

## **Schools as Sites of Socio-Economic Inclusion: Improving the Fabric of Indian Society**

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#### **Abstract**

*This article examines the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE, 2009) in India, including its origin, the system of schools to which it gave rise, and its importance against the backdrop of the larger Indian society. This article further assesses the progress made in the implementation of the RTE, the roadblocks, and the role of different stakeholders in the system to make RTE a working reality. The benefits of integration in the overall functioning of the education system and its different elements such as the students, teachers, the school culture and the larger community are explored in the article. In conclusion, the article gives policy recommendations to close the skills gap and thereby create an ecosystem that will support integration at every level.*

**Keywords:** Socio Economic Inclusion, India, Democracy, Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE), Equity, Economically Weaker Sections (EWS)

#### **Introduction**

India is the 2nd largest country in terms of human resources in the world (United States Census Bureau, 2016) and is producing more population at an alarming rate. I use the term 'Human Resources' because the so-called population explosion if properly nurtured and carefully invested into, will be the very force that will have the potential to make India a more equitable society. However, the reality today is quite the contrary. With increasing globalization and market liberalization, the economic and the social divide that was thought to be reduced has only widened leading to increased disparity between the rich and poor.

## **India as a Democracy**

India achieved freedom from colonial rule in 1947 and in the ensuing years was declared a democratic federal republic by the constitution (Mitra, 2014). However, the common man of the time did not have the consciousness and the necessary education to understand democracy. Today after 69 years of Independence, the situation is not very different, for a large section of society is still uneducated. Hence, despite the efforts being made, Indian democracy has been unsuccessful in achieving even such basic goals as food for all, shelter for all, and education for all. And yet for any democracy to play its optimum role certain key conditions need to be met such as educating the poor and the illiterate, elevating them to exercise their rights, and thereby protecting democracy. Sensitizing the educated to take leadership responsibilities and to work for the public good while eradicating social evils, will encourage a fair and impartial media and spread feelings of tolerance and communal harmony (Mitra, 2014). This at least is the hope.

## **Democracy, Equality, and Education Interlinked**

Education and democracy are closely intertwined. Education plays a key role in elevating the consciousness of the marginalized sections of society which in turn provides support to strengthen democracy.

Thomas Mann once observed, "Democracy wishes to elevate mankind, to teach it to think, to set it free. It seeks to remove from culture the stamp of privilege and disseminate it among people, in a word, it aims at education" (Shah, 2012, p. 515). Education has the potential to develop critical thinking, which is necessary for political participation and decision making. To a great extent, education also has the power to reshuffle the inequality in a democracy and create a level playing field for all.

Social and economic inequality has always been a stumbling block in building democratic functioning. But a society with gross social and economic inequalities cannot wait for the introduction of democratic systems till it attains equality. Nor can it wait till a cultural renaissance emerges. But a society with gross social and economic inequalities cannot wait for the introduction of democratic systems till it attains equality. Nor can it wait till a cultural renaissance emerges. The processes of cultural awakening – spread of ideas and critical discourse – building an egalitarian social order and democratic systems have to go hand in hand. It is not an either – or situation. Nor does one follow the other. Greater equality in all spheres strengthens democracy and vice versa. (Shah, 2012, p. 515)

A society that is democratic and interested in creating equal opportunities cannot overlook the importance of education as a tool to enable the marginalized sections of society to improve their lot. Progressive equality of opportunity to all sections of the population is needed to harness the wealth of human resources and talent available to India. This may at first glance seem to be a roundabout route but is also the surest way to guarantee building an egalitarian and humane society in which the exploitation of the weak can be minimized.

## **Socio Economic Inclusion- Why Does It Matter?**

Poverty involves more than lack of income; exclusion is not merely the result of a lack of money. 'Social exclusion,' as noted in Indus Action (IA, 2014), is often described as the process by which individuals and groups are wholly or partly closed out from participation in their society, as a consequence of low income and constricted access to education, employment, social benefits and services, and to various aspects of cultural and community life.

In this context, our schools can be called socially inclusive when "the children of all classes, rich and poor, partake as equally as possible in the privileges of the school" (Kingdon, 2007, as cited in IA, 2014, p 13). Education can be an equalizer, which mitigates this exclusion and fosters citizenship in children, just as was conceptualized by Vinod Raina (IA, 2014).

### **Benefits of Inclusion**

Richard Kahlenberg (2012), one of the leading advocates for socio-economic school integration in the United States, after studying various successful school systems around the world, including Finland, concludes that the integration of children from various backgrounds leads to more robust and rigorous schools. His research shows that peer-environment positively impacts learning outcomes, and that high-poverty schools fail to provide surroundings which are conducive to high academic growth. He strongly advocates for integration of children from various racial and socio-economic backgrounds, and cites three important reasons for moving children from poverty struck areas to high-income schools (IA, 2014):

- In higher-income schools, peers who, on average, are more academically engaged, will serve as strong role models for other students
- Higher-income schools cater to a community of fee-paying parents who are more actively involved in their child's schooling and will thus be able to hold teachers and school staff accountable for providing high quality education
- Higher-income schools employ stronger teachers who have high expectations for students. (IA, 2014, p 15)

### **Status of Education: Hard Facts**

"By 2020, India is set to have the largest employable population in the world. The good news is that 97% of the children are in school (ASER, 2013). But of those who start school, 25% drop out post primary schooling (DISE Report, 2012-2013), and 6 out of 10 children do not complete schooling in India (The New Indian Express, Oct 2013). Further, despite high enrollment rates in primary schools, the ASER (2013) indicates a "decline in basic literacy and numeracy skills in students across the nation over the last three years" (IA, 2014, p.7).

Moreover, the achievement gap between public and private schools, and across social groups is widening. The IA Report stated findings by ASER (2013) that private school students performed 20 percent better than public school students on basic literacy skills and on numeracy skills. On the same basic skills, the nationally representative India Human Development Survey (IHDS,

2005) found the gap between richest and poorest quintiles to be almost 50%. (IA, 2014, p.7)

## **Right to Education Act – An Attempt at Equity**

In an attempt to address the looming education crisis, the Right to Education Act (RTE, 2009), passed in 2009, provides for free and compulsory education until the completion of elementary school in a neighborhood school. Within the RTE, Section 12(1)(C) in particular has received a lot of attention. It mandates that 25 percent of the seats in all private unaided schools be reserved for students in their entering class who belong to the economically weaker sections of society (RTE, 2009). "This progressive policy has the potential to put roughly 10 million Indian children on a different life path within the next 5 years making it the single largest opportunity scheme in the world" (DISE Report, 2012-13, as cited in IA, 2014, p. 5).

However, when Indus Action, an organization that works to implement the RTE in partnership with the Government of India, juxtaposed this data with a UNICEF report which states that 8 million Indian children of the 20 million enrolled are likely to drop out of school before completing elementary education, there was suddenly grave cause for concern (IA, 2014). Why are so many children dropping out? A recent report by Bajoria, a researcher in the Asia division of the Human Rights Watch, draws attention to the insidious and damaging impact of ingrained discrimination in Indian schools (Bajoria, 2014).

Needless to say, inclusion is indispensable to the notion of equality. But inclusion in itself doesn't necessarily mean equality. Therefore, it will be worth examining how effectively can the current inclusive policy move towards equality under a neoliberal economy.

## **The Why and How of Right to Education: RTE, Section 12 (1)(C)**

Section 12(1)(c), is primarily formulated to foster social inclusion and has been among the most contentious in the RTE Act. "The [RTE] is anchored in the belief that the values of equality, social justice and democracy and the creation of a just and humane society can be achieved only through provision of inclusive elementary education to all" (RTE, 2009, as cited in IA, 2014, p.9).

## **The Debate**

It is also perceived as a 'financial burden' by many private schools. However, the popular interpretations and opinions greatly deviate from the actual intentions behind formation of Section 12(1)(c). A lot of myths regarding its rationale are prevalent among schools and educators. (IA 2014, p.10)

Some of the myths are that the government is abdicating its financial responsibility by not improving the quality of its own schools and transferring it to private schools. It is also believed that marginalized children feel stigmatized and cannot integrate with the elite kids. (IA 2014, p.10)

The Reality is that under Section 12 (1) (C) of the RTE Act, the Government will reimburse the schools for every admitted student (RTE, 2009) and is in the process

of setting up 6000 model schools according to the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD, 2009). "Additionally, the intention of the RTE has been for the 75 percent children to benefit from the 25 % and learn about the realities of our nation" (IA 2014, p.10).

### **Achieve Together Conference: A Personal Experience of the Power of Inclusion**

In 2014, a group of friends and the author of this paper (Rani, & Vaz, 2014) came together to start the Achieve Together Conference (ATC), a conference that aimed to bring children from different socio-economic backgrounds together for a day. The Achieve Together Conference, is a day that every student should have every day, filled with inspiring role models (imagine being surrounded by highly successful adults who lead a life of value creation every single day), fun learning experiences (imagine a curriculum that stresses the use of the head, heart and hand) and collaboration (where children learn about equality, hard work, empathy and compassion). Through the conference, we wanted to give these experiences to children, even if for only a day.

ATC partnered with Indus Action in 2013. As an organization working on creating awareness and support in the implementation of the RTE Act, we became aware that the quota of seats made available under the Act had not been filled. This was either because parents did not know of such a law or students lacked confidence to enroll in such schools for the fear of being stigmatized or the school authorities didn't put in enough efforts to integrate the students into the school. Many parents from elite schools objected to this move (IA, 2014).

According to information sought under the RTE Act, close to 74 per cent of seats set aside for EWS students had not been filled up for the academic year 2013-14 till August 2013. Data shows that out of 12,818 seats reserved for EWS students across 554 private aided and unaided schools in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR), just 3,308 seats have been filled. (Basu & Sonawala, 2014, p. 14)

Only schools run by the missionaries permit students from economically weaker sections to attend. However, some of our other findings have also shown that certain schools in North India and The Loreto School, Sealdah, allow students from different backgrounds yet hold themselves to a very high standard of academic achievement (IA, 2014).

Heritage School in Gurgaon is one of the highest scoring schools in the country despite having students from different backgrounds (Top Ten Schools in Gurgaon, 2012) Hence, if done in the right spirit, inclusive spaces help bring out the best in students. During ATC, in a personal conversation with Madhuri Deshpande, who runs Ankur Vidyamandir in Pune, she shared with us how elite students learn to empathise and reach out to those who might have little (Deshpande, 2014).

Through the three conferences, ATC conducted touched 1000 children and 200 teachers. Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM) schools, schools that cater to students with disability, low income schools as well as night schools have thanked Achieve Together Circle for being a welcoming and inclusive space. (Deshpande, 2014)

## **Role of Different Stakeholders in Making Inclusion a Reality**

**School Leaders:** School leadership is a key lever in transforming the education system. As a leader, the principal has to take initiative, build culture and provide the required guidance to teachers, students and parent. After studying headmasters in India and abroad, Stanford University Professor Nick Bloom concluded that “a one-point increase on their scoring of school management practices is associated with a 10% increase in student performance” (IA, 2014, p. 33).

**Teachers:** Teachers don't need to come from their students' cultures to be able to teach them, but empathy and cultural knowledge are essential. Teachers need to take steps, such as, home visits, and not just to complain about but to solve problems based on a deeper understanding of where their students sleep, eat, play and live after school hours. “Teachers need to exhibit emotional intelligence and incorporate classroom strategies that build relationships and strengthen peer acceptance and social skills in class” (IA, 2014, p. 33).

### **Community:**

1) Parents of elite kids need to be sensitized and educated on the benefits of inclusive education and made active partners in the inclusion process. Socio-economic inclusion has the following benefits for middle and high income children:

- Pro-social behavior: Having poor classmates makes wealthy students more pro-social and generous. They become more likely to volunteer for a charity at school, more generous towards both rich and poor students in dictator games, and exhibit more egalitarian preferences.
- “Having poor class-mates makes wealthy students discriminate less against poor children, as measured in a team-selection held experiment. Consistent with this, they become more willing to socially interact with poor children outside school” (IA, 2014, p. 16).

2) Parents of low income kids need to be educated on their rights through grass root initiatives to create awareness and support in seeking admission in a neighborhood school.

## **Conclusions**

The Right to Education Act (2009) is a landmark step towards inclusion. All these above factors, if achieved at a systemic level, can not only take schools towards inclusion, but also change the prevailing behaviors and mindsets in our society about children from various backgrounds studying together. There has been a lot of debates about the RTE Act, the perceived financial and social burden imposed by it, and the lack of readiness of children to study in private schools. It is at this juncture that one must remember the true purpose of education and one's responsibilities as an educator, and not let a child's education and inclusion in the society, be a function of his socioeconomic background.

## **Policy Recommendations**

For the ecosystem to be ready, we need to overcome a lot of challenges, and the proposed recommendations involve a lot of stakeholders. The list is by no means

exhaustive but does attempt to address some broad challenges facing implementation of the Right to Education Act.

**1. Teacher Training:** India faces a shortage of 1.4 million trained teachers (Deccan Chronicle, 2016). To address this, we need to recruit highly motivated teachers and train them to deal with diversity in schools. The remuneration and the status of teachers in Indian society need to be raised for more qualified people to take up the teaching profession.

**2. School Leadership Modules:** Leading a school with over a quarter of the students coming from poor or disadvantaged background needs school leader training. "Schools can partner with organizations working in the field to mobilize resources to ensure that school leaders change their attitude towards Section 12 (1)(c) cite this and look at this as an opportunity to learn and train their staff" (IA, 2014, p. 52)

**3. Grievance Redressal System:** "The guiding principle for this mechanism should be for government and schools to work together and not against each other. It's important for schools to have a say in the system as well as a protocol for filing their own complaints" (IA, 2014, p. 52). Schools, the primary bodies implementing and fostering inclusion, should not collapse under the bureaucratic processes and pressure of getting the Act right.

**4. Rubric for Social Inclusion:** Social and economic inclusion is an idea which needs more structure and support. The nature of school education has become such that there is barely any external feedback mechanism. "As inclusion is relatively a new policy, having a rubric which can serve as a standard for schools to follow, it will help them carve a path and plan for academic years accordingly" (IA, 2014, p. 53).

**5. School Management Committees:** Parents and communities need to be involved more often to understand the socio-economic and cultural influences on the students.

**6. Book Banks:** Encouraging schools to create book banks for any student who needs these resources can cultivate the traits of giving and collaborating.

**7. Corporate Social Responsibility Funds:** Under the New Company's Act of 2013, section 135 "mandates big corporations to contribute 2 percent of their gross income towards social activities" (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2013, p 80).

**8. Out of school initiatives:** ATC was an out-of-school initiative to show that a world class inclusive space is possible and beneficial. Other such initiatives can be carried out at the grass-roots level such as Community Exchange programs/ creating opportunities to know similarities and differences through buddy outings, engaging in activities/occupations together, and exposure to each other's communities and life styles which will lead to resolution of community issues jointly, that affects both parties as well as being caused by both.

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