

**Right to Education: Money Matters
By Shruti Ambast**

One look at the scope of the Right to Education (RTE) legislation lays bare the difficulties of estimating a budget for its implementation. New schools have to be built, many more teachers employed, bridge courses for out-of-school children funded, reimbursement given to private schools for reserving 25% of their seats for disadvantaged children, and much more. A report on the budget has been prepared by a team at the National University for Educational Planning and Administration (NUEPA), which cites a figure of Rs 1.71 lakh crores for RTE implementation over the next five years. A probing of this report reveals several lacunae in accounting, and that the figure is an underestimation.

The NUEPA estimates of teacher salaries and 'entitlement to children' (which is supposed to cover the 'free' education under RTE) are found to be lacking. It needs to be questioned whether the salary figures used – Rs 8400 for primary school teachers, and Rs 11,200 for Trained Graduate Teacher - are inclusive of all allowances, and whether they reflect the recommendations of the Sixth Pay Commission as they claim they do. Some independent estimates of these salaries show them to be in the range of Rs 13,000 – Rs 22,000.

Entitlement to children accounts only for free textbooks and uniforms; does this really result in a free education? A study by Mukhopadhyay and Chandrasekhar (2006) shows that this is not the case; the actual cost incurred by a child in going to school is much more.

Also, the estimates do not cover many existing provisions under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan such as kitchen facilities for schools and running of various teacher training institutions. There needs to be more clarity on exactly how and where these items are being accounted for.

Many grants that had been accounted for in the estimates made in 2005 (which accompanied the RTE draft made by the Central Advisory Board of Education), are missing, such as research grants, grants for computers, and grants for School Management Committees.

A striking revelation in the NUEPA report is that the total of the state wise estimates which amounts to Rs 2.04 lakh crores is significantly more than the estimates when calculated for the nation as a whole. . While this difference between estimates has been explained as a technical error, it does not take away from the fact that both these figures represent a budget which has been underestimated.

Judging from the above, one may infer that the budgeting for RTE has been done half-heartedly. While it is of course very difficult to account for each and every item under the purview of the legislation, it is at the same time necessary to do so.

Something even more worrying is the actual process of releasing, transferring and using funds. Under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, this process has been severely criticized on counts of underutilization of funds, delays in transfers, misappropriation and lack of monitoring. This can be evidenced through various review reports – Joint Review Mechanism Report 2010, Union Audit 2006, National Institute of Public Finance and Policy 2007 etc. An interview with a Technical Support Group consultant also confirmed the fact that these issues are impeding progress under SSA. If RTE is to be a success, the planning, budgeting and funding process must be streamlined with immediate effect.