

Commentary

Sadhna Saxena

Sustaining Inequality through a Stratified Government Schooling System

Abstract

The Constitution of independent India is rooted in a liberal ideology and committed to the values of liberty, justice, and equality. For achieving equality and justice, education was seen as one of the main strategies. However, over the years, central and state governments have created special categories of schools that have better infrastructural and human resources compared to regular government schools. This commentary argues that such improvements—designed for a small percentage of schools—divert attention from the pathetic state of regular government schools, which are accessed primarily by children of deprived sections. Therefore, by creating a stratified system, the government sustains inequality, violating values enshrined in the Constitution.

This write-up focuses on the issues related to the upgradation of a few government schools through various central and state government special schemes. These special schools are provided with an adequate number of qualified teachers and other facilities that should ideally exist in all government schools. In the name of improving the quality of education and nurturing talent, such policies seem rooted in principles of exclusion. The admission process of such schools is also problematic, as it is based on the questionable notion of classifying students as “talented” or “not talented.” This commentary argues that such schools may be important for improving quality of education, yet by not planning for the betterment of all government schools, the government is abdicating from its responsibility of providing quality and equitable education to all.

Keywords: Stratified, CM RISE, PM SHRI, exemplar, equitable

Introduction

Formulation of education schemes is an ongoing process. Only a few months ago, this author was informed by a government schoolteacher at a senior secondary school of a small town in Madhya Pradesh (MP) that their school building had been demolished. It was one of the best schools for students, not just from socially and economically backward communities of the town, but also from surrounding villages. It had relatively better infrastructure and an adequate number of experienced and committed teachers. I was told that the school had been upgraded to a CM RISE school and crores of rupees had been allocated for the new building. The teacher added that while most government school buildings in the town needed urgent repairs, only this school got enormous funds. He felt that the demolition of a fully functional school building was unnecessary and a waste of crucial resources. From the MP Government's education portal, it is clear that upgradation of more than 200 existing schools would be done during the first phase of the CM RISE scheme; the process had begun in 2023. The portal describes CM RISE schools as a "set of world class government schools offering high-quality and holistic education especially to the students belonging to economically and socially weaker sections" (CM RISE Vidyalaya, Department of School Education, Government of Madhya Pradesh, n.d.). Interestingly, under this scheme, relatively better government schools—not the poorly functioning ones—have been chosen for upgradation.

CM RISE was a dream scheme of the former MP Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan. The scheme was launched in October 2022. In his inaugural speech, the CM had boasted that through CM RISE schools, children of the poor would have facilities equivalent to or better than those offered in the best private schools. He had announced that these schools would have libraries, laboratories, a sports ground and other sports facilities, and smart classrooms, among other facilities. He had said that each CM RISE school would be issued ₹24 crore for a new building, and in next 10 years, more than 9,000 schools would be upgraded under the scheme (NDTV, 2022). The MP Government's education portal also highlights that the CM RISE schools will be a set of world-class government schools offering high-quality and holistic education especially to the students belonging to economically and socially weaker sections (CM Rise Vidyalaya, Department of School Education, Government of Madhya Pradesh, n.d.).

From the CM's speech, it is clear that the scheme is for upgradation of a small number of selected existing schools. It is neither meant for all government schools, nor for opening new schools. Therefore, the stated promise of "good quality education" will not be available to all the students

of the state. According to the MP Government Admission Policy website (Government of Madhya Pradesh, n.d.) admission to CM RISE schools will be done through a “transparent, lottery-based system”. Also, the total number of seats will be decided based on available infrastructure, number of rooms, and other criteria. All the details regarding the admission are available on the government website (Government of Madhya Pradesh, n.d.).

In September 2022, the Government of India had announced the Pradhan Mantri School for Rising India (PM SHRI) Yojana with similar claims of quality of education, infrastructure, and other resources. While launching the scheme, the education minister Shri Dharmendra Pradhan had said that in India, there are 15 lakh schools of which 11 lakh schools are run by the government. He had announced that under the scheme, the government would upgrade 14,500 government schools to PM SHRI schools in next few years—a little over one percent of all government schools in the country. These schools would act as model schools, mentoring government schools in the neighbourhood.

Also, the minister stated that PM SHRI schools would serve as laboratories for implementing the New Education Policy 2020, also known as NEP 2020 (NDTV, 2022). According to the scheme’s vision statement:

PM SHRI schools shall set examples for the best in class in the country. The education in these schools will be such that it will nurture lifelong learners who carry the acumen and desire to learn, unlearn and relearn at all spectrums of life to become engaged, productive, and contributing citizens for building an equitable, inclusive, and plural society as envisaged by the National Education Policy 2020 (Department of School Education and Literacy, Government of India, Ministry of Education, n.d.)

In the introduction to the scheme, it is written that:

The overarching purpose of PM SHRI Schools is to nurture students in a manner that transforms them into engaged, productive, and contributing citizens. This aligns with the vision of the NEP 2020 striving to build a society characterized by equity, inclusivity, and pluralism (Department of School Education and Literacy, Government of India, Ministry of Education, n.d.)

Regarding teacher training it is stated that “Additionally, the scheme prioritizes teacher training to equip educators with the necessary skills to adopt innovative teaching methods” (Department of School Education and Literacy, Government of India, Ministry of Education, n.d.).

Elaborating on the teaching pedagogy, another scheme document states:

The pedagogy adopted in these schools will be more experiential, holistic, integrated, play/toy-based (particularly in the foundational years), inquiry-driven, discovery-oriented, learner-centred, discussion-based, flexible, and enjoyable. The focus will be on the learning outcomes of every child in every grade. Assessment at all levels will be based on conceptual understanding (Department of School Education and Literacy, Government of India, Ministry of Education, n.d.)

All of these are indeed necessary and desirable aspects for school education in India. However, the questions that need to be asked are: shouldn't innovative, learner-centric, inquiry-driven, discovery-oriented learning, discussion-based pedagogy, good teacher training, assessment based on conceptual understanding, and better resources including modern technology and smart classrooms be the norm for all schools? Why are these norms being mentioned only in the context of CM RISE and PM SHRI schemes? How would upgrading a single percentage point of all schools in the country help to achieve an “equitable, inclusive, and plural society” which is talked about repeatedly in the scheme documents? Why have governments selected a few schools—which were already functioning well—from the sea of poorly functioning government schools in the country, to upgrade them with better infrastructure funding, teacher-student ratios, and progressive teaching pedagogy? How will the NEP 2020 achieve its stated goals of “equitable and inclusive education and learning for all” by following such discriminatory practices?

The State of Government Schools

Ironically, repeated emphasis on enabling the most basic facilities in special schools is an admission of the fact that government schools have poor infrastructure, and that governments have no plans to provide quality education to all. A study by Bose et al. (2020) underlines the deficit of resources for government schools even after the passage of the Right to Education Act (RTE) in 2009:

The RTE promises public provision of good and equitable quality education to all children in the age group of 6–14, as a basic right. But even a decade after the Act was made, even though many initiatives have been taken, the task is not complete, and the progress has not been very satisfactory. Inter alia, an important reason for this is inadequacy of public funds allocated to elementary education (p. v)

For decades, shortage of teachers and their exploitative service conditions has been a cause for concern. According to a UNESCO study, “The work force has a deficit of over 1 million teachers (at current student strength) and the need is likely to grow, given the shortages of teachers in certain education levels and subjects” (2021, p. 7). Large-scale teacher vacancies are detrimental to the quality of education in schools. A comprehensive, national-level study on contract teachers by Ramachandran et al. (2020) revealed that in 2017–18, 12.7% teachers across the country were on various kinds of employment contracts, and that their numbers have steadily increased. These employment contracts vary from one to three years. Contractual teachers are not entitled to any benefits except for a consolidated remuneration (honorarium), which is much less than a permanent teacher’s salary. Although the percentage of contractual teachers is more in northern and eastern states, other states have also been following this trend of not filling up vacant positions with permanently employed teachers. Most contractual teachers are posted in elementary schools accessed primarily by children from disadvantaged communities in rural areas.

The study also found that the practice of appointing contractual teachers has caused long-term damage to the teaching profession and to students’ learning due to their lack of experience, training, and professional or academic qualifications. In MP, there are thousands of single-teacher schools run by contractual or guest teachers. Guest teachers are worse off since they are paid based on teaching hours (and not days) they are engaged for.

The special schemes discussed in this commentary were ostensibly created to address the poor functioning of government schools. However, these schemes do not show any long-term commitment or vision for improving the quality of education and resources in all schools. In fact, this commentary argues that such actions make the schooling system more layered and inequalitarian. For example, the NPE 1986 recommended setting up district-level, residential Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas (NVs) to nurture rural talent. NVs have much better resources, and academic activities are well planned. In addition to quality education, these schools provide

students with opportunities to travel to other states and gain a firsthand experience of India's multicultural reality.

Their success resulted in launching block-level NVs in 2012, but with a difference. Almost half of these were proposed to be built under a new type of private financing model known as a Public Private Partnership or PPP scheme. In their study on resource requirements to implement RTE, Bose et al. (2020) write, "A committee constituted by the government of India in recent years on improving government schools, has suggested, inter alia, taking schools like Kendriya Vidyalayas (KVs) or Navodaya schools as a benchmark for every school in the country" (p. vi). For this study they did meticulous calculations of per child per year resource requirements if KVs were taken as the benchmark. However, there is no record of why such successful models/schemes—despite the recommendation of a government committee—were not implemented in all government schools. The obvious reason is the political unwillingness to allocate resources equivalent to those spent on either KVs or NVs—or even the modest amount required for implementing RTE in all schools.

In fact, even the NV scheme itself is not being implemented properly in recent years. Despite the rise in demand for KVs and NVs, only 55 new NVs have been started in the last five years and no new NVs have been opened in 19 States and Union Territories in these many years. An acute shortage of teachers, principals, and vice principals in more than 100 NVs has also been reported (NDTV, 2022). Ironically, CM RISE schools have also been suffering from a shortage of teachers and other facilities which is being regularly reported in local MP newspapers. For example, in October 2024, *Dainik Bhaskar* Indore reported that in Polakhal, CM RISE school teaching is mostly done by guest teachers and there are no subject teachers for teaching class 11 and 12. All the nine sanctioned posts are lying vacant. Southern states have also been struggling with quality issues in government schools, as is evident from a recent newspaper report about Andhra Pradesh schools ("The Hindu", 2024).

The philosophy of creating exemplars for ordinary schools to follow began stratifying school education in India long before CM RISE and PM SHRI schemes. Earlier avatars include central government schemes which created KVs, Sainik Schools, model schools, residential schools like Eklavya Model Residential Schools, NVs, and Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas—to name a few. Additionally, there have been state-funded schemes such as Pratibha Schools, Utkrisht Vidyalayas, Adarsh Schools, Schools of Excellence, Mahatma Gandhi English Medium Schools, Multi Purpose

schools, and many more examples across different states. The distribution of resources has always been skewed in favour of special schools. Admission to these schools is through a selection process which includes merit, a lottery system, and/or entrance tests, undermining the principle of equal opportunity for all.

If privileged government schools are at one end of the spectrum, there are budget or low fee-paying (LFP) private schools on the other end which are accessed primarily by disadvantaged students. In another remarkable study on the unmet, excess demand of government schools (GS) in Delhi, Ghosh and Bose (2022) found:

...the emphasis is on expansion within the existing GSs and less on construction of new schools... The unmet excess demand of GSs at the primary level has seen LFPs as a schooling option. The Delhi government does not want to take responsibility for the lack of infrastructure in MCD (Municipal Corporation of Delhi) schools as the latter is run by a separate administration controlled by the rival political organisation (p. 22)

Children of working classes residing in some of the most densely populated localities in Delhi are accessing education through such poor quality, LFP private schools. In some states, such schools have emerged as the only option for both the urban and rural poor (Saxena, 2020).

Why Should the Idea of a Few Special Schools be Critiqued?

Generally, the focus of critiques and studies of special school schemes has been of implementation aspects (Kumar & Gupta, 2008; Saxena, 2012) or on concerns of status quoist (i.e., unchanging) role of education (Balagopalan, 2010) not of the idea or the policy itself (Velaskar, 2010). Due to this, academics may inadvertently be turning a blind eye to the inequality and injustice inherent in such a biased system. Questions such as in a selection process how talent is defined and by who are not problematised or interrogated. Such schemes are seen as steps towards quality improvement in the government school system at large. In fact, the universal demand for quality education may gradually be replaced with competition for getting into special schools. If indeed such schemes are meant for mentoring all government schools, and they have been running for decades, the question is: why has that not happened yet?

An equally important issue is resource allocation. As discussed earlier, Bose et al. (2020) had calculated that the government spends about ₹32,700 per child per annum at a KV, whereas for

implementing RTE, it needs to spend a modest amount of ₹23,200 per child per annum. However, on an average, the government only spends a little above ₹12,000–15,000 per child per annum at a regular government school. This is the amount it reimburses to private schools in lieu of 25% reservation of seats for poor children. Allocation of resources for various schemes—and whether that implies diversion of funds from regular government school budgets—requires a focussed study.

Concluding Remarks

The NPE 1986—and the beginning of liberalisation in India in early 1990s—laid the ground for external dependence in education (Kumar et al., 2001). The 1986 NPE's thrust towards privatisation—and the disproportionate allocation of resources for building NVs which catered to the rural elite—resulted in further stratification of the government school system. Velaskar (2010) argues that the NPE 1986 was the beginning of abandoning equal opportunity to education as one of the foundations to achieve equality and justice. NVs for talented students, ill-equipped alternative schools, and the revival of discredited, non-formal education for rural Dalits, Adivasis, and children of migrant workers as an expansion strategy has meant that “quality for some” has gained precedence over “quality for all.”

The NPE 2020 mentions that education is a tool for achieving justice and equality. However, the policy equates achieving this with boosting enrollment and focusing on foundational literacy and numeracy skills in early childhood education. The agenda of quality for some is being vigorously followed by the Indian government and state governments instead of universalising existing successful schemes. This approach defies the promise of creating exemplars for handholding ill-equipped and poorly funded government schools.

Policies that address education quality concerns—but result in excluding the majority of students—amount to abandoning our constitutional commitment to justice and equal opportunity for all. Selective criteria for quality improvement take the focus away from the dismal state of government schools. Further, an unrelenting thrust on privatisation of school education and the broken promise of universalisation of exemplary schools has rendered a majority of the disadvantaged population with no option but to depend on poor quality education.

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