

# Strengthening the role of State in School Education vis-à-vis the Private Initiative

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## Abstract

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*The paper pleads for a strong and a more pro-active role of the State in view of the growth of the private schools especially in primary education sector. Most of the private schools, as many of the findings confirm, mostly cater education for the children of the wealthy families. In a developing country like India where illiteracy rate and also the never-enrolled rate is relatively high, giving a free hand to private players to deliver a primary public good like education will not portend well for the country. Moreover, fulfillment of the much desired objective of universal elementary education would remain a distant dream if the state withdraws itself from its responsibility and allows the government school system to deteriorate further till it dies a silent death.*

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A recent instance of a child being denied admission in one of the 'elite public schools' in Delhi despite meeting the required percentage of mark has exposed the myths associated with these schools. The only reason that deprives the child her otherwise deserved admission is her poor family and social background, which the school administration thinks does not meet the eligibility criteria set for these schools. There are such similar instances happening in these so-called elite public schools. It is in fact paradoxical with the term 'public' when these schools are in fact serving only a few section of the society. In fact, private

school system today has become more of an agency of social and class reproduction than the transmitters of knowledge and values. Cultural capital, comparable to economic capital, is transmitted by inheritance and invested in order to be cultivated. And through the new type of private schools emerging, the existing social and class divide tend to perpetuate further, creating a new form of cultural capital exclusively for a few section of the population. This reproduction of social and class divide is less a result of direct reproduction based on inherited wealth and incomes, and has more to do with the mediated

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patterns, for example, access to well-paid employment. This would be true if we see the portrayal of private schools as markers of excellence or merit and also the alleged higher market value of the persons with private schools background.

Private schools have now almost reached a proportion we can no longer afford to ignore. They have grown up so rapidly to become a kind of substitute for, rather than supplement to government schools. This could be attributed to many factors among which the deteriorating condition of the government schooling system and parental demand of a differentiated kind of education are important. However, the promotion and expansion of private sector may further accentuate existing social divisions and reduce commitment towards quality improvement in government schools. Further, what is significant as Vimala Ramachandran (2004) argues is that, the growth of new private schools 'is giving rise to a new trends of hierarchies of access, whereby paradoxically, the democratisation of access to schools seems to be accompanied by a child's caste, community and gender in defining which school she or he attends'. Andre Beteille also argues that the "family among middle class and upper middle class Indians is changing its orientation away from lineage, sub-caste and caste to schools, college and office they attend to".\*

Furthermore, the private phenomenon in school education has also posed serious questions on the policy implications on the part of the State.

What if the government remains a silent spectator while at the same time allowing its own system to wither? What are the consequences on the issue of equity if the private schools overhaul the government school system and what should be the response from the state? The subsequent sections of the study would seek to understand some of these issues pertaining to private schools vis-à-vis government schools.

### **Tracing the Genesis of Private Phenomenon**

Children's education in the beginning was a matter of family, the kinship group or the local community. In several countries, education became a task for religious institutions, and during the nineteenth century only, the State made education a public responsibility. Education was until then private in the sense that it did not belong to the State; it was decentralised and national curricula were very rare (Mallison, 1980).

The private initiatives in education in India could be traced in the ancient and medieval period in various forms such as the Ashram schools, Gurukuls, *Pathshalas* and *Madrasas* which catered education to small section of the society. In ancient India, almost all schooling was conducted by religious bodies or by tutors employed on an individual basis by families with sufficient means. In fact the view that government has responsible for education of their citizens has been widely held only since the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Europe and since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in most other parts of the world

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\* Quoted in Anne Waldrop, *The meaning of the Old School-Tie: Private Schools, Admission Procedures and Class Segmentation in New Delhi*, pp.203-27.

(Bray, 1998). Before that we had religious institutions directly engaging in the sphere of education. This is in the process of secularisation that religious control over education and educational institutions was challenged and the state became a public provider of education.

However, the modern fee-paying private schools in India owe their origin to the Wood's Dispatch of 1854 (Tilak, 1990) which made elaborate provisions for grants-in-aid to private schools. Under the provisions of the Dispatch, educational institutions were allowed to run privately for profit. By this provision for grants-in-aid for the private schools was not only able to reduce financial burden on the public treasury, but also could introduce elitist character into the educational system providing education of the kind the upper classes desired for their off-springs, without a large expenditure by the government. This is in fact a reflection of a capitalist ideology where the role of the state is greatly reduced. The present system of private school unfortunately, is a continuation of this system.

Defining private schools is also a painstaking exercise. There are various types of schools under the nomenclature of private. The private schools are not a homogenous lot. There are different types of private schools in the country but are generally clubbed together and are labeled as private schools. The private sector includes actors with varying motivations, resources and the ranges extend from voluntary organisations, missionary schools and schools founded on philanthropic venture to clearly commercial set ups. It is important here

to mention that some of the schools are established and even registered under the commercial establishment and shops act (Panchamukhi, 1989). Even among the private schools there is a broad classification of private schools as private aided and non-aided or self-financing schools. The present study shall primarily focus on the private unaided schools which are either formally recognised to transact educational business or not necessarily recognised.

It is pertinent here to mention that the Constitution of India allows establishment of private schools irrespective of whether they are or are not recognised and aided by the State (Anuradha De, 2002). Article 30 of the Indian Constitution also clearly mentions the Right of Minorities to establish and administer educational institutions. Private schools thus, have a legal and constitutional sanction to establish and operate in India.

However, the major concern is the pace of the growth of the private schools which if not checked could overthrow the government schools. Placing such a large stake as education on private sectors cannot be a good proposition. Moreover, in a country like India where the dropout rate and the never-enrolled students is still high, the State has also to play a more pro-active role. It is in this context that the Constitution 93<sup>rd</sup> Amendment, 1992 has placed a stronger view of the State by making elementary education a Fundamental Right by inserting Article 21 (A) stating that, the State 'shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of 6 to 14 years in such as the State may by law determine'.

Making elementary education a fundamental right by this amendment has reinforced the role of the State in achieving the goal of free, universal elementary education as envisaged in the Directive Principles of State Policy. The increasing responsibility entrusted by the Act on the one hand and the increasing growth of private schools on the other, pose a question on the role and the credibility of both the State and the private actors.

#### **Understanding Private Schools: A Sociological Perspective**

Education, like health is primarily a public good. The public good ethos is linked to socio-democratic ideals of opportunities and access for many. Since the fundamental assumption that education would help erode the socially inherited structural inequities and provide opportunities for social advancement through equity of access and opportunity, it would continue to be regarded as public good (Levin, 1987). And in a country like India where majority of the population is below poverty line and belong to the lower income strata and also where educational achievement compares still low with other developed countries of the world, education should not be limited by financial considerations.

While analysing private schools in education, it would be appropriate to take into account the available evidence about locational distribution, social reach by looking into the class and social composition of these schools to assess the nature of clients of private schools. The general assumption is that the private schools cater education mostly

to the children of higher income strata and generally the elite class in the society. It is also found that private schools are concentrated mostly in the urban areas. However, their spread has now even penetrated in the rural areas also. Gender bias is also witnessed though less pronounced, taking into consideration the income level of the families. For example, parents unable to afford sending both their children to private schools will prefer their male ward to be sent to the private school. If these assumptions of the private school hold true, and as some of the findings even show and if they remain an exclusive domain of a few children of the affluent families, then it will do more harm than good in education and achievement of universal elementary education will remain an illusion.

Anuradha De *et al.* (2002) findings on the percentage distribution of the primary and upper primary students from two polar groups in 1993 reveal two different worlds of education if we take into consideration two extreme cases of rural, female SC/ST students of India and urban, male forward caste students of the same country. Only about 2 per cent in the primary and 5 per cent in the upper primary students of the former category are taught in the private unaided schools. And the evidence that private school enrolment is biased towards males is more straightforward.

Dreze and Gazder (1996) in their study in Uttar Pradesh also reveal that school attendance in private schools is 'significantly male dominated as parents are more willing to pay for male children'. This could be attributed to parents' more willingness to permit a male child to

travel the location where private schools are established. Implicit in it is that these private schools are located far from the rural areas. Tilak and Sudarshan (2000) study also reports similar findings. While examining the trend in private enrolment they report that nearly a half of the growth in enrolment in urban areas and a sixth of the growth in rural areas of India were accounted for by the private unaided schools between 1986 and 1993. They also find biases favouring urban, male and non-scheduled caste and tribes. What explains these biases then? The higher cost of sending children to private schools and in-affordability of the parents could be one. The private institutions, according to Tilak (1990) practice exclusiveness through charging high tuition fees and alarmingly large capitation fees or donations and through selection of children on the basis of intellectual aptitude defined by the parental and familial background. Another factor that explains the locational bias could be the concentration of more affluent parents in urban than the rural areas and hence the larger concentration of these schools in these areas.

Based on their findings, they conclude that private schools may aggravate the already existing inequalities along lines of gender and caste. Looking at the considerable biases in the clientele of private schools, Anuradha De *et al.* also conclude that 'private schools are more for boys, for upper caste, and for urban areas than government schools, and also attending these schools has become a mark of social privilege'.

### **Are Private Schools Really Better than the Government Schools?**

A true comparison between private schools and the government schools is crucial. In terms of infrastructure, teaching methods, pupils' achievement and teacher competence, the private schools are better than the government schools. Many of the studies report the same. However, the PROBE Data differs in terms of teacher competency. It says that teaching skills for primary level children were not superior to those found among the government school teachers.

However, these perceived advantages of private schools in education may be attributed to many factors. The parents and students' cultural capital very much influence the client composition of the private schools. There are differences between the students when they enroll in private and government schools respectively. Those students opting for private schools have higher motivation and more cultural capital and privileged parents choose these schools over the government schools. The client homogeneity of the private schools, its consideration for profit which ensures managerial efficiency and the element of monopoly rent which its products enjoy due to its small share in the market are the major factors which put private schools above the government schools in their comparison (Varghese, 1993).

However, Tilak (1990) gives a scathing critique of the private schools, terming the so-called of excellence of the private schools as myth. He argues that the quality of private schools is not necessarily superior. Not only are private schools inferior in quality, they also

contribute to the decline in the quality of public institutions and thus to the deterioration on the overall quality of education. He sees profit as sole motive behind the mushrooming private schools. This is the result why they grow more in cosmopolitan urban areas than the rural areas, 'to satisfy the needs of the gullible parents'. And some of the state governments support their expansion as long as they serve the vested interest. This, he thinks would jeopardise the objective of equal opportunities for education and the overall effect would be to convert education into a force for reinforcing the existing stratification of the society.

### **Renewing State's Legitimacy**

The new legislation after the 93<sup>rd</sup> Amendment making elementary education a Fundamental Right has imposed a strong obligation on the state to play a pro-active in providing education. It is also true that with the increased demand of education, the state cannot be the sole provider of education in India. There are both theoretical and practical limitations. Taking into account the limitations of the state, the Tenth Five-Year Plan also suggests a synergetic partnership between the private and the government sectors in achieving universal elementary education.

However, the recent surge in the growth of private schools especially as a result of the falling quality of the government schools seems to have changed the equation between the government and the private schools. If the private schools become an alternative to government schools and become a

dominating feature in education, it could lead to decay of educational standards besides class conflict in the country (Ruhela, 1993). In this context the State has to renew its legitimacy as public authority in education. The existing government schools need to be improved and new curriculum introduced so as to counter the private schools. The schools need to be equipped with proper infrastructures and learning materials. And most importantly, there should emerge a proper mechanism to regulate the existing private schools. Until now, state has not been doing much to regulate these schools and many of them spring up in many states even without the government's knowledge.

The absence of regulation has also facilitated the growth of these schools, creating a dual system of education with the government schools deteriorating further. Therefore, giving private players a free hand especially in areas of public good like education will not be a healthy development. The case of Himachal Pradesh's success story in transforming a mass illiteracy to near universal primary education almost entirely with the government schools with relatively little contribution from private institutions during a short time could be replicated in other states.

Moreover, unless the effectiveness of the government school system improves, there are little prospects of universalisation of elementary education in India by 2010 as promised in the Constitution of India. The experience of the now industrialised countries demonstrates that while private sector could play supportive role, it is the state which plays a more dominant role. The

Indian state will need to be much more pro-active in reforming the public school system. At the same time, the quality of schooling in the private sector could improve if the state were to take a more pro-active regulatory role. The Kothari Commission (1964-66) also stated that 'the growing educational needs of a modernising society can only be met by the State and it would be a mistake to show any over-dependence on private enterprises which is basically uncertain'. This concern also finds echoed in the overwhelming message emanating from the District Primary

Education Programmes (DPEP) schools that the presence of a good quality government school, which functions regularly, can indeed surmount many obstacles of the prevalent social and economic barriers to schooling. As Vimala Ramachandran (2004) rightly says 'special strategies are also necessary to reach out elementary education to the people who not only belong to the most deprived sub-groups of scheduled castes and tribes but are also the people with almost no voice in the society'. This can be fulfilled only when there is a strong state, supplemented by the private players.

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