

Perspectives of Teachers' Unions on Challenges to Education in India



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ABSTRACT

Publicly funded elementary education in India remains an issue of serious concern despite encouraging progress in enrolment in the past two decades. Educationists, NGO's, think tanks extensively talk about the various reforms and measures required to extend the access and enhance the quality of primary education. However, the perspectives of teachers and their unions have received little attention in these discussions. In this paper, I begin with briefly discuss the role that teachers unions' play in the sphere of education. Further, this paper provides an account of their perspectives pertaining to the challenges to education in India through interaction with leaders of teachers' unions concerning primary/elementary education, some of which are based on national level, and others in the two states of Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. On the basis of these and other activities pursued by them, I have tried to show what their major concerns, thrusts, complaints and suggestions are in view of the current status of education India. Finally, I analyze these concerns and establish that these unions focus only on inputs, and are barely working to mitigate the real challenge of education in India- poor learning outcomes.

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INTRODUCTION

Teachers' unions in India have a long history-longer than that of trade unions. These unions can be traced all over the country. They may operate at national or local level, consist of members ranging from 100 to 23 lakh, and vary in their ideologies to an extent. Women Teachers' Association (1890) in Madras was the first teachers' union in the country, followed by Madras Teachers' Guild in 1895, representing both male and female teachers. South India Teachers' union in 1909 was the first federal organization. In North India, Uttar Pradesh was the first state to have established its unions in 1921. Soon, this movement spread to other states and provinces. The first union operating at the national level was All India Federation of Teachers' Association (1954), encompassing all the regional teachers' associations of the country.¹

I interviewed the following teachers' unions for primary and elementary education operating at the national level- as federations of other teachers' organizations spread all across the country.

Name	Full Name
AIPTF	All India Primary Teachers' Federation
STFI	School Teachers' Federation of India
AIFTO	All India Federation of Teachers' Organizations
PTFI	Para Teachers' Federation of India

In West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh, I interviewed the leaders of the following unions² -

State	Name	Full Name
West Bengal	WBPTA	West Bengal Primary Teachers' Association
	ABPTA	All Bengal Primary Teachers' Association
	PJBSP	Paschim Banga Jatiya Bayask Shikshak Parishad
	ABTA	All Bengal Teachers' Association
Uttar Pradesh	PSS	Prathmik Shikshak Sangh
	RSS	Rajkiya Shikshak Sangh

¹ <http://www.egyankosh.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/33034/1/Unit-15.pdf>

² More unions in these states can be mapped. The list mentions only the unions whose leaders were interviewed.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

In this paper, I attempt to-

- Explain why it is important to gauge the perspectives of teachers and their unions.
- Provide an account of the major concerns about education in India as expressed by the union leaders of the primary teachers' unions listed above.
- Critically analyze and reflect upon their concerns and activities in relevance to the current picture of education in India.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

- Interviews with office bearers of various teachers' unions.
- Secondary research involving available research papers, newspaper reports, and documents published by the unions.

WHY IS IMPORTANT TO CAPTURE THE PERSPECTIVE OF TEACHERS' UNIONS?

A) Teachers unions represent the collective interests of teachers- the vehicles of education

Teachers unions are democratic bodies, and thereby represent the interests of their member teachers. These teachers play a crucial role in the sphere of education as they bear the major weight and responsibility of imparting education. They have opportunities to gather facts about the challenges of education through their direct involvement with pupils, interaction with parents, and by being governors/observers of the overall functioning of schools. Thus, their potential to visualize the sphere of education for all angles also equips them to rationally deliberate upon educational policies. Therefore, their complaints, demands, and suggestions deserve due consideration.

B) Teachers and their unions exercise immense influence and power

- In their book *The Political Economy of Education in India: Teacher Politics in Uttar Pradesh* (OUP, Delhi, 2003), Geeta Kingdon and Muzammil show that teachers, teacher unions and teacher politicians are closely linked to one another. 12-23 per cent of the membership of the UP upper house and 6-11 per cent of the membership of the UP lower house has been made up of teachers in the past few decades, and most of the teacher MLCs and MLAs have close connections with teachers, usually being teacher union leaders themselves.

These unions, thus, enjoy significant political powers, and these powers can determine the fate of education to a considerable extent. For example, the political activities pursued by unions has had major impacts on the education sector in UP, suggest Geeta and Muzammil.

- The strength of these unions is also reflected by their success in actively pursuing their demands through strikes and other forms.
 - Studies provide accounts of teacher unions' successful lobbying for **pay increases** over decades. The Sixth Pay Commission has almost doubled the salaries of primary teachers. Tilak and Bhatt (1992) estimated that 99% of the total recurrent primary education expenditure went towards salaries in some states in the early 1990's. Despite increased school inputs under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, it is estimated that non-salary recurrent

education expenditure is still less than 5% of the school's total recurrent education expenditure. Thus, while teacher salaries have increased greatly, no proportionate increase has been observed in non salary education expenditures. This trend reflects the power of teachers' unions to successfully further their own demands, while other concerns remain unattended.

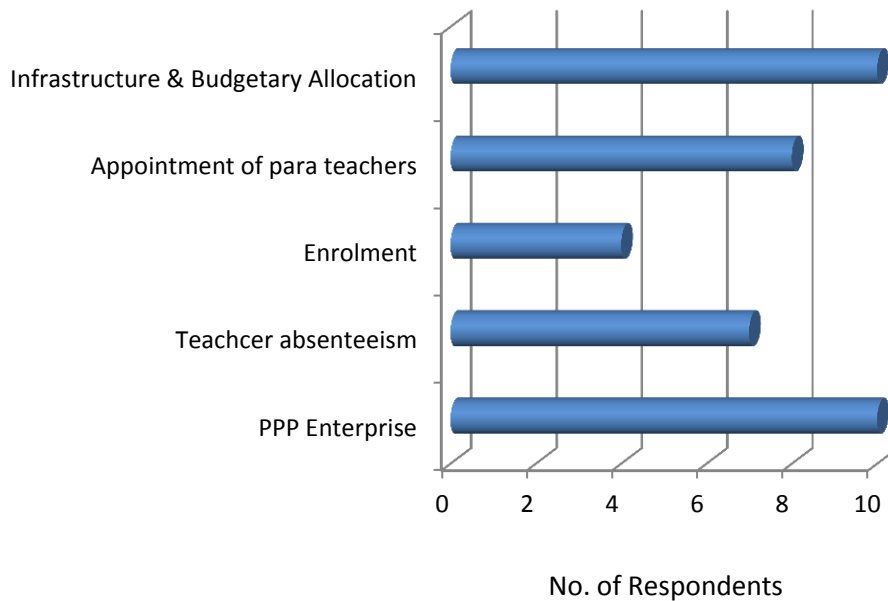
- They have been successful in opposing reforms of **educational decentralization and teacher accountability**. For example, the Salary Distribution Act 1971 and the Basic Education Act, 1972 significantly centralized the management of school education in UP.³ Some more instances have been provided later in the paper.

MAJOR CHALLENGES OF EDUCATION IN INDIA: A PERSPECTIVE OF TEACHERS' UNIONS

My interaction with the leaders of teachers' unions sparked with the basic curiosity about their unions- formation, membership, functioning etc. I then embarked upon the two major questions the answers to which are the main concerns of my study:

- What do you think are the major challenges to education in India?
- What are the solutions that you would propose to overcome them?

The major challenges to education as expressed by these unions have been summarized in the following graph-



³ A Political Economy of Education in India: The Case of Uttar Pradesh (Geeta Kingdon, Mohd. Muzammil; 2008)

These challenges, and the solutions proposed for them have been explained below:

1. **Lack of infrastructure** is the most urgent challenge of education, opine all unions. They complain that while 6% of the GDP is supposed to be allocated for education, less than 4% is being spent currently. Mr. Abhijit Mukherjee, President, STFI suggests that the education in India is in shambles primarily because the RTE has not yet been implemented, pointing to the insufficient budgetary allocations. Some unions assert rather sceptically that the government does not 'want' to spend on public education. Mr. Azad, an active union member of Para Teachers' Federation of India believes that the attempts to increase the number of schools are meagre, which implies that the state does not have the will to enforce infrastructure.

The deplorable infrastructure of our schools cannot be denied. However, placing infrastructure as the first and foremost challenge of education in India points towards a certain ideology of these unions- prioritizing inputs (infrastructure) over outputs (learning outcomes).

Let us consider this. The infrastructural norms laid down in RTE may shut down around three lakh schools across the country. Two views may exist in response to these norms-

- Government must increase the allocation in the budget to realistically implement these norms.
- These norms are not required. Enhancing learning outcomes in classrooms is more important than providing large playgrounds or libraries.

While NGO's and Civil Society Organizations further the latter, teachers' unions always vouch for the first. Several protests have been held by these unions to increase budgetary allocations for the implementation of RTE, and have been heeded to an extent. They seem to consider infrastructure as the engine of educational progress, placed over and above the need to promote learning outcomes. This perspective- given the power and influence that these unions extend in policy making- can retard educational growth in India.

2. All unions are extremely critical of the **public-private-partnership** models which the RTE Act intends to implement. This provision, they believe would doom India's education to a commercial affair. Their opinion rests on the premise that the government is introducing this policy to absolve its responsibility of providing free and compulsory education to all. Only entrepreneurs would profit out of this venture. According to them, education as an enterprise, as the Supreme Court - has time and again pointed out cannot be commercial in nature.

"The government is diving the society into two halves- have and have not. These schools would be for children belonging to well to do families. Children belonging to under privileged and marginalized sections of the society will not have access to these schools because their tuition fee etc. would be beyond the reach of their parents. The government thus purposely wants to keep the poor poorer by depriving them of quality education." ⁴

⁴ *Public Private Partnership in School Education*, a document published by AIPTF.

K. Rajendran, General Secretary, STFI opines that the 25% reservation is absolutely fair, only that it should not be subsidized by the government, the private schools should fund it themselves. "Private schools must also share the responsibility of educating the country; education should not be only a money minting business."

Questioning the very proficiency of private schools, Ms. Ila Basu, General Secretary, WBPTA believes that private schools do not even deliver the quality that the government is chasing. The rush to private schools is only a fashion borne out of the idea that students become 'smart' once they study in private schools. Private schools survive only through the tag of 'privilege' attached to them; the factor of quality education, according to her, there is as abysmal as in government schools.

It is evident that unions are in extreme discomfort with an increased enrolment in private schools. Some question their credibility; while others accuse them of using education only to earn profits, and not as an issue of public good. What exactly is it about the PPP model that worries these unions? The evil of the commercialization of education? Maybe yes. Or maybe not. Let us examine some repercussions of the PPP models on teachers.

The International Finance Corporation (World Bank Group) in its document 'Public Private Partnerships in Education', mentions the following among other challenges to PPP in education:

1. Teachers may see it as a threat to job security
2. Unions may see as diminishing influence over members

Let us deliberate upon each of these.

- Under the PPP models, private entities are accountable for the output levels achieved by pupils. The school management thus has substantial control over teachers in terms of hiring them, assessing their performance, and monitoring their attendance. Comparing this with the sinecure position enjoyed by teachers in the current scenario as government employees—little/no accountability, job security, conveniently exercised absenteeism, the PPP model stirs the comfort zone of teachers. Thus, by opposing the PPP enterprise, unions are shielding their members from facing accountability pressures, such as a credible threat of dismissal if they shirk duties. This is consistent with the observation that even in the past, for over forty years, teachers' unions have successfully opposed various decentralizing reform measures – measures which would make teachers more accountable at the local level.
- The unions extend considerable influence on their members as is observed by the widespread participation of teachers in the activities/protests organized by the unions. If the PPP models are implemented, the influence of these unions would diminish, as they would no more serve the common ground to represent the mass of teachers.

Many union leaders propose the idea of 'common schools' or neighbourhood schools, as practiced in some Eastern nations, where a school setup in a particular locality fairly represents all the children of the locality, irrespective of their socio-economic background. Such a system, they believe, would promote equality and "bring the different social classes

and groups together and thus promote the emergence of an egalitarian and integrated society.”⁵

‘If Common School System is implemented, infrastructural facilities will be more taken care of. If a labourer parent complains of broken benches in his child’s school, his complaint falls on deaf ears. However, if an IAS officer complains of the same, it is more likely to be heeded. Thus, if children from different socio- economic backgrounds were to study in the same school, fixing of the bench would help all other children, whose complaints may otherwise have not been heeded.’ In other words, the rich and privileged would ensure or enforce quality considerations, which would benefit the poor and marginalized also.

The above perspective, however, relies on the pressure imposed by the rich for quality, and not on the intrinsic responsibility of the government to provide quality. Further, it has also come under heavy criticism from education observers and liberal intellectuals for its ‘utopian definition’. Considering that India already has about three lakh private schools, implementing the Common School System would not be feasible at this stage (it might have been possible around independence, at infancy of educational infrastructure in India), as it would require everything to be set up from the scratch. This system is also criticized because it restricts choice. Furthermore, this will lead to more centralization of authority. In such a scenario, even unions would be able to establish their authority in the widest and fullest sense since they would face no more competition from private schools.

3. **Appointment of para/contract teachers**, unions believe is pestering the quality of education being delivered. Para teachers are not adequately trained and paid meagre salaries. They opine that government is employing para teachers only to cut down their expenditure on teachers, thereby compromising on the quality of education. One of the major demands of unions is that the existing contract/para teachers should thus brought to the mainstream after providing them professional training, and future appointment of para teachers should not be allowed.

Evidence, however, does not support the unions’ assertion about the poor quality of education being imparted by para teachers. Available studies on this issue so far show that the learning achievement levels among children taught by para are higher than those taught by regular teachers.⁶ In fact, the worth and quality of professional pre-service teacher training courses is questioned on the basis of this very observation. The superior-than-expected performance by para teachers may be a result of the accountability pressures faced by them. The issue of the poor efficacy or quality of education imparted by para-teachers does not exist. It is based on an apparently correct idea, but gets misplaced when verified practically. However, concerns for poor pay and working conditions remain valid.

4. **Enrolment** is another major evil in the sphere of education, some leaders believe, arising from the unwillingness of parents to send their children to school, and also due to the

⁵ http://www.ncert.nic.in/rightside/links/pdf/focus_group/cst_final.pdf

⁶ *Contract Teachers: Experimental Evidence from India* (Karthik Muralidharan and Venkatesh Sundararaman; 2010)

extreme paucity of schools in rural areas. Government needs to spread awareness about the Right to Education Act, and build more schools, they suggest. Enrolment as a major concern appears misplaced as the enrolment percentage is over 96%, as revealed by ASER report 2012.

5. Most of the unions complain of the undue **burden of non-professional duties** assigned to teachers. Most of them attribute this as the only cause of the high rates of **absenteeism** reported of teachers, and their consequent inability to take classes, resulting in the compromise of quality education. Ms. Ila Basu, (General Secretary, WBPTA) and Mr. G.S. Shukla, (General Secretary, RSS), however, also believe that teachers are not under any pressure to perform their duties, which is why they practice a lax attitude towards teaching. Inspection to monitor attendance, thus, needs to be stricter, they assert.

Non-academic burden on teachers and the resulting absenteeism has for long been complained about. However, ASER 2011 report suggests that teacher absenteeism is actually not as critical an issue as popular accounts suggest, as teacher presence rate is about 87%. Ten major states had teacher attendance figures that were 90% or higher. Moreover, despite an increase in teachers' presence rates, no progress in terms of learning outcomes has been achieved. Thus, the claim that poor learning outcomes follow only from teachers' absenteeism is also dubitable.

It would be interesting to consider here a report published by AIPTF(2008), which, in the wake of Kremer's study (2004) on high rates of teacher absenteeism, attempted to figure out the major reasons responsible for high rates of teacher absenteeism. 1140 teachers in schools were surveyed in the three states of Uttarakhand, Bihar and Tamil Nadu. The findings were as follows:

S.No.	Reason for Absenteeism	Percentage
1.	Personal reasons	9.1%
2	Participation in in-service training programmes	9.2%
3.	Non-professional work	2.7%
	Total	21%

The report attributed the long duration of *in-service training* as the major cause of teacher absenteeism, thus absolving teachers of any blame. This is deemed inauthentic in the light of the fact that in service training is conducted only for a period of 10-15 days in a year. Further, it would be worthwhile to note here that my interaction with teachers unions only revealed their complaints pertaining to their engagement in *non-professional work*, with absolutely no mention about the supposed unnecessary long duration of in-service training hours, as opposed to what the document by AIPTF suggests.

Interestingly, this document also suggests that in states observed with high rates of absenteeism due to personal reasons, 'government must augment infrastructure facilities', borrowing from observation by Kremer et al (2004) that teachers' absence rate was lower in schools with better infrastructure facilities. However, is 'lack of infrastructure facilities' a

plausible argument to defend teacher absenteeism? This only reiterates that the vision of unions does not accommodate any self introspection, only passing the blame.

ACTIVITIES UNDERTAKEN BY UNIONS TO SHUN ACCOUNTABILITY MEASURES

A few more activities by these unions would instantiate that teacher unions have successfully opposed various decentralizing reform measures – measures which would make teachers more accountable at the local level.

- For example, the earlier draft of RTE (2005) proposed two decentralizing measures- making teachers a school-based cadre, and providing SMCs with the power to disburse teachers' salaries, with a possibility to deduct salaries in cases of unauthorized absence. However, this was rigorously opposed by all unions.

"The school management committee (SMC) may not have the vital experience to supervise the work of teachers. SMC members may not have the least knowledge of education system in the country. We feel that it would result in corruption in the functioning of schools", asserts Mr. D.V.Pandit, General Secretary, AIFTO. A study by Devkanya Chakravarty (Teachers' unions: who, where and what they think) reveals that almost all major unions in West Bengal affirmed the above.

Thus, this power of SMCs was eventually slashed when the final version (2009) was enacted. Mr.R.C. Dabas, General Secretary, AIPTF regards this as one of the major achievements of AIPTF.

- Teachers in government schools of Andhra Pradesh threatened to go on an indefinite strike against the proposed introduction of biometric attendance system (replacing the manual signing) for teaching and non-teaching staff to bring in more accountability and discipline in schools. Two of the major government teachers' unions in the state, United Teachers' Forum (UTF) and Andhra Pradesh Teachers' Association (APTF) say the state government should focus on providing basic amenities including (drinking water and toilet facilities) in schools instead of introducing such high-tech expensive measures.⁷

If the focus be the enhancement of learning outcomes, investment in teacher accountability counts for far more a worth than investment in infrastructure. However, for these teacher unions, shielding their members from teacher accountability measures is the primary concern, which is masked by the otherwise secondary concern for building infrastructure.

- The Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India introduced Teacher Eligibility Test (TET) in 2011 with a view to promote quality teaching and thereby enhancing pupils' learning outcomes. However, unions are severely opposing the introduction of TET. They assert that TET only tests the theoretical knowledge of aspirants, which may not be necessary for effective and quality classroom teaching. Interestingly, over 99% aspirants failed to clear the Central Teacher Eligibility Test (CTET) 2012.

⁷ http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2013-01-17/hyderabad/36393628_1_attendance-system-government-schools-government-teachers

Educators agree with teachers in that the exam does not weigh the teaching aptitude and competence of teachers, but is based only on information recall. The exam therefore, in some sense, can be said to be redundant in purpose. However, there is no reason why an appalling percentage of teachers (as B.Ed degree holders) should fail the exam, given its syllabus (English, mathematics and environmental science, and child development and pedagogy), and 60% as the passing percentage. This result only points to the proficiency of teachers on the basis of the B.Ed degrees acquired by them. The failure of teachers is being veiled by the 'uselessness' of the exam. The supposed futility of the exam does not provide adequate explanation for the staggering passing percentage of 1%. Thus, the introduction of this exam points a stick to teachers, and is better than having no exam at all. It cannot, however, be denied that the exam would be more fruitful if it were to accommodate the testing teaching aptitude and competence.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

The above account suggests that teachers and their unions have their eyes intent on advocating only inputs (infrastructure, budgetary allocations etc) and are missing the focus of education- *the need to enhance learning outcomes*. It can be observed that their outlook towards education consists either in furthering their own interests (by opposing PPP schemes), or flinching from their own responsibility and attributing the major blame to the government (teacher absenteeism), or vouching for ideas which do not cohere with practical facts (enrolment concerns, quality related issues with para teachers), and sometimes for utopian ideas which may not be practically feasible (common school system). Increasing learning outcomes would require reforms of teacher accountability and decentralization of education which work against the interests of teachers. Teachers have expressed aversion to all such measures -PPP enterprise, TET, SMC powers and biometric attendance system etc. Opposition of decentralization and accountability reforms has caused great harm to students, more than lack of infrastructure or other input based measures have, or ever can. These unions possess the power to substantially define the contours of education. If these powers are exercised in a constructive manner, they can be a boon to education in India. If at all these unions could monitor their own teacher members and create incentives for teachers to perform through negotiations with government, the problem of quality education could be solved. In addition, this would work for their own long term interests- the stronger grows the platform of public education through increased learning outcomes, lesser would be the intervention of private schools and thereby the unrest experienced by the unions due to them.

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