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Policy Transition from a Common School System to a Stratified School System: The Changing Socio-Economic Profile of the Government School Students

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Abstract

After independence, the Indian state as a welfare state set universalisation of education as its cherished goal. Further, in consonance with the democratic essence of our constitution, the establishment of common school system was envisioned. Subsequently, concerted efforts have been made for the realisation of these goals, but, both these goals remain elusive. The adoption of neoliberal economic reforms by the Indian state since nineties has resulted in the predominance of market logic in different domains of our society. Various developments in the field of education in the past two decades have also been organically linked to the neoliberal reforms. The Right to Education Act (2009) has been a significant step in the direction of universalization of education in our country. But the various provisions of the Act are more in consonance with the neoliberal framework rather than that of democratic framework of our Constitution. The Act legitimizes the existence of different types of schools being accessible to different socio-economic strata. In this context, the respondents among school teachers have substantiated this fact that mostly the children from humble socio-economic background are coming to the government schools whereas, the students belonging to the upper and middle socio-economic groups of the society are going to private schools for their schooling. Such a development has resulted in the emergence of a stratified school system and a demise of the ideal of common school system.

Keywords: *Common School System, Right to Education Act, Private Schools, Socio-economic Profile*

Introduction

After the attainment of independence, India adopted the model of a welfare state with equality and social justice as its cherished goals. The state was given the responsibility of socio-economic transformation of the country. The policy planners well recognised the role of education in the process of socio-economic development of the country. The task before independent India was to remove the infirmities of the inherited structure of the educational system and transform it into a social force geared to the socio-economic transformation of the Indian polity from colonial under-development to self-reliant development. Within such a conceptual frame, education was conceived of as being intertwined with the developmental process as one of its important components (Kaur, 1985:30). It was realised that unequal levels of education resulted in unequal access to the means of production and vice versa and this situation should be rectified by the state. Therefore, education was recognised as one of the principal functions of the state. The Directive Principles of State Policy clearly reflect this commitment by providing that "The state shall within the limits of its economic capacity and development make effective provision for securing the right of education" (Article 41) and "The State shall endeavour to provide free and compulsory education to children up to the age of fourteen years within a period of ten years from the commencement of the constitution." (Article 45)

The government of India took initiative and provided leadership in the field of education. In different five year plans considerable weightage was given to education both in qualitative and quantitative terms. Substantial financial allocations for education were made in union and state budgets. Move over, for realizing the goal of universal education in the context of democratic principles of equality and fraternity, the development of a common school system for providing an education of comparable quality to all children, irrespective of caste, creed, community, religion, economic conditions or social status came to become a cardinal principle of our educational policy in post-independence period.

Envisioning a Common School System

The ideal of common school system came to occupy a place of significance in the educational policy discourse in our country with the recommendations of Education Commission (1964-66) headed by Prof. D.S.Kothari. In its report, while providing a critique of existing education system, the Commission highlighted that instead of trying to provide good education to all children, or at least to all the able children from every stratum of society, it is available to a small minority which is usually selected not on the basis of talent, but on the basis of its capacity to pay fees (GOI, 1966: 10). In such a school system the children of masses are unable to find access to good quality schools and are compelled to receive sub-standard education, whereas, the economically privileged people are able to avail good education for their wards. In Commission's view such an educational system was tending to increase social segregation and perpetuating and widening class distinctions.

The Commission was further of the view that the segregation of rich and poor students, in addition to weakening of social cohesion, would prevent the children belonging to well-off families from sharing the life and experiences of the children of the poor and coming into contact with the realities of life. Such an education would be incomplete.

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The Commission viewed such a situation as undemocratic and inconsistent with the ideal of an egalitarian society, and recommended that if these evils are to be eliminated and the educational system is to become a powerful instrument of national development in general, and social and national development in particular, we must move towards the goal of a common school system of public education:

- Which will be open to all children irrespective of caste, creed, community, religion, economic conditions or social status;
- Where access to good education will depend, not on wealth or class, but on talent;
- Which will maintain adequate standards in all schools and provide at least a reasonable proportion of quality institutions;
- In which no tuition fee will be charged; and
- Which would meet the needs of the average parent so that he would not ordinarily feel the need to send his children to expensive schools outside the system (ibid.)

Further, in order to realize the goal of common school system, the Commission also recommended that neighborhood school plan should be adopted as a step towards eliminating the segregation that now takes place between the schools for the poor and the underprivileged classes and those for the rich and the privileged classes (ibid:251).

Furthermore, the common school system of public education would cover all parts of the country and all stages of school education and strive to provide equality of access to all children (ibid.)

Thus, the Education Commission visualized that the educational system should own the responsibility of bringing the different social classes and groups together and promote the emergence of an egalitarian society.

The National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986 too reiterated the commitment to a common school system by stating: The concept of National System of Education implies that, up to a given level, all students, irrespective of caste, creed, location or sex, have access to education of a comparable quality. To achieve this, the government will initiate appropriately funded programmes. Effective measures will be taken in the direction of the Common School System recommended in the 1968 Policy (GOI, 1998:5).

Neoliberal Order and Demise of the Ideal of Common School System

One of the most significant developments of the post-colonial worldview has been the role attributed to the State for providing education to the child. The delivery of education for the masses was considered to be the preserve of the government (Wazir, 2000:22). The commitment to development of a common school system of public education in India has been a reflection of the same concern. But, the establishment of neoliberal order in India in 1990s has resulted in redefining the role of the state vis-à-vis education. The neoliberal programme questions the dominant role of the State in education sector and encourages the increased role of the market mechanism. The advance of market has led to predominance of market principles. 'Choice' is the foremost principle of market ideology reflecting itself in the field of education as emergence of different layers of schools on the basis of their demand from diverse

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socio-economic strata of the society. In such a scenario of economic capacity based availability of diverse educational facilities, the democratic notions like common school system would definitely lose their sanctity. Besides, the provision of education also does not remain oriented to the goals of national and social development rather it also becomes oriented to the needs of the market. Therefore, a significant development in this regard has been a proliferation of private schools in recent years. A large number of private schools are coming up not only in urban area but also in the countryside. Despite the efforts of the government to improve the infrastructural facilities of government schools under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan in recent years, the students' enrolment is continuously increasing in the private schools.

The ASER 2014, a report on the status of education by ASER Centre, has highlighted that 30.8 per cent of rural India's children in 6-14 age group are going to private schools thus registering an increase of about 12 per cent in seven years as this figure was 18.7 per cent in 2006. Thus, the number of students going to the private schools is continuously increasing. While, looking at the state specific data of private school enrolment, five states in India now have private school enrollment rates in the elementary stage that are greater than 50%. These are Manipur (73.3%), Kerala (62.2%), Haryana (54.2%), Uttar Pradesh (51.7%), and Meghalaya (51.7%) (ASER Centre, 2015). Other States with a high percentage of elementary school children in private institutions include Haryana (53.6%), Uttar Pradesh (52.8%), Punjab (49.3%), and Rajasthan (43.5%) (ibid.).

A study by the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER), based on India Human Development Surveys conducted in 2004-05 and 2011-12, also corroborated this fact that the number of students opting for private schooling is continuously increasing and enrolment in government schools is declining. This study has found that enrolment in government schools has declined from 72 per cent in 2004-05 to 64 per cent in 2011-12, whereas enrolment in private schools has increased from 28 per cent to 36 per cent during this period (Rukmini, 2014).

The government has also recognised that schools under private management (unaided) have been expanding at a faster rate (GOI, 2008: 9). Most of the growth of secondary schools in the private sector in the last two decades has occurred among unaided schools (25 per cent of schools). About 60 per cent of schools are now aided or unaided (GOI, 2013: 68).

In fact, the educational policy discourse in the neoliberal era has been more oriented towards promoting the private sector in education. For Instance, the Twelfth Five Year Plan document observes that private providers (including NGOs and nonprofits) can play an important role in elementary education. Their legitimate role in expanding elementary education needs to be recognised and a flexible approach needs to be adopted to encourage them to invest in the sector. The current licensing and regulatory restrictions in the sector could be eased and a single window approach should be adopted so that the process of opening new schools by private providers is streamlined (ibid.:64).

Such a policy discourse is juxtaposed with declaring the right to elementary education as a fundamental right. Such a situation ostensibly leads to a contradiction between education as a right versus education as a commodity. In fact, the Right to Education Act is lacking in commitment for equality and removal of disparities on the one hand and

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provision of comparable quality of education for all on the other. It has rather provided a framework for discriminatory provision of education by providing right to education only to those children who get admission in governmental or governmental-aided school. This right to education is thus not available to children studying in the private schools. Such delimitation, while challenging the status of this right as a fundamental right of the all citizens, would lead to further segregation of school population with ever expanding fee-charging private schools.

Further, the Act recognises four different categories of schools viz. (i) schools established and managed by government or local authority; (ii) privately managed but government-aided schools; (iii) government schools belonging to specific categories such as Central Schools, Navodaya Vidyalayas, Sainik Schools etc. and (iv) private unaided schools. Within each of these four categories, there is going to be a whole range of schools – from (a) those government and private schools that barely fulfill the infrastructural norms as required by the Schedule in the Act to (b) those schools, again both government and private, which will be reasonably well-endowed (e.g. with Pupil-Teacher Ratios of 1:20 to 1:25 and teachers for fine arts, physical education and computers) and, finally, to (c) those which will arrogantly claim to be ‘over-endowed’ with air-conditioned class rooms, swimming pools, round the clock internet-coverage and International Baccalaureate affiliation! The Act will not only co-exist with this disparity-based multilayered school system but would also legitimize it in various ways (Sadgopal, 2010, 22-23).

Therefore, the RTE Act while legitimizing different types of schools having varied infrastructural and academic facilities and imparting education of varied quality has totally disregarded the framework for establishing a common school system.

Perceptions of School Teachers regarding the Socio-Economic Background of the Students studying in Government Schools

In the above context, 200 school teachers purposely selected from different government schools in the state of Punjab have been interviewed and their responses to a number of questions pertaining to the socio-economic background of students coming to the government schools have been collected. The respondents have expressed varied views regarding the socio-economic background of students coming to the government schools. Their perceptions have been analysed through content analysis and percentage analysis and have been presented as under:

While responding to the question regarding the social composition of their school population, 59.5 per cent of the respondents among teachers have opined that generally the children belonging to lower socio-economic strata of the society are coming to the government schools (Table 1). These include children of farm labourers, masons, small, marginal or landless farmers in the rural areas and those of labourers, hawkers and petty shopkeepers in the urban areas. ‘Mostly the children of lower middle class and those of poor farmers, agricultural labourers and of urban poor are coming to these schools’. Further, the government school population comprises of ‘more children belonging to scheduled castes and backward classes and less from those belonging to non-scheduled castes and non-backward classes’. A respondent has remarked that these schools may be now labelled as ‘schools meant for students belonging to scheduled castes and backward classes’. In the view of a number of responding teachers, ‘earlier the government schools were more or less common schools as students from all strata

used to study there'. 'But now, only the children of economically marginalised sections of the society are getting education in these schools'. One respondent has opined that as 'most of the students are from weaker sections and mainly of illiterate parents'.

Table 1

Views and Perceptions of School Teachers regarding the Socio-Economic Background of Students of the Government Schools

Number of Respondents	From All Socio-economic Strata	From all Socio-economic Strata, but Majority is from Lower Strata	From Lower Socio-economic Strata (+Lower middle class also in some cases)
200 (100%)	28 (14%)	53 (26.5%)	119 (59.5%)

Source: Interviews with School Teachers.

On the other hand, 26.5 per cent of the respondents have perceived that students from all strata of the society are coming to the government schools, but majority of them belongs to socially and economically weaker sections of the society (Table 1). In their view, 'about 65-70 per cent school population of the government schools belongs to that stratum which does not have the capacity to pay for education'. 'In the government schools the children are from those families that could not afford private school education' has been the perception of more than one respondent.

Further, only 14 per cent of the respondents have been of the opinion that students belonging to all socio-economic sections are coming to the government schools (Table 1). In fact, most of these respondents have been working in urban senior secondary schools and especially meant for girls. Such institutions have requisite infrastructural facilities and adequate number of teachers necessary for providing education of some quality.

Moreover, it is at the primary level that the children from most humble socio-economic background generally constitute the government school population. But, as we go upward the educational ladder, the school population becomes somewhat heterogeneous with the enrolment of children of small and marginal farmers in rural schools and those of petty shopkeepers, hawkers etc. in the urban government schools. At senior secondary levels, however somewhat reversal takes place where majority of the students belonging to lower middle class and also from middle class constitutes the clientele. This is because of the fact that most of the students belonging to lower socio-economic strata 'could only complete either primary level or the elementary level due to the provision of free education and incentives'. Besides, 'some students belonging to the upper socio-economic position who could not perform in the private English medium schools also get admissions in government schools at middle or secondary level'. Thus the lower classes in the government schools are more homogeneous with majority of the students belonging to humble socio-economic background. But in secondary classes this homogeneity gives way to somewhat heterogeneity.

An analysis of the responses of the teachers to the question that whether people belonging to upper socio-economic strata send their wards to government schools has

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further clarified the situation. Only 14 per cent of the respondents answered this question in affirmative, whereas 19 per cent of the respondents have been of the view that a few students belonging to this stratum are studying in government schools especially at senior secondary level (Table 2).

A considerable proportion of the respondents (67%) has categorically stated that the parents belonging to upper socio-economic strata of the society do not send their wards to the government schools rather they prefer expensive private schools for the education of their children (Table 2).

Table 2

Views and Perceptions of School Teachers regarding whether people belonging to upper strata of the society are sending their children to Government Schools

Number of Respondents	Yes	A Few/Rarely	No
200 (100%)	28 (14%)	38 (19%)	134 (67%)

Source: Interviews with School Teachers.

Thus, a dominant view among teachers has been that children from socially and economically weaker sections are generally studying in the government schools. A respondent has remarked that if we say that these schools are 'schools meant for poor' then it will not be an exaggeration. Another respondent has remarked that 'not even a single child of any government employee is studying in the government schools'.

Table 3

Views and Perceptions of School Teachers regarding whether their children studied/are studying in Government Schools

Number of Respondents	Yes	No	Not Applicable
200 (100%)	56 (28%)	126 (63%)	18 (9%)

Source: Interviews with School Teachers.

This view got some credibility when the teachers are asked about the schooling of their own children. The wards of only 28 per cent of teachers have studied or are studying in the government schools. On the other hand, 63 per cent of them have preferred/are preferring private schools for educating their children (Table 3).

Conclusion

After independence, the Indian state as a welfare state set universalisation of education as its cherished goal. Further, in consonance with the democratic essence of our constitution, the establishment of common school system was envisioned. Subsequently, concerted efforts have been made for the realisation of these goals, but, both these goals remain elusive. The adoption of neoliberal economic reforms by the Indian state since nineties has resulted in its transmutation from a welfare state to a neoliberal state. This has resulted in the predominance of market logic in different

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domains of our society. Education being a sub-system of society cannot remain aloof of these changes. Various developments in the field of education in the past two decades have been organically linked to the neoliberal reforms. The Right to Education Act passed in 2009, has been a significant step in the direction of universalisation of education in our country. But the various provisions of the Act are more in consonance with the neoliberal framework rather than that of democratic framework of our Constitution. The Act legitimizes the existence of different types of schools being accessible to different socio-economic strata. In fact, the framework of the Act is in consonance with the proliferation of the private schools in recent years and diversion of a considerable proportion of the school going population to these schools.

In this context, almost all the respondents among school teachers have highlighted that mostly the children from humble socio-economic background are coming to the government schools whereas, the students belonging to the upper and middle socio-economic groups of the society are going to private schools for their schooling. Such a development has resulted in the emergence of a stratified school system as only those children who cannot afford private schooling constitute the clientele of the government schools. Thus, the government schools have become the schools for 'have-nots' and there has been a demise of the ideal of common school system.

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