

The Private and the Public in School Education

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The poor quality of the state-run school education system has led to demands that the State should withdraw from schooling, and that the government should only fund private initiatives or let the private sector take over schooling with public-private partnership initiatives. However, proper regulation of private schools and quality-driven reforms in public schools is a better alternative to PPP.

I spent the first four years of my formal schooling in a government primary school in a small town in Kerala and studied in the vernacular. The class had about 40 students, the infrastructure was minimal but adequate, the teachers were committed and above all, present. I went on to finish middle and high school in a larger aided, private school in the town. It should be mentioned that the town had no totally private (unaided) school at the time. My cousin, who is a teacher in a government high school in Kerala today assures me that the state schools are even more effective now; there is greater attention to training teachers and classes remain manageably small. There is also, to much disquiet in many quarters, a booming private English school sector.

I now live in a city of over six million (Bangalore), and am part of a private educational venture that is not-for-profit but is fully independent of the State, financially and otherwise. All around me are signs of mistrust of the public education system, and I hear loud complaints about poor quality and bad management. The government makes it all but impossible to start a private school, unless you are well-heeled, well-connected, or plain unscrupulous. In many parts of the country there are attempts to get the State to withdraw from education, or merely be a funding agency for private initiatives. Many governments, out of ideology or just fatigue, seem not completely unwilling to do just that. Talk of public-private partnership (PPP) has acquired an urgency of tone. At the same time, the central government and the states are pouring thousands of crores of tax money into education.

I mention these contrasting contexts at the outset to caution myself and the reader of the dangers of generalisation – particularly about a country of the size and complexity of India. One can find evidence in support of almost all assertions from somewhere in the country. Still we need

to review the state of our education systems, and explore and keep alive the possibility of public debate. That debate is becoming increasingly polarised and seems difficult, given the ideological and cultural preoccupations and prejudices that divide the protagonists. I proceed in the belief that the alternative to debate, even a raucous one, will be far worse.

The Battle Lines

The case for public provision and control of education (and its close cousin, health-care) is well known. Education has large external social effects, i e, the benefits (and the failures) reach beyond the individual. An educated population is economically more productive and fares better on most social indicators. A failure to educate the citizenry has, conversely, perverse effects on equity and welfare. Traditional economic theory tells us that the private sector, driven primarily by the profit motive, will “under-produce” education, if education is left completely to the market. Seen together, these perceptions have led, the world over, to both large-scale public provision of education, particularly school education, and also tight regulation of private educational activity.

The formal education system in India has its roots in colonial history. Private and public initiatives in education, though largely urban, coexisted. Political independence and the recognition of the importance of education led to large-scale public investment in the sector. However, the experience has been varied, depending on the history of each state. In addition to purely private and government initiatives, most states have a large number of “private aided schools” where the schools are owned and administered by private charities but the government underwrites most expenses. Obviously, PPP has a long history in India.

It is a commonplace, at least among the Indian urban middle class that the state education system is beyond repair. The failures and fault lines are multiple. There is a failure of provision. In spite of the enormous amount of financial and human resources that have been dedicated, millions of children receive no schooling. For many of those fortunate enough to be in school, the outcomes are barely worth the trouble.

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Poor quality is a widespread malaise in the system. There are serious organisational failures in school administration. Accountability of any sort is often non-existent.

It is in the context of the perceived failure of the state-run education systems in both developing and developed countries that many of the assumptions behind these policies have come to be questioned in recent years. There are also increasingly loud voices that question the belief that the private sector cannot deliver education to the poor and the needy and that the poor are not demanding “consumers” of education. Advocates of reform from this perspective demand a variety of responses ranging from outright privatisation of education and the withdrawal of the state, to various versions of market-friendly policies and PPP.

Opposed to this trend is the strong response of those who deeply mistrust the ability of the market to deliver education with any semblance of equity. This school of thought advocates reform and

strengthening of the state system, not its enfeeblement. They see the trend towards private provision as an ideological fallout of neoliberal political and social policies that have blighted many developing countries in the last few decades. The notion of PPP here is suspect, and seen as a cover for rapacious entrepreneurs to capture public resources.

Looking Back

It is often the case that a conflict of ideas of this sort is complicated by the fact that the participants on both sides no longer understand the terms in the same manner. Each side attributes the most uncharitable interpretations to the opponent’s arguments and proposals and puts forth devastating (at least in its own perception) counter-arguments. The notion of PPP is a case in point. It seems to me that PPP is not a monolithic notion whose meaning is self-evident. It is necessary to unpack the term to lay out its components. There may, after all, be many components of PPP that

are acceptable to many, in spite of differing ideological persuasions.

I should also clarify my own preferences. I consider myself a “practitioner”. My own ideas of education are the result of reflection that has accompanied my experience in teaching and school administration. As a practitioner, I would picture myself as someone who is willing to try ideas that work, irrespective of their school of origin. As teachers (and learners) I consider it imperative that we are ready to jettison old notions and practices which have not worked and do not rule out ideas merely out of prejudice.

My attempt in the rest of this essay will be to examine and clarify the assumptions behind various versions of educational provision and partnership. I would also like to clearly express my own preferences and the reasons for those preferences. Hopefully this would allow you, the reader, to locate yourself in the debate critically. Due to the very nature and complexity of the issues at hand, I will

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address a small part of the whole debate; the essay itself will concentrate on issues in school education, and also attempt to understand the kind of PPP, if at all, that makes sense in this realm. As I mentioned earlier, PPP is not an entirely new idea in the Indian context. In addition, the debate is not just an “all or nothing” argument about privatisation and public provision. Such a polarised approach is ahistorical. Once we recognise this, the debate can shift to a more nuanced understanding of past successes and failures, followed by a debate on the shape of the future.

The State We Are In

In spite of recent trends of increased enrolment at primary levels the overall performance of the public school system has failed to live up to even diminished expectations. Many researchers have found the performance of our schools far below that of schools in other countries with which India is often compared – mainly BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China) and some other developing countries. The improvement in primary enrolment has not kept pace at the high school level. Measures of quality and student achievement are even more appalling. Surveys have found high levels of teacher absenteeism, low “teaching activity” and not surprisingly, poor learning attainments. Needless to say, India’s failure to build up quality human capital has a great social and economic cost. In spite of the recognition of the cost of failure on the education front, education continues to be poorly represented in political debate.

There has been an upsurge of private provisioning, particularly in urban areas. Recent data seems to suggest that a large proportion of fresh enrolment in urban areas (even in states like Kerala) is in private schools. If unrecognised schools are taken into account, this trend will be magnified even further. Official data severely underestimate the size and reach of private schooling. Alongside the data on enrolment, evidence seems to suggest that the quality of private provisioning measured in terms of student achievement and subject-specific attainment is definitely better than that of most public schools. In addition, given that teacher salaries in the private sector are market-driven (and generally

much lower than in the state system) private schools are more cost-effective. The claim that private schooling is generally accessible only to the relatively well-to-do also seems untenable in the face of available evidence.

Many of the failures of provision, quality and performance in government schools can be traced directly to systemic administrative and organisational failure. By its very design, the public sector in India (not just in education) has found it difficult to maintain accountability and professionalism. When public provisioning is combined with large-scale and monopoly power, results have been almost always near-catastrophic. The fact that even the poor, given a choice, desert the public school system is sobering.

The conclusion that the performance of the public school system is abysmally poor seems to me to be inescapable even after allowing for imperfect data and other kinds of bias in reporting. Given the magnitude of public resources already committed and being earmarked for the future, sustained analysis and improvement of the performance of the public education system is imperative. However, controversy arises when the prescriptions for change seem to emanate mainly from the poles of the spectrum of opinion – those who advocate scaling down of the state system accompanied by public funding of private schools on the one end and those who refuse to acknowledge and respond seriously enough to the large-scale failure of the state system at the other.

Private = Market = Greed?

It has been claimed that profit-driven private provisioning will lead to the exploitation of the poor who are too ignorant and apathetic to make informed choices. Secondly, it is feared that the private sector will not provide educational services to the poorest who cannot afford to pay for these services or are outside the cash economy. While these concerns cannot be dismissed and do require serious evaluation, evidence is available that many among the poor recognise the value of education and choose to pay private providers even when, at least in theory, “free” state-funded education is available. The alleged mediocrity and exploitative nature

of private schools for the poor is also in need of substantiation. To my mind, the accumulating evidence has begun to point in the opposite direction – it is the state-run school system that is failing the poor, both in quality and access.

It is true that the mushrooming of high-cost, high-fee schools for the new rich in the towns and cities is driven often by capitalist entrepreneurship and rent-seeking. Many of these schools lack a clear educational vision and are of dubious quality. However, I am not sure these represent an inevitable phenomenon of failed markets. It could be argued instead that these schools are the sign of failed regulation.

There is evidence accumulated over decades that certain markets where advantages of scale and location exist, and where short-term measurement of quality is problematic, the state needs to intervene and regulate intelligently. The standard response of the Indian state has been to choke supply through regulatory overkill. In due course, vested interests with political leverage manage to capture licences and market power with disastrous consequences for quality and the ethical climate. In spite of the accumulated evidence, our regulatory systems in education have been very slow to adapt and learn from past mistakes. I would suggest that the appropriate regulatory response to the fear of profiteering by the private sector should not be to choke supply. On the contrary. Choice, competition and diversity, properly understood and properly regulated can trigger a virtuous cycle and can help create a more solid base of human capital for society. An opening up of the market along with a government sponsored and well-conceived quality benchmarking process for private (and public) schools is an idea worth considering. This requires a greater faith on the part of the State in the capacity of citizens to make intelligent choices when provided with better information and greater choice.

I would like to reiterate that this is not the usual free market evangelism. Education is a field unlike other services and is too important to be completely left to the market. However, our mistrust of the market and our inability to learn from past regulatory failures has created a system far less effective than it could be. This

“throwing out the baby with the bath-water” can and must be corrected.

What of PPP?

The argument for the complete withdrawal of the state from education is based on bad theory and poor evidence. The organisational rigidity and inefficiency of the public school system certainly calls for radical reform. The experience with large bureaucracies in the service sector like telecommunications and transport indicate that the state sector can deliver results when it feels the heat of consumer choice and competition. This change also requires innovative organisation and greater autonomy and democracy at the school level. Learning is a highly personal process that depends substantially on the interaction between the learner, the teacher and the subject, and less (after a threshold) on technology and infrastructure.

As was mentioned earlier, PPP, in the form of private aided schools has been part of the educational scene in India for long. This could be termed supply-side PPP, as its effect is to increase the number of schools through direct government funding. It has been noted that this system has serious flaws. Most private aided schools gradually begin to resemble their government cousins and often have very limited autonomy. In fact they seem to suffer, perhaps with some notable exceptions, from all the failings of the public schools.

Another model of PPP, what I would call demand-side PPP, is being put forward as an attractive option. One version of this approach works by giving parents the ability to choose schools by providing them with government-funded vouchers. Many countries have experimented with vouchers, with mixed results. Votaries of the school voucher system, even in the us (presumably the most market friendly society) are facing serious resistance from the public. I suggest that the intricacies of implementing a well-administered voucher system are beyond the capability of most state governments in India. If a voucher system has to succeed here, it should follow (not precede) serious reform of the government education system. If poorly implemented, such a voucher system may result in increased opportunities for corruption and private rent-seeking.

There are many other possibilities of partnership that have been explored in many parts of the country. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and citizen groups have made substantial contributions to improve the infrastructure and quality of public schools. These relationships need to be strengthened and institutionalised. This kind of partnership, as opposed to state supported private ownership has a greater chance of success and potentially a greater impact on quality.

Conclusions

My arguments so far amount to a vote for leaving the public and the private spheres in education to coexist and work independently of each other. “Separate, but equal” seems to me to be a better recipe for partnership. The public sector needs to be reformed and strengthened, not wound down. The private sector too needs sympathetic treatment. The traditional suspicion of the market and private enterprise needs to be replaced with trust and public vigilance. Freedom for private groups to run schools has to be dramatically improved. Regulation, traditionally based on the philosophy of control, has to be replaced with a facilitative approach. Punitive measures in the face of private greed are always a weapon the regulatory structure can wield.

The reform of the public school system needs both pressure from the consumer

(armed with greater choice) and strong “political push”. Whether the politicians and senior bureaucrats have the incentives to attempt serious reform remains to be seen. Such efforts are likely to face the wrath of vested interests of various hues. It is here that the opening up of private opportunities can have a salutary effect on the public sector’s willingness for reform.

I have so far made no mention of the argument for for-profit initiatives in school education. Given a reformed and free public provisioning system and a vibrant voluntary private effort, for-profit-making seems to me to be something of a non-issue. It is the opportunity, created by ill-designed and misapplied regulation that promotes profiteering. In the relative absence of such rigidities, for-profit schools may be just another species in the garden.

I reiterate that greater choice, competition and diversity in the school system where both public and private players co-exist is a more workable model than PPP of both supply- and demand-side variety discussed earlier. It is to be remembered that the public school system will always have a major “price-advantage” over the private provider. If in spite of such advantages, the citizens prefer private offerings, the reasons have to be sought in the mode of functioning of the public schools and not elsewhere.

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