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'Right' drive for education

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File picture of children on their way to school

Bhubaneswar, March 22: A campaign titled *Haq Banta Hai* has been launched in the state to sensitise school students about the provisions under the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, especially the one that ensures 25 per cent seats reserved for underprivileged students in private schools.

According to the act, all private schools will have to reserve 25 per cent of entry-level seats with free and compulsory education for the financially weaker or socially disadvantaged students aged six to 14. However, due to the lack of awareness among the people or the indifference of the government, many private schools in the city have reported no admission under the act. While most schools claim that they had no applicants for the seats, some say they were hesitant to take students for the lack of a clear directive from the government.

This January, the government announced to reimburse Rs 9,184 per year for each child to schools admitting students under the act. Many schools have however quoted the sum as "too meagre".

"The reason behind such poor response could be that the beneficiaries continue to be in dark about the provision. The state government has also failed to take steps to let the students and their parents know about the provisions," said Anil Pradhan, convener of Odisha RTE forum, a state-level network, which helps children with education.

"The time has come to build a united public opinion demanding education for all. Through this campaign, we are planning to reach more than five lakh people including the youths," said Pradhan.

Prashanti Jena, member of a financially weak family that stays close to an elite school, appeared oblivious to the scheme. "Even if there is something like that, poor people like us will never be confident enough to approach these big schools on our own. Either the government or the voluntary bodies working for the education sector should facilitate the process," Jena said.

Besides the reservation provision, the campaign will also stress on the need for toilets, drinking water facilities, ramp facilities, boundary wall, sufficient classrooms and teachers, etc.

"Despite being in force for five years in the state, reports suggest that around 92 per cent of the schools do not comply with the norms of the right to education act even today. The grievance redressal mechanism is ineffective and there is hardly any action against the non-compliance, said an educator. "Though the state is claiming to have the highest budget allocation for education, over 37 per cent schools have no toilet, 3,440 schools still have single teachers and the results are very poor. This inequality must be addressed," said Oxfam India regional manager Akshaya Kumar Biswal.

The campaign launched jointly by the Odisha RTE forum and the Oxfam India will cover around twenty districts in the state. The campaign has already started in Mayurbhanj, Sundargarh and Balangir, and will soon be taken up in other districts, said one of the organisers.

A series of programmes including awareness building, grievance collection and a signature campaign demanding the implementation of the RTE act have been planned for the campaign.

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