

CHOICE, NOT CHARITY

Neha Jhingon

As per the Census 2001, the total population of the Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in India is 16.3% and 8.2% respectively, of the total population (Registrar General, 2005). The SC/ST population is unevenly distributed among the states in India, with nearly 60% of all SC/ST children of primary school-going age (6-10 years) residing in the following states: Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh and the seven North Eastern States. These states are among the most disadvantaged states in India across most social indicators.

While the 86th constitutional amendment recognizes education as a fundamental right of all Indian citizens, disparities continue to be pronounced between the various castes. People from the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled tribes, make up about 25% of the population and consistently fare poorer across various indicators related to primary education. There is a need to argue for a comprehensive policy response which addresses the various barriers to accessing education of this disadvantaged group.

Despite the fact that there has been an increase in the literacy rates of SCs/STs since independence, the present position is still far from satisfactory. The overall increase in literacy rate in the country during the period 1961-2001 was 36.54% against which increase in literacy rate for SCs and STs during the same period was 44.42% and 38.57% respectively. The female literacy rates among STs continue to remain a serious cause of concern, as it is only 34.76% as against the total female literacy rate of 53.67%.

The Planning Commission has constituted a Working Group on "Development of Education of SC/ST/Minorities/Girls and other disadvantaged Groups" - Eleventh Five Year Plan - 2007-2012. They came up with some recommendations which revolve around cultural and linguistic preservation, reservations in already existing schools and institutions, collection of more demographic

data, establishment of an Equal Opportunities Cell to circulate information, increased Mid Day Meal outreach and more teacher training.



A school for tribal children in Andhra Pradesh

These recommendations have been repeated over and over for too long. The need of the hour is to give the disadvantaged sections a choice to the kind of education they want for their children.

"The middle class and the rich can afford to send their children to private schools. For the poor, the only option is government schools. Then why should the poor be denied an opportunity to learn English?" argues Mr. N. Murthy, president of the Karnataka Dalit Sangharsh Samiti.

There is a need for overall expansion of education facilities in the country. Lack of expansion in educational facilities in the country during last few decades has hurt the disadvantaged sections most. At present there are large variations in the standards of education in various schools. The disadvantaged sections therefore have no access to good quality education.

There are various alternatives that are being tried to provide more access to the Tribal and Dalit students.

Residential schools have been a powerful tool in to solve the problem of access. People's Rural Education Movement (PREM) began its rural education programs in Mohana Block in Ganjam District in Orissa in 1980. It now works in four districts in South Orissa with over 600 villages. PREM runs a scholarship scheme where they give scholarships to tribal students to go to a private residential school at the outskirts of Ganjam. Another such residential tribal school will be run in Panchamahar by the management of the elite Navrachna International School in Vadodara. It will start its academic session this



Paljor Namgyol Residential School for Tribal children in Assam

month. Many state governments, including Gujarat and Maharashtra, have experimented with partnering non-government organizations in running tribal schools called ashramshalas. The Department for the Welfare of SC/ST/OBC/Minorities introduced the SC/ST tuition-fee reimbursement scheme in 2003-2004. The scheme applies to SC and ST students of Delhi who are enrolled in recognized unaided private schools and who have an annual family income of less than Rs. 1 lakh. It provides a 100% reimbursement of the tuition fees, sports fee, science fee, lab fee, admission fee and the co-curricular fee if the student's family income falls below Rs. 48,000 per annum and a reimbursement of 75% if the family income is greater than Rs. 48,000 per annum but less than Rs. 1 lakh.

Much better results can be achieved by funding children directly and deregulating the education sector along side. The expenditure in creating and maintaining a not-so-effective education infrastructure should be channeled towards fruitful expenditure in funding students.

By funding students—this can be done through instruments such as vouchers and direct cash transfers—they can be given a real choice. The incredible power to go to a school of their choice—one that will help them succeed. And perhaps just as importantly, to not go to a school that makes them feel helpless and worthless.

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CHOICE FOR ME, INSPECTION FOR YOU

Raj Cherubal

Go to any gathering on education for the poor. The speakers are usually well-off intellectuals and activists. The discussion invariably veers towards how pathetic the situation is—absentee teachers, irrelevant syllabus, non-existent buildings, no separate bathrooms for girls and so on.

Right after the wailing they volunteer their recommendations: *We must energise the bureaucracy; help discover politicians' political will; shoot off memos to the minister, secretary, President of India; poor, Dalit and tribal must perform rasta-rokos and dharnas; empower village Block Development Officer and other petty government official; encourage government teachers to do X (the latest teaching fad or the speaker's pet obsession); file PILs and RTIs; go on hunger strikes outside HRD Ministry; the list goes on.*

Through our taxes, we pay for government officials to do their job. We do our work; shouldn't they do theirs without requiring extra supervision from us?

Another beauty goes like this; *we are all citizens of this country, those government schools are our responsibility. Inspecting them and ensuring their proper functioning is our duty.*

Imagine if one is foolish enough to take these recommendations seriously. How many of your waking hours will you spend inspecting roads, ration shops, government hospitals and schools?

Let us step back a bit. These government “services” are funded by our taxes. We pay taxes for pretty much anything we buy or sell and on our income (especially if you are unlucky like me to be drawing a salary and left with no avenue to evade taxes). We get paid to do our job. Not for inspecting other people's work. So if we spend our time inspecting government works, filing RTI, etc. we don't get paid. If we don't get paid, we don't pay taxes. No taxes, no government “services”.

Also, where are the people who get paid to inspect, poke and probe various government “services”? Why are we being asked to duplicate their duties?

Amazingly, no inspection is required for the goods and services we the non-poor enjoy. I am not poor and I hardly inspect my children's school, give the teachers and the principal pep talks or inspect their accounts and pay scale.

During one of my rare visits to my daughter's private school, if I find a problem that we usually associate with government schools, what do I do? I talk to the Principal. Since I am a patient man, I may even explain things a second time: “Fix it or else”.

But the third time, my children move to another school. My money follows them. Finding a new school may not be easy, I admit. Nothing good in life is easy. But will my children grow unschooled? Absolutely not!

I don't have the time or the inclination for *rasta-rokos*. I like President Kalam. But I don't want to appeal to him. Or to ministers, bureaucrats, Supreme Court judges, PIL lawyers, well-wishers and do-gooders. I sure need them but not for my children's education. Neither, for that matter, for my children's food or health.

Why I don't need for these powerful people, you wonder? Because I have the resources to pay for my family's needs and there are schools, shops and hospitals to choose from. That too plenty and good because there are many like me who can afford them and competition forces entrepreneurs to serve us for our money.

So instead of sermons from the elite, can we get entrepreneurs to compete to serve the poor? I think so. In fact there are plenty of schools, and increasingly so, around where the poor live. The moment the poor is a little less poor, she opts for private services, including private schools.



Advertisement of BSD Academy, a budget private school in Delhi, highlighting the services provided.

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Let us respect her choice and stop insulting her with patronising hypocrisy

about commercialisation of education. What is good for the well-off goose is good for the poor ones too.

Let us go much further. Let us empower her with vouchers, tuition reimbursements and cash transfers so she can access far better services that the private sector is able to provide. Instead of funding inferior government services with taxes, let us empower the poor with those funds.

Today, I have choices. And the poor have none. Soon, thanks to the growing school choice movement in India, they too will have a choice. When the revolution comes, for the first time in our history, the poor will be able to taunt government and private service providers, “Want my money? Dance to my tune. I will tell you how, when and how good. Dance with a smile and say thank you. Else, move on. Next!”

Now wouldn't that be a worthy rebellion, real empowerment and real liberation for a change?

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The overwhelming evidence from the focus group discussions carried out as part of the survey is that the representative village education committees (VECs)—that are part of the local councils or panchayat raj institutions—rarely function and, if they do meet, do not perform their functions.

The reported school working days are much lower in government schools and in many actually less than the 180 days that pedagogues regard as absolute minimum. Generally the number of working days in private-unaided schools is much higher than in government schools—which is one indication that despite having poorly paid, temporary, and untrained teachers, they actually function. The attendance rates in all States in government schools is usually lower than for private unaided schools—as per head count on the day of the survey—in both rural and urban areas.

- *Reforming elementary education in India: A menu of options* By Santosh Mehrotra

SCHOOL CHOICE CAMPAIGN
National Campaign Update

Delhi



An MCD councillor drawing out names of Voucher Students in a public lottery

In Delhi, 2.5 lakh parents have signed the School Choice Campaign petition. Parents from 68 wards across 4 districts met with their local councillor and presented a petition

demanding School vouchers. We received 1.5 lakh applications from parents for 408 school vouchers. A public lottery led by the local ward councillor was held in 68 wards. CCS then held first-contact meetings with the selected parents in the four districts to reorient them and gather data to facilitate the voucher scheme. The Delhi School Voucher Project assures the selected parents school vouchers up to Rs. 300/- per month for 3 years that can be redeemed at any participating school of the parent's

Tamil Nadu



The "Education is Your Right and it is Your Choice" consultation workshop, organized by CCS, ECDF and NAC-DIP

In Tamil Nadu we have partnered with Society for the Development of the Depressed. We kicked off the campaign in a Dalit colony in Nambedu, Chetpet block, Thiruvannamalai district. The response was

fantastic. After our presentation to the audience, the panchayat leaders went back to Mr Manavalan (head of SDD) and wanted to take the ideas to other panchayats. On June 11, we held a consultation workshop on "Education is your right and it is your choice" with East Coast Development Forum (ECDF) and National Advocacy Council for Development of Indigenous People (NAC-DIP) which was attended by over 57 participants.

Jharkhand



School choice Activists with Village leaders in Jharkhand

School Choice activists in Jharkhand held public gatherings and public hearings in various villages. They received tremendous response from parents with 76,000 parents signing a petition demanding school choice, which they later submitted to their elected councillors.

Orissa



The 'Quality School Education in Orissa' seminar organized by CCS partner Kalinga Centre for Social Development

CCS in association with Kalinga Centre for Social Development (KCSD) held a district consultation meeting with NGO's and stakeholders in Mayurbhanj, Orissa on June 5, to discuss the relevance of school choice to Orissa. We launched the Orissa School Choice Campaign on June 19 in Bhubaneswar.

Uttar Pradesh

We launched the Uttar Pradesh School Choice Campaign in Lucknow, in partnership with Centre for Rural Education and Development Action (CREDA), on July 4. The campaign will reach out to more than 1 crore parents across 30 districts including Kaushambi, Bhadohi, Jaunpur and Basraih amongst others. The campaign in UP will be a signature campaign followed by intensive social mobilisation at the village and taluka level. Local NGOs, Self-Help Groups, and volunteers will be the foot soldiers of our Uttar Pradesh campaign. The campaign will spread the message of school choice through cycle rallies, nukkad nataks and puppet shows.



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STUDENT FIRST!

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"The government needs to invest the taxpayer's money wisely. Instead of building more inefficient government schools, it should ease the licences for private education providers so that more schools are allowed to open their doors to eager students. These students should then be given financial support to access these schools so that no child is left out."

Anu Aga
CEO,
Thermax Group of Companies



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