

# Government schools: What lies ahead?

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A recent statement made by Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma about the dark future of the government schools in the State has drawn public ire. Chief Minister Sarma had reportedly said that in ten years from now no student will be attending the government schools, and, accordingly, the teachers of those schools will have to take voluntary retirement. The assertion is based on the fact that enrolments of students in government schools have come down from 84 per cent in 2012 to 68 per cent in the present time. He steered the education department for over a decade from 2011 and has been credited with a lot of supposedly innovative initiatives for the qualitative transformation of public schooling in Assam. Teacher Education Test (TET) and Gunotsav are his most talked-about initiatives. It is to be noted that in the previous governments under Sarma's stewardship the departments of education and health had received higher budgetary allocations compared to the average allocations in those departments by other the Indian states as a whole.

However, on both fronts Assam's performance has been quite disappointing, as is evident from the successive Millennium Development Goals (MDG) reports published by

the NITI Aayog. What is also ironic is that the statement on a dark future of the government schools came amidst the euphoria of achievement of a new era that dawned in Assam in 2016 with the installation of the BJP-led government. The new era was 'an era of hope, of aspiration, of development and of a promise of a future that embraces everyone' as had been claimed by the then finance minister and the present Chief Minister while presenting his last budget for the year 2020-21.

The fall in enrolment in the public educational institutions is the cumulative outcome of a number of factors, including the policies undertaken by successive governments. In his book titled *Samagat Samay* (The Time Ahead), published in 2014, Sarma acknowledged the fact that since 2001 practically no recruitment of teachers had taken place in the State from the primary to the higher secondary levels. Accordingly, 7500 primary schools were running with only one teacher against the annual retirement of around 1200 teachers in primary and middle schools. The consolidation of private education in Assam took place in such a dismal state of public educational institutions. Private education in the State is heterogeneous in na-

ture. It has three important variants: those promoted by private and corporate bodies primarily driven by profit motive; those initiated by groups of individuals for quality education in mother tongues; and, those driven by particular religion-affiliated bodies to consolidate a political footing by imparting education in local languages. The first category of schools are mostly the English medium and CBSE-affiliated schools primarily located in Guwahati and the bigger towns of the State. The second category are mostly the jatiya bidyalays modelled after the Assam Jatiya Bidyalay located at Noonmati in Guwahati. And, the third category are primarily the Vidya Bharati-affiliated Shankardeva shishu and vidya niketans. The third category of schools are steered by the RSS and have an objective of consolidation of Hindutva in the State. The elite in the metros including ministers, bureaucrats and the upper strata of government employees preferably opt for the CBSE-affiliated private and English medium schools. The second category of schools have a commitment to promote local language and culture along with imparting quality education. The third category of schools run by Vidya Bharati have penetrated into every nook and corner of the State.

These schools have also earned the reputation as providers of quality education in mother tongues.

Under the neoliberal model of development privatisation of education was already rampant despite the enactment of the Right to Education Act in 2009. Reliable data suggests that the equation of government schools versus private schools which was 82:12 in 2012, changed to 65:35 over a period of the last ten years or so in the country as a whole. This has happened due to the shortage of teachers, poor infrastructure and over-burdening of the government school teachers with non-teaching responsibilities. A study conducted by the National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA) in 2018 revealed that teachers spend only 19 per cent of their time on teaching and teaching-related activities. The rest of their time is spent on non-teaching core activities (over 42 per cent), as well as school management and other education department-related work (38 per cent) like cooking midday meals, participating in vaccination drive, etc.

Assam is no exception. Updating the NRC, election duties, and even the Gunotsav have taken away core teaching hours of the teachers. The private schools are immune from most of these burdens.

The 'new era' under the BJP-led government has failed to bring about qualitative transformation in government schools. On April 20, 2022 an outfit called Young Assam (Save Education, Save Employment) alleged that as of November 2021 there were a total of 56,84,487 students studying in government schools. It has been pointed out that there are 814 primary schools in Assam with no teachers and 3,716 primary schools run by only one teacher. Besides, there are as many as 27,907 primary schools, 2,462 upper primary schools and 152 high schools with no electricity.

Surprisingly, a statement in regard to a possible closure of the government schools comes at a time when the government has geared up to implement the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.

The NEP 2020 has an important objective - providing government fund to philanthropic private organisations involved in imparting education. This is a long-drawn strategy of the Public Private Partnership (PPP) in education. There is every possibility of identifying educational networks like the one steered by Vidya Bharati, as philanthropic enterprises, and thereby making them constituent parts of the PPP model. So, an apparently passing comment by the CM on the dark future of government schools may be a long-drawn strategy, and not a genuine apprehension alone.