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LOW-COST EDUCATION FOR THE POOR IN INDIA: CONTEMPORARY CONCERNS

GEETHA B. NAMBISSAN*†

Abstract

This article maps the trajectory of low-cost schooling for the poor from early 2000s, situating it within the larger context of rising aspirations of the poor for good quality education for their children and the abdication of the state in this regard. I highlight, in particular, the building of discourse(s) around poverty and for-profit schooling. I also show that the advocacy of low-cost education and business around it have redefined education for the poor and are shaping reforms in government schooling as well. Here, the role of powerful networks in the construction of problems around the education of the poor and their solution through the market has been particularly important. The attempt is to show that markets in schooling, profits and quality education for the poor and marginalised can be realised together. I argue that it is important to seriously engage with the discourses, practices and actual evidence in relation to private education, and the complicit role of the state in the growth of this sector. Such an engagement, I believe, is especially important in the present times as low-cost education is technology driven, and technology (and digitisation) is being projected as the way to address the devastating impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on schooling. I emphasise the importance of research that is informed by a perspective of social justice and public purpose of education.

Keywords: Low-cost education, affordable learning, private schools, advocacy networks, public-private partnerships in schooling.

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I. Introduction

Low-fee/cost[1] private education for the 'poor', also called 'affordable learning' (AL), has been flagged as a key market in the global education industry (Verger, et al., 2016). It is projected as the panacea that will 'help provide millions of the poorest children in the world with quality education, in a profitable and sustained manner'.[2] In barely a decade and a half, for-profit schooling has become normalised in policy discourses on education for the poor. It has spawned a whole new language around education markets that evokes social responsibilities and moral concerns of the private sector which is now engaged in 'impact or social investing' (Ball, 2019: 30). Here, the role of powerful advocacy and business networks in the construction of problems around the education of the poor and their solution through the market has been particularly important. The attempt is to show that markets in schooling, profits and quality education for the poor and marginalised can be realised together.

Focusing specifically on India, this article maps the trajectory of low-cost schooling for the poor from early 2000, highlighting, in particular, the building of discourse(s) around poverty and for-profit schooling. I revisit my earlier writings on the theme (Nambissan and Ball, 2011; Nambissan, 2012, 2014) and more recent scholarship (Verger, et al., 2016; Ball, 2019; Riep, 2019) to map this trajectory and highlight some of the key concerns as they emerge in the last almost two decades. I show that the advocacy of low-cost education and business around it have redefined education for the poor and are shaping reforms in government schooling as well. I argue that it is important to seriously engage with the discourses, practices and actual evidence in relation to private education and the complicit role of the state in the growth of this sector. Such an engagement, I believe, is especially important in the present times as low-cost education is technology driven, and technology (and digitisation) is being projected as the way to address the devastating impact of the pandemic on schooling. I foreground education as a site of competing aspirations and interests. I point to the rising aspirations of low-income families for good quality education for their children, the increasing abdication of the state in this regard, and growing business interests around schooling. I keep in mind that powerful networks and relationships are being mobilised today to dominate the field of education and make it a sphere of profit. I emphasize the importance of research that is informed by a perspective of social justice and public purpose of education.

II. Low-cost Education—Early Advocacy

It is important from the vantage point of discourses constructed around the promise of 'low-cost schooling/affordable learning' to revisit the early years when James Tooley first made public his 'discovery' of 'high performing', unrecognised schools in India (more specifically in the city of Hyderabad) and published a study in 2005 (Tooley, et al., 2007). More than five years earlier, he was in the city conducting an International Finance Corporation (World Bank)-funded study on the possibility of private education in developing countries. The study was published in 1999 under the title, *The Global Education Industry* (Tooley, 1999). The pro-market Centre for British Teachers (Cfbt) with which he was associated already had a base in Hyderabad, and Pauline Dixon, his future collaborator, was doing her doctorate on regulatory systems and private schooling in Andhra Pradesh around the same time. Tooley subsequently established the Educare Trust through which he carried out his study (2003–2005) on 'low-fee' private schooling, generously funded by the Templeton Foundation. At the global level, the World Bank had by 2000 begun to frame a new agenda of privatisation in education based on private 'partnerships with the state in school education (Robertson and Verger, 2012). In fact, the World Bank, International Finance Corporation and CfBT were part of the initial group that in the 1990s itself had 'started considering partnerships in education as an evolution of the privatization agenda' (ibid.: 13). The advocacy for markets in education and the focus on the poor, which appeared to suddenly emerge with Tooley's 'discovery' around 2005, must be seen in relation to the larger global economic and political interests informed by a neo-liberal agenda in education and its major planks: destatalisation, privatisation and extending markets in schooling (Nambissan and Ball, 2011).

Tooley claimed on the basis of his study that 'unrecognised' (unregulated) private primary schools (UPS), hitherto viewed as illegal 'sub-standard teaching shops',[3] were better performing (in terms of learning achievement) and more cost- effective (teacher salaries being extremely low) as compared to government primary schools. Renaming UPS as low-fee private schools (LFPS), he also highlighted that since they charged low tuition fees ($1–2 a month at the time), they were accessed by the poorest, referred to as the 'bottom of the pyramid' (Prahalad and Hart, 2001: 3) families who aspired to English-medium private schooling for their children. Equally emphasised was that LFPS yielded profits and hence could be attractive for education business as well (see Tooley, 2009; See also Tooley, et al. 2007).

It is often forgotten that what Tooley was actually proposing as a good business proposition was not a revamped UPS that would help them compete with the reputed public/private English-medium schools or sought-after government schools such as the Kendriya Vidyalayas. Instead, he visualised a qualitatively different model that would be targeted at poor children —low-cost, standardised education that would be scalable with appropriate technology through branded school chains and yield profit. For such a model to work, it was necessary to bring about changes in education policy. For instance, permitting profits in schooling which was illegal in India, as well as state-supported vouchers to enable parental choice. Led by Tooley, a transnational advocacy network (TAN) for low-cost education for the poor was built, comprising pro-market organisations, foundations and think tanks from the US and UK, as well as local organisations such as the Centre for Civil Society, Educare Trust and Liberty Institute (Nambissan, 2014). TAN proactively built discourses around failing government schools, non-performing and absentee teachers on the one hand, as against 'high quality', 'world class' education that could be provided at a low cost to the poor and yield profits on the other. A narrow base of evidence was used for this purpose (Tooley, et al., 2007; Kremer, et al., 2005). Low-cost school chains were established by some corporate houses/their philanthropic foundations in Hyderabad around 2009, but the venture was abandoned within a couple of years. In fact, the lowest-fee market segment of UPS was also seen as not profitable since school owners did not fall in line with branding, standardisation and raising of fees (Kamat, et al., 2016). The higher-fee unrecognised schools, which were named 'affordable' private schools, and educational services were seen as more attractive markets (Nambissan, 2012).

Bridge International Academies (BIA), a for-profit multinational school chain established in Kenya in 2009, presents the low-cost education model in terms of discourses and practices. The BIA website showcased its ambitious aims: to '*revolutionize access* to *affordable, high quality* primary education for *poor* families across Africa' with a 'network of *ultra low-cost for-profit* primary schools' and claims that 'its schools *profitably deliver high-quality education for less than $4 per child per month*, enabling local school managers to operate their school businesses *profitably*, while creating a *highly successful business at the central* *level'*[4] (emphasis here and through the paper are mine).[5] What was on offer in BIA was 'scripted schooling' where 'every step of the learning process is remotely directed' (Stewart, 2015). Professionally untrained teachers, usually high school graduates employed on low salaries, are instructed to transact standardised and digitalised content, remotely directed through nook readers and tablets (now referred to as 'teacher computers'). Teaching is reduced to simple tasks that are closely monitored with a focus on learner outcomes through regular testing. Further, Bridge Academies (and chains such as Omega) do not reach the poorest (as they claim to) as their fees comprise a significant proportion of the daily income earned by wage workers in these countries (Riep, 2014).

Research on Bridge Schools has shown that they are technology driven to enable cost-cutting and increase profits. But this has transformed the paradigm of education for the poor (Riep, 2019) As he says '…the BIA model has leveraged technology to drive down operating costs, resulting in a profoundly standardised, automated, and mechanised form of provision that is strikingly similar from one context to another' (ibid.: 7; see also Riep and Machacek, 2016). The detrimental implications for the quality of learning offered to children who attend these schools, as reflected in the curriculum and pedagogy on offer, can be seen in Riep's elaboration of the Bridge (Academy-in-a box) model:

> It is is a pre-fabricated model designed for replication and rapid scalability. …all instructional (e.g. curriculum, pedagogy, lessons) and non-instructional activities (e.g. admissions, accountancy, administration) are standardised and automated using internet enabled devices. On the instructional side, pre-programmed curriculum is developed by BIA at corporate headquarters abroad and then sent electronically to each school site using web-enabled smartphones that transfer curriculum to tablet e-readers, which is then read out verbatim, word-for-word, to students by unqualified staff referred to as 'Learning Facilitators' (Riep, 2019: 8–9).

The BIA has come under considerable criticism for the sub-standard infrastructure it provides and the poor quality of instruction offered by deskilled teachers/instructors who work under exploitative conditions. These were among the reasons why BIA was ordered to shut shop in Uganda in 2016. It is significant that Bridge Academies are funded and lauded by powerful philanthropic foundations established by global corporates such as Pearson, Gates, and Google, as well as organisations such as the World Bank and DfID (CDC), among others.

III. 'Affordable' Learning and Edu-business

'Affordable Learning' as a solution to the 'learning crisis' in society was flagged by Pearson in 2012 when the Pearson Affordable Learning Fund (PALF) was established. The corporate giant had morphed into a 'Learning Company' which sought to expand its multi-billion dollar business focusing on education. PALF had a $15 million fund to 'help improve access to *quality education for the poorest families in the world*' (PALF).[6] In 2015, the Fund was expanded to $65 billion in capital 'to expand PALF's work within emerging markets. Its mandate is to invest in companies that can build quality, scalable education solutions to meet a growing demand for affordable educational services across Africa, Asia and Latin America'.[7] Within a few years, Affordable Learning (AL) became what Verger (2012: 109) terms a 'programmatic idea', constructed as the dominant but flexible paradigm and embedded in 'practice communities' (advocacy and business) that present it as the solution to high quality education for the poor and profitable for edu-business—in other words, a win-win sector. Affordable Learning () includes a range of profitable ventures for 'learning' (the shift to individualised 'learning' is strategic), informed by the low-cost school model. PALF offers to support education entrepreneurs with 'scalable and profitable education solutions' for the 'low income segment', and emphasises 'efficacy and learner outcomes' as indictors of quality (ibid.). Also included is 'investment in low-cost private school chains and service providers for low-cost private schools (such as 'teacher development solutions' and 'other low income focused ventures that use technology to create scalable, quality solutions' (ibid.). K-12 schools for the poor also form part of the PALF investment portfolio. In other words, AL is an umbrella category that includes diverse institutional arrangements for 'learning' that are 'low cost' and use technology to create scalable services that yield profit and focus on 'efficacy and learner outcomes' as indictors of quality (ibid.).

Affordable Learning is also embedded in transnational networks. However, the affordable learning advocacy networks are qualitatively different from TAN (discussed earlier), in that they are not merely channels for advocacy but bring together a range of powerful business interests to 'grow' new markets in education. In other words, these are affordable learning advocacy and business networks (ALABN). Ball (2016) has followed the building of networks in which advocacy and edu-business are enmeshed, and shows the new 'transnational and intra-national spaces' that they have penetrated, including policy infrastructure with changing modes of governance. He points to the discursive coherence and 'shared epistemic sensibility' that has been built among network actors as they work in tandem through diverse strategies and synergies to build global discourses that construct educational problems of the poor and the solutions that should follow (ibid.). These are new social relations and strategic alliances, processes and practices that are not easily visible and require innovative methodologies to identify, name and understand. The ALABN has within it powerful corporate houses that are today 'growing' low-cost education markets and an enabling 'eco-system' for this purpose. These are corporates who are active in education policy changes at the global level and within nations where they find profitable business opportunities (ibid). There are new nodal organisations and key individuals within India (Centre Square Foundation [CSF] for instance) that build synergies among private actors within and between networks and also help strengthen linkages with the state(s).

In the last few years, there has developed a whole new language around edu-business targeted at the 'bottom of the pyramid'. This is now called 'impact' and 'social investing' with an emphasis on 'social outcomes' that 'benefit' the underprivileged (see Ball, 2019). New moral narratives and discourses have emerged that locate the private sector within the social sphere where it is projected as addressing concerns of equity and inclusion that were formerly within the purview of the state and civil society. This is what is called 'soft capitalism' where edu-business is 'doing well' but is also 'doing good' (Hogan, et al., 2016: 234; Ball, 2019: 33). Corporate players who have a global presence and are building markets in countries such as India are leading these processes through their philanthropic foundations or social enterprises, as well as international development/finance organisations.

Kamat et al. (2016) provide a window into the expanding low-cost/affordable learning market in India. Focusing on Hyderabad, they point to the rapid expansion of the high-profit unregulated markets for pre-schooling, tuitions and 'coaching' made available to families at 'affordable' prices depending on what they can pay. The picture they paint is one of pro-active 'growing' of markets for edu-business, funding and support (ibid.). For instance, PALF supports educational entrepreneurs who are 'creating scalable and profitable education solutions for the low income segment'.[8] In India, the early ventures that PALF identified and launched include Sudhiksha pre-schools (affordable early childhood education through *low-cost* pre-school centres), Experifun science gadgets (*affordable* and *cost-effective solutions* for schools) and Zaya (blended learning solutions accessed through software and tablets sold to schools).[9] As can be seen, edu-business is launched within the framework of AL: cost-effective, technology-based solutions with an emphasis on 'affordability' for consumers who are poor or from low-income families and their schools.

Srivastava (2016) is sceptical of the actual scalability of low-cost private school chains and points out that they (including BIA) comprise only a minuscule proportion of public provision in the few countries where they operate. However, as discussed, AL comprises much more than school chains and includes a range of cost-effective, profitable educational ventures. The unregulated pre-schools, higher-fee unrecognised schools (called 'affordable' private schools), tutorial or coaching centres, as well as new pedagogies for learning using technology (digital content, scripted lessons, smartphones and tablets) and a range of school improvement services are likely to see expanding markets. Services such as testing and assessment of students and schools are integrated into AL markets as learning outcomes are increasingly projected as indicators of teacher effectiveness and school quality. 'Teacher development', alternate certification as well as school leadership are also new spheres of edu-business. In the last few years, education markets have expanded, especially in relation to education technology, which pervades all aspects of school education from curricular modules, pedagogy, assessment of students, self-learning and monitoring of teachers, school governance and so on.

Ball (2019) draws attention to one major corporate group foundation, the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation (MSDF), which is a key player in the business of, and reform in, schooling in India. He discusses at length the intricate and dynamic web of networks that have evolved in which global investors and financial organisations link with local enterprises and start-ups in education business. 'Edu-start-ups' are embedded in these networks and a whole 'eco-system' is being set in place to enable the rapid growth of what are viewed as emerging profitable markets in education targeted at marginal groups. For instance, there are now 'edcubators' that incubate promising ventures and enable the growth of what are being called 'social enterprises' (ibid.). Global networks and platforms circulate the ideology and practices of new markets in schooling and offer opportunities for innovative businesses that tie in with internationally set goals in education (Sustainable Development Goal 4 [SDG4]) for instance), and national obligations in this sphere which private players offer to effectively meet (see Ball, 2019).

It is important to draw attention to what appears to be the major goal of edu-business in India—the reform of publicly-funded education and making it the site of new markets in schooling. The over one million government primary schools across India today offer a vast site for advocacy and edu-business in the name of the poor.

IV. Public-Private Partnership, School Reform and the Poor

Public-private partnership (PPP), as mentioned earlier, was part of the privatisation agenda mooted since the late 1990s led by the World Bank, International Finance Corporation and other pro-market organisations (Verger, 2012). 'Partnership' was seen as more appealing than privatisation as the former suggested processes of dialogue and democratic decision making. Today, education PPPs are embedded in education policy in India and are seen by governments at the centre and in the states as necessary for reforms to improve the quality of education for the poor (Nambissan, 2014). An earlier paper highlighted a range of interventions by private sector organisations in government schools that initially focused on 'quality improvement'—by bringing IT to schools and computer-aided learning and training of teachers (ibid.). Since 2009/10, private sector and non-state organisations have been given schools/sections within them to improve the quality of education and meet aspirations for learning English. These include handing over of underperforming government schools to corporate foundations (for instance, Bharati Foundation of Airtel in Rajasthan in 2009); the establishment of schools by giving land at cheaper rates and other incentives (Adarsh Schools in Punjab, again in 2009); the School Excellence Programme (SEP) in 2010 where 148 primary schools under the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) in Mumbai were handed over to a group of organisations including McKinsey, Michael and Susan Dell Foundation, Save the Children, Naandi Foundation, Akshansha/Teach for India and UNICEF 'to improve attendance and learning outcomes and reduce drop out'. [10]

The rationale for PPP decisions and the terms of partnership are not transparent, nor are they brought within structures of democratic decision making. Independent evaluations of these initiatives are also lacking. For instance, it is reported that after an expenditure of ₹100 crore, the BMC decided to close down SEP 'on account of the poor improvement in students' performance till 2012', and the programme had to 'hand the schools under its management back to the civic body'.[11] The details are not available and no questions appear to have been asked. Teach for India ([TFI] which is part of the global Teach for All network) is another programme that has been brought into schools in some of the major cities of India. TFI creates separate English-medium sections within government elementary schools where professionally unqualified volunteers teach and manage children under more conducive norms. By creating alternative paths for uncertified teacher–fellows/volunteers as well as exclusive spaces within schools, TFI is compounding the de-professionalising of teaching and stratification and differentiation within institutions that cater to the poor.

I draw attention to a few PPPs that have been initiated in the last decade as they provide a window to the privatisation agenda in publicly-funded schools in the name of education reform. The organisations that lead them are embedded in networks that have a global reach. In 2012, STIR (Schools and Teachers Innovating for Reform) was created as a global forum with a focus on India. On its Board[12] are powerful organisations and individuals who are part of the ALABN and are today in positions where they can influence education policy processes in the centre and states. STIR states on its website that it has entered into PPPs with the governments of Uttar Pradesh and Delhi and plans to 'spread across India'. For STIR,[13] the solution to raising the quality of education in government primary schools is by 're-igniting intrinsic motivation' in teachers and 'changing mind-sets' through 'building teacher networks' where they share their work. It also seeks to identify, *test* and *scale* 'promising school and teacher "micro-innovations" to improve educational outcomes for the poorest children'. Eight years on, STIR explains that it has extended its work to some other Indian states which seem to have bought into its simplistic model. The 'cost-effectiveness' of the reform is underscored. In 2012, STIR offered to bring about reform for as 'as little as $70 per teacher, or $2 per child, per year'. In 2020, the going rate for reform appears to be much lower—'our average annual cost per child in India is less than $0.50 USD, and falling. Every $1 invested yields governments $7 in improved efficiencies'.[14]

Absolute Return for Kids (ARK) entered into a 'partnership' with the South Delhi Municipal Corporation in 2015 and adopted one of its schools. ARK's claim was that if successful, it 'hopes to open a network of primary schools in south Delhi, which could in turn provide a model for education reform across India'. The model proposed for the PPP is one where the government provides 'infrastructure staff and utilities', and ARK and other organisations provide 'academic management, TLM (teaching and learning material) and accountability for outcomes'.[15] It comes as no surprise that ARK was part of TAN and also the ALABN. It initiated a pilot voucher scheme in schools in east Delhi in 2010-11. The organisation created the Global Schools Forum (BIA and STIR are members) and is on the advisory board of STIR. It has also made inroads into policy spaces. ARK is the founding partner of the Education Alliance along with MSDF and CSF. The Alliance is registered as Network for Quality Education Foundation 'to facilitate PPPs' which are called Government-Partnership Schools or 'G-Partnership Schools'.[16] The attempt is to blur the private in the PPP and highlight only the partnership (with the government), suggesting that it is forged to discharge social responsibilities. This is in tune with the building of moral discourses around the market mentioned earlier.

The most contentious of PPPs is the entry of the for-profit (still illegal in India) BIA into schools in Telangana in 2015. The then chief minister of Andhra Pradesh invited BIA 'to *strengthen* delivery of early childhood education and primary education in the state…'. He was quoted as saying that 'the group could use low-cost technology it has pioneered, to radically improve learning outcomes through accountable delivery'.[17] This is Bridge speaking through a chief minister who appears to be oblivious of the intense criticism that these chain schools in Africa are facing. Will BIA attempt to work with its charter school model in India? Riep observes that 'the second market opportunity identified by Bridge involves a US$179 billion publicly funded charter school market in low-income countries (BIA, n.d.). This market venture involves partnering with governments in the Global-South to operate charter schools that are publicly funded' (2019: 8).

What we are seeing are familiar elements of privatisation of education in the name of school reform through partnership with the state. As seen in the cases of ARK, STIR and BIA, publicly-funded schools are being opened up to private organisations on their terms. There is no transparency in PPP processes, nor have measures of accountability to the concerned children and parents been set in place in case it does not perform. This is in the nature of what Ball and Youdell (2007) call 'hidden privatisation in public education' where the private sector/its practices (marketisation and managerialism as well as behaviouristic pedagogies) are brought into government schools, almost by stealth, ostensibly to improve the quality of education for the poor.

Poverty in India is a complex social reality that is intersected by a range of marginalities including caste, ethnicity, as well as gender and other identities. This is reflected in government schools especially at the primary stage where children enrolled largely belong to families in the lowest economic quintile (Desai, et al., 2010). Further, over 80 per cent of Dalit and Adivasi children attend government schools and the proportion of girls exceeds that of boys (ibid.). Majority of children in these schools are also the first generation in their families to receive school education. Though low-cost schooling advocacy claims to provide education to the poorest, neither the earlier chain schools nor the UPS reached children from the most economically and socially vulnerable strata (Nambissan, 2012).

Despite relentless shaming of government schools and denigration of teachers by private advocacy and business networks, there is little robust evidence today to show a clear private advantage in schooling of the poor when the relevant background variables are controlled for (Day, et al., 2014). Akmal et al.'s (2019) review of studies on low-cost schools between 2014 and 2019 also finds that 'any difference between public and private schools is marginal at best and learning outcomes across both sectors are woefully low'. Significantly, they conclude that 'As things stand, there is not sufficient evidence to suggest that the private sector is a viable route to reach the poorest children' (ibid.).

The analysis of data from studies of two pilot voucher schemes carried out in rural Andhra Pradesh (2008-09 to 2011-12) and east and north-east Delhi (2010-11 to 2015-16) is revealing.[18] What emerges is that these programmes failed to realise higher learning outcomes expected of students who won a voucher lottery to study in private schools as compared to their peers in government schools (Karopady, 2014; Crawfurd, et al., 2019). Karopady observes that the Andhra voucher pilot study shows that 'private schools add no value to children in terms of learning outcomes as compared to government schools. Children shifting to private schools under a scholarship programme perform no better than their government school counterparts even after five years of private schooling' (2014: 46). Crawfurd, et al. have a similar story to tell from their analysis of data from the Delhi voucher scheme study: 'A year after the end of primary school, we find no impact of vouchers on

English or math, and small negative effects on Hindi' (2019: 1). We see attempts (Tooley, 2016; Muralidharan and Sundararaman, 2015) to rework their analysis and the arguments in light of less than favorable findings. The instrumental use of 'evidence' to advance business interests in the advocacy of private schools for the poor needs serious attention of the education community in general and researchers in particular.

It is indeed true that government primary schools where children from poor and marginal communities predominate are under-resourced and that teaching and learning are often carried out under abysmal conditions. However, for the majority of the poor in India, and particularly those actually at the bottom of the economic and social hierarchy, it is government schooling that is most accessible. They are tuition-free, mid-day meals are provided, there is special support for marginalised groups and, importantly, they are available through most of rural and urban India. These are the schools that are today the site for improvement under PPPs through affordable learning ideology and practices.

Scholars who have carried out research on poverty and education (Connell, 1994; Darling-Hammond, 2001; and Gorski, 2013, among others) and teacher educators who have taught in high-poverty schools (Delpit, 1988) point to the harsh effects of poverty on children's health and their ability to learn, as well as on their active participation in school activities. While foregrounding the complexity of poverty and a range of intersecting social inequalities, scholars have drawn attention to the fact that children from such families also lack the required cultural capital (language and other social skills) which schools demand.

Decades ago, Bernstein (1971) underscored the importance of creating meaningful and challenging learning environments within the classroom for children from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds if schools wish to respond to the inequalities in society. He pointed out that a teacher must understand the socio-cultural contexts of children which, in today's world, include specific marginalities, cultural diversity, and social and emotional concerns that constitute their life worlds. Delpit also underscores that 'teachers must teach all students the explicit and implicit rules of power as a first step to a just society' (1988: 280). The implication is that teachers and schools themselves must be equipped to play this larger role.

The growing commodification and marketisation of education and the preoccupation with cost-cutting and global scaling to reap profits has little in common with the concerns of social justice, the rights of children and the larger purpose of education. While the neglect of publicly-funded education by the state has been mentioned as one of the reasons for the decline of government schools, the failure to ensure that teacher education programmes equip teachers with a critical perspective and an understanding of pedagogies that can address poverty and social disadvantage within a rights and social justice framework is also a reality. Low-cost education by its very framing cannot even begin to address these concerns because the deskilled teacher and narrow curriculum are key elements in its standardised for-profit business model. On the other hand, publicly-funded education is informed by the norms of the Right to Education (RtE) (2009) that aim to ensure the right to equitable education to all children and hence has the potential to do so.[19]

V. Contemporary Challenges: Some Reflections

The last few months have seen the devastating impact of the pandemic on schooling. Globally, 'hundreds of millions of students' are said to have been affected by school closures (UNESCO, 2020). In India as well, formal schooling has come to a standstill. The poor have borne the brunt of the crisis, as seen in the massive dislocation of their lives and loss of livelihoods following the country-wide lockdown. This has also placed the education of their children at grave risk. In such a situation, we need to look more closely at the calls, globally and within India, for ways to minimise the disruption of children's education.

Online learning, education technology and digital resources are seen as the solution to the current crisis and the way to effectively tide over it. It must be remembered that education technology, digitisation and datafication are the key drivers of the Global Education Industry (for more on GEI, see Verger, et al., 2016; Ball, 2019). In the last few years, scholars have pointed to expanding markets in this sector as well as efforts of industry (mainly ed-tech companies), international organisations and states to bring together synergies from technology that will enable 'disruption' and innovations seen as necessary for the qualitative transformation of systems of education (ibid.). Thus, well before Covid-19, education technology was the main thrust of the GEI with global corporates as major players in this booming business. However, what is equally important is that edu-business in the name of the poor has leveraged low-cost technology in the race for profits for over a decade. This article has focused on the advocacy, discourses and practices around such education, and I have discussed at length their detrimental implications for the education of the children of the poor and for publicly-funded education. It is likely that the pandemic will provide business opportunities to the ed-tech industry which will further place children's right to equitable education at risk.

There is need for a deep and complex understanding of the implications of the pandemic for the deprivations and disadvantages suffered by the poor (compounding prior inequalities), as well as the capabilities of institutions in coping with the crisis. Technology and technological fixes are unlikely to address these issues. It is of concern to see a recent post on the website of The Asia Venture Philanthropic Network (AVPN) that dtscribes itself as 'a unique funders' network based in Singapore committed to building a vibrant and high-impact philanthropy and social investment community across Asia'.[20] AVPN, which has more than 600 members (corporates, philanthropic foundations, development organisations), has already organised events around 'Re-Imagining Education post Covid-19'. It observes that 'this might be the start of an era that necessitates the convergence of technology and education in a way that has never been witnessed before'.[21] We find the floating of social impact bonds to mobilise Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and other funds which are then offered to organisations that are obliged to meet learning outcome targets for further funding. MSDF, for instance, has the 'Quality Education India Development Impact Bond' (QEI DIB).[22] Social Finance India (Ashish Dhawan of CSF is on the Board) has the 'Indian Education Outcomes Fund' and aims to 'bring together service providers, investors and funders to set-up scalable outcomes focussed solutions addressing India's pressing education challenges'.[23] What appears likely is that education technology business will receive a fillip as private actors mobilise resources and consolidate networks to construct 'solutions' to meet the challenge posed by the pandemic. We can expect to see more of the same for-profit, low-cost narrow solutions that are couched in discourses suitably tweaked to flag the enormity of the Covid-19 crisis and the urgent imperative of technology to 'effectively' ensure equitable and inclusive education.

What a closer look at the pandemic and its impact on schooling reveals is that the most critical issues are not digital inequality and lack of teacher preparedness in relation to online learning,[24] even though these will have to be addressed in the short run. What is important is the paradigm of education constructed for the poor and the need to systematically interrogate discourses and practices that camouflage the democratic deficit that characterises it. The narrow, standardised, scalable business model of education and school improvement services that are being marketed will diminish what we know as education and hollow out the 'public' in institutions (Nambissan, 2020.

It is urgent that the community of researchers and educators also build networks for research and advocacy. Collaborative networks of scholars and interdisciplinary conversations are necessary to understand and systematically research the extremely complex processes that I have drawn some attention to. Such research can inform advocacy, which is long overdue, for the 'public' in education—that is, one which is equitable and informed by the rights of all children. That foregrounds the critical role of social and pedagogic relations and practices that are mindful of the complexity of poverty, diversity and the range of marginalities that children bear because of the iniquitous social structure in which their families are located. It also means revisiting the public purpose of education and engaging with how to realise and strengthen it.

Notes

[1] A number of terms have been used to signify private education that can be accessed by poor/low income families. The term low-fee school was used in the early advocacy of edu-business and subsequently 'affordable learning'. I prefer to use low-cost education as this indicates that the cost of provision of such education is low.
[2] See PALF website: https://www.affordable-learning.com/about.html (Accessed December 2017).
[3] http://www.delhidistrictcourts.nic.in/Feb08/Social%20Jurist%20Vs.%20GNCT.pdf. All unrecognised schools were given until 2013 to meet the required norms and gain recognition, or close down, under the RtE Act, 2009.
[4] https://www.omidyar.com/news/bridge-international-academies-launches-affordable-schools-kenya Omdiyar (accessed, January 2016).
[5] Omega chain of schools in Ghana, which is co-owned by Tooley, has similar aims 'to bring quality education to as many children as possible. We think it is possible for a private company to educate the poor at a profit … and provide high quality education at the lowest cost possible' (For a critique of Omega schools see Riep, 2014).
[6] https://www.affordable-learning.com/about.html (accessed December 2017).
[7] https://www.pearson.com/news-and-research/announcements/2016/11/pearson-affordable-learning-fund-makes-investment-in-indonesian-.html (accessed December 2017).
[8] https://www.affordable-learning.com/about.html (accessed December 2017).
[9] Ibid. See also respective company websites.

[10] https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/mumbai/civic-body-to-scrap-school-excellence-programme/ (accessed March 2018).
[11] Ibid.
[12] The Global Advisory Board includes 'the World Bank's Chief Education Economist; chief advisor to UN Education special education envoy Gordon Brown; Professors James Tooley and Eric Hanushek; a global director at Pearson; the co-founder of Teach for All; and the former Permanent Secretary for Education for Uganda'. The 'India Advisory Board includes the CEOs and Directors of some of India's most progressive education reform organisations—Central Square Foundation, Bharti Foundation, JPAL, Pratham and Akanksha'….'STIR is fortunate to be funded by some of the world's leading foundations and development agencies, including USAID, the Macarthur Foundation, the Mastercard Foundation and the Draper Richards Kaplan Foundation' http://stireducation.org/pdf/Senior-Programme-Manager-Karnataka.pdf. (accessed July 2020In 2020, there were many more funders. See updated website. (accessed July 2020).
[13] http://stireducation.org/. (accessed July 2020).
[14] https://stireducation.org/our-learning/. (accessed July 2020).
[15] http://arkonline.org/news/new-school-model-south-delhi-could-transformeducation
[16] http//.www.theeducationalliance.org/ (accessed December 2019).
[17]http://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/bridges-international-to-partner-with-ap-state-government-115090901472_1.html (accessed September 2017).
[18] The Andhra Pradesh voucher pilot programme was 'implemented and evaluated' by the 'Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, working with the Legatum Institute, the Azim Premji Foundation, and under the technical leadership of the World Bank' (World Bank, 2016: 1). The Delhi voucher programme was 'administered by the UK-based charity Absolute Return for Kids (ARK) and the Centre for Civil Society' (Crawfurd, et al., 2019: 6).
[19] It is important to keep in mind that the publicly-funded school system includes reputed and sought after institutions such as the Navodaya and Kendriya Vidyalayas, indicating that the state can also provide high quality education. The RtE aims to ensure that all children have access to such education as a matter of right.
[20] https://avpn.asia/about-us/ (accessed August 2000).
[21] https://avpn.asia/event/re-imagining-education-post-covid-19/ (accessed August 2020).
[22]https://qualityeducationindiadib.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Quality-Education-India-DIB-Case-Study.pdf (accessed July 2020).
[23] https://socialfinance.org.in/india-education-outcomes-fund-2/ (accessed June 2020).
[24] A number of articles have highlighted the vulnerability of children, especially from marginalised communities, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. The adverse impact on their education has been particularly highlighted. Jha and Ghatak (2020) show how the significant challenges and constraints in online learning vary for children in different social contexts.

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