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School Differentiation in India Reinforces Social Inequalities

By: A R Vasavi

In promoting schooling that is differentiated by class, caste, region, religion, language and standards, the state is working against the possibility of realising a democratic and equitable society.

Recent pronouncements by the government seek to fit religious nationalism, neo-liberalism, and populist schemes into schools to "improve" India's education system. Such posturing overlooks a more structural truth: the educational regime is highly differentiated and fails to provide equality of educational opportunity, or generate an ethos of a democratic culture, or facilitate social transformative processes that can help address the multiple and interlinked inequalities of Indian society.

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The foundational structures of such an unequal educational regime are visible in the sharp differentiation of schools. While recent data for India indicate the growth of the school education system (catering to about 250-300 million children) to becoming one of the world's largest, there is a spectrum of schools that aligns with the nation's varied and hierarchical socio-economic classes. Although government classification (GoI 2018) recognises only three types of schools (government, aided, and private unaided), there are in reality nine types of schools which vary by the cost of schooling, medium of instruction, type of board exams, and management structure. These include (i) Ashramshalas (for Adivasi/tribal regions); (ii) state-run government schools (including municipal, corporation and panchayat schools); (iii) state-aided but privately managed schools; (iv) centrally aided special schools such as the Kendriya Vidyalayas, Navodaya Vidyalayas and "Military Schools"; (v) low-fee paying, state-syllabus private schools; (vi) expensive private schools including the "Public School" chains; (vii) religious schools (Pathshalas and Madrassas run by religious institutions and trusts); (viii) alternative schools run by independent or non-profit organisations; and (ix) international schools. In sum, these constitute the most variegated and most class-based schooling system in the world.

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Government schools account for 72% of all schools (GoI 2018), but they are poorly funded, largely mismanaged and have ceased to be the foundational educational institution that can ensure equality of educational opportunity. Enrolment data now indicate that it is primarily the children of the poorest and low-ranked caste families who fill the rosters of government elementary schools. Abandoned by the local economically advantaged and powerful caste-groups, who have both political leverage and cultural capital, the government school cannot be considered a "common school" catering to the needs of all the children in any particular settlement. In contrast, there are a range of other types of schools (private schools, aided schools, convent schools, and public schools) that cater to the new rural, middle classes and to the heterogeneous middle classes in the urban areas.

New international schools (whose fee, functioning, curricula and orientation are drawn from European and US schools) cater to the rich and to those who want international careers and lifestyles for their children. They are primarily in the metropolitan areas or in salubrious rural settings. A sharp difference in the very economics of such schools can be gauged by the fact that the average expenditure of a government school in a village that caters to about 250 students is nearly equal to the average fee of about Rs 7 lakh per student per year that a single student is charged at an international school.

The mushrooming and growth of these diverse types of schools, which clearly reinforce the class, regional, religious and social divides in India, indicate the absence of educational policy in India. Far from engaging with issues or concerns and providing periodic direction that can realise the broader goals of education, a combination of populist expansion and state facilitation of education as an industry has led to such a highly differentiated schooling system. In most cases, the pattern of growth of schools highlights the ways in which policies "favour the most favoured and disfavour the most disfavoured" (Bourdieu 2010: 36). Nothing substantiates this better than the

fact that the poor and disadvantaged receive the lowest quality of schooling while the well-endowed received substantial support. For example, while Ashramshalas are meant to serve the Adivasi and remote-dwelling groups, which account for nearly 8%-10% of the population, there is no single authority/board/or registered society in the Ministry of Human Resources and Development to oversee the education of Adivasi/tribal children or that of the Ashramshalas. This is unlike the specialised institutional support for schools such as the Kendriya Vidyalayas, the Navodaya Vidyalayas, and even for some of the elite special boarding schools that have reservation for children of officers of the defence forces.

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The growth of many of the new private schools reflects the demand for education by parents of a wide spectrum of classes from the working poor to the new middle classes in both urban and rural areas. Many of the private schools, including the low-fee paying ones, reflect parents' aspirations for mobility and their unhappiness about the quality of education provided in government schools. In addition, such schools represent the ability of the market to fill the gaps in the state's educational provisioning capacities. The desire for English-medium education is one of the key factors for the decline of government schools, and is both the source and result of deeper social fracturing. As Faust and Nagar (2001) elaborate, the demand for English-medium education ruptures not only the fabric of earlier social relations and identities (such as those derived from Indian language and regional cultural identities), but also creates a double alienation between students and their home life and culture.

Religious schools such as Pathshalas, Madrassas, including the new "Gurukul international schools" (some of which claim to "fuse ancient wisdom and modern technology") and the new-age "heritage" schools, reflect the reification of traditional learning among certain circles. They also re-embed education within the fold of religious institutions and reinforce the integration of entrepreneurship and profit-making by and into religious institutions. Far from declining, the growth of some of these religious schools indicates a strengthened legitimacy that they have gained at a time of increasing globalisation. Filling in for the state's inability to provision schools in remote areas and focusing on religious proselytisation in Adivasi belts is the growth of the Ekal Vidyalayas, schools run by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its affiliates. Such schools erase the heterogeneous identities of Adivasis and enfold them into the Hindutva agenda.

Markets and Schools

Among the upper classes, a language of the market in which education is an investment and for which parents seek the best returns is now determining the choice of schools. High-end international schools, also referred to as "five-star" schools, reflect the economic capacity of upper-class parents to be able to purchase exclusive education for their children and assert their search for international careers. Distanced from regulatory mechanisms, such schools are increasingly driven by competitive parameters among themselves. These include not only a constant upgradation of facilities (air-conditioned classrooms, smart boards, swimming pools, international cuisine, computer-based instruction etc) but also the introduction of new teaching-learning packages which are products of an increasingly commercialised education industry.

Private companies and consultants seek to provide a range of "educ-services": development of curricula, textbooks, teaching-learning materials, school management, teacher training, and student assessment. They also vie with each other to capture such educational institutions as their clients. Such "edu-entrepreneurs" are emerging as a formidable force in formulating educational standards and expectations. They have now become key players in the private school industry.

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As school education in India is increasingly directed by market forces, it is subject to agendas that seek to fit education into the new global economy. While ideas of inclusion (which challenge entrenched regional, class, caste and gender differences) and the need for improved administrative efficiency are contributions of such global directives, there are problems in the conceptualisation of "quality" and in the overall restructuring of the system. For one, schools are increasingly seen as sites in which the global worker is to be produced and literacy, numeracy, and "minimum learning levels" are stipulated.

Assessments and prescriptions by international agencies that focus on education to be able to deliver "human capital formation," provide value for money and enhance productivity of finances, call for more private provisioning in the delivery of education. Such globalised agendas further create distortions in the education system, thereby altering the public's perception of what is relevant or valid for them. Absent in the endorsement of such recommendations is the idea of fostering equality of access and equality of quality in education.

Despite the state's rhetoric of "inclusive growth," the promotion and support of differentiated and graded schools belies any genuine intent of addressing such educational differentiation. In fact, legislative attempts at fostering "common schools" and enforcing the private sector to cater to the disadvantaged have only led to pitting the two classes against each other. This is reflected in the cases in which the stipulation of the Right to Education Act (2009) that 25% of seats in private schools be reserved for children from economically disadvantaged families is increasingly being questioned by the management bodies of private schools. Or, even where it is implemented, there are widespread reports of resistance by administrators, teachers and parents, resulting in either high drop-out rates of children or in the harassment of the children (Sarin and Gupta 2013) who are marked as 'EWS' (economically weaker section) children.

Pluralism as the nation's palimpsest of an old civilisation has been the bedrock of India's cultural fabric. This has hitherto been fairly well sustained by a broad-based policy that recognises religious, linguistic, and regional differences. For a nation with varied physio-geographic characteristics, 6,748 different types of communities, 780 languages and four major religions and multiple sects, a rigidly uniform system of schooling will not be viable or relevant. Yet, the challenge of enabling a recognition of the plurality of life conditions, cultural preferences and educational practices and at the same time providing for a foundation on which there can be equality of educational opportunity has not been addressed.

Contemporary trends indicate that we must reckon with such a contradiction as the wide variations in schooling seem to enhance the class and cultural divides among people. Much of this is resonant of what Ambedkar (1987/1936) had elaborated: the specificity of inequality in caste society was that of "graded inequality" where infinite divisions and separations exist between groups. The fostering of such school differentiation, buttressed by new alterations in the economy and society, intensifies such "graded inequality" with educational inequality as one of the key factors.

Democratic Deficits

The potential of schools to play a key role in democratising society and then sustaining democracy as a larger socio-political entity on a national level has been elaborated by several scholars (Dewey 1916; Gutman 1987; Apple 1993). Although the Kothari Commission (GoI 1966) had recommended the establishment of "common schools" as a way to bring about equality of education opportunity, the state's commitment to enforcing or realising this has been largely absent. Subsequently, what has also been absent are structures and processes to enable children to engage in a collective shaping of their society and to creating social resemblances, which, in turn, can foster or support democracy. If common schools can act as shared sites that facilitate shared experiences and bridge generational social, religious and economic divides, then the loss of this is also imminent for the very social fabric of a community.

Permitting a proliferation of schools and an education market has negated the possibility of fostering a democratic ethos that would be embedded within educational institutions. All these combine to account for the widespread "democratic deficits" that some scholars have pointed out are glaring in the everyday private and public life of Indians.

New directives in which the "community" or parents are to be involved in the administration of government schools have become meaningless as the most advantaged parents have their children in private schools, leaving only the most disadvantaged to relate to the school administration. The subsequent inability of low-ranked caste groups and economically disadvantaged families to hold the education administration accountable to them has led to the fact that villages with predominantly lower-caste groups also have poorer functioning or ineffective schools.

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Another fall-out of school differentiation is to be observed at the level of its impact on the lives of children. Even as government schools lack adequate opportunities to engage children and provide them with competent skills and knowledge, private and elite schools are increasingly overloading children. This split in expectations-high and excessive from and of children from the middle/upper classes and of nothing from the lower and working classes-manifests in different ways in the job market. Mass poor quality education

with out-dated syllabi, poor teaching-learning methods, and an in-built anti-rural and anti-agriculture orientation means that a large proportion of those who do graduate are alienated from their rural communities. As many elderly persons now rue, there is a large pool of youth who are considered '*na ghar ka, na ghat na*': neither able to fit into the home or be employable.

In the context of a new, booming, urban and globalising economy, the results of such school differentiation also shows in various problems of employment allocation. That school and early educational background influence economic opportunity is elaborated by Krishna's (2014) study, which indicated that students from rural schools (and therefore by default from government schools) are particularly disadvantaged in that they have much less access to the new range of higher educational institutions. They subsequently have much less access to the new employment opportunities in the globally connected economy. The continuation of such disadvantages even after graduation has led to the peculiar situation where a large number of graduates continue to be unemployed, even while the booming urban market with the new service and high-tech sector is unable to find adequate numbers of trained youth to fill positions. As a result, millions of youth are cast aside as being useless for the urban, global employment market. Science institutions constantly moan the dearth of students for basic sciences even as a significant proportion, primarily from the government schooling system, are not able to pass the standard X exams.

This foundational disadvantage in schooling manifests itself at several levels. For one, for those who do make it into higher education (especially through the reservation system) an inability to match the academic competences of those from more privileged schools and educated families leads to their being labelled as "weak students," "undeserving candidates" "government brahmins," "sarkari nawabs" etc. As the sociologist Satish Deshpande (2014) has elaborated, it is the oversight of the foundational disadvantages that most rural and or Scheduled Caste/Tribe students face that accounts for the lack of sensitivity and support to students from these reserved categories. The failure of schools to endow a sense of empathy and sharing indicates the extent to which the differentiated educational system has reinforced the lack of commitment to creating not only an equitable society but has legitimised and strengthened the idea that society can be "acceptably unequal" (Whitty 1998: 94).

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While the most significant and visible aspect of such differentiation is the failure to provide equal opportunities and ensure equality of educational outcomes, the long-term impact is also at the level of a national culture. If in the Nehruvian imaginary, the nation was to be a palimpsest of plural societies in which different cultures could be intertwined with equal opportunities at a secular and institutional level, then the current trend is of emphasising only superficial, constructed, and homogenous cultural identities. At the same time overlooking the structural disadvantages of marginalised societies. In the failure to generate a comprehensive policy for a common schooling system or to support processes that would enable a diversity of schools but with similar standards, schools in India have become the key institutions by which inequities are being reproduced. In promoting, both consciously and by default, schools that are differentiated by class, region, religion, language, orientation and standards, the state is abdicating its primary role of fostering education for realising a democratic society which in turn can sustain a democratic polity. A highly skewed and differentiated schooling system feeds into the mass of poor quality higher education with a few "star institutes" offering opportunities for a limited few.

> If hierarchical school differentiation and its impact on individuals, on society and on the larger nation are to be addressed, then there is a need to take stock and reimagine what should be the true role of schools.

Although Gandhi and Tagore elaborated on new forms of education that could overcome the limitations of existing forms of formal education, their visions and endeavours have not been realised or sustained. As a postcolonial democratic nation, Dewey's (1916) stipulation of the links between education and democracy also seems a distant perspective that has been deliberately ignored in India. Instead, what we are witness to is an increasing hierarchical differentiation in which exclusion and further social distance between citizens is being created. If schools must bear the mandate that to "be just and equal, (they) must contribute to the advantage of the least advantaged" and if "education…must play a part with other economic and social institutions in redistributing cultural and economic capital more justly" (Apple 1976b: 121 cited in Arnot 2006: 24), then India's schooling system is a long way from this ideal goal.

If hierarchical school differentiation and its impact on individuals, on society and on the larger nation are to be addressed, then there is a need to take stock and reimagine what should be the true role of schools. Speaking in 1932, after his visit to schools in the then

Soviet Union, the educationist George Counts (1932/1996) called for educationists in other countries to "Dare Schools to Challenge the Social Order." He spoke of going beyond the then prevailing ideas of progressive education. Calling educationists to see schools as sites that would enable their graduates to become agents of micro and macro changes, he laid stress on the possibility of working towards the establishment of a just and equitable social order. If we were to keep this in mind and make the key role of school education to be to challenge the existing iniquitous social order, then the first principle is to challenge the very differentiation of schools. Only a shared and equitable education system, especially at the basic level, can make possible both structures and agencies that can ensure the challenge of multiple inequities.

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