

**Inauguration of Branch Office, India**  
**14 February, 2015**

**Panel Discussion on**

**Education for the Poor:**  
**The Politics of Poverty and Social Justice**

*A concept note*

Academic debates in education are often tied quite closely to policy considerations. While this is in and of itself not a serious limitation, the narrowness of this gaze not only becomes more evident but paradoxically also more paralyzing at moments in which legal battles have been won, but fundamental issues of social justice still remain unresolved with the terrain of education for the poor becoming more complicated. This appears to be the current scenario in India, as the Right to Education has on the one hand guaranteed all children free and compulsory schooling, but on the other considerations of equity have taken a more complex character. Fundamental to this complexity are the rise of performance-based testing as a new measure of school performance; teachers having become increasingly marginal to the imagination of schooling; the rapid rise of private low-cost schools; a naïve understanding of gender and education; and the relation between schooling and vocational training, to name a few. Popular imagination around education for the poor appears to be dominated by the discourse on ‘access’ and often tends to tie this to a simplistic reading of its translation into ‘opportunity’ and ‘mobility’ in the lives of lower-caste and tribal children and their communities. Given that

the rhetoric used in all of these popular, corporate philanthropic and more market-driven efforts is equality of performance, and that pointing to the lack of success of these efforts might not necessarily serve as an effective counter narrative, how do we think aloud on the perplexing dilemmas thrown up by our present moment's intense focus on the right to education for the poor? How do we take into consideration the specificity of our current historical conjecture, on how different forces have come together, in order to create a new terrain on which a new politics of education must come up?

First, any well-developed critique of the current situation would need to open up a more fundamental discussion on what constitutes education for the poor and bring into focus the difference between 'instruction' and 'education' as developed by Gramsci as part of his concern in developing intellectuals from the working-class. Currently debates on curriculum and pedagogy appear to circulate separately within class-specific contexts: hence, policy considerations around 'access' have focused on a variety of pedagogic strategies that variously attempt to make learning more 'fun' while debates on the content of textbooks and the attendant classroom practices appear to be the domain of more middle-class anxieties around the student's performance at an examination. Is there anything in the very framing of our curricular and pedagogic debates that has allowed for the rise of 'measurement' as an acceptable index of equity? How does 'measurement' depoliticize discussions on the kind of knowledge that has historically been represented in debates on curriculum and pedagogy? And how do we raise these more ideological differences between 'instruction' and 'education' in the face of the enduring stigma of non-performing public schools

and the redress that the efficiency of ‘measurement’ popularly represents? How do we salvage the central role the trained teacher can and should exercise in classroom instruction in the light of new imaginations around teacher training, the apparent inclusion of issues of caste/race and gender in these trainings, and the rise of modular instructional materials?

Second, what would be the right kinds of questions we would need to ask to capture the current tensions between educational qualifications, job opportunities and social mobility in the light of the rapidly growing informal labour sector? More recently, several Indian economists in attempting to explain the paradox between high growth rates and the expanding informal sector have analysed the Indian economy as thriving on a deliberate inability to accommodate a majority of the country’s population in the formal sector. They have characterised the Indian economy as a post-industrial global economy which works through two parallel registers of ‘accumulation’ and ‘need’, and discussed ‘accumulation’ as an exclusionary apparatus centered around creating surplus wealth for industrial development, which continues to rely on primitive accumulation as a constitutive element of postcolonial capitalism. For the majority of the population, who cannot be accommodated within the ‘accumulation’ economy, the governmental apparatus of ‘planning’ offers limited economic relief, a subsistence living that supplements their low wages but is never adequate to propel them outside of futures within the growing informal sector. How do we begin to address the paradox of this apparent structural, and largely class-specific, settlement of poor children’s futures at the very moment that their right to education has been guaranteed? How do we understand and

engage with the politics of education and the asymmetries of power that are being played out? What can we learn from Dalit, anti-apartheid and feminist mobilizations around issues of social justice that have more centrally addressed the class-specific resolutions that the discourses on rights usually produce, without necessarily giving up on the liberatory potential that a 'right' to education contains?

**Speakers:**

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**Krishna Kumar**, Professor, Department of Education, University of Delhi and Former Director, National Council for Educational Research and Training

**Crain Soudien**, Professor, Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Former Director, School of Education, University of Cape Town

**Chair and Moderator:**

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