

# Education in India: getting back to basics

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In the past few years I haven't heard a single government school teacher complaining about her salary. They have many problems, but compensation is not one of them. The salary range within which a government primary school teacher starts is between Rs16,000 and Rs22,000 a month, depending on the state. Public healthcare (what is available) and retirement benefits are in addition to this, not to talk of the security. The salaries are in the range of Rs40,000-45,000 per month for someone who has worked for 20-odd years in the system. This has to be considered in the context of where most of these teachers live, i.e., rural and small town India. Their salaries are not lavish, but are reasonably comfortable.

This doesn't include teachers who are not in regular employment, but are "contract teachers". Their salaries are much lower, and they are an understandably disgruntled lot. While few states do have large number of contract teachers, in most it's a small minority.

Salaries of private school teachers are another matter altogether. In similar locations as I have mentioned, their salaries range from Rs2,000-6,000 per month. I am not referring to elite private schools which are an insignificant minority.

Let's now look at some implications of these facts and related issues. For the average Indian, not the Mint reader, employment in a government school is a reasonably attractive proposition. It may figure lower in the attractiveness hierarchy as compared with many other roles in the government, because of it being low in the power hierarchy, but as compared with any other vocation in life, it's pretty good.

The urban middle class notion that we must get better people to become teachers is a nice general homily, with little connect to reality. That's because the socio-economic incentives are already aligned such that the profession attracts the average capable person, within the limitations of the existing population. The small minority of "best and the brightest" are anyhow attracted to medicine, engineering and the like. The starkest disincentive of the teaching profession is that it requires people to live in small towns and villages. This cannot be changed. Certainly teaching can be made more attractive, but that's by cultural and governance changes in the school system, to make the role of the teacher more creative and empowered as it should be.

It's clear that the salaries of teachers in most such private schools are very low, bordering on the exploitative. The reasons why they get teachers at these salaries are fairly simple. Most of those who join private schools as teachers are those who are waiting and trying to

join government schools. Since recruitment of government teachers has its own pace and scale (though it has become “cleaner” in many states), many keep waiting and trying for years, and it’s this lot that largely feeds the private schools. Eventually of those who don’t make it to the government system, many leave teaching to do other things, which is not surprising, given their salaries.

The “teacher labour market” is driven by the government schooling system. Private schools are an appendage. One crucial implication of this is that the kind of people entering the teaching profession is driven by the government schooling system. If it were not so, the kind entering teaching would be of very low capability, making the situation in education even worse than today, given the primacy of the role of teachers in anything related to education.

There are some interesting related issues. To get to those, let me ignore my “market fundamentalist” friends who continue to ignore all evidence that performance of private and government schools is not different, and that movement to private schools is largely because of non-educational, social factors.

Given that both the government and private schools deliver similarly poor learning outcomes, is there a case to consider the relative economic efficiency of the private schools? They do deliver the same poor quality at perhaps one-third to half the cost of the government schools. I am making an assumption here, that large percentage of the operating cost of a school is related to teacher salaries and associated activities; at the level of our discussion, this is roughly accurate.

Hopefully two things are obvious. One, even the same poor quality outcome is delivered by private schools because they are able to tap the overall labour market and social incentive structure created by the government system. So considering “efficiencies” of private schools, narrowly looking at their costs is an invalid exercise. Second, what we really want is not the poor quality outcome, but a significant improvement in our educational outcomes.

What we need to focus on is the basics of our overall educational system: teacher preparation, professional development of the existing 7 million teachers and other functionaries, student assessment reform, improvements in curricular support material and approaches, and cultural changes that empower schools and teachers. The simple fact is that private and government is an irrelevant dimension of differentiation in the context of our schools.

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