

PEOPLE'S ALLIANCE FOR FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT TO EDUCATION (PAFRE)

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UNION BUDGET IS NOT ONLY DISAPPOINTING BUT COLOSSALLY FAILED TO RECOGNISE THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION AS A FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT IN THE CONSTITUTION

Union Budget 2023-24 comes as a deep disappointment to those working in the school education sector. While the Finance Minister acknowledges the importance of quality education, she has failed to allocate a fair budget to realise the same.

The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected the education of children from marginalized communities, especially the girls and the system is yet to recover from systemic collapse and the learning deprivation. Though the budget speech acknowledges the pandemic-time learning loss and proposes a programme to build the culture of reading. What is distressing is that instead of looking at learning loss from a holistic learning process through systemic reforms by providing substantial budget allocation to address the situation, the budget proposes for mere reading culture as a kneejerk response.

As indicated in the Economic Survey 2022-23, the percentage of GDP on education spending in India is static at 2.9 in the last four consecutive financial years. The survey also showed that as against the total expenditure on social services, the education expenditure had fallen from 10.4 to 9.5 percent. On the other hand, as per the UDISE data, the enrollment has increased from 13,49,04560 in 2020-21 to 14,32,40480 in 2021-22. Whereas the number of government schools declined from 10,32,049 in 2020-21 to 10,22,386 in 2021-22 and thereby closing around 9663 schools in one year. What is more alarming is that nearly 12,54,773 teachers post are vacant in the country in the academic year 2021-22.

The current budget instead of addressing this burning issues which weakens the system by paving way for privatisation and commercialisation of education, the Finance Minister propose to appoint 38,000 teachers for Eklavya Model Residential Schools in the next three years as against 12.5 lakh teachers' vacancies in government schools across the country where the children from marginalised sections are learning. This is clear violation of the RTE Act.

Education budget of Ministry of Education has increased from Rs.104277 Crores in 2022-23(BE) to Rs.112899 crores in 2023-24(BE) – and accounts for 8.3% increase. The budget for Department of School Education and Literacy has increased from Rs. 63449 Crore in 2022-23 (BE) to Rs.68804 crores in 2023-24(BE) accounting 8.4% increase. In

absolute term this Rs. 5356 crore increase is largely on account of allocation in budget for Rs. 4000 crore for PM SHRI (Exemplar schools) However, the share of total education budget by MoE as % of total Union Budget has decreased from 2.6% to 2.5% between 2022-23(BE) and 2023-24(BE) and in this period, the share of DSEL in total Union Budget has declined from 1.61% to 1.53%.

Coming to actual allocations to major education programmes, Rs. 37,453 crores is earmarked for Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan which is a vehicle for implementing the RTE in the current budget as against Rs. 37,383 crores in the Financial Year 2022-23. This is a negligible increase of Rs.70 crores that accounts to 0.19 percent. Allocations to the MDM which is being renamed as PM Poshan Shakti Nirman is a marginal increase of Rs.1367 crores in the current budget as compared to previous budget. However, this is Rs.1200 crores less than the previous revised estimation of 2022-23 despite the policy commitment made in the National Education Policy 2020 to provide morning breakfast in schools.