

# Beyond 25% reservation

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Educational issues usually attract headlines when a controversy emerges. Controversies have differing levels of substance, ranging from the truly important to the totally irrelevant. There has been a clutch of such issues that have grabbed headlines in the past months. These include, poor learning levels in our schools; cartoons boiling the feelings of a few and getting expunged; and a list of holidays in a school book determinedly ignoring all holidays other than the ones related to religious festivals of the “majority” community, among other issues.

I can’t think of a controversy, which has grabbed more headlines (and column space) in the recent past, than the issue of the 25% reservation for children from disadvantaged sections in private schools through the Right to Education Act (RTE).

It’s not difficult to understand why this is so. It directly involves people like us. These are our schools: we own them and send our children to them. So the real and imagined impact of the reservation is exercising us. Screaming headlines follow naturally. After all, the headlines are written, once again, by people like us, to be read by people like us.

It has come to a stage where for most, RTE means 25% reservation. Nothing could be further from the truth. RTE has many dimensions, each with good intentions, but contestable on many grounds.

Let us just take a brief glimpse of these largely ignored dimensions of RTE. In the long term, some of these may have significant implications. Here, I will not attempt to be exhaustive, neither in the coverage of the issues nor in their critique.

The fundamental promise of RTE is quite unusual: that all children in our country between the ages of 6 and 14 get free education, is the government’s obligation. This education must be based on certain detailed guidelines and standards as laid down in RTE. In most other countries, the government takes charge of education, but the final responsibility rests with the parents. In India, now, free education can be demanded as a right by people.

The guidelines and standards that I refer to are spelt out in varying levels of detail, but all with the intent of providing conditions that enable good education in a safe environment for the child. Both—the government and private schools—are to be held to the same

standards and guidelines. The notion of “good education” is drawn from years of policy and curricular refinement in India, all with progressive notions of an integrated cognitive, social, emotional, ethical and physical development of the child.

The physical infrastructure of school is spelt out in detail: (e.g.) standards for class rooms, playgrounds and toilets (separate for boy and girls). In our country, where schools (and colleges) are often run in two room lofts, spelling out these basics is useful.

The Act sets guidelines on fee to be charged, including an explicit prohibition of capitation fee. Clearly it attempts to address a malaise that we are all familiar with, and which at a deeper level is symptomatic of rampant commercialization of education.

For those (most) of us harried parents who have experienced the torture of seeking admissions for children, the clause in the Act on admissions will be a basis for relief. Schools are not allowed to have any screening procedure for children or their parents for admissions. Also children are supposed to be admitted in age appropriate classes. To compensate for education that a child may have missed (while not being in school) special training must be provided by the school such that the child can catch up with her age appropriate class.

Teachers are supposed to be appointed in schools is a certain ratio (1:30) to the number of students in a class. The teachers must also be “qualified teachers”. The intent is to ensure a certain minimum capability of a teacher. This has substantial implications for both government and private schools, since currently they have lakhs of “unqualified” teachers. They must all be qualified within five years of notification of the Act, or they will not be allowed to teach.

Children cannot be given punishment, which not only includes hitting, forcing children in to awkward poses, but also mental intimidation. Children cannot be expelled from schools. Assessment of children’s learning will only be for developmental purposes (for improvement) not for judgement or grading. No child can be retained in a class, up-to Class VIII. There are special provisions for schools’ obligation to educate children with disabilities.

It’s probably apparent that each dimension that I have referred to, can have its own raging controversy. The overall thrust and scope of RTE can also be questioned as being inadequate. And the method, of using legislation and rights-based approach for quality education, too, can be questioned on philosophical and efficacy grounds. I am myself deeply conflicted by RTE.

However, what cannot be questioned is that RTE will probably have significant impact—way beyond the 25% reservation; it will be useful for people like us to open our eyes to that.

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