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Building Blocks and Ballot Boxes: What Elections Mean for India's Children

More schools and free lunches are just stepping stones to ensure a quality education

April 16, 2014

by

[Monisha Bajaj](#)

In India, where 800 million voters will go to the polls starting this week ¹, the Constitution requires children aged 6 to 14 to go to school. A landmark *Right to Education Act* from 2009 obligates the government to provide a primary school within one kilometer of every village or residential area, and a secondary school within three kilometers. Free nutritious lunch meals are also legally binding. These reforms have resulted in sharp increases in school enrollment. However, they have not necessarily meant improvements in educational quality, school facilities, retention of students, or teacher attendance (recent reports show that on any given day, an average of 25% of Indian teachers are absent for no good reason) ². But even responsible teachers

are sometimes absent, because India relies heavily on teachers to be poll workers in state and national elections, taking them away from the classroom.

Too many Indian children are not in school...

Millions of India's young have never set foot inside a school, and, according to [UNICEF](#), some 80 million children drop out or are pushed out—by discriminatory seating, grading and treatment based on caste or gender; by the outlawed but routine practice of corporal punishment; and by the mere fact that they don't learn in school and decide to spend their time in more productive activities. India's [ASER Center](#) has consistently found learning levels to be low, with less than half of Indian students in Standard (or Grade) Five able to read a simple Grade Two-level test ³.

I have visited hundreds of Indian schools in my research as a professor of international education. In one urban school, a 10-year-old boy showed me his deformed arm, the result of bones not setting properly after his teacher severely beat him for not knowing the answer to a question in class.

Teachers in rural government schools shared that their colleagues sell off lentils and rice sent by the government for school lunches and pocket the money for themselves. Often authorities are bribed by the offending teachers to keep quiet.

I've also heard countless accounts of young girls being sexually abused in schools—sometimes by teachers or school staff—often with no recourse.

...while others learn in prestigious universities

Then, of course, there are the Indian students who are at the top of my graduate school classes at expensive universities in the United States and whose private, English education and social networks prepare them for further professional advancement and success. Data show that more than 200,000 Indian students pursue higher education abroad each year ⁴.

India's population of 1.2 billion faces starkly unequal realities: 25% or approximately 300 million (the size of the entire U.S. population) are middle class with access to a range of luxury goods and services ⁵, while another near 400 million live on less than U.S.\$1.25 a day ⁶.

Much more needs to be done to ensure all children are in school and learning

The current government took on an ambitious school reform project to secularize and update the curriculum, adding in critical pedagogy, peace education, along with concepts of human rights and environmental responsibility. Efforts have also been made to upgrade the curriculum for teacher training. Nonetheless, there remains a huge gap between policy prescriptions and actual implementation. Millions of poor children and their families put their hopes in education - their only shot at social mobility.

Despite India's aspirations as a rising economic power, public spending on education averages just 3% of its GDP (by contrast, OECD countries spend an average of 6% of their GDP on education)⁷.

With so many children still out of school, and vast differences in girls' and boys' attendance and completion rates, India is not on track to meet the targets set forth in the international Education for All Summits (1990 and 2000) for the achievement of universal primary education, and gender parity in schools, by 2015.

Regardless of the outcome of India's elections, **quality education for all of India's children, one that promotes mutual understanding and respect for difference rather than fueling the many ethnic and religious differences in this richly diverse nation, must be at the top of the agenda.** India's children are counting on it and deserve no less.

[1] Voting will take place in phases from April 7 to May 12, 2014.

[2] Transparency International. (2013). Global Corruption Report: Education. Retrieved March 31, 2014 from http://www.transparency.org/gcr_education

[3] ASER Centre. (2013). "Annual Status of Education Report – Nationwide Findings." Retrieved March 31, 2014 from http://img.asercentre.org/docs/Publications/ASER%20Reports/ASER_2013/4-p...

[4] "Indian Study Abroad Trends: Past, Present and Future". From World Education News and Reviews, retrieved March 31, 2014 from <http://wenr.wes.org/2013/12/indian-study-abroad-trends-past-present-and-...>

[5] S. Mustafi (2013). "India's Middle Class: Growth Engine or Loose Wheel." New York Times India Ink, retrieved March 31, 2014 from <http://india.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/05/13/indias-middle-class-growth-eng...>

[6] "Poverty & Equity in India," The World Bank, retrieved March 31, 2014 from <http://povertydata.worldbank.org/poverty/country/IND>

[7] OECD. (2012). "Education at a Glance." Retrieved March 31, 2014 from <http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/download/9612041ec018.pdf?expires...>

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