

Our experiences with the Government school system¹

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The popular narrative

In popular narrative, Government schools² are mediocre and failing. They have inadequate and rundown infrastructure. Teachers do not come to school; if they come to school, they do not teach; and if they teach, children do not learn. Most Government school students cannot read or write or do basic Math despite years of schooling. Only the very poor send their children to the local Government school; if they had a choice, they would prefer private schools, which are far better. It is a system without any hope of reform.

This narrative has been fuelled by mainstream media and by a large number of neo-liberal voices in civil society. It has become so dominant, that any experience or evidence to the contrary has little chance of a hearing. This article examines how much of this stereotype is real and how much is myth.

Azim Premji Foundation has been working with the Government school system since 2001, in some of the most rural, remote and disadvantaged districts of India. Every day, our teams go to Government schools that are off the radar, in the deserts of Rajasthan, the mountains of Uttarakhand, the tribal belt of central India, and in many other parts of the country.

This continuous on-the-ground engagement with thousands of teachers and others, year after year, has given us a deep insight into the methods and motivations of the Government school system. These experiences are often at variance with the popular pejorative narrative, and needs telling.

Keeping things in perspective

Over the past three decades, India has pushed hard to have a school in every village. Today, the Government Primary School and the Anganwadi Centre (pre-school) are the most ubiquitous symbols of public systems in India. Walk into any village anywhere in the country, no matter how remote or inaccessible, and in all likelihood you will see a Government school. In a country as vast as ours and with its complex geographies, this is an enormous achievement.

With close to 11 lakh elementary schools, we have one of the largest Government school systems anywhere in the world.³ School enrolment is close to universal, irrespective of gender, caste, or religion. If you consider that just 30 years ago, less than half of our girls were in school, this is nothing short of remarkable. All this has not happened by chance, but is the result of a systematic effort to ensure every

¹ The term “public education system” is open to wide interpretation and critique. For instance: Should the term be limited to schools run by the Government, or could it include schools regulated, but not run, by the Government? Can a system that has been abandoned by large sections of citizenry be truly called public? Since this article is specifically about Azim Premji Foundation’s experiences of working with Government schools, I am using the more specific term, “Government school system”.

² By Government schools, I am referring to State Government-run schools that form the bulk of the system. It excludes Government schools than run under special schemes, by separate managements, and so on. E.g.: Kendriya Vidyalayas, Navoday Vidyalayas, Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas, Army Schools, Aided Schools.

³ To offer another comparison, India has 1.5 lakh post offices.

child in the country, no matter who she is or where she lives, has access to a school.⁴ When reflecting on the Government system, this perspective – of its sheer scale and complexity, and its significant advances – is important to keep, for these are markers of a healthy and evolving system.

Government schools run

Put together, all of us at Azim Premji Foundation would have visited thousands of Government schools over the past decade and more. These visits are neither brief nor one-off. Also, given that by design we work in more underdeveloped districts, the more remote a school is, greater is the possibility of our having been there.

We have seen, more often than not, that teachers and students come to school, and there is a genuine effort at teaching-learning. To those unfamiliar with the debates raging around Government and private schools, this might seem like a basic claim, for what else would one expect from a school? But this is nothing short of blasphemy to those who like to believe otherwise.⁵

In addition, schools typically have sufficient classrooms, potable water, toilets for boys and girls, and a well-managed mid-day meal, which for many students is their most important meal of the day.^{6 7}

That the Government manages to pull this off, day after day in 11 lakh distributed locations, is an administrative feat worthy of study.

But then, why are students not learning enough?

The big mystery of school education is that despite genuine efforts at teaching and years of schooling, students struggle to learn. On an average, students learn only 40-50% of the scholastic concepts expected of them in each grade.⁸

An argument one hears is around teachers. It goes like this: Teaching is not an aspirational or well-paying profession and it only attracts those who have no other career options. What else can you expect with such teachers?

Now this argument really has no basis. One, becoming a Government school teacher is quite an aspiration for many; in most towns and villages in the country, a Government teacher's job pays better

⁴ There are those that argue that this enormous expansion has done more bad than good. That we have ended up with a large proportion of very small schools (<20-30 children and 1-2 teachers) which are unviable educationally, economically and administratively. However, this wisdom is largely retrospective.

⁵ It is the fashion of the day to lambast Government schools and teachers. Some of the critique certainly has basis, which we will explore further on. But to stuff everything into this narrative of a failing system borders on fiction. It does not help that some of these Government school bashers are also avowed fans of private schools. But more on that later.

⁶ This is not to suggest all Government schools have sufficient classrooms, etc. There is a small but significant percentage of schools with inadequate infrastructure. However, that is not the general norm.

⁷ Many schools have inadequate budgets for school maintenance. Which means it is usual to see Government school facilities in poor repair: Classrooms in need of a coat of paint, plumbing issues in toilets, weeds in the open areas.

⁸ This is based on our internal assessments. However, the broader point about poor student learning, has been established time and again in various studies, and there is more-or-less a consensus on this matter.

than most other options, and offers good service terms to boot.⁹ Two, being a good teacher is not the privy of a few. With appropriate education and practice, most people can develop into capable teachers.

Some people argue that there is a strong correlation between the socio-economic backgrounds of students and educational attainment, that children from disadvantaged homes tend to have lower learning levels than children from more privileged homes. Since a majority of children in Government schools come from poorer homes, learning levels there are low. Hence, the only systemic solution to the “poor learning” problem is to reduce poverty.

This argument misses three things. One, it is an ethically barren idea that a student’s learning is only going to be determined by the family she was born in. In a nation that aspires to be a democracy, this argument strikes at the very heart of things, that one’s abilities and choices will get determined by one’s birth.

Two, new evidence suggests that the reason children from privileged homes seem to have better learning outcomes is because they get more educational exposure at home. For instance, there is a greater chance a young child in an urban middle class home has access to children’s books; there is less chance she has to work to support her family’s livelihood. Now, positive action can resolve some of these differences – such as having a good library in the Government school or framing student scholarships to supplant the income of really poor households.

Three, the view does not have educational validity. Any decent teacher will tell you that with good teaching, just about any child can master elementary curriculum.

Teachers and the wrong-pedagogy hypothesis

Teaching is a complex profession.

It requires a strong conceptual understanding of one’s subject. We have seen teachers come with good textbook knowledge, but that is far from adequate. For instance, a history teacher needs to understand what history is, how historical knowledge is formed, a broad historical view of the world, etc. Unfortunately, our school and higher education system does not really help build this kind of deep conceptual ability in subjects.

Teaching needs an insight into every student in the classroom. This is not easy. The student likely comes from a very different family circumstance than the teacher is used to. Most teachers come from general caste categories and are economically middle-class. Government school students come from poor homes and are more likely to be from scheduled castes and tribes and other backward castes.

Teaching has to be guided by a broad understanding of the school’s role in a democratic society. And it needs a specific understanding of how a child constructs meaning in the context of that subject.

⁹ One short-sighted action by several State Governments was the appointment of a large number of ‘para-teachers’. These were people without requisite educational qualification and were hired on short-term contracts at pay-levels far below regular teachers. This has severely undermined the teaching profession in the country. Mercifully, this practice is now illegal with RTE 2009 coming to force.

The Government school classroom is a complex theatre. It has children from different cultural and religious backgrounds. Students are at various stages of learning and bring different abilities and inclinations to the learning process. More complex yet is that students of different grades are often clubbed together. The greatest complexity is when children come from different linguistic backgrounds, and these languages are not the teacher's, or indeed the school's, language.

The teacher has to combine her understanding of the subject and the learner, situate it in the broader aims of public education yet customise all this for the diversity of her classroom. This point, when teacher pulls all her abilities together to finally engage with students in the act of teaching, is pedagogy.

Our wrong-pedagogy hypothesis is this: most teachers do not know how to teach such that most of their students learn. (To clarify, this is not a comment on the teachers themselves, but is a reflection of the pathetic state of teacher education in India.)¹⁰

Many new teachers begin in right earnest and often go out of their way to make things work. However, since she has not been adequately prepared for the profession, nor does she have adequate on-the-job support, it is a losing battle. After a few months (or years) of trying, most teachers end up resorting to the least effective of pedagogic methods, which is built largely on lectures, rote, drills and the stick.

However, while the last few paragraphs have painted a bleak picture, there is more hope than despair. In our experience, a large number of teachers and others are genuinely concerned about this issue. Given the right support, they come forward in significant numbers to rebuild their professional abilities.

In the districts we work in close to 25% Government teachers and head teachers voluntarily give their personal time (after school hours, over weekends and holidays) to engage in their development. How many of us would be willing to sacrifice our holidays month after month, so we can do our jobs better? But they do, and they do it because they care about their profession and are concerned for their students.

Exponential growth of private schools

Our country needs a robust Government school system. A healthy democracy needs a school system that actively works for its ideals, one that exposes students to democratic values and rational ideas. And I cannot visualize any other construct, except a Government school, playing this role in full measure and at the scale that our country demands.

By their very nature, private schools cannot serve this purpose. The natural inclination of private enterprise driven schools¹¹ is to cater to the immediate aspirations of the communities they serve. These mushrooming for-profit (in practice even if not on paper) schools that have come all over the country are at every fee level – from hundred rupees per month right up to a lakh of rupees per month.

¹⁰ The greatest imperative today is to dismantle our hopeless Teacher Education system of incompetent (and often spurious) colleges, and set up a new system ground-up. One hopes that the new National Mission on Teachers and Teaching will rise to the occasion.

¹¹ There are several private schools that are non-profit and run primarily for social purposes; I am not referring to them here.

A direct import of this is that private schools tend to serve socially and economically homogenous groups, furthering social stratification. By doing this, we are designing inequity right into the heart of our society. Hence, while I have no fight with private schools and while I know some wonderful private schools, taken as a whole, the private school system inadequately serves the purpose of a school system in a democracy.

Now, if private schools only served a small proportion of students, it may not be a major cause for concern. But that is not the case in India. 67% of children in urban towns go to private schools. While this number drops to 23% in rural areas, the trend clearly points to rapid shifts happening here as well. By the next decade, we may well have private school students outnumbering Government school students for the entire country.

There is a large pro-privatisation lobby in India which claims that this is a good thing, simply because private schools do better. But evidence from across the world clearly highlights that private schools do not contribute to student learning any better than their counterpart Government schools.¹²

From what we have seen, many of the private schools that compete with Government schools employ unqualified teachers on almost contract-labour wages, and operate out of tightly packed and unsafe premises. Fear is considered an acceptable pedagogic tool, and there is little attempt to customise school practices for the child. That this could become the dominant educational future of our children is a troubling notion.

Many believe this shift is part of a larger social shift from public to private provisioning of services, fuelled by a growing distrust of public institutions combined with a liberal market economy. The issue is that education is not a service that can be traded, but a social process in developing a certain kind of citizenship and nation.

Conclusion

The Government school system has made decisive and significant strides. It has expanded to every corner of this vast country. It has motivated children from the most deprived backgrounds to come to school.

Every day, this system runs. Teachers and students come to school and there is a genuine effort at teaching-learning.

However, student learning is far from satisfactory and we now have to figure how to make this system work for the students. For that, our teachers and school leaders will need to be differently prepared and better supported.

The big challenge to Indian education is the burgeoning of private schools, which stratify educational opportunity on the basis of what parents can afford to pay. This rapid privatisation of school education is fuelled, among other things, by a false belief that these schools are better. The only response we can

¹² The most emphatic of these studies from the Indian context is the longitudinal School Choice study in Andhra Pradesh; see this special EPW article by my colleague D.D.Karopady: <http://www.epw.in/special-articles/does-school-choice-help-rural-children-disadvantaged-sections.html>

imagine is to visibly improve the quality of Government schools. But only time will tell if that will turn the tide.

To truly understand the Government school system, one has to take a decadal view. And that tells us that, rather than being a system in decline, it actually is a system that is slowly maturing. With the right support, it can improve.
