

Myths of Privatopia



There is a land called Privatopia. There, Leviathan is but a distant memory, of the beast that withered away. It's a clean and healthy land. Children grow up there with great education. Gleaming roads connect all places. Transport works without a glitch. The water is sweet, germ-free, delivered to every house. Sanitation works perfectly. High-tech hospitals take care of the few who are ill. Peace in the land and its security are maintained by the ever-alert forces. All this has been made possible after the beast was helped to wither away by the dynamic forces of competition and markets were encouraged to take over all these services. The glorious day when other essential services like legislative representation, justice and parenting will also be offered by the efficient forces of markets, is not far away.

This caricature of a place without any public systems and services resonates with the ideas of many of my friends on what can solve India's problems, till I get to the last few words.

Most of us do live in our own Privatopia. The Indian upper middle class does not get involved with public systems in any way, unless it's completely unavoidable. There are good reasons to avoid Indian public systems. The simplest of which is that these systems do not deliver what they are supposed to. In addition, their general wastefulness, corruption and brazen disregard for basic human dignity is obvious.

So the abandonment of public systems by those who have money and power is quite understandable. However, this phenomenon is leading to something deeply insidious to a good society and democracy. The well off and the influential are not only abandoning public systems, but they are abandoning the very idea of it.

A lack of immediate personal stake in these systems, combined with a strangely narrow understanding of economics, leads to hankering for Privatopia. These ideas and their pursuit are hollowing out the foundations of good society.

Even those who understand well that market-oriented economic theory itself suggests that certain goods and services have character which make them non-deliverable by the market can't bring themselves to accept that India needs to fix its public systems. They (including senior government officials) continue to think of privatization and competition as solutions.

School education, which is my area of work, is the frontline of this war. India's schooling system is more privatized than any other country in the world, almost by a factor of two, and growing. Only failed states have similar percentage of private schools; failed states by definition have failed public systems and institutions.

Theory, experience and evidence all point in the same direction: that good public schools are the only route to good education at a systemic level. I have earlier written about how well-researched evidence in India busts the myth that private schools perform better than public schools. Let me mention a few experiences from across the world. Diane Ravitch's very readable book *Reign of Error* gives a blow-by-blow account of this war on education and its insidious effect in the US. The Swedish school system is showing worse results and growing inequality after two decades of privatization. Not many countries have tried this self-defeating strategy of introducing markets in schools.

For a comprehensive global view, let's look at the Programme for International Students Assessment (PISA). This is a cross-country study of school education conducted periodically by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). PISA has been accused of making facile international performance comparisons; but despite its limitations, its characterization of country-wide systems is still useful. PISA is unambiguous about the record of public systems. Let me quote verbatim from the concluding chapter of PISA 2012, which sort of addresses the implications of its research for policy: "...in contrast, some features, most notably the prevalence of private schools and competition for students, have no discernible relationship with student performance, at least at the system level...thus, after socio-economic status is accounted for, private schools do not perform better than public schools...although individual parents may derive an advantage for their child from the privileged socio-economic context—and attendant resources—of private schools, school systems as a whole do not seem to benefit from a greater prevalence of private schools or a higher degree of competition among schools." In simple terms, the comprehensive evidence from 65 countries says that competition and market-based mechanisms do not improve school systems; on the other hand, they increase inequity.

India's education will not improve till our public education improves. There is no way out. But forget about trying, the idea itself has been abandoned by (most of) the Indian elite.

The efforts to improve education in India are reflective of a deeper struggle; the struggle to retrieve the idea of public systems, including public education, and then to make them function. We may not be a failed state because of our "vibrant" democracy, but will fail as a society, if we let our public systems wither away.

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