UNIT 11 COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN EDUCATION

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11.1 INTRODUCTION

Education is a social process. The participation of a community or a social group in the education process is a precondition. The idea of community participation in education is not new to the Indian society. Since the very early days, schools in the forms of ‘pathshalas’ and ‘madrasas’ emerged as community institutions. The society transmitted its knowledge and skills through these institutions. However, with growing formalization and governmentalization of education, the linkage between community and school has weakened leading to widening gap. The gap became very wide when modern formal education in the form of schools was established externally by the British colonial administration without any involvement of local community members. The community participation in modern formal education, therefore, has been main concern for the policy makers in the post independence period. National educational policies have been formulated recommending active involvement of local community members in the functioning of educational institutions. For example, the National Policy on Education (1986) recommended the establishment of an appropriate institutional framework at the district and sub-district levels, such as, District Board of Education and Village Education Committees (VEC) for greater involvement of local community members in the management of elementary education. Furthermore the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments have entrusted roles and responsibilities to the Panchayati Raj bodies in management and control of elementary education at local level.

This Unit deals with the concept and practice of community participation in education. As indicated in the structure of the unit; first, it explains the concepts of ‘Community’ and ‘Participation’ independently before analyzing the overall theme of community participation in education. After providing conceptual background, the unit identifies certain major community structures, which have been created especially for ensuring community involvement in the functioning of schools. The unit also critically examines their functions. At the end, the unit raises certain contemporary problems and issues relating to community participation in education, which can be scanned through different perspectives and theoretical frameworks.
11.2 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- define community and identify community structures in social cultural contexts;
- develop an understanding of the role of community in education; and
- analyze the problems and issues related to community participation in education.

Let's begin our discussion by trying to understand the very concept of community participation in our social context.

11.3 UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Before we analyze and examine community participation in education, it is crucial to understand the meaning of the terms 'community' and 'participation', as both the terms are in popular and varied use without specific meaning attached to them. In the following section, we would try to define the two terms.

11.3.1 Defining ‘Community’

The term ‘community’ has been used in various ways with a lot of arbitrariness. They use it to denote a group of people occupying a geographical area. But not all the social groups can be termed as ‘community’. When individuals live together in a common territory, have the feeling of mutuality, develop organized interaction among them, it is called the community spirit. The community is a social group characterized by the community spirit. The examples are a village, a town, a city etc. The community, therefore, is an expression of the unity of common life of a group of people. In other words, the life of members of a community is wholly lived in it and there is very little they need to share with outside.

Some of the early sociologists such as Tonnies (1887), Durkheim (1893), Redfield (1955) and MacIver (1937) who have made important contribution in developing understanding of the concept of ‘community’, have highlighted the features by using typologies or dichotomizing ‘pre-industrial and industrial’ ‘rural and urban’ ‘primary and secondary’ etc.

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The sociologists have characterized ‘community’ as little, distinctive, harmonious, homogeneous and self-sufficient in comparison to other groups. The typologies continue to dominate in highlighting the main features of community. The typologies indicated, although useful in highlighting features, are simplistic and do not show the nature and extent of diversity in different types of communities which may be found in our real life.

The use of the term ‘community’ for homogenous, harmonious and self-contained social group is often criticized as construct of conservation ideology. To several social scientists, even the pre-modern communities were neither homogenous nor harmonious. In the present context, the community is obviously not a homogenous community in absolute sense. The features indicated in the above typologies should be seen more in terms of degree rather than as absolute categories. The nature and
extent of homogenous and harmonious character of the community would vary from one social group to another.

The conceptualization of community in the Indian social context in the forms of villages and group life has been influenced by the categorization practised during the colonial period. In the post-Independence development discourse, the community as a concept has assumed a central place. The government while pursuing its planned development, implemented the Community Development Programme (CDP) whereby the concept of community was applied to the village. The village as ‘imagined community’ (as harmonious and egalitarian) under this programme never became a reality. In fact community reinforced the division and hierarchy around which the villages were traditionally organized. In recent decades, there has been revival of focusing the rural community for development programmes under the overall decentralization agenda. The shift is from community development to community participation in development. The latter is much more limited and less ambitious than the former. The main purpose behind the initiative is to cover those who have been left out of development. The participatory approach therefore is consensual, does not address the issue of empowerment properly. The concept of community, thus, has been changing as per the needs of development and administration whereby the communities are reduced to a group of beneficiaries, stake holders or target populations in the framework of their projects. Therefore for understanding community, it is essential to identify the context within which it is to be analyzed.

11.3.2 Community Participation

Like ‘community’, the term ‘participation’ is also used in different ways. In simple terms, by participation we mean ‘taking part in’ or ‘involvement of people’ in any meaningful activity. The term ‘participation’ should be viewed as context specific expression based on the degree of involvement of people, to bring certain changes with the basic objective of involvement of people, to bring certain systemic changes with the basic objective of bringing forth development and improvement in the quality of life of the participants. The involvement could be for health, education, social security etc (Govinda et al, 2003). The UN described community participation as ‘the creation of opportunities to enable members of a community and the larger society to actively contribute to and influence the development process to share equitably in the fruits of development.’ The definition does not answer questions as to ‘who participates?’ ‘what participation does it entail?’ and ‘how can it be promoted?’. The UN Economic and Social Council Resolution (1929) states that ‘participation requires the voluntary and democratic involvement of the people in a) contribution to the development efforts, b) sharing equitably in the benefits derived from and, decision making in respect of setting goals, formulating policies and planning and implementation of economic and social development programmes.’ The characterization of participation can be summarized as involving a) people or groups b) adherence to certain set of rules, customs and tradition and c) empowerment and adjustments between individual and group behaviour.

The notion of participation can be approached from different theoretical perspectives. According to the Functionalist Perspective adhered by the state and espoused by the politicians and administrators, participation means taking part passively in consultations planning, execution and benefit sharing. In this case, participation is primarily based on the notion of service and that it can be effectively rendered with the help of government. This participation is done formally by setting up of committees and bodies for village level participation and bringing about co-operation between village level functionaries of government and also non-government functionaries. According to Marxist or Conflict perspective, state’s authority is coercive and oppressive in nature and therefore cannot be conducive to any participation from the community. Mobilization and participation of the masses is often perceived as a threat by the
state, as the state acts in the interests of the upper ruling class. According to it, proper community participation will emerge automatically with communalism, once the oppressive and the repressive influence of the state is removed. Furthermore according to Interactive Perspective, participation occurs when people participate in joint analysis, which leads to action plans and the strengthening of existing institution or formation of local institutions on their terms. The groups take control or ownership over local decisions and people have a stake in maintaining structures and practices. People participate by taking initiatives independent of external institutions to change the existing system.

From the above discussion, diversity in the concept and practice of community participation may be highlighted in the following ways:

a) **Participation can be both passive and active:** In passive participation, people participate by being told what is going to happen or has already happened. For example, participation may be used to explain very rudimentary levels of consultation between agency staff and community members. Such consultative process does not concede any sharing in decision making and professionals are under no obligation to take on board peoples’ lives. People participate by forming groups to meet predetermined objectives related to projects, which can involve the development or promotion of externally initiated social organization. On the other hand, people may actively participate by providing information, decision making, planning and execution and various other activities.

b) **Participation can be legislated or self-mobilized:** Following constitutional provision, several participatory structures have been created to promote various forms of participation. For example, the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments have recommended for setting up of local bodies and for their involvement in providing educational and other services. On the other hand, sometimes people participate by taking initiatives on their own, independent of any external system or change agents. A number of movements or self-help initiatives would fall under this category.

c) **Participation by providing information or material contribution:** Further, sometimes people participate by providing information (such as in research) and do not have the opportunity to influence the proceedings as the findings of the research are neither shared nor checked for accuracy. On the other hand, community contribution in the forms of labour, cash or kind is also indicative of the community participation. In various programmes, community contribution is sought in the form of matching grants.

### 11.4 COMMUNITY STRUCTURES AND FUNCTIONS IN EDUCATION

The community participation in education can be understood properly by examining the existing community structures and their functions in education. In the post Independent India, there have been constant efforts in terms of new policies and programmes for promoting community involvement in education including literacy. In this case, the Constitution of India has played an important role in providing direction and guidelines for seeking community involvement in education. The following sub-sections of this unit specify the constitutional provision and policy measures and examine important grassroots level community structures and their functions.
11.4.1 Policy Framework for Community Participation in Education

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts have envisaged introduction of democratically elected bodies at the district, sub-district and panchayat levels. The Acts also provide for adequate representation of women, Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST). The 11th Schedule of the Constitution among other things entrusts the Panchayat bodies with the responsibility of looking after 'education including primary and secondary school, technical training and vocational education, adult and non-formal education, library and cultural activities.' Following the Constitutional Amendment Acts, it has been made mandatory for the states to constitute, through legislation, elected local self government at district and sub-district levels in both rural and urban areas, to plan and administer development activities in their respective jurisdictions. Consequently the states have taken legislative actions to constitute Panchayat structures as local elected government bodies and have initiated decentralization of governance with respect to education, health and infrastructure.

The National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986 and Programme of Action (POA) revised in 1992 have emphasized the importance of decentralizing planning and management of education at all levels and people's participation in education. In pursuance of the Policy and Programme of Action, the state governments have taken steps to set up structures for decentralized planning and management. It is expected that as part of the decentralization, local communities through appropriate bodies would get involved in improving the functioning of schools. The formation of Village Education Committee (VEC) and various other participatory structures and their involvement in education is a result of the constitutional commitment and policy recommendations.

11.4.2 Relationship between Panchayati Raj Institution and Community Structures

As explained above, the Constitution (73rd and 74th Amendment) Act 1992 has accorded statutory status to local self-government known as Panchayati Raj system and has entrusted it with the tasks of looking after primary and secondary education. The CABE Committee on Decentralized Management of Education suggested constitution of Village Education Committee (VEC) at the village level and the Panchayat Standing Committees on education at intermediate and district levels. The committee delineated the roles and functions, organizational and administrative support for VECs and preparation and training requirement for them. The states have formulated guidelines for formation and involvement of the VECs in elementary education with adequate representation to the Panchayat bodies. Since the VEC is considered to be an integral part of the overall Panchayat administration of elementary education as envisaged under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, it is important to understand the linkage between Panchayat institutions and VECs in terms of the following:

- Representation of the Panchayat members in VEC and other community fora;
- Roles and functions performed by the Panchayat members in primary education;
- Statutory provisions and actualization; and
- Networking of Panchayat and other governmental/non-governmental bodies.

11.4.3 Community Structures in Education

Community participation has been translated into reality with the creation of various grassroots level structures such as, Village Education Committees (VEC), School Management Committee (SMC), Mother Teacher Association (MTA), Parent Teacher Association (PTA), Mothers Associations and Women Motivator Group (WMG). For understanding community structures and their functions in depth, we would concentrate on analysis of VEC and PTA in the context of:
• Nature and composition of the community fora (VEC, SMC, etc.),
• Formation processes involved,
• Areas and extent of their operation, and
• Roles and responsibilities.

Under various educational programmes such as District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), added emphasis has been given to the formation and involvement of VECs and PTAs in elementary education with specific roles and functions. The VECs and PTAs are the school level community structures set up mainly for improving the functioning of schools. They have representation from both the school and the village community. Although VECs and PTAs have been set up for the schools in all the states, one may notice variation across different states in their nature and composition, roles and responsibilities, etc.

11.4.4 Village Education Committees (VEC) and Parent Teacher Association (PTA)

Village Education Committee is a village/habitation level body set up through government order entrusted with responsibilities of administering educational programmes and looking after schools or other educational institutions at the village level. The committee usually has average 10 to 15 members with representation from the women, the disadvantaged groups such as SC and ST, elected panchayat members, head teacher and others. The nature and composition of the state varies from state to state, as each state has formulated its guideline for setting up such committees. This is also considered as one of the sub-committee under Panchayat system. The CABE Committee highlighted some of the functions of the VEC as follows:

• generation and sustenance of awareness among the village community ensuring participation of all segments of population;
• developing teacher/instructor and community partnership to oversee and manage the effective and regular functioning of the schools and centres; and
• vesting it with appropriate statutory and financial authority.

Some of the centrally sponsored programmes such as the DPEP and SSA have specified its roles and functions and have sought greater involvement in planning and implementing the programmes. Some of the functions currently being performed by the VEC under SSA are as follows:

• ensuring enrolment of all the children in the age group of 6 to 14 years;
• monitoring school activities for retention and providing good quality education;
• paying special attention to the educational needs of the girls and other disadvantaged groups;
• to improve facilities in the school, e.g. compound wall, new classrooms, toilet facilities, repair and maintenance etc; and on the whole
• to involve community with the school.

Thus at the village level, VEC is a community organization which assesses the requirements of elementary education and necessary schooling facilities required in the village. It identifies problems and works out solutions so as to be able to chalk out a feasible plan for the village. Village/habitation being the smallest unit of micro-planning, the VEC has an important role in preparing educational plan and universalizing elementary education.
Like VECs, for ensuring co-operation of the parents of the children attending the school, PTAs have been formed. In some states, alongside the PTAs, Mother Teacher Association (MTA) has also been formed to seek co-operation of the mothers of the children attending the school. This is a smaller body as its membership is confined to the parents of enrolled children only. This also gives adequate representation to the disadvantaged groups and looks after the functioning of the schools. Some of the functions performed by the PTA/MTAs are as follows:

- assisting the teachers in conducting school activities;
- helping the teachers in conducting door to door survey work;
- assisting the teachers in pursuing the parents of un-enrolled children for sending them to school; and
- providing feedback to the teachers about educational progress of their children.

Besides, in some states (such as Madhya Pradesh) the PTAs have been assigned larger responsibilities for example construction of school buildings/classrooms, repair and maintenance, etc.

On the whole, the VECs, PTAs and various other community structures have been created to forge and strengthen linkage between the community and the school. The states have been conducting orientation and training for the members of these bodies for performing their tasks efficiently and effectively. With the help of the orientation programmes, the VEC members have been able to conduct activities such as, micro planning, construction of school buildings and classrooms, day to day monitoring of school activities, repair and maintenance of school buildings, students’ and teachers’ attendance, etc. The recent educational programmes have emphasized the role of VEC, PTA and other such bodies, which draw membership from both the school and the community. However the effectiveness of the VEC depends upon the awareness and motivation of the members and technical and resource support provided to them.

### 11.5 PROBLEMS AND ISSUES

The communities in India are at different stages of socio-economic development and educational attainment. Despite over five decades of planned development, so far only 65.38 per cent population of India is literate and around half of the female population remain illiterate even today (2001 Census). The elementary education in India is characterized by incidence of low enrolment and high dropout rate. Besides, quality remains a major issue at all levels of education. However the nature and extent of the problem varies from state to state, region to region and from community to community. Due to differential socio-economic background, the communities respond to education and developmental programmes differentially. The problems and issues relating to differential community participation in education can be explained in terms of the following:

COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION
COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION
COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT

The nature and extent of community participation depends upon the level of awareness among the communities. A large number of communities, which are socially disadvantaged and economically backward, have indifferent and apathetic attitude towards modern formal education. These groups need to be awakened and motivated for education. For mobilizing these communities, several strategies have been
formulated and implemented under different programmes. However, the implementation of mobilization activities does not automatically lead to community participation. For community participation, it is necessary that participatory structures be created, as have been done through formation of Village Education Committees (VEC), PTA/MTA, SMCs etc. It is to be noted again that mere formation and functioning of these local level bodies does not ensure community participation. It is the community ownership in which decision-making is entrusted to the community members; one may visualize proper community participation. The following sections will, therefore, analyze different issues related to different forms of community participation.

11.5.1 Community Mobilization and Participation

In order to promote environment-building activities, initiatives such as Kala jatha, Nukkad natak, Bal melas etc. have been made. Besides, for media campaigns to enhance community participation, the states have followed various mobilizing activities including radio and TV programmes, production of video and audio cassettes, printing of newsletters and pamphlets, etc. for disseminating information about benefits of education. Besides micro-planning was also undertaken for mobilization as well as promoting intensive interaction and participation among the community members. Teachers and community members trained for this purpose took up micro-planning in the form of activities such as social and resource mapping, identification of out-of-school children, development of a village education register, village education plan etc. in different states under DPEP and SSA. Besides, local culture and tradition along with institutionalized structures have been used in various forms for optimizing the impact of mobilization strategies. The advocacy campaigns used localized themes/contexts. Moreover the programmes also modified the nature and scale of mobilization, keeping in mind their requirements. For example, the Total Literacy Campaigns (TLC) relied more on environment building through *kala jathas* than other modes.

The mobilization campaigns on the whole, are imbued with the goal of ensuring the efficient delivery of welfare inputs. The activities are mainly target oriented, intended for the poor and disadvantaged. Under the community mobilization process, although the communities are visualized as both the provider and consumer, in reality it is the state, which dictates what is to be provided as per its own guidelines. The community members have little say in deciding what are provided to them in terms of educational inputs. The mobilization strategies that follow the functionalist perspective do not take radical posture with regard to injustices related to the existing social order. One may notice such cases, if we examine the nature and extent of state sponsored advocacy campaigns. Some of the states such as Kerala, West Bengal did choose radical form of advocacy campaigns, and achieved success in eliciting active participation in initial years. The current trend is not very encouraging. The soft agenda followed in their campaigns hardly induce the communities for active involvement in educational development. The campaigns are getting routinized and monotonous. The mobilization initiative will achieve only partial success, unless it is linked to the systemic issues.

11.5.2 Community Participation and Empowerment

The analysis of community participation in education would remain incomplete, if we do not relate it to the question of 'community empowerment'. Does 'community participation' ensure community empowerment? Will empowerment of the local political bodies ensure genuine representation of the traditionally excluded community? In recent years, there has been a shift in the debate on community involvement in education from participation to empowerment. Mere participation does not necessarily lead to community empowerment. It is also argued that community participation is a means to community empowerment. That is, when people are entrusted with roles and responsibilities within participatory structures, it is assumed that such participation
would become the means of empowerment. Panchayati Raj could be viewed as a mechanism for promoting such involvement of people with community interests.

The notion of empowerment is integral to the concept of participatory development. Here community participation implies participation of the disempowered, which would include those who have not had access as a community. The participation provides opportunities for power sharing and distribution of resources. In this case, the state has an important role to play for protection of interests of the poor and disadvantaged. It is often pointed out that the current practice of community participation in education through VEC and PTA does not address the issue of empowerment adequately, as the local bodies reflect the local power structure. The panchayats are no longer community institutions, they are political bodies dominated by party interests (Acharya, 2002). The electoral process has brought forth the political interests to the fore. The analysis of the process of decision-making with regard to devolving money and power in these participatory structures explains the case. While emphasizing the need for community empowerment, Raina (2003) explains that

...though participation must begin at the local level with communities, a project cannot end there. Whether we would like it or not, the state continues to be a major player, and we want it to be a major player if education is to be universalized or sustained livelihoods for the vast majority of poor have to be ensured. Local empowering action perhaps requires a strong state, particularly in times when the dominant market mechanisms can marginalize the poor further without state-mediated safeguards. If the community participation is to advocate the social empowerment of the poor, it must also, therefore, advocate their political empowerment.

**11.5.3 Decentralization and Community Participation**

Decentralization of educational governance is one of the major strategies for inducing greater community involvement in education. According to 73rd and 74th Amendments of the Indian Constitution, the panchayats have been entrusted with the responsibility of implementing compulsory and free elementary education. Panchayat system, therefore, is the main framework through which decentralization of educational governance is currently being pursued. The basic question arises whether simply handing over basic education to Panchayat bodies will ensure popular participation. The Kerala experience, which involved integrated efforts of the Panchayat system and NGOs in achieving universal literacy and elementary education is an encouraging example of the decentralization initiative. However at other places, the strategy has been partially effective or not effective at all. One of the main reasons has been its halfhearted implementation. It is often argued that panchayat system does not alter the power base at local level, in fact it becomes part of the existing power structure. In many states, panchayats have become party panachyats, even though formally elected by the people (Acharya, 2002). The political interference of the parties has destroyed the village solidarity. The spirit of spontaneity has given way to structured and pre-determined participation.

The community participation in education has a close linkage with decentralization, as so far most of the participation discourse currently centre around it. It is often contended that community participation and empowerment will emerge from decentralization of educational governance. Although panchayat system has not been able to play effective role, this does not mean that the decentralization in education has failed. Decentralization can be of different types; a) deconcentration, b) devolution and c) delegation. Most of the decentralization measures which have been implemented are either in the category of deconcentration or delegation of roles and responsibilities. There are rare cases where devolution of money and power has taken place. The careful examination of the decentralization through panchayat system would explain the case. Not much financial and administrative powers have been given to the
panchayat bodies. Furthermore VEC-PRI interface, which was recommended by the new education policy and constitutional amendments, has yet to take definite shape and perform effective role in universalizing and improving quality of elementary education. Education being classified under the Concurrent List it is left to states in formulating policy and programmes.

11.6 LET'S SUM UP

From the above analysis it follows that the community participation in education is much deeper than usually assumed. Although the concept of community participation in education is not new to Indian society, the current and emerging forms of community participation in education demands a separate analysis as provided in this unit. The unit explains the nature and diversity of the concept of community participation in education. The participation can be viewed along a spectrum with passive participation at one end and self-mobilization at the other. Passive participation is where the people are told what to do. On the other hand, self-mobilization is where the local people are in total command (Kumar, 2002). Participation can be treated both as means and end. It becomes means when opportunities are created for people to get involved and later become empowered. In certain cases, participation becomes end in itself, when people participate in particular activities mechanically and in ritualistic manner.

The community participation in education in India can be termed mostly as legislated participation, as people's participation are being promoted through constitutional provisions and programme guidelines. Following Constitutional Amendments, there have been concerted efforts on the part of central and state governments to decentralize educational governance through Panchayat Raj institutions. The VECs with representation from both the school and community have been formed. These bodies are getting strengthened under educational programmes such as, DPEP and SSA. However, the community participation process in education is at the nascent stage and has a long way to go. The current practice of community participation is limited in comparison to community development programmes implemented during the initial phase of post Independence period. The main objective of participatory development is to increase the involvement of socially and economically marginalized people in making decisions regarding their own lives. The assumption is that participatory approach empowers people with the skills and confidence to analyze their situation, reach consensus, make decisions and take action, so as to improve their circumstances. The community participation in education is also intended to focus on the disadvantaged and needy people.

11.7 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS


Government of India. (2003). Education for All: National Plan of Action, MHRD, Department of Elementary Education and Literacy, New Delhi


