

# Right to Education Act: A Comment

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To argue that alternative schools or private schooling can take care of the needs of primary school-going children ("Feasibility of Implementation of Right to Education Act", EPW, 20 June 2009) is to effectively condemn the poor and the marginalised to a second-rate education since they can never afford private and expensive schooling. The need of the hour is higher public investment in school education.

The article "Feasibility of Implementation of Right to Education Act" (20 June 2009) by Pankaj S Jain and Ravindra H Dholakia merits a serious debate in the country. This comment is restricted to the fourth section of that article on the policy implications.

## Neglecting Primary Education

It is deeply disturbing that the authors recommend:

...large expansion of AS/AIE (Alternative School/Alternative and Innovative Education) under SSA (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan), after some improvements in the budget allocation to support higher education quality and setting up mechanisms to assess quality... Another alternative would be for the government to contract out the bulk of school education delivery up to grade 5 to private schools... It is, therefore, not at all an inferior solution. It would enable proportionately higher amount of budget to be allocated to higher classes, and make the government to play a more active role in the schooling of higher grades, the bulk of which is currently left to private sector providers.

The early years of schooling from pre-primary right up to the end of the primary cycle are the most important phase of a child's development, where the foundations for life-long learning is built. It is at this stage that we need highly competent and sensitive teachers, who can stimulate creativity and nurture and build innate intellectual abilities. There is considerable global as well as Indian research that has established without doubt that investing in the early years is very important (Ramachandran et al 2003).

It is, therefore, important for the government to pay more focused attention to pre-school education (which is currently grossly neglected) and to primary education by enhancing financial as well as academic resources to create good quality schools accessible to all children. If the government abdicates this space, it is the

poor and the marginalised who will bear the brunt of this neglect. As it is today the economic and social background of the children determines what kind of schools they go to and with lower investment in government primary schools, the poorest would be the hardest hit and within them children from disadvantaged social groups – especially, dalit, tribal and new migrants in rural and urban areas. The hierarchies of access in schooling have been well-documented.

## Quality of Education

Furthermore, the authors observe:

Some education experts have opposed the expansion of government funding for AS/AIE scheme and for any private-public partnership based on low cost schooling as inherently iniquitous and against the poor (Dube 2007; CABE 2005 and Kothari Commission 1966). However, now there exists credible evidence that both AS/AIE-funded non-government schools and private schools provided better quality education than the average government schools....

What is this "credible" evidence? The problem of learning seems all pervasive – assessment of learning outcomes done by the National Council of Education Research and Training (NCERT), Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) and other foundations point to the alarming situation with respect to learning – not only in government primary schools. The answer to poor quality does not lie in privatisation of primary schooling or giving vouchers.

Yes, higher investment is called for at higher levels – but not at the cost of pre-school and primary education. The right to education should ideally guarantee all children "equal" rights and creating schools with lower investment goes against the spirit of equality for two well-known reasons. One, substituting government primary schools with AS/AIE will affect the poor. The middle class and the rich will continue to access regular schools with qualified teachers for their children – thereby further reducing the chance of the poor ever competing with them in any sphere. Second, as of now we do not have a clear picture of the nature and spread of private schools in rural and remote areas and even in urban/peri-urban

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slums. The little work done in this sphere shows that private schools in these areas are little more than poorly resourced teaching shops, where children learn little and the schools themselves are ramshackle, and in many areas, unsafe. Therefore, there is a need to be wary of the “voucher” model.

### Conclusion

Recent surveys (ASER 2008 being the latest) have shown that the percentage of students opting to go to private schools has been steadily increasing and it is the most marginalised, and among them girls, who continue to enrol and attend government schools. If this trend continues, and if the people who can pay opt out of government schools for a variety of

reasons, then the case for increasing per-child investment in government primary schools (and further, middle school and high school) becomes all the more compelling.

We need to invest more on the most disadvantaged and deprived and ensure that they access the best quality education so that we can proactively “neutralise the accumulated distortions of the past” (National Policy on Education, 1986: 4.2, government of India). Yes, this may pose a huge challenge to educational planners. Given the steady growth of the gross domestic product (notwithstanding the hiccups of 2008 and 2009), the government has to make resources available and we have to create a strong and autonomous quality assurance mechanism,

whereby all schools – private or government – are made accountable to ensuring children learn and are provided a nurturing environment for development. The right to education is not about optimal allocation of funds between different sectors of education – it is about ensuring that every single child has access to education of comparable quality at all levels. It will be going against the spirit of this right, if we relegate the poor to AS/AIE in order to increase investment at other levels.

### REFERENCE

- Ramachandran, Vimala, Kameshwari Jandhyala and Aarti Saihjee (2003): “Through the Life Cycle of Children: Factors Determining Successful Primary School Completion, *Economic & Political Weekly*, No 47, Vol XXXVIII, 22 November.

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