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Learning curbs

Jawaharlal Nehru did a huge amount for education in India. He gave us the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), the Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs), the Indian Statistical Institute (ISI) and much else. Yet, for a man whose birthday is celebrated as Children's Day, he had relatively little to do with primary schooling. The first Five Year Plan allocated just about Rs 12 crore for investment in primary education, out of a total planned outlay of over R2,000 crore. This was not because he did not care about children - quite the contrary - but he did not see it as a problem that needed immediate external intervention.

Like many free market economists, with whom he had little else in common, Nehru seemed to believe that people will find a way to get their children educated. The free market view is, of course, that the market will supply what is needed, while Nehru probably thought in terms of community run schools, or non-governmental organisations (NGOs), but the underlying principle is the same - parents know what is good for their children and are willing to do it.

At one level, one might think that this is borne out by the facts: most children are now in school and an increasing fraction of poor parents are somehow managing to send their children to a new breed of cheap private schools that are mushrooming all over the country. What better evidence could we have for parental activism?

There is just one central problem with this rosy view - the children are not learning. The Annual Status of Education Report (Aser) results, year after year, tell us that just under half the children in Class 5 cannot read a Class 2 text and the results in mathematics are even worse.

There are, of course, many reasons why learning lags behind: these days there is a lot of talk about the (many) failings of the government schools. One study found that government teachers actually teach only about half the total number of hours that they are supposed to be teaching. Private schools do much better on teacher attendance, and parents often cite that as a reason for favouring them.

Unfortunately, private schools don't do much better than government schools in terms of getting the average child to learn. It is, of course, true that the average results are better but then parents who send their children to private school are richer and/or more committed to their children's education. To compare like with like, Rukmini Banerji and her co-authors, compare siblings of the same gender. This is not ideal, because it is likely that the sibling who is favoured enough to be sent to private school is also favoured in other ways (say in terms of how much time they get to study), but even this limited correction reduces the gains from going to private school very substantially. What remains is a

smallish increment, smaller, for example, than the gain from attending a summer camp taught by government teachers in Bihar.

Why don't private schools deliver more to the average student? This is a difficult question to answer in full, but my guess, based on everything that I know, is that a part of the story is very simple: Everyone in the system - teachers, parents or administrators - share the premise that the education is not meant to benefit the average student in the average school. The goal of education, in this view, is to permit the most successful students to get through the difficult exams that get thrown at them and hit the jackpot of a government job or a place in an engineering school. The rest, unavoidably, will just drop out.

Therefore, the teacher, be it in government schools or private, cannot afford to pay attention to the many lost faces in his class, those kids who never learnt to read properly and now have to endure science or civics. He has to keep going, covering the syllabus at breakneck speed so that the few students who can keep up can make it to the line of victory. This is what parents expect of him, what makes his bosses happy.

Yet, there is no evidence that education only benefits those who make it to the top. In fact, to the extent that there is any evidence, it seems like the gains from getting to Class 4 rather than never going to school, are in proportional terms about the same as the gain from getting from Class 8 to Class 12. One can see why the average parent may not appreciate this: after all, when you leave at Class 4 there is no piece of paper you can take with you. But the ability to read a little or to do some basic arithmetic does make you more productive at farming or shop-keeping or whatever else you end up doing.

One might have hoped that the Right to Education would have tried to undo some of this irrational elitism. Sadly, if anything, it seems designed to reinforce the status quo. Covering the entire syllabus - whether or not anyone is actually learning - is now the law. The Class 10 public exam, which used to be the one formal qualification that was within the reach of the average student, is gone. And, most remarkably, given that it is a right to education and not a right to a seat on a school bench, the Act says much about what the school premises should look like and nothing about how schools will be made to deliver a certain minimum set of skills to every child.

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The views expressed by the author are personal

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