

# From Right To Education To Right To Education Of Choice



BY PARTH J. SHAH

How much does the government spend in a government school per child per month in India? Surprisingly it's a question that very few interested in improving educational opportunities in India ask — whether in India or outside. You can bet that no state education minister knows that number with necessary details. Nonetheless it's the critical point to start any discussion on the goal of education for all.

The answer usually varies from Rs. 10 to Rs. 500. Many friends and family in the U.S. think that it cannot be more than Rs. 50 per child per month, given what they have seen or know about government schools in India. When I ask that question to slum dwellers in Indian cities and tribal self help groups, they typically say Rs. 6. to Rs. 20, the amount they pay to government schools. In the next breath they add, *"Itne paiso me aishi hi padhai hongi na."* (With this much money, we can get only such a quality of education). Yes, at Rs. 20 a month, one cannot get high quality education.

The government however spends a lot more than what most people guess or the poor pay as fees in government schools. In Delhi for example, studies by the Centre for Civil Society (CCS) show that the government spends in

the range of Rs. 800 to Rs. 1,200 per child per month. (Disclaimer: I am president of CCS). Bangalore municipality spends Rs. 1,700! The amounts would not be the same in rural areas but the government does spend a great deal more money than what most people generally believe.

Certainly quality education is expensive and we need to spend more money. But the issue in education, as it is in many areas, is not so much about the amount of resources. It is about how those resources are used — **not how much but how**. Even if we were to double the expenditures but keep the same system of accountability, autonomy, and incentives, we are unlikely to get any better quality of education. It is the system that must change to take us to the promised land.

The first and foremost concern of anyone interested in advancing educational opportunities in India should be education system reform. Much has been written about this from the Kothari Commission of 1960s to the recent Sam Pitroda's National Knowledge Commission. I cannot talk about all that needs to be done, but let me suggest one idea that provides direct help to access better education to some students immediately and

Photo courtesy of CCS



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also builds genuine pressure on the system to reform over a period of time.

That one idea is of school vouchers. In India today we have a two tier system of school education. Those who can afford, go to private schools and those who cannot, go to state schools. The children of the poor have no option; the government has become a monopoly supplier of education for the poor.

School vouchers are a tool to change the way government finances education of the poor. Instead of government giving money to schools which then provide free education, the government gives money directly to parents — through vouchers. The voucher is a coupon offered by the government that covers the cost of education at the school of the student's choice. The schools collect vouchers from students, deposits them in their bank account, and the bank credits their account by equivalent money. No money actually changes hand, only the voucher moves from the student, to the school, and back to the government.

In the present system, the schools are accountable to the government. The voucher system makes schools accountable directly to parents and students since they pay for their education through vouchers. Under the voucher system, money follows the student. In the present system, money follows the school.

The school voucher provides:

✓ **Choice for students:** The voucher empowers poor students so that they can attend a school of their choice. If the school does not meet their expectations, they have the power to change schools, just as wealthy students do today.

✓ **Equality of opportunity:** It fulfills the basic human right that all children are treated equally and equal opportunity for education is provided to all irrespective of cash, caste or creed.

✓ **Competition among schools:** Today schools compete only for students with money. With vouchers, they compete for all students, rich and poor.

✓ **Performance based payment:** The revenue of a school depends on the number of students it has — both who pay directly and those who pay through vouchers. Schools therefore have an automatic incentive to increase enrolments and to improve qual-



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ity to retain students.

✓ **Win-win outcome:** Those government school students who get a voucher are able to change schools and do better for themselves. Evidence suggests that even those students who stay in government schools also perform better. First, the student-teacher ratio improves and second, schools become more attentive to stop student numbers from going down further. All students achieve better learning outcomes.

In a voucher system, instead of funding schools, the government funds students. The resultant choice and competition working together provide universal access and higher quality of education to all. We move for the mere right to education to the more meaningful right to education of choice.

What can a non-resident Indian do? Ask the question I started with to everyone, everywhere. The second best option is to support India's first voucher program in Delhi launched last year for 408 students, see [www.schoolchoice.in](http://www.schoolchoice.in).

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