

Education of Girls: A Study of the National Programme for Education of Girls at the Elementary Level (NPEGEL) in Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura

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Introduction

The present research was to make an assessment of the contribution of the National Programme of Education for Girls at Elementary Level (NPEGEL), in enhancing enrolment and retention of girls in elementary education and to explore the benefits of the programme in overall development of girls. More specifically, the focus was on examining what kind of transformation has been brought in the educational scenario and overall development of girls in educationally backward blocks of the North Eastern States of India.

In India, education was accorded a place of great importance in the Constitution. Article 45 of the Constitution clearly directs the State to provide universal, free and compulsory education to all children upto the age of fourteen year within a period of ten years from the commencement of the Constitution in 1950. In 2009, free and compulsory education has been declared as a fundamental right by an Act of Parliament 'The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009', as passed on 26th August, 2009, reads as follows: "Every child of the age of six to fourteen years shall have the right to free and compulsory education in a neighborhood school till completion of elementary education. For the purpose of this, no child shall be liable to pay any kind of fee or charges or expenses which may prevent him or her from pursuing and completing the elementary education."

National policies have been formulated to develop strategies to promote education of all with special focus on girls and children belonging to the socially disadvantaged groups, and also rural and remote areas of the country. Many schemes and programmes

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have been launched to ensure easy availability and accessibility of educational opportunities for children, particularly for girls in general and of girls belonging to socially disadvantaged groups (SCs and STs). Prominent among these are opening of more number of schools in remote rural areas as well as in urban locations, distribution of free uniform, free textbooks, scholarships, free boarding and lodging facilities in *Ashram Shalas/Chatravas* (Hostels), launching of Mid-Day Meal Scheme, waiving tuition fee and coaching classes, etc.

The National Programme for Education of Girls at the Elementary Level

The NPEGEL is one among these programmes that has been launched by the government of India (GOI) in 2003 as a 'gender component plan' with specific budgetary provisions, and has been integrated into the SSA to cater to the specific socio-educational needs of girls for their overall development. Under this programme, provisions were made for additional financial support to states for enhancing girls' education from Class I–VIII and also for providing facilities to promote retention of girls in schools, ensure their greater participation in school activities, improve the quality of their social life, including their educational status, stress upon the relevance of quality education for their empowerment and for ensuring their overall development, particularly of girls belonging to the disadvantaged and underprivileged groups, living in risk prone difficult circumstances. This idea was proposed to be implemented through intensive community mobilisation, development of 'model cluster schools' as the girl-child friendly schools, development of gender sensitive need-based teaching-learning materials and provisions of need-based interventions like escorts, availability of need-based books, uniforms and stationery, gender sensitisation of teachers, etc. (GOI, 2005).

The NPEGEL was basically introduced as the GOI visualised that SSA has limited financial provisions for girls' education in the form of innovations at district level. Thus, the NPEGEL was launched as a gender component plan of SSA with a view to have more funds to cater to the needs of girls in educationally backward areas to achieve the goal of UEE. The major objectives of the programme was to develop and promote facilities to provide access; facilitate retention of girls; ensure greater participation of women and girls in the field of education; improve the quality of

education through various interventions and to stress upon the relevance and quality of girls' education for their empowerment. This programme covered Educationally Backward Blocks (EBBs). EBBs were identified on the basis: firstly, blocks having rural female literacy rate less than the national averages, and the gap between male-female literacy rate for these places higher than the national averages as per 2001 census data; secondly, blocks with at least 5 per cent SC/ST population and female literacy rate among these groups below 10 per cent. The benefits of the NPEGEL programme were also applicable to some selected urban slums.

The development of Model Cluster Schools (MCSs) for girls was one of the specifically proposed measures to achieve the improvement in the educational status of girls for their overall development. The MCSs were developed as the girl-child friendly schools and the financial assistance was given to MCSs under the NPEGEL for purchase of items like teaching-learning materials, equipments, library books, and sports materials, etc., for enhancing quality in learning and also to conduct programmes for empowerment of girls. The MCSs were proposed to be opened in areas having high density of SC/ST/OBC/minority population.

Against this backdrop, a necessity was felt to understand whether the NPEGEL has played a role in the educational and overall development of girls. If yes, in what way? In this light, during 2011–12, a study was conducted to examine the role of the NPEGEL scheme in the educational and overall development of girls in two north-eastern states namely Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. The findings of the study indicate that the scheme has contributed significantly in facilitating access to education of Scheduled Tribe girls in Assam through bridge courses and also mainstreaming them in schools through community mobilisation. In addition to access to schooling facilities, the programme proved beneficial in the overall development of ST girls in the state. Based on earlier experiences, during 2014, this study has been planned for other three North-Eastern states— Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura. The aim of the study was to broadly understand how well the scheme has worked for promotion of education of girls in these three states.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study included the following:

- To assess the contribution of the NPEGEL in enhancing enrolment and retention of girls in elementary education;

- To find out the benefits of the NPEGEL in overall development of girls;
- To examine the role of the NPEGEL in sensitising teachers with regard to issues concerning gender; and
- To understand the role of *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA) in the implementation of the NPEGEL.

Research Questions

The following research questions were framed under the study.

- Whether the NPEGEL has played a role in enhancing enrolment and retention of girls in education? If yes, in what way?
- How the NPEGEL has benefited in girls' overall development?
- Whether the NPEGEL has proved beneficial in gender sensitisation of teachers? If yes, how has it helped girls' education and development?
- What kind of support SSA provide in the implementation of the NPEGEL?

Method

In order to answer the research questions as also to realise the objectives of the study, both quantitative and qualitative data was required. Quantitative data was obtained from published and unpublished records of the concerned departments and also with the help of personally canvassed schedules. Qualitative data was collected through personally canvassed interview schedules, observations, discussions and meetings with the beneficiary girl students, teachers, concerned officials, parents and community people. The impact assessment of the scheme in enhancing girls' enrolment was done by analysing the progress made in mainstreaming of out-of-school girls into schools. Two sets of data were collected for measuring the progress:

- Number of out-of-school girls in the 6–14 age group identified through the efforts initiated under the NPEGEL during the past 5 years;
- Number of girls mainstreamed into schools through the efforts initiated under the NPEGEL during the past 5 years.

The impact assessment of the NPEGEL in the overall development of beneficiary girls was made by measuring the level of awareness of targeted girls about different aspects of three indices, i.e.,

personal health and hygiene, self-esteem and self-confidence, and girl child rights and some social issues associated with it through a social skill rating scale. Face-to-face interaction was carried out with the targeted girls in the model cluster schools under study. Interaction with sample girls lasted for 60–70 minutes, and data collected through interaction was systematised and quantified. Item wise analysis of girls' responses was done in respect of these indicators. Analysis was done manually using a frequency method. The frequency tables were used to quantify the amount of girls' level of awareness and utility of different aspects of three indicators mentioned above. The qualitative data collected through focus group discussions and selected case studies was analysed and presented in the form of statements in the study.

The role of the NPEGEL in sensitising teachers on gender issues was analysed through a structured schedule. Through the schedule, data/information was obtained with regard to the number of programmes organised during the last 5 years; duration of each programme; themes covered and profile of participants and resource persons. Information was also collected on whether the teacher training modules have been developed to carry out gender sensitisation programmes. To cross check the efforts of the implementing agencies with regard to gender sensitisation of teachers, beneficiary teachers were interviewed to enlist their level of understanding about issues concerning gender. Collection of data/information was ascertained from teachers with the help of a personally canvassed schedule. The frequency analysis was done to quantify the amount of teachers' understanding about gender, gender relations and gender sensitivity.

Findings of the Study

In Manipur, the National Programme of Education for Girls at Elementary Level (NPEGEL) was implemented during 2006–07. The programme was implemented by the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA), Manipur. The NPEGEL in the state was implemented with the objective to attain educational development, capacity building and empowerment of the 'Hardest to Reach' girls, especially those not in school. This is the block which was identified as an Educationally Backward Block (EBB) by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India. The state prepared a detailed action plan for the target group of girls that include specific strategies with defined and measurable outcomes in every

SSA annual work plan since the implementation of the NPEGEL. A gender coordinator for girls' education appointed under SSA at the state level/district/block/cluster level was given the responsibility to look after the implementation of the programme. At the start of the programme, cluster resource persons (CRPs) owned the responsibility to track out-of-school girls in the clusters of the block.

In Mizoram, the NPEGEL was implemented by the state project office, Mizoram *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* Mission during 2005–06. The NPEGEL was implemented with the objective of mainstreaming out-of-school girls in schools and providing them vocational skills along with studies. The programme was implemented only in one block namely Lungsan in Lunglei district. Lungsan is the block which is identified as an Educationally Backward Block (EBB) by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India in the district. In every clusters of the block, one model cluster school (MCS) was developed under the NPEGEL. The state prepared a detailed action plan that included specific strategies with defined and measurable outcomes, and submitted for approval as a part of SSA annual work plan since the implementation of the NPEGEL.

In Tripura, the NPEGEL was implemented by the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA), *Rajya* Mission, Tripura during 2005–06. Initially, the programme was implemented in one district namely Dhalai. The district Dhalai is divided into 5 blocks namely Salema, Ambassa, Manu, Chawmanu and Dumburnagar. Out of a total five blocks, two blocks namely Chawmanu and Dumburnagar are declared as educationally backward blocks (EBB) and both these blocks are covered under the NPEGEL programme. Later, in 2006–07, 5 more blocks of another two districts namely North Tripura and South Tripura were covered under the NPEGEL. In all, three districts namely Dhalai, North Tripura, and South Tripura (now Gomati) were covered under the NPEGEL.

The study recommends making of continuous efforts in this direction which need to be taken up seriously as the study felt the need to equip the teachers' understanding of gender and gender issues regularly, to enable them to deal with the ideologies behind gender representation in class rooms situations. The study also highlights the need for the government to support such programmes with zeal and regular release of fund in time.