Battle for Schools
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Abstract

Even after more than half a century of India’s independence the real battle for schools to accommodate our children remains still illusive. The paradox however is, the country is celebrating the growth of its economy and its growing power as a key international player. One hardly ponders over the real issue of our children working as child labour, who are out of schools and yet, remains tolerant of the existing condition of the children in workplaces. This is also manifested in the kind of arguments people make and their misinformed perception that poor parents don’t want to send their children to schools. Perhaps, this has been the reason of this alienation of the children for long. Schools also remain unprepared or rather unmindful of the challenge of accepting the children of the poor parents. The government is also half hearted in it policies and in providing the required infrastructure to schools to accommodate these children. In fact, there is a failure of the whole system which excludes the children, and therefore the solution is beyond the local. The factors that hinder the children form going to schools need to be addressed. Here, issues of ‘access’, ‘distance’ and the functions of the schools in a developing country like India with higher percentage of poor need to be redefined. The education system should be able to reach out to the poor and the gap between the household and the schools in terms of culture, attitude be narrowed. Only then, our children will be in the reckoning and enjoy their entitled rights. Therefore, the real battle for schools has to be won and return the children their due rights and prepare them for a bright future.

1The article is based on a lecture delivered by Prof. Shantha Sinha, Director MV Foundation, 201, Narayan Apartments, West Marredpally, Secunderabad-500026 at the India International Centre, New Delhi under NCERT-IIC lecture series on 3.7.2006.
Struggle of the Poor for their Entitlement to Education

I thank the NCERT and the India International Centre for giving me this opportunity to share some of my views on the education and the battle for schools. This is particularly important, now when India is in a mood of celebration as it makes strides in economic development and growth, winning accolade, world over for showing up a great performance in the global economy. The market in India is bouncing. Does it mean that children will no longer have to work? Is it the defining moment for the system to listen to the voices of the poor and make education a reality for every child? Can we seize this opportunity to give children freedom through education?

Exploitation of children and being out of schools

Millions of children in our country do not go to schools. Instead, they become subject to untold misery and hardship, working at farms and in factories; in sweatshops and at homes. They live lives of drudgery, surviving against all odds—uncared for, unprotected and unnoticed.

It is seldom appreciated that much of the lives of ordinary citizens in our country are so integral to the lives of poor children and their sweat and toil. It is their long hours of work, under conditions of total submission and servility, without any support, fear of abuse, insults and humiliation, risks to health they work for our upkeep. In fact the ‘roti, kapda and makaan’ (food, clothing and shelter) in our lives must have child labour at some stage or the other in the production chain which are local and global at times.

Young girls work under scorching heat, with blistering sore feet dug into the marshy land; these children do the sowing, weeding, harvesting of vegetables, lentils, cooking oils and all the food we relish. When they are not working in the fields they are burdened with the monotony of work at home—cooking, fetching water, carrying siblings and doing all the domestic chores. Children are also engaged in tending to cattle, sheep, goats, in fishing and work in the poultry, contributing to producing milk and milk products, and all other food items. Children’s labour is mixed in most of the food we eat in our country.

The clothes we wear too breathe child labour. Hundreds and thousands of children work in production of hybrid cotton seeds, wrapped in violence, embedded in worn out bodies, nausea of daily lives, knocking headaches, giddiness and mental depression, waste childhood toiling relentlessly and getting burnt under heat and dust.

The cotton ginning mills, handloom weaving looms as well as the spinning machines and power looms too employ children. The silk one wears, and the process of sericulture has an abundance of children working in damp, dark, poorly ventilated, and have loud, deafening music playing in the background.

Our homes, offices, business centres, entertainment places, in fact every building owes its creation to children and at the cost of their childhood. With growing demand in the building and construction industry, children leave their villages to work on sites without water, sanitation and
shelter, around brick kilns lifting head loads, brick by brick on the head and piling clay moulds to bake under the blazing sun.

The homes of most middle and upper classes too depend on young girls and boys working as domestic servants. They are either full time workers trafficked from their homes or part time workers living with their parents in the same town. There is an undercurrent of suspicion about their honesty and they are rebuked more often than not for being lax and untidy in their chores.

Lacking a societal norm in favour of their right to education, multitudes of children are in the work force as child labour.

There is a lack of societal shock or outrage that children are out of school and are at work. Tolerance of child labour is explicit in all arguments, beginning with the position that poor families depend on children for their livelihood. “*How can families manage without the income earned by the children?*” This question is repeatedly asked by almost every section in the society and also by policy making bodies — dealing with protection of children and child rights — operating at the local, national and global levels. It is even suggested that arrangements must be where children can work and learn at the same time. (A kind of win-win situation where both children and their families benefit.)

Elaborations of such a view can be seen in the kind of questions that often get raised: “*Aren’t poor children better off acquiring skills on the job? Schools are bad and the quality of education poor, is it not a waste of time to go to schools?*” In fact, it is also stated that being in schools would only alienate children from their surroundings and render them useless to the community that they belong to. “*Would they not be better off if they had a learning process that reintegrates them into their society and culture?*” In a way, such arguments imply that children can continue to work till solutions are found to resolve all the issues.

A poor parent’s decision to send the child to school is predicated, and pre-decided, by an atmosphere that repeatedly states that they are too ambitious and impractical in intending to do so. These values and attitudes seep through all layers of society with such ease that they are internalised by the parents themselves. Parents cannot take education of their children for granted and have to, in fact, even offer explanations for sending their children to school, something that is otherwise considered normal.

**Parental demand for schools**

Poor parents are sending their children to schools and we are witnessing an explosive demand for education in the country today with 75% of all school-going children in India attending government schools. In fact in nine States of India over 90% of all school-going children attend government schools.¹ Almost all these States are regions that are considered backward in all respects. They are the ‘Hindi belt’, the tribal pockets, the dry land monsoon fed

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¹ Punjab 99.9%, Bihar 99.3%, Tripura 97.3%, Jharkhand 96.5%, Assam 96.2%, Orissa 96%, Haryana 95.7%, Himachal Pradesh 90.2%, and Sikkim 90%
agricultural zones and so on. With unwavering faith in education, they persistently send children to school, making enormous sacrifices in the process.

There are innumerable examples of poor children who have persisted in schools even though schools were inadequate both in terms of infrastructure and sensitivity. This yearning among the poor parents to send their children to schools even if there are not enough classrooms or schoolteachers, even when there is no drinking water or toilets, and even if the children are not treated well is never adequately explained.

In fact, several millions of them are literally paying through their nose to get what they consider a proper education in the English medium private schools. Those who cannot make this are content with sending their children to the government schools.

What is important therefore is to pose the question why even today many children belonging to poor families go to schools, the same schools that are castigated as being ill equipped and providing irrelevant education? They do so because they value education. They realize that they can beat the cycle of deprivation, marginalisation and poverty only if their child is in school.

It is in understanding the answers to this question that the true insight into the thought processes that govern the parents in poor families emerges and a measure of the latent demand for education can be made. The view that the poor cannot send their children to schools results in distracting attention from the often heroic attempts made by parents to send their children to schools and in retaining them there.

**School Governance and exclusion of first generation learners and child labour**

For those of us who have taken education for granted and send our children to school as a matter of habit a new academic session means new books, school uniforms shoes, school bags, lunch boxes, and arrangements for transport. It means new resolves to do well this year and give children all support to see them through as good students. For the poor children, who have never been to school before but studied through the residential bridge course camps, or those who have long absented from school and want to get back, and those withdrawn from labour force, a new academic year is a nightmare. It is full of anxiety and fear, having to cross hurdles, convincing the school authorities that they too deserve to be in schools. It is a wait for the defining moment to be in a school as a student.

It is far less complicated for the ten to twelve year olds to defy local authorities and power structures and be released as bonded labourer than to be accepted as students in the present education system. It seems that even for the girls rebelling at home using all the weapons of resistance they have, like sulking, crying, not eating and not talking virtually offering individual satyagraha was relatively uncomplicated than having the school accommodate them. Schools are unmindful of the difficulties the girls had to endure to escape getting married, even seek divorce through community, combat gender discrimination and assert their rights to education. Instead of supporting older children to embark on a journey of self-discovery, the
schools often think of them as a burden and work out ways of pushing them out of the system. They are just not ready for the backlog of children aspiring to join schools.

Thus, once they enter the portals of the schools there are innumerable pressures on them for payment of all kinds of charges to the school, for school fees, maintenance, sports, library and so on. Many of them being poor can ill afford such expenditures. In spite of the fact that most State governments have issued orders that no child be denied admission for want of birth certificates, caste certificates, transfer certificates, income certificates and so on, the schools have not taken such government orders and circulars seriously. Schools continue to throw them out because of inadequate documentation. This is more so in the upper primary and high school levels. In many instances, older children have been asked to take entrance and eligibility tests to qualify for re-admission into schools. If they did not qualify the rigors of such tests, the schools have unceremoniously rejected them to fend for themselves, instead of taking the children and preparing them for the class they ought to be in. Added to this, the language the children speak, their cultural background and family circumstances are all considered as being unsophisticated and therefore these children are made to feel unwanted.

There are many ways in which schools make it difficult for a child to survive in the system. All the rules governing the procedures at the school level including admission, transfer and so on have been developed for a situation where all children come to school as a matter of habit. Since the poor are culturally not equipped to handle schools, the formal and informal systems of school management, which have evolved over a period of time, seem intricate to them. For example, the poor lack the skill to get birth certificates, medical certificates, income and caste certificates, which need dealing with more than one government department. They are much less familiar with the rules of examination, attendance, promotion, procurement of transfer certificates and so on. Thus poor parents are easily intimidated and often even the most benign rules and regulations appear deviously intractable and seem to have been formulated for the sole purpose of preventing the child from joining or continuing in school.

**Systematic Processes of Exclusion of Poor**

Schools remain unprepared to accept poor children and making it easy and less painful for them as it functions in an environment where children’s right to education is considered unachievable. Therefore, it does not matter if half the country’s children end up outside the school. This non-seriousness of the school is reflected in making the poor child’s survival in the school system a daily struggle. The result: there is no guarantee that children would continue to do so without any disruption till they finish elementary school or the 10th grade. The girl child’s survival in school is even more precarious, as the social atmosphere condones her being illiterate. Let me start with the 27 million children in India who joined in Class 1 in 1993 of whom only 10 million children reached up to class 10, which is about 37% of those who ventured into the school system. In more than half the states in the country, only 30% of children actually reached up to class 10. A whopping number of 17 million children in just one batch were pushed out and some would have graduated to be called ‘10th class failed’ which is an euphemism for all school dropouts after middle schools in the country. In almost all the states, girls fared worse than boys.
It is so easy to explain away this ‘failure’ as the ‘failure’ of the child. It is seldom recognised that it is the failure of the school system itself. The number of children who reach up to classes 8 or 10 is in proportion to the actual capacity of the schools to absorb them. It is anticipated that all children who join in first class do not necessarily continue up to class ten and thus provision is made for only ten to twenty percent of children to reach up to class ten. There are just not enough upper primary and high schools. Therefore, the number of children who survive the school system settles down to the proportion of schools that are actually available and children are pushed out. In other words, the child’s survival in the school system up to class 10 is not by design but an accident or like winning a lottery ticket.

Even if one looked at the decade in the 90’s when District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) was taken to scale and now the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), all planning was for universalisation of primary education dealing with primary education first. As if children need not go to the next level of learning. A message that it is OK if children studied up to class five alone is deeply engrained in the system. It is felt that planning for all levels simultaneously and ensuring that all children up to at least 14 years are in school is impractical. Translated, an argument of impracticality means that the government is unwilling to make investments in education beyond class five. How unfair that class five is the maximum most children attain just because the movement of children from one stage to the next is not being seen as an organic whole. Such a half hearted policy has resulted in denial of children, their right to education and also in inefficiency and wastage.

At a more operational level the incapacity to supply all that is necessary to keep children in schools pushes children out of the system. All of us know when a new academic session begins. It is not like the monsoons where there has to be a prediction of the same. Yet, year after year there is a delay in textbooks reaching on the day of reopening of school. There are also not enough subject-wise teachers. Certainly not in English and Mathematics! This leads to hardly fifty percent of the lessons being done. It is not reasonable to expect that children would learn without teachers even if some children are self-taught and somehow survive.

I must here mention how when the issue of lack of teachers is mentioned, the importance of computers is brought up and the discussion soon revolves around the digital divide. One is not against bridging of any divide, let alone the digital divide. Years ago, when the issue of teacher shortage was discussed, there were solutions offered in terms of giving radio lessons to poor children. This is somewhat similar except that the technology has become different.

Thus the issue of inadequate supplies is never allowed to be raised or discussed. As if the problem is of the schoolteachers and the poor parents, and that, the authorities need not have anything to do to resolve these issues.

We find that not many children make it to the class ten board examinations. Schools are pulled up for bad results and are assessed on the basis of percentage of children passing the board examinations. Because of which, children are discouraged from appearing for the class ten examinations and most are held back in ninth class itself. I thought this happened only in schools in Andhra Pradesh, till I read a newspaper report of school results in Mumbai the current academic session. It stated that due to the pressure on the schools to show 100% only those
children who were sure to make it were promoted to class ten or even given the hall tickets. The pressure to show good results excludes children batch after batch by stealth.

Any honest assessment of why children failed would show that neither the school, nor its teachers nor children are at fault. It is the failure and superciliousness of the system that stands on judgment of school and seeks accountability without giving them any facility to perform. It is the failure of the system and the solution is beyond the local. Instead of making demands on the system for better facilities and infrastructure the schoolteachers look for ways to exclude poor children and victimise them further. This is an easier option than making demands on the system for better conditions of work. The school authorities at the higher levels on the other hand pretend that they have no role or responsibility to sort out the problems encountered by poor children and that in fact they have provided for every thing and the fault lies with the school teachers.

Winning the battle for schools

There is a need to change our way of seeing reality. We must begin to acknowledge that the poor are making wholehearted efforts to send their children to school. There is such a mismatch between parental aspirations and the half-hearted policies that are unwilling to recognise and respond to parental demand for education. In the name of being practical they make plans in a piecemeal fashion, saying ‘lets do primary education’ first or lets focus on removing children engaged in the ‘worst forms of child labour first’. Translated into action it means that the older child who is out of school would have no redemption as she is now too old, (10 years old!) and it is perfectly all right for the younger child who is asked to come to school to not go beyond class 5.

Yet the debate on access continues as if the problem is about the inability of the poor to access schools. While in reality access is the ability of the education system to recognise the yearning of the poor for education and not giving up on them that they simply aren’t interested. Access is to be defined as the capacity of the system to reach out to the poor and in making all arrangements to get children into schools and keeping them there. It means heralding changes in the school governance system and consequently in the processes of teaching and learning within the classroom. It is responding to the silent struggle for schools in the hope that one day the education system would learn to respect them and their children.

Neither is distance to schools measured in terms of physical distance, and making school available at every kilometre or having the school next door. The poor have seldom made such a demand. Distance is measured in terms of the gap between the household and the school in terms of culture, attitudes and the insensitivity to children belonging to the poor. Removing distance or coming closer would mean anticipating all the barriers that the poor children encounter and in making children feel wanted.

The function of schools in the context of developing societies where a large number of children remain out of school too needs to be redefined. When children are out of school they can never be reached out to. Their lives of tension and tribulations, their exploitative conditions of living, the violence and suffering they endure in the family and at work place, if the child is a girl, then their gender discrimination and the issue of early child marriages all go unnoticed.
Once they are in schools they are in the reckoning and thus can gain access to all the rights they are entitled to as children.

Schools like any other educational institution is also instrumental in democratising distribution of all those resources [technical and social skills, certificates, general capacities] which help improve the life chances of those who survive in the system. Since it is only by going to schools that the children’s capabilities are enhanced and eventually as adults there is a possibility of new choices and opportunities for them. Stated differently, schools become institutions that break the intergenerational cycle of poverty and deprivation. Children no longer grow up to become what their parents did as marginalized and vulnerable workers. In fact even during the process of their children gaining access to schools the families of the poor witness a change in their lifestyle and mode of thinking and living their daily lives and these families cease to reproduce the same values and culture, which keep them marginalized. They begin to assert and question with greater confidence and take informed decisions. This gives them an access to cultural capital. Schools thus become the first step towards equity. Consequently the process of democratisation of schools results in the process of democratisation of the society.

It is only when children attend schools and are exposed to a world of ideas and knowledge they gain the power to negotiate with authorities, the confidence to bargain effectively for their share in the national resources and all the accoutrements that are necessary to live a life with dignity and self-esteem. School is a site for contestation of power.

In a more immediate sense schools are the only institutions, which can keep children out of work and abolish child labour. Thus schools perform a radical function as they become protector of child rights. In fact the right place for children to be in is the school. And therefore the battle for schools must be won!