



Why are government schools not the first choice?

Context:

1. The public education system is the primary option for millions of students in India. These institutions have become more important as the pandemic takes a toll on the economy, putting fee-charging schools beyond the reach of many and forcing thousands to move to government schools.
2. The Patna High Court recently asked for data on how many IAS and IPS officers have enrolled their wards in government schools.
3. About 51% of students are in government schools and nearly 10% in aided schools.
4. Poor children who don't have tuition, parents to support them at home, or books. During COVID-19, 60-70% of children had nothing. There was no attempt to go to them and see what they needed. But we say they have a 'learning loss' and poor 'learning outcomes'.

The Government School Hierarchy:

1. People feel there are not enough teachers in these schools, or the schools may not be functioning regularly. They get carried away by the notions of a branded private school, even though it may not have good teachers.
2. Also, private schools brand themselves [in a particular way]: they say they are English medium and parents feel that is good.
3. But children don't learn better in a second language, they learn better if they begin to first read and write in the first language. Then, they also learn English better as a second language.
4. There are different kinds of government schools: there are Kendriya Vidyalayas (KVs), which are very well-resourced, with good infrastructure and good teachers. There are Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas, which are islands of excellence and competitively looked at for admissions.
5. There are residential schools run by different State governments which are again well-resourced, have good infrastructure, spacious classrooms. Then, there are other model schools.
6. We also have municipal schools and the typical government schools run by the different Zilla Panchayats, which are not always as well resourced but often tend to get the poorer students.



The Right to Education law and structural issues

1. It's an ongoing process. Structural issues are vast. We are a very large country with different kinds of education systems in different States. And we have different kinds of issues — some areas may have a higher tribal population or different kinds of local issues that need to be addressed.
2. We should also look at the basic safety, well-being and hygiene factors in these schools. There is no reason why they cannot have well functioning toilets, drinking water and proper compound walls.
3. To that extent, there is some work that should be done in improving the image of these schools. We then come to pedagogy, teacher development, the level of community participation, the parent committees, etc.
4. But over the years, the RTE has contributed tremendously in filling our classrooms and in making education accessible to children who would otherwise have been at risk of slipping out or being pushed out of the education system and into situations like child labour or child marriage.
5. We need to look long and hard at what we have been able to achieve and what remains to be achieved. The fact that there is a lot that remains to be done should not take away from the considerable work that has been done.
6. Barely 15% of the schools can be called compliant with the RTE. That is also a reason why children are being pushed out. Section 29 of the RTE explains what kind of education every child has a right to.
7. There is no school complying with that, including elite schools. It talks about discovery and activities which are child-centred. And on developing the potential of every child, not calling them 'slow learners', not testing them in a centralised way. We have abandoned that understanding.

Bias in favour of Private schools and Concerns

1. It's true that we should be conscious of not using the language of deficit. The RTE gave us the approach of looking at the child not as a bucket to be filled but as a person who is growing and bringing to the class rich and valuable experiences and the ability to learn.



2. The RTE also gave us the approach of formative assessments. It is not the child who is unable to learn; assessments need to help us find ways to help children learn better.
3. Some people prefer English. People don't want a school that does not offer English. English is seen as aspirational, which is fine, but for it to become the medium of instruction would cut away a child from what she already knows, such as concepts.
4. Education begins as a journey from the familiar to the unfamiliar. Education in the mother tongue in the primary years helps a child build on prior knowledge and concepts.
5. We need to have adequate capacity at the secondary and higher secondary levels in government schools as the net enrolment falls sharply beyond the primary level.
6. The fact that there is a drop in net enrolment from primary to secondary should be viewed with concern. We need to understand the obstacles: transportation, location, etc., which may be preventing teenagers, especially girls, from accessing secondary education.
7. It's important that the public education system becomes a common school system. A KV has a small percentage of children coming from different socio-economic backgrounds. The notions of equity are more rooted there. Children get a chance to study with children from different socio-economic backgrounds.
8. The midday meal cooks in a school also contribute to building a healthy and happy school environment as, say, the chemistry teacher.

Focusing on teachers:

1. While all that is true, the work of a government school teacher can be lonely and difficult. It's highly creative work. There's a lot more that we need to do in terms of empowering school leaders, school heads, school communities, the entire teaching community, as well as the non-teaching community.
2. So, there's a lot that we need to do to value the work of teachers and staff, make their work visible so that families recognise that. We also need to create



better professional networks for teachers, because the best teachers continuously learn from each other.

3. Teachers' professional development is a very weak area. Even students who do a four-year B.El.Ed course and start teaching feel the in-service training they later get is quite dismal. Teachers' professional development is poor.
4. We don't find investment in terms of resources or in the planning of institutes. Now, 95% of teacher education is in private hands and most of it is substandard. Even today, almost half the regular teacher vacancies are filled by guest or ad hoc teachers.

Planning from micro to macro:

1. We should make a micro plan for every school, a larger plan for schools at the district level, and then at the State level. Then basic needs — drinking water, rainwater harvesting, school gardens, dining areas — need to be taken up before we can even start talking about levels of learning and teaching.
2. The role of local bodies should be enhanced. Local bodies can take ownership, and school development committees can be linked with elected local bodies, so they can support the needs of schools.
3. In Kerala, there were people who had earlier sent children to private schools and were now shifting them to government schools. They were not people very high up in the government hierarchy, but there were people from government offices too. They saw that their child was learning much better because they were not forced into the English medium.
4. And during the pandemic, we have seen thousands of students moving to government schools in many States.
5. If people who have lost livelihoods are seeking government schools, such schools should try to show their commitment to good quality education — not leave them as segregated silos for the poorest.