

# Strengthening Public Education by Implementing RTE

## Abstract

*There is a decline in enrolment in government schools in many states in India and increase in enrolment in private schools, this is partly due to a migration of students from government schools to private schools. However, this shift leads to increasing stratification of school education, which is an obstacle to social mobility.*

*One way of addressing this stratification, as well as improve quality of school education in India, is to implement the RTE in letter and spirit. This will require the government to shut down private schools which do not meet the requirements of RTE with respect to infrastructure and teacher provisioning. The Central and state governments will also significantly increase their budgetary investment on government and aided schools to ensure they meet these RTE norms. Governments also need to invest in greater school – community linkages to strengthen government school accountability to the local community.*

*Such increase in investment is also required to meet the norm of 6% of GDP investment in education, suggested by the Kothari Commission report of 1966.*

The percentage enrolment of children in government schools overall, is declining every year and that of private schools increasing, as the statistics collected by the Government of India indicate. 'Private' has become a buzzword for 'quality education', or at least to making a claim to be better than 'Government'.

## Privatisation of School Education

Most private schools are similar to enterprise, where the clientele is based on ability to pay tariff. The range of private schools, in terms of their resources and capabilities is wide; depending largely on the fees paid by the parents. At the top, there is a small percentage of well resourced elite schools catering to the upper classes. These schools have more than adequate infrastructure and support staff. Teachers tend to be well-paid, and they have a small teacher-pupil

ratio of 1:20 or lesser, enabling individual attention to students. The annual fees for a child can easily be in excess of a lakh of rupees.

Private schools which cater to middle class sections of society have basic infrastructure and adequate teachers, though teacher-pupil ratios tend to be larger than those in the elite schools. At the other end, are the so called 'affordable private schools' catering to the poor, these schools tend to have poor infrastructure, pay poor salaries to teachers, and can offer only a limited range of learning opportunities to students, due to paucity of resources. This stratification is inevitable as private schools are 'unaided'; meaning they get no support from government and have to depend on fees paid by parents. Good schooling is expensive; providing schools, classrooms, libraries,

playgrounds, equipment for sports and laboratories, qualified teachers and rich learning experiences requires significant initial and recurring investments.

While having a range of enterprise is socially acceptable, this scenario is harmful in the case of school education. As the American philosopher John Dewey explains, the primary aim of education in any modern society is to help every student develop as a concerned and responsible citizen in order to evolve a just and democratic society. For Gandhi, the school was the primary institution to build a peaceful and non-exploitative society. The increasing privatisation of school education leads to increased stratification, which promotes social inequity. The rich and affluent are able to purchase good quality education (at least in terms of academic knowledge) in elite schools, while the children of the poor suffer in poorly resourced schools, which are not capable of providing quality education. Providing poor learning opportunities to a section of society negates possibilities to evolve a non-exploitative, equitable and democratic polity and society.

The middle class has accessed government schools in the past and continues to do so in areas where there are none or few private schools. However, the increasing enrolment of students in private schools, often leaves behind only students from very marginalised groups in government schools. This contributes to the further weakening of the government system, as parents of students attending government schools coming from increasingly marginalised backgrounds are unable to provide pressures for greater accountability of the government school system. More universal

a public system is, more the chances of the users enforcing accountability on the system. David Kynaston puts it across humorously, “One only has to witness pushy private-school parents to realise that the state sector will never achieve its full capability without them.”

Pasi Sahlberg, the Finnish educator has described how Finnish education has evolved from a steeply hierarchical one, made up of private, selective and less-well regarded “local” schools, to become a system in which every child attends the “common school”. He has asserted that Finland’s politicians and educational figures recognised that a profoundly unequal education system did not simply reproduce inequality down the generations, but weakened the fabric of the nation itself. In our country, already stratified on grounds of gender, caste, class, ethnicity and religion, school privatisation would further weaken national cohesion and ‘unity in diversity’.

### Funding Private Schools

One cause of the increasing enrolment in private schools, is the partial implementation of the Right to Education Act (RTE), specifically, implementation of the provision requiring private schools to admit students from marginalised backgrounds, to the extent of 25% of their enrolment. The fees of such students are reimbursed by the government to the private schools, the reimbursement amount being the government’s per student expenditure in its own schools, or the actual fees collected by the private school, whichever is lesser. Parents are finding this a novel method to enrol their children in private schools, which otherwise would have denied their wards admission. With the government paying the fees, more and more parents are now able to fulfil their desire for enrolling their children in private schools. This move appears to have unfortunately strengthened the popular impression that private schools are better than government schools, as the government itself is paying parents to enrol in private schools! Parent desire for private

schools is extending even to those schools which may not be well resourced to offer good education, and may even be worse off than the neighbouring government school, in some or all respects.

In many states, especially in urban areas, this has triggered an exodus towards private schools, with parents scrambling to participate in the admission processes. In some states like Karnataka, a software application has been designed and developed to manage this process and significant efforts and time of education department officials at the state, district and block levels goes to implementing this single clause of RTE, managing government funded admissions to private schools.

### Implementing RTE fully

While the 25% clause of RTE may be causing declining enrolment in government schools, the best way to reverse it, would be to implement the RTE fully, in letter and in spirit.

The RTE is not only about providing 'free and compulsory education' for every child in our country, it requires that such education must be of 'equitable quality'. Hence, it has clear and specific provisions stipulating the minimum physical and academic infrastructure required in each school, adequate number of teachers, minimum teacher qualifications, continuous teacher development etc. These clauses are critical to quality education. However, less than 10% of the schools meet all the norms. The remaining 90% schools include both government and private schools.

### Strengthening Government Schools

The RTE is an act of Parliament, ratified by state legislative assemblies; not a single school should be allowed to violate it. The resource requirements to implement RTE fully, are simply impossible for the 'affordable' schools to meet, since they require investments far

exceeding the fees that poor parents can pay. Such schools must be closed, and students from these schools transferred to neighbouring government and private schools that meet these norms. This can be done in a phased manner, beginning with schools that are worst in their compliance, and extending to schools which are less so. This phased process may also put pressure on schools to work for compliance.

While the RTE intended that well resourced private schools should become inclusive with government funding, it did not intend that the low cost private schools (whose costs per student may even be lower than that of the governments) should get government subsidy to admit students to poor quality education.

Likewise, all government schools too must fully meet RTE norms. Unlike private schools which depend only on fees paid by the parents, government schools get budgetary support. The central and state governments have to increase their education budget to ensure that schools are available all over the state with adequate infrastructure and well qualified and trained teachers. This is not an insurmountable challenge, as the government can raise resources to fulfil its obligations under the RTE. Indeed, countries that have been able to provide universal quality education, have only done so through adequate public investment.

### Funding education

The 1966 Kothari commission recommended that India should spend at least 6% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on education. The 2005 Tapas Mazumdar committee on funding RTE emphasised that budgetary support should even exceed 6%, if required to implement the act in letter and spirit. Unfortunately, nowhere in our history has this investment crossed 4.5%. Many countries poorer than India spend higher percentage of GDP on education. While India is ranked first globally for the number of children in the school going age, it is ranked

124<sup>th</sup> in percentage expenditure of GDP on education.

Professor Jandhyala Tilak has repeatedly argued that the Indian economy is quite capable of funding its schools adequately. The challenge is our polity, which is complacent about the need to provide equal opportunities to every child, irrespective of socio-economic background. This is painfully witnessed every year when the budgets are presented. The 2018 Indian budget for school education was around Rs. 50,000 crores, while concessions given to corporate sector was Rs. 85,000 crores, customs and excise revenue foregone was Rs. 154,822 crore (a quarter of this for import of gold, diamonds and jewellery), and concessions for individuals was Rs. 75,000 crores. Defence budget at 295,511 crores was nearly 6 times the education budget. Meeting 6% target would not be difficult, if some of these concessions were to be withdrawn or even reduced. The RTE clearly states that the central and state governments have concurrent responsibility for funding its implementation.

**Table:** Government expenditure on education in India, as a percentage of GDP

Year (Illustrative)	Education budget as a % of GDP
1951-52	0.67
1965-66	1.82
1985-86	3.71
1989-90	4.21
1999-2000	4.3
2000-01	4.4
2005-06	3.34
2010-11	4.5
2015-16	2.6

The level of financial support (measured in terms of per student investment) provided to the 'elite government schools', the Kendriya Vidyalayas, should be made available to all government schools across the country. This is essential to providing equitable quality education to all children in our country. If anything, the increasing

proportion of marginalised groups in the state government run schools means that the per student investment in government schools must be even more than that of the Kendriya Vidyalayas or elite private schools, since in the latter, students are likely get better support from home to move towards an equitable playing field. Currently, it is a fraction of the latter.

### Implementing the 25% Rule Selectively

An alternate interpretation of the RTE provision requiring private schools to admit 25% of students, could be that the government should implement it only where government schools are not accessible. In many states the norm of having a lower primary school within 1 kilometre, and a higher primary school within 2 kilometres is met in most habitations. There is no need to finance admissions to private schools in such habitations, to fulfil the RTE requirement of free and compulsory schooling. While this interpretation can create logistical complexities to identify eligible private schools, it would impede if not reverse the current movement to private schools. From 2019-20 academic year, the Karnataka education department has decided to reimburse admissions to private schools, only when there are no government or aided schools nearby. This has reduced the migration to private schools.

### From 'Sarkari' Schools to 'Sarva-janiks' or 'Samudaya' Schools

The RTE mandates each school to constitute 'School Management Committees', comprising of parents and other local representatives, which would monitor the functioning of the school and prepare its development plan. To make community participation in the development and management of the school meaningful, the government needs to allow them much greater autonomy, and provide funds based on the schools development plan,

as required by the RTE. Such autonomy is required to build the school as an institution that can work with its community to meet local requirements, rather than treat the school and teachers as the implementers of rigid and detailed instructions from those above in the hierarchy.

Such decentralisation would also enable it to raise resources from well wishers for further institutional development. Greater ownership and participation by the community in the work of the school is also in line with Gandhi's vision of 'Nai Talim'. As a part of this, schools must also encouraged to be more 'sarvajanik' (public) or 'samudaya' (community) than 'sarkari' (government) schools, and rechristened accordingly.

## Public Image

There is a need to challenge the popular impression that government schools are inherently inferior to private schools, which discourse is often promoted by the media and vested interests. There are innumerable stories and case studies of well functioning and good quality government schools and there is no reason why, given similar circumstances of adequate investments and support from stakeholders, other schools cannot become so.

For this government schools need to pro-actively communicate with their local community, share their work, challenges and invite support and co-operation. At a systemic level too, education department needs to provide greater publicity to the work being done in the schools, and invite community support to strengthen government schools. There is also a need to be transparent about the challenges and the under investment, and invite criticism to create a groundswell for improvement.

## Strengthening RTE

There is also a need to further improve the RTE to support quality education. Currently, the RTE stipulates a teacher:pupil ratio to

derive the number of teachers required in a lower primary school. However, this results in having just 2 or 3 teachers in small schools. In many schools, this means multi-grade schooling, as the 2-3 teachers have to teach grades 1 to 5, and all the subjects. This is a consequence of the policy to provide a lower primary school within 1 kilometre of every habitation, and its penal consequences are unfortunately being borne by teachers. While multi-grade schools have potential for greater collaborative learning, that state requires very high level of capacities on the part of teachers, access to multi-level resources and adequate teacher support, which is currently not available in many schools.

As Dhankar says, "the real solution to the (multi-grade) problem is to appoint more teachers and rectify the adverse situation. But appointing more teachers costs money. Since most of the children in these schools belong to the weaker sections of society, easier and less expensive solutions are sought. Therefore a pedagogical solution for this socio-economic problem is devised in the name of multigrade teaching strategies". The RTE must be amended to require one teacher per section, so that access is not at the cost of quality. Another option is to provide public transport facilities, so that children can go to larger schools with better infrastructure. However, this requires reliable transport facilities in rural and remote areas.

Currently, the RTE mandates free and compulsory education for grades 1 through 8 (children of ages 6 through 14), it should also allow for pre-school / early child education (from age 3 till 6); this needs to be mandated. Secondary education (grades 9-12) must also be covered under its ambit, to provide equitable opportunities for all children. This is recommended by the draft National Education Policy 2019.

## It is Possible

Education is the most important pro-active investment to build a just, democratic and

equitable society. The shortfall in education investment condemns generations to poor socio-economic development. Fully implementing the RTE to ensure adequate infrastructure, facilities, and teachers in government schools is essential to avert a demographic disaster. This would also reverse the declining enrolment in government schools, as has been corroborated recently, in the states of Kerala, Rajasthan and Delhi. The 'public education rejuvenation campaign' of the Kerala government has focussed on improving infrastructure and academic quality in the government schools and sought support from community and well-wishers to strengthen schools. In Delhi and in Rajasthan, the governments have made significant investments in school infrastructure and teacher recruitment over the past few years, reflecting in increasing

enrolment in government schools.

State and local governments must also invest in sharing and publishing information about government schools regularly. This will help counter discourse that equates government schools to poor quality schools and encourage closer links with and greater accountability to local communities. States also require much higher allocations from central government budgets for supporting improvements in their schools. The New Education Policy (draft) calls for a significant increase in investment in education, if these RTE norms must be met. Simultaneously, the so called 'affordable' private schools, which provide, and can only provide poor quality education, must be shut down, and students shifted to nearby schools that are RTE compliant.

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