School Rationalisation Process in India: Case of Rajasthan and Causes of Worry

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Abstract

This article analyses the ongoing school rationalisation process in India by using the case study of Rajasthan, where recently, 17,129 public schools (primary, elementary and secondary) have been merged into 13, 565 schools, resulting in the closure of approximately 3, 593 schools. The primary driving force behind the school rationalisation process has been (a) to make the public education system more ‘sustainable and economically viable’ by closing schools that have less number of students; and (b) to enable the state to adhere to multiple provisions of the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009- India’s prominent rights-based attempt to universal elementary education. This article analyses the school rationalisation phenomenon on three grounds: (i) whether closing schools have indeed resulted in better compliance with the norms and standards of the RTE Act, 2009 (ii) the manner in which decisions have been translated into actions and carried out across the state (iii) and lastly, it explores the possible impact of the rationalisation process on the community. The analysis also emphasises India’s context in contrast to the Western countries that have undergone this stage of school rationalisation, specifically due to decreasing enrolment rates. The paper concludes by suggesting some alternatives that could have been taken (instead of closing/ merging schools) and broadly reflects upon the visions of the state with respect to primary education in India.

Keywords: RTE Act, Education, School, Merger, Closure.

Introduction

The 86th Amendment, 2002 of the Indian Constitution incorporated Article 21 (A) in the Constitution of India which stated that, “The state shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of six to fourteen years in a manner as the State may, by law, determine”. Subsequently, in 2009 the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act was formulated (implemented since April, 2010) which universalised elementary education in India. At the time of enactment of the RTE Act, 2009, India had roughly 8 million children who were out-of-school [1]. Therefore, ensuring every child had (at least) the access to an elementary school became a prime agenda of the State, much in congruence with the broader Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of universalisation of primary education.

Considering the massive size and spread of government schools in India, the government was given a grace to ensure the availability of all necessary inputs and infrastructure that was required to fully implement all the provisions of the Act. As per the deadlines, all necessary infrastructures that were required to succinctly implement the RTE Act were expected to be provided by March 31, 2013. However, it was only in the case of teachers (the Act mandating the provision of regular and trained teachers) that the deadline was extended to March 31, 2015. While the analysis of the overall performance of the RTE Act is beyond the scope of this paper, the fact that roughly 10% schools across the country are presently compliant with all the norms and provisions of the RTE Act is enough to highlight the apathy of the state with respect to publically funded elementary education [2]. Insufficient fund allocation, massive shortage of teachers, debilitating and dysfunctional infrastructure, poor learning outcomes, poor attendance and transition rates of children (from one level to another) and obsolete pedagogical techniques are just some of the problems plaguing the system [3]. It would not be presumptuous to conclude that the public system of education is currently in need of radical reforms to make the system more
relevant, sensitive and responsive to the contemporary needs of the society.

Considering the gloomy picture, it is only natural to imagine that at present, policy-makers throughout the country must be grappling with the situation and deliberating over best possible mechanisms to improve the condition of public education. However, reality is quite different. The last few months in India has witnessed massive school rationalisation processes across the country. Thousands of schools have been shut or merged (into other schools) in states like Rajasthan, Telengana, Odisha, Uttarakhand and Maharashtra in what is being termed as ‘school rationalisation’ process [4-7]. The common rationale being given by the states is that less enrolment of children in these schools is making them uneconomical or unviable. Therefore, they must be shut down and merged into other schools for to cut unnecessary costs and for better management purposes; as well as to free the teachers who are currently posted in these schools. These teachers, once free, can be transferred to other schools which have a high rate of student enrolment. The RTE Act, 2009 mandates the presence of 1 teacher per 30 students at the primary level. Closure of under-performing schools is thus believed to help the state government fulfil the pupil- teacher ratio (PTR) norms of the Act by freeing almost 10,000 teachers.

While the reasons provided by the state are indeed rational, especially when viewed through the utilitarian lens of maximising welfare at the lowest cost, the school rationalisation process becomes interesting when situated within the present right to education context. What is more important: maximising welfare at the lowest cost or ensuring the protection of fundamental rights (the right to education in this case) for every child? The question becomes even more interesting when placed in context of India, a society that continues to remain hierarchical and segregated based on class, caste, religion and gender.

This article uses the case study of Rajasthan to analyse the entire school rationalisation process.1 The state government of Rajasthan on August 14, 2014 issued orders to merge 17,129 public schools (primary, elementary and secondary) into 13, 565 schools, resulting in the closure of approximately 3, 593 schools in the State [4]. The reason stated by the government was that merging existing schools or closing uneconomic schools would make the system more sustainable and enable it to adhere to the provisions of the RTE Act, 2009. This article broadly analyses the school rationalisation phenomenon on the following three grounds: (i) it questions the basic premise on which the central line of reasoning is based upon, or in other words, whether closing schools would indeed result in better compliance with the provisions of the RTE Act, 2009 (ii) the manner in which decisions were translated into actions and carried out across the state (iii) and lastly, it explores the possible impacts of the rationalisation process on the community.

Despite being present in-practice for almost a decade now, school rationalisation processes is an under-researched area in India. The next section briefly analyses the available literature, mostly from countries like Canada and USA, on the processes and impacts of the school rationalisation phenomenon. Following that, it presents the detailed case study of Rajasthan and analyses the issue based along the specified dimensions. The final section of the article summarises and concludes the discussion, suggesting some alternatives that could have been taken (instead of closing/ merging schools) and broadly reflects upon the visions of the state with respect to primary education.

School Rationalisation Processes in the West

School rationalisation processes or the closure of schools due to low enrolment rates is neither new nor unique to India. However, since it is relatively an under-researched area, we refer to some of the articles published in Western countries that have undergone this stage of school rationalisation, specifically due to decreasing enrolment rates. It must be noted that the time (late 1970s and 1980s) when school rationalisation measures were being undertaken in Western countries, most of these countries were going through a dynamic change in their demographic profile, with trends indicating towards a decline in the number of children. It is essential to note that India, on the other hand, is one of the youngest countries of the world today with around 39% of its population below the age of eighteen [8]. The estimated number of children between the age group of 6-13 is 20.41 crores [9].

Most of the available literature on school closure emphasises the dilemma faced by policy-makers during the entire rationalisation process. While

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1 The authors would like to update readers on the current status of the rationalisation process. As per recent government orders, the decision to merge some of the schools have been recalled due to mass protests and civil society intervention [19].
some scholars, mostly education administrators, base their arguments on the rationality principle stating the additional burden of running schools with low enrolment, many suggest alternative uses of the school infrastructure to generate revenues. Shakeshaft and Gardner (1983) in their analysis of the problem in the American context highlight the tendency of policy-makers to focus almost too much on the cost–benefit analysis during the decision-making phase, often neglecting other socio-political and educational ramifications [10]. They cite multiple research based evidences of increasing chances of student drop-outs, reduced level of learning outcomes due to increased class size, psychological effects on both students (anxiety) and teachers (resistance to change); thereby building a cohesive argument against the entire process.

Education administrators and decision-makers, at the other end, emphasise on the processes through which actual decision-making is undertaken-stressing upon the detailed nature of the case-by-case analysis and substantial negotiations with local community members that is done prior to the closure process [11]. Alternatively, Zerchikov (1982), on the other hand, in his review of the literature available on school closure argues how declining enrolments actually provide an opportunity to the education administrators and state authorities to take up the challenge and bring about multiple innovations within the system [12]. In fact, he distinctly states two fundamental rules that must be followed during the closure process – (i) allowing plenty of time for a smooth transition into closure and (ii) actively involving the community in the planning and decision-making phase- to avoid resistance and conflict.

While most of the studies are based upon an analysis of the process (and its potential impact on the community), some provide alternatives to rationalisation process. However, there is a certain degree of commonality in almost all of the writings. To begin with, almost all of them unanimously agree that school closure should be the last resort and not a fall-back policy option to compensate for excess education expenditure. Having stated that, most of them (whether it is the perspective of an education administrator or otherwise) reiterate the importance of a detailed, case-by-case analysis of the school scenario (and possible alternatives to closure) before taking any decision. While very few of the studies are actually dedicated to the impact of the decision on the community, it is important to note the basic premise on which the studies are based upon-which is that no student is left-out (due to the school closure) during the process. Thus, most of the impact that is referred to in these writings is in terms of student and teacher psychology. Relying much on psychological evidences, challenges faced due to increased classroom size, ability to learn in a new environment, problems of bullying and so on are discussed upon.

Framing the Problematique: What happened in Rajasthan and Why we should be worried?

In August, 2014, the state government of Rajasthan issued orders through which 17,129 schools (primary, upper primary and secondary) were merged into 13,565 schools. Almost overnight, the process led to the closure of approximately 3,593 schools in the state. The reason provided by the government was low enrolment of students, which made the functioning of these schools unviable and hence called for rationalization measures. It was further emphasized how this act would ‘free’ approximately 10,000 teachers, who will be transferred to other schools, thereby fulfilling the 30:1 pupil-teacher ratio as per the Right to Education (RTE) Act norms; a provision that continues to be violated in vast number of schools across the country.

Before initiating any further discussion, it is imperative that we look into the demographic profile of Rajasthan. Since most of the closures in the West have been a result of a proportional change in the demographic profile of the society, it is only fair that an analysis of the school rationalisation process in India must begin with a review of the demography of the state. As per Census (2011), there are approximately 23.75 million children aged between 0-14 in Rajasthan, roughly 34.6% of the total state population. Figures also indicate that roughly 9 million of these children are below the age of six, the section of the population that will soon enter the education system [8]. Hence we notice that the state is certainly not undergoing any major shift in its demographic profile at the moment; unlike other western countries where aging population was identified as a primary factor motivating school rationalisation process.

In fact, as per a recent report of the National Sample Survey estimation of the number of out-of-school children, it has been estimated that there are approximately 11.9 (or roughly 12) million out-of-school children (including both rural and urban areas) in the state of Rajasthan [9]. Thus, the action of the state took many by
surprise, especially when low enrolment rates were given as the primary reason driving the state agenda. Considering the number of children in the state of Rajasthan who are of school-going age and the number of out-of-school children on one side and low enrolment rates in government schools, it is surprising that the response of the state has been to shut or merge schools, almost directly in contradiction to the broader universal elementary education goals. While the natural response to public rejection of state-run schools should have been to turn these schools into centres of learning excellence, it is almost as if the state is adopting the easy solution of shutting the schools altogether.

It must be noted that closing uneconomic/unviable schools is a phenomenon not particularly unique to Rajasthan. As per recent media reports, 13,905 schools in Maharashtra met similar fate when orders were issued by the Directorate of Primary Education to shut these schools which had less than 20 children enrolled [6]. Similarly, in the newly-formed state of Telangana, orders have been issued to shut down almost 1500 schools where enrolment is less than 20 at primary level and less than 75 at secondary level [13]. Thus, we notice a common thread binding all these decisions, guided by pragmatic economic frameworks of cost-benefit analytical models. However, what is actually being challenged in this entire school rationalisation process is the fundamental right to elementary education that every child in India is legally entitled to. The remaining sections of this article analyse the problem along three dimensions – the rationality of the process, the manner in which decisions were executed and lastly, the probably impact on the community.

How Rational is the Rationalisation Process?

The foremost explanation given by the state for the rationalisation process is better compliance with the RTE Act, 2009 norms. However, before an enquiry into the norms and provisions of the Act, it is essential to understand the broader objective of the Act and the reasons behind enacting it. At the time of enactment of the Act, India had roughly 8 million out-of-school children. Therefore, one of the primary agenda of the government became to ensure accessibility to at least a primary school for every child in India. The concept of neighbourhood schools was also stressed upon, stating the need of a primary school within reach of a child, that is, within 1 km. While the Act may perform poorly in terms of retaining students in school or ensuring quality education, it has definitely made people more conscious towards the need for at least a primary education that is reflected in the almost universal enrolment rates. Thus, for the first time, every child whether he/she is a first-generation learner or belonging to the extremely bottom of the social hierarchies has at least access to a primary school. And the decision to merge schools works against the very principles of ensuring accessibility. As an example, two features of the RTE Act are stated in the following points to highlight how the decision of rationalisation is against the principles of the Act.

Access to School

As stated above, one of the basic goals of the RTE Act was to ensure the availability of primary schools in every neighbourhood in India. Hence, once the Act was implemented, herculean efforts were made to ensure the presence of (at least) a primary school in every neighbourhood. Subsequently, state rules for RTE Act implementation were drawn up specifying the same. In the case of Rajasthan, the RTE rules mandate the presence of primary schools within 1 km and upper primary within 2 kms [14]. However, reports from the field suggest that post the merger phase, the distance to schools have increased to as much as 3 kms in certain instances. In fact with reference to accessibility, there are two problems that have emerged, mainly due to (i) the topography of the Rajasthan and (ii) social structure. For example, post the merger phase, situations have emerged where the children have to cross highways, rivers and canals to go to school that are now at a substantial distance. Safety of children has emerged as a big concern for parents who are now reluctant to send their children to far-off schools.

Some of the schools that have been shut were located in the periphery of the villages. In fact, these schools were created to ensure the availability of schools to traditionally marginalised communities, who are often geographically located in the peripheries of the community. With the closure of these schools, it is natural to assume that these communities are once again left without schools. While the state’s response has been to merge the children who were attending these schools (located in the fringes) to other schools (often at a distance), no transportation facilities have been provided to

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2 The ‘reports from the field’ referred throughout this article take cognizance of emerged from primarily two meetings that have been convened by concerned civil society representatives in Jaipur (Rajasthan) organised by Rajasthan State Commission for Protection of Child Rights (RCPCHR) and in New Delhi, organised by national Right to Education (RTE) Forum.
smoothen the process. On the other hand, in a social context like Rajasthan where caste hierarchies are persistently present, often the marginalised groups are themselves reluctant to send their children to schools located to areas inhabited by people belonging to upper castes [15].

PTR Norms
The second reason that has been given for the rationalisation process is to free of teachers who are posted in schools with less number of children. These ‘free’ teachers can be transferred to other schools that have high rate of enrolment to fulfil the 30:1 PTR norm, as per the RTE Act. Again, while the reason given by the state is valid, one is bound to question whether closing schools is the best possible solution for teacher rationalisation. In an overall scenario where there are 5 lakh teacher vacancies and 5.5 lakh additional teachers who are yet to be trained, why not have alternatives like teacher recruitment (to fill the gap)? [16] Most of the teacher recruitment processes continue to hire teachers on a contractual basis, much against the violation of the RTE Act which prohibits contractual teachers [17a and b].

Decision-Making and Processes Involved
As we noticed from the brief review of literature on school rationalisation, there are specific steps involved before every rationalisation process. Case-by-case analysis of every individual school and detailed discussions with the community before and after the rationalisation process is essential. However, in the context of Rajasthan, we notice that both these actions have been missing. In this section, we review the mechanism through which the whole process of school closure has been carried out in the state.3

Table 1: List of few schools that have been merged in Rajasthan along with enrolment number

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the School</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>Enrolment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rajkeeya Prathmik Vidyalay</td>
<td>Ajapura</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prathmik Vidyalay</td>
<td>Mundavra</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rainee uch prathmik vidyalay</td>
<td></td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pratmik Vidyalay</td>
<td>Jeevana</td>
<td>414</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pratmik Vidyalay</td>
<td>Alavada</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balika Pratmik Vidyalay</td>
<td></td>
<td>264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balika Ucha Pratmik Vidyalay</td>
<td>Neemrana</td>
<td>301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pratmik Vidyalay</td>
<td>Jatiyana</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: DISE Data

For example, the above table highlights some of the schools that have been merged into other schools. However, as evident, enrolment numbers indicate that the school did not have less enrolment. This table leads us to question that basis on which schools were identified before the process.

The second aspect, deliberations with the community and involving stakeholders throughout the process, has also been missing. While policy-makers and administrators alike lament the fact that schools have become disconnected from the society and the joint feeling of ownership is largely missing, actions like this will only worsen the scenario. The decision-making processes in the case of rationalisation has been autocratic in nature, rigid and centralised where decisions taken by top level officials were converted into actions by mid-level officials without much explanation, generally through verbal orders (over the phones). The community was kept out of the entire process till the very end.

The RTE Act has provisions for a School Management Committees (SMCs), a committee formed through the RTE Act, consisting of both members of the community and teachers. Although the SMC would have been the perfect body for deliberations and negotiations before initiating closure processes, they were left-out of the entire process. It makes little sense to have representative bodies like SMCs if they are left-out of major decision-making processes concerning the welfare of the school. The entire process simply reflects the centralised manner in which the education systems continue to function in India.

Possible Impacts in the Community
It is not very difficult to imagine the likely consequences of the rationalisation process.

3 While we keep referring to Rajasthan since this paper is based on the case study of Rajasthan, it is imperative to note here that the processes have been more or less similar in every state where school rationalisation is underway.
Considering the increased distances to school, it is natural that the process would lead to increased number of drop-outs or out-of-school children [18]. For example, reports from the field point towards parents who are adamant that they will not send their children to far-off schools. Without doubt, the girls will be left worse-off in the entire process. In fact, since most of the schools that have been merged are primary schools, the children are very small to travel to distant places, especially when highways, canals, drains, hills and other topographical features come in between the house and the school. While the solution to this problem is a well functioning system where necessary mechanisms are in place to provide transport facilities, no such provisions have been put in place.

Secondly, social barriers to accessibility remain a challenge. Schools that were initially in marginalised areas but have been merged into schools that are located in upper-caste areas face a potential threat of almost a 100% drop-out since parents are extremely reluctant to send their children to the new school; fearing discomfort of the child and threats of discrimination [15]. Similarly, all-girls schools that have been merged into co-educational schools face a major challenge to keep up with the attendance rates. These schools were created to encourage education of girls in communities that were reluctant to send their girls to co-educational schools. Problems are also emerging in communities that are jointly inhabited by Hindus and Muslims as parents continue to be uncomfortable with children from the genders of both these communities socially interacting with each other, even in a school environment [15].

**Reflections and Conclusion**

It is extremely unfortunate that instead of focusing on strengthening the public system of education, the state government is busy closing down schools. If the rationale given for closing down is low enrolment or non-performance, then it won’t be surprising if in a few years, government schools cease to exist. The growing preference of people for private schools is almost uncontested now. The reason is the systematic, structural de-institutionalisation of the public system of education that has taken place over the years and has resulted in the current poor quality education being imparted in a majority of the public schools. However, instead of accepting its Constitutional obligations and fixing the system, it seems that the state government has almost given up on the entire process. It is important here to revisit the reason for having a ‘right to education’ in the first place. Rights-based policies are generally the first step towards equality and ensuring equitable access. However, actions like the present one will just lead to increasing the equity gaps. While those who can afford private schools will definitely send their children to private schools (if they weren’t previously), those who cannot afford private schools will be left with no alternative. Unfortunately, most of the people who cannot afford private schools are the traditionally marginalised sections of the population, for whom the right was incorporated in the first place.

To conclude, we question the basic premises upon which decisions are taken for school rationalisation by presenting an analysis of the situation along three lines – the rationality of the process, the manner in which decisions have been taken (and executed) and the likely impact on the community. There are primarily two dimensions of the problem: one, where we question the very process of rationalisation on normative grounds and secondly, in a more objective manner, where we analyse the manner in which the processes have been initiated and executed. While this paper focuses more on the second dimension, the first dimension deserves an equal (if not more) emphasis.

In a country that has so many children (both in and out of school), is closing existing schools a prudent decision? And how synchronous is the decision with the overall policy goals of universal education? Economic efficiency is necessary, but should it be at the cost of fundamental right violation. At the moment, the public education system is in need of a dynamic revival. Closing schools will just lead to a loss of confidence in the system. Even if the rationale provided is low enrolment of students (which is not the case for every identified school as shown above), it simply indicates that children (despite being present in the community) do not attend the school. In such a case, the state should take up the challenge to convert these institutions into centres of excellence so that the faith of both parents and children can be reinstated within the public education system. Merging or closing of schools is hardly the best solution to the problem.

However, in instances where the schools must be merged, whether for economic or for management purposes, extreme attention needs to be paid in the manner in which decisions are taken and thereby executed. In most countries where school rationalisation processes have been undertaken, the methodology for doing it has been detailed and well planned. Unfortunately, in the case of India, little attention has been paid to details.
Regarding the impact on the community, since there is little research on the actual impact on the process, many questions remain unanswered. This simply indicates to the gap in present research on the impact of the process on the community.

While the Rajasthan government has issued a fresh round of orders to stall the process and has even recalled some of the school mergers, the action has been a result of massive protests and civil society interventions. In other states, the process is still underway.

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