Learning, Marginalization, and Improving the Quality of Education in Low-income Countries

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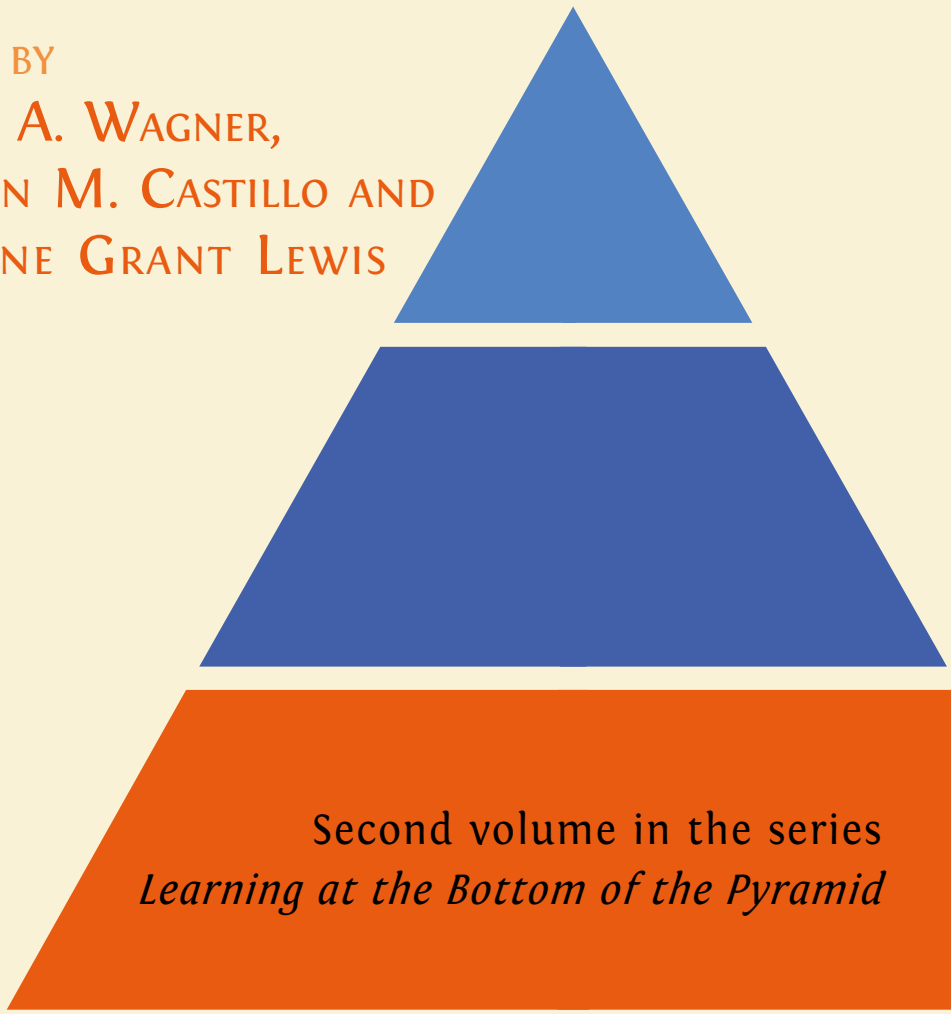

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9. India: Learning in the Margin

Reflections on Indian Policies and Programs for Education of the Disadvantaged

Rangachar Govinda

Introduction

India has witnessed enormous expansion of school infrastructure and near-universal enrollment of children in schools in recent decades. But it is common knowledge that improvement in quality has not kept pace with this expansion. What if all children get to attend school, but the majority fail to acquire even the basic skills of literacy and numeracy after several years of schooling?

While ASER (2015) and other achievement surveys have repeatedly pointed to persistent levels of learning deficit, it is well-recognized that learning enhancement for children from marginalized groups requires comprehensive strategies. This raises several questions: how has India been responding to this challenge? What policies and strategies have been adopted to provide quality education to children of communities afflicted by chronic poverty and social marginalization? What are the critical issues that confront Indian policymakers in creating an equitable system of school education? In the context of learning at the bottom of the pyramid, this chapter attempts to address these critical questions related to India's policies and strategies for educating the large mass of children living in the margin.

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Retrospect on policies and strategies

India began its efforts to provide universal elementary education more than seven decades ago. The initial goal was to reach universal access within 10 years, but that did not happen, and the goal has remained elusive. Recognizing the complex nature of regional and social inequalities in education historically inherited from the colonial period, special clauses were incorporated in the Indian Constitution. Emphasizing a "right to equality", the Constitution explicitly specified: "The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them" (The Constitution of India, 1950). The Constitution also empowered the state to practice positive discrimination to ensure advancement of special category groups, including women, scheduled castes consisting of people belonging to (former) untouchable castes who had been patently discriminated against, and scheduled tribes consisting of aboriginal ethnic groups, largely isolated from mainstream society. There is no doubt that substantial progress has been made in the education status of these groups. Yet statistics for recent years point out that they continue to occupy the bottom of the hierarchy in educational progress. In fact, reviews have revealed persistent educational backwardness among religious minorities (particularly Muslims) and also among several other caste groups broadly classified as "other backward classes".

Over the years, both central and state governments have been launching a number of measures to offset the handicaps faced by various disadvantaged sections of society. We will not list out various schemes and projects launched over the years, which are still in operation with variable levels of success and failures. We would rather present an overall picture that will give an indication of the kinds of efforts being made. Broadly, these measures could be discussed under three categories, namely: (1) area-specific strategies; (2) target-specific strategies; and (3) programs of early childhood care and learning enhancement.

Area-specific strategies

The Indian scenario is too complex and varied to be effectively captured through aggregate national figures. On the one hand, there is Kerala, where practically every child attends elementary school, with an

adequate number of teachers and classrooms. At the other end of the spectrum, there is Bihar, where only one out of two children are in school, invariably with subminimal infrastructure. By the beginning of 2000, it was estimated that three-quarters of out-of-school children lived in six states of the country—namely Andhra Pradesh,[1] Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal (Govinda, 2008). Even within these states, the situation varies widely across different districts, castes, religious minorities, and ethnic groups.

Under an area-specific approach, programs and projects are designed based on the empirical observation that some geographical units, which are characterized by chronic educational backwardness, are inhabited by socially marginalized groups. One of the earliest projects to emerge with this perspective was the Integrated Tribal Development Program, which was specially designed to send developmental resources to ethnic minority groups or scheduled tribes inhabiting specific geographical pockets. It is debatable if this approach, which has been in operation for several decades, has really helped improve education in these areas. There is no systematic assessment to conclude if it has really worked. An empirical study taking place over 18 years in a cluster of villages in a tribal area revealed overwhelming interest among parents to get their children educated, marking a significant change from the attitude of parents in early 1990s. However, this was barely matched by the response from the state; no private providers seem to be interested within the locality, unlike other parts of the same state. Except for improved physical infrastructure in the schools, barely any improvement in the teaching learning facilities and conditions could be observed (Govinda, 2009).

In recent years, area-specific strategies have been adopted with an expanded framework. For instance, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) has identified more than 350 districts and blocks as special focus areas for targeted interventions, based on a composite set of education development indicators. These geographic units receive special consideration in matters of allocation of funds and school infrastructure. Based on this consideration, SSA has identified 61 districts with a high SC (scheduled caste) population, 106 districts with a high ST

1 Andhra Pradesh is now divided into two states but the overall situation remains unchanged.

(scheduled tribe) population, and 88 districts with a high Muslim population. Further, over 3000 blocks (subdistricts) with low female literacy levels and high gender gaps—called Educationally Backward Blocks (EBB)—have also been identified as part of the focus on girls' education (Government of India, 2017).

Relatively small habitations located in difficult-to-access pockets make the provision of schools fully equipped with physical and academic infrastructure really challenging. The problem is partially being tackled by establishing residential schools in central locations within the hard-to-reach tribal pockets. Special residential facilities are also being set up in low-female literacy blocks to improve the participation of girls.

Target-specific strategies

While area-specific initiatives can address the problem of marginalization to some extent, children from vulnerable groups have to be reached more directly if their educational conditions are to improve. With this in mind, several incentive schemes and direct support measures have been initiated. These include monetary support in the form of cash and scholarships to the students or their families, as well as non-monetary support specifically focusing on scheduled castes and differently-abled children. Further, a number of measures also focus on girls across social affiliations, with increased focus on girls from marginalized groups. Considering that many of the children from marginalized groups are first-generation learners, special attention in the form of additional coaching classes is also given to students in higher levels of education who are from educationally-backward families. Because incentives such as scholarship schemes have been in operation for several decades, some of them are no longer viewed as special measures. Rather, they are part of the regular process of financial allocations at the state government level.

It should of course be acknowledged that, notwithstanding constitutional measures and directives, transforming social practices is a slow process and there has, indeed, been progress on this front. Yet, empirical observations point to the continuance of subtle forms of discrimination in schools and classrooms that clearly impact children's learning. While special measures focusing on vulnerable groups and less developed pockets seem reasonable, they potentially lead to a hierarchy of schools corresponding to the marginalized status of the children,

particularly affecting the educational progress of girls (Ramachandran, 2004). Addressing such unintended consequences of special-focus programs poses a difficult challenge.

Programs of early childhood care

There is increasing empirical evidence to suggest that, by the time children reach school-age, it might already be difficult to stop certain types of exclusions. In particular, it is clearly established that nutrition and cognitive stimulation early in life are critical for long-term skill development (Galiani & Manacorda, 2007; Shonkoff & Phllips, 2000; Shore, 1997; Sternberg, 1985). Indeed, there is a widespread conviction among educators that the benefits of pre-primary education are carried over to primary school. In particular, teachers identify a lack of academic skills as one of the most common obstacles children face when they enter school. Also, they perceive preschool education as facilitating the socialization and self-control necessary to make the most of classroom learning (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000; Currie, 2001). It is within this context that India operates a massive program under the banner of Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) to provide developmental support to children ages 0–6, coupled with prenatal and post-natal care facilities for mothers. One of the six components of the program is to provide preschool education to children attending the ICDS center. The government is committed to expanding the program to ensure full coverage throughout the country, even though a lack of qualified preschool teachers and trained caregivers poses a major challenge to meeting this goal.

Another country-wide program in operation is the National Program of Nutritional Support to Primary Education, popularly referred to as the Mid-Day Meal (MDM) program. Evidence suggests that undernutrition, both protein-energy malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies, directly affect many aspects of children's development (Ijarotimi, 2013). In particular, it retards their physical and cognitive growth, and increases susceptibility to infection and disease. Unfortunately, India's record in this regard is quite unsatisfactory. Around 35 percent of children in India have been identified as malnourished (UNICEF, 2019). This is an issue of direct relevance to the achievement of EFA/SDG goals, as there is disturbing evidence of *worsening* gender gaps in

child malnutrition (although gender gaps in educational outcomes have decreased), particularly in rural areas of northern and eastern states where nutritional status has been improving substantially more for boys than girls (Tarozzi & Mahajan, 2005).

The MDM program recognizes the vulnerability of children without adequate nutritional input at home. Provision of nutritious food under the program, which is currently operating throughout the country and covers children in Grades 1 through 8, is now increasingly viewed from a "food security" and rights perspective, and not just as an incentive to attract and retain children in schools.

Programs with special focus on learning enhancement

The problem of poor learning levels is not a new finding of recent years. The National Policy on Education (NPE), issued in 1986, flagged this as a serious issue (MHRD, 1986). It declared that the universalization of elementary education was incomplete without universal achievement, and called for elementary education programs to look beyond reaching quantitative targets of enrollment and completion. In order to refocus classroom teaching on learning outcomes, in the early 1990s the government of India published a document delineating "Minimum Levels of Learning" to be mastered by the end of each grade, from 1 to 5. But the implementation of the corresponding program was disbanded within a few years without any systematic assessment. However, the launch of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan in 2002 brought back the focus on learning outcomes, prompting the state governments to embark on major programs for enhancing learning levels in elementary schools. Further, the ASER Report on learning outcomes in 2006 attracted public attention to the poor state of learning among school children, and highlighted the need for devoting greater attention to the issue.

Interestingly, a number of programs have been initiated during the last two decades by various state governments with the goal of enhancing learning levels. Even though the goal has been to improve learning among the children, the approach and emphasis varies from state to state. We will present a synoptic view of three programs which are illustrative of different approaches with respect to their design and instrumentality.

Activity-Based Learning of Tamil Nadu

The main thrust of the Activity-Based Learning (ABL) program[2] is to recast classroom pedagogy to be more child-centered. The approach involves the provision of engaging and challenging learning materials in a carefully graded and planned sequence. It attempts to create an individualized tract for each child by enabling differentiated learning through the use of the "learning ladder", consisting of a sequence of steps that must be completed as a child proceeds through the curriculum. Learning is also self-directed by the child as they learn to recognize their position on the ladder and choose the appropriate "self-learning card" that corresponds to the step they have reached. The program has been, over the years, the subject of a number of evaluation studies, which have identified five key features of the model:

(a) *classroom organization* as multigrade with small groups on different mats carrying out independent learning activities with support from teachers and students following the "learning ladder";

(b) *curriculum structure* broken down into small learning units or milestones;

(c) *teaching and learning* through a series of activities and opportunities for independent and peer learning;

(d) *role of the teacher* as a facilitator rather than learning being solely teacher-driven, and

(e) *assessment*, which is non-threatening and built into the activities the child completes, moving onto the next milestone only after they achieve a certain "mastery of skills".

The ABL approach was an adaptation of the Rishi Valley Institute for Educational Resources' model of child-friendly education, practiced in its satellite schools. The model was tried out in a small number of schools in Karnataka under the banner "*nali kali*" as part of the District Primary Education Program (DPEP) in 1995. The success of the experiment led to subsequent expansion within Karnataka. In Tamil Nadu, the ABL program also began as a small experimental project in 13 schools of the Chennai Municipal Corporation in 2002–2003. Based on the positive

2 See for more details: UNICEF (2012); Akila (2009); NCERT (2011); Singhal et al. (2017).

experience, the program was extended to the whole of the Corporation area, and within five years the Tamil Nadu government decided to adopt the approach throughout the state, covering all government and government-aided primary schools.

Evaluation studies of the ABL have tended to focus on the implementation of child-centered pedagogy; it is difficult to determine if the program made a significant impact on learning levels of the children. ABL is also one of the most replicated learning-improvement programs in India. The positive promise it held for ensuring a child-friendly education gained the attention of educational administrators across the country. Over the years, with encouragement from UNICEF, which was the original sponsor of *nali kali* in Karnataka as well as ABL in Chennai, adaptations of the ABL approach have been implemented in as many as 13 states.

Gunotsav of Gujarat

The *Gunotsav* (Celebrating Quality) program design assumes that assessment and feedback in a competitive framework spurs quality improvement in schools and enhances learning outcomes of students. The program was launched on a state-wide basis in 2009 as a Gujarat government initiative. The entire state-government machinery was mobilized to evaluate and grade the quality of teachers and schools. The main purpose of the annual exercise is to monitor school conditions and make sure that all children studying in primary schools (Std 2 to 8) achieve improvements in basic reading, writing, and numerical skills. The exercise is expected to build an environment of accountability. Some view the program as a mass-scale diagnostic assessment and remediation exercise.[3]

3 The program implementation consists of three sequential phases, repeated every year. Phase 1 consists of self-evaluation by all schools (around 34,000) and all students (more than 5,000,000) by head teachers and teachers. Phase 2 involves external evaluation by more than 3000 political representatives and government officials, who spend full days in randomly selected schools (three schools in three days). The assessment parameters are based on learning outcomes (with 60% weight), co-scholastic activities (20%), infrastructure, including human resources (10%), and community participation (10%). Based on the evaluation, schools are given a grade ranging from A+ to D. Phase 3 consists of remedial action for improving school conditions and bridging the gaps identified in learning outcomes.

Over the years, government reports indicate that, as a consequence of *Gunotsav* implementation, many schools have improved their grades, and practically none or very few can be found at the bottom of the ladder, with a D grade (Government of Gujarat). As a follow-up measure, a learning-based child tracking system was launched in 2013, in which the learning levels of each individual child were monitored along with teachers' profiles, competencies, and training needs. A database of 54 lakh (5.4 million) students was generated through a web-based application by assigning unique identification to each government primary school student. Self-assessment by the school was carried out using OMR sheets pre-printed with student names and unique IDs.

As the program has been consistently implemented in more or less the same format, cumulative progress in school quality and learning outcomes should be clearly discernible. Considering that the program covers the full cycle of elementary education, it should also be possible to identify and earmark critical stages in which progress in learning get disrupted, and thereby help launch corrective measures. Government reports indicate that many schools have moved to higher levels in the grading system, and that several agencies have been involved in implementation. However, there are no comprehensive studies available in the public domain which explore the progress made with respect to each of the eight objectives of the program. What is somewhat surprising is that its impact on improving learning outcomes does not get reflected in reports of ASER and NAS by NCERT for various years following the program.

Mentor Teacher program of Delhi

The program of "Mentor Teacher" (MT) was launched in recent years by the Delhi government[4] and is still taking shape. It is based on the assumption that teachers make the biggest impact on education quality and learning outcomes. It aims to leverage the creative expertise of around 200 experienced teachers to enhance the pedagogic and academic capacities of the rest of Delhi's 45,000 teachers. Each mentor

For a broader discussion of the theme of accountability, see: Ish, Singh, & Vaghela (2015) and Sankar (2013).

4 Government of NCT of Delhi (2019).

teacher has five to six schools assigned to them, which they visit at least once a week, to observe classroom practices and guide the teachers. They also create supplementary learning materials for children, in consultation with other teachers. Mentor teachers also act as critical pivots in implementing various other government programs which focus on improving school quality. Even though teachers, both the mentor teachers and others, are held accountable for learning outcomes of children, the program is carefully designed not to pose any threat to incumbent teachers. This is in contrast to the several other initiatives in the country where teachers seem to have felt intimidated by the grading of their performance.

Delhi has around 5700 schools, of which around 2400 are directly managed by the Delhi government. The remaining schools are managed by a number of private and semi-private organizations. The "Mentor Teacher" program is confined to the schools under direct government management. Thus, the MT initiative has a relatively small reach compared to state-wide programs of other states such as *Gunotsav* or ABL. Yet it is perhaps the largest experiment in quality improvement through peer learning and school-based on-site support through participatory process. This, unlike other state-wide programs, offers the opportunity to create interventions tailored to the unique requirements of each school and provide teachers with more personalized support. The program was extended to cover all state government schools based on positive feedback to an initial pilot. It is perhaps too early to judge if the initiative could be sustained and whether it can really bring about permanent improvement in school quality and learning outcomes.

Reflections

The core concern that has led to these innovative efforts is common—to improve the learning levels of children in school. But the approaches and underlying assumptions have been quite different. While the ABL program is anchored in the principle of pedagogic transformation leading to improvement in learning, Gunotsav considers assessment and remediation as the route to enhancing learning outcomes. The Delhi government initiative of "mentor teachers" seems to place its faith in supporting and empowering teachers through professional development for improving learning outcomes.

The increasing number and variety of programs for improving learning outcomes signify the recognition by the state of the magnitude and intensity of the problem, as well as the urgency of action. Many of the projects for learning improvement have been in operation for more than 10–15 years; some of them, such as the ABL in Tamil Nadu and *nali kali* in Karnataka, began nearly two decades ago. The basic principles on which the programs are designed cannot be questioned for their technical soundness. Yet, when India participated in PISA in 2010, the results were dismal, with India appearing at the bottom of the league.

Why have such large-scale interventions, implemented for a decade or more, made such little impact on the ground? Possibly because government projects are generally treated as refutation-proof. If the project works, the political leadership and the government bureaucracy is credited with the success; if it fails, implementation inefficiency is thought to account for it. Consequently, numerous evaluation studies—most of which are sponsored by the government or by development agencies with tacit consent by the government—opt to keep their critical observations muted. There are not many independent evaluation studies. Sponsored evaluation projects often fail to reveal the full story, as broad program evaluation exercises do not go deep enough to investigate school functioning and classroom dynamics. It is urgent that we engage in open debate and critical reflection on these initiatives, as well as the broader policy context. The following are a few reflective observations on some of the critical themes on the array of projects being pursued and the policy framework within which they operate.

On scaling up and standardization vs. local initiative and innovation

The large-scale projects for quality improvement in most states began as small-scale local innovations. The program design and learning materials were invariably the products of collective thinking and cooperative work by the direct stakeholders involved in implementation—teachers and local administrators. This was indeed the case in the *nali kali* project in Karnataka or ABL in Tamil Nadu. Even though a common design was arrived at, flexibility, improvization, and adaptation by the teachers in each school were the watch words. This was the precise element that disappeared when the government decided to upscale the project for

state-wide implementation. Flexibility gave way to standardization and participatory action was replaced by adherence to pedagogic prescriptions from authorities. Enthusiasm among the teachers, which was high to begin with, waned over time. Robbed of such vital elements, the program has continued without much impact on quality of learning.

Similar stories have unfolded in most states in their efforts to improve quality of education. It may sound logical to argue that standardization is inevitable while going to scale. But such an argument is self-defeating. The answer likely lies in promoting multiple local-level innovations instead of hoisting a single state-wide model as the panacea for all the ills of the system. Can the government bureaucracy initiate and sustain such flexible initiatives? While this is a pertinent question, we have to recognize that there is no dearth of public-minded non-government entities engaged in education. It is time that school education is viewed as a genuinely public good, with synergic contribution from government and non-government sectors.

On large-scale testing

Most of the state governments also have embraced the practice of conducting mass-scale tests of student learning through specially created institutional arrangements. There is no doubt that these initiatives have raised general awareness among the public and presented useful benchmarks for planners and administrators regarding the health of the education system; they also present helpful pointers to curriculum framers and textbook writers. In fact, ample reference to these tests and their findings can be found in all contemporary policy-related documents at national and state levels. However, it is difficult to assess how effectively these findings have been used for redrawing policies that improve learning outcomes among the marginalized; one could possibly construe the emergence of state-level learning-focused projects as a demonstration of such consciousness. It is pertinent, however, to reflect on the way state governments attempt to utilize the findings of such achievement surveys.

Identifying learning gaps and bridging them through corrective action is specified as a core objective of the testing programs in most of the states. Diagnostic testing followed by remedial action is a

time-honored practice used by all teachers. But that has been in the context of classroom teaching and school-based testing, where the focus is on specific problems faced by the learners. It is not an exercise for fixing the learning deficit or raising the average learning score of a district or a state. Could we use external testing (not school-based) for diagnosis and mass-scale remedial action in a generic fashion? This could be the subject of academic discourse and exploration. But it suffices to state that continued low scores on national achievement tests indicate that such measures have not worked in the Indian context.

Could the findings of such large-scale testing initiatives be used for holding an individual school or teacher accountable? This, again, has been an objective that the state governments have sought to achieve, though without much success. Even though state government reports claimed that almost all schools have moved up the ladder due to such efforts, NAS and ASER results do not show any significant progress in learning outcomes. In fact, the method of using test results as accountability measures for teachers was strongly resented by the teachers themselves, forcing the state to give up the practice of grading teachers based on *Gunotsav*. It should be recognized that poor scores in tests are only symptomatic of underlying malaise in the system, not all of which can be attributed to schools and teachers. Test results may not always help in identifying and rectifying the cause of the malaise. For that to happen, such testing exercises should be accompanied by carefully-designed analytical studies that are context-specific.

In any endeavor to improve school quality and learning outcomes, teachers have to be part of the solution framework, whereas using test results for fixing teacher accountability tends to treat them as adversaries. Viewed from this angle, the "Mentor Teacher" program of Delhi stands out as a unique example, even though it is too early to predict its future course when implemented on a large scale and over a longer period of time. If there has to be a "one-point agenda" for improving learning levels in Indian schools, it should be to significantly enhance investment in the professional development of teachers. This also points to the need for reflecting on broader policies and practices that help or hinder extending quality education to the children of the poor and marginalized.

Conclusion

Creating a comprehensive school system commonly accessible to all does not imply casting all schools in a single standard mold. No two schools are identical or even similar in terms of resources and outcomes, and some inequality among schools is inevitable. But it becomes problematic when the variation is based on social and economic considerations. This, indeed, is the situation that the Indian school system is slipping into. If the trend is not reversed, it would not take long for it to evolve into a highly discriminatory and exclusionary system, placing children from different backgrounds into designated slots in the name of schooling. Schools in the public realm are not only places of common provision, but also settings for civic education. Ideally, at least, they are places where children of all classes can mix and learn the habits of democratic citizenship (Sandel, 1998).

This is not in the least to suggest that such discriminatory policies and practices are being consciously pursued. In fact, Indian policy has always advocated for embedding concern for quality within a framework of equity and social justice. This, indeed, is the intent of incorporating education as a fundamental human right in the Indian Constitution. But translation of that intent into reality has proved elusive, particularly jeopardizing the prospect of quality education for the disadvantaged children living in the margin of the society. The goal is difficult but achievable, with appropriate restructuring of the system in order to create more robust and wider learning pathways that are inclusive and common for all.

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