

The death of a school in Delhi

The Right to Education Act imposes a statist vision of education on India



Illustration: Jayachandran/Mint

Some days ago at a former school in New Delhi, sandwiched between a garbage dump and ramshackle living quarters, students and teachers gathered to reminisce about what their place of learning gave them. The private school, located in a slum in Okhla—an industrial area—shut down more than two decades after it opened doors and thousands of children passed through its portals. Ironically, the school's fate was sealed after the implementation of the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009, a law enacted with the promise of leaving no child without access to a school.

Broadly, India's school education system faces two problems: those of quantity and quality. The quality story is complex and involves historical legacies of neglect, under-provision of inputs and sociological problems that defy easy untangling. The RTE Act tries to address the quantity problem, but six years later, there is anecdotal evidence that it is doing a bad job of that as well.

The case of the school in Okhla, run by Deepalaya, a non-governmental organization—is illustrative. Section 18 of the law prohibits any school from functioning unless it is recognized by the government. Recognition in Delhi (under the Delhi School Education Act, 1973) requires that schools own the land they operate on. This school is run on land owned by the Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board. The fines imposed for running an unrecognized school are prohibitive. On paper this is a step that appears positive. Recognition by government is an essential quality control measure to ensure that schools don't reduce to mere tuition shops. The gap between the ideal and what happens on the ground is often so wide that the purpose is defeated. There is another, more perverse, consequence of this section: it drastically limits the choices available to parents and children for attending school.

This is a bugbear for many educationists who believe that unless India creates a common school system for all children, education in government schools will continue to be of poor quality. The economic motivation for this is based on the distinction between exit and voice made by the American economist Albert Hirschman. The argument is that if exit is an option for children then better-off parents will send their children to good schools while the poor will be left in badly run schools. If, in contrast, the exit option is denied, then the mass of parents and children in a common school system will raise their voice to improve the quality of education.

The Okhla school is a neat demonstrator of the limitations of such theories. Its location and the income background of the children who attended the school showed that it catered almost entirely to the poor. There is a government-run school not very far away that was not exactly popular. The burden of voice in this case would lie almost totally on working-class parents who have no wherewithal to push for quality in a government school. The closure of the private school ended up harming the interests of the poor. Surely even poor citizens are entitled to choice. But then, choice is a bad idea in India's still socialist educational landscape. Better-off parents—let us not hide behind words: the elite—will send their children to schools that poor citizens can only dream of. Socialism, as always, is for the poor only.

Undoing these pernicious laws requires much more than just legislative sanction. The first step has to be an understanding that choice in schooling is an essential part of improving educational outcomes. It is no one's case that government schools be shut down: that is not a solution at all. But shorn of competition, government schools will never be able to improve quality. As legally enforced monopolies they will hold parents and children to mercy, as all monopolies do. Think hard about the fundamental barriers to equality of opportunity in India and you will discover that poor quality of education is almost at par with access to education. For India's poor citizens to cross these twin trenches is too much to ask for.

Should parents have a choice of the school where they send their children? Tell us at views@livemint.com

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