamic and more responsive. National Policy on Education (1986 and 1992) had recommended decentralized management of education at all levels (district, block and village) and also the involvement of people in the decision-making process. Few would contest that the bureaucratic departmental approach had to give way to a decentralized and democratic vision.

This chapter begins with a review of the status of education in India in the recent years (see the first section of Chapter 1) which shows a clear compromise on quality for massive quantitative expansions. How has the policy of decentralization intersected with the overall agenda for educational expansion and quality improvement? Chapter 5 reviews the policies on decentralization of the education sector and the redistribution of various competencies across different tiers of government and community groups. It focuses on the centrally sponsored schemes (CSS) in education which presents an odd mismatch of centralization within decentralization. This Chapter also analyzes the experiences of Kerala and Madhya Pradesh, the two states that have made simultaneous moves towards decentralization and direct democracy formally but where decentralization has been scripted by different logics, compulsions and forces. The discussion shows how stronger devolution of funds, function and functionaries to the PRIs in Kerala allowed for autonomy and participation in planning and decision-making in education, whereas in Madhya Pradesh, decentralization has been used by the authorities to expand the system of schooling at low cost, and where democratic participation in decision-making, if at all, has been marginal. The findings from research studies on decentralization in the education sector in India presented in the last section confirm (i) democratic participation and autonomy in decision-making is still the exception rather than the norm as most of the local self-government institutions have remained on paper; (ii) the large countrywide CSS programmes despite their decentralized structures have not enabled 'users' sovereignty' in the true sense, though resources have flown to fill the gaps in infrastructure, teachers, quality improvement, etc. (iii) decentralization has not given autonomy and initiative to the teachers as the standard setting, examination and curriculum are still pretty much centralized; rather teachers' positions have further suffered through contractualization of appointments at low salaries and a large number of teachers, which cannot help the cause of quality improvement.

The status of schooling in India

Quantitative expansion

The literacy rates in Table 5.1 capture the overall spread of mass education in the country. Even after 50 years of independence, the literacy rates though increasing have remained far short of universal coverage. Comparison across caste, gender and region shows that the burden of illiteracy is borne disproportionately by certain social groups, gender (Table 5.2) and regions (Table 5.1). Gender gaps in literacy for all social groups exceed 16 per cent at the all-India level, with the overall literacy in the SC and ST population being behind the general castes by 7 per cent and 14 per cent, respectively. The low literacy is a reflection of the home environment of many now enrolled school children, who are at a huge disadvantage in a system that privileges a distinct type of cultural capital.

Table 5.1: Literacy rates for selected states, 1951–2011

	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001	2011
Bihar	13.49	21.95	23.17	32.32	37.49	47	61.8
Uttar Pradesh	12.02	20.87	23.99	32.65	40.71	57.27	67.68
Rajasthan	8.5	18.12	22.57	30.11	38.55	60.41	66.11
Andhra Pradesh	–	21.19	24.57	35.66	44.08	60.47	67.02
Orissa	15.8	21.66	26.18	33.62	49.09	63.08	72.87
Madhya Pradesh	13.16	21.14	27.27	38.63	44.67	63.74	69.32
Karnataka	–	29.08	36.83	46.21	56.04	66.64	75.36
West Bengal	24.61	34.46	38.86	48.65	57.7	68.64	76.26
Gujarat	21.82	31.47	36.95	44.92	61.29	69.14	78.03
Punjab	–	–	34.12	43.37	58.51	69.65	75.84
Haryana	–	–	25.71	37.13	55.85	67.91	75.55
Himachal Pradesh	–	–	–	–	63.86	76.48	82.8
Tamil Nadu	–	36.39	45.4	54.39	62.66	73.45	80.09
Maharashtra	27.91	30.08	45.77	52.24	64.87	76.88	94
Kerala	47.18	55.08	69.75	78.85	89.81	90.86	82.34
ALL INDIA	18.33	28.3	34.45	43.57	52.21	64.84	74.04

Source: Census of India (various years).

Table 5.2: Literacy rates for 2011

	Total	SC	ST
Total	73	66.1	59
Rural	67.8	62.8	56.9
Urban	84.1	76.2	76.8
Male	80.9	75.2	68.5
Female	64.6	56.5	49.4
Gender gap	16.3	18.7	19.1

Source: Census of India, 2011.

Since a few years, the primary enrolment rate has been high across all regions in India (Table 5.3). The gross enrolment rates at the upper primary level has also been rising though more modestly. There is a fair amount of gender parity in enrolment at the primary level, whereas the gender gaps in enrolment are large at the upper primary level in the educationally backward states such as Bihar and Rajasthan. In an environment where access to primary education has become the norm, the inequality is shifting from the primary to the upper primary and secondary levels.

The rising demand for schooling has been met through massive increases in the number of schools. At the all-India level, between 1999–2000 and 2004–05, the increase in enrolment in primary schools was 16 per cent whereas the increase in the number of primary schools was 20 per cent (Selected Educational Statistics, MHRD). The recent NSS round data confirms that more than 90 per cent of rural as well as urban households reported having a school with primary classes within 1 km. At the middle level classes, 61.6 per cent of rural households, compared to 82.5 per cent of urban households, had a school within a kilometre providing middle-level classes (NSSO, 2007–08).

Table 5.3: Gross enrolment rate 2007–08

States/union territories	Classes I–V (6–10 years)			Classes VI–VIII (11–13 years)		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
Andhra Pradesh	92.2	93.6	92.8	76.5	78.5	77.5
Arunachal Pradesh	136.3	130.8	133.6	86.0	83.0	84.5
Assam	79.9	83.2	81.5	64.3	67.1	65.7
Bihar	100.1	97.7	99.0	66.4	63.8	65.2
Chhattisgarh	115.9	112.4	114.1	90.8	86.4	88.6

Table 5.3 continued

Table 5.3 continued

Goa	117.7	114.1	115.9	115.8	109.3	112.7
Gujarat	110.1	110.8	110.4	80.7	75.2	78.2
Haryana	85.9	93.9	89.5	76.7	83.6	79.8
Himachal Pradesh	101.2	102.6	101.8	103.1	101.7	102.4
Jammu & Kashmir	88.1	91.2	89.6	79.5	77.8	78.7
Jharkhand	116.2	118.3	117.2	76.9	78.1	77.5
Karnataka	103.8	101.4	102.6	91.9	90.2	91.1
Kerala	87.4	87.2	87.3	97.8	95.2	96.5
Madhya Pradesh	121.6	127.1	124.3	93.3	97.8	95.5
Maharashtra	102.5	101.6	102.1	93.5	90.9	92.3
Manipur	130.9	135.8	133.3	82.9	87.3	85.0
Meghalaya	128.9	134.4	131.6	77.9	89.5	83.6
Mizoram	124.9	117.6	121.3	95.3	90.5	92.9
Nagaland	91.1	91.0	91.0	60.2	62.4	61.3
Odisha	107.6	105.8	106.7	75.2	73.3	74.3
Punjab	106.7	106.6	106.6	92.8	91.9	92.4
Rajasthan	104.6	103.8	104.2	80.7	73.2	77.2
Sikkim	132.0	132.0	132.0	90.3	106.7	98.4
Tamil Nadu	114.8	116.7	115.7	104.9	105.9	105.4
Tripura	115.3	115.9	115.6	102.2	102.5	102.4
Uttar Pradesh	109.1	112.9	110.9	77.2	71.2	74.4
Uttarakhand	93.5	95.7	94.5	80.8	84.9	82.7
West Bengal	113.7	116.9	115.3	81.9	92.3	87.0
A&N Islands	102.8	102.9	102.8	106.6	103.4	105.1
Chandigarh	104.4	108.6	106.3	108.0	106.2	107.2
D&N Haveli	108.1	106.7	107.4	100.7	95.6	98.3
Daman and Diu	99.4	95.3	97.5	92.1	90.8	91.5
Delhi	112.9	116.8	114.7	105.0	105.7	105.3
Lakshadweep	104.8	100.3	102.6	113.6	117.6	115.7
Puducherry	108.4	106.6	107.5	114.2	112.8	113.5

Source: Govt of India (2014), Statistics of School Education, MHRD, 2011–12.

The increased supply of schools was achieved in a variety of ways. Govinda (2007) notes that, ‘the steep reduction in the out-of-school children was due to

establishment of a large number of small schools, many of which are run by single teachers employed locally on a contract basis. In 2002-03 around 9.5 million children were enrolled in such schools, which included more than 275,000 children in short-term bridge courses with the hope of eventually mainstreaming them into regular schools. Most of these schools would not be able to take the students beyond second or third grade.' In Madhya Pradesh, the number of public schools increased by 37 per cent between 1994 and 1998 (81,627 to 1,11,541), and Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS) centres accounted for 63.7 per cent of the increase. EGS is what gave Madhya Pradesh quick success of universal physical access, much before several of the educationally advanced states.²

No less significant has been the contribution of small fee-charging private schools for the less-privileged (De, Norohna, Samson, 2002; Tooley, 2009). With the government system struggling with both access and retention issues, many felt that the new private schools could be allies in achieving universal elementary education. Many of these schools were unrecognized and, hence, not a part of the official database; they are of a questionable quality, in terms of the physical infrastructure, qualification of the teaching staff, terms of appointment of the teachers.

Table 5.4: Distribution of currently attending students by type of institution attended

	Rural			Urban			Rural and urban		
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total
Primary									
Government	77.6	74	75.6	37.5	33.2	35.1	69.2	65.4	67.1
Local Body	6.3	5.4	5.8	4.7	4.4	4.5	6	5.2	5.5
Private aided	3.4	4.3	3.9	16.7	15.6	16.1	6.2	6.7	6.5
Private unaided	12.4	15.8	14.3	40.2	45.3	43	18.2	22	20.3
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Middle									
Government	74.3	71.8	72.9	40.6	39.2	39.9	65.6	64	64.7
Local Body	5.9	5	5.4	4.9	3.9	4.3	5.7	4.7	5.2
Private aided	9.2	9.1	9.2	23.3	20.5	21.8	12.9	11.8	12.3
Private unaided	10.2	13.7	12.1	30.3	35.3	33	15.4	18.9	17.3
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: NSS 64th Round 2007-08, Report No. 532.

² Leclercq (2002) notes that on 20 August 1998, the MP Government declared that universal physical access to a public primary school had been reached (p. 8-9).

In fact the relaxations of restrictions on the operation of private schools is a vital part of the strategy to enlarge the access base, and without taking notice of the encouragement of private sector activity in elementary education, the public management nature of education reforms can be easily overlooked (Hillger, 2009). The recent NSS 64th Round data and ASER reports provide conclusive evidence on the increasing trends towards privatization as seen in the distribution of currently attending students in institutions by ownership (Table 5.4). In rural India, the proportion of children going to private school has increased from 18.7 to 30.8 per cent between 2006 and 2014 (ASER Centre, 2014). Among the households surveyed in the urban areas, 43 per cent of students at the primary level are attending unaided private schools in 2006–07. Surveys of urban wards in five major cities carried out in late 2014 show significant variations in private schooling, ranging from 83.2 per cent in Mysore to 24.1 per cent in Delhi (ASER Centre, 2014). Also, the intra-household biases of sending sons to private institutions whereas daughters to public schools are reflected in both the NSSO and the ASER Surveys. At all levels and across rural and urban areas, a higher proportion of girls as compared to boys study in state-funded institutions.

Quality of education

Even as the 1990s saw quantitative expansions in the school system across the country, the quality of schooling continued to be a major source of concern for most. Education for all Development Index (EDI) published in the UNESCO EFA Global Monitoring Report 2010 ranks India 105th, among the lowest in the world. EDI consists of four quantifiable indicators meant to capture access, quality and equality: adult literacy rate, net enrolment rate at the primary level, gender parity index and, lastly, the survival rate up to grade 5. The survival rate is meant as a proxy for the quality variable, and this has been the Achilles heel of our school system. A large number of children who enter the education system do not even complete the primary level. Only 66 per cent of the children enrolled in Grade 1 survive to Grade 5, that is, as much as 34 per cent of the children enrolled in Grade 1 drop out before reaching Grade 5.³

There are broadly two sets of factors that explain the high drop-out rates. The first relates to the cost of schooling – the cost of what parents perceive as ‘quality education’ and the opportunity cost of the child not contributing to the daily bread in the family in some way is high. This has to be seen in the context of a lack of adequate and decent employment at a fair wage for large segments of the workforce

³ http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/india_statistics.html

hovering around the bottom of the informal sector economy. Breman cites that 77 per cent of the population in 2004–05 had to make do with, on average, no more than ₹20 per day per capita.⁴ Compare this to the annual average out-of-pocket expenditure on public education at ₹473 for the primary level and ₹1,074 for the middle level.⁵ Thus, even when parents are aware of the socio-economic mobility that education provides the immediate needs might be so overwhelming that long-term considerations are drowned.

The second set of factors relate directly to the school. The NSS (2007–08) finds that about 30 per cent of the drop outs were due to ‘child not interested in studies’ and ‘unable to cope and failure in studies’. Both are serious indictments about the school system. The first implies that the schools fail to interest students and are unattractive for them (in fact, many who continue in school would also join the chorus). And the second implies that the school system, despite its rhetoric of universalization, pushes out (rather than students dropping-out) a number of the students, by failing to support their individual needs, through discrimination of a variety of types (caste-based, lingual, cultural, etc.).

The Right to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act was passed by the Parliament in 2009. Subsequently, rules and guidelines pertaining to the Act were drawn up by all states. At a very gross level, there are two things that would need to be considered before a place can be called a functional school and can be a site of teaching–learning: a minimum amount of infrastructure (classrooms, toilets, playgrounds, library, teaching–learning material) and a reasonable teacher/pupil and classroom/pupil ratio. While the RTE norm is one teacher for every 30 students in primary and 35 in upper primary schools, only half of all schools in the country would achieve that benchmark. In terms of infrastructure, one-third of all schools lack usable toilets, 25 per cent lack drinking water and 20 per cent do not have libraries. There is still the need to fill substantial gaps in education infrastructure and human resources at the elementary level with some states and districts needing more attention than others.

To man the massive expansion in the school system, a large number of teachers have been recruited. Most of the educationally backward states were reluctant to appoint regular teachers for fear of additional recurring expenditure. Since these were the states that observed the maximum rise in student enrolments, para-teachers were appointed on a large scale. Not only are these teachers less qualified academically, they have not received professional training and therefore less prepared to handle students who require greater maturity and inputs of formal schools. While

⁴ <http://beta.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/article450111.ece?homepage=true>

⁵ See NSS (2007–08) statement 4.18.

some states like Tamil Nadu and Kerala have opposed the policy of para-teachers, certain others have made extensive use of the policy with a preponderant share of their teachers now being para-teachers: Jharkhand (50 per cent), Uttar Pradesh (37 per cent), Orissa (29 per cent) and Andhra Pradesh (23 per cent).⁶ We shall return to the policies on recruitment of the para-teachers in the next section.

'Different school types, different teacher types' have been widely criticized (Drèze and Sen, 2002; Leclercq, 2003; and Kumar, Priyam and Saxena, 2001, to name only a few) as part of the trend of providing the lowest quality to those who should get the best, because only the best can counter the historical accumulation of disadvantage that these groups were born into. Naik (1975) had made the following assessment on the progress of the Indian educational system in the first 25 years after independence: 'the pursuit of quality has often linked itself with privilege and become inimical to that of quantity; the pursuit of quantity in its turn has often led to deterioration of standards and pursuit of equality has often found to be inimical to that of quality, and has been frequently hampered by the very inequalities in society which it was intended to remove. We have tried to reconcile the inevitable conflict with little result....' The observation seems as pertinent to today's context as in the past.

Organization of education: Towards decentralized public management

In the post-independence years, education was the exclusive responsibility of the States. The Constitutional Amendment of 1976, which included education in the Concurrent List, required a new sharing of responsibility between the Union Government and the states. While the role and responsibility of the states in education remained largely unchanged, the Central Government accepted a larger responsibility of 'reinforcing the national and integrated character of education, maintaining quality and standards including those of the teaching profession at all levels, and the study and monitoring of the educational requirements of the country'.⁷ In case of a conflict, this provision gave the Central government supremacy in all matters concerning education.⁸

With the renewed commitment to 'Education for all' under the international banner of the Jomtien conference in 1990, international development agencies became active partners in advising educational policy and funding educational programmes both at the national and sub-national levels. As it was also the time of nationwide economic reforms and restructuring aimed to curtail fiscal deficit and

⁶ DISE Flash Statistics, 2008–09.

⁷ http://india.gov.in/sectors/education/education_overview.php

⁸ Majumdar, 1999: 232 cited in Mukundan and Bray, 2006.

public expenditure, education policy had to accommodate the two contrary pressures. Education for all (EFA) at the elementary level meant a larger commitment of public expenditure to reach out to hitherto excluded groups and habitations and also stem the tide of drop outs from schooling. On the other hand, the emphasis of public sector reforms was on downsizing with a smaller role for the public sector.

There were three responses to these conflicting pressures, which could address the immediate imperatives without tinkering too much with the overall educational structure. Firstly, external funding was accepted for running educational programmes to supplement public sector expenditure. District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) was the first major programme that was externally funded.⁹ Secondly, there was an attempt to enlist help from the community and community groups in management of schools, implementation of programmes, monitoring, and bridging the gaps in hard and soft infrastructure, which would augment the resource base for schooling. Though National Policy on Education (1986, 1992) also spoke about it, the zeal with which community participation was evoked was new. And finally in a related development, decentralization of governance structures was pursued in order to improve service delivery and thereby the efficiency of public expenditure. Implicit was the assumption that decentralized structures automatically imply better service delivery.

DPEP, launched in 1993, a centrally sponsored scheme in education was the first major programme to embody the new organizational idea of 'decentralized planning, administration and community involvement'. Targeted at the educationally backward districts, the programme focused at filling 'the gaps' through a focus on special groups and the enhancement of pedagogic quality.

Researchers have pointed at the increased importance of centrally sponsored schemes in social sector spending in general in the recent years (see Mukherjee, 2009; Chakraborty, Mukherjee and Amar Nath, 2010). Rather than providing untied grants, which could be allocated across different sectors as per the priorities of the state government, the centrally sponsored schemes fixed the mandate at

⁹ Prior to 1990, there were a few large-scale foreign funded projects in education. UNICEF and the ILO had funded some non-formal education centres, the Andhra Pradesh Primary Education Programme (APPEP) which was funded by the DFID, UK, the Siksha Karmi with Dutch funding and Lok Jumbish with funding from SIDA, were the only programmes operational. All of these were 'aid' programmes. Since 1990, the Government of India began accepting funding for elementary education in the form of loans, with the World Bank being the largest creditor. The European Union is also a large donor. The funding by the World Bank seems to be linked to 'providing a safety net' within the overall policy of structural adjustment (Saragapani and Vasavi, 2003).

the central level and created parallel agencies for fund flow and implementation ostensibly to check the lack of accountability in implementation (see Box 5.1).

Box 5.1: Discretionary central transfers through centrally sponsored schemes

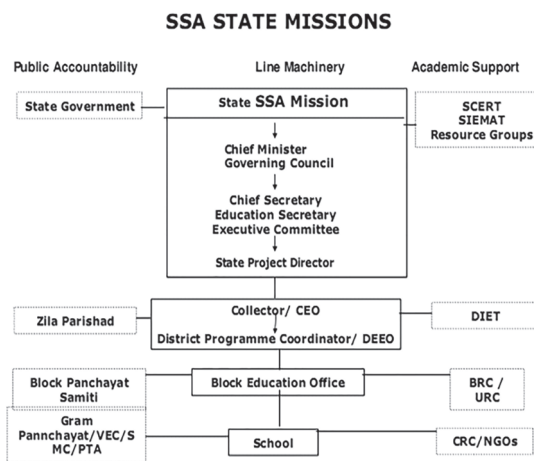
Isaac and Chakraborty (2008) estimated that in 2007–08, the aggregate resource flow from the centre to the states constituted more than 7.26 per cent of GDP and resources that are going directly to districts and other implementing agencies amounted to 1.22 per cent of GDP. The latter is higher than any other components of grant transfers and constituted 34.8 per cent of tax devolution to the states in the year 2007–08. Around 93 per cent of this flow is through three central ministries, viz. Ministry of Rural Development (57%), Ministry of Human Resource Development (22%) and Ministry of health and Family Welfare (13%). Out of this, transfers on account of Sarva Sikshya Abiyan constituted 20 per cent of the total. Many observers are of the opinion that these direct transfers of the above type have been undermining the role of systems and institutions in the transfer system (Rao, 2007). “We have a situation where the grant system has become predominantly purpose-specific, with a cobweb of conditionalities specified by various central ministries. Furthermore, quite a considerable proportion of grants which used to be given to the states now directly go to autonomous agencies. This raises questions about the capacity to deliver public services by these autonomous agencies, mechanisms to augment the capacity and as the funds do not pass through states’ consolidated funds, of accountability” (Chakraborty, Mukherjee and Amarnath, 2010).

The creation of independent societies through which DPEP would function was justified as necessary in order to make the programme more efficient and promote local innovation and initiative (Sarangapani and Vasavi, 2003). Although the implementation society had as its board members officials from the department of education in their ex-officio capacity, it operated outside the normal bureaucratic and administrative norms. It represented a parallel structure to the already existing state organized departmental set up. In all the states, the DPEP society worked closely with the MHRD’s DPEP desk and Ed CIL (New Delhi) on issues regarding funding and in terms of technical inputs including the choice of consultants to conceiving and implementing the programme. At the ground level, the DPEP was implemented through a network of newly created Block Resource Centres (BRCs) and Cluster Resource Centres (CRCs). The CRC and BRC are networked via the District Project Office with the DPEP’s state project office and were expected to implement programmes devised at the state project office such as for teacher training or material development.

Prior to 1987, the only institution for academic support and teacher training in each state was the State Council of Education Research and Training (SCERT). After 1992, there was an attempt at provision of academic and technical support by the creation of the District Institutes for Education and Training (DIET) at the district level. DIETs are responsible for providing pre-service teacher training, acting as the main technical support structure for the incumbent teachers, and action research. At the sub-district level, DIETs are connected to the BRCs and CRCs at the level of 15–20 schools. The key functions that these centres perform include teacher training, supportive visits to schools and monthly cluster meetings of teachers to discuss issues related to classroom practices. These centres provide a platform for teachers to meet, which otherwise is not possible, leaving teachers isolated from their peers.

Since 2002–03, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) has replaced DPEP as the major centrally sponsored scheme on education, covering the entire country. SSA is designed to fill the gaps in infrastructure and teachers, provide alternative learning institutions for out-of-school children, so as to also enhance teacher quality and community participation. The financial assistance under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan has moved from 85:15 sharing arrangement during the Ninth Plan to 65:35 following the enactment of the RTE with an implementation structure similar to DPEP through state implementation societies and district project offices. Therefore, the mechanism of decentralized management in elementary education has been largely unchanged for the last two decades (Figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1: Organization structure of SSA



Source: Management structure for programme implementation and integration with current efforts, Chapter 3 in <http://ssa.nic.in/> SSA Framework.

The types of reorganization of educational administration noted above are a form of administrative decentralization. Manor (2003) defines **administrative decentralization** (or deconcentration) as the transfer of administrative powers, and sometimes administrative personnel, from higher to lower levels in political systems. In contrast, **democratic decentralization** (or devolution) is the transfer of funds and powers (including decision-making powers, and sometimes revenue-raising powers) from higher levels in political systems to elected bodies at lower levels. Manor (2003) further stresses that if decentralization is to yield most of the benefits that are commonly associated with it, it must have significant democratic content.¹⁰ If administrative decentralization occurs on its own, it tends to strengthen the ability of those high up in the political system to exercise top-down dominance and control. It tends in practice to promote centralization, even though it is described as a form of decentralization.

The overarching framework for democratic decentralization in India is contained in the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment and the corresponding state legislations. All the educational programmes starting in the 1990s, beginning with the major centrally sponsored schemes have insisted on the devolution of competencies to district, block and village level elected bodies, and the creation or activation of specific educational committees comprising of parents and teachers.

Educational governance at the local level in all states has been accordingly envisaged as a joint exercise of the Village Education Committees (VECs) and school-based committees such as the School Management Committee (SMC) and/or the Parent/Mother-Teacher Associations (PTAs/MTAs). VECs are formed at the village level. For instance, in Uttar Pradesh, they consist of the elected head of village panchayat, the head teacher of the government school and three parents of students enrolled in government schools in the village. Banerjee et al. (2007) along with others elaborate the expectations from the VECs. The VECs are seen as the mechanism through which public funds for education services will flow to the village, through which planning, implementation and monitoring will be coordinated. Through habitation-level planning and community participation, it is envisaged that the VEC will take decisions based on local needs and, therefore, will be able to effectively use the resources allocated for primary education at the local level. In SSA as also DPEP, the VECs have been given a prominent role in improving school functioning and school governance through community participation and decentralized decision-making.

PTAs/MTAs are mainly to be concerned with matters such as monitoring student attendance and achievement. More importantly, they were also expected

¹⁰ 'Local Governance' by James Manor (2003) Available at <http://www.gsdr.org/docs/open/PO40.pdf> (accessed on 7 July 2010).

to control teachers' presence in the classroom and teaching activity, viz. exercise 'policing' functions, while on the other hand allowing teachers to gather parental support in running the school (not exclusively, but predominantly for the purpose of additional resource mobilization).

Table 5.5: Para-teachers' recruitment and service conditions

State	Honorarium per month	Appointing agency	Duration of contract
Andhra Pradesh	₹1,000	School committee	10 months in a year
Gujarat	₹2,500	District education committee	2 years; to be absorbed after 3 years if vacancy exists; to be absorbed after 5 years irrespective of vacancy; provided there is no adverse performance
Himachal Pradesh	₹2,500	District primary education officer	1 year; can be extended after evaluation of performance and approval by the director of primary education
Madhya Pradesh	grade I (secondary) ₹4,500; grade II (upper primary) ₹3,500; and grade III (primary) ₹2,500	Block panchayat for primary; District panchayat for others	1 year; renewable up to 3 years if there are no adverse performance reports; to be made permanent after 3 years
Maharashtra	₹3,000 (proportionate) honorarium to be paid on the basis of working days other than school holidays	Chief executive officer of the zilla parishad	June–April (10 months) every year renewable for 3 years based on performance
Rajasthan	₹1,800 including ₹500 for night school which is mandatory	Shiksha Karmi (Project) Board	Appointment reviewed after every year and made permanent after 8 years
Uttar Pradesh	₹2,250	VEC of the gram panchayat	Annual contract for 10 months from 1 July to 31 May

Source: Govinda and Josephine (2004).

Note: RTE mandates phasing out of contractual teachers and their absorption into regular teaching cadre.

Teacher recruitment has been another area where some states have involved the local governments. The para-teachers, in most places are being appointed by the district/block panchayats or school committees, as part of educational reforms of school governance so as to increase the accountability of teachers (Table 5.5). However, the real rationale of this route for recruitment has been as the National Committee of State Education Ministers (1999) observes candidly, 'to avoid possibilities of litigation for pay scale at a future date. The appointment of para teachers on a lump sum emolument is sometimes agitated as an infringement of the principle of 'equal pay for equal work' and there are court matters in this regard in many states' (cited in Govinda and Josephine, 2004).

A few remarks about the nature of organizational reforms and decentralization in school education are in order here.

- (i) The creation of the strong PRIs on the one hand and the parallel administrative machinery for the management of the centrally sponsored schemes were justified as an effort to remove the influence of the existing political and administrative institutions that were perceived to be corrupt and inefficient. However, the creation of parallel administrative structures has been critiqued from several quarters. It has been critiqued by the panchayat purists, who would ideally like a greater devolution of funds to flow directly through the local governments rather than through bureaucratic structures.¹¹ It has also been critiqued by people who see this as a missed opportunity to reform the education bureaucracy. Separating the project activity from the department cannot improve the system per se (Sarangapani and Vasavi, 2003).
- (ii) Hillger (2009) points out that the patterns of decentralized management in the social sector in India have reflected the development of the 'New Public Management' in Western countries, importantly the UK and the US. It has included the separation of operative (delivery) from strategic (policymaking) units of service provision. While the traditional branches of governance in the service sector, line departments and bureaucracy, functioned as strategic units, where most of the decision-making as well as sanctioning powers were retained, operation was 'outsourced' to different agents, at different levels. In line with the concept of corporate governance, educational management was envisioned to include different kinds of institutions with clearly delineated areas of competencies. In the manner of Pritchett and Pande (2006), Table 5.6 shows the distribution of competencies across different tiers of governments, bureaucracy and community organizations.

¹¹ One of the main criticisms of KSSP, Kerala of the DPEP programme related to the involvement of bureaucracy rather than transfers made directly to the Panchayats.

Table 5.6: Distribution of competencies

Teacher recruitment	Wide variation. Many states have devolved the responsibility to District/Block Panchayats, PTAs. Traditionally teachers were employees of the State Education Department.
Academic support and training	DIETs at the district level with BRCs and CRCs at the lower levels.
Provision/upgradation/maintenance of school infrastructure	Largely, funded by the CSS, and implemented through the parallel structure with State Implementation society at the top.
Monitoring/planning	School Monitoring Committees, PTAs, VECs
Overall decision-making	Central and State Education Bureaucracy
Curriculum	NCERT at the national level with participation from teachers, NGOs, academics and SCERTs at the state levels.

Source: Authors' Collation.

Educational reforms at the state level: Two contrasting models

Whereas the big stories of the past two decades have been the government flagship programmes, the DPEP and the SSA, educational reforms at the state level have responded to the new era of decentralized administration and management in varied ways. We shall analyze the developments in the two states of Madhya Pradesh and Kerala focusing on the challenges of their local educational systems and their reform efforts.

Despite its enviable record in terms of universalization, Kerala's education system at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of 1990s was faced with three challenges (Tharakan, 2003). First, the much acclaimed educational progress in Kerala did not help the marginalized communities as much as the others. Their comparative educational backwardness had persisted. Second, in the mid of quantitative expansion, which resulted in mass literacy and basic education, the quality of education seemed to have suffered. Third, infrastructural facilities required for normal functioning of schools was lacking widely (Tharakan, 2003).

One way of solving these problems, which people felt, was community and local participation, as the history of education in Kerala had always benefited from people's initiative and participation. Hence, even before the 73rd or the 74th Amendments and the new Panchayati Raj Act came into force in Kerala, there were some significant attempts at decentralization related to education. For instance, in the four village-level initiatives undertaken by Kerala Sasthra Sahithya

Parishad (KSSP) in Dharmadam, Sivapuram, Madikai and Kalliaserry, the notion of school complexes was introduced which would share facilities with neighbouring schools. The framework for sharing facilities was provided under the elected panchayat committees in association with school authorities, representatives of the public and mother-teacher association (MTA). MTA was a new innovation. What was significant about these experiments, Tharakan (2003) notes, is that the village panchayats proved capable of bearing the organizational and academic responsibilities of the school complexes. Under the district councils, which were in power for a short while (1991–92), some districts ‘integrated local efforts into district-wide programmes’.

Vigyanotsavam is another instance of KSSP being effectively able to mobilize community participation to affect the quality of education, in this case examination. The committees, at the district and the panchayat level, had teachers, parents, social workers and elected panchayat members as members, and these members helped in creating a changed atmosphere in the grass roots besides helping conduct the examination.

After the introduction of the new Panchayati Raj Act of 1994 and the Kerala Municipality Act of 1994, institutionalization of decentralized management and local participation started on a wider scale. During 1997–98, the total resources devolved to the local self-government institutions worked out to be ₹1,025 crores which was one-third of the plan outlay of the state to be spent by local self-government institutions on projects of their choice. About 75–85 per cent of the devolution was in terms of grant-in-aid and the rest in the form of schemes sponsored by the state government so as to give maximum autonomy to the local bodies in drawing up the development programmes (Table 5.7). Necessity then compelled the government to carry out essential complementary reforms to create the conditions for successful financial devolution (Isaac, 2000).

Table 5.7: Distribution (in per cent) and growth rate of plan grants to local bodies

Year	State plan outlay (₹crore)	Plan grant-in-aid to local governments (₹crore)	Plan grants to state outlay (%)
1997–98	2,855.00	749.00	26.23
1998–99	3,100.00	950.00	30.65
1999–2000	3,250.00	1,020.00	31.38
2000–01	3,535.00	1,045.00	29.56
2001–02	3,015.00	850.00	28.19

Table 5.7 continued

Table 5.7 continued

2002–03	4,026.00	1,342.00	33.33
2003–04	4,430.25	1,317.00	29.73
2004–05	4,800.00	1,350.00	28.13
2005–06	5,369.81	1,375.00	25.61
2006–07	6,680.62	1,400.00	20.96
2007–08	6,950.00	1,540.00	22.16
2008–09	7,700.40	1,694.00	22.00

Source: Government of Kerala (2008), *Economic Review*.

The real fillip to decentralization was provided by the People's Planning Campaign (1997–2000) that allotted a central role to planning by local self-government institutions. A comprehensive area plan was to be prepared by each local body before they could claim the grant-in-aid. In no other state in India are the local bodies, particularly at the grass-roots level, entrusted with the task of preparing such comprehensive area plans. In order to ensure transparency and participation without compromising on the technical requirements of planning, a sequence of phases each with its distinct objectives, central activities and training programme was drawn up. The campaign itself developed into a large informal education programme with around 15,000 elected representatives, 25,000 officials and 75,000 volunteers being given training. One abiding factor in all the stages has been the presence of KSSP and the government itself.

Using three data sources, reports generated during the campaign – the 1998 reports of successful experiments, the 1999 reports of neighbourhood groups and the 1999 reports of beneficiary groups. Tharakan (2003) gives an account of the type of improvements in educational conditions that were possible under the PPC. 'Building a school for tribal children with active cooperation of the community concerned, or extending both academic and physical facilities for children of the poorest section in Thiruvananthapuram are both remarkable achievements', he notes. Notably, none of the examples he cites include the policing function which is all that is commonly delegated to the local bodies and the community. Certainly not every case was successful, and there were cases of lack of local support and more importantly non-cooperation of officials. There were areas where the desire for educational change and community participation was nil. However, the PPC clearly demonstrated that an alternative way to educational reform with participation of the people was available.

Efforts in the last 10 years have been to institutionalize these experiments and programmes and to build on the lessons of PPC. PRI Acts have been amended during the years 1995, 1999 and 2000 to remove the restriction and control of

the state government on the local bodies. A predominant role has been given to the gram sabhas through which common people have a direct participation in the development administration of the local bodies. Functionaries have been devolved to the local bodies. For instance, in the proposed amendment to Kerala Education Act it has been recommended a Panchayat Educational Officer with the same qualifications as the Principal of a higher secondary school, should be appointed at the level of the village panchayat (KEAR Revision Committee Report, February 2008). The committee has also proposed the extension of the governance of LSGIs to private schools in the area, and a system of independent scrutiny on the recruitment and qualification of the teachers to private aided schools, which are in substantial numbers in Kerala.

In contrast to the Kerala experience, where ordinary people have been a part of planning, mobilization and decision-making and have been supported by the government by building capacities at the local level, devolving funds and functionaries, decentralization in Madhya Pradesh has largely been scripted from above. It has followed a top-down approach to changing the legal provisions and transferring responsibilities to locally elected bodies, to shift 'functions and responsibilities rather than power and authority' (Govinda, 2003).

Madhya Pradesh has been a lagging state in terms of economic and social development, with overall literacy levels of 44.7 per cent in 1991, large out-of-school populations, huge gaps in literacy and primary school participation across gender and social groups. Also, the political inertia and the lack of mass mobilization of the non-elite population are features that continue to characterize the political landscape of Madhya Pradesh, and it is important to keep this in mind when thinking about decentralizing efforts, especially its more normative aim of 'deepening democracy' and structures of people's participation in governance (Hillger, 2009).

In the post 73rd Amendment period, the Madhya Pradesh Government attempted vigorous decentralization of school education to the PRIs, including transferring the physical assets such as the school buildings to them. One of the flagship initiatives of the Madhya Pradesh Government, the Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS), concerns harnessing demand for children's education by allowing panchayats to open a centre. The EGS centres are granted if a requisite number of parents make such a demand, provision of suitable space by the community to conduct classes and commitment to ensure that a minimum number of children regularly attend the classes. Once a village provides the space for the centre and identifies a teacher, the government guarantees to create and fund a school within 90 days of the application within the village panchayat area.

The contradictions in the EGS experiment surfaced in trying to reconcile this 'model of direct democracy and participation in governance', with the objective

of equity and quality in education. While EGS has been hailed by some as a model of direct democracy (Vyasulu and Vyasulu, 1999; Johnson, 2003), others have opposed the EGS for creating a parallel, low-profile education stream for the poor and disadvantaged, thus cementing the unequal access to quality elementary education for different sections of society (Kumar et al., 2001; Sadgopal, 2003; Tilak, 1999). The fact that the poorest citizens are required to materially contribute to their children's access to education, while the state bears the entire costs of establishing schools in larger villages and urban areas which potentially catered to better off citizens has been perceived by many as an anomaly (Govinda, 2003).

EGS centres are monitored by school management committee, like the Village Education Committee (VEC) is responsible for formal schools. Since the involvement of locally elected bodies in the administration of DPEP schools was a policy condition of the programme, it was mandatory for panchayats at all three levels to establish standing education committees. With the amendments to the MP Panchayati Raj Act in 2001, essentially directed to empower the gram sabha by moving power from the panchayats, the VEC has become a standing committee of the gram sabha. However, the nature of specific responsibilities of the VECs vis-à-vis the official machinery has been a recurring question, rendering the VEC process mostly non-functional, mostly something that exists on paper (Raina, 2003). Recent government orders reveal an increased reliance on the stakeholder committees such as the Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) instead of the VEC representing the community. Probably, the move towards empowering PTAs reflects the threat of capture as a result of the weak accountability mechanism at the local level. It is argued that at the village level, elected representatives on VECs are not necessarily direct stakeholders in schools, because their own children may be enrolled in private schools or larger middle schools outside the gram panchayat area and this creates an incentive problem. So, even before local self-government institutions could understand their responsibilities, the authorities lost faith in these institutions.

As per the present rules, the PTAs are to monitor enrolment, attendance and learning achievements of students, monitor teacher's attendance and monitor the input supervision required by the centrally sponsored schemes such as the SSA, the mid-day meal scheme and the state schemes. Given this impressive list, it could very well be asked as to whether there is any meaningful participation in it or is it only a deconcentration of administrative duties at a low cost?

Sen et al. (2007) note that, 'one of the pillars of education decentralization in Madhya Pradesh has been to declare the regular government teachers as a "dying" cadre, with no fresh recruitment allowed into it.' From 1996, Shiksha Karmis have

been recruited by the Block Panchayat.¹² They are different from regular teachers in terms of relaxation of the minimum qualifications and do not require to have gone through any pre-service training. It is calculated that Madhya Pradesh has been able to save an amount of ₹455 crores on teachers' salary alone in a single year. Citing these, Sen et al. (2007) propose that decentralization would be one 'way of achieving allocative efficiency in the poorer states' (*Ibid*).

The formation of an EGS centre and the scheme of recruitment of Shiksha Karmis done locally are seen as major initiatives in decentralizing education and seeking community participation in its implementation. It is also a way of reducing costs. But whether they strengthen or weaken the already diluted quality of the school education is the question that is relevant. Increasing access without improving quality would lead to higher wastage because of non-achievement or worse drop out.

Looking at the two experiences, we see that the content of decentralization in the two states is completely different. In Kerala, decentralization has involved devolution of funds, functions and functionaries in an equal rhythm (refer to Table 5.1). People's planning has promoted planning from below. Political decentralization and fiscal decentralization have been as much, if not more, important as the administrative decentralization. Kerala, of course, had the right pre-conditions. Historically, the development process in Kerala has been more of public policy-led rather than growth-led. Judicious mix of public policy stance and public action remains the basic path followed by Kerala in achieving success in resolving the basic human development issues (Chakraborty et al., 2010). Thus, by the end of the 1980s, Kerala had an enviable record of literacy and educational attainment, traditions of political participation and voter awareness, fairness and regularity of elections, transparency in local decision-making processes, all preconditions to successful decentralization (see Box 5.1). Bardhan (2002) makes an important point that in policy debates, when we consider the costs and benefits of redistributive policies like land reforms, public health campaigns or literacy movements, we often ignore their substantial positive spillover effects in terms of enlarging the stake of large numbers of the poor in the system and strengthening the institutions of local democracy. Comparing across the various states in India, it is no surprise that local democracy and institutions of decentralization are more effective in the states like Kerala and West Bengal where land reforms and mass movements for raising political awareness have been more active.

¹² Shiksha Karmis can become regular Panchayat employees on satisfactory performance. From 2001, a new cadre of teachers called Samvida Shala Shikshak was started. The former EGS gurujis were transferred to this cadre which also includes all new teacher appointments. These posts are contractual, school specific and are not eligible for conversion into regular Panchayat posts, unlike the Shiksha Karmis.

The state of Madhya Pradesh had a historical disadvantage in that sense. The political leadership did not envisage decentralization of the Kerala type, instead it chose to share responsibilities of governance through a variety of legislations. PRIs, PTAs and SMCs were involved to manage and monitor, with little real role in decision-making, with hardly any funds at their disposal. Allocative efficiency has probably been achieved, but at the cost of quality.

Research evidence on decentralization and education in India

Most studies on decentralization in India have found large gaps between *de jure* decentralization efforts and the *de facto* decentralization practices.

The following observations on democratic participation were made in a number of research studies:

- (i) Elected panchayat members as well as parents of children enrolled in local schools lack information about the existence and functions of panchayat education committees, school management committees and Parent/Mother-Teacher Associations (PROBE team, 1999; Banerjee et al., 2006 and Chaurasia, 2000).
- (ii) Meetings of both education and school committees are held irregularly, and participation in them is erratic (Kantha and Narain, 2003; Leclercq, 2002).
- (iii) Women and members of marginalized groups are underrepresented in committees and cannot participate beyond physical presence due to social conventions and economic dependencies (Srivastava, 2005; Leclercq, 2002; Behar and Kumar, 2002; Ramachandran, 2001; Chaurasia, 2000).
- (iv) Village Education Committees (VECs) have been effective only in some villages where landed, and relatively well-off and powerful families have been able to engage with the teachers and the education bureaucracy (Sarangapani and Vasavi, 2003).
- (v) 'Many people expressed that they felt inadequate to play any significant role in the management of the school except with regard to the construction of the school building or finding temporary space for the schools.' The involvement of the community is marginal (Govinda, 2003).

Doris Hillger's (2009) comprehensive field study in Sehore district of Madhya Pradesh reveals that decentralization in elementary education is strongly biased towards devolution of implementation against a lack of financial and planning autonomy in the state. This systemic constraint is complemented by a lack of participation in local educational governance on part of parents due to a widespread

lack of parental capabilities rooted in low socio-economic and educational status, and a lack of congruence between the desired outcomes of parent involvement in schools on part of parents and teachers.

The lack of planning and financial autonomy has also been strongly argued in the case of major centrally sponsored schemes (CSS) such as the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and District Primary Education Programme (DPEP). Mukherjee (2009) shows that the centralized norms of SSA lead to a system of grants that are tied to specific items, whereas the requirement on the ground is better served by giving untied grants. In a survey of 100 schools in Nalanda district in Bihar, the author finds that there is a substantial gap between the felt need of the school as expressed by the school functionaries, the principal and the teachers, and the norm-based allocations that the SSA allows. Most schools in the sample wanted furniture, girls toilet, teachers and computers, whereas the tied nature of the transfers meant that the schools had no choice but to spend in ways that were specified (uniformly) from above, thus undermining user sovereignty.

A similar point has been made in the context of Kerala by Chakraborty et al. (2010). The challenges facing the educational sector in Kerala relate more to quality issues and issues of exclusion rather than universal access and participation. But given the tied up nature of funds transferred on account of the SSA, it remains largely under-utilized in Kerala (*Ibid*).

SSA, despite its decentralized structure, has faced the problem of tardiness of fund flow. A nation-wide public expenditure tracking survey by ASER–NIPFP–Accountability Initiative in 2009 found that two-thirds of all schools surveyed reported receiving grants in 2008–09. But grants flow slowly through the system and do not arrive on time (by October 2009, at least 40 per cent of schools had not received grants for the year). Even when money reaches schools, they do not always get their full entitlement. Money gets spent but in the last quarter of the financial year and not always effectively. The study also points to information bottlenecks. Implementation problems have remained despite administrative decentralization.

Also, despite the public management nature of reforms, there are ambiguities/overlaps in responsibilities that have persisted. Centrally sponsored schemes have a tendency to prescribe formation of programmatic committees. These committees are: (i) outside the permanent institutional structures and processes and (ii) their relationship with permanent structures is not always clear. For instance, the current governance structure in school education in Madhya Pradesh is composed of five branches: the administrative (Department of Education) and the regulatory (Collectorate) branch, the financial (represented by project coordinators) and the academic (represented by academic coordinators) branch, and the democratic branch embodied in the PRIs. Before 1994, schools were inspected rather erratically by education office or development office staff and were otherwise left

on their own. For the installation of cluster level jan shiksha kendra and village level institutions, VECs brought schools under much closer purview of agencies authorized to directive action. Any of the five agencies involved in educational governance at each level has the right to inspect schools, and while all of them do so, Hillger (2009) notes that there appears to be little coordination between them in terms of ensuring that schools in the block/district are inspected in roughly similar frequency.

Planning is the other crucial area that most states and programmes have not paid adequate attention to. Sarangapani and Vasavi (2003) have reviewed the annual work plans of Kolar and Raichur, two districts under DPEP in Karnataka. There are wide variations in ecological, economic and socio-cultural aspects in the districts of the state which are reflected in the wide variations in the literacy levels and conditions of schools in the districts. However, these do not find any reflection in the plans, which suggests that they have been overlooked. Instead, modules produced at the state project director (SPD) office are simply applied on an arithmetic proportional basis, depending only upon the numbers of schools and teachers to be covered. There is no district level deliberation and process to develop district-specific plans.¹³

This is not to suggest that micro-planning in education, though extremely important, is easy or can be done without expertise. Mukundan and Bray (2004) review the experience of people's campaign and the associated projects that were taken up for Kannur district in Kerala. In analyzing the projects and their implementation, the authors find that among the lists of projects that the gram sabha took up, the majority would have to do with capital works and familiar schemes such as noon-day feeding. The 'softer' qualitative issues of education proved much more difficult to address as gram sabhas lacked technical expertise. A similar finding emerges from Sharma's (2007) field survey (conducted in 2001) of 10 village panchayats of district Palakkad in Kerala in 2001. The projects undertaken by the panchayats on education are rather simple, Sharma notes. Five panchayats had supplied equipment to schools, five had undertaken one or more construction and repair projects, one had provided financial assistance for lunch to students below the poverty line and one had provided tuition fees for students from the underprivileged backgrounds.

The one exception that Mukundan and Bray (2004) noted was Panniannur; this village panchayat prepared an educational calendar which spelled out curricular and co-curricular activities to be carried out during the academic year, and did

¹³ Jha and Parvati (2008) note that there is no separate post of a planner in the District Project Office under SSA in Madhya Pradesh. The officials prepare the plan based on their 'collective wisdom' (p. 97).

proceed with implementation. Projects in Panniannur panchayat included quiz competitions, knowledge festivals, handbooks for primary teachers, field trips for pupils, and arts and sports festivals. However, this has so far been the exception rather than the norm. The authors noted the general lack of capacity among parents and people's representatives to deviate from traditional patterns.

Box 5.2: Decentralization and the teacher's agency

Many teachers have observed that although several experiments and initiatives in teaching practices and pedagogies have been recently introduced, these are more than often not fixed packages set from above, leaving little room for professional autonomy and responsibility of teachers (Majumdar, 2006). They are part of a professional cadre and therefore, need to be given the challenge and the impetus to engage themselves in core educational activities such as designing curriculum, writing and choosing textbooks, professionally interacting among peers about effective teaching methods, setting question papers and evaluating their own pupils have not entered into policy figurations of supra-local bodies in a major way. Similarly, Hillger (2009) observes that panchayats at all levels were explicitly excluded from any say in pedagogic matters. Even at the district level, panchayats were not involved in any decisions concerning curriculum, syllabus, use of textbooks, teacher training, etc., which were taken in a centralized manner at the state level. Decentralization has yet to impact these core functions in education. The distinction between 'interna' and 'externa', according to Isaac Kandel, remains muddled.

What has been the impact of low-cost innovations such as the Education Guarantee Scheme centres or recruitment of para-teachers locally? The evidence is mixed.

- (i) Like Mukundan and Bray (2004), Leclercq (2002) observes that the extension of the existing system is more notable than its reform. EGS centres have certainly increased access, but field research shows that what is really problematic is the limited level of activity in most schools. 'What is guaranteed is the existence of an institution that opens almost everyday for a small and variable number of hours with some pupils and at least one teacher who spends much time on supervising and bit on teaching using methods which could hardly be described as thrilling.'
- (ii) Norohna (2003) on the other hand notes that though the observations of classrooms of the EGS centres, the para-teachers and formal school teachers do not depict a pattern which indicates that one type of classroom is categorically better than another, by and large the EGS centres and

para-teacher classrooms have been found to be more friendly, lively and regular with less corporal punishment. She owes this to the younger age of the teacher, the teacher being locally employed, without the burden of non-teaching work, regular monitoring of the EGS due to the relative newness of the system (often to the neglect of the 80,000 formal schools). The need to show adequate participation of children for the continued existence of such centres also makes the EGS 'guruji' individually approach the community in case of irregularity by the students. The carrot and stick policy is probably responsible for the low teacher absenteeism in Madhya Pradesh as documented in World Bank (2006).

Quantitative studies on governance reforms and educational performance of the type noted for Latin America are practically non-existent in India, probably due to the recent nature of reforms. In one of the early attempts, Mahal et al. (2000) have tried to estimate the relationship between decentralization and net enrolment rate at the village level for a sample of 1,598 villages based on a survey done by the NCAER. Decentralization is captured variously in the different models in terms of existence of PTAs, history of administrative and expenditure decentralization, and the annual frequency of elections. The authors find that the PTAs are significant in explaining gross enrolment rates. Villages with more regular elections have better enrolment rates, but the effect is not very strong.

In conclusion, decentralization in education in most cases has been through administrative fiat and not through an organic process. Evidence suggests that the degree of local control is slightly high in states like Kerala which have empowered local government institutions. On the other hand, decentralized management of education is not the norm in states like Madhya Pradesh in spite of enabling legislation devolving control of schools to PRIs and school management committees. Decentralization in education therefore cannot be seen in isolation from the wider political processes that shape the empowerment of local institutions.