

It took a virus to highlight the value of our public schools

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Photo: PTI

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Private schools let people down and flagged the importance of a good state-run schooling system

The little girl stood in the doorway for a few minutes, a silhouette against the blazing sunlight outside. Then she walked in to lean on the desk at which I was sitting. She remained silent, unhurried, as the class progressed. After two minutes of silence, I asked her, “*Kyaa kar rahi ho?*”; what are you doing? “*Main dekh rahi hoon*”; I’m observing. “*Kyaa dekha?*”; what have you seen? “*School toh chal raha hai, lekin khidki bund hai*”; school is on, but the windows are shut. In her bright pink dress, she walked to the front of the class, and climbed onto a chair that was too big for her small frame. As she caught the teacher’s eye, she was asked, “*Muneera school kyon nahi aai aaj?*”, why did you not come to school today? “*Khidki bund toh mujhe lagaa school bund, isi liye dekhne aayi hoon*”; the window was closed so I thought the school was closed today, so I came to investigate.

She darted out and came back in 10 minutes with her school bag, dressed in her school uniform, and hair in two neat plaits. A big grin stretched across her face. She blended into the group of children, from classes 3 to 5, studying together in that one classroom.

This government primary school has 55 students in classes 1 to 5, and two teachers. In March 2020, when it shut because of covid, it had 39 students. The number has increased because all children in that age-group from the village have enrolled in this school, instead of some going to the two private schools in a nearby small town, as was the case before the pandemic. One of the private schools shut down for good. The other is working, but villagers have lost trust in it. This loss of faith in private schools is a

pervasive sentiment common across the communities I have talked to. I have repeatedly heard that the pandemic has exposed the nature of private schools. Here is the gist of those sentiments.

All that they are bothered about is the fees. During the past 18 months, they have done nothing to engage children. In contrast, many government schoolteachers have often reached homes and communities, some very regularly. But all that these private schools have done is demand fees. A few have pushed for some kind of online education. But they know that this is ineffective when most children don't have access; and also that it's highly questionable whether the few who do have access actually learn anything online. But they don't care, they only want the money. They have no interest in the children or their education. They are running a business. And it is preposterous that while they are clearly running a business, they expect to be paid even when they don't deliver the service. They are holding people to ransom. So, these schools have lost all trust, and even if they have resumed functioning, children would rather be sent to a local government school. Also, the crisis has reinforced a growing acknowledgement that the quality of government schools is usually better than they get credit for and often better than that of private schools.

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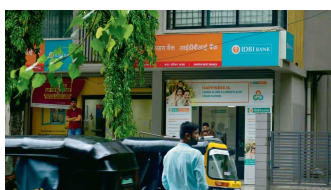
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The loss of trust in private schools and the collapse of many during the pandemic has boosted enrolment in the government (public) school system. Muneera's village is a prototypical example. In contrast to the experience with private schools, one of the government-school teachers in that village, held regular mohalla classes through the past 18 months. Teachers also ensured that the grain and pulses meant for daily mid-day meals at the school were regularly distributed to the homes of the children. During the most severe phases of the lockdown, they also supported many families with dry rations. Last week as I travelled through that region, I noticed that every single government school saw its enrolment rise by at least 20% as schools reopened.

The energy in the public-school system with this rising enrolment must be effectively harnessed to tackle the unprecedented educational emergency facing us. We must recover the learning losses of the past 18 months. And we must pre-empt another potential crisis caused by a rise in the drop-out rate of India's most vulnerable, a trend that may be obscured by the rise in enrolment because of children moving from private to public schools. This must be prevented by identifying the children most at risk and taking targeted action.

Not all private schools are bad. Many are of good quality and are truly bothered about the education and welfare of their students. But an overwhelmingly large proportion of private schools are run only with a commercial purpose.

The pandemic has revealed our character to its core. Our hopes, fears, weaknesses and courage as individuals. As well as our inequities, inadequacies and deepening cleavages, alongside shades of solidarity and resilience, as a society. In addition, it has sharply underscored the fact that what must be a public good can only be served by public-spirited social institutions. The deep structural fallacy and incongruity of private organizations running for-profit businesses in the guise of delivering public goods is now out in the open.

There is no substitute for an equitable, strong and vibrant public education system. Much like, despite the existence of many deeply-committed private philanthropic hospitals, there is no substitute for a robust public health system of high quality, a point made tragically clear by this horrific pandemic.

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