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THE STUDY OF THE PROGRESS OF SCHOOL EDUCATION IN INDIA.

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of school education in India. Firstly, it places India s educational achievements in international perspective, especially against countries with which it is now increasingly compared such as BRIC economies in general and China in particular. India does well relative to Pakistan and Bangladesh but lags seriously behind China and the other BRIC countries, especially in secondary school participation and youth literacy rates. Secondly, the paper examines schooling access in terms of enrolment and school attendance rates, and schooling quality in terms of literacy rates, learning achievement levels, school resources and teacher inputs. The substantial silver lining in the cloud of Indian education is that its primary enrolment rates are now close to universal. However, despite progress, attendance and retention rates are not close to universal, secondary enrolment rates are low, learning achievement levels are seriously low and teacher absenteeism is high, signalling poor quality of schooling. Thirdly, the paper examines the role of private schooling in India. While more modest in rural areas, the recent growth of private schooling in urban areas has been nothing short of massive, raising questions about growing inequality in educational opportunity. Evidence suggests that private schools are both more

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effective in imparting learning and do so at a fraction of the unit cost of government schools, their cost advantage being because they can pay market wages while government school teachers bureaucratically set minimum wages have large rents in them which teacher unions have fought hard to secure. Lastly, the paper discusses some major public education initiatives such as *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*, mid-day meal and para-teacher schemes. The impacts of these massive interventions (and their sub-components) on children s schooling outcomes need to be rigorously evaluated to learn about the cost-effectiveness of alternative interventions for better future policy making. However, the existence of some of these initiatives and the introduction of the 2% education cess to fund them suggests increased public commitment to school education and, together with increased NGO education activity, gives grounds for optimism about the future, even though many challenges remain.

Introduction

India s recent economic growth rates have generated much optimism about its general social and economic development. But has there been accompanying progress in indicators of educational outcomes? How good are Indian educational achievements in relation to China s, the country with which it is increasingly compared? What are the most significant developments in Indian school education and what has been the impact of various education policy initiatives? This paper presents a critical overview of the school education sector in India using newly released data and a survey of existing studies.

The story of India s educational achievements is one of mixed success. On the down side, India has 22 per cent of the world s population but 46 per cent of the world s illiterates, and is home to a high proportion of the world s out of school children and youth. On the positive side, it has made encouraging recent progress in raising schooling participation. While the base of India s education pyramid may be weak, it has emerged as an important player in the worldwide information technology revolution on the back of substantial (absolute) numbers of well educated

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computing and other graduates. This paper provides an assessment of the current situation and recent progress of school education.

Learning achievement levels in primary education

A large body of evidence suggests that workers productivity and earnings depend not only on years of education acquired but also on what is learnt at school. This literature is summarised in Hanushek (2005). He cites 3 US studies as showing quite consistently that a one standard deviation increase in mathematics test performance at the end of high school in the US translates into 12 per cent higher annual earnings. He also cites three studies from the UK and Canada showing strong productivity returns to both numeracy and literacy skills. Substantial returns to cognitive skills also hold across the developing countries for which studies have been carried out, i.e. in Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, Morocco, Pakistan and South Africa. Hanushek and Zhang (2006) confirm significant economic returns to literacy for 13 countries on which literacy data were available. This evidence underlines the importance of ensuring that what schools do leads to learning achievement. Unfortunately, no national data on learning achievement levels were available in India until 2006. India s largest educational NGO, *Pratham*, carried out a survey of learning achievement in 2005 and repeated the survey with a bigger sample of about 330,000 household in 2006. It visited 20 homes each in 30 randomly selected villages in each one of 549 Indian districts, and interacted with all children aged 6 to 16 years old in the sample homes. The ASER 2005 and 2006 reports are published by Pratham (2006; 2007). The findings make grim reading. In 2006, nearly 47% of children who were in school and studying in grade 5 could not read the story text at grade 2 level of difficulty (Table 6). In arithmetic, 55% of grade 5 and 25% of grade 8 children could not solve a simple division problem (3 digits divided by 1 digit). In both reading and arithmetic, there was significant inter-state variation in student performance. For example, in 2005 based on the sample of grade 5 children, in West Bengal, Haryana, Bihar, Uttaranchal and Chhattisgarh less than 50% children were unable to do the simple division

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problems. In the bottom five states, 62-75% of grade 5 children could not solve the same division problems.

Learning achievement levels in secondary education

Given the weak base of learning at the primary level, it is expected that learning levels at the secondary level of education will also be poor. We already saw that in cross-country comparison, achievement levels of Indian students appear to be well below the international average, though the latter does include developed countries. While each Indian state examination board sets its own curricula and examinations and there are no national level data based on a common standardized achievement test in India, the Council of Boards of Secondary Education (COBSE, 2004) provides pass rates in the High School and Intermediate (senior secondary) examinations in different states. 2004 pass rates in the High School exam varied from 37% in Manipur to 80% in Andhra Pradesh but such inter-state comparison is meaningless since curricula, exam papers, passing requirements, etc. all differ from state to state.

In any case, the high school pass rates cannot be taken at face value as they are much inflated due to the phenomenon of wide-spread cheating, if the experience of Uttar Pradesh can be generalized. While the true levels of learning achievements in secondary education are generally hidden, fortuitously they became visible one year in Uttar Pradesh. Table 7 shows that when the Kalyan Singh government brought in an anti-cheating rule and installed police at all examination centres in 1992 to prevent the mass-cheating that routinely takes place at board examinations in Uttar Pradesh, the pass rate in the High School exam fell from 57% in 1991 to a pitiful 14.7% in 1992 (17% among regular candidates and 9% among candidates who appear for exams privately i.e. through self-study, without attending any school). This is when the bar for passing is set very low, i.e. a student only needs on average 33% marks in their various subjects in order to pass High School. This suggests the true extent of the problem of low achievement levels in secondary education, though it is possible that achievement levels in Uttar Pradesh are lower than those in other states. Moreover, students rely on guess papers which are prepared and sold a few weeks

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before the exams. These attempt to anticipate exam question and are often remarkably close to them. There is frequent leaking of papers in advance of examinations.

School quality

The impact of cognitive achievement on earnings, productivity and economic growth highlights the importance of school quality. How is India doing in terms of the common measures of schooling quality, namely school facilities and teacher effort? The Public Report on Basic Education (PROBE Team, 1999) was the first serious evidence-based study of the state of primary schooling quality in India. It is based on a survey of schooling facilities in 242 villages across five north Indian states Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh in 1996. PROBE found very poor school infrastructure, e.g. 26% of schools did not have a blackboard in every classroom, 52% had no playground, 59% no drinking water, 89% no toilet, 59% no maps or charts, 75% no toys, 77% no library and 85% no musical instruments (PROBE Team, 1999, p. 42). Nine years later, the ASER report found that in 2005, 66% of primary schools had water (up from 41% in 1996) and 42% had functioning toilets (up from only 11% in the PROBE survey of 1996). These improvements in school infrastructure are explained at least in part by the massive educational intervention called the District Primary Education Project (DPEP) which started with donor assistance in the mid-1990s in districts with below national mean literacy rates. One of the explicit objectives of the DPEP was to construct schooling facilities and upgrade school infrastructures. While DPEP and its successor programme *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (Campaign for Education for All) have obviously helped, the current state of school facilities is nevertheless clearly far from satisfactory, with substantial proportions of primary schools still without the most basic essentials such as drinking water, toilets, furniture, teaching aids and books, let alone more advanced resources such as fans, playground, musical instruments, computers etc.

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Equally worrying perhaps is evidence of teacher negligence in schools. Firstly, teacher absence rates are high. Kremer et. al. s (2005) survey of teacher absence in rural India in 2003 made three unannounced visits to each one of 3700 schools in 20 major states of India. They found that, on average, 25 percent of teachers in government primary schools were absent from school on a given day.

Secondly, and more disturbingly, even among teachers who were present, only about half were found engaged in teaching (Kremer et. al., 2005). The PROBE survey had similar findings of low level of teaching activity in schools. PROBE Team (1999) states that the extreme cases of teacher negligence were less devastating than the quiet inertia of the majority of teachers In half of the sample schools, there was no teaching activity at the time of the investigators visit . Inactive teachers were found engaged in a variety of pastimes such as sipping tea, reading comics, or eating peanuts, when they were not just sitting idle. Generally speaking, teaching activity has been reduced to a minimum in terms of both time and effort. And this pattern is not confined to a minority of irresponsible teachers - it has become a way of life in the profession (PROBE Team, 1999, p 63). The ASER2005 report also found a teacher absence rate of 25%, as in Kremer et. al. (2005).

Conclusions

This paper has sought to build a picture of school education in India. Section 2 placed India s educational achievements in international perspective, noting that while it does relatively better than its South Asian neighbours Pakistan and Bangladesh in certain educational indicators, it lags seriously behind the other countries with which it is increasingly compared, such as BRIC economies in general and China in particular, especially in terms of secondary school participation and youth literacy rates.

Section 3 examined schooling access and quality, finding that there are several positive sides in India s educational development. Its primary school enrolment has come close to being universal

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and current attendance rates as well as literacy rates have risen encouragingly in recent times. However, Indian achievements in other respects leave much to be desired. Firstly, secondary school participation is still low and unequally distributed. Since economic incentives for acquiring secondary schooling are very high, demand for secondary schooling is likely strong suggesting that greater participation is hindered by a combination of constrained supply of secondary schools and household credit-constraints. Secondly, learning achievements in both primary and secondary schooling are very low, signalling poor quality schooling. Thirdly, and relatedly, school facilities/inputs are low and teacher absenteeism is high.

Section 4 examined the role of the private schooling sector in India. The size of this sector is greatly under-estimated in official published statistics particularly at the primary level due to excluding unrecognised schools, given that more than 50% of all private primary schools are unrecognised. While household data offer a truer picture, no recent household surveys are available. Current attendance rates are a more reliable indicator of schooling participation than enrolment rates, since large enrolment rates measured at the start of the school year can mask nonattendance and/or drop-out later in the school year. Table 2 shows current school attendance rates from the National Family Health Surveys (NFHS) 1993 and 1999. In this short 6-year period, school attendance among rural 6-10 year old girls and boys increased by 20 and 12 percentage points respectively; these are very substantial increases. In the rural 11-14 year age group, increases were more modest but still large, especially for girls, at 13.7 per cent. Urban increases were smaller. Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh made very large improvements in their current school attendance rates, particularly in rural areas where, in each of these four states, attendance rates rose by over 25 percentage points in the six-year period. Overall, nearly 80 per cent of all 6-14 year olds were attending school in 1999. As Kingdon et. al. (2004) notes, while attendance rates themselves are not a guarantee of grade completion or of achieving minimum levels of learning, these are nevertheless highly encouraging trends.

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