

# Schooling for a New Society?

## *The Social and Political Bases of Education Deprivation in India*

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### 1 Introduction

In his poignant autobiography, which also details the conditions under which he studied, Tumbadi Ramaiah (1999), a *dalit*<sup>1</sup> writer, describes his older brother's suicide that resulted from the poor treatment he received at school and of his own travails in studying. In perhaps what can be read as a commentary on the degrading and dehumanising conditions under which the marginalised study, Ramaiah describes his school bag, which was stained with the food that he carried from the school to his home. It was this food, consisting of broken wheat and rejected by his upper-caste classmates and donated to him for doing their homework that enabled him and his family to survive two years of drought-induced deprivation. An employed and socially active citizen, Ramaiah now considers his opportunity to be have been educated as the single most important factor that enabled him to escape from a life of deprivation, discrimination and humiliation.

Yet, the possibility of schools being institutions that could address the wide range of disadvantages and disabilities that inhere in a hierarchical society and nation has been consistently overlooked. For as data indicate, both the continued failure to make basic education a widely available opportunity for all people and the continued neglect of the social bases of education deprivation have led to India becoming one of the world's largest zones of illiteracy. While there are wide variations between the states in the literacy levels, the average literacy level is only 65.38 per cent (Census 2001) – lower than that for many developing countries. Some states within the nation, such as Bihar (47.53 per cent literacy; Census 2001) record even lower averages, and in most cases it is children from the low-ranked castes and the tribes and girl children who are the education excluded. It is little wonder then, that there is what Tilak (2000) aptly describes as 'education poverty' in the nation, in which about 100 million children between the age-group 6–14 years are out-of-school.

### 2 The elusive right to basic education

The historical oversight of the constitution framers to have not included the right to a free and compulsory basic education has only recently

come under scrutiny and received condemnation. A nationwide mobilisation by civil society groups and organisations to make basic education a fundamental right and thereby initiating an amendment to the constitution has met with resistance. While the state first foot-dragged itself to making an amendment to the constitution,<sup>2</sup> it later rescinded the potential of the amendment by noting that the costs of implementing such a programme were too prohibitive under the current financial conditions. Such resistance by the state and its actors reflect the extent to which both, the *right to education for all* and the *need for mass education* are not only not recognised, but the attempts to achieve these are constantly challenged. This, despite the fact that the Indian government is a signatory to the Jomtien conference<sup>3</sup> whose goals were to ensure 'education for all'. Even though 'Education for All' has become a slogan and several central and state-wide conferences and consultations have expended their energies and the public's money over it, the required financial and administrative support and orientation required to ensure this have not been forthcoming. Instead, a range of disparate schemes, programmes, initiatives and agendas are deployed with the assumption that they will increase the numbers, proportions and percentages of literacy levels, without paying adequate attention to education institution-building and to its related parameters of equality, quality, and achievement.

Though the failure to institutionalise basic education persists, there is a new urgency, which marks many of the new programmes to enhance literacy levels. This is linked to the new, post-1991 economic liberalisation agenda, in which there is an onus on the state to indicate that its development indicators, including that of literacy, are improved. While the very distinction between literacy and education itself is not taken into account, a plethora of programmes and policies to improve the nation's literacy rates, so as to boost the ranking of the nation in international development indicators, have been initiated. Such schemes, programmes and policies have ranged from the spectacle – creating 'Literacy Missions' to those of state-specific schemes that seek to enhance the literacy levels of specific categories of people. Such an approach has led to the formulation of programmes in which basic education is promoted

on an expansion drive or mode and supply side factors (total number of schools, total number of teachers, facilities, etc.) are invoked to indicate this.<sup>4</sup> The actual functioning of schools is largely assessed in terms of enrolment, retention and attendance of students. This approach, that has aptly been termed the ERA approach<sup>5</sup> to education planning and assessment, overlooks the extent to which such programmes and data are not reflective of actual realities, but are more representative of the extent to which the system is bureaucratised. The new measures to make teachers accountable has led to teachers boosting enrolment and attendance figures as they are considered to be markers of their drive and commitment to the school and teaching. A result of such methods that seek to expedite literacy indicators is that there is little or no reliability in the new literacy and education data generated by the government.<sup>6</sup>

The post-Jomtien conference period has also seen the increasing presence of international donor agencies seeking to provide blue-prints, designs and orientations to promote basic education in the nation. Despite the fact that there are a wide range of indigenous, creative, and alternative education programmes, the voice and impact of the programmes developed by the donor agencies have gained ground. A result of their presence has been the promotion of a range of basic education schemes in the nation, which buttressed by the neo-liberal economic agenda, sees the access to education as a way to increase 'human capital'. Though recent pronouncements by the World Bank, the leading donor agency in the country, claim to link basic education to the larger goals of social development, welfare and poverty alleviation, its primary emphasis is to build the bases for a reliable and qualified workforce.<sup>7</sup> Such strategies and policies increasingly stress on the state providing the minimum needed to ensure the functioning of a system, while the substantial issues of universal accessibility, equity, management, and continued development are left to the whims of the society at large. Such an orientation is particularly problematic as it overlooks the fact that a large number of communities are unable to mobilise for their education, as they are economically, socially and politically marginal. Strategies that stress on community contribution and liability to basic education then overlook the inability of the poor and the marginalised to be

proactive and engage in the establishment and administration of basic education programmes has led to the dismal conditions of schools in the poor and marginal communities.

### 3 In search of education

That it is not the lack of awareness or the lack of a demand for education among the people that accounts for such dismal school achievement levels is evident in the broad-based, public demand for schooling. For, despite problems in accessibility and the limitations of the education system, such as its strong urban bias and the lack of linkage to appropriate employment or livelihood-enhancing capabilities, many want to be educated. For the first time in the history of the nation, and perhaps in Indian civilisation, children from groups and societies that were typically excluded from rights to formal learning are now attending schools. Such children include those from that of the 'menial castes', such as scavengers, stone-cutters, toddy-tappers, fishers, earth diggers, snake charmers, shepherds and pastoralists and members of a range of tribal groups, such as the Bhil, Korku, Meena, Gond, Bilava, and Jenu Kuruba (see Balagopalan, this volume). Yet, for many children, basic education is not as free as it is assumed,<sup>8</sup> and many families extend themselves well beyond their economic capacities to provide for their children to be in school. Children themselves take tremendous trouble to be in school; many walk miles to school, some cross rivers and streams, others traverse jungles and urban children brave unruly and dangerous traffic to get to school. Worse still, many children bear the frequent and widespread corporal punishment meted out to them and many tolerate the verbal and mental abuse of some hostile and cruel teachers as inevitable in the process of being educated.

Yet, state response to such demand for education has been slow and lackadaisical. In many regions, dysfunctional schools and indifferent teachers account for a large number of children to be out-of-school, even though they are not employed or involved in household chores. Several recent studies<sup>9</sup> indicate that far from poverty, or lack of interest in education being the key factors that retain children out of school, it is the lack of availability of satisfactory schooling that accounts

for a significant proportion of children to be out of school. That emphasising only supply side factors without taking into account the actual functioning of schools is inadequate is observable in the fact that dysfunctional schools (marked by high teacher absenteeism, inadequate infrastructure, poor teaching-learning transactions) accounts for more than any other single factor for children to drop out of school.<sup>10</sup>

### 4 The rhetoric of poverty / discrimination and deprivation in schools

Official discourse overlooks the above and focuses on poverty and parental lack of awareness as key issues in education deprivation. In many cases, poverty and poverty-related conditions, such as migration, are cited by teachers and education officers as reasons that account for the low school attendance, poor performance and high drop-out rates at schools. Such a discourse and perspective lays the blame on parents, and the larger disadvantages and structural conditions, while providing an escape route to teachers and education officers. Unchallenged, it has become the rhetoric in which the problems of the system and its failure manifested in poor infrastructure, high teacher absenteeism, and inadequate teaching-learning transactions, remain unchallenged and are reproduced.

Such widespread assigning of problems to the culture of poverty has meant that the education policy continues to overlook the fact that education deprivation in the nation results not only from poverty, but also from pyramidal social relations that enhance the ways in which children are excluded and eliminated from school. This is particularly explicit in the disjuncture between the social background of the body of teachers and the body of students. While the recent drive to increase the number of schools and enrol all children has led to the enrolment of children from hitherto excluded and low-ranked caste and tribal groups, most teachers, especially in the north Indian states, continue to be from the higher caste and class groups. Such a disjuncture, between the caste and class backgrounds of teachers and students in the government schools, accounts for the rampant insensitivity to and abuse of children from poor

and low-ranked caste backgrounds. Resentful of the presence of children from such backgrounds and untrained to interact with first-generation school-goers, teachers construct such children as 'uneducable' and fail to treat them with consideration. Further, new government programmes (such as the supply of free uniforms, textbooks and grains) that are promoted as incentives to attract children from disadvantaged backgrounds are seen by teachers as unnecessary sops to such families and further incites them to maltreat children. That practices of untouchability, such as prohibiting low-ranked children from using the school's water source, the segregated seating pattern in the classrooms, the labelling of children with pejorative caste-derived names, etc., continuing in many schools indicates the entrenchment of discriminatory and demeaning treatment of children. In our study, as many as 27 per cent of the parents from low-ranked caste groups, especially in the slum schools in Jaipur and in the village schools in Madhya Pradesh, cited ill-treatment by the teachers as reasons to withdraw their children from school.<sup>11</sup> As one parent put it, 'schools treat our (low-caste) children as donkeys ... thrashing them and keeping them thirsty are ways to punish them'.

The inability of teachers to relate well to children and parents stems primarily from differences in their social background and their lack of training and orientation. While there has been recent emphasis on providing teacher training, much of the training focuses on providing pedagogical skills and even child-centred approaches to teaching methods. However, little or no attention is paid to orienting teachers to the life of the communities in which they work or to sensitising them to the problems that the poor, disadvantaged and non-literate face. The fact that even teachers from low-ranked caste and tribes uphold such biased views and ideas about the communities that they are assigned to teach in accounts for this.

In addition to the widespread prejudices and hostility that many teachers have towards the communities in which they function, they typically have ambivalent attitudes towards the students and their parents. On the one hand, they are contemptuous of the parents, especially those from labouring, non-literate and low-ranked caste groups and their inability to supervise their

children's homework, to ensure that their children attend school regularly and to keep them clean and neat or to provide their school supplies. Yet, such teachers are understanding of community practices, such as child marriage, the withdrawal of girls from schools, the retention of children as labourers, etc. Such an ambivalent attitude accounts for the fact that teachers do not play proactive roles in the functioning of schools and in the children's opportunities to be educated. Defining their roles as only restricted to the immediate responsibilities of teaching, which in most instances is not adequately performed, many teachers remain distant and hostile to the children and their communities.

What is highlighted by these conditions is the extent to which the idea that education can be a public good, accessible to all and a right that must be recognised and implemented, remains absent in the collective mindset of the people. This is visible in the numerous accounts of the ways in which children of the socially and economically marginalised communities and families are kept out of the purview of education (Nambissan and Sedwal 2002; Jha and Jhingran 2002). Such conditions contradict the popular rhetoric of India being a vibrant democracy, as they fail to note that the idea and practice of democracy also requires that education be promoted for democracy and democracy be built on education (Baber 1997).

## 5 C o m p o u n d e d d i s a d v a n t a g e s

Arguments for schools and schooling focus primarily on schooling or education as a way out of poverty. Yet, the conditions of poverty and their complexities, in which social and political marginality combine to handicap communities and their children are often overlooked. That declining 'traditional' livelihoods and the loss of customary and collective knowledge forms also compound the need to access education is often overlooked in government programmes. While agriculture, the predominant source of livelihood in the nation, is undergoing a crisis, the livelihoods of artisans and specialised caste groups are also being disembedded. In such contexts, children from these marginalised and disembedded communities face the double burden of not being integrated into the 'knowledge forms' of their families and

communities and also, in the context of the inadequate or dysfunctional schools that are within their vicinities, or of the inability of their families to be able to afford schooling, are not able to attend schools and gain formal knowledge.

Further, while most data and policies continue to emphasise the disadvantages that rural areas have with reference to education opportunity, new trends indicate that it is in the urban poverty areas that a large percentage of out-of-school children can be found.<sup>12</sup> Growing metropolises, which record the highest population growth rates, and provide opportunities for a range of menial and service jobs, attract large numbers of rural migrants, but provide no institutional and systemic structures for children to receive education. As a result, the metropolises have large numbers of children in poverty who do not attend schools.<sup>13</sup> Problems in establishing schools for such children are largely linked to factors such as the administrative inability to set up schools in 'slums' that are considered to be illegal settlements, the inability of the urban labouring poor to demand education services, and the failure of elected bodies, such as the municipal and metropolitan corporations to address such issues. A drastic and disturbing result of neglecting basic education in the urban poverty zones is the growth of a number of families among whom the new and youngest generation is illiterate. This is in contrast to the parents who have received at least basic education in their natal villages.

In fact, the presence of such non-school-going children provides the new urban service economies, such as garages, hotels, construction and domestic services, with an available supply of cheap and manageable child labour. As our study in the slums of Jaipur and Bangalore indicate,<sup>14</sup> such service economies act as magnets for children to seek quick employment, which then later leads them to a life of illiteracy and a cycle of poverty.

## 6 School differentiation

Further, in not halting the decline of the existing government schools in many areas, the state has encouraged the growth of a variety of private schools. Such schools not only cut into the already low income of the poor but are also sites where the

children of the poor are discriminated against and relegated as 'uneducable'. Government schools have mostly become schools for children of the most poor and the low-ranked caste groups, resulting in a ghettoisation of schooling. Our recent study of selected schools in six states confirms this; on an average, about 74 per cent of children in the government schools are from scheduled caste and backward caste families,<sup>15</sup> while private schools have mostly children from the middle and upper caste groups. Such school differentiation also compounds the gender and class differences among a community and in the society at large. As observed in our study, where families have the option of sending children to different schools, they often send girls to the government schools and boys to the private fee-paying schools.<sup>16</sup>

The government's continued neglect of schools and the failure to provide adequate financial support has led to the growth of a market in education. There are now a range of school types that vary in terms of medium of instruction, type of management, school-board affiliation and religious orientation. Such a range of schools is now visible and active not only in the urban areas, but also in several rural areas. Indicating a sharp shift from the single village school, which largely catered to all, there are now villages that have as many as three to four schools in them. More especially, even in states, where the government school system was considered to be good, there is now a proliferation of schools that cater to different sectarian and class preferences. This proliferation of schools, which I identify as 'school differentiation' has several implications. For one, the diversity of schools does not reflect the cultural plurality of the society or the nation but is the result of the increasing commercialisation of education and the appropriation of education institutions as sites for sectarian and communal agendas. Such trends indicate the extent to which schools are increasingly directed by market norms and preferences in which education as a public good is rejected for the idea that education is a privilege. More importantly, such 'school differentiation' negates any role that education can play in developing a shared sense of citizenship or even in providing resemblances across a socially and economically diverse student body. Perhaps even more importantly, such differences mean that schools in India will continue to fail to be '...

democratic public spheres ... where students learn the knowledge and skills of citizenship within forms of solidarity that provide the basis for reconstituting emancipatory forms of community life' (Giroux 1987: 108).

## 7 Denying equal and quality education

Even as schools and schooling are marked by the exclusionary structures of the dominant players, there is a recent thrust by the government<sup>17</sup> to introduce and induce 'value education' in schools with an emphasis on values as derived from 'Hindu culture' and which reflect 'Hindu civilisation'. In upholding a curriculum that focuses on such an orientation, the recent verdict by the Supreme Court reinforces the extent to which basic education continues to be devoid of the larger goals of endowing children with life-long learning abilities and instead focuses on providing an 'Indianised, nationalised and spiritualised' education system.<sup>18</sup> Far from addressing the pressing issues of learning levels and the much needed teaching-learning methods, the new curriculum directives seek to make the study of Sanskrit compulsory while that of studying science is made an option. As evidence of the direct attempt to build Hindu fundamentalism in the nation, the curriculum debates needs to be made central to the agenda of providing quality and universal basic education in the nation.

The emphasis on being culturally oriented is not only misplaced and misdirected, but goes against the principles of education in and for a culturally heterogeneous republic. While cultural diversity itself must be recognised in terms of allowing for diversities and variation in content, pedagogy and languages of education, it is important for the state to emphasise an inclusive definition of value education by which universal values, such as 'democracy, secularism, gender equity, work culture and social justice'<sup>19</sup> can be integrated into the curriculum.

## 8 A new triangle for basic education?

J.P. Naik (1975), the eminent educationist, had astutely noted issues of equality, quality and quantity to be the 'elusive triangle' in the Indian

education system. But, in the context of urgently addressing the long-elusive goal of universal elementary education, it may be pertinent to focus on a new triangle, which will help in institution-building for an elementary education system and which will encompass or enable the pursuit of equality and quality in education opportunities. A new triangle for education can consist of the state and society acting as primary agents or agencies, which in close interaction with each other must evolve and make possible an education system in which schools become centres or sites that can be institutions in which a sense of shared resemblances, ideas of solidarity and abilities to work together can be forged.

Such a relationship involves identifying and consolidating links between the state and society (more specifically between the different communities that combine to make a society) in forms that could enable a paradigm shift in education policies. Education, and the practices of education institution-building, should cease to be seen as an independent sector that needs only infrastructure and, instead, must be located within the rubric of the primary responsibilities of a democratic nation-state. For this, it is important for the state to provide basic education as a primary attribute or endowment available to all citizens and which enables all to be able to assert their rights within a genuine democracy and republic. Yet such citizenship-enhancing education need not be aimed at disseminating or instilling ideas of submissiveness to the nation or to institutions but can be one that enables citizens to become critical thinkers and transformative agents (Giroux 1987).

In this context, a more nuanced understanding of state-society links in the context of education needs to be developed. Given the significant proportion of people who continue to live below the poverty level, the state must also bear the larger responsibility for financing and supporting elementary education. Recognising that basic education deprivation is a result of the bundle of disadvantages experienced by the poor and marginalised, requires the state to play a more proactive role. Only the continuation of substantial state support, including benefits and incentives such as the provisioning of grains, midday meals, uniforms and textbooks can ensure that the

children of the poorest attend schools. In many ways, this requires a conceptualisation and orientation to basic education as a 'system of provision' in which education is provided 'in terms of highly country-specific socio-economic systems, rather than as a more or less efficiently co-ordinated stream of costs and benefits attached to education and training' (Fine and Rose 2001: 172). With such an orientation, access to education in India can become the media for addressing a range of societal disadvantages and the real devolution of administration and management of schools to communities or society can be made in terms of enabling the community to monitor the everyday functioning of the school, drawing on their knowledge and skills to develop locally relevant curricula, and in drawing school schedules (which synchronise with local ecological and economic schedules) that suit the needs of the community. Such initiatives, which if actualised, may help address the problem of society-school divide, an issue which has remained as unaddressed as that of quality in education.

In the context of widespread basic education deprivation, claims and plans that the Republic of India will enter and be a leader in the 'knowledge-based economy' in the twenty-first century<sup>20</sup> make a mockery of the widespread education deprivation

experienced by close to 100 million children. Such a refrain not only overlooks the real needs of the marginalised and the structural problems besetting the education sector, but also fails to recognise the potential of schools being key sites in which the norms of and for a democratic republic can be realised.<sup>21</sup> Schools can assume responsibilities for processing skills and capabilities with which citizens can address the problems of a hierarchical and differentiated society and can retain cultural specificities as elements of their own cultural and social lives. The state must take cognisance of the fact that an unregulated school market further disadvantages those unable to access or engage with the market. And schools as institutions are central to the well-being of society and the state and therefore must fall outside the logic of the market (Whitty 1999). A continued failure to address the widespread education deprivation will only contribute to enhancing not only the great class and cultural divides that exist in the nation but also in making dubious our claims to being a 'democratic republic' that is resurgent. More especially, the possibility of developing a 'decent society' (Marglit 1999), in which inherited inequalities can be challenged and in which institutions can assure all the right to dignity, self-worth and respect, will continue to be a mirage.

#### N o t e s

1. Refers to the relatively new nomenclature by which members of the once 'Untouchable' and other ritually and socially low-ranked caste groups are identifying and organising themselves. The term is from the Marati language and means 'those who are ground or exploited'.
2. Though the government conceded and passed the 93rd Amendment to the Constitution in 2001, making basic education a fundamental right, it has cited financial constraints and has largely failed to implement the rights. For a review of the problems in its implementation, see Subrahmanian (2002).
3. Since the Jomtien Conference in 1990, the Government of India has placed a range of basic education programmes under the umbrella of an 'Education for All' section in the Ministry of Human Resource Development.
4. The Sixth All-India Educational Survey, New Delhi: NCERT (1998) is an example of this.
5. This acronym and description is owed to Professor Amar H. Kalro of the Indian Institute of Management, Kozhikode, Kerala.
6. Even the recent Census (2001) data are unreliable and questionable. For example, data for Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan indicate a sharp increment in literacy levels. For example, some districts which recorded below 20 per cent literacy rates are now shown as having literacy levels of more than 50 per cent. Attendance at basic, adult literacy schools and the ability to just sign are also taken as measures of being literate.
7. Some of the international aid agencies that are providing aid and designing primary education programmes in India are the World Bank, DFID, the European Union and SIDA. An excellent critique of the World Bank's orientation to education can be found in Ben Fine and Pauline Rose (2001). See also Soudien (2002) for an insightful overview of the problems with the World Bank agenda or strategy for education.
8. J.B.G. Tilak elucidates the costs borne by even the poorest working class parents in having to send their children to the so-called free government schools. See Tilak, J.B.G, 'How free is free elementary education?', *Economic and Political Weekly*. (Tilak 1996)

9. See Rukmini Banerji's (1997) study on schooling in New Delhi and Mumbai, which highlights the importance of 'teacher effects', that is the role and significance of teachers to defining a school and its functioning. The PROBE (1999) report and also the study indicate that dysfunctional schools largely account for many children to be out-of-school. More recent studies confirm such conditions, Govinda (2002), Ramachandran (2002), Jha and Jingran (2002).
10. Findings of a study conducted by the sociology and social anthropology unit at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, 'Exclusion, elimination and opportunity: schooling among the poor in India' (2002) confirm such effects.
11. *Ibid.*
12. For example, see Govinda (1995) and also the National Institute of Advanced Studies (2002).
13. Several metropolises of India record large numbers of children who are out-of-school and in labour conditions. However, official data including that collected by the Labour Department and its Child Labour Cell do not record this. For example, the Government data on out-of-school children in Bangalore records it to be around only 3 per cent of the population. However, our study and others note that there are at least 27–30 per cent of school age (6–14 years) children out of school in the poverty or slum areas in the city. See NIAS (2002).
14. See the *Local Education Reports*, NIAS (2001) and NIAS (2002).
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. The reference here is to the recent document, *National Curriculum Framework for School Education: A Discussion Document*, 2000, New Delhi: NCERT. Attempts by the Hindu nationalist party to promulgate this curriculum for all the states were contested by individuals. However, the Supreme Court verdict in September 2002 struck down the objections and upheld the validity of this curriculum framework.
18. See Testa Setalvad, *Education with Values* (2001) for a summary overview of the curriculum framework and the problems it poses.
19. A contrast to the Government of India document is the report of the committee put together by the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (1999).
20. This refers to the rhetoric and refrain with which the Hindu nationalist party and its supporters seek to define the education, development and foreign policy agenda of the nation. Such ideas and orientation stem largely from the iconisation of the IT industry and the expectations that competence in high technology will help the nation ride into the advanced, super power nation category.
21. See Leschinsky and Roeder (1983) who argue that despite the limitations of education, in as much as it is often a source of social and class reproduction, education has the ability to provide opportunities to a wide range of people.

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