

Move to make primary education a fundamental right

India's \$12.5 billion annual programme to make primary education up to Class VIII free and compulsory for its 192 million children may soon see the central government foot the entire financial burden, as states are unwilling to fund it in the present format.

The programme will be part of the Right to Education Bill of 2005, that is being revived from the backburner for tabling in parliament in the forthcoming budget session as directed by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

'The main component of this legislation will be 'free and compulsory' education. This was the main problem faced by the flagship Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (Education for All programme),' said a senior official in the Ministry of Human Resources Development (HRD).

'Our minister (Arjun Singh) has been writing regularly to all chief ministers to come on board for this major programme. But they all want the central government to fund the programme completely,' the official said.

'As a result, we are taking a call on funding the entire programme with central funds as opposed to the earlier proposal of 75 percent share from the centre and the rest from the states.'

Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan wants to ensure universal primary education in the country in a time bound manner and address the second target set under the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations, of which India is a signatory.

Apart from funding, states also had a problem with the proposed legislation as it made it mandatory for them to extend free education to all children between 6-14 years of age.

'Without ensuring the free and compulsory aspect of primary education, the 86th amendment to the Constitution, that makes primary education a fundamental right, will remain on paper,' the official said.

'This was precisely the problem faced by Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. It is free, but not mandatory. So, along with the mid-day meal scheme, the idea is to give more teeth to this flagship programme,' he said.

'Using the Right to Education Bill, the government also wants to address issues like child labour, adequate nutrition for children, gender bias and special care for children with disability,' the official added.

On the issue of funds, HRD ministry officials said, the government has earmarked \$21 billion towards education in the 11th Plan (till 2012) - which is five times that in the 10th plan - a part of which would be used for the programme.

This is a step ahead of the earlier thinking within the government to widen the scope of existing programmes like the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and the midday meal scheme to meet the target for free and compulsory education.

Addressing the annual session of a leading industry chamber earlier this month, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had said that education remained a key factor for a nation to ensure inclusive growth for its citizens.

'We will soon be introducing a bill providing the right to education to every child,' he said, while promising the 'most ambitious' expansion of educational opportunities in the country since independence.

He said 6,000 top class schools would come up in each development block (a cluster of villages), apart from 370 colleges in all educationally backward districts in the country.

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