



**Consortium for Research on
Educational Access,
Transitions and Equity**

**Changing Framework of Local Governance
and Community Participation in
Elementary Education in India**

**R. Govinda
Madhumita Bandyopadhyay**

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Research Monograph No. 35**

May 2010



**National University of Educational
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NUEPA**



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List of Acronyms

AIE	Alternative and Innovative Education
AWC	Anganwari Centres
BRC	Block Resource Centres
CLRC	Cluster Level Resource Centres
CRC	Cluster Resource Coordinator
CREDA	Centre for Rural Education and Development Action
DPO	District Level Project Office
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ECE	Early Childhood Education
EGS	Education Guarantee Scheme
DIET	District Institute of Education Training
GoI	Government of India
IED	Integrated Education for Disabled children
MSK	Madhyamik Sikhsa Kendras
MTA	Mother Teacher Association
NGO	Non Government Organization
NPE	National Policy on Education
NPEGEL	National Programme for the Education of Girls at the Elementary Level
NUEPA	National University of Educational Planning and Administration
PBRSSM	Paschim Banga Rajya Shishu Shiksha Mission
PRI	Panchayati Raj Institute
PTA	Parents Teacher Association
RBC	Residential Bridge Course
SC	Scheduled Castes
SCERT	State Council of Educational Research and Training
SDMC	School Development and Management Committee
SMCs	School Management Committees
SSA	Sarva Siksha Abhiyan
SSK	Shishu Shiksha Karmasuchi programme
ST	Scheduled Tribes
TLM	Teaching Learning Materials
UP	Uttar Pradesh
UT	Union Territory
VEC	Village Education Committees

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Preface

India has made considerable efforts in enhancing initial access to schooling and even enrolment of all children at the elementary level. This has happened in recent years not only due to unprecedented expansion of schooling infrastructure across the country but also because of a large number of initiatives that are being taken to improve the governance of the education system at the state, district and sub-district level. The present paper reviews different documents and research literature related to this issue and discusses in greater depth how, since independence the framework of local governance has changed according to state specific contexts over a period of time consequent upon access, equity and quality of elementary education. The paper also highlights approaches that have been adopted by the states for strengthening governance of school at the local level and also for involving the community in order to increase children's participation in schools in different parts of the country.

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Summary

In recent years, strengthening and better functioning of local governance have become prime concerns of educational reform agenda. Establishment of effective local governance has been part of overall changes in educational governance for several years in many countries including India. It is now widely recognized that effective local governance considerably impacts on access to education as well as the enrolment, retention and learning experiences of children in school. It is in this context, that this paper provides an overview of the changing framework of governance of elementary education and community participation in India with a special focus on its role in improving the participation of children. An attempt has also been made to examine the extent to which grassroots level functionaries and local bodies like *panchayat* and VEC are able to get involved in decision making processes and different approaches that have been taken by different states in regards to local governance of education. Drawing references from recent efforts made by different states, the paper has tried to establish a link between effectiveness of local governance and issues regarding access, equity and quality of school education. While discussing the changing framework of local governance, the paper critically examines the guiding principles of governance reform from two perspectives. 'Top-down' and 'bottom-up' approaches are discussed, in terms of ensuring the effectiveness of the system and empowering people for active participation in decentralized decision making process.

Changing Framework of Local Governance and Community Participation in Elementary Education

1. Introduction

Governance reform has emerged as a key concept shaping all debates and discourses on development in recent years, significantly impacting the dynamics of policy making as well as the implementation of development programmes. In particular, there is an increasing trend of moving decision-making processes away from authorities at the centre to organizational units and towards individuals operating nearer to the grassroots, changing the patterns and distribution of power and influence at different levels. These trends can be observed everywhere – from liberal democracies to totalitarian regimes, unitary central governments to federal arrangements, developing economies, and countries in transition to industrialized countries. Changes in educational governance which are currently engaging the minds of planners and policy makers should be viewed as part of this larger phenomenon of reforming public governance structures and processes. Decentralisation, in particular, is being recommended as an important means of promoting progress in mass education and the Dakar Framework of Action (UNESCO, 2000) explicitly calls for developing responsive, participatory and accountable systems of educational governance and management:

The experience of the past decade has underscored the need for better governance of education systems in terms of efficiency, accountability, transparency and flexibility so that they can respond more effectively to the diverse and continuously changing needs of learners. Reform of educational management is urgently needed — to move from highly centralized, standardized and command-driven forms of management to more decentralized and participatory decision-making, implementation and monitoring at lower levels of accountability. These processes must be buttressed by a management information system that benefits from both new technologies and community participation to produce timely, relevant and accurate information (UNESCO, 2000:19).

Establishing grassroots level democratic institutions for local self-governance has been an integral part of the Indian perspective on public administration for some time. Efforts in this direction began even before gaining independence from British colonial control more than 60 years ago. The Constitution of the country adopted in 1950 made this explicit by directing all states to create local self-government bodies under the framework of *panchayati raj*¹ through an electoral process. Article 40 of the Constitution of India states that ‘the State shall take steps to organize village *panchayats* and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government’. Subsequently, the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee recommended the establishment of the *panchayati raj* system as an inter-connected three-tier organizational structure of democratic decentralization at the village, block and district levels.

¹ Village *panchayat* is the lowest level of democratically elected self-governing body operating in every village within the three tier system of *panchayati raj*. *Panchayati Raj* is a system of governance in which gram *panchayats* are the basic units of administration. It has 3 levels: village, block and district. At the village level, it is called a *panchayat*. It is a local body working for the good of the village. The number of members usually ranges from 7 to 31; occasionally, groups are larger, but they never have fewer than 7 members.

In fact, following the constitutional directive many states enacted *panchayati raj* acts in 1950s, though not all followed the same pattern. The situation became quite uneven on the ground as not many state governments empowered the bodies effectively. Yet all state governments have continued to vouch for the policy of decentralization and a variety of political power sharing frameworks have emerged across the country, all under the common banner of decentralization and with the objective of enhancing community participation in governance.

In general, decentralization seems to mean different things to different people, depending on the political and administrative context in which the term is being used. Even though used extensively by policy-makers as well as academics, the public discussion on decentralization is often confusing, assuming the character of sweeping, cross-disciplinary claims about the effects of administrative measures on the quality and efficiency of both government and social interaction (Fauget, 1997). It is within this ambiguously defined framework of decentralization that one has to find meaning to governance² reforms initiated in the education sector in India for transfer of powers and authorities to local level actors.

With changing priorities across different Indian states, the contours of decentralization in education have also undergone a variety of transformations in different parts of the country. This paper presents an analytical overview of the changing framework of governance of elementary education and community participation in India with a special focus on improving the participation of children in schools.

Based on a review of academic and government literature, this paper discusses changes and innovations to education governance in India. It examines initiatives that aim to strengthen local governance of education and the effects these have had on service delivery. Improved governance of education has been identified as one way in which levels of access, quality and participation in education can be improved (UNESCO, 2009). Improving governance of education has an important role to play in ensuring meaningful access to education for all children in India.

² Even governance does not carry a uniform understanding across academics as well as development practitioners. The phrase is taken to include different activities ranging from policy formulation, planning, programme implementation, co ordination, personnel supervision, monitoring and evaluation and so on. While weak management is frequently cited as a major impediment to improving education quality and delivery, few studies actually report on the personnel characteristics, career development, or professional problems of administrators at any level (Chapman, 2002)

2. Educational Governance: Changing Policy Framework

From the previous discussion it is clear that in India decentralization has a special significance because it advocates for a shift of decision-making centres closer to the people at the grassroots level. Many initiatives are underway for translating policies of decentralization into action and to facilitate this implementation. The government has already initiated structural changes and devised various mechanisms for the successful implementation of decentralization. The present section focuses on these mechanisms initiated in the education sector.

As India came into existence, bringing together territories with diverse historical, socio-cultural and linguistic contexts, educational governance received immediate attention. The responsibility for governance of school education was largely given to state governments. Thus, since then decentralization in public governance in general, and in education, in particular has consisted of moving decision making powers to structures and authorities at sub-state levels. For successful implementation of decentralisation, the main issue seems to be the establishment of institutional mechanisms below the state level. It is in this context that the concept of *panchayati raj* and the community development frameworks were adopted in the years after independence. The local self-government system under *panchayati raj* is conceived to consist of three tiers of political-administrative structures beginning at district level through the block level³ and the village level. This is also viewed as facilitating the emergence of grassroots democracy involving people in local electoral process. While political decentralization was to follow this framework, it was deemed appropriate to designate block level as the main unit for development administration. Thus, a Block Development Office was established in each block consisting of 100-150 villages. The district, which was the revenue division created during the British period remained more or less intact.

Within the education sector, to begin with, the District Education Office remained the main centre of governance of school education in the district. After nearly 25 years of this set up, a separate office of the School Education Department came into existence at block (sub-district) level in many states. This was partly due to the enormous expansion of the primary education system during the preceding two decades. The Block Education Office now deals with elementary primary education in many states, while the District Education Office directly governs secondary education.

The rationale for decentralization in the early years was driven by the agenda to give power to the people by creating local self-governments through democratic elections. Empowering people through democratic institutions was seen as a value in itself. While, *panchayati raj* and community development gave the operational framework for decentralization, the contours of the discourse were largely defined by the liberation rhetoric that characterised most countries in the immediate aftermath of colonialism. In fact, the report from the Education Commission (GoI, 1964-66) recommended decentralization of educational governance to ensure better involvement of the community in school education. It was envisaged that community service

³ Indian states are subdivided into divisions each comprising several districts. Certain states' districts are further divided into sub-divisions. (*pargana, anuvibhag, mahakuma*), which comprise several blocks. Block is an administrative unit lower to the district level, and comprise several villages or village clusters. It is also referred as *tehsil, mandal*, sub-division etc. The governmental bodies at the *Tehsil* level are called the *panchayat samiti* also see in the site:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Administrative_divisions_of_India

would be made an integral part of education at all levels. At the primary stage, suitable programmes were to be implemented to bring the school closer to the community with the focus on serving the community in suitable ways (NCERT, 1971:22). It was argued that:

School education is predominantly a local-state partnership and higher education is a Center-State partnership. It is this basic principle that should guide the evolution of delicate balance between centralization and decentralization which our planning needs' (NCERT, 1971:848).

However, the early 1970s witnessed a reverse, leading to the large-scale nationalisation of schools, particularly at the primary stage in most parts of the country. With this, state governments became the main providers and managers of elementary education. It is within this context that the Block Education Offices came into existence. This paved the way for the deconcentration⁴ of power, though considerable authority continued to be vested at the district level, in particular with regard to recruitment, posting and transfer of personnel.

Interestingly, while deconcentration was pursued with respect to district level administration, decision-making became more centralised at the state level – to some extent leading to the erosion of authority at the district level. The state secretariat, which within the original framework dealt only with policy matters leaving all operational matters to the Directorate of Public Instruction and its subordinate offices at the district level, assumed greater levels of direct responsibility for running the system. This was particularly so with respect to teacher appointments and the location of new schools. This also brought in a new dimension to the issue: what was hitherto mainly an affair of the professional administration came into the ambit of political action. The attention of the leadership, therefore, naturally was focused on streamlining the administration leaving behind the policy of establishing decentralised governance under the *panchayati raj* framework.

Again in the 1980s a revival of interest in *panchayati raj* was witnessed in some of the states. Significant developments took place in states like Karnataka, The state not only conducted elections of local bodies but also took initiatives for providing block grants and considerable autonomy to the local bodies in using the finances. This prompted many local bodies to allocate funds for educational development activities at the district and sub-district levels. Of course, some of these got reversed with changes in political leadership in the state, demonstrating the vulnerability of such measures to political vicissitudes. Interestingly, Andhra Pradesh moved away from the national pattern of a three-tier local governance system comprising district, block and village level bodies. Instead the state adopted a two-tier system, by and large following the recommendations of the Ashoka Mehta Committee (GoI, 1978) with local bodies at the district and *mandal* (consisting of about thirty villages) levels. However, unlike Karnataka, the reforms in Andhra Pradesh did not include any major move to decentralize governance of education sector. West Bengal also took up the task of strengthening the three-tier system for local governance and linking education governance

⁴ Deconcentration is defined as “One of administrative decentralization which redistributes decision-making authority and financial and management responsibility among levels of the central government there is no real transfer of authority between levels of government. It may involve only a shift of responsibilities from federal forest service officials of the capital city to those stationed in provinces, districts, etc” (Gregersen et al. 2004) As Govinda (1997:16) has pointed out “An obvious implication of this process is to move the administrative set up nearer to action setting, but by increasing the weight of bureaucracy”.

with that set up. Meanwhile, the western Indian states of Gujarat and Maharashtra had decentralized educational management significantly to the district level, though not much progress could be observed with regard to decentralization of authority to sub district levels.

The National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986 (GoI, 1986) was a landmark event as it not only recommended the policy of decentralization but also gave a concrete programme of action to implement the policy. Interestingly, the NPE recommendations essentially entailed a process of deconcentration. It appeared that the focus was on streamlining the functioning of the bureaucracy. The policy did not make any significant proposal to devolve powers to local self-governing bodies such as the *panchayati raj* except for oblique references and not much reform in educational governance really materialized, except for the establishment of Village Education Committees (VEC) and school complexes (Govinda and Bandyopadhyay, 2006).

The 1990s witnessed perhaps the most significant moves towards decentralization both in terms of policy reorientation and practical action in the field. Corresponding to efforts to reform public administration, fairly vigorous attention was paid to the management and control of education, both at the policy and implementation levels, and the need to involve communities in the process of school education through decentralization. At the policy level, the somewhat aborted attempt of the *Panchayati Raj* Institutions (PRI's) during the early period after independence was revived through the 73rd and 74th Amendments of the Constitution in 1992. This made the setting up of local bodies at the village, block, district and municipal levels, through a process of democratic elections, mandatory. This is arguably the most significant policy initiative for decentralized governance that India has formulated since independence.

These constitutional amendments adopted by parliament were accompanied by detailed delineation of specific powers and responsibilities to be transferred from the state government to local bodies. Education has featured prominently in this delineation. The *panchayat* has been given the responsibility for

- (a) Education, including primary and secondary;
- (b) Technical Training and Vocational education;
- (c) Adult and non formal education;
- (d) Libraries;
- (e) Cultural activities.

Functions of *panchayat* bodies related to education have been mentioned in a number of sections in the PRI Act⁵. Recognizing that the organizational arrangements in different states are likely to vary considerably, the recommendations do not use any standardized framework for devolving powers and responsibilities in the education sector. Some of the recommendations made are:

⁵ *Panchayati Raj* was adopted by state governments during the 1950s and 60s as laws were passed to establish *Panchayats* in various states. It also found backing in the Indian Constitution, with the 73rd amendment in 1992 to accommodate the idea. The Amendment Act of 1992 contains provision for devolution of powers and responsibilities to the *panchayats* to both for preparation of plans for economic development and social justice and for implementation in relation to twenty-nine subjects listed in the eleventh schedule of the constitution. In the history of *Panchayati Raj* in India, on 24 April 1993, the Constitutional (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 came into force to provide constitutional status to the *Panchayati Raj* institutions. This Act was extended to *Panchayats* in the tribal areas as well. Accessed from internet: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panchayati_raj

(i) The *Gramsabha*⁶ (village council) will run the adult education programme in the village. It is interesting to note that no mention has been made regarding the role of *Gramsabha* in other aspects of education.

(ii) *Gram Panchayat* (local self-governing body at the village level) will provide education through primary and middle schools, create awareness among the people and ensure enrolment of all the children in the primary school, construction and maintenance of hostels etc.

(iii) *Panchayat Samitis* (block level bodies) are expected to perform a variety of functions particularly with respect to elementary education. These include the promotion of primary and secondary education, the construction and maintenance of school buildings, and the provision of education for working children.

(iv) Roles identified for *Zilla Parishad* (district level body) include the construction of roads to connect all the schools and colleges in the district; the construction and maintenance of primary and secondary schools; the construction and maintenance of hostels, *ashram shalas* (residential schools), etc.; the provision of scholarship / maintenance grants; the construction of schools and hostels for Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe and Other Backward Caste students; and the provision of free textbooks and teaching and learning materials for these groups. It is also specified that permanent committees of the *Zilla Parishad* could be constituted for different sectoral areas, with one such committee, the Education and Health Committee, which would look after all the functions related to education.

As the policies have changed, the rationale for decentralisation has also undergone a significant change. The National Policy on Education 1986 and the accompanying Programme of Action called for an integrated and decentralized approach to developing school education systems with a focus on building the capacity of districts in planning and management of school education, particularly at the elementary level. Decentralization was envisaged as a fundamental requirement for improving the entire education system and for creating an appropriate framework for accountability at each level of administration. Reviewing the situation towards the end of 1980s, Ghosh, (1989) listed several arguments in favour of the move for decentralization. These included:

(a) The needs and priorities of different areas are best determined by local assemblies of persons rather than by outside experts (though the latter may be able to proffer technically better drawn up schemes to meet those needs).

(b) With growth in political consciousness, as well as the emergence of diverse 'action groups' (including NGOs) to assist and organize poor people, the politicization of the masses can be speeded up by the process of decentralization of power and authority.

(c) People may be trusted to know their best interests and to fight for the same especially where purely local matters are involved.

(d) Decentralization would allow the different socio-cultural groups in India to plan for their own welfare and growth in line with their cultural traditions, background, aptitudes, resources and aspirations. India is a country of people with diverse cultural identities, which must be recognized as a matter of priority and can be possible by promoting decentralization.

⁶ *Gramsabha* is conceived as the general council of all villagers.

(e) Such action may foster a spirit of self-reliance and not make the people dependent on and prone to always look for outside support for the betterment of their conditions. People may be allowed to make their own plan and implement that according to their own priorities. Which is why, it is suggested that local institutions like *panchayati raj* may help people work together for more egalitarian growth in socio-economic development, including education.

In nutshell, it can be said that, the impact of decentralization on education can be seen from two points of view, one, before the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments and another after the constitutional amendments. Before the amendments state governments were not under the obligation of adopting the decentralized structure of administration. However, the constitutional amendment has obliged states to adopt the structure. The act is a significant landmark in the Indian history of decentralization. It transforms representative democracy into participatory democracy. Governance at the grassroots level has also opened up new vistas in educational administration, making PRIs directly involved in planning, implementation and monitoring of educational policies, programmes and schemes. However, effective involvement of PRI depends on the effective implementation of the PRI Act. However, when the issue was revisited in the 1990s, a decade characterized by the government's eagerness to introduce market reforms, the emphasis appeared to have changed dramatically. For instance, the language used to describe the rationale for decentralization underwent significant transformation. Phrases such as 'empowering the people' or 'grassroots level democracy' almost disappeared from the discourse putting considerable emphasis on efficiency of system. Yet, the Moily Committee, set up by the Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE), argued:

It is increasingly becoming evident that the bureaucratic systems are not able to manage the challenges in the field of educational development and people's participation is seen the world over as an essential pre-requisite for achieving the goal of education for all. It is in this context that the Committee perceives the entrustment of educational programmes to institutions of local self-government as a step in the right direction (GoI, 1992:14).

The move appeared to have been prompted essentially by the perception that involving the community could improve the deteriorating efficiency and effectiveness of the school system.

India may not be alone in changing the contents of the discourse on decentralization. In fact, in line with increased open market reforms, a predominant view is emerging at the international level that centralised state control is responsible for the poor state of affairs of educational services and it is important to bring in decentralisation and local community participation to improve services. This view is often promoted at least implicitly by the conditionalities placed by international agencies involved in educational development. According to Maclure (1993) three arguments underscore this line of thinking:

(a) Since central governments are increasingly unable to direct and administer all aspects of mass education, decentralisation of planning and programming will result in improved service delivery by enabling local authorities to perform tasks they are better equipped for.

(b) Since mass education has placed an inordinate strain on state resources, decentralisation will improve economies of scale and will lead to more appropriate responsiveness to the particular needs and situations of different regions and groups.

(c) By engaging active involvement of community and private sector groups in local schooling, decentralisation will generate more representativeness and equity in educational decision-making, and thus foster greater local commitment to public education. It may seem unimportant to read too much into this transformation in the language or the increased emphasis on utilitarianism in reforming educational governance. Yet, it raises some critical questions in the Indian context: Are we moving from a fundamental commitment for empowering the community for self-determination to a limited rationale of technical and economic efficiency? Is governance reform viewed only as technocratic means of solving some of the management problems?

3. State Level Actions following the Constitutional Amendment

This section provides an understanding about the policy and actions undertaken by different states during 1990s after the introduction of the PRI Act. As mentioned earlier, the PRI Act has provided a new perspective in decentralisation of educational governance, one needs to examine how different states could take initiatives to implement this Act and this present section attempts to analyse the same. Constitutional provisions after the Amendments (73rd and 74th) present only an enabling framework for decentralisation, requiring positive action at the state level for implementation through necessary executive and legislative measures. Thus it leaves much to the wishes of state government and many observers doubt whether in the system of political pluralism; state level leadership would be willing to share powers with local leadership. This is an important issue as:

In the Indian federal set-up, most structural reforms fall in the state sector. The centre can only offer incentives and guidelines. Even where the central government has specific roles to play, implementation is by-and-large left to the state governments (Misra and Nataraj, 1981:271).

Notwithstanding the scepticism of the scholars, one has to recognize that many states have acted upon the recommendations and promulgated new acts to strengthen governance at local level.

In Madhya Pradesh, though the roles and responsibilities of *panchayat raj* bodies in promotion of education have not been defined clearly in the PRI Act, executive orders have been issued by the government from time to time to specify functions related to education to the local bodies. The state government has also introduced the system of District Government and more recently the Village Government System, further decentralizing the power of the state level administrative structure to the district and village level. Apart from this, recruitment and transfer of teachers, construction of school building and procurement of school equipment have become the responsibilities of *panchayat* (GoI, 2001). Subsequently, some of the provisions have been incorporated in the *Jana Siksha Adhiniyan* (People's Education Act), 2002.

In Bihar the role of *panchayat* has been confined to the construction and management of schools. The roles and responsibilities of PRI have been well defined by the Act introduced in Uttar Pradesh. However, the extent to which these acts are being implemented is a matter that needs further investigation.

A survey conducted by the Centre for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) has concluded that a host of limitations were imposed on functioning of the *panchayat* in two districts of Himachal Pradesh, which resulted in erosion of power of *panchayat*. Village level bodies like School Committees, Mother Teacher Association, Parent Teacher Association, set up by the State Government, are bypassing the Institutions of *Pradhans* (head of the village *panchayat*) and other elected *panchayat* representatives (ISS, 2002:3).

Another study conducted by Mathew and Nambiar (2002) dealt with devolution by state governments of the powers of primary education to *panchayats* in fourteen states. This study revealed that though all the state governments studied had passed conformity legislation and primary education was included in the list of functions to be transferred to the *panchayats*, most *panchayats* were not clear about their role as well as functions they are expected to

perform due to a lack of information or official communication from the respective State Governments regarding the transfer of power to *panchayats*. The financial autonomy of *panchayats* is affected by tied grants from state and central government. *Panchayats* have been devolved very little power to generate their own funds. In the absence of adequate funds, the *panchayats* very often are not in a position to spend on education. They have to prioritise the use of funds and in most cases education does not receive high priority (Mathew and Nambiar, 2002).

In comparison to all these states, the situation in Kerala is significantly different and this has been studied in detail (Isaac and Franke 2000; Mohanakumar, 2002; Mohanakumar, 2003; Lieten, 2002). A new *panchayat* act was enacted and a three-tier system of PRI came into existence in 1995. All the three tiers of the *panchayat* system were authorized to formulate local plans and to implement them with the active participation of people. Towards this, following the recommendations of the State Planning Board 40 percent of the State's budget was given to the *panchayat* system to execute these locally generated development plans. In addition to this, as informed by Joy (2001), a Government Order issued in 1996 transferred some significant powers related to primary education to the *gram panchayat* which included the supervision of routine functions of schools including the performance of teaching and non-teaching staff; providing necessary direction to the Deputy Director of Education if disciplinary actions are needed against any of these staff; the *gram panchayat* is authorized to monitor whether there are adequate staff in the school at the beginning of the academic year and it can provide necessary directions to the controlling officers to deploy staff either from Public Service Commission or through employment exchange; the *gram panchayat* is also made responsible for the supervision of the construction, repair and maintenance of school buildings, the supply of midday meals to children and distribution of scholarships and grants to students; as well as the provision of non-formal education etc. The *gram panchayat* can decide about remedial measures to minimise dropping out of children from school. In addition, is also authorised to supervise the workings of school complexes, conducting programmes like *aksharapulari*⁸ and other programmes implemented to improve quality. Similarly the district *panchayat* is authorized to supervise all the functions required to promote the quality of education in schools and is also responsible for the management of upper primary and high schools within the district.

In the case of Karnataka, which had a record of better performance with respect to the implementation of the PRI Act in the 1980s, the act was implemented in its diluted shape in the 1990s (Issac and Franke, 2000). However, the state government decided to adopt some significant measures following recommendations from the Task Force on School Education⁹

⁸ *Aksharapulari* is a programme implemented in 1993-94 as one of the pre people's planning campaign efforts (Tharakan and Tendler, 2003). This programme was implemented by the District Councils that attempted to link the Total Literacy Campaign with schemes for quality improvement to help the children to improve their ability in mathematics and science as well as to remove illiteracy. The programme targeted the children who were lagging behind others in their class (Chandrasekhar, et al, 2001).

⁹ "A Task Force appointed by the Karnataka Government in 2001 on quality improvement of elementary education, recommended the setting up of School Development and Monitoring Committees (SDMC) for each school. The SDMC includes nine parent representatives elected from among the parents whose children are presently studying in the school. The Task Force - headed by Dr. Raja Ramanna -suggested three-year tenure for these SDMCs. Karnataka State has been one of the pioneers in setting up these SDMCs which replaced the village education committees." (Vaijayanti, 2004:1)

giving greater importance to block and village levels in school education. For instance, the block was made the main unit for teacher recruitment and also School Development and Monitoring Committees were created in all the schools giving them considerable power and authority.

West Bengal has strengthened the PRIs since the act was passed in 1978, which gives a clear indication that state government can play an important role in promoting the involvement of PRIs in local governance (Mohanakumar, 2002). West Bengal is the first and the only major state to have had *panchayat* elections every five years since 1978 but despite its pioneering status in terms of reforms, the state lags behind several other states today in terms of devolution of power, finances and functions to the *panchayat*. Also, the extent of people's participation in the planning process is significantly less compared to that of Kerala (Ghatak and Ghatak, 2002).

The 74th Constitutional Amendment Act for decentralization of urban local governance was passed in 1993. Following this Act, some states have introduced a separate act to establish and empower urban bodies like the Municipal Corporation, Wards Committees etc for taking necessary decisions regarding the development of Wards. The Nagarpalika Act mandated the setting up of ward committees and designated them to be responsible for the planning and implementation of local services. While Karnataka has introduced the KMC Amendment Act in 1994 (CIVIC, 2009), in Kerala, the 74th Constitutional amendment has provided for the setting up of District Planning Committees (DPC) in each district with the aim of helping the district prepare a plan encompassing both rural and urban areas (Kannan and Pillai, 2007:14). In urban areas separate arrangements have also been made to tackle the problem of urban poverty and one of such programmes is '*Kudumbashree*' (family prosperity) that include Neighbourhood Groups, Area Development Societies and Community Development Societies the three tiers of Community Based Organisations (CBO).

'Kudumbashree' has emerged as strong social capital structure having crucial say on the design and development of programmes for poor (GoK, 2005:2).

This programme has also focused on the education of children. *Balsabha* (Children's Council) is an innovative attempt by *Kudumbashree* to promote creativity of children and their education.

On the whole, although most states have held elections for local bodies and have adopted revised legislation in this regard, until now, the involvement of *panchayats* in the functioning of the school system seems to be limited. In most cases *panchayats* have been responsible for constructing, repairing and maintenance of school building only and the lowest tier of *panchayat* has very little say in the educational matters of children and in the functioning of the local school. In addition, inadequate resources, the lack of participation of backward groups and women, and a lack of understanding about the roles, responsibilities and authority of *panchayat* members have seriously hindered *panchayats* from functioning effectively. It is commonly perceived by education functionaries that undue political interference by local leaders or general indifference towards educational development is undermining the positive role *panchayats* could play in education and therefore is weakening the process of local governance as a whole.

Nevertheless, many recent studies have re-emphasised the need for democratic decentralisation by involving *panchayats* in the education system. Based on a seven-state

study, Mehrotra (2006:39) strongly recommends that in order to improve teacher accountability, 'state governments (need to) genuinely decentralise decision making to the *panchayats* in respect of schooling.' and 'without any depth in decentralisation, there is little likelihood that the pattern of accountability of school system will change' (Mehrotra, 2006:40).

Often it is stated that the process of decentralisation needs to be initiated at the planning stage rather than implementation stage in order to make it more effective and meaningful. From this perspective, the centrally sponsored and externally assisted project District Primary Education Programme (DPEP)¹⁰ emphasized the formulation of district level perspectives and decentralised annual work plans from the beginning of the programme. In DPEP the district was considered as the most viable unit for educational planning though recently it has since been realized that the district is too large to develop any context-specific or needs-based plans. In view of DPEP experiences of planning process making district as a unit of planning, the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA)¹¹ located the planning process further down, advocating for habitation level planning¹² in the pre-project phase which would be the basis for the preparation of the District Elementary Education Plans (DEEP). The plans¹³ for SSA reveal that, though the majority of states could not conduct habitation level planning, district plans are basically the consolidation of block plans. Block data has been analysed to understand the block specificity and that has been reflected in some of the district plans. This can be considered as a major development as the 'unit' of planning is transferred to the sub-district level from the district. This has, as mentioned in the district plan documents, resulted in the involvement of block level functionaries who are familiar with the educational needs of their own block.

Corresponding to the changes in planning, empowered committees have also been set up at district and sub-district levels in some states for decentralised management of the implementation process. Some instances of functional decentralisation with respect to financial allocation also could be found in several States.

¹⁰ DPEP is a programme conceptualized and evolved on the basis of varied experiences the country possesses and supplemented by the experiences of various international agencies directly involved in the funding of primary education projects in the developing countries. The objectives of the programme are: i) to provide access to all children to primary education through formal primary schools or its equivalent through alternatives; ii) to reduce overall dropouts at the primary level less than 10 percent; iii) to increase achievement levels by 25 percentage points over and above the measured baseline levels; iv) to reduce disparities of all types to less than 5 percent. (Department of Education, 1993). Accessed in internet: <http://www.educationforallindia.com/page91.html>

¹¹ *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* is an effort to universalise elementary education by community-ownership of the school system. It is a response to the demand for quality basic education all over the country in a mission mode. The *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* is to provide useful and relevant elementary education for all children in the 6 to 14 age group by 2010. There is also another goal to bridge social, regional and gender gaps, with the active participation of the community in the management of schools. Accessed in internet: http://www.education.nic.in/ssa/ssa_1.asp

¹² The habitation (smallest unit within a village) level plans should be drawn up on the basis of the micro planning exercise. After orientation of community teams, the process of micro planning should be undertaken. This would involve intensive interaction with each household to ascertain the educational status and the educational need. The requirements have to be discussed at the habitation level before they are finalized. The broad financial and physical norms regarding school infrastructure, teachers and teaching learning materials will have to be the basis of the planning exercise. Accessed in the internet: http://www.education.nic.in/ssa/ssa_1.asp

¹³ These plans are prepared by the State Society and District Offices working for DPEP and SSA. These are unpublished; a few are available in the libraries of NUEPA, Technical Support Group and State Societies. These plans (perspective and annual) are used as the basis for approval of Government of India for financial allocation required for conducting activities as per SSA norms.

A study conducted by Bandyopadhyay (2006) reveals that, both Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal are in the process of strengthening block level committees by involving key functionaries (from the education department and PRI) working at the block level in the decision making processes. In West Bengal, the *Siksha Sthayee* Committee, a sub unit of *panchayat samiti* at the block level has been involved in all aspects of elementary education including the preparation of Perspective and Annual Work Plans for the district. The *Sabhadhipati* of the *Jilla Parishad* and the Deputy Commissioner of the district together meet the officers working on implementing SSA not only to monitor the programme but also to discuss various important issues. *Siksha Karmadhaksha* is the key functionary at the *Jilla Parishad* responsible for all the aspects of school education in the district including the functioning of *Sishu Siksha Kendras* - the *panchayat* run non-formal primary schools. Funds for many activities other than construction work are now being allocated to Village Education Committees (VECs) for distribution and utilisation in Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. In Uttar Pradesh a separate Grant in Aid Committee is responsible for the identification of NGOs to be involved in SSA, with a view to deconcentrating decision making processes (NUEPA, forthcoming).

The experiences from some States suggest that the conflicts in the distribution of power and functions of various stakeholders often arise while practicing decentralisation. It is to be remembered that these kinds of conflicts do arise at the initial stages of decentralisation and may pave the way for harmonization of educational management in the future. However, it is now well-accepted accountability has to be built up at the local level to ensure enrolment, retention and completion of each and every child in school. (Govinda, 1997) Without accountability of VEC and teachers, meaningful access is not possible, as they need to identify out of school and vulnerable children and take necessary action to enrol them. Teachers' accountability is also required as teacher absenteeism and attitudinal problem effect children's schooling. This has resulted in complexities at the grassroots level particularly after the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments were adopted in 1992.

Much research (e.g. Bray, 2003; Rose, 2003) suggests that the participation of community in schooling helps improve the relevance of provision according to need. Bringing schools closer to the community by developing an interface between school and community has been a major policy focus in India. The NPE, 1986 has an emphasis on people's involvement in education, and includes the role of NGOs and voluntary efforts in education management. It was envisaged that local communities, through appropriate bodies, would be assigned a major role in school improvement programmes. The role of community was made clear in NPE, 1986 and became part of the Programme of Action, 1992.

While the communities are varied in nature, their capacity to be involved in decision making processes also varies. Linking up management of schools with village *panchayats* or corresponding bodies in urban areas by establishing SMCs / VECs / MTAs / PTAs is viewed as one strategy for incorporating community involvement into school activities. For example, the District Primary Education Project was initiated in 1994. It provided a significant emphasis on community participation. Gradually the goal shifted from mere community participation to the development of community ownership. It was expected that community would play a greater role in quality improvement and school effectiveness. So, in addition to making the PRI responsible for educational management, almost all Indian states followed the recommendations of NPE 1986, by establishing Village Education Committees (VEC) involving teachers, community members and parents through Government Orders. Some states

like Karnataka have established School Development and Management Committees (SDMC). Some states have given statutory status to these grassroots level bodies with clearly defined roles and responsibilities. For example, very recently, Nagaland, one of the north eastern states introduced the Act of 'communitisation'¹⁴ to enable the community to manage their elementary education at the grass-root level. The VEC plays an important role in this process of communitisation. As mentioned by Bansal (2009:1-2):

In a communitised school, the academic, administrative and financial management of the school substantially vest with the community which acts through an elected Village Education Committee (VEC). Salaries of government teachers are disbursed through these VECs who are empowered to control teachers in a variety of ways, including implementing the "No Work, No Pay" principle. Three months advance salaries of teachers are drawn and kept in the VEC account to be disbursed by the VEC to teachers on the first of the month. The VEC are also responsible for universal enrolment and retention of children up to the age of 14 years. The community receives funds for key purposes, such as purchase of textbooks, furniture, repair of school buildings etc. The village thus treats the school as its own, thereby contributing their best in cash, kind and labour. The Government continues to supervise, support and supplement the activities. Communitisation thus augments the limited capital resources by making available the community's 'social capital' for betterment of the school and improvement of every facet of elementary education.

The provision of a hot cooked midday meal is an important strategy not only to improve access and retention, but also to improve the nutritional status of children. Varying strategies have been adopted by State Governments to meet the requirement of cooking and distributing meals to school children. Several states such as Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh have used *panchayati raj* bodies and PTAs for this purpose; Chattisgarh has encouraged local women's self-help groups to take up the responsibility. Both these approaches have further contributed to the involvement and ownership in school management activities by local stakeholders.

The SSA policy framework has placed considerable emphasis on the decentralization of elementary education and guidelines have been developed to establish linkages between the various levels of management. However, due to fast changes in education, the establishment of forward and backward linkages with different administrative levels continues to be challenging. The involvement of local communities has also been promoted through other activities such as:

- (a) Monitoring attendance in the community and grassroots level structures like VEC, PTA, MTA, *Mahila Samooh*, youth clubs etc.
- (b) Regular micro-planning exercises to be undertaken involving the community.

¹⁴ Communitisation is a unique concept introduced by the state government of Nagaland for empowerment of community by transferring certain management responsibilities to the community through an Act, called the Nagaland Communitisation of Public Institutions and Services Act, 2001: (http://www.nagaland.nic.in/new_policy/communitisation.htm). The main objective of communitisation of education is to provide quality education and improve capabilities of the children by developing partnership between community and government for delivering essential educational services. With the enactment of Public Institutions and Services Act, 2002 (Act No. 2), the state government framed necessary rules for Communitisation of Elementary Education. With this Act VECs became legal local authority to manage elementary education in village (Joshi, 2005).

(c) Follow up and tracking of drop out children to bring them back to school either through camps or bridge courses.

(d) Organising retention drives on a regular basis to put pressure on parents and the school system to ensure the retention of girls. In addition, other activities are taking place to support access, retention, equity and quality across the states which include communities. These include infrastructural development, remedial classes, the improvement of coverage and quality of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) centres and innovative activities for Scheduled Caste (SC) / Scheduled Tribe (ST) students and girls.

From the above discussion, it is discernable that concrete measures for establishing a system of local governance in education have taken different shapes in different states. In general, state governments have gone for a technical administrative approach, which involves top-down transformation through a change of rules and regulations with or without corresponding legislation. By implication, the stakeholders at various levels of the hierarchy are expected to practice the new roles and functions as explained in the rulebook. For alternatives to this route, a socio-political approach could be adopted, which would involve building the institutional structures from below through direct and active participation of the people at the grassroots. Such an approach, however, can only be found in short term explorations under specially designed education development projects such as *Lok Jumbish* (Govinda, 2003).

Initiatives for the education of the urban poor have also been undertaken in most states. Many such activities are increasingly being part of SSA. The guidelines of SSA have already acknowledged the need for special interventions for urban deprived children and involve urban local bodies like the Municipality Corporation¹⁵, the Ward¹⁶ Committee etc. which were created following the 74th Constitutional Amendment. According to the SSA norm, the Municipal Corporation of larger cities is considered as a 'district' for purposes of the preparation of Elementary Education Plans. The arrangements for decentralized management are also applied to these proposals. These proposals can be developed by Municipal Corporations and the State government needs to recommend these for funding under SSA, clearly specifying how the state share will be provided. All norms of SSA are applicable to urban areas. In addition to Ward Committees, Urban Slum clusters¹⁷ can also be considered a unit of planning in such areas. In view of the problems unique to urban areas, coordination and convergence are required across the different departments and local bodies to implement different educational programmes in urban areas.

¹⁵ In India a Municipal Corporation is a local government body that administers a city of population 200,000 or more. Under the *panchayati raj* system, it interacts directly with the state government, though it is administratively part of the district it is located in. The Municipal Corporation consists of members elected from the wards of the city. The Mayor and Deputy Mayor are elected by the members among themselves. A Municipal Commissioner, who is from the Indian Administrative Service is appointed to head the administrative staff of the Municipal Corporation, implement the decisions of the Corporation and prepare its annual budget. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Municipal_corporation

¹⁶ A ward is an electoral district within a municipality used in local politics. In certain cities of India, like Mumbai, a ward is an administrative unit of the city region: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ward_\(country_subdivision\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ward_(country_subdivision))

¹⁷ An area can be considered as a slum in urban area if the majority of buildings in the area are dilapidated, are over-crowded, have faulty arrangement of buildings or streets, narrow streets, lack ventilation, light or sanitation facilities, and are detrimental to safety, health or morals of the inhabitants in that area, or otherwise in any respect unfit for human habitation. A slum cluster is defined as a spot where many slums are located covering a large area. <http://jnnurm.nic.in/nurmudweb/toolkit/LucknowCdp/Chapter4.pdf>

This calls for a provision of planning distinctively for the urban areas either as separate plans or as part of District Plans in the case of smaller towns. In either case, this would require partnership with NGOs, Municipal bodies, etc. (GoAP, 2009).

Many initiatives have been established by different state governments to bring the children of the urban poor into schools. However, this is not an easy task as these urban poor children are heterogeneous groups who require diversified approaches and strategies for their education. These might include flexible strategies like bridge courses, remedial teaching centres, residential camps, drop-in-centres and half-way homes. All strategies require extensive community mobilisation and prior work at the local level with parents, children, NGO workers, employers and other stakeholders working in local governing bodies (GoI, 1999).

In addition to urban local bodies, the involvement of other agencies can also be important. These agencies include the Land Development Agency, Cantonment Boards and Railways, Police, Association of Contractors and their regulating authorities, Ministry of Women and Child Development, Ministry of Urban Development, Department of Transport and the Judiciary. For instance, in Chandigarh:

The Executive Committee of *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*, Union Territory (UT), Chandigarh decided to involve the community and elected representatives of *Panchayati Raj* Institutions, local bodies, PTAs and other grass root level groups in the management of elementary education to improve accountability and transparency. Therefore, Education Committees, involving the members of the community, have been constituted at Cluster level with the Councillors of the respective wards and members of the Ward Committees and PTAs..... The Executive Committee has decided to enter into partnership with Non Government Organizations (NGOs) for mainstreaming of out-of-school children and for capacity building of community. It has also decided to constitute another Committee in convergence with UT Labour Department to eliminate child labour and to bring these children to main stream of education..... It was proposed to open Day Care Centres near the labour colonies, villages and slums to relieve the elder children from the responsibilities of sibling care. These Day Care Centres should commensurate with the working hours of the parents..... The Committee seriously viewed the shortage of class rooms and learning spaces in various schools and for Alternative Innovative Education (AIE) centres and for non-fulfilment of the target fixed for construction of school buildings and additional classrooms in schools..... It was decided to allot construction work of school buildings to Chandigarh Housing Board to speed up the execution of the project for expansion of the capacity. It was also decided that school education committees may get prefabricated structures raised for additional classrooms as per their requirements under the guidance of Chandigarh Housing Board (Government of Chandigarh, 2008).

From the above analysis it is clear that in recent years Indian states have been developing their administrative structures for implementing the PRI Act which has provided the framework for decentralization. Ironically, the completion of the Act depends on the action taken by the state. It is because of this, the status of implementation of this Act varies across the states. As mentioned above, in Madhya Pradesh, decentralization is confined to delegating administrative power and functions whereas in Kerala, PRIs are involved in planning, implementation and monitoring and 40% of the state budget was given to PRIs. Karnataka and West Bengal are in the process of strengthening their PRIs. Financial constraints have been a major hindrance in many states including West Bengal in the implementation of the Act. The

state governments are reluctant to provide budgetary support to the PRIs resulting in serious setbacks in the functioning of local governing bodies in many states. It has also been observed that local bodies are involved only in the implementation stage instead of at the planning stage which calls for the attention of the government. Local governance in education has taken different shapes in different states according to the policies taken up by the state. The earlier DPEP and the current SSA framework have strengthened the process of decentralization in education. Since then community participation in the administration of schools in the villages has improved significantly in many states. Many states have taken up their own policies to increase people's participation in the governance of education. However, it is also increasingly realised that India has long way to go to translate the policy of decentralisation of educational governance into action in any real sense.

4. Initiatives for Strengthening District Level Management

In a large country like India with a number of federated units and with an expanding system of education, the issue of district and sub-district level action gains further significance as it also raises issues of flows of finances between the centre and state governments on the one hand and between the state government and the lower level governance structures on the other. In many cases, issues related to the opening of new schools, deciding on financial allocations for school development activities, teacher appointments and posting become issues of contention. This section discusses the district level initiatives that have been undertaken for strengthening the management system.

In this context, DPEP attempted to put in place a new framework for the management of primary education at the district level which would function with considerable autonomy and with the objective of actively involving the community. This has been adopted further while implementing SSA. As mentioned earlier, under DPEP and SSA, the district has become an important unit of planning, financial allocation and implementation although state and union governments have continued to influence all decisions regarding programme implementation¹⁸. The setting up of district level units with substantial roles for planning and management under DPEP had its precursors in at least two previous enunciations within the education sector. First is the explicit recommendation contained in the National Policy on Education of 1986, later reiterated in the 1992 statement, to make the district and lower level management organs to be fully authorised to plan and manage primary education. The second was the success of *Zilla Saksharata Samitis* (District Literacy Committees) created for literacy campaigns.

While in some states, the mainstream education department at the district level was given responsibility to implement DPEP, in some others, a parallel structure was established by creating the District Project Office under the coordination of District Project Officer. There are also examples of various departments integrating into one department in order to function better, for example, in Madhya Pradesh. With decentralization involving the transfer of decision making powers to local bodies, the convergence of structures and processes for ensuring a common perspective is considered critical. Accordingly administrative arrangements for integrating structures have been initiated at all levels. At the state level, elementary and adult education programmes have been brought under one agency designated as the *Rajya Siksha Kendra*, which was created by bringing the Directorate of Adult Education, the state project offices for various projects and SCERT together into one common institution. district and block level elementary and adult education structures have also been integrated as *Zila Siksha* and *Janpad Siksha Kendras*¹⁹, respectively so that different agencies and institutions involved in the

¹⁸ The approach has been described as ‘centralised decentralisation’ (see Varghese, 1996). However, some scholars argue that considerable efforts have been made to make planning process under DPEP consultative and responsive to local needs. For instance, Mercer (2001:59) observes, “Prior to a district becoming part of DPEP, a perspective five to seven year plan is required. Much work goes into the preparation of these plans using expertise and experience from districts already within the programme and from state and national level institutions. Once perspective plans are approved at state and central levels and by the funding agency or agencies concerned, then steps can be taken to construct the annual work plan and budget. This is a detailed and difficult exercise, which requires a) accurate and reliable data both up-to-date and over a period of time, say for the past three years, and b) considerable expertise and understanding not only of the mathematics involved, but also of the social dynamics at work at the village, cluster, block, district and state levels...”.

¹⁹ *Jilla Siksha Kendra* is district education centre and *Janpad Siksha Kendra* is block education centre. These centres were created for implementing the literacy programmes.

planning and implementation of various education development programmes come together for coordinated action (GoMP, 2003).

In addition, professional staff, working on a contract basis, were recruited at the district level to provide technical and academic support and to coordinate the various activities. Whatever the official arrangement is, the functionaries at the district level appointed for DPEP were expected to work in coordination with other developmental officers at the district levels such as the district *panchayat* office and mainstream education department under the instruction of District Collectors. They were also expected to establish the coordination with the District Institute of Education Training (DIET) functionaries to conduct teacher training, Teaching Learning Materials (TLM) preparation, action research and to provide regular support to schools.

Another major initiative in DPEP and now in SSA has been the involvement of NGOs in the provision of educational opportunities through accelerated learning programmes designed for educationally disadvantaged groups (including the urban poor). Accelerated learning strategies have been established. For instance, the strategy adopted by MV Foundation for mainstreaming child labour into school through bridge courses and back to school camps. Several NGOs²⁰ are involved in various kinds of joint intervention to deal with issues of access and retention.

Local governance of schools involving NGOs has resulted in improvement in the enrolment of physically challenged students. Integrated Education for Disabled children (IED) has become an important component of SSA.

The DPEP management framework, however, raises certain critical questions, which have a bearing on its long-term sustainability in the Indian context. As a centrally sponsored scheme of the Government of India, the DPEP maintained an independent identity at the district level away from the general education administration set up in the state. Could such an arrangement really lead to a system-wide transformation of the educational management set-up of the state? (Govinda and Varghese, 1993). The issue gains particular importance as SSA has adopted the framework almost wholly and covering all States and Union Territories.

From the above analysis it can be understood that, as an intermediate structure below state level, the district level administration has a major role to play and for educational governance. District Education Officers have major responsibilities like opening new schools, financial allocation to schools, teachers' appointment and posting, etc. The roles and responsibilities of DEOs have undergone considerable changes during implementation of DPEP and SSA with initiation of district level planning and management of education widening the capacity building needs of these functionaries. In addition, the creation of new structures like block resource centres and cluster resource centres at the sub-district level and convergence with other departments like social welfare department and NGOs has resulted in more complexities in educational management, further changing the roles and responsibilities of district level functionaries as well as those working at the sub-district level. The following section provides a brief account of the management initiatives introduced at the sub-district level.

²⁰ For example, Cini Asha in Kolkata; Pratham in Mumbai and several other cities; Centre for Rural Education and Development Action (CREDA) in Mirzapur; Bodh Siksha Samiti in Rajasthan and Azim Premji Foundation in Karnataka.

5. Management Initiatives at the Sub-District Level

Although the district continues to be considered the unit for planning elementary education under SSA, attempts have been made to further decentralise the process. For instance, the Education for All Project in Rajasthan, namely, *Lok Jumbish* adopted the block with about 250 schools on an average as the unit for effective planning and decision-making for education development. It is argued that if grassroots level involvement through micro-planning as recommended by the National Policy on Education 1986 is to get integrated into the regular planning process, the block would be the best unit of planning, as the district level, with an average of 2,500 schools might prove quite unwieldy. Even during DPEP, block level planning was attempted in many states and District Annual Work Plans and Budgets began including block specific strategies in some of the states such as Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Madhya Pradesh.

In addition, DPEP proposed making habitation the unit of planning and habitation level planning has been made mandatory at the pre project phase under SSA. However, the preparation of habitation level plans has not been attempted. House-to-house surveys have been conducted only for assessing the educational needs of the habitations and villages. Similarly, school mapping exercises proposed in the SSA guidelines have remained on paper only. Despite the absence of such sub-district planning, it has been observed that the involvement of sub-district level functionaries made it possible to assess the actual situation of the habitations as well as schools.

Community participation is considered as the single most effective means of improving the functioning of schools, with the education of children seen as the joint responsibility of home and school (Govinda and Varghese, 1993). Village Education Committees (VECs) have been set up in the majority of states as the interface between the school and the community. One can also observe a distinct shift from having informal parent teacher associations (PTAs) to the creation of formal School Management Committees (SMCs) as has been seen in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and some other states.

This section has clearly pointed out the fact that there is a need to evolve initiatives at the sub-district level to strengthen further the process of decentralization making local governance more responsive and effective. On the one hand, service providers at this sub-district level need to understand the local context and respond accordingly, ensuring better service delivery, while on the other hand, an enabling environment has to be created for active involvement of community and civil society at the grassroots level, raising demand for education and also for enhancing the functioning of schools with its significant impact on access and participation of children in school. Different approaches have been taken for making decentralisation work for strengthening local governance of education, some of which are discussed in following section.

6. Emerging Institutional Arrangements: Widely Different Approaches

Concrete measures for establishing a system of local governance in education have taken different shapes in different states of the country, resulting in different types of institutional arrangement. It is obvious that the way these institutional structures are created and the nature of such arrangements will significantly impinge on the actual empowerment and functioning of the education governance system as a whole. As the move towards decentralisation of educational governance has picked up momentum over the last two decades, questions remain over how a centralised system is dismantled to make way for effective decision making at lower rungs of the hierarchy. In so doing, state governments had two options: the first was to adopt a technical administrative approach, which involved top down transformation through the changing of rules and regulations with or without corresponding legislation. By implication the stakeholders at various levels of the hierarchy would be expected to practice the new roles and functions as explained in the rulebook; the second option, was a social-political approach, involving building institutional structures from below through the direct and active participation of the people at the grassroots.

Attempts in most states follow the former approach though one could find explorations of the latter kind in some education development projects (Govinda, 2003). For example, the Annual Report (GoWB, 2004) of West Bengal mentioned that the *Paschim Banga Rajya Shishu Shiksha Mission (PBRSSM)*²¹ was established to function as a societal mission to supplement the efforts of the school education department in order to bring about fundamental changes in primary and elementary education. It acts as an autonomous and independent body which is responsible for the overall improvement of socio-economic and cultural circumstances. The district level project office (DPO) and cluster level resource centres (CLRC) function under this mission to implement the state education policies. In Karnataka, the establishment of school management committees in each school has been a part of state policy. In 2001, the government of Karnataka issued an order to establish SDMCs²² in each school. That set the stage for parents to have a direct say over school affairs and participate in school management. The order aimed at empowering SDMCs to target several managerial issues related to schools, and included attendance of teachers and punctuality.

Whatever the approach adopted for transforming the system, the basic principle seems to be to transfer the responsibilities of education governance to the democratically elected local self-government bodies (*Panchayati Raj* bodies) and/or their counterparts at the school level. But this also depends on the seriousness with which state governments have been promoting local self-government which is quite uneven across the country. That said, within the broad principle of governance by local bodies, one could identify four trends taking shape in different states. These will be explored below.

6.1 Empowering Local Self Government Institutions through Legislative Measures

The first model is based on empowering local self government institutions through legislative measures. The model typically consists of committees set up under PRIs at various levels,

²¹ The state society in West Bengal implementing *Sarva Siksha Abhiyan* in the state.

²² In 2004, the Government of Karnataka decided to quash the system of electing parents to SDMC in 50,000 state owned schools. The government has decided to open these positions to MLAs for nomination. Subramanian (2006).

which have been empowered to act through appropriate legislative action at the state level. In this approach as illustrated in Kerala, the state government adopted legislation transferring wide-ranging powers and responsibilities to *panchayat raj* bodies in the area of education along with several other social development sectors. The state government devolves about 35 to 40 percent of the development budget to local bodies. The *panchayat* development plans include school improvement planning as an integral component and considerable funds are spent on this purpose. Parent teacher associations have been strengthened to take an active role in the implementation of school improvement programmes. Many observers like Mohanakumar (2002:1492) have appreciated the effort made in Kerala:

The unique model of People's Planning in Kerala with its major stress on involvement of people in all activities, from the identification of development issues and resources at the local level through project formulation, implementation and monitoring to social auditing for transparency has set an example before all other states for operationalisation of LSGIs.

Whether one agrees with such euphoric assessment of the Kerala experience or not, the model illustrates a possible way forward for decentralizing educational governance through the institutional framework of *panchayati raj* institutions. Some other states like Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Orissa have provided statutory status to the local committees working at school level.

According to the Government Order in Karnataka, the SDMC which is the general council of school's parents is the highest body; it elects nine parent representatives and in turn elects a president. The core group can co-opt other members into the committee who may not be parents of school children but may include elected representatives, officials and members of community at large. The committee has several powers. They can scrutinize finances of the school (receipts and expenditures), auction crops grown in the school's land and for accrual to the school education fund and also use government funds to buy necessary items for schools.²³ Similarly, in Andhra Pradesh, initiative has been taken for strengthening community involvement by establishing school committee comprised of parents in each school through an Act of the State Legislature in 1998. It has been mandated that half of the chairpersons of these committees shall be women (NIEPA and UNESCO, 2003:24).

6.2 Combining Delegation and Devolution

The second approach combines delegation and devolution. The principle is to initiate gradual changes in such a way that one can quickly withdraw the change if proved inappropriate. In more than one way, this is illustrative of the efforts of the Madhya Pradesh government, which has recently completed an elaborate process of deciding on the powers and responsibilities for education governance at local levels through *panchayat* bodies. Unlike Kerala where a large proportion of schools are under private management, though fully supported by government funds, schools in Madhya Pradesh are almost wholly funded and managed by the state

²³ However, as a recent publication of CMS India indicates "the implementation of the project was marred by very low level of awareness and enthusiasm among the target community. For example, a study undertaken by the state government found that less than half of the SDMC members (48 per cent) were unaware of its exact composition and its function. In fact, 66 per cent of the respondents reported that they were even unaware of any government circular on SDMCs. A very miniscule number was aware of the actual procedure and powers of the committees. Nevertheless, the model holds potential and with proper dissemination of information and holistic training of the target community at the local level can improve the quality of school administration." (Centre for Media Studies, 2005).

government. Therefore, the approach has been one of cautious and gradual transformation. Actions have been initiated through two processes. On the one hand, significant powers and responsibilities have been delegated through executive orders of the State Department of Education to *panchayat* bodies at different levels - district, block and village levels. However, the state government is simultaneously moving ahead with comprehensive legislation to transfer the school education system to the control of the *panchayat* system. Such a dual approach is being adopted, as most of the personnel in the schools are legal employees of the state government. This dual track transformation is likely to continue until such time that the whole system comes fully under the legal control of the local-self-government bodies. In order to implement the local governance process, Village Education Committees have been established involving the elected representatives of the local *panchayat* bodies along with other community and school representatives. Thus, the approach essentially consists of restructuring of the system through the top-down rewriting of the rulebook by the government bureaucracy, which subsequently gets legitimised through political and legislative processes.

In relation to this, one of the important initiatives that was undertaken by the Madhya Pradesh Government is the introduction of *Jana Sikshan Adhiniyam*²⁴ in 2002. This is an important legal framework for educational reform which seeks to strengthen institutional partnerships between the government, local bodies and the community in the task of universal elementary and adult education promoting equity and quality. Whereas it legitimises involvement of local bodies like *gram panchayat*, *panchayat samiti* etc. whereas delegates some responsibilities to PTAs. As mentioned in the Human Development Report of Madhya Pradesh:

The Act recognises the right of every child to basic education and seeks to remove impediments to access and participation in schools both by improving delivery as well as by creating social pressure. Parental responsibility for compulsory education up to age 14 is enforceable by *Gram Sabha*. Strengthening decentralization, the Act lays down clearly the roles and responsibilities of key agencies: parents, teachers, local bodies and government. A crucial role is assigned to the PTA to be set up for every school (GoMP, 2002:25).

Apart from all these, the Act also state that teachers are not to be normally deployed for non teaching tasks and prior permission is not required to open schools up to the middle level. In addition, the Act also envisaged for development of *jan siksha yojana*²⁵ from PTA level. Education Funds (*shiksha kosh*) are also to be set up at the school, the district and the state levels facilitating the mobilization of additional resources. Thus, this Act has facilitated financial decentralization as well. A Public Education Report has to be presented to the PTA and District Government on a quarterly basis and to the legislative assembly. These reports are used for *jan shiksha yojana*.²⁶

According to the Uttar Pradesh *Panchayat* Act of 1994 (The Uttar Pradesh Local Self Government Laws (Amendment) Act 1994 passed by the legislature of UP to incorporate the mandatory provisions of the CAA 1992), six committees have been created with specific roles and responsibilities to assist all three tiers of *panchayat and education committee is one of these six committees* (GoUP, 2006). The *shiksha* (education) committee:

²⁴ People Education Act in Madhya Pradesh

²⁵ People Education Plan

²⁶ People Education Plans

has emerged as the main instrument to shape the responsibilities entrusted to *panchayats* in the sphere of primary and secondary education (Srivastava, 2006:95).

Subsequently under the amendment of Basic *Shiksha* Act in 2000, the VEC needs to have the *pradhan* as chairperson, three parents / guardians (one woman) and a senior teacher of primary school (member secretary). These VECs were given specific roles and responsibilities including selection of contract teachers, establishment of Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS) centres, supervision of construction of new schools and the mobilisation of the community for the schooling of children (Srivastava, 2006).

6.3 Decentralization through Quasi-autonomous Local Units

A common complaint associated with implementing projects and programmes sponsored by the central governments has been the inefficiency of the state governments to channel funds in a prompt fashion and implement programmes effectively. The emergence of *Zilla Saksharata Samitis*²⁷ for implementing mass literacy campaigns under the auspices of the National Literacy Mission represented an effort to offer considerable autonomy to a district voluntary body specially created for the purpose. The main advantage of the model was that funds from the national level could flow directly to these semi-autonomous bodies without going through the traditional route of state government. Similar effort was made under the District Primary Education Programme to create an empowered semi-autonomous body at the state level. Similarly, many state governments have attempted to create quasi-legal bodies such as village education committees or school management committees at the grassroots level. The recent effort of the Government of Karnataka to establish School Development and Monitoring Committees with delegated powers is an example of this approach. Government of Andhra Pradesh also has taken similar steps with respect to school management committees. The danger of this arrangement is that it may lead to parallelism between these structures and the existing system structures on the one hand and the emerging local self-government bodies on the other. Also, many observers consider this antithetical to decentralization as it circumscribes the authority of the state governments as well as local self-government bodies, and implicitly promotes central control.

6.4 Process Based Model – Building from Below

The fourth approach is premised on the principle that reforming the system can follow actual practice. The attempt as illustrated by the *Lok Jumbish* project is to build a system of local governance for primary education from the grassroots level. The basic assumption is that capabilities for self-management among the community members evolve through practice rather than prescription. Therefore, the project began vesting in the community the responsibility of determining the demand and preparing local education development plans based on concrete empirical explorations. Through this approach, the attempt was to create a system of management from below by laying great emphasis on the formation of village teams. A core team of the block level education management committee functioned as a spearhead for the purpose, using participatory school mapping and other aspects of micro-planning as a method of people's mobilization. Villagers themselves carried out field surveys and prepared an education map of the village indicating the status of every child in the village. An important feature of the approach was its focus on the issue of equity by ensuring the participation of traditionally excluded sections in the process of institution building. This is

²⁷ The literacy programmes in the districts are being implemented through voluntary agencies known as *Zila (District) Saksharta (Literacy) Samities (Committee)*.

critical in Rajasthan, which has still a long way to go to reach the goal of universal elementary education. The state government, however, is yet to take full note of this practical move and legitimise the bodies created under the project through official recognition.

6.5 Need for Convergence

It is apparent that whatever the institutional structure that has been created, the acceptance of these structures and their functioning by the state as well as the community is critical for their sustainability and effective functioning. It would be helpful to resolve conflicts that emerge from time to time. For instance, many local level organized groups working in education have tended to close over time due to inadequate recognition from the state. Such legitimisation is required not only for civil society initiatives but also for state initiated reforms if they have to be actively followed by the field functionaries and the larger public. In the latter case, mobilization of the people at large to embrace new roles and responsibilities at the grassroots level and facilitate the acquisition of necessary capabilities for playing these roles would be required to create convergence of purpose and function across the stakeholder groups.

This section mainly argues that a centralized system can be replaced by local governance to make way for effective decision making at the lower ranges of hierarchy. In doing so, two approaches have been suggested. One is a technical administration approach and second is a socio-political approach. Moreover, the basic principle seems to be the transfer of responsibilities of educational governance to democratically elected local self-government bodies or counterparts at the school level, depends on state responsibility. The four different approaches towards the governance by local bodies are – first, empowering local self government institutions through legislative measures, second is combining delegation and devolution, third is associated with implementing projects and programmes of central government, and fourth is reformation of the system to make it community friendly (access). Finally, the section concludes that sustainable and effective functioning of the structures developed during the process of decentralisation is only possible when the state as well as the community accept it. Only then one can expect that different initiatives for decentralisation may have some impact on enrolment, participation and performance of children transforming mere access to ‘meaningful access’. Drawing reference from different experiences of states, the subsequent section will throw some light on these aspects.

7. Linking Local Management of Schools with Access and Participation

Attempts to bring schools and communities closer together has meant that increasing emphasis has been given to such bodies as Village Education Committees, Parents Teacher Associations and Mother Teacher Associations. State Governments have officially defined the roles and responsibilities of VECs or other similar bodies. Research (Ramachandran, 2001, Govinda and Diwan, 2003) indicates that that school functioning has improved significantly in places where communities have been involved actively. This section intends to examine how local governance has impacted on access and schooling participation of children. One of the major strategies with this respect has been increasing involvement of communities which is considered as key to local governance. The following section elaborates upon this issue at greater length.

There are a number of examples of how communities can and have been involved in schooling in India. In most states, evidence is found that VECs are involved in a variety of activities ranging from *kalajatha* (cultural programmes for awareness generation of the importance of education of children, about different educational programme, and different schemes available for incentives etc.), VEC fairs, parental counselling, and community events for parental motivation. In some states, VECs are responsible for mobilizing and utilizing funds available from the government as well as from other sources. Under SSA, VECs in consultation with school authorities decide how to use school grants for the development of schools. There are many instances where community members have been involved in volunteer teaching and Teaching Learning Materials (TLM) preparation in addition to monitoring regular attendance of teachers and students. Special programmes such as *praveshotsav* or enrolment drive, *ma-beti mela* (*mother-daughter fair*) and teleconferencing have helped organize communities around schooling and also for creating demand for education. This has been particularly useful in promoting participation of girls in schooling (Ramachandran, 2001:5).

The involvement of Mother Teacher Associations in the functioning of schools was part of the DPEP and in many states MTAs have started playing active role (Ramachandran, 2001). For example, in Himachal Pradesh MTAs were found actively involved in many villages leading to improvement in attendance and performance of children. Recently local school management bodies have also been taking part in cooking and the distribution of mid-day meal in many states. In some States, women motivator groups have been mobilized to promote girls' education. In Maharashtra, *Sahayoginis*²⁸ are appointed for a cluster of schools and in Madhya Pradesh *Sahayoginis* are appointed in each block (Ramachandran, 2004). Most states have encouraged alternative schools to enable out of school girls to access basic education. These special programmes run with community support are also part of the larger strategy to mobilize the community (Ramachandran, 2001:5). Also a special package has been designed under SSA called the National Programme for the Education of Girls at the Elementary Level (NPEGEL) to reduce the gender gap in the blocks identified as educationally backward in terms of women's education. In view of the varying situation in gender relations that is attributed to social and cultural norms operating within a specific area, community support seems to be the most essential ingredient for running this programme.

Women's participation in local governance remains a critical concern across the states as generally their representation and effective participation even in *panchayat* meetings and

²⁸ Women animators who can establish a link between community and school to promote girls' education

VECs is found to be quite low. Drawing evidence from different states, Ramachandran (2001:11)²⁹ states:

While VECs have been formed in all the DPEP-I districts, evidence from the field suggests that women's participation is not uniformly effective.

However, it was found that with more training opportunities access to adequate information and NGO interventions, the participation of women could be increased resulting in considerable improvement in children's particularly girls' education. Participation of girls in school increases if Mother Teacher Association is actively involved making schools more gender friendly and secured place for girls. Women's participation became more effective in the districts where the *Mahila Samakhya* Programme is being implemented (Ramachandran, 2001:5) and in view of this, some states have established links with the ongoing *Mahila Samakhya* Programme. This programme is showing significant impacts on the education of children, particularly girls³⁰. For example, in Andhra Pradesh, AP *Mahila Samata* which implements the *Mahila Samakhya* Programme also implements the NPEGEL programme (started in 2003-04) to provide education to disadvantaged girls in 37 *mandals* in its project areas while in other *mandals* it is implemented directly by SSA (Jandhyala, forthcoming).

In view of the need to promote women's participation and also the special roles of community and teachers for this purpose, gender sensitization training has been integrated with VEC as well as teacher training programmes. In addition, in many states, mothers have been motivated to participate in the education of their children particularly girls since the initiation of the programme like DPEP.

The programme strategy has had an overwhelming impact on girls' enrolment, especially SC/ST girls. The parent and community now recognise the need and are willing to send girls to school. With a conducive environment for girls' education created at the community level, girls' enrolment has shown a significant upward trend in DPEP districts compared to non-DPEP districts (GoI, 2003:54).

Community participation is now the hallmark of various educational programmes in the states but still there is a lot to do to ensure the effective participation of the community in school

²⁹ Ramachandran (2001) found that in Andhra Pradesh 50% of statutory school committee members were women. In Assam, it is less than 20%, in Gujarat two of nine VEC members are women and in Himachal Pradesh, Haryana and Tamil Nadu 30 to 33% were women but in reality their actual participation in VEC meeting has been found much lower in many villages across the country.

³⁰ The evidence from a study conducted in Bihar (Janssens, van de Gaag and Gunning, 2004) strongly suggests the positive relationship between the *Mahila Samakhya* (MS) programme and increased individual and community social capital. The findings strongly suggest a positive relationship with pre and primary school enrolment of not only of members, but of non-members as well of *Mahila Samakhya* Programme. The authors state: 'Controlling for child, household and community characteristics, we find that children in programme villages are significantly more likely to be enrolled in preschool. The number of preschools, itself strongly correlated with the presence of the programme, is highly predictive of enrolment. We also find a significant and additional relationship between individual participation in the programme and preschool enrolment. Finally, the evidence suggests that children living in programme villages, whose mothers do not participate themselves, are significantly more likely to be enrolled as well. In short, the programme seems to have a direct relationship with preschool enrolment. For primary school the findings are approximately similar. The main difference is that the spill-overs of the programme are much less visible. Only girls and children from the lowest castes seem to benefit of the presence of the programme regardless of whether their mother participates herself' (Janssens, Van de Gaag and Gunning, 2004).

affairs. One such effort may be to improve trust with the community by involving them in different activities including financial transactions. One Government of India document states:

To ensure effective participation, it is essential to have faith in the community ability without which all efforts to bring about their participation would be half hearted. The community is heterogeneous, stratified and has different sections with differing and sometimes antagonistic interest too. While eliciting community support, it is important that persons belonging to deprived sections get due representation in the form created for community participation (GoI, 1999:13).

In view of this, more and more community-based activities have found their place in SSA plans. In some states, local self-government bodies have been given the authority to select and recruit teachers. For example, the Rajasthan Government has modified the procedure of teacher recruitment such that while regular primary school teachers are recruited by *Zilla Parishads*, (Ramachandran, 2001). *Gram sabha* and *panchayats* are entrusted with the selection of para-teachers. It may be mentioned that even though some aspects of this approach to teacher recruitment has been questioned, empowering local self government bodies with respect to the governance of elementary education has been one of the recommendations of constitutional amendments concerning the composition of *Panchayati Raj* bodies. Almost all states have taken this policy option to meet the challenges of increasing enrolment by recruiting more and more teachers at the local level.

In spite of policy recommendations, the examples of the non-participation and exclusion of parents and community from school affairs is still apparent in many cases and this is a major concern. Often their participation remains limited to the contribution of resources in cash or kind³¹. Local management of education, community participation in educational management, building community ownership, seems oversimplified. One recent study (Ramachandran, 2004) has explored the complex web of interrelationships between social power and formal education. In a review of this work, (Manjrekar, 2005:248) states that:

Dynamics of poor at the family, community and village level determine which child goes to which school, which groups have a say in the working of local level communities to monitor education, as well as the social experience of the child in school. The types of schools available and their location within villages marked by caste separation and segregation also play a critical role in influencing parent's decisions about schooling for their children. What emerges clearly is that in a situation where parallel systems of schooling exist, who goes to which school is increasingly coming to be defined by the child's gender, class caste and community..... similar complexities arise in the context of village education committees, where local politics of class caste and gender play an important role in their working.

Problems regarding community participation are also found in states like Kerala. A recent study by Mukundan and Bray (2004) indicates that the rhetoric of decentralisation in the education sector does not match the reality in this state that has strong reputation for political participation and has introduced recent initiatives for decentralisation. Experience shows that many institutional structures such as Village Education Committees and school complexes

³¹ The study conducted by Ramachandran et.al. (2002:1608) reveals that the "evidence from the field indicates that they (VECs) either do not function or seem to function with a mechanical intensity rather than a genuine sense of participation and commitment." While in Haryana, the VECs were found upholding "the interests of dominant group", (1608) in Madhya Pradesh, "caste identities were reflected in school committees" (1608).

created through executive orders from the state have never taken roots and there is an absence of acceptance among stakeholders. It is important to work towards convergence between the state and that of the grassroots level stakeholders. In recent years, some initiatives have been taken in different states towards this and a few examples can be cited here. These states have taken up different kinds of programmes according to their requirements and also have made administrative arrangements to implement these programmes not only for elementary education but also for the children of pre-school level that could improve attendance of children in school at the later stage.

Uttaranchal (a new hilly state which was earlier part of Uttar Pradesh) has opened *Balvadis* to provide quality ECCE programme to 3-6 years old children. This programme was initiated in two villages in 1998 and has expanded to 321 villages. The community owns each centre and provides a room for the centre while the members of the women's group maintain the centre. *Bal mela* (Children's fair) is also organized by a local NGO, the centre and community together.

The involvement of local organizations for ECCE is also evident in other states. In Bihar, Early Childhood Education centres (ECE) under DPEP are established by *mata samitis* (mothers' committee) while in Gujarat, the *Mahila Samakhya* programme provides leadership in running the early childhood programme in the villages where it emerged as a felt need among the women of the *Sanghas* (Women's collectives).

Under DPEP, many states have adopted different models to provide ECCE. Some states like Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat set up ECE centres to address the problem of non enrolment of children due to sibling care. In Uttar Pradesh, the state government passed an order such that wherever possible, primary schools would provide space for *Anganwari* Centres³² (AWCs) in their campus. In Assam, pre-primary classes were opened in the primary school precincts. These initiatives invariably involved the local community in the management of these centres through mothers' groups, VECs and other local organizations. While a separate resource group for providing support to ECCE programme was formed in many states, the involvement of Cluster Resource Centres (CRC) and Block Resource Centres (BRC) was also considered important to provide academic support to the instructors of these ECCE centres. A strong emphasis has been placed on school readiness programmes through these centres, the establishment of linkages between primary schools and AWC/ECE centres and making children familiar with the school. These are seen as important to improve enrolment and retention in primary schools. The Government of Andhra Pradesh has given high priority to preschool education to reduce the problem of high enrolments of under age children in class I and also to relieve older children from the responsibility of sibling care that prevents them from attending school.

A similar emphasis on the involvement of the local community has been given for school education. A Report by the Government of Madhya Pradesh points out that a series of mobilization activities such as *Mahila Siksha Abhiyan*³³, have lead to a considerable increase

³² *Anganwari* centres are run by the Department of Women and Child Development to implement Integrated Child Development Scheme in selected areas. These centres provide necessary services to children of 0-6 years, pregnant and lactating mothers for fulfilling their nutritional and supplementary nutritional needs monitor the growth of children and also provide preschool education. Under DPEP and SSA these centres are also linked with Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme in convergence with the State Education Department.

³³ Focused on enrolment of around 1.4 million girls particularly from SC / ST communities.

in enrolments. Education Guarantee Scheme centres which were initially based on voluntary community initiatives, enrolled 1.233 million children of which, 47% were girls, and tribal children accounted for around 45% (GoMP, 2003:22). The *Maa-Beti Melas* (mother-daughter fairs) in Madhya Pradesh focus on an awareness generation among parents through motivation camps organized for mobilizing out-of-school girls and their mothers. It also includes door-to-door contacts and orientation of PTA members. A recent publication by SIEMAT Kerala reports that local government is now investing resources and providing leadership in conducting several activities for achieving 'sustainable excellence through effective educational governance' (GoK, 2009:75). *Panchayats* are involved in conducting annual festivals of schools to promote family / social get togethers, film camps and music clubs to develop creativity among students. *Panchayats* are also engaged in improving learning skills of English and computer education in many districts for which they have provided resources and even developed learning materials including text books in collaboration with DIETs (GoK, 2009:75-92).

As previously mentioned *panchayati raj* Institutions are involved in providing primary and secondary education through *Shishu Shiksha Karmasuchi* programme (SSKs) and *Madhyamik Siksha Kendras* (MSKs)³⁴ in West Bengal for children unable to benefit from regular schools. Initially the programme was a state / Government sponsored programme which was subsequently linked to SSA as its EGS/AIE component (GoWB, 2007:4). Community participation as mentioned by PBRSSM (*Pashim Banga Rajya Shishu Siksha* Mission) Annual Report 'is considered as driving force of the *Karma Suchi*' (GoWB, 2007:4). These centres are managed by a managing committee which serves as an elected representative body of the parents and the community. They are responsible for the opening of *Sishu Siksha* and *Madhyamik Siksha Kendras*, engagement of *Sahayikas* (teachers in SSK) and *Samprasaraks* (teachers in MSK), the construction of buildings, identification of children, their enrolment and retention, disbursement of honorarium, maintaining account etc. Managing Committee members have already been trained (GoWB, 2007:8) and training modules have been prepared for this purpose.

Learners in these SSKs are provided with hot cooked mid-day meal for which members of Self Help Groups are engaged. *Panchayats* construct kitchen sheds for cooking the meals and in many cases the members of the management committees and guardians raise resources to add to the quality of food served. The state has introduced several mechanisms and strategic interventions such as establishing alternative channels for educating drop outs and unenrolled children through *Madhyamik Siksha Karmasuchi* and *Rabindra Mukta Vidyalaya* (State Open Schools)³⁵ at the upper primary level. Grassroots functionaries are given responsibility to ensure enrolment of children transiting from one level to other. For example, in Hooghly district in West Bengal, it has been observed that once VEC could update the Village Education Registers, the list of non enrolled children of below 5 years age is given to the *Anganwari* workers as they are expected to enrol these children in their centres. Similarly, the list of children who complete primary education is given to the head teacher of nearest upper primary and secondary schools to ensure enrolment of these children in upper primary classes in those schools (Bandyopadhyay, 2006). The impact of all these efforts is now visible and the Third Joint review Mission (JRM) of SSA

³⁴ *Sishu Siksha Karmasuchi* (child education programme from class I to IV) and *Madhyamik Sisksha Karmasuchi* (Secondary Education Programme (from class V-X) are *Panchayat* run programmes of Government of West Bengal respectively for primary and secondary education through which small centres are opened in the un-served villages, and these are not served by permanent teachers. Under SSA convergence has been made between PRI and education department of the State Government to run these centres.

³⁵ *Rabindra Mukta Vidyalay* (RMV) was found benefitting 26784 children at the time of 3rd JRM of SSA in the state in 2006. (<http://education.nic.in/JRM/jrm3-wb.pdf>)

(GoWB, 2006), that combined with the Twenty Second JRM of the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) in West Bengal found the state had made good progress towards universalising the primary education and reducing gender disparities (GoWB 2006).

Similar efforts have been made to improve access and participation by involving local government agencies in other states as well. One of the JRM Reports (GoAP, 2006:3) on Andhra Pradesh describes the continuous decline in the drop-out rates over the years. Yet, it also indicates poor learning level of children and it states that:

(The) percentage of drop-outs in the state is the highest in class V. Though the dropout rates have shown overall improvement in the stage, some of the districts still have very high drop-out rates. The drop-out rates in Mahabubnagar, Medak, Warangal, Nizamabad (above 50%) and Nalgonda (above 40%) are very high and needs urgent attention. However some regions have done extremely well in this as well. Districts of Hyderabad, Kadapa and Chittoor have below 10% drop out rates. The community leaders, teachers, political representatives and NGOs have captured significant information on out of school children including never enrolled, drop out children and children with disabilities. The State has developed a number of strategies and interventions to bring more number of children to school those who currently remain out of the system, In this effort, the State carries out awareness campaigns among parents and employers through community mobilization, establishment of more EGS and AIE centres, opening of Non Residential Bridge Courses / and Residential Bridge Courses for drop-outs and child labour, provision of bridge courses for migrant children from neighbouring state and similarly for the migrant children of Andhra Pradesh in other adjoining states. NGOs are also being mobilized for mainstreaming the out-of-school children (GoAP, 2006:3).

The state has also initiated unique programmes called *Chaduvula Panduga*³⁶ (festival of education) and *Janmabhumi* Programme³⁷ involving community members, parents and teachers on a large scale. These forums give opportunity for active interaction with community members impacting the participation of children in school (GoAP, 2006:24). Such active dialogue with school education committees and in larger village forums called *gram sabhas* has significantly contributed to high enrolment and retention rates. The State Government has also initiated innovative programmes involving community members, parents and teachers to address the problem of drop out which is a major problem in the state. One such programme is called *Badi Bata*³⁸. Similarly, boat schools³⁹ have been initiated for the children of fisherman

³⁶ In this programme, “mobilizing the community and motivating the teachers to make schools child friendly, has resulted in establishing a social norm that all children should be in schools”. (GoAP, 2006:22)

³⁷ Through this programme, the mass contact of government officials with the public is conducted once in six months when “entire governmental machinery including political executives spend one week in the villages helping to bridge the gap in understanding and enhance effectiveness of ongoing developmental efforts. The Education Department has used these meetings to create greater awareness about school education and adult literacy”. (GoAP, 2006:23).

³⁸ As part of this programme volunteers carry out house to house surveys to identify dropouts. The consolidated list is discussed by the *Gram Sabha* and the final list is sent to district SSA office. Assistant Project Coordinators start the process of bringing back the identified dropouts by admitting them to Residential Bridge Courses. Rallies and processions are also taken out as part of this programme in habitations to create awareness. People having child labour in their houses are identified and targeted activities are also undertaken to sensitize them. Children freed from these places are sent to RBC (if they had no formal education in the past) or mainstreamed directly (children with some formal education in the past). This action has given very good results in most of the area it is being followed. (GoAP, 2006:3).

in East Godavari district. Special initiatives have also been taken to meet the educational needs of children of families migrating to specific locations in Andhra Pradesh from the neighbouring state of Orissa for seasonal employment. Such specific activities suited to meet the educational needs of local people could be undertaken because of flexibility in design of school provision and through delegation of more responsibility to the local government authority. Sujatha's study (1990) on community schools reinforces this point.

Assam also has made several efforts to increase community involvement through the creation of local committees and involving them in conducting household surveys and social mobilization through the *Alokar Jatra* Programme⁴⁰ in the State of Assam. The programme resulted in the creation of a local level data base on the educational status of children and had positive impact on access and enrolment⁴¹ (for example, 30,158 out of 31,604 children enrolled in 935 bridge course centres were mainstreamed 2002). SSA has also focused on urban deprived children in this state. The *Alokar Jatra* Programme started with survey in 39 towns of the districts through a ward wise child tracking method and identified 212 pockets with very high number of out of school children. As many 8,500 children were out of school in 5-6 year age groups out of them almost 7,000 children would be enrolled in school with special enrolment drive. Another group of 2,856 children in 7-8 year age group could be admitted into 94 Bridge course centres. These children also received some remedial teaching, as the documents mentioned. The State Government also established local specific committees for education which include Village Education Committee (21,460), Tea Garden Committees (1,055), School Managing Committees (36,374), *Gaon Panchayat* Education Committees (2,451), Ward Education Committees (474) etc. These committees are actively involved in local management of schools, education centres functioning under EGS/AIE scheme and other programmes such as distribution of mid-day meals and conduct of bridge courses, camps for out of school children. A massive orientation programme in the name of *sankalpa jatra* for the members of these committees has been conducted. In addition, micro-planning and school mapping have been conducted by the Block Resource Persons with the help of identified and trained village volunteers (Government of Assam, 2003a:10-11). Based on all these efforts enrolment drives are conducted with the help of these committees enrolling children in difficult areas like *chars* (river fronts), tea gardens, forest areas, tribal areas and international border areas. This, indeed, has led to the expansion of educational facilities in 6,000 villages through EGS and alternative schools called *amar pathshale* (Government of Assam, 2003a:11-

³⁹ Children of fishing community, who live closer to ponds, lakes or rivers, had no access to formal schools. Schools established on boats with regular teacher and equipped with black board have been introduced in these areas. These boats go to the community and the children are now getting formal education on regular basis. Under this initiative, a separate boat with play kits, teaching tools and a teacher plied and docked along with the 168 fishing boats. Children need to spend 2 to 3 months on the educational boat, get introduced to the idea of education leading to an increase in interest and the support of the parents. Children who are ready would then be shifted to a residential bridge centre on the mainland and then from there mainstreamed into regular schools. (Jandhyala, forthcoming).

⁴⁰ The Household Survey to identify out of school children

⁴¹ The state conducted a household survey (*Alokar Jatra*) in 2002 and the results of this were used for planning for UEE during 2002-03. Every village maintains a Village Education Register (VER) containing details of educational status of each child. Based on this the planning for enrolment drives, house to house visit and bridge course is done by the VEC, village task groups. Through this survey it was possible to identify the districts (i.e. Tinsukia) and disadvantaged area of tea garden, Char & ravine with high percentage of out of school children. Their problems were also identified. The survey also revealed the blocks with high percentage share of out of school children as well. While planning for bridge courses these areas were given higher priority. For details, see, Government of Assam, 2003a, 2003b; 2003c.

12)⁴². For achieving universal enrolment some districts have formed task forces at the village *panchayat* and block levels. Some village *panchayats* have also been given special incentives of Rs. 5,000 for achieving 100% enrolment of all children in schools.

In Karnataka, SDMCs are visualised to play a vital role in overseeing the regular activities of schools, monitoring teachers' attendance and work, students' attendance, enrolment campaign, bridge courses, infrastructure facilities and utilisation of funds given by governments or collected through donations etc. Devolving financial powers and other related responsibilities have facilitated empowerment of the SDMCs and have developed a sense of ownership of schools among the community members (Rao, 2009:326). A study conducted by National Law School, Bangalore, Karnataka in 2004 has raised various issues regarding the functioning of SDMCs and has suggested that:

There was need to protect the autonomy of SDMCs both at the time of formation and in their day-to-day functioning.” (National Law School, 2004 cited in Rao, 2009:327).

A recent document (Khan, 2008) has given detailed account of initiatives taken under SSA for urban children in 35 cities with a million plus inhabitants. One of these is the formation of urban cells to ensure coordination and convergence among different service providers while another one is the establishment of sub-city resource support structures and urban resource centres. The three broad based approaches that have been adopted for planning of urban education are: 1) separate city specific plans, 2) city supplementary specific plans and 3) inclusion of urban issues in district plans. Several innovative activities are being conducted to address the educational needs of different categories of urban deprived children. For example, in Jabalpur town of Madhya Pradesh, 'Human Development Centres' have been opened involving communities and slum volunteers have been engaged for each slum pocket. Mobilisation camps are also being organized for parents and community members in slum areas. In Chandigarh:

The members of the Executive Committee commended the proposal of introducing the 'Tamasha Gadi'⁴³ for bringing in the street children, roadside children, rag pickers, beggars etc. in to the fold of education. SSA would procure big sized bus fitted with a LCD projector, radio, computers, story books, picture books and other interesting learning material. These vans would go around the areas, collect the children and take them to some fascinating place in the city and simultaneously pursue the learning activities while on board” (Government of Chandigarh, 2008:2).

In some states, municipal functionaries are being trained to develop city plans and proactive participant of ward education committees. Although these strategies have helped many children to access educational facilities in urban areas, according to the recent information

⁴² It has been mentioned in a recent document that the *Panchyati Raj* Institutions especially *Gawn Panchyats* (GPS) are actively involved in programme implementation under SSA. *Panchyat* presidents and members have been involved in campaigns to bring out of school children into regular schools through bridge courses, enrolment times setting up of EGS etc. Special campaigns and mobilization work have been carried out in tea garden, remote forest areas and minority dominated areas. In some districts, Mothers' Groups have been forward to help in universal enrolment and attendance of children. Plans are now afoot to give an active role to the community in planning for school improvement and monitoring the performance of children. Government of Assam, 2003a:10-11.

⁴³ An innovative programme to provide access through mobile school in a bus with teaching learning materials to attract those children who are not enrolled in schools in urban area.

given by 2008-09 AWP&Bs, there are still very high numbers of out of school children in the 35 million plus cities included in the study. To promote educational access to these children various administrative arrangements have been made implementing educational plans. While in some states (Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Maharashtra) Municipal Corporations have been empowered and actively engaged, in some other states (Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal) district level agencies are involved to large extent. In Rajasthan, Bangalore, Hyderabad etc. state level agencies are having a more prominent role compared to Municipal Corporations.

While there are several examples of such state specific initiatives with positive impacts on access and participation, one recent study (Banerjee et al, 2006) has found several gaps with respect to the functioning of VECs in 280 villages from four blocks in Jaunpur District, Uttar Pradesh. Many parents were found to be unaware about existence of VECs and VEC members were found unaware about their roles. The study reveals that, parents, teachers and VEC members were unaware about the low learning level of children who were found in large number at the time of this research and also the role of public agencies in improving outcomes. The authors also described information and advocacy campaigns that were implemented to promote local participation.

This section thus discussed how local governance has imparted on access and schooling participation of children. Primarily this section focused on involvement of community which is considered as key to local governance. This section also focused on the various roles of different agencies like VECs, teleconferencing, *ma-beti mela* etc. to ensure the value of education and schooling. It also discussed the role of motivators group especially to promote women's education. Women's representation and participation in *panchayat* and meetings of VEC is found to be low. Hence, it is suggested that women need more training opportunities and access to adequate information and NGOs interventions. These will result in an increase in the participation of women and ultimately lead to an increase in girls' education. The above statement is supported by various models adopted by the government and NGOs in various Indian states and is explained by the author in this section. Finally, this section discussed the linkages between local governance with the existing government programmes and schemes in various parts of the country with a aim to increase the access of education at the grassroots level.

8. Decentralization and School-based Quality Improvement

The National Policy on Education 1986, promotes decentralisation of teacher capacity building as an important measure for improving school quality. Initiatives in this regard have taken different shapes at the ground level. One significant step supported by the Government of India has been the creation of a decentralised teacher and school support system. Under this, District Institute of Teacher Education (DIET) has been established in all districts, as well as block and cluster resource centres at the sub-district level. A Block Resource Centre (BRC) caters for around 200 elementary schools while a Cluster Resource Centre (CRC) covers around 15-20 schools. In March 2008, there were 529 DIETs functioning in India (GoI, MHRD, 2009). 6,653 BRCs and 62,000 CRCs were functioning in 2004-05 (GoI, 2007:59).

Over the years, three key roles for these sub-district level centres have emerged: teacher training, supportive visits to schools and monthly cluster meeting to discuss various issues related to teaching the curriculum. These sub-district resource centres have a significant impact on in-service teacher training and TLM preparation. Necessary infrastructural facilities are created at block level resource centres to conduct residential needs-based training in cost effective ways. Block level resource centres also allow for discussion of issues specific to that particular block or a few pockets located within the block (for example, multi-grade teaching, TLM preparation, continuous and comprehensive assessment, subject specific and content specific problems). Interactions and feedback from these sub-district resource centres have highlighted the inadequacy of the existing school inspection system and also of the importance of the school head in improving overall school functioning (Mehta, 2006).⁴⁴ In view of importance of the academic support provided by these district and sub-district level functionaries, Dyer (2003:2) suggests 'paying closer attention to developing the professional competencies of those doing that support- the CRC and DIET staff.' According to a recent report issued by DISE (Mehta, 2006) nearly 46% of all schools do not have a regular head teacher who can take responsibility for the internal management of school.

There are other school level initiatives involving the community to help improve quality. School based management systems are intended to give schools greater autonomy. As Govinda (2004:130) states:

Individuality or uniqueness framework is beginning to replace the standardized framework applicable to all schools. In this, the school development plan has become a powerful instrument, not only for setting the direction of change and improvement within the schools but also for receiving recognition and support from public funds. Another component of school based management with far reaching implication is the establishment of school governing board with authority to oversee the functioning of the school and also give policy directions for school improvement.

⁴⁴ It has been reported that, "Nearly 63.01% of the total schools (all categories) were visited by the CRC coordinators during the previous academic year i.e. 2003-04 against 57.84% schools in yet earlier year 2002-03" (Mehta, 2006:25). At the same time around 57% of schools could be inspected and the number of such schools is the highest in case of the primary schools with upper primary sections (see Mehta, 2006, Table- B4, 26). More schools in rural areas could be visited by the CRC coordinators and also could be inspected as compared to the schools located in the urban area (Mehta, 2006:26). While in some states like Andhra Pradesh, Assam and Karnataka nearly 90% of schools could be visited by CRCs, the percentage share of such schools was negligibly small in a few states like Delhi, Chandigarh, Pondicherry, Tamil Nadu, Haryana and north eastern states of India (Mehta, 2006:25). In the absence of regular visits by CRCs, monitoring and supervision of educational activities cannot take place on a regular basis, affecting school functioning.

One commonality in all recently initiated quality improvement programmes has been to develop the school as an independent institution. Schools are considered the unit of change, with schools not only responsible to implement the decisions made for the larger system by the higher authorities (Govinda, 2000, Govinda. 2004) but it is also given authority to decide about its own course of action and setting its own goals and priorities. It requires restructuring the power relationships between different functionaries working at different levels of administration including schools. However, changing the 'framework of power sharing' is not a simple technical exercise. It can only be pursued through the continued strengthening of democratic processes in school governance (Govinda, 2000, 2004). Here, the school becomes the primary unit of all interventions and actions meant for enhancing their efficiency and effectiveness. This is challenging where schools are under-resourced, small and have frequent absenteeism.

Another factor gaining recognition is school autonomy. School autonomy⁴⁵ gives schools authority in their effectiveness, since it gives schools decision-making power to conduct their own activities according to their needs. Grauwe and Varghese (2000:7) argue that:

...dimensions of efficiency namely focus on outcomes, favourable internal management, cost effectiveness and equity, should be an integral part of an efficient school.

All these dimensions may be achieved to some extent if the schools are allowed to decide their own course of action in three crucial areas (Grauwe and Varghese, 2000): i) curriculum; ii) examinations and performance evaluation; and iii) financing. However, existing examination systems and funding arrangements would constrain such autonomy to schools accordingly as these are decided by higher authorities leaving the responsibility of implementation on schools.

The role played and responsibilities borne by head teachers⁴⁶ are viewed as critical for quality improvement. In efficient schools, head teachers tend to play a pro-active role, provide leadership and motivate and support the school staff. Based on a study conducted on role of head teachers in six states, Govinda (2002:4) states:

Field data reveals that effectiveness of the management depends heavily on the personal initiative and leadership of the head teacher and his or her style of maintaining human relationships within the school and with the departmental authorities....

⁴⁵ "School autonomy implies the relative independence of an institution in its operation, to carry out commonly agreed goals, with a view to making it function more efficiently and effectively (Grauwe & Varghese, 2000:7). In reference to school effectiveness, many researchers have raised the issue regarding school autonomy. "School autonomy, might be seen to imply that the school would become a fully self administering unit, completely free from external authority and influence. But in reality this is never so. The school continues to be seen only as one level, the last layer in a hierarchically organized arrangement for management of the school education system." (Govinda, 2000:76)

⁴⁶ In the context of school autonomy, it is very important that head teachers are in a position to provide academic leadership to work with their staff on school development plans and that they are trained in budgetary processes so that school activities can be prioritized, initiated and closely monitored. This is all the more important in a situation where autonomy also implies freedom to operate the funds allocated to school (Grauwe and Varghese, 2000:11).

Indeed:

(a) review of recent developments in the school education sector across most countries shows that the head teacher or the school principal has come to occupy a more central position than ever before. Invariably, the onus for projecting school's worth in the increasingly competitive world is essentially placed on head teacher (Govinda, 2002:7).

It is increasingly recognised that, they also need orientation and administrative training to develop their skills in institutional management including financial management (Grauwe and Varghese, 2000; Govinda, 2002).

Even though role of the head teachers has been highlighted in most official documents, granting autonomy to individual schools in India remains contested, as school level autonomy is often seen as a means of reducing government control. It is not easy in India to reduce government control significantly in state-supported schools. Therefore the empowerment of head teachers and school autonomy measures have to be designed innovatively to accommodate freedom of action at the school and community levels within the framework of a state controlled system (Govinda, 2000:93).

From the above discussion, we can discern that states need to consider teachers' capacity building as an important measure for improving school quality from bottom to top which is broadly discussed in the National Policy on Education 1986. To do this, the Government of India created a decentralized teacher and school support system. Under this umbrella a multi structure system has been established at various levels of the district and sub-district level like DIET at the district level, BRC at block level, CRC at cluster level. Since their inception, they fulfilled major responsibilities in the area of education especially to impart training to the teachers, TLM preparation and allied activities for improving teachers' capacity and school quality.

9. Conclusion

Education of all children should be considered a shared social goal for all members of the community and it is important to set up structures and interventions to get stakeholders involved. These might include initiatives to improve physical infrastructure, develop efficiency in educational services and improve educational quality, and should include community members, as well as educational professionals. Indeed, both public response and public action are essential ingredients for the sustainable and continuous development of education.

... the virtuous circle of state intervention and public response is likely to be consolidated as education levels among parents continue to increase rapidly in the near future (PROBE, 1999:127).

India has witnessed a wide range of reforms of educational governance over the last couple of decades. Most states have attempted to establish multilevel governance systems moving closer to the schools and redefining the roles and responsibilities for elementary education. This paper has described the process of these changes which differ in various states. In some states the local authority including the *Panchayati Raj* Institute is managing school education, while other states are considering involving parents and the community in the management of schools through school level committees. Various policy measures have made these moves to a more decentralised system more possible.

However, the situation is politically complicated and reform uneven across the country. This complication, as well as variation, is likely to increase in the years to come and so it is essential that planners and policy makers have a good understanding of the processes and outcomes of effective decentralisation. Educational reforms at the local level require realistic understandings of community characteristics and greater flexibility in order to address local needs. Effective decentralisation is one way to help enable this.

This paper has shown how through the effective involvement of parents and community organisations, different states are attempting to bring schools and the community closer in order to meet educational needs in a contextualised manner. This has no doubt introduced a sense of ownership and democratic participation among parents and other stakeholders in school management. An ongoing study undertaken by NUEPA has examined the involvement of VECs and found that regular interaction with communities can improve democratic participation.

However, the major emphasis in these states has been on improving the efficiency of the system rather than empowering the local community to decide and take action on their children's education. Moreover, these school-related bodies have been established essentially through top-down administrative processes without serious efforts towards grassroots mobilization and the organization of local citizenry in participative processes. Devolution of power and functions at the local level in most cases are far from complete resulting in weak community participation. It is generally the case that states that have adopted more community and local representation also have better access and retention rates for children; those states with weaker access and retention rates also have less community involvement.

Any meaningful discussion on governance of school education in the current context in India has also to examine the effects of the growing involvement of private providers which is clearly visible in the case of secondary and higher education and is fast becoming a significant factor in elementary education. Traditionally, the state and civil society have been the main providers of school education. With the emergence of the market as a powerful new arbiter for provision of education, questions of equity and quality have been further compounded. Policy makers have to recognize the downstream and intergenerational costs of seriously unequal learning opportunities, which are likely to emerge with unchecked marketisation of the education sector. Markets do not solve fairness problems. These problems are the natural responsibility of the public sector and have to be integrated into public education debate and policy (World Bank, 2000). Improvements in education require policy makers to face up squarely to their responsibilities. They cannot leave them to market forces or to self-regulation to put things right when they go wrong (Delors, 1996). Governance reform initiatives in school education, therefore, have to treat the issue in a triangular fashion, between the state, the community (represented by the local governance system) and the market.

As we have argued in previous work:

.... governance reforms have to be based on the long-term goal of empowering the people for self-determination. Education has a critical role to play in this process both as a subject of reform and more importantly as a promoter of the reform process in the larger socio-political relational dynamics (Govinda and Bandyopadhyay, 2006:175).

Convergence between the long-term vision from the centre and short-term transformative actions at the local level are essential for improving the effectiveness of the system of educational governance to achieve the goal of universal elementary education.

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Report summary

In recent years, strengthening and better functioning of local governance have become prime concerns of educational reform agenda. Establishment of effective local governance has been part of overall changes in educational governance for several years in many countries including India. It is now widely recognized that effective local governance considerably impacts on access to education as well as the enrolment, retention and learning experiences of children in school. It is in this context, that this paper provides an overview of the changing framework of governance of elementary education and community participation in India with a special focus on its role in improving the participation of children. An attempt has also been made to examine the extent to which grassroots level functionaries and local bodies like *panchayat* and VEC are able to get involved in decision making processes and different approaches that have been taken by different states in regards to local governance of education. Drawing references from recent efforts made by different states, the paper has tried to establish a link between effectiveness of local governance and issues regarding access, equity and quality of school education. While discussing the changing framework of local governance, the paper critically examines the guiding principles of governance reform from two perspectives. 'Top-down' and 'bottom-up' approaches are discussed, in terms of ensuring the effectiveness of the system and empowering people for active participation in decentralized decision making process.

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