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**Classes for the Masses? Social ambition, social distance and
the quality of the government school system**

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Abstract

During the fifty years of our independent existence, the government schooling system has been witness to the interplay of two parallel but opposing forces : a) on the one hand, by catering to *all* of our children, whether have-little or have-enough, meritorious or mediocre, dalit or brahmin, the public school system has made basic education within the reach of all; b) on the other hand, the quality of public schools has steadily deteriorated. That is to say, educational facilities extended to the poor have more often than not turned out to be poor facilities. We read in these divergent developments something more than just a quality-quantity trade-off. In a society as iniquitous as ours, the state-supported school system offers a scope for both domination as well as 'low' caste/class social ambition; it is both a form of power and a form of protest. Consequent to the interplay of these two contrary forces, the state-run education system, which only in the recent past was an institution *for* the upper/middle classes (i.e. students) and *by* the upper/middle classes (i.e., practitioners and providers), has evolved into a system in which the 'social distance' between the teacher and the taught (and their parents) has increased due to greater educational participation of the latter. Hence the step-motherly and careless attitude of service-providers to the educational well-being of the disfavoured, hence the deteriorating performance of government schools (the quality of which reasonably satisfied educational needs of our previous generation) and hence the growing disillusionment of affluent parents with publicly provided education.

The latter perception, in turn, is getting translated into a greater demand for private schooling which then triggers another cycle of school segregation. Armed with old and new data, this paper proposes and scrutinizes more fully these hypotheses and, by extension, examines the new exclusionary forces that are at work in the present education set up, as evident through a greater reliance on prospects of private sector contribution to elementary education and a greater readiness to allow the government school system to collapse. The paper hopes to demonstrate that to let the radical potentials of education dominate over its hegemonic ones and to satisfy its equity goals, we need to 'fix' government schools and not 'abandon' them.

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Classes for the Masses? Social Ambition, Social Distance and the Quality of the Government School System

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I. Introduction

"An impression appears to have gained ground, both here and in England," Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar wrote to the Viceroy of Bengal in the late nineteenth century, "that enough has been done for the education of the higher classes and that attention should now be directed towards the education of the masses. An enquiry into the matter will however show a very different state of things. As the best, if not the only practicable means of promoting education in Bengal, the Government should, in my humble opinion, confine itself to the education of the higher classes on a comprehensive scale...To educate a whole people is certainly very desirable but this is a task which, it is doubtful whether any government can undertake or fulfill."²

Without trivializing, by any means, Vidyasagar's seminal role in educational reforms of Bengal, it may be noted that his letter echoed the truism about colonial education; in colonial India the demand for education was primarily articulated by the privileged strata of society and educational opportunities remained largely concentrated in these sections of the population. But since independence, even within an elite-dominated social structure, the education system has triggered in the masses, in some parts of the country at least, an urge for upward mobility and this heightened awareness has helped basic education to spread (See, for example, Kumar 1991). That is to say, the tradition of education being an exclusive privilege of a select few has gradually given way to an education transition, if not revolution, whereby the disadvantaged groups of society can at least make an effort to come up and out of illiteracy.³

During the full fifty years of our independent existence, the government schooling system⁴ has been witness to the interplay of two parallel but opposing forces : a) on the one hand, by catering to *all* of our children, whether have-little or have-enough, meritorious or mediocre, dalit or brahmin, the public school system has made basic education a tangible

² As quoted in Ghosh (no date).

³ This is not to deny that the dominance of the 'privilegensia' in the education sector continues to persist today, though in more subtle forms. But the dominant classes no longer appear to have total control in the education sector.

⁴ I use the terms 'public schools' and 'government schools' interchangeably in the text.

aspiration for all. Despite all its shortcomings, it is due to the government schooling system that the reach of elementary education has expanded beyond its narrow confines to include the masses. Also, several welfare-oriented public policies such as positive discrimination in employment, incentive schemes in schools etc. have played a role in augmenting the educational aspirations of parents from disfavoured sections of society. b) Yet, on the other hand, the quality of public schools has steadily deteriorated. That is to say, educational facilities extended to the poor have more often than not turned out to be poor facilities. We read in these dialectic forces something more than just a quality-quantity trade-off. In a society as iniquitous as ours, the state-supported school system offers a scope for both domination as well as 'low' caste/class social ambition; it is both a form of power and a form of protest and assertion of one's rights; it is both a site of control and a site of contestation.

To understand this intercession of contrary forces and their impact on educational 'progress', current efforts have been directed primarily at the analysis of either family circumstances or public policies, to the relative neglect of the role of social conditions and institutions in enabling or disabling educational participation.⁵ The argument that family economic wherewithals and supportive public policies matter in encouraging schooling is familiar by now; but schooling does not take place in a social vacuum. On the contrary, the right to education of some quality is a product of social arrangement. Therefore, we need to incorporate in our analytical frame the third oft-ignored element, namely, the social commitment or social motivation factor. If a society collectively attaches importance to basic education of all children, including female and dalit children, then even poor parents internalize this value and feel motivated to send their children to school.

However, the absence or presence of such civic cooperation and engagement in this public cause is highly contingent upon the depth of social inequalities that obtain in different corners of the country. In a society as deeply divided as ours, it is, therefore, important to examine the link between social inequalities and educational participation. More completely, the familiar explanations for schooling patterns have to be rounded by a closer look at 'social capital' and civic cooperation that we can garner to promote the task of universal elementary education, amidst 'durable' inequalities around us.⁶ All these matters will be the subject of this essay. In more concrete terms, the substantive purpose of this paper is to examine the steady erosion of the government schooling system, by engaging in an analysis of civic participation or its obverse in the task of educational progress of all.

⁵ For some important exceptions to this omission, see Kumar (1989), Sen (1990) and Dreze and Saran (1993).

⁶ The concept of social capital represents one of the approaches to the relationship between civil society and the state.

The recently burgeoning literature on civil society and social networking (built around the concept of social capital)⁷ emphasizes the importance of a vibrant civil society and civically oriented communities to the performance and effectiveness of public institutions, including government-run schools. Put simply, the concept refers to aspects of social organization and relations such as social trust, norms and networking among community members which facilitate civic engagement in collective action (Putnam, 1995).

There is, of course, an unstated assumption that underpins the so-called benign view of social capital or civil society. Social interactions, communication and networking are supposed to take place in a setting of relative equality. But in circumstances of pervasive inequality, of class, caste and gender, a civil society may become highly 'uncivil' (Bickford, 1995) in that it may spawn and nurture exclusive 'clubs' rather than inclusive communities, which are interested in securing 'club goods' rather than 'public goods' (Hall, 1999), which are interested in finding private solutions to public deficiencies rather than participating in common endeavours.

The problems and prospects of the government school system are analysed in this paper, keeping in mind both the liberating and limiting or exclusionary potentials of the civil society. To put the basic conclusion of this essay crossly but prematurely, consequent to the interplay of the above-mentioned twin forces, the state-run education system, which only in the recent past was an institution *for* the upper/middle classes (i.e. students) and *by* the upper/middle classes (i.e., practitioners and providers), has evolved into a system in which the social distance between the teacher and the taught (and their parents) has increased due to greater educational participation of the latter. Consequently, a schism has developed between the educational needs of children (especially the fresh entrants from depressed communities) and the caste/class interests of education professionals and bureaucrats. Hence, we argue, is the step-motherly and careless attitude of service-providers to the educational well-being of the disfavoured, hence the deteriorating performance of government schools (the quality of which reasonably satisfied educational needs of our previous generation) and hence the growing disillusionment of affluent parents with publicly provided education.

The latter perception, in turn, is getting translated into a greater demand for private schooling which then triggers another cycle of school segregation. Armed with old and new data, this paper proposes and scrutinizes more fully these hypotheses and by extension examines the new exclusionary forces that are at work in the present education set up, as evident through a greater reliance on prospects of private sector contribution to elementary education and a greater readiness to allow the government school system to collapse. The paper hopes to demonstrate that to let the radical potentials of education dominate over its

⁷ Two widely cited contributions to this literature are Coleman (1990) and Putnam (1993).

hegemonic ones and to satisfy its equity goals, we need to 'fix' government schools and not 'abandon' them. The following sections lay out the argument and summarize the evidence.

II. Inequality and Participation

The issue of educational progress or otherwise has to be discussed in the context of entrenched inequalities that pervade and fragment our society. Indeed, inequalities of caste, class and gender are particularly germane to the analysis of the importance of civic participation to the spread of mass education, since there could be wide differences in the attachment that people in different class/caste situations feel to the community at large. In a highly stratified society, caste, class, gender or spatial (i.e. rural-urban) divisions provide the main reference points for social relations; fragmentation along these lines makes cooperation and collective action in community institution-building difficult. It is, for example, quite unlikely that a community-wide dedication to the public cause of universal basic education will be naturally forthcoming in a society where deep social divisions have spawned educational disparities to begin with.

The sharpness of social fragmentation, however, varies from State to State within the same national boundaries. Those who suggest that all systems are characterized by inequality obscure the real differences from society to society and time to time. The social constraints which may depress civic cooperation are of varying virulence across different parts of the same national universe. It is, therefore, instructive to examine inter-State variations in both social inequality and educational participation and the link between the two, if any.

Table 1 summarizes evidence on multiple dimensions of social and educational inequalities which persist in rural parts of India and its major States. Due to paucity of relevant data, the proxies used for measurement of inequalities are rather crude; consequently we have presented multiple indices of socio-economic and gender inequalities : land concentration, poverty, caste and gender divides in literacy. Admittedly, land ownership cannot be taken to be a marker of social and economic privilege in a straightforward and simplistic way, unless we pay heed to whether a particular State or region is land-constrained, densely populated or drought-prone. Also, the degree of occupational diversification, the extent of non-farm employment opportunities and available credit facilities all have a bearing on the salience of land as an asset. Nevertheless, widespread inequalities in the distribution of land assets or concentration of land in the hands of a few households are indicative of social divisions which fragment village communities and are likely to sustain educational disparities.

[Table 1 about here]

In Table 1, the balance of evidence seems to suggest that while nowhere in India the distribution of land is perfectly egalitarian, in the States like Assam, Himachal Pradesh

(H.P.) and Kerala the situation is perceptibly better than what obtains in the rest of India. In these States, households in the bottom 30 per cent of the land ownership scale own a sizably greater proportion of the village land than what their counterparts command elsewhere.⁸

Similarly, at the top end of the land ownership scale, these States stand out from the rest on two specific counts : 1) there is relatively lesser degree of land concentration in these parts of the country; and 2) the caste gap between households owning large plots of land is much less pronounced, whereas in the States of Haryana, Madhya Pradesh (M.P.), Punjab and Rajasthan, land hierarchy appears to be a much more dominant social force to reckon with.⁹ In other words, in the latter group of States there is a significantly large number of households owning four Hectares of land or above and a far greater number of 'forward' caste families fill the rank of 'land-rich' than those belonging to SCST communities. Thus, while the pattern of land distribution is far from equal in any State of the country, a handful of States are better-off than the rest in this respect and correspondingly leave more scope for educational progress across the board. It is apparent that in addition to land another major source of social inequality is the caste system. What is more, inequalities of class and caste tend to reinforce each other.

Looking at the effect of poverty on education, in States of H.P., Kerala and Tamil Nadu (T.N.) literacy achievements of the adult population 'below poverty' appear to be significantly higher than what the people in similar economic situation have achieved in educational terms elsewhere in rural India. Moreover, while the 'poverty gap' in literacy (i.e., the difference in the literacy levels of people below and above poverty) still persists in these educationally high achiever States (except in Kerala where, as statistics reveal, closing the poverty gap is near complete), the absolute level of literacy among the economically depressed classes in these areas is so much higher than that of their counterparts elsewhere that we are talking of differences of very different scales.

Remarkably similar observations may hold for the same group of States regarding the 'caste gap' in adult literacy (i.e., the difference between the literacy rates of SCST and non-SCST adult population groups) : States of Assam, H.P., Kerala and to a lesser extent T.N.

⁸ Admittedly, the measure of land concentration used here does not include landless households. Arguably, a measure of land inequality which incorporates information on landlessness is a better one. In land-poor Kerala, for example, the number of landless households is non-negligible. Unfortunately, no such measure involving recent data is available. An incisive analysis along these lines, using the 1980s data, is in Sharma (1994).

⁹ Of course, over time there has been a decline (though in varying degrees across States) in the proportion of land operated by the households at the top of landownership hierarchy; but the lion's share of the area thus shed by them has come to stay with medium holdings. In other words, as the data also indicate, a trace of 'landlordism' has continued to exist in many parts of the country, depriving households at the bottom of landownership hierarchy of the benefits of land distribution (Sharma, 1994).

are much ahead of the rest of rural India vis-a-vis the educational progress of SCST communities, although in all of these States except one (Assam) 'forward' groups continue to outperform the disadvantaged groups by a large margin.

Turning to 'gender gap' in literacy, not unexpectedly literacy profiles of males and females are far from equal in rural India, reflective of unequal gender relations in society. This is old news; but what enlivens our hope is that women (more specifically adult women) in Assam, H.P. Kerala and to a lesser extent in Punjab have established a firm lead in literacy achievements over their fellow women in the rest of the country.

Put simply, the foregoing discussion only reiterates the presence of a pernicious synergy between educational disparities on the one hand and entrenched inequalities of class, caste and gender on the other. It is indeed amazing that literacy achievements should vary so much between different social categories within the same village borders when basic training in literacy is supposed to be freely available to all. But perhaps it is not so unexpected. Nested inequalities of such magnitude can undermine the basis of collective action driven by shared interests. More specifically, these disparities can substantially weaken the strength of the collective demand for improved performance of the common school system.

However, this generally fractious nature of the rural social structure notwithstanding, it is imperative to note that in some regions of India there are villages which may not be fully egalitarian but in which the society has become less stratified and social divisions have become less pronounced than elsewhere. This comparatively less fragmented nature of village societies in some regions has significant implications for the progress of school education.

For example, the PROBE study (1999) draws our attention to the relatively homogeneous social structure that exists in H.P. which, in turn, makes it possible for the village community to nurture "...a consensual social norm such as education being an essential part of every child's upbringing" (p.124). We discuss, in some details, what the study reveals vis-a-vis these specific features of the Himachali society and the corresponding positive social influences on school participation. Educational opportunities and aspirations in hill villages of H.P. are no longer a monopoly of the 'privilegensia'; rather these are tangible goals for the whole community.¹⁰

A land-abundant economy with a low density of population, H.P. has few landless households. Also, common property resources such as forests and pastures further enhance the comparative equity of access to productive resources in this region. Similarly, while caste discriminations do exist in this area, they tend to take a less virulent form than in many other parts of the country. Single caste villages are also common here, contributing to social cohesion at the village level. Again, while gender relations are not exactly equal in H.P., the

¹⁰ For example, the PROBE (1999) study points out that in H.P. if someone in the village gets a good job, it gives a sense of possibility to the whole community.

society and the family leave more scope for female autonomy.

In short, inequalities of class, caste and gender which are so pernicious in large parts of India are not so deep in the Himachali region; and what is important in the present context is that this relatively congenial social atmosphere coincidentally leaves scope for "a sense of village solidarity" and commitment on issues of village prosperity, including the progress of school education. Similarly, as numbers in Table 1 plausibly suggest (a careful analysis of the prevailing social structure would give a more direct evidence of this), in States like Kerala, Assam and T.N. too, class, caste or gender origins no longer strictly determine educational destinations. Such possibility of social mobility is itself a result of a social consensus that basic education is important for every child, irrespective of gender, class or caste. Social involvement in educational matters, in its turn, is a product of favourable social circumstances. Simply put, less iniquitous social structure leaves a scope for the promotion of mutual interaction, trust and engagement in collective endeavours, the sum total of which is 'social capital'.

III. The Government Schooling System : Social Commitment to Basic Education for All?

Social Capital

Aside from public facilities and private incomes, social conditions and social influences can be quite important in the promotion of schooling, as the recent literature on civil society and social capital has tended to emphasize. To set the stage for our discussion, it is useful to briefly describe the concepts of social capital and civil society, as they are being used in the recent literature.¹¹ 'Social Capital' is conceived as the proclivity of individuals to trust one another, to interact and associate together and to engage in public affairs. The central premise of this rapidly growing body of work is that social interactions and civic engagements in collective causes have pervasive influence on our public life; a vibrant civic life in a robust civil society is considered to be a precondition for effective participation in communal life and correspondingly for the proper functioning of public institutions. Social networks, it is believed, enhances people's capacity to get together in collective action to resolve common problems or to organize demand for concerned governmental authorities to address such problems.

Ability of the people to organize in pursuit of collective educational needs of the entire community has been the distinguishing mark of some regions of the Indian union; for example, the PROBE study has focused on the virtuous circle of the congenial social conditions, community initiatives and state policies that has paved the way for accelerated

¹¹ The literature on these is quite sprawling, but two of the major recent contributions on these concepts are Coleman (1990) and Putnam (1993).

transition toward universal elementary education in Himachal Pradesh. The Himachali society has achieved a social consensus on the need for every child to go to school and hence parents of widely divergent social and economic backgrounds feel motivated to send their children to school. The study highlights quite a few examples of collective initiatives in the villages to improve the local school, including cooperative action among parents as well as cooperation between parents and teachers.

Such community-wide involvement with matters of schooling, the study further reflects, also points to the reason why the government schooling system appears more accountable in Himachal Pradesh than in other areas of Northern India, even when the formal management rules are the same as elsewhere. Surely, the potential for civic cooperation is more likely to be realized in a social setting of relative equality; as mentioned before, the social structure of the Himachali hill regions is marked by an absence of sharp social and economic divisions at the village level. This cohesive and relatively homogeneous nature of village communities facilitates civic involvement as well as cooperation in schooling matters. Conversely, it is not difficult to imagine that such collective concern and cooperation would unlikely flourish and would be hard to sustain in a setting characterized by sharp caste and class polarization.

There are other prominent illustrations in the country of the possibility of nurturing a shared social goal of schooling for all. In Kerala, for example, the history of social reform movements (with mass education in their core) and favourable policy responses shows how the Kerala society has established its own heritage of education for all. Starting off with a highly inegalitarian social structure, Kerala has overcome the initial barriers to mass education through sustained social and political action, not only in the area of education but also in the broader sectors of agrarian and land reforms and reforms of the polarized caste structure.¹² Owing to considerable initiatives from social-reform oriented community groups (especially among the peasantry and the down-trodden classes), school education was opened up to all sections of the population, which in turn created an across-the-board demand for education irrespective of the divides of class and caste. Increasing demand for education further fostered awareness of the necessity to invest in education. Schools began to be established on a large scale either by the government or under the auspices of private initiatives. The generous grants-in-aid schemes of the government facilitated this process.

¹² Kerala's early start in education, its extensive missionary activities and initiatives of princely states and educational efforts under the auspices of various reform movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are well documented. For some illuminating analyses on the subject, see Dreze and Sen (1995), KSSP (1999), Mathew (1999), PRG (1983) and Tharakan (1984), among others.

Similarly, the fact that Tamil Nadu is one among the more literate States can be traced back partly to the egalitarian claims of the non-Brahmin movement in the State.¹³ The tradition of positive discrimination policies in this region, itself a product of progressive social mobilization activities, has clearly something to do with the fact that social or economic origin does no longer irrevocably determine people's social destinations. Generalizing a little more and drawing on historical trends, in Western and Southern India progressive social movements have been able to mobilize people to engage in the collective goal of educational expansion.

In striking contrast to this scenario, however, there are regions in the Union (in particular in the low literacy heartland in the North) which are notorious for their neglect of school facilities and their poor achievement in the field of education and yet, quite paradoxically, inertia and apathy on the part of the people (or at least the majority of them) seem to be the most potent political force in these areas. In other words, there is a virtual absence of any organized demand for school improvement on the part of either the community as a whole or parents in particular, who are no doubt deserving of decent schooling.

That very little collective pressure for change occurs in the villages of these areas in spite of the fact that village schools hardly function raises questions about the largely benign view of the civil society and its effects, routinely expounded in most of the literature. The question is whether the civil society is always civil. Can we expect civility to flow automatically from social interactions and connectedness, even in a situation of widespread inequality? It is possible for a society to be well-knit and yet highly stratified, with the underprivileged assigned a functional role within the system; only the terms of their incorporation are inegalitarian and exploitative.

We need to be careful to unpack the assumptions of civil society and social capital, since these are not undifferentiated categories. In a situation of sharp inequalities and hierarchies, a community may in fact be an ensemble of particularistic solidarities, religious or caste groups, ethnic or racist organizations; these groups may function as closely knit exclusionary clubs or cartels rather than as inclusive communities. Under these circumstances, group actions need not necessarily be civically oriented in that they may not pursue a shared social goal like the spread of mass education. Rather it is possible that these factional groups will be dedicated primarily to the private needs of their members, that they will serve narrow individual purposes and not a 'public' cause, and that the benefits of their activities will be available primarily to those inside these networks.

¹³ The Non-Brahmin movement of the early twentieth century and the subsequent Dravidian, Self-respect and Backward Classes movements in the State all focused on education as an essential component of self-respect. (Radhakrishnan, 1996)

It is also not unreasonable to expect that the particularistic allegiances and orientations of these special interest groups will reinforce and not weaken educational divides between regions, social groups and gender. It is, therefore, useful to keep both the reformist and hegemonic potentials of the civil society in mind in order to understand why the community is civically engaged in promoting mass schooling in some parts of the country but uninvolved or disengaged from this task elsewhere.¹⁴

Following closely the nature and activities of caste-centred reform movements in Kerala, one may argue that reform-oriented activities, of say, Nairs, Nadars and Ezhavas in Kerala were based on strong caste sentiments; these groups were particularistic in that they acted to improve the educational status of their own members, relying often on their private initiatives. One may, therefore, suggest that these were 'club-like', 'special interest' caste associations that experienced a salutary competition among themselves for the educational betterment of their respective members and not for pan-community actions.

However, it is important to point out that the apparently particularistic demands of these caste groups led to demands that were democratic in over-all effect; that is to say, there was a clamour for education for all. There, indeed, emerged a social consensus that basic education was indispensable to childhood. In the creation of this wide social acceptance and vibrant civic interest in education across castes, classes and localities, the presence, influence and positive role of the government were crucial. The initiatives of governmental actors, such as a generous grants-in-aid system, facilitated private initiatives for a 'public' cause. The heritage of social achievement in Kerala is, indeed, attributed to a process of *social intermediation*, fed by cooperative and complementary efforts by the public and the government (Kabir and Krishnan, 1996).

More generally speaking, experiences and activities in an associational life and interactions within the civil society by themselves cannot fully explain policy or institutional performance. What happens in the arena of the state and government are also of critical relevance. In the literature on civil society and social capital, associations are often conceived of as in a realm apart from politics and the state; at times a zero-sum opposition is anticipated between voluntary associations and government actors. To be sure, there is perhaps a need to mark off and defend a social space away from the direct control of the state; there is also a case for viewing civil society as a counter-balance to potential abuses by the state.

This acknowledged, the relationship between the two need not be necessarily conflictual; on the contrary they influence and respond to each other as if being in a relationship of symbiosis and reciprocity. It may be noted in passing that the Kerala society has a legacy of not only reformist movements but also a penetrative party structure,

¹⁴ I am grateful to Professor A. Vaidyanathan for a comment on an earlier draft of the paper that led me to include the following two paragraphs.

politically enlightened citizenry and a responsive and enabling state - in short a strong overlap between the social and political life of its people. Generalizing, a more complete understanding of the functioning of public institutions would, therefore, require an analysis of interactions not only within civil society but also between civil society and state actors. Civic vitality depends not only on strong associational ties but on vibrant ties across groups, classes and localities; and governmental actors and their policies seem critical in generating such pan-community ties (Levi 1996, Skocpol 1996).¹⁵

State-run Schools : Expansion and Erosion?

With a steady and considerable expansion of the government schooling system in different corners of the country over time, the exclusivity of government schools has given way to a situation in which these schools are accessible to all segments of the population. By catering to *all* children irrespective of social and economic divides, the government schooling system has made educational aspirations widespread and educational attainment tangible for the disfavoured sections of society. Consequently, the underprivileged segments of the population have started responding to the possibility of benefiting from society's schooling investments and from subsequent education-related advantages. Put another way, the public space created by the 'public' schools has allowed social ambition of the downtrodden to rise and at times to assert itself against elite domination in education. In a broad and simple sense, public school services have increasingly become services for the public, especially for that underprivileged section of the public whose educational needs we should really worry about.

But have the facilities extended to the poor turned out to be poor facilities? Many indeed complain about the deterioration of teaching standard in government schools, even though infrastructural and instructional inputs have on the whole improved over time. While all government schools are not in a state of ill-health or equally dysfunctional¹⁶, a general perception pervades (often backed by evidence) about the failure of the government schooling system. In one strong view, government schools are in an irretrievable crisis, with many students barely learning to read, write and compute. Perhaps there never was a golden age when all children in government schools were taught well and plenty, but earlier these schools, in general, offered training of some quality which reasonably satisfied the then

¹⁵ Also in a hierarchical society, it is often a positive governmental intervention that is required to combat the so-called 'dark side of social capital'.

¹⁶ Indeed there are some elite government schools all over the country, mostly in urban areas. Even in rural areas, there are inter-State variations in the functioning of state-run schools.

clientele; but now in contrast, researchers, activists, parents and even teachers are all aware of how poorly some government schools are functioning today. It may be noted that the decline in quality has come at a time when average teachers' salaries in government schools have gone up substantially. This is by no means to deny that there are a sizable number of state-supported schools in which physical facilities are very poor and which are in acute shortage of teachers; a single teacher cannot possibly satisfy an entire school's educational needs. But even with relatively better infrastructural and instructional materials, in many parts of the country (especially in the States in North India) teaching activity in state-run schools has been reduced to a minimum, in terms of both time and effort, even in cases where the schooling infrastructure (such the number of classrooms, teacher-pupil ratio) is relatively better.¹⁷ This is not to ignore that in some other parts of the national universe a sustained social and policy commitment to schooling of decent quality in inexpensive government schools has found expression in a high level of per capita expenditure on education and an appreciably high teacher-child ratio (for example, in Kerala, Himachal Pradesh, Goa and Tamil Nadu). In these regions, the school environment appears to be conducive to teaching and learning, even when the education management set up remains more or less the same as in the rest of the country.

[Table 2 about here]

A cursory look at a few basic infrastructural facilities (Table 2) in village schools of India (let alone more subtle indicators of teaching-learning environment in classrooms) reveals that primary schools are in a worse state of health than middle schools.¹⁸ It is, indeed, ironical that primary schools which are supposed to nurture the fledgling educational career of the beginners by maintaining an attractive learning environment are the least equipped to do so. Furthermore, the availability and quality of facilities in rural schools are highly uneven across States, indicating, among others, the inequality of public spending in different regions of the country. The proportion of primary schools with as basic a facility as drinking water is lower than a very modest 25 per cent in States like Bihar, J&K, Karnataka, Orissa and Assam, whereas the corresponding figure is at least 60 per cent in States such as Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Punjab and Tamil Nadu.

¹⁷ Some micro-studies on the subject include Dreze and Gazdar (1996), Majumdar (forthcoming), Nambissan (forthcoming) and Srivastava (forthcoming) among others. Also, the macro-survey conducted by the PROBE team reports in several surveyed villages poor infrastructure, teacher shortage and more importantly teacher negligence in government schools. When PROBE investigators visited the government primary schools (without prior notice) fifty percent of the government schools had no teaching activity going on.

¹⁸ Facility profiles are not available separately for schools under different management; but since a majority of village schools are government-run, the aggregate picture is reflective of the state of affairs in government schools.

These inter-regional differences notwithstanding, on the whole it is felt that the standard has deteriorated in state-run schools and the main problem is persistent absenteeism on the part of teachers, compounded by the lack of effective supervision and accountability.¹⁹

Social Distance

It bears repeating that teaching standards in government schools used, in general, to be higher in the past, when work conditions were, in many respects, more challenging than they are today. What, then accounts for a visible decline in the functioning of these schools? One cannot possibly claim that there is one unique, unequivocal and uncontested response to this question. Indeed, a number of explanations as to why government schools are in disarray have been helpfully discussed by several authors. For example, the inadequate monitoring of teaching activities, the lack of incentive-compatible accountability mechanisms, under-utilization (also wastage and leakage) of available inputs and under-provision (shortage) of educational facilities are routinely cited as reasons for the declining performance of state-run schools. Furthermore, increase in the quantity of schooling is often thought to result in the erosion of quality, particularly for the poor. Also, there is a view that the government schooling system has become 'irrelevant' (and therefore dysfunctional) for the underprivileged children, because the curriculum and teaching methods are inappropriate.²⁰ Admittedly, all these competing explanations provide some pieces of the puzzle. But they do not exhaust our query about the reasons which underlie all these pathologies - of the inefficiency and inadequacy of educational investments and management, or the alleged quantity-quality trade-off or the pedagogical shortcomings. The pedagogical argument, for example, can be taken as a case for pedagogical improvement for all children throughout the schooling system but not as a convincing interpretation of why the school curriculum would selectively lose its relevance to down-trodden children and thereby enervate government schools.

Similarly, there is no ineluctable negative correlation between the quantity and quality of schooling; in selected regions of India (as in many other parts of the world) increases in

¹⁹ Two related issues, namely, the alleged decline of academic achievements in government schools (as measured by test scores) and the role of money in this have not been addressed here.

²⁰ Some other popular views are that the nationalist spirit that was alive and bubbling immediately after independence has gradually died down; with this are gone the dedicated teachers. The teaching profession has itself lost its attraction to other non-farm employment opportunities, available in the market. A contrary view is that a teaching job is quite lucrative, as revealed through the fact that selection of government school teachers is a hotbed of corruption. In this view, government schools function poorly as these are manned by incompetent and undeserving people, churned out by corrupt selection practices.

quantity have been associated with improvements in quality. Simply put, the above interpretations do not quite tell us why within the same educational management structure, government schools perform very differently across States of India and more pointedly, why with some palpable improvements in the instructional, physical and financial health of these schools, the teaching-learning environment has grown demonstrably unsatisfactory over time. The residual explanation, we claim in this paper, comes from what is characterized as the 'social distance' argument in the PROBE study (1999).²¹ It is, by no means, suggested that the 'distance factor' offers the whole explanation for the question under study; but as we proceed to demonstrate below, the interpretation carries considerable conviction.

In simple terms, 'social distance' indicates the gap between the social background of teachers and students (and their families). We argue that in government schools this distance has grown over time, as students from a wide range of family backgrounds have found more places in an expanded education system; but the social background of teachers, though more diverse than before, is still not representative of the general population; rather it still remains predominantly elitist in nature.

Diversity of social background (i.e. of class, caste, ethnicity and religion) is not in itself problematic; in fact plurality of social affiliations is expected to occur in a multi-religious and multi-cultural society like ours. However, the problem surfaces precisely because differences are not benign in most cases, as they reflect a power structure within which social opportunities are non-randomly distributed across social groups, with certain population sections disproportionately bearing the burden of social deprivation. In our specific context, distance, in terms of their interest, social attitude and orientation, between parents from 'lowly' castes and with no formal education and teachers from 'forward' castes having BA/MA degrees, more often than not results in a situation where teachers show little sensitivity to or sympathy for the educational needs of poor/'low'-caste children.

In many villages surveyed by the PROBE team, parents have bitterly complained about the way their children are treated in local (mostly government) schools. As one respondent says, "Our boy goes to school, but does not learn anything. The teacher is upper-caste; if he was from our community, he would teach" (PROBE 1999, p. 51). While sensitive attitude on the part of some teachers to the predicament of poor children is not uncommon, many teachers display a lack of commitment to the educational progress of disadvantaged children; they can afford to ignore the educational aspirations of underprivileged parents who lack, in large parts of rural India, collective organization and assertive power.

In certain parts of the country, social opposition to schooling of dalit children is palpable and well-documented. In some schools, SCST children are still required to sit

²¹ For penetrative sociological analysis along these lines, also see Kumar (1989).

separately in the corner of the classroom or at the door outside the classroom; a clear message of social inferiority is often conveyed to them by teachers and peers (Nambissan, 1995)²². Caste prejudices sometimes go quite far. To give a quick example, criticizing the accessibility of government schools to dalit children, one teacher in a PROBE village put it plainly, "What is the point of teaching scheduled caste children? Let them learn how to beat drums, that's good enough" (p.51). But even in the absence of such an extreme form of social apartheid in education, the 'quiet' indifference of many teachers in government schools to the educational promotion of underprivileged children (who are entering the system in a greater number than before) accounts for the erosion of a minimum level of teaching-learning in these schools. In PROBE States, the team finds this pattern of 'quiet inertia' among the majority of teachers even in cases where the school infrastructure is relatively good.

It is often suggested in both macro and micro surveys on education that the poor lack interest in education. But it may be helpful to question this widespread perception which keeps clouding our clear thinking. Because what we fail to discern through the veil of their sense of resignation is that the attitude of teachers (mostly upper-caste) is negative towards children from depressed backgrounds; they usually share the belief with the wider educated community that lower caste people lack the capacity to benefit from education. It is, indeed, 'our' lack of interest in 'their' children's education! Surely, teachers face a challenge posed by first generation learners whose parents cannot provide any out-of-school support for their children's educational needs. But in coping with this challenge, teachers mostly talk about the responsibility of 'have-little' parents towards their school-going children rather than their own responsibilities in the matter.

There is, of course, no easy way to measure social distance between the teacher and the taught and more importantly to assess whether the distance has increased over time.²³ Within the limits of available data, we use the caste background of teachers and pupils in both government and private (unaided) schools as a crude proxy for measuring the hiatus between their orientations, social aspirations and experiences, to the relative neglect of other relevant dimensions such as class or gender (Table 3).²⁴

²² As recently as in late 1999, P. Sainath reports that in Rajasthan, there are several cases of *Balmiki* girls dropping out of school because of caste harassment; this is what Kumar (1989) calls 'a high rate of early elimination'.

²³ We need to monitor the inter-temporal trend in this respect in order to state with conviction that the 'upper/middle class' character of the government schooling system in the past (i.e., the caste/class convergence of the teaching as well as the student communities) has changed over time and hence the decline of government schools. Due to paucity of data, we have not been able to attempt such an exercise here.

²⁴ The two capacious and broad caste categories of SCSTs and Non-SCSTs are clearly crude, glossing over several layers of inequalities within each category. Paucity of relevant data makes it difficult to

[Table 3 about here]

Admittedly, the social background of teachers of teachers is more diverse today than it used to be in the past. As the PROBE study indicates, there is some evidence of a trend towards a more balanced composition of the teaching profession, partly reflecting the effect of official policies (e.g., reservation of jobs) to narrow caste and gender biases in educational employments. Today, individuals of different backgrounds, including a sizable proportion of women, are found in the teaching profession. But the pace of change is slow. To quote the PROBE study, "...within the rural society, teachers remain relatively privileged in terms of class, caste and gender. Taking class first, government teachers almost inevitably belong to the more affluent sections of the rural society by virtue of their relatively high salaries and favourable terms of employment. Even in terms of economic status *prior* to getting a job, it is very likely that most teachers come from economically privileged families." (p.54, emphasis original). Similarly, the upper castes continue to be over-represented among teachers.

On the other side of the register, the PROBE study continues, over time "...the social background of pupils has significantly shifted in the direction of underprivileged groups, due not only to massive entry of disadvantaged children into the schooling system, but also to a major shift towards private schooling among privileged families...This social distance is one reason why many teachers have a limited commitment to the educational advancement of their pupils." (p.56)

In the present paper we try to pay a closer look at this hypothesis. Of course, no econometric evidence is supplied here to establish the correlation between the changing social character of government schools and their declining quality; but a few pieces of evidence point to the salience of such proposition. Clearly, without time series data it is difficult to test this proposition. Therefore, the analysis here should be treated as an exercise in the generation of strong hypothesis. In Table 3 we summarize State-wise statistics on social background of students and teachers in the two polar cases of government schools and private unaided schools. The figures pertain to rural areas only.

Let us first take the case of government schools. As mentioned in the foregoing, as a system which admits students on an unrestricted basis, government schools cater to a heterogeneous group of students. Over time, due to educational expansion policies, social reform movements and more generally to the spread of awareness about the benefits of schooling, the experience of basic education has started being available to a wide array of

capture these nuances. Furthermore, as indicated before, caste relationships reveal only a part of the story which underpins school performance; several other forces are at work. There is a possibility that a focus on caste alone may obfuscate issues. To cite two quick examples, in West Bengal historically caste divisions have remained relatively less prominent, yet civic consciousness and enthusiasm for mass education were dormant. The opposite was the case in Kerala.

people. As a result, the caste composition of the student body has changed substantially within the government schooling system. For example, the school survey data culled from the NCERT 6th Educational Survey indicate that there is a parity, in almost all States of India, between the enrolment share of SCST students in government schools and their population share.²⁵ Put another way, the student population of government schools is substantially representative of the general population.

[Figure 1 about here]

But the proportion of full-time teachers in primary and upper primary government schools in almost all States is much below their population share. That is to say, teachers come from more advantaged backgrounds than both the general population and their students. In simple words, the upper castes are over-represented among teachers, while SCST communities are under-represented. The consequent social distance, measured as the absolute difference between the proportion of SCST students and that of SCST teachers in state-run schools is plotted in figure 1. In States like Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Orissa and Punjab the distance appears to be quite stark.²⁶ Figure 2 plots the same data for a few selected States, highlighting the lack of commonality between the social experiences of the teaching and student communities. The States of Gujarat and Kerala seem to be the closest to the line of parity. In these States, a relative balance seems to have been achieved between the caste background of teachers and their students. Their counterparts in government schools in States like Orissa, Haryana and UP on the other hand are far from sharing a mutuality of interests and experiences. While no systematic effort is made here to correlate in a straightforward way social distance and school functioning, it bears mention that scholarly works routinely indicate the superior health (in functional and financial terms) of government schools in States like Kerala, Himachal Pradesh or Tamil Nadu, as compared to their counterparts in the BIMARU States of the country.

[Figure 2 about here]

In striking contrast but predictably, in the case of private fee-charging schools the caste gap between the teacher and the taught is negligible in most of the States. (Figure 3)²⁷

²⁵ Here we focus on SCST students who depend almost entirely on government schools for their schooling. See column 4 of Table 2. Notice that here we are talking about those SCST children who are fortunate enough to go to school; many of them remain outside the system altogether.

²⁶ Notice that Orissa and UP on the one hand and Haryana and Punjab on the other are almost at two opposite ends of the economic prosperity scale, yet having a roughly similar picture of social mobility (or its obverse) so far as the teaching profession is concerned.

²⁷ Here we pay attention to the non-SCST students who are the primary users of this type of school. We are inadequately informed at this point to explain the Orissa situation in which the distance between the user and the provider is huge in both government and self-financing schools. In the case of Bihar also (Table 3), the modest proportion of non-SCST teachers in private unaided schools poses a conundrum which we are unable to provide answer to at this point.

Conversely, neither the student population nor the teaching population in these institutions is substantially representative of the general population. Rather, one notices a convergence of upper class/caste interests between the teacher and the taught in fee-charging schools, as measured through their respective caste backgrounds. It is not only that private school teachers tend to belong to privileged castes, children enrolled in private schools also come mainly from better-off families. In the same sets of States in which government schools reveal a chasm along caste lines, in private unaided schools the picture is different in that the enrolment share of non-SCST students and the employment share of non-SCST teachers tend to achieve a near-perfect balance; all the selected States cluster around the line of parity. Clearly, there is an element of 'mutuality of interests' of teachers and students (and their parents) in fee-charging schools. It is, therefore, not surprising that these schools perform relatively well in terms of teaching activity, better utilisation of facilities, responsiveness of teachers to parental concerns and complaints.

[Figure 3 about here]

It is true that the system of accountability is much stronger in private unaided schools as compared to government schools; the private school teachers are accountable to the managers who can fire them (and to the parents who are keen on getting their money's worth), whereas government school teachers have a permanent job with salaries and promotions practically unrelated to performance. But the point we wish to emphasize is that it is not only the fear of management or stricter accountability rules or greater cost-effectiveness but also a greater convergence of class and caste interests of the users and providers of schooling that explains the better quality of instruction in private schools.²⁸ There has been an exodus from the government schooling system of upper and middle class students who largely relied on the same system in the not so distant past, as though to 'vote with their feet' against the entry of the disadvantaged children. Hence their indifference, apathy and disengagement from the task of reviving the poor government schooling system or even a tacit approval for allowing the system to collapse. This sociological perspective (also a political economy one)²⁹ has to be factored in to an analysis of the declining quality of the government schooling system, in addition to the available incentive-centred explanations.³⁰

²⁸ In an absolute sense, the pedagogic practices or learning achievements in private schools leave much to be desired, as pointed out by education experts. But a minimum level of teaching-learning activity takes place in these schools, setting them apart from an average rural government school.

²⁹ In passing, it is important to underline that the social capital approach to state-society relations does not necessarily incorporate political economy considerations.

³⁰ To belabour the point once again, recall that government schools functioned reasonably well in the past, despite the inadequacies in the incentive structure. Even now, under different social conditions, the same management set up functions differently in different States of the country.

From 'Capture' to 'Exit' : A New Form of School Segregation?

In the colonial past as well as during the early years after independence, educational opportunities were largely the monopoly of the affluent classes; the state-run schooling system was virtually 'captured' by their children. But as the system has expanded gradually to allow the participation of disadvantaged children and as the deficiencies of the system have grown progressively acute, the 'privilegensia' have decided to exit the system in favour of private schooling. In many parts of the country, to echo the PROBE survey once again, a new and intriguing form of "...social apartheid has developed, whereby most dalit children go to the government school, while most high caste children attend private schools." (p.50)³¹

Surely, private schools have been allowed to function under the present Constitution and they have always existed in our country; at times private educational initiatives have complemented governmental efforts. But the large scale penetration of private schools in rural let alone urban areas (sometimes as rather commercial initiatives) is a recent phenomenon. Partly, this is a response to the growing parental demand for education and to the declining quality of government schools. But pursuit of such a 'private solution to a public deficiency' (as opposed to seeking improved public performance) on the part of the middle/upper class families has produced a new form of dualism in the school sector and correlatively a new process of 'social streaming'.

Some recent research, however, underlines the heterogeneity within the private sector and contradicts the strictly elitist picture of privately managed schools.³² In this view, there are several types of self-financing schools, drawing their clientele from across the socio-economic spectrum. Admittedly, there are some fee-levying schools which charge modest tuition fees and are, therefore, accessible by some of the lower economic groups; but in general there seem to exist several entry barriers to admission in private unaided schools. For example, the private unaided sector exercises considerable discretion - sometimes even discrimination - in admission of students (Ambili, 1999). Also, high tuition and other fees (comparatively speaking) and other eligibility tests (e.g., parental education achievement) further disable certain sections of parents from opting for private schools for their children. The effect of such careful screening is that often 'good' schools are schools where 'good' students attend. On balance, evidence suggests that the private schooling sector caters predominantly, though not exclusively, to the upper castes and classes.

³¹ Several surveys reveal a similar pattern. A study of 169 primary schools in Delhi (Agarwal, 1998) showed that SCST student were largely studying in government schools; only 6 per cent of the children enrolled in private unaided schools belonged to dalit communities as compared to 26.5 per cent for MCD (Municipal Corporation of Delhi) schools.

³² For a review of existing research on private schools, See De et al (1999).

With this massive reliance of the 'have-enoughs' on the private sector (this trend is prominent especially since the 1980s), the 'voice' for the improved performance of government schools is severely weakened. More elaborately, the 'exit' of this class from the government managed schools has affected the system in three specific ways : 1) it has reduced pressure to improve government schools. Devoid of both 'voice' and 'choice', the present clientele of government schools, namely, families at the lower end of socio-economic scale, can create that much less pressure on teachers and the education bureaucracy for meeting, with some degree of satisfaction, the educational needs of their children. 2) It has created higher resistance among the middle and upper classes to subsidize educational services, even at the elementary level. Indeed, austerity in social sector spending has been the dominant mood in the current climate of 'cost-consciousness'. 3) It has reinforced, not weakened, the 'our children, their children syndrome'. In the revealing words of the PROBE report, "...the notion that it is not essential for all citizens to be educated remains widespread...Even among teachers, we found persons who considered education as unimportant for children of the 'lower classes'....Interestingly, we found little trace of these rejectionist views among ordinary parents. It is usually in elite circles that concern to obtain the best possible education for one's own children somehow goes hand in hand with nagging doubts about the value of education for *others* (emphasis original) (pp.3-4).

In this atmosphere of indifference, apathy, or even resistance to 'education for all', it only requires a few more steps to talk approvingly of the collapse of the government schooling system - the system on which the 'lesser citizens' largely depend. Taking an opposite viewpoint, we argue here that to universalise basic education, we need to at once *defend* and *improve* the system. We need to defend it because there has to be a collective commitment to bear the burden (financial and otherwise) of minimally educating the entire population. While discussing recent attacks on public education in the USA, Barber (1997) makes a similar point eloquently, "It is the glory and the burden of public schools that they cater to *all* of our children, whether delinquent or obedient, drug-damaged or clean, brilliant or handicapped, privileged or scarred. This is what makes them *public* schools" (emphases original, p.4). Even without prejudice against private educational initiatives, it is, thus, necessary not to 'individualize' or 'privatize' the task which demands collective concern and action.

And we need to improve the system because of the demonstrably poor quality of government schools. As mentioned earlier, no direct exercise of measuring government/private school performance (e.g., academic achievement measured by test scores) is taken up here.³³ A rough and general exercise is carried out here to see how schooling

³³ Information on pupil-teacher ratio, infrastructure, per pupil expenditure etc. may also give some idea about school quality. However, in the literature on school effectiveness, it is the outcome variables (e.g. standardized test scores) rather than input variables that are thought to be more revealing of

achievements (as reckoned in crude terms of enrolment and retention in school) of disadvantaged children (i.e., the children who are in the 'wrong' class, caste or gender) compare with that of their privileged peers (Table 4).³⁴ With notable exceptions in some States, in each dimension of social privilege considered here (i.e., income, land, caste and gender) the schooling patterns of the disfavoured compares unfavourably with that of affluent children. Furthermore, the various indicators of 'power and privilege' show some tendency to move together. Simply put, the data seem to carry the message that there are some entrenched social and economic barriers to the educational participation of the downtrodden. It is once again the burden of the collective to demand improved public performance such that the poorer children not only overcome the initial entry barriers and get enrolled in government schools but that their educational performance compares favourably with that of their non-poor counterparts.

[Table 4 about here]

IV. Concluding Remarks

The paper suggests that the lack of civic engagement with schooling matters in general and the progressive irrelevance of government schools to upper and middle class dispositions in particular have been underestimated, with some notable exceptions,³⁵ in past studies of the erosion of the government schooling system. That fact that the village schools in large parts of the country have remained non-functional for many years has generated little collective pressure for change, at least in some regions of the national universe. This is what we call the public (especially upper class) disengagement from the challenge of revitalization of the state managed schools.³⁶

This is not to deny that the elite routinely castigate the quality of these schools and call for broad educational reform. But the suggested reform seems to be in the direction of opting out of government schools and turning to private ones. Stated differently, the prevailing mood is to call for a greater reliance on the private sector contribution to the spread of mass education and thus allow the government schooling system to deteriorate

school quality (Lewin, 1997). Of the few studies available on comparative achievement scores of government and private school students, both Bashir (1994) and Kingdon (1996) indicate the comparative advantage of private schools.

³⁴ The low incidence of discontinuation among the school-going children in UP and Bihar is contrary to our expectation; the high incidence of the same in TN seems also to be counter-intuitive.

³⁵ See especially, Kumar (1989), Dreze and Saran (1993), and PROBE study (1999).

³⁶ In one of her recent essays, Omvedt (1999, p. IV) ruefully observes, "Today Indian upper middle class parents will do almost anything to save their children from the public school system."

further. Talking about a major shift in the form and content of the education system in Kerala in the 1990s, The Kerala Education Commission Report (1999) points out, "The pathetic state of affairs in the common schools became a stick to beat general education with, while espousing the cause for commercial 'unaided' sector. It is the downtrodden sections who are adversely affected by this shift in education" (p.5). Speaking more generally from a 'social capital' perspective, there has been a shift in the attitude away from values that show collective commitment and action to ones that put more emphasis on self-help and individual opportunism.³⁷

Some think that given the financial constraints, the deterioration of government schools is inevitable. But it is worth asking, as we have done so here, whether the lack of financial resources to sustain government school facilities might itself be a symptom of an underlying phenomenon of reduced commitment of the elite to state-centred provision of education for all (also see, Dreze and Saran, 1993).

Under the present situation, one can spread gloom about the current standing of the state-managed educational institutions or one may give the opposite spin to the exact same phenomenon. That is to say, we can work to 'fix' the system and not 'abandon' it; we can incite action rather than allow stagnation, we can raise a spirit of commitment to the provision of basic education for the whole population as a matter of right, without displacing voluntary or private endeavours in the process.

What could be the strategies of action and empowerment that would enhance educational opportunities for the deprived? More concretely, what will it take to improve the performance of teachers? While suggestions for reform cannot be totally innocent of structural changes in patterns of social inequality, we cannot afford to wait for such reforms to be completed before we can act. That would indeed be a strategy for inaction. Even the social distance between the teacher and the taught cannot be totally removed due to demographic and other reasons.

Also, ideally speaking, social background of practitioners of education and their beneficiaries should become irrelevant to the functioning of an educational institution. Indeed, one is not looking for a coercive homogenization of the social circumstances of the school population. If anything, the opposite is what is desirable. That is to say, ideally we should work for a 'common' school that draws its students and teachers from groups/classes that include the poor and the middle class, dalits and non-dalits - a school which is a symbol of multiculturalism and plurality. Coincidentally, there will be a concern for and interest in the functioning and quality of that school across the socio-economic spectrum. What would, therefore, matter is the improvement in the educational standard of an 'average' government school such that it can satisfy educational needs of children across the-board (Vaidyanathan,

³⁷ For penetrating analyses of such patterns in the USA and Britain respectively, see Putnam (1995) and Hall (1999).

forthcoming). To that end, an appropriate strategy would be to involve the public at large in educational matters, to engender a societal consensus about basic education being a right of all children and thereby to entrust teachers with a civic responsibility of imparting a minimum level of learning to their pupils, despite differences of caste, class, gender or ethnicity between them.

Ensuring accountability of teachers is not easy; several strategies for that purpose have been suggested in scholarly works including the democratization of education management at the grassroots. Village panchyats, Parent-Teacher Associations, Village Education Committees, NGOs, communities can all play their respective roles in promoting teacher responsibility as well as public involvement in schooling matters. Also, accountability does not necessarily signify an anti-teacher stance (PROBE, 1999); rather it underlines the critical role of teachers and their initiatives in making the classroom a success. Indeed, the role of the teacher in school transformation is undeniably crucial. Sujatha (1995), for example, points out how teachers can act as agents of change, how a teacher with a positive attitude and an interest in the life and needs of disadvantaged children and a belief that they are 'educable' can make a big difference in terms of their participation and learning achievements. Similarly, as the PROBE report (1999) succinctly puts it, if any single factor can make the difference between a poor school and a successful school, it is the commitment and the initiative of the teacher.

How do we raise and nurture a civic spirit which enthuses both teachers and the public at large with a commitment to education for all? There is no magical formula to achieve this, for sure; there is no alternative to relying on the time-consuming and trouble-torn usual democratic practices of mobilization, organization, advocacy, debate, protest and demand - in short, the assertion of citizenship rights. We need both a civic-minded citizenry and civic-minded state actors to make quality education a socially and legally sanctioned entitlement of every Indian child. Obviously, the privileged will have to join their fellow citizens in the task of improving the performance of the common school system. Hence, even if some parents are willing and able to allocate sizable amount for their children's education and thus opt out of the government schooling system, it should not diminish or dilute the responsibility of the citizenry and the government to bear the social cost of improving government schools. This is especially so when we are worried, as per our catchy slogan of 'Education for All', about the most educationally marginalized section - the people whose educational needs are the greatest but whose private resources that might be mobilized for educational purposes are the most heavily constrained.

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Table 1 : Socio-Economic Climate in Rural Areas in India and its States : Entrenched Inequalities

States	Land Concentration		Poverty Gap in Literacy		Caste Gap in Literacy		Gender Gap in Literacy	
	Percentage Share in Operated Area of the Bottom 30% Landholding HHs 1992	Proportion of HHs Cultivating 4:01 (& above) Hectares of Land 1993-94	Adult (15+) Literacy Rates, 1992-93		Adult (15+) Literacy Rates, 1993-94		Adult (15+) Literacy Rates, 1995-96	
			Below Poverty Group	Above Poverty Group	SCSTs	Others	Male	Female
AP	2.9	0.8	35.9	45.0	21.6	36.8	48.2	22.8
Assam	5.5	2.2	-	-	62.9	62.8	76.1	57.4
Bihar	2.3	1.1	33.4	39.5	19.0	39.2	47.4	17.2
Gujarat	2.0	1.0	45.2	59.6	38.8	53.9	67.0	36.1
Haryana	0.3	1.1	40.0	49.8	33.8	49.7	67.4	34.5
H.P.	5.7	0.2	54.1	65.1	50.6	61.6	71.0	50.6
J&K	6.1	0.0	-	-	38.3	52.5	55.9	29.4
Karnataka	2.1	2.6	41.1	51.1	26.2	47.4	57.3	31.3
Kerala	5.9	0.0	88.6	90.1	76.8	91.1	92.8	84.2
M.P.	3.8	7.0	31.5	43.6	22.9	43.1	54.4	21.1
Maharash	2.1	4.5	43.8	56.9	38.6	55.3	71.8	39.0
Orissa	4.6	1.3	43.4	59.0	26.1	55.1	61.1	33.6
Punjab	0.4	0.2	36.3	58.0	33.2	57.2	64.0	47.7
Rajasthan	3.3	7.9	26.2	40.3	20.8	34.3	52.0	14.1
T.N.	2.1	0.2	51.7	62.6	46.2	58.2	67.4	39.3
U.P.	3.1	0.4	34.2	47.9	22.4	41.3	57.0	20.9
W.B.	3.3	0.2	46.8	58.9	43.4	59.9	67.5	41.5
India	2.0	2.1	41.3	52.7	30.6	49.8	60.6	31.7

Sources :

Calculated from NSSO, 48th Round, Operational Land Holdings in India (col. 2), NCAER, "Non-Enrollment, Drop-out, and Private Expenditure on Elementary Education : A Comparison Across States and Population Groups", (cols. 5, 6), Sarvekshana, vol. XXII, No. 4, NSS 50th Round on Employment and Unemployment Situation among Social Groups in India (cols. 3, 4, 7, 8), NSSO, 52nd Round, Attending an Educational Institution in India, (cols. 9, 10).

Table 2 : Basic Infrastructural Facilities in Elementary Schools in rural areas of India and Its States : 1993

States	Average No. of Instructional Rooms per school		Proportion of Schools having facilities for			
	Primary	Upper Primary	Drinking Water		Urinal	
			Primary	Upper Primary	Primary	Upper Primary
Andhra Pradesh	1.6	4.2	28.7	54.5	3.7	17.6
Assam	1.3	3.6	18.8	41.3	10.8	32.8
Bihar	1.2	3.6	39.8	69.7	2.9	18.5
Gujarat	1.6	5.2	34.0	59.2	20.9	57.6
Haryana	2.9	7.2	76.7	91.3	54.8	86.5
Himachal Pradesh	2.6	2.8	61.0	73.3	10.6	26.4
Jammu & Kashmir	1.9	4.8	10.0	27.5	4.8	18.6
Karnataka	1.5	4.2	22.2	42.6	2.5	18.6
Kerala	5.9	12.1	75.7	87.4	81.5	93.1
Madhya Pradesh	1.9	3.2	29.9	48.6	11.8	39.3
Maharashtra	2.0	5.0	48.2	64.4	17.1	44.6
Orissa	2.3	3.2	24.1	42.6	5.6	24.4
Punjab	2.8	4.0	87.6	96.3	51.0	88.1
Rajasthan	2.6	6.0	50.8	69.6	23.4	57.3
Tamil Nadu	2.6	6.1	60.8	72.1	15.8	43.2
Uttar Pradesh	2.3	3.5	52.6	64.9	18.0	46.2
West Bengal	2.0	4.8	58.4	83.0	15.2	92.8
India	2.0	4.5	41.4	58.3	14.0	40.6

Source : Sixth All-India Educational Survey, vol. II, Schools and Physical Facilities, 1998.

Table 3 : Social Background of Students and Teachers in Government and Private (unaided) Schools in rural areas of India and its major States : 1993 : A Profile of Social Distance

States	Proportion of SCSTs in total rural Population 1991	Proportion of Students SCST in Elementary Classes (I-VIII) of Govt. schools	Proportion of (full-time) Teachers SCST in Govt. Elementary (primary + upper primary) schools	Proportion of SCST students going to Govt. schools	Proportion of students Non-SCST in Elementary Classes (I-VIII) of Pvt. Unad. schools	Proportion of full-time Teachers Non-SCST in Pvt. Unad. Elementary (Prim. + Upper Prim.) schools
Andhra Pradesh	25.9	28.5	18.5	91.7	87.8	93.8
Assam	21.1	31.8	20.1	97.0	85.7	93.6
Bihar	23.4	23.3	16.9	96.6	70.8	55.3
Goa	1.9	3.0	1.4	69.6	100.0	100.0
Gujarat	27.9	29.2	27.9	90.8	86.6	89.0
Haryana	21.6	23.2	6.1	99.0	91.2	93.3
Himachal Pradesh	30.5	30.4	16.8	99.0	90.2	92.9
Jammu & Kashmir	9.3	23.3	13.3	95.4	79.4	89.2
Karnataka	23.4	26.5	18.3	91.0	79.8	85.3
Kerala	12.4	15.5	10.7	45.7	96.6	97.7
Madhya Pradesh	43.6	39.5	36.0	96.6	79.8	91.9
Maharashtra	24.7	28.0	21.6	81.0	78.9	83.9
Orissa	41.0	40.3	17.6	95.2	72.7	93.3
Punjab	31.9	33.8	15.4	98.6	86.9	94.7
Rajasthan	33.4	29.9	19.6	96.9	82.1	88.8
Tamil Nadu	24.3	28.6	18.2	78.1	90.0	93.5
Uttar Pradesh	23.4	28.6	13.5	81.7	76.9	78.0
West Bengal	34.9	37.8	16.4	78.2	61.0	84.8
India	28.1	30.5	20.8	87.8	77.9	86.2

Sources: Census of India, 1991; Sixth All-India Educational Survey, vol. III, Teachers in Schools, vol. IV, Enrolment in Schools, 1998.

Table 4 : Who Attends and Who Is Retained in School? A Class, Caste and Gender Profile : 1992-93

States	Income				Land		Caste				Gender							
	Net Enrolment Rate of Children from HHs with per capita income of		Discontinuation Rate of children from HHs with per capita income of		Net Enrolment Rate of children of		Discontinuation Rate of children of		Net Enrolment Rate of children of		Discontinuation Rate of children of		Net Enrolment Rate by Gender		Discontinuation Rate by Gender			
	upto Rs. 1500	more than Rs. 6000	upto Rs. 1500	more than Rs. 6000	land owners	landless wage earners	land owners	landless wage earners	STs	SCs	Other Hindus	STs	SCs	Other Hindus	M	F		
Andhra Pradesh	80.5	89.5	7.8	7.4	80.5	73.1	6.8	17.1	63.2	77.3	80.1	13.7	12.8	9.3	85.1	73.5	8.2	12.1
Bihar	48.3	72.9	3.5	1.3	64.9	34.7	3.5	2.5	46.0	44.1	67.0	2.2	1.7	3.3	64.6	51.2	2.6	4.1
Gujarat	67.1	92.8	6.5	5.9	81.1	73.2	6.7	11.8	65.1	89.6	85.9	10.7	10.6	5.5	85.3	74.3	5.6	9.5
Haryana	66.8	86.8	3.8	3.4	82.1	58.9	4.1	4.5	*	67.9	68.0	*	6.2	2.6	83.8	72.3	3.9	4.6
Himachal Pradesh	89.1	96.9	5.5	0.6	92.3	95.2	2.0	2.8	*	88.6	95.4	*	3.8	1.6	95.5	90.0	1.8	2.2
Karnataka	72.0	82.9	8.2	5.1	79.9	66.7	7.6	9.3	74.8	66.1	81.4	8.2	10.5	6.8	80.6	75.1	6.7	9.1
Kerala	99.3	98.7	2.7	0.0	98.7	99.2	0.9	4.0	*	97.2	99.1	*	5.4	2.0	99.2	98.0	1.5	2.0
Madhya Pradesh	49.8	79.3	9.1	6.7	63.3	47.8	7.6	10.7	50.4	52.8	71.3	9.6	10.0	6.8	68.5	55.8	7.3	9.0
Maharashtra	82.7	90.5	6.2	5.6	86.9	74.9	7.2	8.9	75.4	77.9	89.1	10.5	6.5	6.4	88.1	82.3	5.9	8.4
Orissa	66.9	82.3	8.0	3.6	74.2	48.1	6.9	14.0	42.9	67.1	82.6	7.3	12.0	6.8	78.5	63.4	6.2	9.3
Punjab	82.2	92.3	7.4	5.1	92.2	73.6	4.9	7.0	*	72.9	92.4	*	10.1	4.3	89.0	84.4	4.8	6.1
Rajasthan	55.0	79.1	3.6	1.5	61.6	40.7	4.2	6.4	43.9	50.8	68.2	5.0	2.7	4.3	78.0	41.9	3.1	6.6
Tamil Nadu	80.9	91.9	11.9	3.4	89.1	82.7	9.4	13.1	*	84.4	88.3	40.4	12.0	10.3	90.9	84.3	7.5	14.3
Uttar Pradesh	56.8	78.4	4.3	2.8	68.4	41.4	4.0	5.0	*	53.4	72.0	3.9	4.3	3.7	73.3	53.4	3.3	5.6
West Bengal	54.0	78.3	4.5	6.6	72.7	48.4	6.0	9.3	*	65.7	76.7	11.5	5.4	5.1	67.0	65.1	5.9	6.5
India	63.2	83.7	6.1	4.0	73.6	59.7	5.3	10.1	60.3	62.6	77.4	7.2	7.0	5.4	77.1	64.8	4.8	7.6

Notes : 1) The Net Enrolment Rate is the proportion of children ever enrolled in the age-group 6-14. 2) The Discontinuation Rate is the proportion of ever enrolled children who discontinued at any time in the age group 6-14.

Source : NCAER, 1994.

FIGURE - 1

Social Distance between the Teacher and the Taught in Govt. and Private Unaided Elementary Schools: 1993

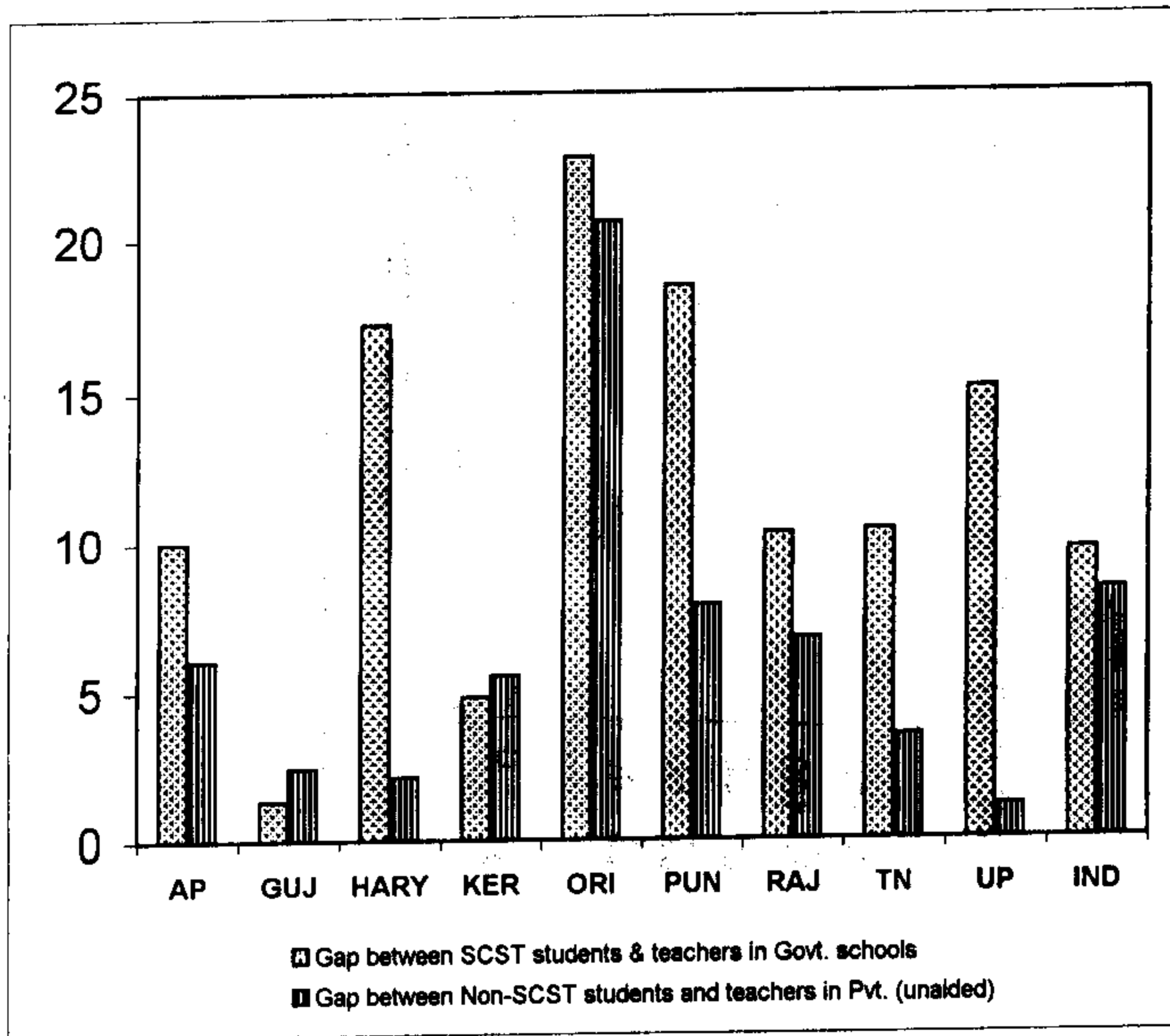


FIGURE - 2
Social Distance in Government Schools

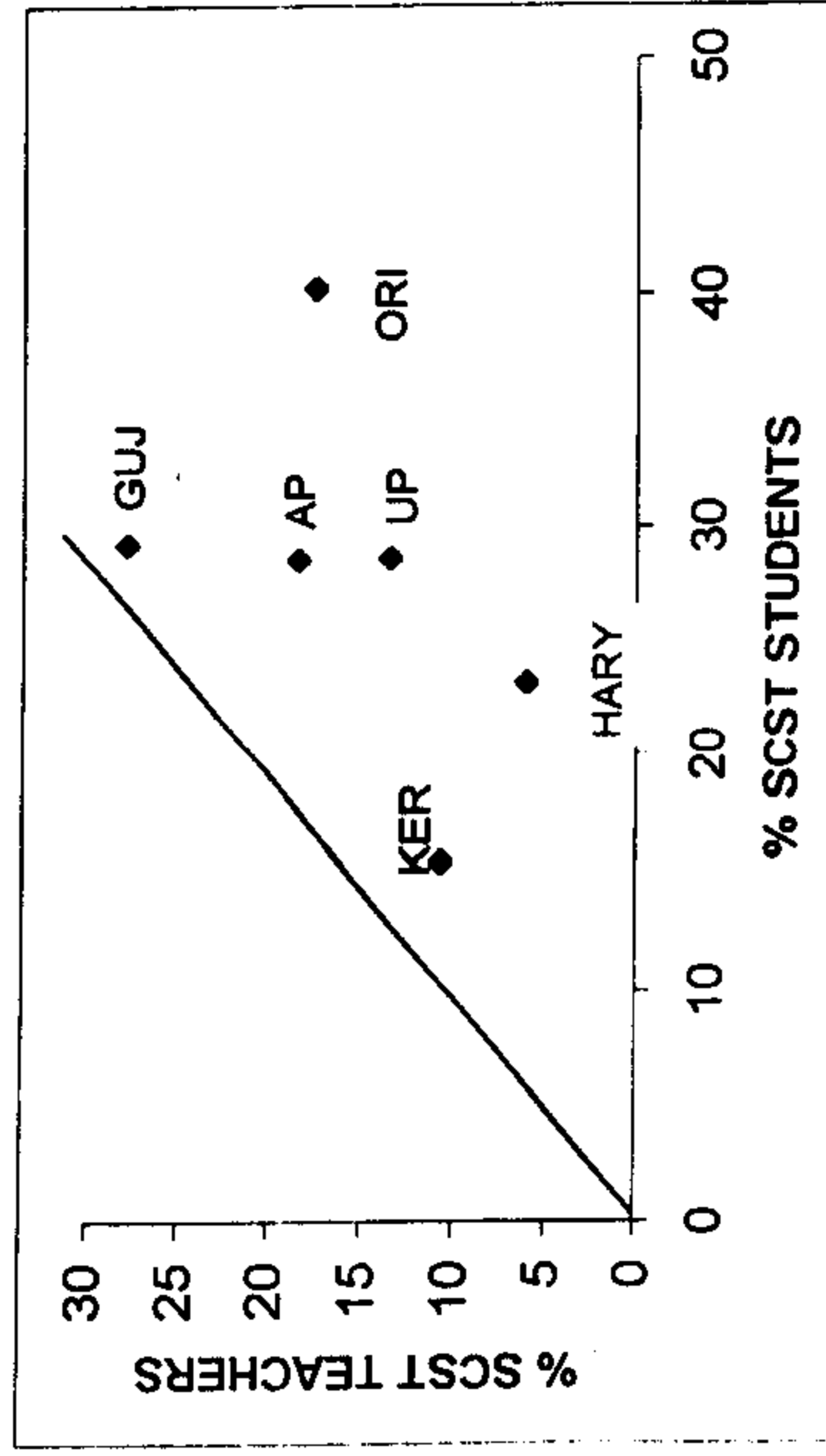


FIGURE - 3
SOCIAL DISTANCE IN PRIVATE UNAIDED SCHOOLS

