

17,189

colleges and universities in India, compared to 4,182 in the US

93,000

elementary schools with computers in India, compared to 1,10,000 in the US

19%

primary schools in India with single teachers

76%

primary and secondary schools with drinking water in 2004, up from 71.9% in 2002-03

25%

schools with electricity in 2004, compared to 21% in 2002

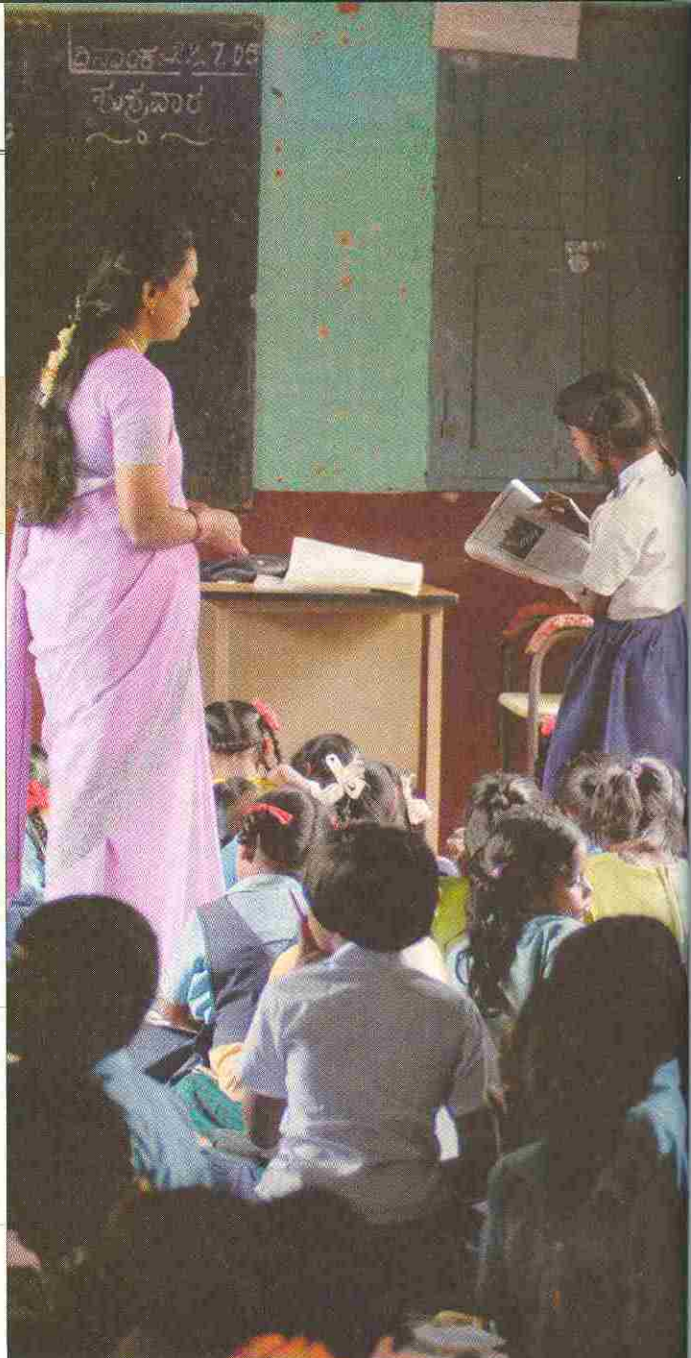
87%



schools in villages out of a total of 9,00,000 schools in India in 2004

70%

schools with pucca buildings in 2004



PHOTOGRAPHS BY GIREESH GV

# ON A NEW SLATE

**Quality education, not just education for all, is what is required in India. For this, the mindset of 'poor schools for the poor' must change and academic support systems turn more responsible.**



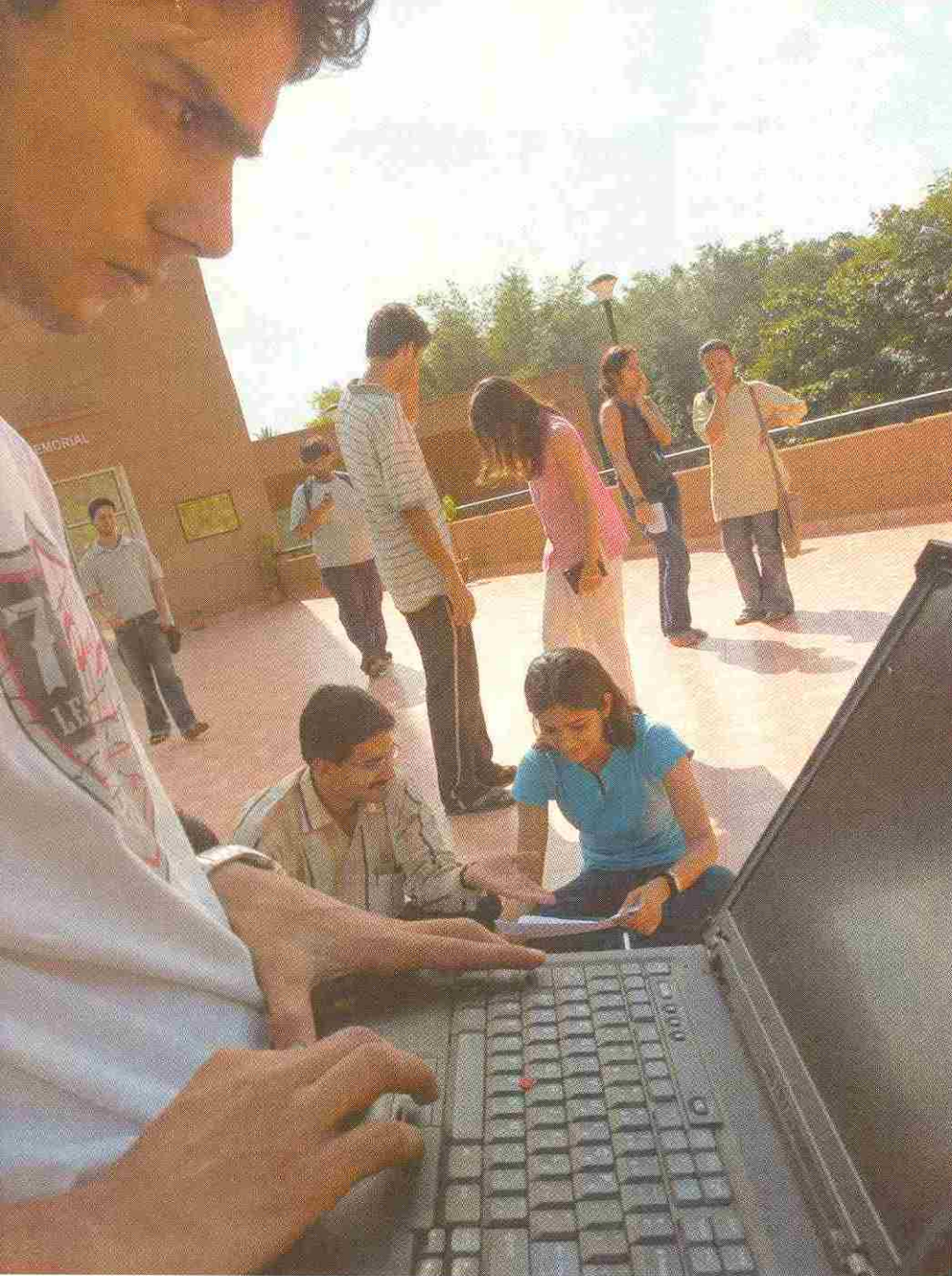
Madhav Chavan

Education is more a centrestage subject today in policy-making than it was ever before. The change in the view on education occurred perhaps in the mid-1990s as international aid agencies and the World Bank started talking about investment in primary education and its socio-economic returns. As the Indian economy was liberalised and the promise of high growth rates began to look real, the focus of policy began shifting towards a qualitatively superior education system that was capable of serving much larger numbers of

children. The two arguments together power the consensus on the need for education while the conflict between the two is what prevents a consensus on the 'what' and the 'how' of education delivery.

Rajiv Gandhi's policy initiatives, including the seven technology missions, attempted to integrate social justice with economic development in the mid-1980s. The thrust on literacy and education, which was an integral part of this policy, also suffered a derailment from which we are just beginning to recover. While expenditure on education rose from about 3 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP) to





**5,00,000**

become doctors in India every year, compared to 1.5 m in China which produces the largest number

**9,070**

doctoral degrees awarded in 2005, less than 42,700 in the US but more than 6,000 for China

**3,50,000**

engineers produced annually, compared to the highest in China, 6,00,000

about 4 per cent of GDP between 1980 and 1991, it has remained stagnant at 3.8 per cent over the past decade while GDP has increased in leaps and bounds as a result of a growing economy. It is only recently that the Union Government has made a substantial financial contribution. In contrast with the 1980s, the political picture today is highly fragmented with different parties and alliances ruling in different states and the Centre. This makes ideological unity much more difficult but it is possible to build a consensus on common programmatic objectives.

Of course, several issues such as regular attendance of children and teachers, disruption of school functioning and unevenness of quality of schools persist. The findings of both the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2005 and the NCERT assessment in earlier years paint a grim picture of poor learning achievements of in-school children—nearly 50 per cent cannot read, write, or do basic arithmetic in spite of spending four-five years in school. These challenges have to be met and steps have been taken towards improvisation.

**8,00,000**

complete MBA every year, compared to 2,00,000 in the US

**5.7m**

school teachers in India as against 2.2 m in China

**1:41**



the teacher-pupil ratio in primary schools in India, while the ratio is 1:21 in China

**400**

medical colleges in India. The US has 125 colleges



The focus is clearly turning to quality. Overall, it is obvious that the education cess has helped in accelerating the pace of infrastructure-creation and hiring of lakhs of teachers over the past two years. There is much encouraging news on the financial management of funds. Nearly 70 per cent of the cess is spent by the village institutions and the money is transferred directly to a village bank via wire transfers or alternative mechanisms provided by banks, which makes the movement much more efficient. When teachers are paid for, they are appointed. Where the mid-day meal is paid for, it is provided. There is a lot of room for improvement especially in enhancing governance at the village level but this is not something restricted to education and is part of a much larger problem that the country has to grapple with.

The pace of improvement in areas requiring administrative decision-making is much faster than in the area of quality of education, which depends on the quality of human capital and interaction. Unless academic support systems are challenged and held responsible for improving quality along with the autonomy to function, we will not make serious progress. Government schools are now "poor schools for the poor". This lack of conviction is at the root of the problem of quality. It has to be changed, not by lecturing but by demonstration of large-scale success.

Improvement in quality is not possible without planning for it, beginning with setting clear goals as to what is to be achieved. I believe children should acquire basics of reading, writing and numeracy skills by Class II which can be



DREAMS UNLIMITED: Ready for the civil services?

## Officers' Choice

Tucked away between rock-faced craggy mountains in Lahaul Valley, Tholang is a mere speck on the map of Himachal Pradesh. Yet this tiny village of 300-odd people has contributed more personnel

to the top-rung government services than almost any other village in the country. In the last four decades, eight of its inhabitants have made it to the premier civil services—including three in IAS, one in IPS and three in IRS. Not surprising, the Buddhist village has 100 per cent literacy, with 90 per cent of its women being graduates. "By embracing education early our village has made the most of the government policies on tribal welfare," says A.N. Vidyarthi, a 1964 batch IAS officer from Tholang, the first from the village, an area that is snow-bound for six months during winters. Its primary school was set up by Christian missionaries as early as the 1920s.

"Hard life made us more enterprising," says Vidyarthi. What gave a major boost to education was the ST status which is a passport to government jobs. Thalong has been a trend-setter for neighbouring villages too, but village elders rue the rising lack of commitment to excel in civil services in the new generation as career choices explode.

by Ramesh Vinayak

2,00,000 science degrees are awarded every year. It is 6,00,000 in China

73%

literacy rate in India among males. It is 95% among males in China. The literacy rate among women is 47.8% while it is 86.5% in China

13 m

children do not attend school in India according to an SRI-IMRB survey

built upon in later years to include higher levels of comprehension, and analysis, using not just textbook knowledge but also the child's environment. Textbooks are the only books that most Indian children see. The support system of libraries is missing or inaccessible and museums are rare. Children's literature is not growing in Indian languages. But it is necessary to go beyond. Should our schools not have strong sports and athletics programmes? Should we not have a strong programme in the learning of arts, given our rich artistic tradition? Should our children not know about the problems of agriculture from their elders rather than from their textbooks at schools? Schools, colleges, and the entire education system today work in complete isolation from the community around it. Fifty years ago, a teacher was seen as the most knowledgeable person in a village.

Today, not only is the teacher not the most knowledgeable person but knowledge is growing enormously outside the stagnant education system in every sphere of life, through global exchange. If our schools and universities have to undertake a quantum jump in quality, local authors, farmers, artisans, athletes, and artistes should become an integral part of the education process. Opening up education by inviting the community into schools to enrich the learning process is needed. We need an *abhiyan*, not apathy.

All this may seem too idealistic to some, but look around. As the economy grows, livelihood opportunities will grow in every sphere of life including recreation and sports. Our education system should not confine children to textbooks at a time when they are learning about the world through the rising reach of television and computers. We have to chal-



# Lone Graduate

If she were one of India's Midnight's Children, Mamata Dhurve would have perhaps picked and bartered dry fruit like chironji all her life for something as commonplace as salt, kilo for kilo. That's because Gond tribals like her, inhabiting the subterranean dwellings in Patal Kot, were almost completely cut off from civilisation for centuries.

The deep gorge inside the scenic Satpura hills where daylight appears only for a few hours in some parts is witnessing a new awakening. Mamata is the first woman graduate from this forgotten world, about 80 km from the nearest town of Chhindwara, the constituency of Union Commerce Minister Kamal Nath. Her unlettered father Amar Singh Dhurve now struts about with barely concealed pride. The 55-year-old former sarpanch of Ghatlinga, one of the dozen villages in the verdant valley, owns 12 acre of land but it is still impoverished because the soil is largely uncultivable. Still, he made sure his daughter studied hard. "I'm eternally indebted to him," says Mamata who was sent at the age of seven to Tamia, a tehsil headquarter town nearby to study at a school run by the State Tribal Welfare Department in Madhya Pradesh.

But the rub came at her government degree college in Tamia. Education and educational material were free but there were no lodging or boarding facilities. She rented a room at Rs 200 a month from another tribal family known to her father who would step out of Patal Kot once a month and walk his way for four hours to stock her little room in Tamia with monthly rations.

Last year, Mamata earned her graduation in economics, political science and Hindi literature. Now she is an anganwadi worker near Tamia. Her attitude towards issues like men and marriage is couched in a unique blend of egalitarian tribal culture and unrestricted upbringing focused on education. Mamata is emblematic of a quiet transformation slowly taking place in the tribal hinterland. And for once, the government isn't a villain. There are now seven primary, two middle, one ashram and nine education guarantee scheme schools for 12 villages in the 79 sq km area that is Patal Kot.

by Ambresh Mishra

lunge children and young people without intimidating them with stressful examinations. There are issues like whether English and maths should be compulsory for school certification. The question is not whether the subjects should be compulsory but what level of English and maths should be mandatory and how to enable children to learn and certify their learning. Is it not possible to allow children the facility of taking standardised public exams in different subjects to certify their skills at any point they choose to?

The coming age is one of mobility and greater freedom of choice. The education and examination system has to keep up with this change, offering choices rather than limiting them, offering mobility from course to course rather



**FIGHTING ALL ODDS:** Patal Kot's first woman graduate

PANKAJI WARI

10,500

students who studied at the world's first university at Takshila in 700 BC



25% government primary school teachers in India are absent from their work annually

9.9 m

students enrolled in various colleges across the country

16% out of 3,00,000 children between 6 and 14 years study in private primary schools in villages

than restricting movement. If all this has to happen, the role of the government must be of a fund provider, facilitator and regulator for different stages of education and not that of a micro-implementor and controller. We need to start planning and building capacities for the move towards publicly funded, locally or privately managed autonomous schools, colleges, and universities that are governed transparently within a set of regulations and performance measurements. India certainly has the talent to achieve this. The question is of actively synthesising the social, the educational, and the economic viewpoints.

(The writer is director, Pratham Mumbai Education Initiative Trust)