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Poverty, Markets and
Elementary Education in India

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Abstract

Over the last decade, trans-national and local advocacy networks have been projecting the low-cost unregulated schools market in India as a cost-efficient, high-quality and equitable solution for education of the poor and as a site for viable business options. The actors in this market include individual ‘edupreneurs’ and, more recently, corporate groups which have entered the schools business in developing countries. What we are witnessing is the construction of narratives of ‘good education’ for the poor in extremely minimalistic terms, validated through ‘research’ and disseminated by powerful networks. The attempt is to evolve globally scalable models that will deliver ‘high quality’ education at the lowest of costs, yet ensuring profits. In this paper, I map some of these trends highlighting the manner in which private actors are attempting to change education policy in India by drawing upon neo-liberal discourses and constructing new narratives, networks and practices around schooling. I argue that these trends have serious implications for social justice in education for the poor.

Key words: Advocacy networks, poverty, schools markets, education policy, low-cost private schools, India

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Poverty, Markets and Elementary Education in India

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In 1949, the Constitution of India directed the state to provide education up to the age of 14 years to all children. In 2009, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009 (GoI, 2009) was enacted by the Indian parliament. These six decades have seen profound changes in the landscape of school education in this country. This has been particularly so with reference to the provision of elementary education and the role of the State and markets in ensuring that all children complete at least eight years of schooling. At the time of independence in the late 1940s and for at least four decades thereafter, there appeared to be a consensus both in policy discourses as well as in popular imagination that the responsibility of providing elementary education for all children up to the age of fourteen lay with the State. Further, the State had a special responsibility where the education of historically disadvantaged and neglected social groups was concerned. However since the 1990s, and particularly after the turn of the last century, advocacy for the private sector in elementary education and specifically for the schooling of the poor has been gaining ground. What has also emerged globally is a discourse around education as the key pathway out of poverty – but one that requires an overhauling of the public system of education and bringing in market principles to ensure efficiency in schooling and better performance by children. In addition, a clear role for the private sector in the education of the poor in developing countries is being charted out by powerful advocacy networks as part of school reforms. India is being projected as a key market for the education business. Together, these trends have critical implications for the right to education of poor children and indeed for the very purpose of education.

In this paper I focus on the relationship between poverty and elementary education in India and specifically on the advocacy of markets for the schooling of poor children. I view poverty within a complex and relational framework that takes into account structural inequalities as well as multiple and intersecting deprivations that disadvantage and render vulnerable large sections of society. Equally important to situations of poverty are the mechanisms and processes that enable the building of economic and cultural resources, social capital and networks that lead to advantage, privilege and power. The discussion is situated in the larger context of neo-liberal globalisation¹ and the coming together of powerful networks around the education business that seek to expand schools markets and shape educational policy in developing countries. All of these are pertinent to the larger concern of social justice and the

¹Neo-liberal globalisation is 'an ideology which promotes markets over the state and regulation and individual advancement/self-interest over the collective good and common well being' (Lingard, 2009:18).

education of children in general and that of the poor in particular.

India's Poor

A reported 32.7 percent of the Indian people in 2010 were below the international poverty line of US\$ 1.25 per day (PPP) while 68.7 percent were said to live on less than US\$ 2 per day (World Bank, 2014). India's record on indicators of children's well being is abysmal and points to the vulnerability of children in general and those in poverty in particular. In 2005–06, the National Family Health Survey(NFHS) reported that a shocking 48 percent children below 5 years of age were reported to be 'chronically malnourished' (a major factor for death in this age group) and nearly 70 percent were anaemic (Arnold et al, 2009: 6–15). Among the poorest households (in the lowest income quintile), 60 percent children were found to be stunted and an equal number underweight (ibid: 23).

The definition of 'poverty line' and the numbers within it are deeply contested.² While this paper does not enter this debate, it underscores that 'poverty lines' fail to capture the magnitude and complexity of poverty and the lives of the poor. For instance Sen (2001: 87) has argued that 'poverty must be seen as the deprivation of basic capabilities rather than merely as lowness of incomes, which is the standard criterion of identification of poverty'. The 'poor' are also extremely diverse both in economic and social terms. A distinction has been made between poverty that is 'chronic, persistent and of extended duration' and that which is 'transient' (Mehta et al 2011:5; see also Rose and Dyer, 2008: 53). There are also the 'near poor' who may be officially above the poverty line but slip into poverty in times of crisis. Over represented among the poor are communities that have historically been disadvantaged due to their caste location as 'ex-untouchables' (Scheduled Caste), marginalised ethnicities (Scheduled Tribes) and minority status (Muslims). NFHS also showed that 'young children from SC and ST are likely to be more stunted and wasted' than children from 'other backward classes' and 'other groups' (Arnold et al, 2009: 24). Caste, ethnicity and minority status, as well as gender, are likely to result in varied experiences of families in poverty. These interlocking inequalities call for a more complex understanding of what schooling may mean for children in poverty as compared to those who come from non poor families and especially those that have wealth and power.

²See for instance the editorial and articles in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2013, Vol. XLVIII, No. 33; Mehta et al, 2011).

Children belonging to families at the bottom of the economic hierarchy are educationally at risk, which is reflected in relatively low school enrolment rates. Among them, SC and ST children and those from Muslim communities have relatively lower school enrolment rates as compared to the average figures even for these strata of the population (Desai et al, 2010). 'Geographies' of poverty and deprivation include poor settlements or slums and shanties in urban areas, segregated habitations in villages where SC communities reside and remote and neglected regions where ST populations, including nomadic groups, are concentrated. These are high poverty areas that often lack the most basic facilities and amenities for a dignified life in which education is a crucial component.

Education, Poverty and Markets

The dismantling of the welfare state and the spread of markets in the social sector in the early capitalist countries since the 1980s has led to the repositioning of education in relation to poverty. The earlier emphasis on the promise of education for equality and social mobility has now become more pronounced albeit with a change of emphasis. Education is increasingly projected as the only pathway out of poverty, but obstructed by the bureaucracy and inefficiency that is seen to increasingly characterise state-run public systems, including education (Marsh, 2011). Since the mid-1980s, reforms in education in these countries have focused on introducing market principles of competition among schools and standardised high-stakes testing that are used not only to monitor school performance but also to decide which schools will receive state funding and which students can access further educational opportunities. Test scores are also made available for parents to make 'informed' choices around schooling for their children. Handing over the running of schools to the private/non-state sector, vouchers for students and parental choice became the buzz words that characterised market-based reforms in schooling towards the end of the last century in early capitalist countries. Individual schools in high-poverty areas and teachers were made responsible for school outcomes and they were called upon to shape up or ship out. Teachers' work has also become the focus of reforms and is characterised by new regimes of control and accountability (Ball et al, 2010). Research on No Child Left Behind (NCLB) implemented in the US after 2000 has pointed to the disturbing implications of reforms in schooling where high-stakes testing is used as evidence of learner outcomes and hence to monitor the performance of schools and teachers. While on the one hand the larger context of inequality, including within the

school system – between schools in privileged and high-poverty areas is bracketed out, high-stakes testing has been seen to lead to a ‘narrowing’ of the curriculum and a focus on low-level, easily measurable cognitive skills as teachers are forced to teach according to the test. Also pointed out is the fact that testing regimes encourage corrupt practices and manipulation of data in order to show that the officially mandated progress is maintained (Gorski, 2008; Berliner, 2011; Ravitch, 2010).

Scholars have highlighted that there are clear 'poverty effects' on education (Biddle, 2001; Berliner, 2011). Children from families in poverty who lack basic necessities and conveniences and live in unsafe and polluted neighbourhoods are deprived of environments that enable learning. Research has also shown that poverty adversely affects cognitive development (see Marsh, 2011 and Biddle, 2001). The increasing standardisation, deskilling and control of teachers' work are seen to have detrimental implications for the education of students who have suffered multiple deprivations because of poverty and social disadvantage (Connell, 2009).

I have briefly touched upon these developments because policy and discourses around poverty and education from neo-liberal capitalist economies are today strongly influencing policy making and advocacy for school reforms in developing countries. In India, privatisation of public schools is becoming increasingly visible and much of the advocacy for private schools for the poor in this country in the last decade is linked to the USA and UK (Nambissan and Ball, 2011).

Poverty and Education Policy in India

The policy thrust in elementary education in India until the early 1980s largely focused on ensuring equal educational opportunity so as to remove social, gender, rural-urban and regional disparities. The perspective was one of ‘deficit’ where poor families were seen as largely unaware of the importance of education as well as unable to bear the burden of the direct and indirect costs of schooling. The involvement of poor children in work (child labour) was seen as a major obstacle in their education. In order to remove economic barriers to children's education, incentives such as tuition-free schooling and free textbooks were provided to children in publicly funded schools. Increasing access and expanding provision through relaxation of norms for setting up schools in habitations predominantly inhabited by SC/ST communities were also major policy interventions to facilitate easy access to education. Adult literacy and community mobilisation were emphasised to spread awareness about the importance of elementary education. Midday

meals were introduced more recently in all schools to address hunger among children and improve enrolment and retention rates. 'Ex-untouchable' caste locations and ethnic or minority identities in themselves were not seen as major impediments to schooling.

The major thrust of education policy for most of the post-Independence decades was thus 'bridging' social and gender gaps in relation to enrolment, transition and school completion rates. Little attention was drawn to what was happening within schools despite the fact that the majority of children who discontinued schooling came from families that were at the bottom of the economic and social hierarchy and were often the first generation to receive formal education. Studies conducted in the 1990s clearly contested prevailing policy and popular perceptions that child labour and parental apathy towards education were responsible for non enrolment of poor children and their discontinuation from school (Vaidyanathan and Nair, 2001; Bhatta, 1998). While the burden of the direct costs of schooling was acknowledged, attention was brought to bear on the school and the quality of learning in the public system of education that was catering increasingly to poor families – inadequate facilities, unimaginative curricula, 'chalk and talk' based pedagogy and rote-based learning were seen as factors that 'pushed' children out of school and failed to enable them to learn (ibid). The decade of the 1990s saw a growing emphasis on teacher training and curriculum development and a number of non government organisations (NGOs) who were hitherto involved in innovative curriculum and teaching methods were brought in by the State to help make the learning experience within schools more meaningful for children (Rampal, 2002). Some research attention also came to focus on discrimination within schools and around classroom practices that disadvantage children – more specifically on caste, gender and minority status-based discrimination in education (Nambissan, 2013).

However, official statistics and surveys (see Arnold et al, 2009; Mehta et al, 2011) clearly showed that large sections of Indians were living on negligible incomes and infant mortality, morbidity and malnutrition resulting primarily from income poverty and abysmal living conditions, continued to sharply define their lives. Teacher education departments dominated by psychology and the behaviouristic paradigm remained largely untouched by the social and economic realities of children's lives (Batra, 2009; see also Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Elementary Education and the State in India

The development of the public system of education was subject to enormous challenges

given that the colonial State neglected the spread of mass education. At the time of independence in 1947, barely 14 percent of India's population was literate and 'only one child out of every three children in the age-group of 6–11 years was in school' (Naik, 1974:6). Over the next four decades, a vast network of elementary (primary and upper primary) schools was put in place. The state was the major provider of elementary education. In 1994, as many as 90 percent of elementary school students (grades 1–VIII) in India were enrolled in government schools (67.9 percent), or in those that were privately managed but aided (PA) by the government (22.1 percent). Only 9.8 percent of enrolled children were in private unaided (PUA) schools (NCAER, 1994). Only a negligible proportion of SC (5.8 percent) and ST (3.2 percent) students were enrolled in PUA schools (ibid).

The decade of the 1990s saw the Indian state under pressure to meet its international commitments on the rights of the child and education for all (EFA). Access to school was still an issue and school completion rates were extremely low. Even in 1998–99, around 13 percent of children in the 6–14 year age group were not in school and barely 50 percent of those in the 10–14 year age group had completed primary education (IIPS and ORC Macro, 2000). Significant changes were brought about in the public system of elementary education to address both concerns. Alternative schools, multiple tracks and increasingly inferior tiers were institutionalised within publicly funded schooling, ostensibly to address the issue of education of economically and socially marginalised groups.³ The ambitious District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) launched after 1991 with aid from international donors to universalise primary education as well as the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) post 2000 for universal elementary education, brought the Education Guarantee Scheme and Alternative and Innovative Education Centres into the public school system for children who were seen as educationally most at risk. These were government-sponsored schemes that encouraged 'centres' to be established on 'demand' to cater to the special needs of children. 'Para teachers', who were employed on contract and paid minimal salaries, were brought into the school system along with regular teachers. It must be remembered that state-funded schooling by the 1990s was already offering a small section of middle-/lower middle-class children an education of better quality in the Central Schools (Kendriya Vidyalas),

³Part-time non-formal education (NFE) was earlier offered to children who were seen as unable to participate in full-time schooling largely because of their involvement in work within and outside the home. However NFE was criticised as being second-rate education and closed down by 1990 (Nambissan, 2000).

Model and Navodaya schools. However, the interventions in the 1990s were targeted specifically at poor and marginal groups and led to the public system of elementary education getting increasingly stratified in relation to teachers, students and conditions of learning.

The turn of the century has seen the opening up of public schooling to the private/non-state sector for providing services and improving the ‘quality’ of education offered through what is called Public Private Partnerships (PPP). It is not merely provision of infrastructure and other services that are being contracted out to private organisations but their participation in improving the quality of teaching and learning in schools is being actively sought. Computer training for teachers, handing over of primary school classes/sections to private organisations and ‘adoption’ of schools are some of the policy interventions under PPP to improve the quality of education (Nambissan and Ball, 2011; Teltumbde, 2013). This is a ‘creeping’ form of privatisation where private organisations are given easy access to public institutions and resources while not subjecting them to public scrutiny.

In 2009, after a decade of civil society campaigns and judicial activism, the Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE, 2009) for all children was enacted. Though the RTE has its detractors, it laid down for the first time a pan-Indian legal framework for how elementary schooling should be viewed and implemented from the perspective of the right of every child to equitable education without discrimination. Profit making from schooling is illegal under the Act. Clear norms and standards are laid down for the obligatory participation of PUA recognised schools in the implementation of the RTE(2009) and specifically in the education of the poor.⁴ Private schools that were unrecognised (unregulated under the state school act and hence illegal) were given a deadline—until 2013—to meet RTE norms.

Markets in Elementary Education⁵

In 2013, the majority of elementary schools (75.5 percent) were state funded and managed (NUEPA, 2014). A small proportion of schools (4.7 percent) were government aided but privately managed. The proportion of PUA recognised (unregulated) schools

⁴Under the RTE (2009), 25 percent of seats in PUA schools are to be set aside for children from economically weaker sections (EWS). This paper does not deal with the schooling of EWS children in PUA schools.

⁵Some of the discussion that follows draws upon Nambissan and Ball (2011) and Nambissan (2012).

had significantly increased since the mid 1990s and now accounted for 17.4 percent of all elementary schools (ibid). According to NUEPA (2014), the remaining 2.4 percent comprised unrecognised schools but this is likely to be an underestimate.

The most sought after are the elite 'public'/private schools that cater to the education of the upper and middle classes. Exclusive English medium private schooling is seen as the pathway to elite status and better life chances, and hence these schools have become the centre of competition and striving for positional advantage (Nambissan 2010). Though the middle class abandonment of state schools since the mid 1980s has been commented upon, it is important to note that in 2004–05 an all India household survey (Desai et al, 2010) showed that as many as 67 percent of students (6–14 years) from the fourth income quintile and 48 percent from the top income quintile were attending government (included PA) schools, suggesting that the publicly funded system of schooling was still fairly robust. At the lower end are the unregulated private schools that have grown in the last two decades in response to the growing demand for English medium schools from the lower middle classes and sections of the poor/working classes. State-run schools offer education in the regional medium though, more recently, in response to parental demand English-medium sections are being included in these schools. In the state sector, local body-run independent primary schools are the most badly equipped in relation to basic infrastructure, resources and teaching staff. These schools cater largely to remote and poorly developed rural habitations and to urban 'slums' and shanties and have an over representation of students from poor and marginalised communities (Ibid; NIAS, 2002).

A significant phenomenon since the turn of the century is the advocacy of for-profit private schools for the poor in India through state-supported vouchers to enable children to access schools (private) of their choice (Nambissan and Ball, 2011). In 2003, UK academic James Tooley (2009) reported the large presence of unrecognised private schools in the city of Hyderabad which he called 'budget' private schools (BPS) as they were run by individual school owners (later called educational entrepreneurs/edupreneurs) at minimal cost and charged relatively low tuition fees (less than \$2/100 per month at the time). A study that Tooley subsequently carried out showed that 'budget' schools were 'cost efficient' and that pupils in these schools 'out performed' their counterparts in government/state run schools on standardised tests (Tooley et al, 2007). One of the reasons given for the better performance of budget school students was higher teacher attendance in these private low-fee schools as compared to government schools. The findings from the study were highly publicised as were the implications that

were seen to follow ‘logically’ from them: low-cost/low-fee private schools were performing better than state-run schools and at lower cost. They were also the choice of poor parents. Hence it was argued that these schools must receive support from the State through relaxation of regulations, and vouchers. Equally emphasised was the fact that with adequate financial and marketing support and research to create a ‘truly replicable model of education for the poor’, low-cost, private schools in India can be a profitable business opportunity given the vast numbers who aspire to this education (ibid). Studies by advocates of schooling for the poor, largely by Tooley and his associates have been the basis for building the school choice discourse in India as well as advocacy for the promise of edu-business from this sector.

The Low-Cost School Business⁶

The powerful advocacy for educational markets for schooling of the poor in India in the last decade and its transnational roots was flagged in an earlier paper (Nambissan and Ball, 2011). These networks were traced to the UK and USA, to foundations, think tanks and organisations that propagate a free market philosophy and are linked to pro-choice organisations in India. We had also shown important links of network actors with businesses and business philanthropists and the key role of intellectual entrepreneurs such as Tooley in directing and building these networks (ibid). In India, organisations such as the Centre for Civil Society and Liberty Institute and Educate Trust (established by Tooley in Hyderabad in 2002) that are part of these networks, were early actors in the campaign for school vouchers and parental choice. School choice/private schooling advocacy networks also included investment companies and venture capitalists looking for new markets in India (see Nambissan and Ball, 2011 for details).

The last few years have seen the entry of corporate players in the low-cost education market, investing in budget schools as well setting up for-profit schools/school chains. The enactment and implementation of the RTE in 2009 has created a road block in the spread of unregulated for-profit private schooling. Under the RTE, private unrecognised schools are legally obliged to meet the laid-down norms and standards, or close down. There is hence urgency in showcasing private schooling as the answer to education for poor/low income groups and to present new low-cost models of how this can work in order that regulations are relaxed and edu-business is not obstructed. In

⁶Budget private schools (BPS) are referred to in literature as ‘low-fee’ private schools (LFPS). In this paper they are referred to as low ‘cost’ private schools (LCPS) as they are run on a low budget. Tooley estimates that the annual cost per child in a BPS/LCPS was around \$80 a year (2009).

Africa, low-cost private school chains targeted at low-income families are expanding rapidly in countries such as Kenya and Ghana. These schools/chains are projected as a successful model that can be up-scaled and replicated globally, including in India. The rest of the discussion briefly maps these trends that are attempting to directly shape school education in India by attempting to influence policy makers and civil society at large.

The major focus till around 2008 was the building of transnational networks of organisations and individuals towards advocacy of parental choice and vouchers. The objective appears largely to be the creation of a policy climate favourable to legalising unregulated schools and profit making, and to direct state funds through vouchers to budget private schools. Efforts were also directed to creating a market for schools through school chains which were expected to yield profit from the low-income market segment. Investment companies, micro credit organisations and banks were encouraged to provide finance for existing and new schools (Tooley, 2009). Funds were also mobilised to expand the market for schooling and carry out research and development for setting up school chains as well as to explore appropriate technology for these schools. In 2007, Richard Chandler created a \$100 million education fund specifically for this purpose with Tooley as its president (Nambissan and Ball, 2011).

Around 2008–10, we see signs of corporate houses beginning to establish schools/school chains and explore the building of brands to ‘sell’ low-cost schooling in India. These efforts were enthused by ‘research’ which showed that budget schools were a profitable venture but required specific marketing strategies. In 2007, Chandler established the Rumi budget schools. Career Launcher, well known for setting up high-end ‘coaching’ or preparatory institutes for entry to elite institutions of higher education, established the Indus Budget Academies. The SKS micro finance group set up Bodhi Academies while Reddy Labs established their Pudami schools. These schools were mainly at the primary level, some with pre-school and early middle school grades. Interestingly, all of these were set up in Hyderabad/rural Andhra Pradesh. The tuition fee by this time was around \$3–4 a month (Garg, 2011).⁷

By 2011, the promise of the low-cost budget school market bubble appears to have burst. The poor quality of teaching in budget schools and problems of sustainability and scalability were proving to be costly for the earlier mentioned companies that had

⁷ See also web sites: <http://drreddysfoundation.org/pudami-neighborhood-schools/>;
http://www.sksindia.com/bodhi_academy.php (Accessed, June 2012).
<http://www.citizencommandcenter.org/shelters/show/6049> (Accessed, June 2012)

begun edu-business in this sector (Garg 2011; Nambissan, 2012). Career Launcher closed down its Indus Budget Academies in less than two years of setting them up. Thakore reports that Chandler shut the Rumi schools since budget schools for children of households at the 'Bottom of the Pyramid are properly the province of micro finance rather than investment finance corporates' (Thakore, 2011:2). Micro finance funds were already being used by 'edupreneurs' to establish what were called 'micro schools' (Nambissan and Ball, 2011).

Corporate players now appeared to be on the search for schools markets that were likely to yield greater profits than budget schools catering to the near bottom of the economic pyramid. The buzz words by 2012 were not 'low fee'/budget schools but 'affordable' private schools. 'Affordable Private Schools' (APS) was a new term coined by corporate players for schools that catered to a higher-end market segment that could afford tuition fee of up to around `600–1200 per month. For instance, after closing its Indus Budget schools, Career Launcher entered their 'second phase involvement' in rural schools though this time they intended to charge a tuition fee in the range of around `600 (\$10) per month. Thakore (2011:1) observes: 'Post liberalisation, India's new genre of unstoppable education entrepreneurs have hit upon a new "middle-of-the-pyramid market segment", and have launched several affordable schooling initiatives with this high-potential price sensitive education sector.' New business prospects around the demand by low-income parents for educational services such as computer training and private tuitions (tutors) were also flagged by a market survey sponsored by Grey Matters Capital (PI and GMC,2010). Education service providers were now the 'new market entrants' in the low-cost school sector (ibid).

It is significant that Career Launcher and transnational companies such as Omdiyar and SONG are simultaneously targeting low-income as well as middle-class parents in India. For instance, Career Launcher has its K–12 Indus World Schools in tier II cities. SONG advisors have invested in Gowtham (low-cost schools) as well as Chaitanya, exclusive schools for the elite at high cost. Transnational companies such as SONG, Omdiyar and Pearson are also involved in 'school chains' for the 'poor' in Africa. It is important to keep in mind that that all these corporate groups strongly advocate a more conducive regulatory environment for the private school sector in India (Garg, 2011; relevant web sites).

In Africa, the experience of the for-profit schools in which transnational companies and big business are investing, is revealing. In Kenya, Bridge International Academies (BIA) was founded in 2007 and the first schools (it is not clear whether these

offer all primary grades) were started in 2009. Partners who have invested in BIA include Omdiyar Network, Grey Ghost Ventures, Kellogg Foundation and Deutsche Bank. All these companies have declared their interest in the private school sector in India. Tooley, who spearheaded the budget school advocacy in India, is actively involved with both school chains. Omdiyar Network is the brain child of Pierre Omdiyar founder of e-Bay. In 2009, the Omdiyar Network invested \$1.8 million in BIA. The Omdiyar Network website elaborates:

Bridge International Academies' mission is to revolutionise access to *affordable, high quality primary education* for poor families across Africa...to scale a network of primary schools that will educate more than one million impoverished children in Africa,... The company opened the first schools in its franchise – like network of *ultra low-cost for-profit primary schools* in 2009...*Its schools profitably deliver high-quality education for less than \$4 per child per month, enabling local school managers to operate their school businesses profitably, while creating a highly successful business at the central level*.⁸ (Emphasis mine)

Omega schools are another for-profit school chain in Ghana in which Pearson (the 'media giant') has business interests. In 2012, Pearson invested \$15 million in the 'Pearson Affordable Learning' Fund' (PALF) to 'improve access to quality education for the poorest families in the world. It will invest in private companies committed to innovative approaches and improving learning outcomes'.⁹We learn that, 'The first PALF investment was made in May 2012 with Omega Schools, a privately held chain of for-profit schools based in Ghana... Omega establishes schools in areas where parents live at or below the poverty line'. To address frequent default in payment of fees by parents, Omega has come up with what it refers to as a 'unique' Pay as You Learn Scheme (PAYL): 'an all-inclusive daily fee makes education more accessible to families who cannot afford term fees upfront' (ibid).

School fees are paid on a daily basis (1.5 Ghanaian Cedi (GHS)/\$0.75) and are inclusive of food, tests, uniform and workbooks....The fee covers a hot lunch, school uniform, learning materials, and a de-worming programme as well as 15 free school days per annum ensures children can still attend at times when parents cannot afford the fee.... Each student has a 'wristband with a chip that records their daily arrival and departure'.¹⁰

⁸<http://www.omidiyar.com/news/bridge-international-academies-launches-affordable-schools-kenya> (Accessed, April 21, 2012).

⁹www.affordable-learning.com (Accessed, February 2014).

¹⁰ Ibid.

The Affordable Learning web site goes on to state that ‘Taking a “pay as you learn” approach, Omega Schools offer a low-cost, scalable model for private education in the developing world.’ Donkoh, who (along with Tooley) is a founder of the Omega schools in Ghana, states that their aim is ‘to bring quality education to as many children as possible. We think it is possible for a private company to *educate the poor at a profit ... and provide high quality education at the lowest cost possible*’.¹¹ (Emphasis mine) In other words, BIA and Omega are presented as the new for-profit, low-cost scalable models of schooling for the ‘poor’. While the claim that Omega schools will provide ‘high quality at the lowest of cost’ is a contradiction in itself, practices such as making children wear wrist bands to record their attendance are an affront to their dignity. Further, the claim that by charging 1.5 GHS per day from each child under PAYL Omega schools will provide better access to schooling to children from the poorest households, is questionable.¹²

The Quality of Private Schooling for the Poor

The quality of education in unrecognised private schools has been of serious concern even prior to 2000. These schools usually employed untrained teachers, an increasing number of whom had barely more than secondary-/higher secondary-level schooling. Teachers are engaged on contract and paid low salaries linked to classroom presence. Many ‘schools’ are seen as mere teaching shops that profess to offer private ‘English medium’ education which low-income parents aspire to for their children (see Nambissan, 2012). It is significant that low-cost school advocates such as Tooley, who had initially waxed eloquent about budget schools, have admitted to shoddy teaching and the rapid turnover of teachers – who leave these schools for a raise of `100/200 (Chandrasekaran, 2010). One of the main planks for budget school advocacy is that private schools will meet the aspirations of low-income parents for English-medium education at low cost. However, it has been acknowledged that ‘in some low cost schools, teachers are so under qualified, that they cannot speak in English let alone teach in English, one of the biggest attractions for parents in the lower income segment’ (Garg, 2011:31).

The RTE (2009) and its deadline of 2013, as mentioned earlier, threatens the very existence of budget private schools (BPS) as well as the new scalable models being

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Akaguri, in a study of families in the lowest income quintile in three communities in Ghana, observes that ‘in the poorest rural areas in Ghana, LFPS (low-fee private schools) provision is not sustainable in the long term due to lack of affordability’ (2014: 158-159). He says that in 2008, the daily wage of a casual agricultural labourer in the communities he studied, was merely GHS 3 (\$3 at 2008 prices) and that they found work for barely about five days a month (ibid).

proposed since neither meet the norms and standards that are required if they are to function legally under the Act. Since 2011, we find concerted efforts underway to:

- a) a) Show that BPSs are already using ‘effective’ ‘micro-innovations’ (MI) that enable improving of learner outcomes. These MI need merely be identified, tested and up-scaled to improve the quality of schooling offered by this sector and lessons can be learnt by government schools as well,
- b) Present low cost for profit scalable models as new paradigms of good quality education for the poor, and
- c) Continue to show that learner outcomes in BPS are better than in government schools and use this as a leverage to step up advocacy of unregulated private schools.¹³

The discussion that follows maps some of the networks and new strategies emerging for budget/low-cost private school advocacy.

In 2011 and 2012 we see the setting up of Progressive Action Committees (PACT), the National Independent School Alliance (NISA) and Students and Teachers Innovating for Results (STIR India). Both PACT and NISA are platforms created to ‘improve the image’ and ‘voice’ of budget private schools¹⁴ and are led by the Centre for Civil Society, Delhi, the early lead player in India for transnational advocacy of school choice and vouchers (Nambissan and Ball, 2011). PACT’s objective is to engage in ‘advocacy to *build a facilitative environment* for budget private schools *and improve their image*’ (emphasis mine). NISA is a ‘a platform that brings together budget private schools (BPS) from across the country to give them a *unified voice to address their concerns about legislations and bye-laws which apply to them* and to facilitate quality improvement in schools’.¹⁵ (Emphasis mine) What is important is that NISA states quite clearly that it will help BPSs to ‘build evidence through systematic linkages with academia’ and to ‘bring together different stakeholders...’ (ibid). In tune with advocacy network strategy, NISA has links with a broader platform: STIR (Students and Teachers Innovating for Results) India, which is networked with the global forum STIR Education (STIR, 2013).

¹³It must be mentioned that learning-level data is now increasingly viewed as ‘robust data’ that is necessary for making investments in the low-cost schools sector. Mitter, the Portfolio Director of education in India for the Dell Foundation which provides funding support for the Teach for India Programme, says ‘The investment decision, or any other decision, should be based on learning level data.’ (Callard, 2011)

¹⁴<http://nisaindia.org/about-us> (Accessed, May 2014).

¹⁵<http://nisaindia.org/partnership-programs> (Accessed May, 2014).

STIR India's objective is to 'catalyse education quality' through its efforts to 'harness teacher- and school-led micro-innovations' (MI) in budget schools. MI are defined as "'small-scale" low- (or zero-) cost practices already being implemented by teachers and schools to directly or indirectly improve learning outcomes' (STIR, 2013:5). Likewise, STIR Education is also focused at a global level on the 'school- and teacher-led micro-innovations in order to improve educational outcomes for the poorest children...'.¹⁶As is routine in BPS advocacy, there is piloting of MI, testing and generation of 'objective' and 'rigorous' evidence (by international scholars) regarding their effectiveness, which is then disseminated through the network. STIR is a platform 'to find, test and scale the most promising schools and teacher "micro innovations"' which are then to be up-scaled. STIR education on its website says it has created '*a new mechanism for collating the best "micro-innovations" in education taking place in classrooms and staffrooms globally. And rigorously assessing their impact on learning and attainment we aim to replicate and scale-up the most effective micro-innovations across the developing world*' (ibid). We come back to NISA which claims to be 'partnering with STIR ...to encourage the idea of low-cost innovations which will have a direct impact on improving quality education'.¹⁷What is visible are key advocacy network strategies: the 'circulation and recirculation of ideas and joining up points of articulation' (Nambissan and Ball, 2011:167).

The founding partners of STIR India and those on the advisory board of STIR Education and STIR India include organisations that have earlier links to private school advocacy and research. For instance, the advisory board members of STIR India include leaders in organisations such as Absolute Returns for Kids (ARK), British Council, Pearson, New Projects Pratham Books, Bharti Foundation, Akanksha J-PAL South Asia and Education Practice McKinsey India. The global forum STIR Education has on its advisory board the Director of Education, World Bank; Director EG West Centre, Newcastle University (Tooley); Special Advisor to the Secretary of State for Education UK; Chair, Ofsted, who is also ARK Board Advisor; Fellow Brookings Institute; CEO GEMS Foundation; Country Director, ARK for Kids India; and so on. These are organisations with economic and social power and links with the Indian State. Scholars from Columbia University, New York, have been involved in 'measuring the impact of STIR search and network model on teachers' attitudes and behaviours' (ibid).

What appears to be a new thrust of BPS advocacy is to suggest that MI from low-

¹⁶<http://www.stireducation.org/>

¹⁷ <http://nisaindia.org/partnership-programs>

cost private schools, ‘rigorously’ tested for their effectiveness, can now be used in government schools. In other words, the aim appears to show that MI and other practices of BPS can improve the quality of publicly-funded schooling. It is reported that in the same year that it was established, STIR India’s findings on ‘MIs and teacher efficacy were disseminated to over 50 partners’ that included ‘Government of India and State Governments’ and further that ‘STIR entered into partnership with the Uttar Pradesh Government to embed the STIR model within 100,000 of its schools’ (ibid). Azim Premji Foundation, Bharti Foundation and Teach for India are mentioned as ‘partner organisations’ that have piloted the MI (ibid). That these organisations are themselves involved in ‘quality improvement’ programmes in government schools as well as in education policy dialogue at the Centre and in the states is likely to facilitate the process of bringing MI of private schools into government schools. Thus, we are seeing new evidence being generated to prove that BPS practices provide good quality education and, if upscaled in government schools, this will lead to improvement in the latter. This in turn is likely to be used by newly emerging networks to argue for greater PPP in publically-funded schools as well as for advocacy to ensure that unregulated low-cost schools are not shut down because they fail to follow RTE norms.

A major thrust of low-cost innovations is making schools ‘teacher proof’¹⁸ and if possible ‘teacher free’, ostensibly to address teacher turnover and make for more efficient learning. In 2009, Tooley established Empathy Systems, a company that would provide low-cost educational services to address the quality and other concerns of BPS. According to Chandresakaran (2010), Tooley’s company provides ‘detailed lesson plans to combat higher teacher turnover so that new teachers can immediately fill the shoes of their predecessors’. Tooley elaborates, ‘A low-cost teacher training model ensures that you are not investing in instructors so much that the whole system collapses when they leave’ (interview to Chandrasekaran, 2010). His associate Sugata Mitra ‘discovered’ that poor children can ‘learn without teachers’ through what he calls ‘Minimally Invasive Education’ (MIE). ‘He found that children using Learning Stations required little or no inputs from teachers and learnt on their own by the process of exploration, discovery and

¹⁸ ‘Teacher-proof’ curricula reforms in the USA were carried out to improve test scores and include ‘scripted lessons, mandated classroom management strategies and strict instructional timelines that ignore the natural rhythms of teaching and learning’ (Delpit, 2006: xiii). This is taken to an extreme in low-cost schools and especially in the new scalable models of school chains.

peer coaching'.¹⁹ Building on this 'discovery', Mitra has gone on to create his most 'recent innovation', Self Organised Learning Environments (SOLE), where children can learn under 'minimum of remote supervision'.²⁰ The model seen as particularly relevant in the preparation of teachers for the affordable schools markets/school chain business appears to be 'para skilling'. Karamchandani et al define 'para-skilling' as 'disaggregating complex processes into simple, routine and standardized tasks. These can then be undertaken by less skilled workers, with the desired reduction in costs and a simultaneous increase of volume and throughput' (Karamchandani et al, 2009: 56). This effectively means the breaking down of curricular and pedagogical processes into simple routine and standardised tasks so that they can be handled by 'less skilled' but 'suitably trained' individuals at low salaries. Para-skilling is the model being used in the BIA and Omega schools. The effort appears to be to reduce teaching to a simple standardised set of tasks that can be handled by anyone who is 'suitably trained' and thereby to cut costs on regular teacher salaries and increase profits. In fact, it is reported that in the BIA schools in Africa projected as the biggest and rapidly expanding schools chain in Kenya, deskilling of the teacher and standardisation of content is taken to the extreme:

Bridge relies on standardization and technology. *At 11 a.m. for example, every single second-grade teacher in every Bridge academy will be teaching the exact same lesson, supplied with a word-for-word script from Bridge headquarters delivered by Nook e-reader.* (Rosenberg, 2013)

And Omega schools have this to say:

We have created, *for every subject and every level, lesson plans, workbooks, digital content, and intensive training and mentoring around these, so that our teachers can teach consistently at a higher level than in other schools. Call it paraskilling—* we combine the experience and expertise of a critical number of education specialists with trained, passionate and energetic high school graduates to deliver quality teaching and learning in our schools.²¹ (Emphasis mine)

Critical educators and researchers have highlighted how important the 'labour' and intellectual skills of the teacher and her understanding of the diverse contexts of poverty are for the education of the poor and disadvantaged communities (Connell, 2009). The systematic effort to cut costs and 'teacher proof' schools and use technology—so that the

¹⁹<http://www.hole-in-the-wall.com/MIE.html> (Accessed, October 2014).

²⁰<http://egwestcentre.com/research/> (Accessed, January 2013).

²¹<http://www.omega-schools.com/payl-model.php> (Accessed, June 2014).

teacher herself does not matter in the low-cost edu-business—is hence of serious concern. Connell (2009) underscores that 'We can always improve the test scores of a group of children by teaching-to-the-test—narrowing the curriculum to the topics being tested, giving the pupils lots of practice on tests, and focusing teachers' energies on performance as measured by these tests....Have you improved education? For most children, you have probably made it worse, and for children from the least privileged you have certainly made it worse' (ibid: 1–2).

There is today little doubt that poor parents also aspire to give their children a 'good education' in order to improve their life chances. For the individual, education is the pathway out of poverty though education on its own does not change the reality of poverty in society. Unlike popular assumptions of the poor as being submerged by the 'culture of poverty' or that they passively respond to the larger systemic forces, low-income parents actively strategise to provide to the best of their ability, what they see as 'good quality education' for their children and they do so at great cost. Baird (2009) in his report for Grey Matters Capital recalls that:

Across Hyderabad and Mumbai, parents repeatedly cited the overwhelming importance of education as a reason why they would spend large proportions of their income to send their children to private school—if they felt that private education was providing their children with the best available educational needs, they would make financial sacrifices to do so.... Many parents that I spoke with have sold, pawned, or mortgaged comforts to send their children to private school, if it meant that the child's education would be substantially better (and some families I spoke with sold land that had been in their family village for generations) (2009:37).

Have the aspirations of poor parents been met or have they been belied, especially in schools that are the focus of low-cost advocacy and edu-business? What of parents whose children were enrolled in LCPS that were shut down because edu-business shifted to new market segments? While the voice of the low-cost school advocates has been loud and clear about the 'high quality' of education and the micro innovations that are being 'discovered' and up-scaled in schools accessed by the poor, the voice of parents has not been heard.

Research for Advocacy, Edu-business and Policy Change

'Research' has played a key role in low-cost, for-profit school advocacy and in the expansion of the education business and has been generously funded by organisations such as the World Bank, Department for International Development (DFID), pro-market foundations and 'philanthropic and non-profit' institutions. The emphasis has been on

generating evidence to establish that low-cost private schools are of better quality than those run by the State and children who receive vouchers to attend BPS perform better than their counterparts in government schools. Recent overviews of low-cost private schools have failed to provide strong and conclusive evidence on two of the main planks of low-cost private school advocacy– that of the quality and equity advantage in comparison to government schools (see Day Ashley et al, 2014; Barakat et al, 2014). However, in our view, what is also of concern is the failure of scholars to engage with conceptual and methodological issues that inform the ‘research’ that is emerging on low cost/BP schools, especially sponsored research that is targeted at education policy changes.

The much publicised Hyderabad study (Tooley et. al, 2007) of low-cost private schools had conceptual and methodological weaknesses that are usually glossed over. The study was located in a Muslim dominated settlement within a specific socio-cultural, historical and educational context, the category of ‘poor’ was fuzzy and the comparisons made between government and private schools were methodologically problematic. The findings raise a number of questions and definitely do not allow for sweeping generalisation to be made (see Sarangapani and Winch, 2010; Rose and Dyer, 2008; Nambissan, 2012). Yet the findings of Tooley et al (2007) are shown as applicable to BPS schools across India and have been cited in all subsequent studies and advocacy for LCPS and APS. Standardised testing of specific skills of the students in LCPS as compared to those in government schools catering to the poorest sections of Indian society appears to be one of the major objectives of these studies. Tooley and Dixon(2007) also studied private schools in another predominantly Muslim settlement in East Delhi in 2004–05. This was funded by the Templeton, Fordham and Goodrich Foundations. The findings were again presented as reiterating those of the Hyderabad study and confirming the ‘high quality’ and efficiency of low-cost schools as compared to government schools (ibid). Academics have also not critically engaged with the methodology used for assessment of students in low-cost private and government schools. For instance, it would be important to see whether the tests administered repeatedly to students in these studies and the results obtained from them are appropriate indicators of learning, or lack of it, in these schools.

Studies specifically aimed at policy changes in government schooling and for state-funded vouchers to support private school choice were initiated from as early as 2005. These used a controlled/experimental design so that the ‘impact’ of the intervention (school vouchers, contract teachers and so on) could be measured. One of the major

studies was the Andhra Pradesh Randomised Evaluation Study (APRESt) carried out by the World Bank in partnership with Azim Premji Foundation and the Government of Andhra Pradesh. It aimed to evaluate the ‘most promising’ among the following policy options in government schools: a) Performance pay for teachers; b) Use of contract teachers; and c) Provision of cash grants to schools.²² The longitudinal (five year) study used a research design that ‘randomly’ assigned units in ‘control’ and ‘treatment groups’. The evaluation of the project was to be done by Kremer and Muralidharan (Harvard University) and Sundaraman (World Bank).²³

In a paper published in 2011, Muralidharan finds ‘consistently positive and significant impacts of the individual teacher incentive program on student learning outcomes across all durations of program exposure’ (2011: 1). Even if it is accepted that students’ test scores in the intervention schools improved significantly, it is not clear what changes in ‘teacher performance’ led to these results. The study also shows that teacher presence or teaching activity in the classroom did not differ within the intervention as compared to the control schools. To quote Muralidharan himself, ‘Particularly, over 5 years of measurement through unannounced visits to schools, *we find no difference in teacher attendance between control and incentive schools. We also find no significant difference between incentive and control schools on any of the various indicators of classroom processes as measured by direct observation*’ (2011:17–18; emphasis mine). He goes on to say that ‘unprompted questions about what they did differently during the school year, indicate that teachers in incentive schools are significantly more likely to have assigned more homework and class work, conducted extra classes beyond regular school hours, given practice tests, and paid special attention to weaker children...’ (2011: 17–18). In other words, classroom observations by researchers indicate that the curriculum transaction and pedagogic processes remained the same in both ‘control’ and incentive schools. If indeed the ‘unprompted’ responses of teachers are to be taken seriously, it appears that performance pay has merely encouraged individual teachers to engage in after-school practices: provide extra teaching (more likely to be paid tuition), increase the burden of homework and give more practice tests. This raises disturbing questions about the nature of school reforms and changes in teacher behaviour envisioned by APRESt. Further, for the reader familiar with Indian society, this is truly a *context free*

²²<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EDUCATION/Resources/278200-1121703274255/1439264-1178054414297/karthikmuralidharan.pdf> (Accessed, February 2009)

²³ Ibid.

study. Except for Andhra Pradesh being mentioned a couple of times, there is nothing that remotely suggests that this is a study done in specific schools/villages in a state in India – it could be a study anywhere in the world. The manner in which poverty, caste, class, gender and region mediate learning within specific school contexts are not touched upon at all. Neither the perspective nor the framework that informs the study or its research design allows for any of these concerns to be addressed.

Also included in APRESt was the Andhra Pradesh School Choice Project where recipients of scholarships (in the nature of vouchers) and schools (read private) they chose would be evaluated. The control group was to include children who had applied for but did not receive the scholarship in the selected villages. The project proposal specifically states: ‘Thus *policies that hope to leverage the existence of private schools for universal quality education need to be designed on the basis of rigorous evidence regarding the relative performance of public and private schools. The Andhra Pradesh School Choice Project aims to provide such evidence*’.²⁴(Emphasis mine) However, evaluation of the project showed that voucher winners who shifted from government to private schools did not outperform those students who failed to win the voucher lottery and remained in government schools. Muralidharan and Sundaraman(2013) acknowledge that ‘at the end of two and four years of the program, we find that voucher winners had slightly lower scores on Telugu and Math than lottery losers... (all four point estimates are negative but none of them are significant...). They have higher scores in English (though significant only in the 2-year estimates ...). *The average programme impact across the three subjects that were assessed at the end of 2-years was close to zero* (2013:17; emphasis mine)

In 2010, another five-yearlong study (randomised control trial) was conducted to assess the ‘impact’ of school choice/vouchers on pupils who attend low-cost private schools (as compared to a control government school group). The study was funded by ARK for Kids (founding partner of STIR India and on the board of STIR Education) under its programme ENABLE (Ensure Access to Better Learning Experiences) in the slums of Shahdara, East Delhi, where ARK is located. In 2011, ARK India launched a study of the impact of its English Literacy Programme (ASPIRE) which uses synthetic phonics and Genki English. The ARK web site reports that Dixon, advisor, trainer and evaluator of the programme, carried out ‘multilevel modeling’ and found that ‘children studying within ASPIRE programme outperformed those who did no (sic) significantly in

²⁴<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EDUCATION/Resources/278200-1121703274255/1439264-1178054414297/karthikmuralidharan.pdf> (Accessed, February 2009).

reading and speaking English'.²⁵ These are 'findings' from studies that are not in the public domain and are yet to be subjected to critical academic scrutiny.

Studies aimed specifically at testing the waters for investments in private schools/chains have also been carried out. The PI and GMC (2010) study for LCPS and education service providers has already been mentioned. M-CRIL (2010) carried out a study of 35 'affordable private schools' in Hyderabad city to 'develop a rating/assessment tool for private schools geared to the children of low income households in India (p: iii). The Omega School Foundation was established as a 'non-profit' (tax exempt) and non-governmental organisations in 2009, barely a year after the Omega schools were founded in Kenya. Some of the areas that the foundation is researching are:

What low-cost methods could create quality lesson plans that could be used in low-cost private schools? What low-cost methods could be instituted that would significantly raise the standards of teaching and learning in low-cost private schools? Could a computer lab for self- and peer-learning be introduced into the low-cost private schools without any significant premium on fees to parents?²⁶

The importance of generating evidence to build a neo-liberal discourse on private education and school choice, for advocacy to effect changes in education policy as well as to project attractive school markets for prospective investors is quite clear. It is surprising that researchers and educators in India have not interrogated the framework and methodology that informs such research and their findings. This needs to be done urgently.

Conclusions

In the foregoing discussion I have drawn attention to poverty and education, focusing in particular on the unregulated private school sector in India. I have shown how over the last decade trans-national and local advocacy networks have been projecting the low-cost unrecognised schools market in India as a cost efficient, high quality and equitable solution to the education of the poor. This sector has also been showcased as a site for viable business options. The advocacy is driven by powerful financial and political (pro market) interests that are couched within a neo-liberal discourse of schools markets for the poor and are attempting to change education policy in India.

The most serious and questionable aspect of the low-cost private school advocacy

²⁵ <http://egwestcentre.com/research>. (Accessed July 2014)

²⁶ <http://www.omega-schools.com/foundation-overview.php> (Accessed, April 2012).

and edu-business is the deliberate misconstruction of ‘good quality education’ for the poor in increasingly minimalistic terms to ensure greater profits. Education that is projected as ‘good’ for poor/low income groups is minimalistic in terms of the role of the teacher, and curriculum transacted, with the ‘quality’ of these processes demonstrated in terms of narrow learner outcomes. Of particular concern is the aggressive advocacy for creating the deskilled teacher of the poor through training models such as ‘para-skilling’ where young people are drilled and directed to perform the role of teachers who will transact a narrow set of standardised, homogenised and mechanical skills under tight management controls. Strategies to ‘teacher proof’ the school to ensure that the teacher herself does not matter, innovations to make the school free of the teacher and suggest that poor children can be left with a computer to learn on their own, and advocacy for performance pay for teachers are examples of the extent to which education which is blatantly inequitable can be packaged as ‘good quality’ at the lowest of costs. Built into low-cost school advocacy are also concerted attempts to de-professionalise, de-skill and underpay (and thereby exploit) teachers of the poor. As also discussed, some corporate players in the low-cost schools market are simultaneously offering middle and elite sections of Indian society a qualitatively different package of education: K-12, well resourced schools that will yield high profits. These trends are not merely reflective of a democratic and ethical deficit in the business of schooling in India but also what Gorski(2008) calls ‘classism’ – the exercise by the upper/middle classes of economic and social power and privilege. The implications are detrimental for social justice in and through education for poor and marginal groups.

The role of powerful networks in constructing and disseminating what Ball (2012) calls ‘new narratives’ about what counts as ‘good’ education’ in this instance, for the poor, is also clear. Considerable importance is given to validate these narratives through the generation of ‘rigorous evidence’ and sophisticated analysis carried out by researchers with a stamp of ‘prestigious’ educational institutions in the US and UK. Studies are largely ‘impact assessments’ using controlled/randomised designs in which a key component is repeatedly subjecting pupils to a battery of standardised tests on specific skills. The results of such studies are without exception shown as favourable to low-cost schools and the findings are used by transnational advocacy networks to influence policy and promote education businesses despite the fact that ‘evidence’ on the quality as equity advantage of low-cost schools is weak. As Ball observes, ‘the network members embody and disseminate narratives of enterprise and enterprising solutions to social and educational problems’ (2010:159). These ‘solutions’ are shaping education for

the poor and need to be critically interrogated.

In my view, the RTE (2009) is today the main hurdle in the path of LCPS advocacy and edu-business precisely because it lays down the essential norms for education of quality and a good teacher and profit making from schooling is declared illegal. The last two years have seen the spread and consolidation of networks to pressurise the state so that budget private schools are not obstructed by the RTE. One of the strategies is to raise the 'image' and 'voice' of unregulated/unrecognized private schools and prove (through 'research') that professionally untrained teachers are creating low-cost MI that can improve the quality of schooling and that simple models can change teacher mind sets. Efforts are underway to 'embed' and up-scale these low-cost MI and models in government schools—as evidence that the state is persuaded about the good quality of unregulated schools and teachers and hence RTE norms need not be applicable to them.

It is also important to look more critically at the state sector and its complicit role in failing to stem the deteriorating quality of education in government schools catering to the poor as well as in pro-actively encouraging the privatisation and casualisation of public education through PPP.²⁷ A blind eye has also been turned to enforcing the regulation of unrecognised private schools. Policy makers and politicians appear equally complicit in facilitating for-profit elementary school markets that are being aggressively advocated and are also buying into the discourses of denigration of the entire public school system and its teachers. The public school system still plays a key role in the education of a majority of children in India and efforts must be brought together to strengthen it. The RTE Act offers an opportunity to make the state accountable as its provisions are legally obligatory and justiciable.

Children in poverty (and we are looking at a majority of Indian children) experience multiple deprivations such as ill health, hunger, malnutrition, violence and insecurity as well neglected school environments. Intersecting disadvantages from structures of deprivation and devalued identities of caste, ethnicity, minority status, gender and regional backwardness are likely to adversely affect children's access to

²⁷ Programmes supported by corporate foundations that are being 'up-scaled' in government schools under PPP at the elementary stage include *Gyanshala* which is based on the para-skilling model and *Teach for India* which places professionally untrained youth as 'teachers' in schools for a duration of time after which they move on with their careers. See <http://www.affordable-learning.com/research-fieldwork/case-studies-stories/gyan-shala.html#sthash.igmKy49U.dpbs>; www.teachforindia.org (Accessed July 2014).

education and participation in schools as well as their sense of self worth and dignity, which are critical to learning. Ladson-Billings (2006: 106) may be speaking of India when she says, ‘We lack complex understandings of how individuals, family, community, school and societal factors interact to create school failure for some students.’ It is this complexity, particularly in relation to poverty disadvantage and learning, that teacher education in India must engage with and professionally equip teachers to address in their classrooms. In other words, education should be re-visioned from the standpoint of the poor and marginalised.

If the educational rights of children are to be protected, the purpose of education must be revisited, informed by a perspective of social justice. Such a perspective must go beyond the mere distribution of educational opportunities to ask how socially just the quality of education as well the social relations that constitute it, are. Here, it is pertinent to remember that Gramsci who highlighted the need for ‘organic intellectuals’ of the working classes opposed reforms that would merely give them narrow skills in the name of ‘active education’ (1998). He underscored that education must mean that every ‘citizen’ can govern and that society places him, even if only abstractly, in a general condition to achieve this’ (ibid: 40). Closer home, we have Phule who ‘re-imagines education as the *Trutiya Ratna* (third eye) that has the possibilities to enable the oppressed to understand and transforms the relation between power and knowledge’ (Rege, 2010:93). Ambedkar was also looking towards an education that would help build and deepen social democracy when he exhorted the dalits to ‘educate, agitate and organize’ (GoM, 1982). He observed that, ‘The backward classes have come to realize that after all education is the greatest material benefit for which they can fight. We may forgo material benefits of civilization but we cannot forego our rights and opportunities to reap the benefits of the highest education to the fullest extent and emphasises “the importance of this question from the point of view of the backward classes who have just realized that without education their existence is not safe”’ (ibid:62, cited by Mungekar, n.d). It is important for researchers and educators to understand the possibilities for carrying out this vision and resist subversions of it.

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