

Recent Upliftment in the Quality of Elementary Education in state Assam of India Through Reform in Curriculum, Pedagogy etc

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Abstract: Assam is one of the northeastern states of India, situated between 90-96degree-east longitude and 24-28 degree north latitude. The state is bounded by various bordering countries like Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh. The geographical area of the state is 78438sq.km with 27 districts. The state is breadth taking scenic beauty, rarest floras and faunas, tea garden, green hills, vast plain, mighty waterways, large forest area. The state is a melting point where diverse races from diverse tribes at different points of time were synthesis and transformed into the colorful Assamese people. Such perfect fusion of culture and heritage gave birth to Assamese culture. It is a multilingual state of 26 languages and other smaller linguistic groups. Therefore language education is rather complicated issue in Assam. Government of Assam has been trying their best to linguistic aspiration of many linguistic minorities in the state. Around 87% of the total population is rural of which 75% are depended upon agriculture. A large part of the population is consists of tea tribes. Since last decades throughout the world emphasis had been laid for achieving UEE and many innovative thoughts have been immersed in different states/countries leading to reform in curriculum and pedagogy. In state Assam also State Council of Educational Research and Training had taken a major challenging task of quality improvement in elementary education through out the state on the basis of public demand/opinion and practical needs of the people and successfully able to reform curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation etc during the period 1998-2003. Present paper describes how and what reform is made in recent curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in the state education that attempts to provide suitable child friendly elementary education suitable for all types of children of the state so that each and every child of 6-14 yrs of age can complete the elementary education with joy and able to develop themselves as a worthy human being of the society as well as the country and the world in the 21st century.

Keywords: child friendly, joyful learning, integrated approach, activities, competency achievement

Introduction

Improving the quality of elementary education is being a major concern in developing countries of the world in last decades to achieve UEE. Since independence substantial and noticeable development have taken place in our country India in elementary education in last century and sustainable attempts were being made in various parts of our country for improvement of the quality of the primary education in last decades. Despite these efforts the basic issues such as universalization of elementary education, development of skilled manpower and value driven personality have remain unaddressed to a great extent. 1990-91 survey report showed that 97 million children (Education in India 2005) at the age group 6-11 yrs were attending school, with gross enrollment 92.8% yet there were many left out children who were not attending school. Though India had achieved increased enrollment rates in the last few decades, but still there had been a low attendance and high dropout rate.

A similar scenario was also found in Assam, where dropout rate in elementary education as on 2002 was 68.76% compared to the national dropout rate 52.79% (Mahanti, 2005). So government of Assam through State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT)

had taken a major task of quality improvement in elementary school education through out the state. Survey report showed that high dropout rate and low achievement level among children are due to some facts related to curriculum and text books, teaching learning process i.e. pedagogy used by teacher and evaluation system etc which seemed unsuitable for children of different section of the society as those—

- *Could not motivate children to learn*
- *Did not help in all round development*
- *Could not make all children competent*
- *Were not related to child's day to day life etc*

As nearly 70% of the children have a rural background and most of them being first generation learner, the past curriculum and text book were not effectively working in upliftment of elementary education of Assam, even after 50 years of independence. In stepping to 21st century, SCERT, Assam along with other states of our country have been taken up challenge for changing education scenario of the state. For this mission mood action have been taken by the state govt. through SCERT for upliftment in quality education in elementary education mainly for reforming curriculum textbook, changing teaching pedagogy and reforming evaluation process since 1995 when District Education Primary Project (DPEP) funded by World bank was launched with an aim of achieving UEE.

Socio- economic context of Assam

Assam is the frontier province of India and situated at the northeast. It contains at present an area of 78438 sq. kms. (Assam 2000). The state is a region situated close to India's international borders with as many as 4 countries- China, Myanmar, Bhutan and Bangladesh. Assam is a mini India and a meeting ground of diverse ethnic group and cultural streams, which enrich the Assamese culture and heritage, where people live in unity in diversity. The land is having natural scenetic beauty with rarest flora and fauna, tea garden, green hills, mighty rivers and waterways, large forest areas with lack of sound transport and communication system.

Though Assamese is the main language in the state, 1991 census of India listed 26 languages of the state with other few languages of other ethnic groups. Thus language education is rather a complicated issue here. Nevertheless the state govt. have been trying the best to meet the linguistic aspiration of the different groups. As many as nine languages are presently being used as medium of instruction at elementary stage. The state is a land of rich cultural heritage with different types of folk dance and song as well as theatre, art and drama. It is also a homeland of many religion, caste, creed and social groups. For centuries they have been living together in peace and harmony.

Economically the state is not so sound. Most of the people are rural which is 87% of the total population out of which 75% are depended upon agriculture (Assam 2000). The economy of the state is an under developed with low per capita income. Geographically the state has to frequently face natural calamities like storm, earthquake, and floods.

Against this background it is really a challenging task to make some remarkable reform in curriculum which must lead to a kind of education that would maintain age old bond of the diversities and also respond to the *social, cultural, emotional and economic needs* of the learner.

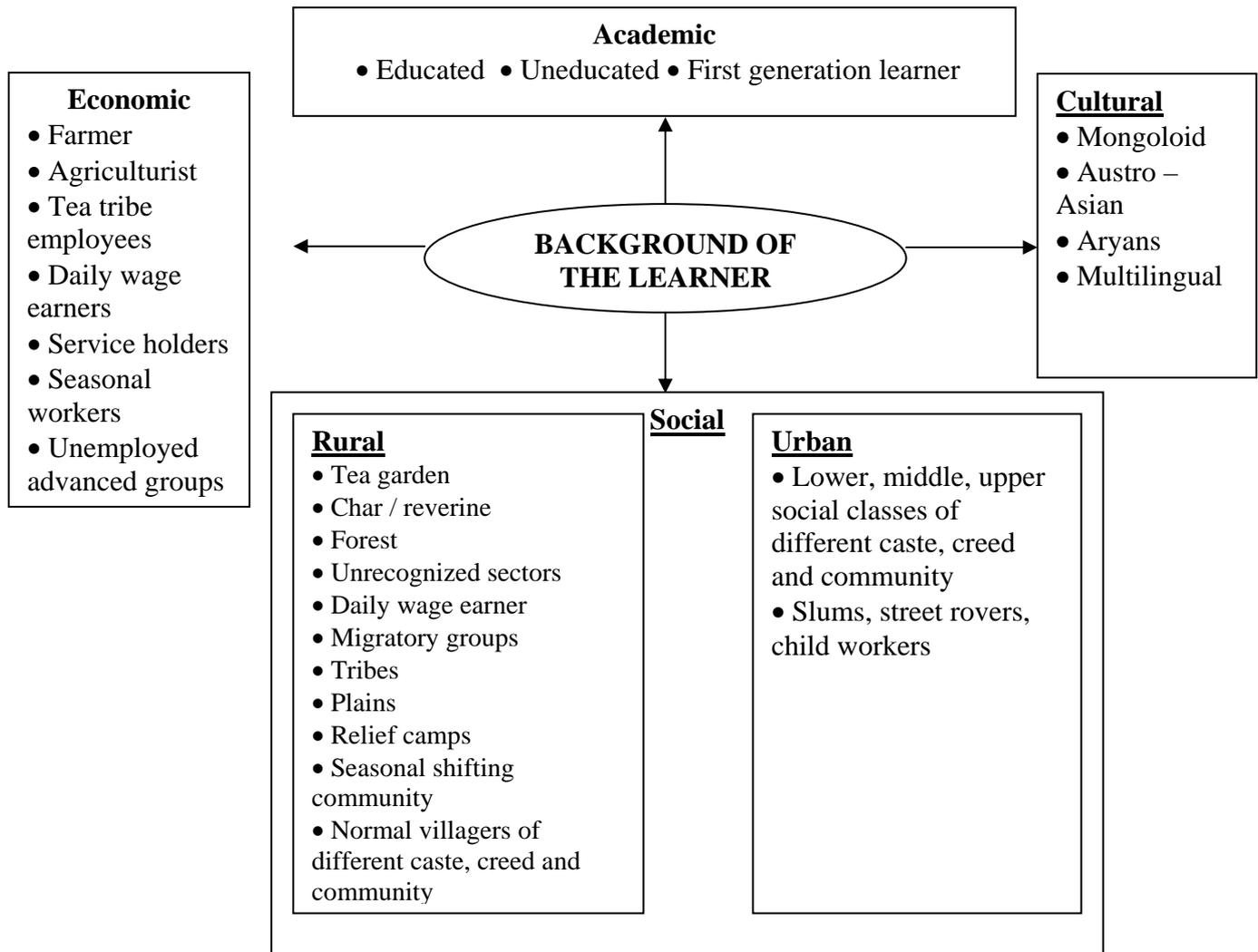
Excellence should be the foremost endeavor of the curriculum for meeting the multifarious challenges of today and tomorrow. Hence the latest reform curriculum of the state is so developed (1998-2003) which rests on five elements—*relevance, equity, unity, progress and excellence*.

How the reform in curriculum is made

To cope with the first changing world in the 21st century keeping universalisation in mind, the child of each community/section needs to provide high quality education that will do her/him justice. In 1996 the launching of DPEP program initiated with following major objectives (Mahanti, 2005)-

1. Reduction of the dropout rate
2. Reduction of disparity among gender and social groups in respect to enrollment, learning achievement etc
3. Improvement of level of learning achievement for all SCERT, Assam started work since 1997 for upliftment of the primary education to bring changes in curriculum, textbook and teaching learning process, which began a new era in primary education of the state for which a core curriculum and textbook group was formed. In collaboration with DPEP, SCERT curriculum group made a sincere effort to bring changes through-
 - *Community involvement*
 - *Motivating children to attend school regularly*
 - *Planned teacher training with minimum transmission loss*
 - *Innovation in teaching learning process*
 - *Reform in evaluation system*
 - *Development of locally relevant competency based curriculum and textbooks free from non comprehensibility*
 - *Continuous supervision and monitoring with academic support*

One of the major areas under academic change made, is the classroom teaching learning process through reforming curriculum and developing new sets of child friendly text books which have been made suitable and relevant to the learner of the state who are of the following background-



Following steps are mainly followed in reforming the curriculum:

Step 1 - Public contact

SCERT, at the very beginning thought that any effort in reforming the elementary education system would be futile without public view on the then curriculum in order to make new curriculum and textbook cater to the aspiration of the people. Public opinion was collected in 1997 mainly on the following issues.

1. Whether they are satisfied with the existing system of education?
2. Whether they are satisfied with the existing teaching – learning process?
3. Whether they are satisfied with the present curriculum and textbook?
4. Whether their child had acquired what they have expected from them at the end of the primary education?
5. Whether primary education is helping the child to contribute to social, economic, and moral development?

The three strategies have been taken for collection of public opinion, which are through:

- A. *Mass media* B. *Questionnaire* C. *Seminar at district level*

For (A) advertisement in newspaper and announcements on T.V. and radio were made. For (B) three steps of questionnaires were prepared for seeking opinion from teachers, guardians, general public and students, which were distributed in all districts including remote areas. For (C) seminar were organized in all districts to directly interact with the public where participants were-on

- Parents and guardians
- General public including weaker and minority community
- Teacher community
- High school students including a few block of children

After studying the combined public opinion coming from A, B, C, it was observed that public wants

- Uniform education for all section of society
- Classroom process should be joyful in healthy environment
- There should be no force education
- Child should feel at home at school
- There should be reduction in the load of curriculum and the course to be condensed according to the child's capability
- Curriculum should help students in practical life
- Vocational education should be included for making child self dependent
- Introduction of preliminary knowledge towards the end of preliminary education
- Textbook should be child centric, interesting and attractive with colorful pictures
- Books should be prepared by giving importance to the local environment
- Learning with the help of rhymes, action songs, stories, games, are to be given importance

Step 2 - Vision made for bringing changes in primary education

To improve the quality education at grass root level it was a paramount importance to strive for visualizing the basic changes required in the system of primary education. Hence SCERT Assam in collaboration with DPEP organized *Visioning workshop* for the first time in Assam in August, 1997. In the said workshop the main objective was to chalk out problems and formulate action plans on the following issues.

1. What kind of school do we want for the children in the coming years?
2. What changes do we require?
3. What difficulties are to be faced for bringing changes?
4. What steps / measures are to be taken in order to overcome those difficulties?

A number of participants from all over the state participated from all over the state including teachers, teacher educators, educationist, child psychologist, pediatricians, social workers, administrators, writers of children literature and national level resource persons. After brainstorming debate and discussions participants found out the desired changes required in seven core areas, that is

1. Curriculum
2. Methods
3. Materials
4. Textbooks
5. Teacher training
6. Evaluation
7. Supervision / support

OUR VISION

In the said workshop following vision was made (Visioning workshop, 1997) for bringing the required changes.

We would see in our school –

- *All children coming to school happily*
- *Children playing and smiling cheerfully*
- *Children cleaning their classroom and school campus*
- *The teacher outside the classroom; working and playing with the children*
- *Children and teachers collecting materials in the school campus*
- *Lot of materials in the school*
- *Children working in groups*
- *Children enjoying action songs and busy with their activities*
- *Children observing different phenomena in the school environment with a specific outlook*
- *Inside the classroom, it is difficult to see where the teacher is*
- *In multigrade situation, children working on their own even without the teacher in the class*
- *Children are curious and asking questions. Sometimes they argue with one another to decide the truth*
- *Children are free from tension and freely mixing with other children with love and affection at the same time they are highly respectful for their teachers*
- *Guardian / community involve in school issues with the teacher*
- *Lots of dialogue can be heard from the students*

Step 3 - School attachment programme

In the same year we, the curriculum and textbook group members of SCERT carried out a very innovative programme, which was **school attachment programme**, where two-member group was attached with a particular school of different part of the state. Schools were selected of different typed – rural and urban, learners having multilingual situation, first generation learner, having small and large number students. The purpose of the programme was to study the actual school situation and to try out effective classroom teaching method suitable for Assam context.

What we observed

- All children did not take part in the teaching learning process equally
- Teaching learning process was confined to the classroom only without any activity of enjoyment. Most of the children were hesitant and could not express their experiences in standard language.
- 70% children are first generation learner specially in rural schools
- Children promoted to higher class without achieving the minimum level of learning
- Very little friendly relation between students and teachers
- Teachers were practicing mostly lecture method.

What we did

- Interacted with students to evoke responses
- Engaged children in various joyful activities
- Used different types of folk songs, dance, stories, action songs, rhymes, dramatization etc. in teaching learning process

- Used sufficient number of low cost and no cost materials prepared and collected by ourselves
- Decorated classroom and school campus and created a small learning corner in each class
- Introduced self/peer/group learning
- Organized meeting with the guardians with the community

It is observed that activity based teaching enhanced the learning among the children and involved them in joyful atmosphere. However care should be taken in selecting activities so that purpose of learning should be fulfilled, Accordingly during the development of new textbooks many activity which were tried out in the school attachment programme were included as it is in the lessons of the textbooks for achievement of competency. The activities of the textbooks are designed in such a way, which enhance learning through observation, experimentation, enquiry, play and different types of other joyful activities.

Step 4 - **Conceptualization of the approach**

On gathering of the field level experience and collection of public opinion curriculum reform process started for primary stage where various people from different fields were actively participated. The new curriculum is then prepared with common understanding on: -

- The child
- The learning process
- Teacher and student's role
- Value of education in the present day context.

Care has been taken in fulfilling the needs of all categories of children and in motivation in learning. Keeping mind in slow learner, absentees, reflection of recapitulations and spiraling was done in curriculum and textbooks. The approach to teaching for all primary subject i.e. language, mathematics, environmental studies, and Health & physical education had been finalized in such a way that children can learn the required competencies in free, friendly, enjoyable atmosphere using environment as basic platform for learning all the five subjects. Even mathematics curriculum and textbooks are so designed that children can easily and happily learn mathematics from their environment and day-to-day activity only through various activity like story, rhymes, games, puzzles and other activity with low cost and no cost material. Approach of language is totally made contextual and skills are to be developed through use of conversation, story telling, action song, local folk songs, dance and riddles, dramatization, etc. At lower level maximum activity in language was incorporated on speaking and conversation. The said curriculum is developed emphasizing on--

- Learner center as well as child center teaching learning process
- All round development of the child
- Local specificity
- Activity based
- Joyful
- Use of learning in solving in child's day-to-day problem

Most remarkable of the new curriculum is adapting integrating approach at lower level. In this approach major seven competencies are identified for all the five subjects, which are –

- | | | |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Listening and responding | 2. Speaking and conversation | 3. Number and countin |
| 4. Working with materials | 5. Solving problems | 6. Reading and writing |

7. Observation and exploration

As we know that though children learn many things before going to school but after coming to school the child placed in such a new atmosphere where learning for her / him becomes rigid, unnatural and compartmentalized different subjects. These create dislike and fear for subjects and school atmosphere also, which is one of the major reasons why children are not motivating to come to school. Hence, integrated approach is the best possible alternative for making free and homely environment to the child through which she/ he can be adjusted herself/ himself to school situation in better manner. That is why Integrated Approach has been introduced specially at lower level (class I and II). The class routine has also made flexible and activity based instead of traditional rigid and subject based as there is only integrated textbooks have been developed for the first time for class I and II (one text book at class I, two textbooks at class II) for five subjects. These approaches helped in

- Spontaneous learning by all
- Reducing load
- Using varieties of learning materials by learner as well as teachers
- Handling multilingual situations
- Removing fear of particular subjects
- Facilitating absentee slow learners
- Reducing cost of production

Immediately after reframing curriculum the new sets of textbooks in different mediums of instructions are so designed and developed which are totally – child friendly, environment friendly, joyful, activity based, competency based and brings smiles to each child. The development and implementation of the new textbooks were in phased manner with effect from 1999 –2003 after development of curriculum in 1998. The textbooks were also developed through series of workshop by a team involving resource person from different fields including experienced teacher. For finalization of the lessons of the textbooks trailing at field level was conducted by the team member as well as schoolteacher. For handling of the new textbooks, before implementation, mass teacher training at block and cluster level were conducted in all over the state for which training module in different languages for teachers were prepared and distributed.

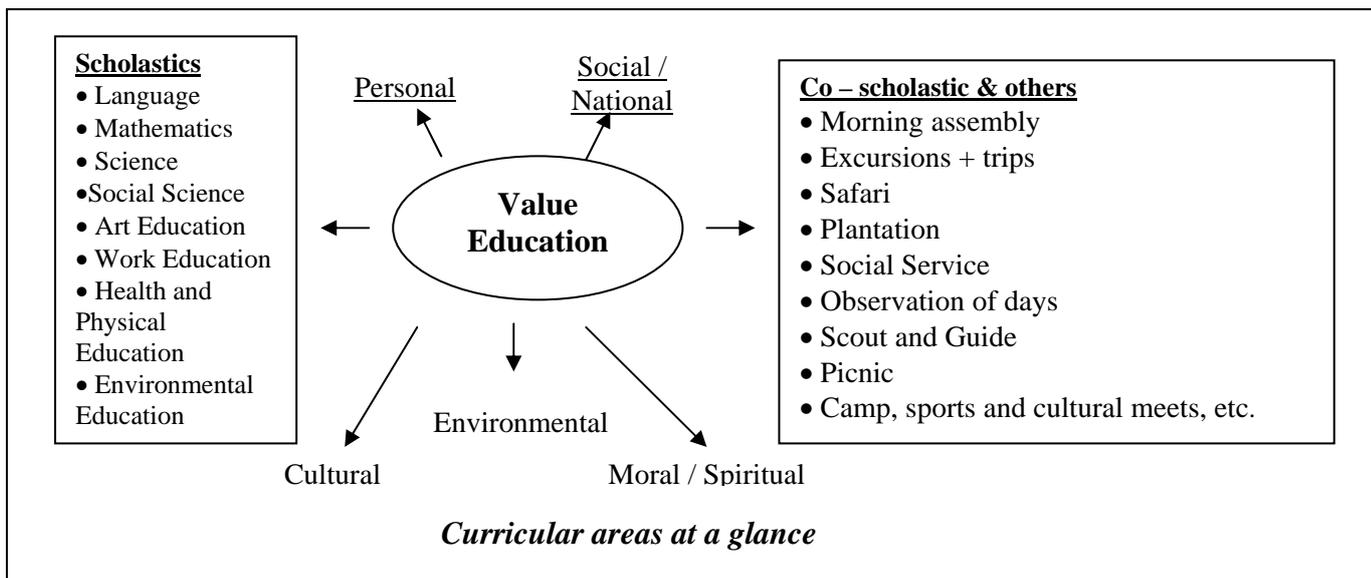
As per new curriculum changes have been brought in evaluation system through: -

- Introducing CCE
- Abolishing traditional half yearly and annual exam
- Introducing remedial measure after each periodic evaluation
- Using variety of evaluation tools of different types – oral, activity, writing, etc.
- Orienting teacher for evaluation
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Reformation in upper primary curriculum

In 2003, in linkage with lower primary curriculum reform is made in upper primary stage (class V to VII) also in the same manner and approach. As elementary education is made compulsory and fundamental right in the year 2002 by the govt. of India, for which *Sarba Siksha Abhijan (SSA)* is being launched by the govt. of India throughout the country to provide quality education for all children of the age group 6 – 14 years for which Assam state govt. immediately started work in reformation of elementary education of the state. And SCERT, Assam has taken the responsibility of reforming the upper primary curriculum and textbooks in linkage with primary education without any gap. Like before, this time also public opinion was collected and numbers of workshops were also being organized for curriculum renewal at this stage. In the new curriculum both scholastic and

co –scholastic areas are equally emphasized and hence incorporated varieties of school, program at this stage.



As Assam is the multilingual state with a number of medium instructions along with some other languages used by learners it is really a difficult and challenging tasks to develop curriculum, textbooks and other teaching learning materials as a large number of languages have to be handled. Utmost effort has been made to provide elementary education in learner’s own home language. The remarkable efforts are

- Adaptation of curriculum & textbooks in different media not only in language but also adapting socio cultural facts and events
- Development of different language textbooks with different scripts used including tribal languages
- Training of teachers in handling different languages along with development of training modules including adaptation

Salient features of primary and upper primary curriculum

1. Curriculum provides ensure equality of opportunity of all
1. It rests on equity, relevance, and excellence.
2. Emphasizing achievement of competencies along with all round development of the child
3. Importance given on inculcation of values that is, Personal, Social, National, Spiritual and Environmental
4. Providing opportunity to different linguistic groups as per needs and demands of these groups, keeping the curriculum loads same.
5. Emphasis governed on environmental education – its awareness, problems and solution in learners day to day life
6. Shifting from traditional teacher learning strategy to the learners centric approach where participatory, activity based, environment based, learning process has been stressed
7. Selection of learning areas / content is mostly done on the basis of local socio cultural needs and keeping an eye to meet the future challenges and requirements and linking education with life skills

8. Practical and need based periodical evaluation and CCE is introduced followed by remedial measures till each competency is attained by each learner.
9. Sufficient use of TLM by the learners as well as teachers for enhancing learning

Maximum efforts has been given in teaching learning process by introducing varieties of activities in classroom transaction along with use of teaching learning material. For that extensive teacher-training programme is being organizing throughout the state through SSA. Required TLM grants to each school along with free distribution of textbooks and workbooks are supplied to the learners by the state govt. at Elementary Education. New sets of activity based child centric textbooks have been designed and implemented upto class VII through which learner are getting maximum opportunity to achieve need based competency for their future life.

Our expectation

Through proper implementation of curriculum, textbooks, innovating teaching practices and new evaluation system we hope that in our state

- Each child will be coming to school happily and will learn in a learner friendly, fear free and secure environment
- Each child will enjoy learning and learning will be ensured and guaranteed
- Learners will be able to apply learning effectively in their experiences in day-to-day life in various activities
- The curriculum will bring about a change devoid of hatred, violence and mistrust. At the same time awareness will be created for preservation and protection of the environment
- No child of the state will be left out from receiving education up to elementary stage and continuation for a major section of learners

Conclusion

In the coming days we have to do hard work jointly with teachers / teacher educators and community to yield the desired results. We should do work together for the better future of next generation and work in missionary zeal. In this context we can quote here our Ho'nble, President, Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam who have written in his book **Ignited Minds** that "*all nations which have risen to greatness have been characterized by a sense of mission*". Any nation surely can rise to the highest peak of civilization through their sheered effort of dedication, sincerity and social commitment. In order to do so right of education of all children must be ensured at any cost and it is the responsibility of the state, country to fulfill it without further delay to one of the major goal identified in education for all summit in April 2000 (Dakar, April 2000) which is – improving all aspects of quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning are achieved by all specially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills. Hence we all the stakeholders for education system must realize that –

“Education for all is the soundest investment in a peaceful and prosperous future that we can make for our children”

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