

ANU AFEC Students' Society

# PROTEGE

AFEC magazine

2009



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# Private education for the least advantaged

ANU Masters graduate **Manu Sundaram**, now working with the School Choice Campaign (SCC) in India, draws some lessons from the urban Indian poor

Written with Dr Parth J Shah,  
Pres. of The Centre for Civil Society

Is it possible to provide equitable and quality educational opportunities for a country with over 440 million citizens under the age of 18? The government of India certainly believes so and has over the last decade launched some of the most ambitious programs to provide 'free and compulsory' elementary education. The planning, implementation and success of such programs will play a critical role in determining the fate of the world's largest democracy. This article outlines some of the biggest challenges confronting Indian

**"...there exists a largely unscrupulous nexus between politics and education – drunk on a potent cocktail of disproportionately powerful teacher unions and mind-boggling levels of bureaucracy.."**

education, while showcasing innovative solutions to these challenges that are already in place and seeks to offer a



**The SCS awards vouchers to urban students**

roadmap for future policies.

## **Challenges facing Indian education**

With over a million children (defined here as those between 6 and 14 years of age) still forced to abandon schooling to seek employment and supplement family incomes, the challenges facing Indian education are indeed Himalayan. The Parliamentarians Group for Millennium Development Goals noted in 2004 that nearly 70% of students from the disadvantaged communities (termed Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, comprising historically backward caste and indigenous societies) drop out before completing ten years of formal schooling. In India, although publicly

unacknowledged, there exists a largely unscrupulous nexus between politics and education – drunk on a potent cocktail of disproportionately powerful teacher unions and mind-boggling levels of bureaucracy – that has also contributed to the debilitating state of the current education system.

Given the nature and depth of the problems confronting Indian education, successive governments have taken great efforts to expand education. Not least of these is the Eighty-third Amendment of the Indian Constitution which guarantees every child residing in India the fundamental right to free education. The enabling legislation to this Amendment, called The Right of Children

to Free and Compulsory Education (Right to Education, hereafter), is to be passed through the Parliament before the end of this year. In addition, the Education for All movement has been actively working towards the goal of universal elementary education for over seven years. However, all of these initiatives set few or no quality standards and continue to function as cosmetic policy changes at best. This claim is backed by findings from a recent, nationwide survey of rural children – Annual Status of Education Report 2008 – which reports that less than 50% of students in year 5 could perform the reading, writing and arithmetic that is expected of year 2 student. Oblivious to such clear warning signals, the government continues to build more schools and hire teachers without demanding quality or any measure of accountability.

### **Private schools serving the poor?**

In spite of such serious policy shortcomings, poor parents are finding ways to access

quality education of their choice. In a phenomenon that is increasingly finding favour among the urban poor, 'affordable private schools'

**“When Tooley surveyed North Shahdara ... he found that 175 of the 265 schools were under private management and received no government aid!”**

are mushrooming in slums and lower class neighbourhoods across the country. Prof James Tooley talks about the impact of these schools on the urban poor, who have 'already abandoned public education' – because of its inadequacies and lack of accountability – and are using private schools instead.

When Tooley surveyed North Shahdara slums of New Delhi, where a large number of people live on less than \$2 a day, he found that 175 of the 265 schools were under private management and received no government aid. The average fees charged by these schools

were approximately \$2 – \$3 per month. The reason that such schools were successful, despite almost half not being 'recognised' by the government, is explained by the differences in teacher performance. In government schools, Tooley reported that only 38% of teachers were involved in teaching activity compared to around 70% in private unaided schools. Another key finding from the same study was higher achievements levels among students. When 3500 students were tested and controlled for a range of background variables, the private school students scored on average 72% higher marks in mathematics, 83% higher in Hindi and 246% higher in English. Satisfaction with school inputs (school buildings, facilities, teacher punctuality) among pupils in private schools was also higher than their government school counterparts.

### **Changing Public Opinions**

Despite the fact that a significant proportion of private schools are not officially recognised by the government, the increasing participation of the urban poor in such schools defies conventional wisdom. The success of such schools in driving one of India's fastest growing sectors – school education – demonstrates the triumph of enterprise solutions over bureaucratic waste in the provision of public goods. There is a growing band of intellectual



**408 students from Delhi receive school vouchers**

and influential voices that is now backing large scale changes in education policies to factor in the evolving landscape. In a recent article, renowned economist and Times of India Editor Swaminathan Aiyar suggested that the government provide school vouchers, which are 'redeemable only for expenses in a government or private school', to historically disadvantaged and discriminated communities as an affirmative action tool. Columnist and political commentator with the Indian Express, Tavleen Singh, has pointed out the inadequacies perpetrated by the government regulatory system that are barricading the access of poor students to quality education. Ms Singh argues that the dearth of good schools in India is due to the 'license-quota-permit raj' (regime of bureaucratic licensing) and the unholy alliance between political players and education providers. Another policy reform idea of providing per-child funding has also been mooted to improve funding in education. At the moment, government funding in education is largely dependent upon the teachers on the payroll rather than the number of students. Madhav Chavan, Chairman of the NGO Pratham, has demanded that the government set per-child expenditure norms in the annual budget allocation and assess learning outcomes. However, the government continues to drive the vehicle of failed public policies away

from meaningful change.

## **“voucher students were reported to have higher achievement levels than their peers ... in government schools”**

### **Policy Reforms: School Choice Campaign**

The School Choice Campaign is an initiative to advocate evidence based policy reform ideas in education. The School Choice Campaign, launched in 2007, has been running India's first school voucher project – the Delhi Voucher Project – in the capital city of New Delhi. The project provided vouchers to 408 students from low socio-economic groups across New Delhi and, in doing so, enabled them to choose the school of their choice. A third-party assessment of the project, conducted by the Centre for Media Studies, has revealed interesting and positive insights into the potential of vouchers in the education of poor and marginalized groups. The 'voucher students' were reported to have higher learning achievement levels than their peers who continued in government schools. The parents of voucher students also expressed a higher degree of satisfaction with the school and admitted to greater involvement in their child's education than before.

With the initial success of the Delhi Voucher Project, there are plans afoot to initiate voucher schemes in other regions of the country. The demand for

measures such as vouchers has been growing increasingly louder among the poor and disadvantaged groups. More than 2.7 million parents have signed petitions asking for similar schemes to be made available by the government, so they too can choose a school for their children. Other policy reform ideas such as proven private players managing underperforming state schools, cash transfers to offset the foregone income to families of their children not working and deregulation of the education sector to allow more schools to open are currently being advocated by the School Choice Campaign with the goal of accessible and equitable education.

While ushering in reforms to liberalise the Indian economy in 1991, the then Finance Minister and now Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh remarked that it was 'difficult to stop an idea whose time has come'. For India, to stay competitive in a global economy, urgent and wholesale reform initiatives are required. The ground is fertile for such ideas and the new Minister for Human Resource Development (responsible for education and vocational training) – Hon. Mr Kapil Sibal – has promised a reform agenda. Many previous Ministers have promised much and delivered little due to the lack of political will. Unfortunately the Harvard-educated Mr Sibal does not have the same luxury as he must reform and reform fast if the world's largest democracy is to shed its tag of being the world's largest illiterate population. •