

CONTROVERSY

ARVIND JAIN



Right gone wrong

RTE Act shocker for millions of students who rely on unrecognised schools

BY VANDANA

Sant Nagar is a typical locality in Delhi's Burari village. Though far from the malls and high-rises, it is chock-a-block with houses and shops. Potholed roads and filthy drains point to the absence of government intervention. In one of Sant Nagar's dusty bylanes stands Excellent Public School, though it looks more like a residential building. Nearly 500 children up to class VI study in this unrecognised school.

But the students may have to find a new school, within no time. Unrecognised schools in India are staring at the March 31 deadline by which they need to obtain government recognition or else close down. The deadline was set after the Right to Education Act came into effect in 2010, which gave a three-year window for unrecognised schools to gain recognition, by fulfilling certain crite-

ria. According to section 19 of the Act, schools require all-weather building, one classroom per teacher, adequate library facilities, separate toilets for girls and boys, drinking water facilities, and fencing and boundary walls, among other conditions, to get recognition. As the deadline looms, nearly three lakh unrecognised schools in the country are facing an uncertain future.

The unrecognised schools are in a dilemma. They do not want to discourage the students, yet it has become a moral responsibility for them to inform the parents about the gravity of the situation. Most parents are already worried. Ranju Kumari's daughter Rekha studies in class III in Tagore Academy, another unrecognised school in Sant Nagar. She is worried whether the school will continue to function after March. "I do not know whether to start searching for a government school or carry on with this. I was happy with Rekha's performance. She can read and write English.

No teaching happens in government schools," she said.

While the Union government has notified the umbrella norms for recognition under the RTE Act, each state has its own criteria for recognition. In Delhi, the matter is further complicated because of the Delhi Development Authority's Master Plan 2021. The plan requires schools to have 800 square metres of land. But most of the unrecognised schools do not have more than 500 square metres. Considering the unavailability of land and its soaring prices in Delhi, these schools are left with no choice.

"I would need at least a crore to buy land adjacent to my school. This will get translated into increased fees. Children come to my school because it is affordable," said Preeti Kumari, principal of Excellent Public School. The school charges ₹500 as monthly fees across classes. Other than the

Future tense: Students of Excellent Public School in Delhi may have to look for alternatives after March 31

area norm, the school meets all conditions prescribed by the RTE Act.

In Bihar, the prescribed size of a classroom is 25x20 feet. For recognition, the schools should also have libraries, and high schools should have laboratories. Specialised training is compulsory for teachers and their basic pay should be equivalent to the basic pay of government teachers. There are close to 20,000 unrecognised schools in Bihar that fail to meet these norms. "The government cannot afford to deprive 50 lakh children of their right to study wherever they want. Some of the criteria are ridiculous. How can we match government salaries? We are in discussion with the state government but no relief has come through," said Dr D.K Singh, president of the Private Schools' Association in Bihar.

A study conducted by the Delhi-based India Institute and Newcastle University of the UK found that private schools in Patna had better teacher attendance and good basic infrastructure. "The government's excess focus on ensuring quality though infrastructure inputs and not learning outcomes is not correct. These schools cater to a market not serviced by big private schools," said Baladevan Rangaraju, one of the authors of the study report.

Down south in Andhra Pradesh, the government prescribes a classroom size of 22x25 feet, while most unrecognised schools function in rooms not bigger than 12x15 feet. Additionally, the schools in AP require no-objection certificates from local bodies and traffic police. School authorities say NoCs are hard to come by and bribery is rampant. The government norms also require that 50 per cent of the income earned by the schools shall go towards teachers' pay. But most schools pay them only ₹4,000 to ₹5,000.

While the unrecognised private schools are facing the threat of imminent closure, the enrolment in such schools has been steadily increasing,

A for act

According to section 19 of the RTE Act, unrecognised schools need to satisfy the following criteria:

<p>Number of teachers (Class I-V) Up to 60 students: Two 61-90 students: Three 91-120 students: Four 121-200 students: Five Above 200, one teacher for every 40 students</p> <p>(Class VI to VIII) At least one teacher per class with a 1:35 ratio</p> <p>Infrastructure All-weather rooms (one room per teacher plus a store-cum-office-cum head teacher's room) Barrier-free access</p>	<p>Separate toilets for girls and boys Safe drinking water Kitchen for mid-day meal Playground Boundary wall and fencing</p> <p>Minimum working days Class I-V: 200 (with 800 instructional hours) Class VI-VIII: 220 (with 1,000 instructional hours)</p> <p>Minimum working hours for teachers 45 per week</p> <p>Others Library Teaching-learning equipment Play material, games and sports equipment</p>
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according to the recent report by the ASER Centre. "Education is a priority area for middle-class Indians, and that is why admissions in private schools have gone up. Falling standards of government schools have also been pushing people to private schools," said Shantanu Gupta, associate director, advocacy, at School Choice Campaign, an NGO.

Although the government is getting ready to close down unrecognised schools, it has consistently failed to address problems faced by its own schools. Many government schools do not meet the recognition criteria that are being enforced on private schools. Under the RTE Act, it is obligatory for states to provide required infrastructure to students in government schools. It also mandates that students in unrecognised schools be shifted to nearby government schools. However, most government schools are already jam-packed, often without basic amenities. A UNICEF study points out that nearly three crore school children in India do not have access to toilets.

"The RTE Act empowers the child.

It is the right of every child to have separate toilets and adequate drinking water. It is the obligation of the government to provide these facilities. Let April come, and most of these issues will be decided by the courts," said Vinod Raina, member of the Central Advisory Board of Education, which advises the ministry of human resource development on policy issues.

Even though the March 31 deadline is almost here, the Central and state governments have not yet decided on the fate of millions of students who study in unrecognised schools. An HRD ministry official was evasive in his reply, "We had a meeting with state education secretaries. We have asked them to look at it"

The violation of RTE norms is not just in terms of school recognition, infrastructure and teachers' qualification and remuneration. The government, said sources, had not yet reimbursed private schools for implementing the 25 per cent quota for underprivileged students mandated by the RTE Act. A summer of discontent is brewing in India's education sector. ●