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Where is the Indian education system going? Privatisation, Inaccessibility and Deprivation

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Prologue

People may be awed going by the *appearance* of the current emphasis on education – school education as well as higher education – by the Indian state. The non-state actors such as the NGOs and INGOs, the cellular companies, media companies and celebrities are also showing an unprecedented empathy to the need for expanding education. Given the context of neoliberal capitalism, where market reigns supreme and the desire to bring everything within the ambit of capital accumulation is the governing idea, this impetus on education may surprise people looking at the *appearance*. It is only a deeper probe into its *essence* that will reveal its dark underbelly. The dark underbelly of the Indian education system can be understood through two of its vital aspects – (1) the way discourses on education are being crafted and implemented in tandem by different agencies today – ranging from the state, international agencies and local non-governmental organisations and (2) the dismal picture of education that statistics reveal. The latter would provide us a view of where India is really placed so that one may proceed further to understand, in a later work, the logic of how the education system operates.

It was tragic that when India became independent in 1947, its leaders did not include the Right to Education as a fundamental right. It was rather incorporated in the Indian Constitution as Article 45 in the Directive Principles of State Policy.¹ It was only in the year 2002 that through the 86th Amendment to the Indian Constitution, the Right to Education

was made a Fundamental Right. However, even with this inclusion, the situation has remained problematic. Not only have vital aspects of education such as the education of children up to 6 years of age or of those between 14-18 years² been ignored but also the *form* and *content* of education to be provided has been left to the whims and fancies of the respective governments. These loopholes create the space for an unequal education system to persist. In all its mutilated form, the right to education came into force only on April 1, 2010. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act passed in the Parliament was debated outside the Parliament by a host of intellectuals and activists with some of them supporting it (Raina, 2009) and still others opposing it (Sadgopal, 2008; Kumar, 2009). The Act itself was passed in an unconventional manner. For instance, the Standing Committee did not invite public representation for the Act (as is generally the convention) and when it was tabled in the Parliament, it did not have financial provisions attached to it as is required for a Bill that involves public expenditure.

'Dirty Dozen' Flaws of the Draft Right to Education Bill, 2008

1. Lacks provision to compel the State to provide adequate funds.
2. Dilutes the Fundamental Right of children below six years to nutrition, health and pre-primary education by falsely equating this role to that of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS).

¹The Indian Constitution had defined certain rights as Fundamental Rights, which are justiciable in the court of law whereas a greater number of provisions were included in the Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSP), which are non-justiciable and were designed to serve as mere guidelines for the state. The Article 45 of the DPSP provided that within ten years from the day the Constitution comes into force, (i.e., by 1962) all children up to age of fourteen years should have been in school.

²UN Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as being under 18 years of age and a large section of activists and intellectuals have been demanding such a definition in India as well. In India, it is only at the age of 18 that individuals get voting rights and are officially considered adults. However, under the Child Labour Prohibition Act, 1986, a child is a person under 14 years of age. There is thus no clear agreement on the definition of a child.

3. Doesn't include the right to secondary and senior secondary education.
4. Shifts public funds to private unaided fee charging schools, exacerbating commercialisation, exclusion and inequality.
5. Legitimises inequality through a multi-layered school system.
6. Doesn't prevent the violation of the neighbourhood principle which ensures that the government run elite and private schools don't exclude poorer children or charge fees when they are not supposed to.
7. Continues discrimination against government school children as their teachers will continue to be deployed for census, elections and disaster relief duties.
8. Doesn't require the states/UTs to regulate private unaided schools, leaving them free to indulge in profiteering, anti-child practices and other violations.
9. Fails to guarantee the child's mother tongue as a medium of education, even at the primary school stage. (For children of linguistic minority groups, this violates Article 350A of the Indian Constitution.)
10. Contains subtle provisions to exclude disabled children from schools.
11. Opens space for private agencies to make money through questionable assessment of schools.
12. Lacks guarantee of dignified salaries, professional development, promotional avenues and social security for teachers and for the prevention of fragmentation of teacher's cadre.³

The consequences of such an act by the state will retain the inequity inherent in the education system, which by design, has kept the majority of the poor, Dalits and girls outside its fold. Moreover, the Indian state equates literacy to education – a misnomer that helps it shed responsibility to provide school education to children in the country. Therefore, when one talks of the inequity in the country, it is in terms of *education* and not *literacy*. "Literacy, as defined in census operations, is the ability to read and write with understanding in any language. A person who can merely read but cannot write is not classified as literate. Any formal education or minimum educational standard is not necessary to be considered literate" (NCRWC, 2001). Education on the other hand is about providing a child *holistic education* equipping it to deal *critically* with the world around it. It is altogether a different matter that globally this notion of education has been altered drastically by neoliberal assault, a view of education as a mere skill development exercise that equips a person to serve market needs.

³ Source: Misconceiving Fundamentals, Dismantling Rights: Deciphering the Neo-liberal Assault on Right to Education by Anil Sadgopal available at <http://www.educationforallinindia.com/CSS2.pdf>.

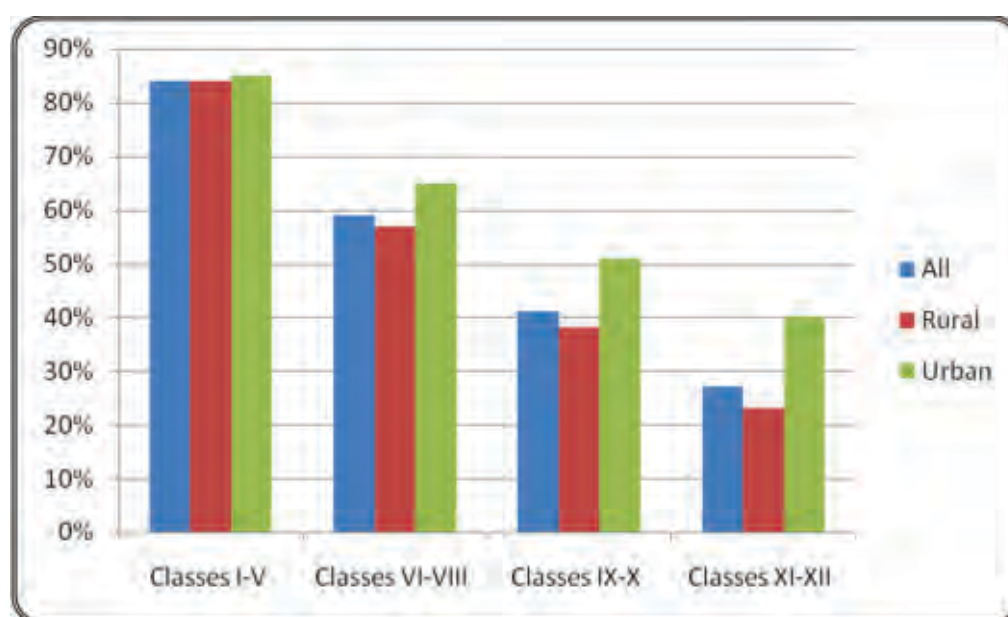
Inaccessibility and Inequality in Education

More than sixty years have elapsed since India became independent from British colonial rule but its education system has remained acutely iniquitous. The number of children attending school is still far from being satisfactory as indicated by a recent survey by the Government of India. The Net Attendance Ratio (NAR) ⁴ in schools which gives a far more realistic picture than the Gross Attendance Ratio paints a dismal picture.

The Chart (1) makes it amply clear that the participation of students in schools declines as they move to higher levels. This has been a

major source of concern because the dropout rates in schools have been alarming. There are differences in the figures of Net Attendance Ratio provided by the National Family Health Survey and the National Sample Survey Organisation. For instance, for the primary section NAR, while NSSO puts the national figure at 85% (in 2007-08,) the NFHS puts it at 71.9% (in 2005-06). Given the high prevalence of poverty, the increasing costs of education, and little accessibility for the poor, a low NAR is not hard to fathom. The differences in the figures can be on account of differences in sample distribution across states as well as the way data has been handled. Ultimately, however, it is in the interest of the state to project higher NAR figures.⁵

Chart 1: Net Attendance Ratio (%) in Schools



Source: (GOI, 2010), p. H-2.

⁴ **Net attendance ratio:** For each education class-group, This is the ratio of the number of persons in the official age-group attending a particular class-group to the total number of persons in the age-group. For example, for Class group I-V the ratio (in %) is equal to the number of persons aged 6-10 years currently attending Classes I-V, multiplied by 100 and divided by the estimated population in the age-group 6-10 years.

Similarly it can be obtained for the remaining class-groups of school education, i.e. VI-VIII, IX-X and XI-XII and XI-XII, with the corresponding official age-groups as 11-13, 14-15 and 16-17 respectively.

⁵ The data being used here is primarily from the state because that is the largest data range available. And it has been used keeping in mind that there is always a certain kind of manipulation (of different kinds and at different levels, ranging from doctoring figures to choosing particular categories of data that could demonstrate a better performance for the state) involved in data generation

Table 1: All India Dropout Rates for General, SC and ST Students

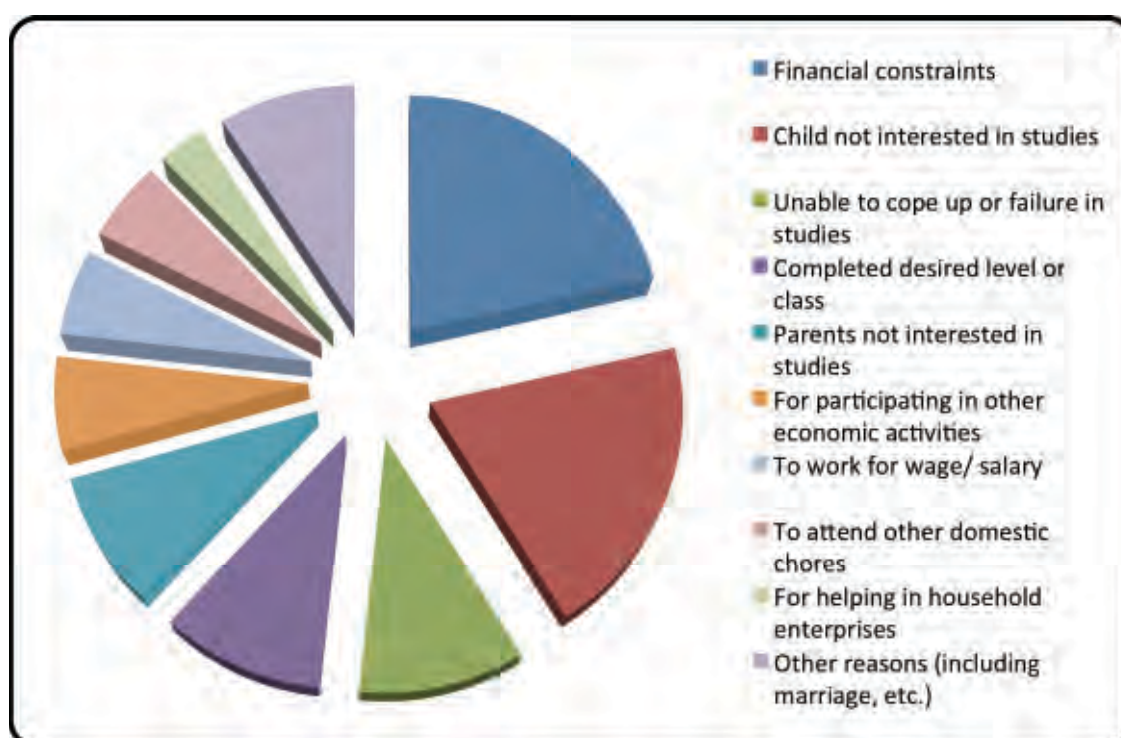
	Classes I-V			Classes I- VIII			Classes I- X		
Category of Students	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
General	24.57	26.75	25.60	46.44	45.22	45.90	58.61	61.50	59.88
Scheduled Castes	32.33	39.89	35.91	51.56	54.98	53.05	66.58	72.17	69.01
Scheduled Tribes	30.57	35.82	33.09	62.78	62.22	62.54	77.32	79.08	78.07

Source: SES-school-2006-07 (School data available at : <http://www.education.nic.in/stats/SES-school-2006-07.pdf>, accessed 12 May, 2010)

The Table (1) above indicates the deprivation that is inherent in school education in India. This has a cascading effect at the higher education levels as well because there are very few students left from the Scheduled Caste (SC) or Scheduled Tribes (ST) who even reach higher education. Dropouts from schools have

been on account of many factors (see Chart 2) but the most significant factors have been financial reasons and the disinterest shown by schools along with the fact that the children have to help in household chores (and there is a very strong gendered dimension to it with female students more likely to drop out).

Chart 2: All India Percentage distribution of persons of age 5-29 years enrolled in the past but currently not attending categorised by major reason for discontinuance.



Source: (GOI, 2010), p. 85

Educational Cost and the Problem of Inaccessibility

A lot of studies point to how difficult it has been for the poor and marginalised to access education in real terms (Kumar, 2006; Kumar, 2009). It is also clear from Appendix II that educational levels among members of scheduled castes and tribes are dismal. Similarly, parents who cannot afford to purchase education find their children lagging behind in terms of educational attainment (GOI, 2010, p.17). The data provided through the correlation of Monthly Per Capita Expenditure (MPCE) and educational attainment makes this amply clear. It is relevant here, however, to mention how education has been thrown into the ambit of the market from being a facility provided by the state, therefore making it difficult for the masses to access it. Though MPCE based data is referred to here, it also needs to be understood that by using it, we tie education along with the other items that a family / individual consumes as a commodity from the market. The discourse generated, therefore, establishes how, effectively, a family *purchases* education as a commodity. And within this realm of all pervading commodification, we find the *majority* not being able to purchase it at par with a *few* others. This logic of the market deprives the majority of education because they live in abject conditions of poverty.⁶

In fact, it was mentioned long back that even in schools which claim to provide free education to children (as government schools are considered to do so), the education does not remain free (Tilak, 1996). The recent data also indicates that students enrolled in the

education system have to pay huge sums of money (Table 2).

Table 2: All India Average annual expenditure (Rs.) per student of age 5-29 years by type and level of education

Type & level of Education	Rural&Urban		
	Female	Male	Total
Primary	1308	1501	1413
Middle	1959	2193	2088
Sec./Higher Sec.	4140	4503	4351
Above HS (General)	7324	7386	7360
General education-all	2293	2595	2461
Technical Education	31111	32695	32112
Vocational Education	17705	13480	14881

Source: (GOI, 2010) p.59

In the government schools, although the tuition fee is taken care of, there are a host of expenses that parents have to meet. Even if parents curtail on private coaching, a mandatory expense for those who can afford it, students will still need to pay for stationery, books, transport, uniforms etc (see Table 3). For instance, during a visit in 2011 to the Damoh district of Madhya Pradesh, we came across tribal girls who had to drop out of school because they could not pay the examination fees. Such issues along with the need to supplement household income become important factors that pull children out of the education system.

Table 3: All India Average annual expenditure (Rs.) per student of age 5-29 years pursuing any education by item of expenditure

Item of expenditure	Rural&Urban		
	Female	Male	Total
Tuition fee	899	1140	1034
Exam. Fee, Other fees & payments	415	493	459
Books & Stationery	547	617	586
Uniform	261	274	268
Transport	230	248	240

⁶ Going by the different calculations of poverty in India, it can be safely said that around 40 percent of Indians live below the poverty line which is for instance Rs.15 per day for a rural person as per the Tendulkar Committee recommendations.

Private coaching	324	378	354
Other expenses	103	129	118
Total	2780	3279	3058

Source: (GOI, 2010) p.62

Table 2 also indicates that as the education level and the management of education institutions change (see, GOI, 2010, p. 60), the cost of education increases. The students from populations with a lower MPCE have lower educational levels compared to those with higher MPCE. This inaccessibility based on the pure economics of an ability to participate in the market as a consumer aggravates further when we find that more and more educational institutions (especially of technical and vocational education) have been left out for the private capital to quench its thirst (Table 4). The pending Foreign Educational Institution (Regulation of Entry and Operation) Bill, 2010, which was introduced on 3 May, 2010 in the Indian Parliament will take this inequity only a step further.

Table 4: All India Percentage distribution of currently attending students aged 5-29 years pursuing different types of education by type of institution

Type of education	Type of institution	Rural&Urban		
		Female	Male	Total
General	Govt. & Local body	70.4	67.0	68.5
	Private aided	11.9	12.2	12.0
	Private unaided	17.2	20.2	18.8
	Total	100	100	100
Technical	Govt. & Local body	34.5	23.3	27.4
	Private aided	23.2	31.5	28.5
	Private unaided	40.1	44.5	42.9
	Total	100	100	100
Vocational	Govt. & Local body	24.1	39.4	34.3
	Private	23.0	13.4	16.6

	aided			
	Private unaided	50.2	45.8	47.3
	Total	100	100	100

Source: (GOI, 2010), p.50

Privatisation remains the Mantra across Educational Levels

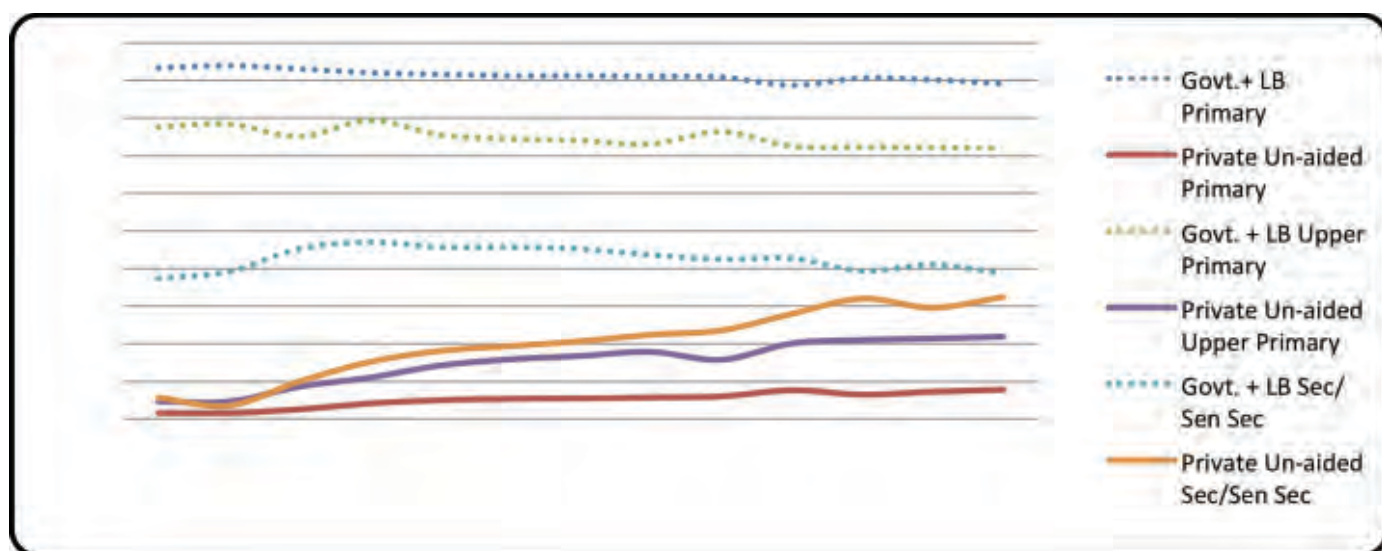
The situation depicted above through the recent data is in consonance with the way educational institutions across levels of education have been privatised in post-independent India. The recent trends of privatisation of higher education has been discussed by many (Tilak, 2002; Prakash, 2007; Sharma, 2007), and the way private educational institutions in higher education have been mushrooming can no longer be explained unless one looks at private capital as merciless and as that which seeks expansion at all costs. The University Grants Commission (UGC) Annual Report 2005-06 indicates that as of March 31, 2006, the number of central universities was 20, there were 217 state universities, and 102 deemed universities, 10 private universities, 13 institutions of national importance and five institutions established under the State Legislature Act (Prakash, 2007). However, quite notably since March 2002, while the number of central and state universities has grown by 11 percent and 22 percent respectively, the deemed universities have grown by 96 percent. Besides, 10 private universities have come into being during this period (Prakash, 2007). There has been an increasing trend in the number of private higher education institutions and enrolment in such institutions in recent years. For instance, "in 2000-01, private unaided institutions constituted 42.6 per cent of the total number of higher education institutions, which increased to 63.21 percent in 2005-06 (UGC: 2006, cited in Prakash, 2007). Similarly, the share of enrolment in private unaided higher education institutions has gone up from 32.89

percent in 2000-01 to 51.53 percent in 2005-06” (Prakash, 2007, p. 3254).

It is rightly argued by a number of educationists today that government schools outnumber privately managed educational institutions. However, what is forgotten in the process is that there is an alarming rate of privatisation of these institutions. And this privatisation, it needs to be emphasised, is not because things go out of control of the state but rather because the state wants to become an agent of capital. This is a development

schools for better off government servants, municipality schools for poor children, Pratibha Vikas Vidyalaya for ‘bright’ students, etc. In rural areas, the categories of ‘worse’ schools further multiplies with infrastructure-less schools being run with underpaid and undertrained teachers (called para teachers). This only shows how discrimination and inequality is institutionalised by the state itself and none of these aspects have been taken care of by the new Act enacted in the Parliament. Along with this, the education

Chart 3: Trends in Privatisation of School Education



Source: Based on data available in the Time Line Series, Ministry of Human Resource Development, available at <http://www.education.nic.in/stats/Timeseries0506.pdf> (Accessed on 13 March, 2011).

LB = Local Body

which can be witnessed across the globe today. The government school system in India is fraught with its own problems, created intentionally to segment the labour force right at the entry level. This segmentation happens at different levels and in different forms: when the government schools themselves become multi-layered – different kinds of schools for different sections of people are instituted. There are government schools that cater to different levels of aspirations and classes – for instance, in the city of Delhi itself, there are Kendriya Vidyalayas for central government employees, Navyug schools and government

system, due to increasing participation of the private sector has been going out of reach of the majority of children. The private educational institutions become out of reach of the majority and therefore in an economy which flourishes on certain types of skills and where employment opportunities get determined by training in such skills, a kind of a segmentation of labour force takes place. Therefore, people at the lower rungs of the economic ladder simply cannot afford advanced training or degrees, and the jobs that they promise. They have no route whatsoever towards any social and economic

mobility in such a system. The state is also drawing up plans to involve the private sector in running its own schools, something which has been pending since it expressed its desire in the Tenth Five Year Plan⁷.

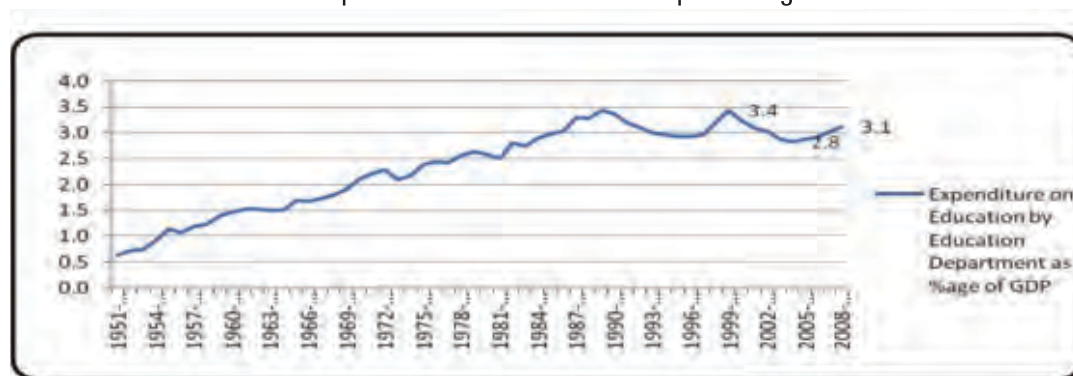
Combined with these trends of privatisation, the fear gets multiplied when one looks at the way state expenditure on education has been stagnating or declining. It was way back in 1966 that the Education Commission had recommended that 6% of GDP (Gross Domestic Product) be used in educating India's children. Since then, that figure has remained a dream. In fact, today, the proponents of neoliberal think tanks have been arguing for school vouchers, the need to recognise private schools as better than the government schools

and providing lower salaries to school teachers. They recommend substandard "low cost private schools" to be more "reliable" as a significant instrument of the government education policy" to educate all children (Shah, 2009, 2010; Jain and Dholakia, 2009).

The signs sent out by the available data do not generate any hope that even in the coming years, there will be a semblance of justice and equality in accessibility to education. More so when we find that the state expenditure itself has been going down as revealed by the chart below.

The children of the poor and underprivileged in India have been caught in a trap, which has been engineered by interests subservient to

Chart 4: Expenditure on Education as a percentage of GDP



Source: Based on data available at <http://www.education.nic.in/planbudget/GDP51-09.pdf>

⁷ The state has proposed to start 2500 secondary schools in the backward regions with the help of private sector participation, the goal being access to quality education. "According to the model finalised by the Planning Commission in consultation with the private sector, these schools will be set up by 2014 and will have the capacity to educate 65 lakh students, of whom 25 lakh will be from the deprived sections. Each school will have about 2500 students, 1000 of whom will be from deprived sections and charged a token fee. Fifty percent of the 1000 students will be from the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes and the Other Backward Classes. They will be required to pay a monthly fee of Rs.25 each. The rest of the children, who will be from other deprived sections — non-income tax paying families — will be required to pay a fee of Rs.50 a month. The remaining costs of educating these students, estimated to be Rs.1000 to Rs.1200 a head per month will be reimbursed by the Union Government to the schools. It is estimated that the government will have to pay Rs.10, 500 crore until 2017. The amount is likely to go up with escalating prices, in general, and increasing costs of education, in particular. Over and above this, the schools may get access to relevant funds from the Centre and the State governments under different schemes. The schools will be free to admit anyone to the remaining 1500 seats and charge any amount of fee" (Tilak, 2010).

private capital. Over the years, and more rapidly than ever before, a stark inequity in the education system has been noticeable. This inequity has ejected those children who cannot afford education out of the system. Though, historically, they have been kept out of the schooling system even when the welfare state promised them their due share on paper, it has been from the closing decades of 20th century onwards that the education inequality has started appearing starker.

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The Chennai Declaration was formulated by the All India Forum for Right to Education (AIFRTE) at a conference held in 2012. It challenges the neo-liberal policies of privatization of the educational system in India and fights for the reclamation of knowledge as a public good. This paper is a good read and an important piece in the struggle for a de-commercialisation of education.