



Fostering educational inclusion: reality far removed from policy

THE GROUND REALITIES OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION NARRATE A SAD STORY OF DISCRIMINATION. ASHU KAPUR SHARES THE FINDINGS OF HER RECENT STUDY.

The term inclusion is commonly understood as the ability of society to ensure participation of an individual regardless of their disability, gender, caste, class, and other social or economic constructs. The discussion on inclusive education requires a wider perspective and a broader understanding of what inclusion really means as opposed to its textbook definition.

What is inclusive education?

The all-pervasive definition of inclusive education includes children with disabilities as well as those from backward social groups. The traditional exclusion of such groups may be based on disability, caste, class, gender, ethnicity, or similar social distinctions.

In the Indian education policy context, the term 'inclusion' has conventionally only referred to the inclusion of children with disabilities in the classroom. In this article however, one will take a slightly broader perspective, to also consider the case of children from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The approach to the latter kind of inclusion also boils down in many instances to the issue of how students belonging to the backward and disadvantaged groups can be provided equal educational opportunities. Given the history of demanding struggle of those belonging to marginalised groups, education policies and practices have had a special focus on educational equality and social justice for these communities. The idea of equal educational opportunity for all, however, takes a leap from educational access to active participation across all levels.

The importance that our society places on education stems from the fact that education facilitates social mobility, improved quality of life, future life choices, and overall wellbeing, aside from enabling active participation in our democracy. Inclusive education is thus a means to bring all students together in one classroom irrespective of their ability, class, caste, gen-

der, or ethnic backgrounds.

RTE Act: nuances

In India, the well-known Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, (usually referred to as the RTE Act) was passed a decade ago, making education free and compulsory for children in the age group of 6 to 14 years. This Act itself follows from the fundamental right to education guaranteed by the Constitution of India under Article 21A.

The RTE in section 12(1)(c) stipulates that a school 'unaided, not receiving any kind of aid or grants to meet its expenses from the appropriate Government or the local authority...' 'shall admit in entry level class, to the extent of at least twenty-five percent of the strength of that class, children belonging to weaker section and disadvantaged group in the neighbourhood [...].' (RTE Act, Gazette of India, 2009). In other words, children belonging to economically disadvantaged groups are entitled to 25 per cent reservation in private or unaided schools.

Ground realities

The RTE Act brought with it the promise of a paradigm shift in how education was perceived and delivered in India. It aimed to ensure that children belonging to economically weaker sections also had access to quality education.

The ground realities of inclusion however, are different. A doctoral study undertaken in 2019 examined the localised cultural context of two private schools using the lens of an inclusive mandate, with specific reference to the RTE Act. Over a period of 15 months and with a sample size of 20, the study involved unstructured interviews with teachers, parents, school principals, and students including six EWS children. Extensive participant observations were carried out to corroborate the information and field notes provided thick descriptions of settings, actions, activities, events, and

relationships. The primary site of the study was the school classroom as it provided first-hand insights into the structures, processes, events, behaviours, roles, and relationships prevailing in the school.

The findings revealed that classroom practices contradicted the spirit of inclusion. The challenges emerge right at the elementary school level, especially for children belonging to those social groups who have remained the victims of discriminatory practices. This study undertaken in a private unaided school found that the RTE Act {specifically section 12(1)(c)} as envisaged by the policymakers does not eventually benefit the ones who need it the most.

Several class-cultural practices as disguisedly present in the school's social set up make inclusion an elusive goal for students belonging to economically weaker sections. Insights from the semi-ethnographic doctoral study reveal the different meanings that students from economically weaker sections make of their day-to-day school processes that have implicit discriminatory, unequal, and unjust practices.

The major findings of the study are as under:

- EWS students admitted under the RTE Act belong to socially backward communities. The structure and processes of the school were organised in a way that elite characteristics engulfed the school and its practices oblivious to children's class or cultural backgrounds.

- Pedagogic processes and practices inside the school were devoid of any connection between a student's class cultural contexts and schools' class cultural practices – both the aspects standing poles apart.

- Challenges and contestations that underlie private schooling make it impossible for students from backward sections to sail through the school system smoothly. Some

of the major hurdles being emphasis on English language, closed same class peer group formations, forced ascription to stereotypical class-specific roles, etc.

■ There is an absence of systemic and pedagogical interventions by school authorities or teachers for fostering learning and providing handholding support to children from backward sections.

■ Derogatory remarks and stigmatisation continue to prevail in the classroom culture and environment.

In reality, children from economically and socially backward groups are deprived of their basic human rights, as well as their right to education, even when official policies provide them an entitlement to education. Because they belong to a lower socio-economic class, children are unofficially provided with unequal resources that tend to perpetuate educational inequality within the well-designed structure of private schools. Therefore, for fostering educational inclusion, besides policy changes, changes at systemic and ground levels are fundamental for fulfilling the goal of inclusion and making a difference in the educational opportunities of the beneficiaries. **T**



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