

## What is Public Education

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What is public about Public Education? Before we go to that question, we can safely reaffirm that there is a wide and growing agreement now on the usage of language, that what were called Public Schools in UK and India, are private schools, mostly for the economically well-off and not included in the ambit of Public Education in any way.

Schools that are funded by tax revenues generated by the State and administered ('managed', 'run') by the State are called Public Schools. Here I use schools in a broad sense, to include educational institutions from pre-primary levels to college. The word 'State' includes its various organs, even those which may have a fairly autonomous nature, but are eventually part of the State system. The funding may have some element of resources that are raised by the school itself, through fees and other sources, but is substantially provided by the state from its tax revenues. Such a system of Public Schools is what constitutes Public Education.

This is certainly the commonly shared understanding when the phrase Public Education is used. This commonly shared understanding is on sound grounds and under most circumstances quite adequate. However, the adequacy of this notion is worth a closer look, especially under the circumstances that face us today. There is wide dissatisfaction with the state of affairs of our education, while the expectations from education continue to soar. The fiscal pressures on the State find convenient solutions from market based private sources of service delivery, often turning a blind eye to the short and long term deleterious impact of such actions. These circumstances vary in their detail, but in their basics are common across many countries and not limited to India.

A hint of the limitation of this particular notion of Public Education comes from our natural tendency to use that phrase rather than State Education (or State Schools). If the aforementioned notion of Public Education had been adequate and complete, one could use the phrase State Education, without any loss of meaning or intent. It appears that this natural tendency arises from the valid notion that the State is the institutional mechanism for this

kind of education to happen, but is not the same thing as this kind of education i.e. in itself it's not Public Education.

Which takes us back to: what is this public in Public Education? It appears that the most basic notion is that of it being equally available to all; that is why it is public. There is another equally important notion embedded, and that is about people coming together for something. In this case, since it's in the context of education, it's about people coming together to further public good through education. So the word public has two basic aspects: for-whom (equally for all) and for-what/why (for public good).

Seen like this, i.e. being equally available to all and with the aim of furthering public good, it becomes apparent that the State may be well suited to conduct such education under most circumstances. Nevertheless, State Education is a mechanism and not necessarily the same thing as Public Education. Let's consider an extreme situation where this point becomes clearer. In a (imaginary) totalitarian State, the state school system indoctrinates students to support the State and its grip. This is State Education, but it's not Public Education. Of course, such a State may claim that this is Public Education, but then that would be based on their notions of good society, which certainly wouldn't include (e.g.) freedom, liberty, autonomy, equality.

For furthering public good, education must have appropriate aims. Such aims are at the core of the notion of Public Education. These aims are achieved through (and manifested in) various educational processes and arrangements and centrally in the curriculum. For now, let's just briefly touch upon these aims, which would further public good. On one hand it's about the development of autonomous, thinking and engaged individuals, with knowledge of the world, and capacities to pursue a meaningful life. On the other, the aims also include the development of a just, compassionate, humane and sustainable society. These two threads of the aims together further the public good. In this context the necessity of such an education being equally available to all becomes even clearer,

because only if it's equally available to all, can it achieve its aims.

Once we look at the Public Education from this perspective, it starts becoming clear that it is immensely important to any society. In a democratic society, where education is the most (perhaps the only) organized and directed process for developing its people and the society, Public Education becomes foundational to the society and democracy.

Since we have looked at the importance of appropriate aims of education and its implication on curriculum, let's look at one kind of attack on (or gnawing away of) Public Education, through aims and curriculum. If curricular goals or its content were to change to suit idiosyncratic needs of certain groups, or to serve the whims of a particular ideology, Public Education will no longer remain public, undermining its central role in the society and democracy. Such efforts for change would perhaps be obvious and would be contested.

However one kind of shift advocated for by a large cross section of people today, often goes in adequately contested. This starts with statements that are at the level of aims of education and get translated to curricular matters. This is about 'education must make our economy more dynamic', 'education must drive employability' and so on. These statements in themselves are not problematic. The issue is the oft explicitly (and almost always implicit) stated intent to give primacy to the economic aims of education over all else.

Economic aims are integral to Public Education. Since, for example, helping people lead a meaningful life is an aim of education, economic well-being must be adequately weighed. But narrowing the aims and curriculum, by the continuous emphasis on economic aims, thus diluting other aims, gnaws away at Public Education. It makes education serve the market (and its dominant groups) not the public good. This is as insidious as the other kinds of attacks, which though may be more obvious.

Let's now go to the matter that is more often discussed, the matter of Public and Private Education and whether private schools can deliver Public Education.

In theory, a public spirited private school can deliver (or be a part of) Public Education as long as the two basic conditions are met. One, it follows the curriculum that is designed for the public good.

Two, it is equally available to all, irrespective of their socio-economic status.

The second condition cannot be met by private schools if they intend to recover their costs from the students, it would immediately exclude the economically disadvantaged. This has led to the notion of publicly funded private schools, which can then purportedly deliver on Public Education.

There is no doubt that when we look across our country (or outside) we can find a number of public spirited private schools. Some of these may have state funding, some are philanthropically funded. They do (or try their best to) meet the two conditions, which then qualify them as being a part of Public Education. However these schools are a minority.

The majority of private schools are not public but profit spirited. They narrow their curriculum to directly serve the dynamics of their market, rather than the Public Good, while paying lip service to good education and the regulatory mandated curriculum. They do not provide equal access to all. Aside from the economic barriers, they have significant social (often in the form of 'academic standards') barriers to access. They see this exclusivity as a critical part of their reputation, which feeds their 'business' success. Many such schools have little or no interest in education, let alone Public Education.

Only if one were to deliberately close ones' eyes and ears can one deny this reality of private schools in India. Even on the matter of 'learning levels', it's clear that the private schools do not do any better than government schools<sup>1</sup>. This situation is not unique to India, but is the same across countries. Increasing number of (including through state funding) private schools, have led to no improvement in learning at the education system level, but have led to greater inequity and stratification<sup>1,2</sup>.

This should not be surprising at all and can be completely anticipated if one sticks to the fundamentals, without getting waylaid by ideology of market-fundamentalism<sup>2,3,4</sup>. And those fundamentals are that private entities establish and run schools for (with few notable exceptions) private purposes e.g. profit, prestige, political influence. Few would admit to these purposes, they will always wear a veil of commitment to public good. But that is all it is – a veil. Entities that are neither established nor run for public good cannot

miraculously produce public good, against their basic intent. Private schools cannot deliver Public Education.

So, a Public Education system can only be on the basis of a system of State schools. While a State schooling system may not always be Public Education, but Public Education cannot happen without a sound State schooling system. And Public Education is central to our efforts to develop a good society and is foundational to democracy.

In India we need to invigorate and improve the State schooling system; there are no short-cuts available for that. But then there are no short-cuts available for the attempts to develop a good society, the kind that we have promised ourselves in our Constitution.

**Notes:** All notes refer to columns (and references therein) written by the author for the newspaper Mint, available on its website Livemint (<http://www.livemint.com/>).

1. 'Cost of Privatized Education', April 17, 2013
2. 'Ideology of Education', October 30, 2013
3. 'Myths of Privatopia', December 25, 2013
4. 'Market no fix for Education', October 28, 2015

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