

# Partners in Education?

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Public-Private Partnership in school education is projected as a strategy to distribute the ownership of institutions, rather than tasks within institutions, between private entrepreneurs and NGOs on the one hand, and the government or state on the other. While the rationale for PPP is inefficiency of the government, the means offered to overcome it actually promise no relief or improvement. PPP is not an idea, but rather an ideology which promotes privatisation as a means of reducing the government's responsibility to increase the number of schools.

A number of individuals and organisations concerned with education believe that the best thing the government could do is to outsource the running of schools it is presently responsible for. On the other hand, there is a sizeable body of government officials who feel that the low efficiency with which state-run schools function cannot be much improved, given the depth to which corruption and inefficiency have seeped into the system.

Between sharp critics and cynical officials, thus, familiar arguments in favour of state withdrawal resonate with mutually reinforcing loudness. Though the speed at which the state system of education is being enfeebled and dismantled does not appear fast enough to satisfy either the critics outside or the functionaries within the system, the process is on nonetheless. Politically, the time is neither particularly right nor wrong for speeding up privatisation, for education does not matter sufficiently to deserve a place in electoral propaganda the way the provisioning of roads and electricity does. If more attention is paid to it, the expected political gains are not perceived as being substantial; if it is ignored, the losses are seen as negligible.

## Plenty of Arguments

The critics who want to dislodge the government from its status as the major player in educational provision have plenty of data and arguments to make their case worthy of consideration. Data on teacher absenteeism, for instance, come in handy, cursory though they are to say that the state system leaks. Similarly, the data on high dropout rates and low achievement, when viewed in isolation from socio-economic background, prove that state investment in schools is wasteful.

On the rhetorical front, the plea for vouchers is the latest in a series of strategies offered by pro-privatisation lobbies. They have used the popular discourse of "quality" to seek respect for the promise of

free enterprise in education. They have been assisted in this exercise by the conceptual separation of access from quality which took place in policy over the 1990s and found reflection in various documents accompanying the economic structural adjustment programme. The only point on which the pro-privatisation argument has been weak is in its inability to refer to a national model anywhere in the world in which the state does not serve as a primary provider of education. Answers to this kind of query vary, ranging from the claim that India's case is unique, to pointing out that private provision is growing elsewhere too.

One might expect that the official discourse would take advantage of the point that nowhere in the world has a national system of education evolved without the state playing the lead role. By the mid-1990s, assertion of this point had begun to go out of fashion. Recognising how vast the challenge of education was and how valuable it was to encourage voluntary effort, gained status as arguments.

## Public-Private Partnership

One way of granting status to a view is to declare it new. This is how "public-private partnership" (PPP) was ushered in as a fresh approach. When an idea becomes a buzz word, it acquires a selective kind of transparency, which means that a certain amount of the meaning looks so obvious that you need not interpret it each time, while other parts of the meaning fail to draw our attention. This is what seems to have happened to the term PPP. Had it not been for its newly found high status as a term, we would recall that it conveys nothing new. A good number of institutions which gained success and reputation for excellence during the days of the national movement were examples of private initiative which attracted public or state support later on. Indeed, the grant-in-aid system was mooted by the British precisely to enable the public exchequer to share, rather than to own, the responsibility for educating the Indian population. The articulated logic was that the government wanted to encourage native interest in education. The aided-school model, with

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its distinct imprint of colonial times, continues to operate in many parts of India, carrying all the weaknesses it had begun to manifest a 100 years ago.

Offering solid evidence of the meagreness of structural change in education since colonial days, the state-aided private-initiative model of institutional expansion has earned a renewed and vigorous favour today. And the state continues to feel persistently reluctant to own up to its primary responsibility for educating all its children in ways that would necessitate reforms in the system. This aspect of the meaning of PPP is quite apparent. The meaning which lurks in the zone of opacity has to do with the culture of outsourcing, especially in the context of non-government organisations (NGOs).

### NGO Outsourcing

The NGO outsourcing phenomenon requires careful consideration mainly because the term NGO covers so vast a range of efforts to compensate for the state's inefficiency and incapacity to fulfil its mandate. The range includes small-scale initiatives that deserve to be called "voluntary" in the same sense the word was used about three decades ago.

A few such initiatives have been devoted to innovations of the kind which are difficult to imagine in government schools. A literally unique example of voluntary initiative inside state schools is that of the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme which was started by Kishore Bharati in the 1970s and carried forward by Eklavya (Bhopal) until quite recently when the state stopped it for reasons best left to speculation.

Then there are established NGOs which once started as small-scale initiatives to serve a local or regional need, but have gained a considerable size and sustainability. Some of them have also acquired the experience of working within the state system of education wherever they are permitted. Since the 1970s when there was barely one example in this category, there now exist a small but significant number of NGOs which have made a valuable contribution in augmenting the state system's meagre capacity to innovate.

A third subcategory is of corporate NGOs which operate on a scale the other two

kinds cannot imagine. The word "corporate" here refers to their large annual budgets, and managerial practices that are closer to corporations than to voluntary organisations. This third kind of NGO openly competes with the state and frequently asserts that the latter is redundant, so it might as well reconcile to handing over its responsibilities, especially those pertaining to the education and health of the poor. The idea that an NGO is a local agency dependent on limited resources looks seriously out of date when viewed in the context of corporate NGOs. Several NGOs of this kind have a considerable regional presence now, and some have an inter-regional or national presence. Their resource base is vast, and quite a few have access to funds from all over the world, particularly from non-resident Indians. Though education is one of the ostensible reasons for which they exist and work, the vision(s) they carry of India's educational development are diverse, ranging from purely political visions such as those associated with revivalist religious groups, to economic visions of a wealthy India in which services to the poor need to be managed with greater efficiency than the state is believed to have the capacity to deliver.

### Legitimising PPP

This diversity in the meanings of the NGO label notwithstanding, the NGO phenomenon has made an important contribution to the legitimacy of the PPP model of education. The manner in which the word "partnership" is commonly interpreted in the PPP model indicates that it is actually a road map for territorial division rather than for a sharing of responsibility to run institutions jointly. In other words, PPP is projected as a strategy to distribute the ownership of institutions, rather than tasks within institutions, between private entrepreneurs and NGO on the one hand, and the government or state on the other. This interpretation clearly reflects the distrust that private or non-government providers have of the government's capacity to improve its own institutions or to enter into a decent partnership for taking joint responsibility to run schools or vocational institutions, or carry out teacher-training. It is thus not a model, at least

not according to its present interpretation, which aims to improve the state's efficiency by joint engagement with the problems of running educational institutions.

While the rationale for PPP is inefficiency of the government, the means offered to overcome it actually promise no relief or improvement. This is why it would not be wrong to view PPP as a renamed strategy to take advantage of the scarcity of educational provision in a society where education is now in high demand. In the history of private education, philanthropic efforts leading to high-quality education have played a very limited role, while profit-seeking has been an inappropriate (and illegal) goal to acknowledge. Private providers and their supporters therefore continue to succeed in shielding the normal, entrepreneurial aspect of educational ventures.

The judiciary alone has cleared the air when it pointed out that setting up an educational institution is a part of the right to pursue an occupation. In both official and social circles, it still sounds odious to acknowledge that for private providers, children's education is a business, just like any other business.

### State's Response

In the state's response to pro-privatisation claims, one can see a definite loss of nerve and a corresponding increase in cynicism about the prospect of general improvement in the system. The focus on showcase strategies continues, reinforcing the view that the state can at best run a few schools well, but certainly not all.

It is difficult to say which factors are responsible for a remarkable rise in the self-deprecating and depressive modes of discussion, which have gained currency in state circles over the last two decades or so. Several possible reasons can be considered. One is the speedy spread of the ideological discourse associated with neoliberalisation and globalisation among government officials. The key idea in the neoliberal theory of governance is to treat the state as merely one player in the market game. The state's best contribution is supposed to be that of a facilitator which has the authority and power to maintain social order so that the market can flourish. In this

instrumentalist notion of the state, good governance is a task-accomplishment exercise. In the context of education at least, long-term investment in institution-building is perceived as somewhat obsolete and unnecessary, apart from being financially burdensome. Hence the preference for outsourcing which promises gradual but substantial dismantling of the apparatus in the foreseeable future and the accomplishment of pressing tasks in the immediate future, without incurring long-term liabilities.

This perspective has a number of attractions. One is that the state's overall responsibility gets transformed into specific tasks, at least some of which can be outsourced. Other attractions have been added by means of advocacy, and these include a greater scope for flexibility and decentralisation, reduction in the risk of political pressure influencing decision-making, and introduction of the concept of "stakeholders" to refer to the beneficiaries. Seen in a positive light, these

features of the neoliberal doctrine do offer a model which looks different from the corrupt regime of the bureaucracy. This model also looks less prone to political indoctrination. Where it falters is in offering a wholesale package, which is supposedly as good for education as it is for transport. By this kind of generalised promising, the neoliberal doctrine misses out the role that institutionalisation plays in the context of education, and the role that the state plays in institutionalisation.

Yet neglecting institution-building and structural reforms within the system poses a grave risk for the role of education in harnessing the intellectual and creative potential of society.

### Instrumental View

An instrumental view of education necessarily concentrates on immediate tasks, including the task of crisis-management. The fact that education is facing a chronic crisis in terms of access and quality helps a short-term view, and the strategies

associated with it, in gaining acceptance. The possibility of redefining PPPs as a joint responsibility at the institutional level needs to be explored, even though it is not likely to find favour with the current ideological supporters of PPP.

It is not surprising that advocates of PPP have not been impressed with the resistance that certain fully-functional examples of partnership which defied or ignored the ideology of neoliberalism have faced. The best known case is that of Eklavya's science and social science programmes in Madhya Pradesh. These remarkable initiatives had triggered unprecedented energy for change within the state system, yet, they were throttled.

The work of the mv Foundation in Andhra Pradesh is also an example of PPP, but not in the ideological sense in which the concept is currently being defined. mv Foundation has put lakhs of children from marginalised sections of rural society into government schools, closely monitoring and thereby increasing



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#### Deadlines

Abstract : February 10, 2008  
 Draft Paper : March 15, 2008  
 Final Paper : March 31, 2008

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the schools' capacity to retain children of the poor. There is no evidence to date that the government has perceived the Foundation work as an example of partnership. Equally disappointingly, the advocates of PPP also do not perceive and recommend it as a model. Their entire focus is on running schools, not on improving the system.

### **Teacher Education**

Glaring systemic gaps and areas of neglect do not attract them either. Any observer of the schooling scene in India can see that the biggest area of darkness is that of

teacher education. The neglect of this sector has reached the level of a grim national joke. On the one hand, institutional structures like the District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs) and State Councils of Educational Research and Training are stagnating in most parts of the country, and on the other, commercial Bachelor of Education colleges with no institutional integrity, let alone quality, have surfaced all over the country like ugly little warts.

Why are PPP advocates not talking about setting up good quality teacher training institutions? India needs at least

10 IIT-IIM-level national institutes of teacher education, and many more to address specific regional needs. It seems neither the central government nor the states have interest in setting up new institutions for teacher training after the speedy decline of DIETs. Surely, there is scope for PPP. The fact that it is not even being mentioned in needy contexts of this nature lends strength to the view that PPP is not an idea with a considerable inheritance, but rather an ideology which promotes privatisation as a means of reducing the government's responsibility to increase the number of schools.