

Inclusion of students from EWS category: A study of a private school in Delhi

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Abstract: The journey to implement Right to Education (RTE) in India has been a challenging policy implementation task. And within the framework of RTE, the section 12 (1) (c) provision of giving 25% reservation to students from Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) in private school in India has been a monumental task. This paper attempts to generate evidence from a private school in Delhi regarding the nuances of inclusion of students from economically weaker section (EWS). The study records experiences of students from EWS category, non-EWS students and teachers and does an analysis of their responses to understand the experiences and challenges for inclusivity of students from different backgrounds. This study would give enough evidence to researchers and policymakers to do deeper research in this area and take informed steps for the realization of the policy.

Keywords: RTE, private school, education, reservation, policy

Introduction

A historic milestone was etched in the landscape of Indian education on April 1, 2010 as it marked the official enactment of the Right to Education (RTE) Act. This landmark legislation set forth the principle of providing free and compulsory education as an undeniable right for every child within the age bracket of 6 to 14 years. Notably, a significant provision within the RTE Act earmarked 25 percent of seats in private schools for children hailing from economically weaker sections (EWS), reflecting a resolute commitment to address educational inequalities. This proactive step aimed to extend the reach of education to the most marginalized through specific provisions for disadvantaged groups such as child labourers, migrant children, and those facing various forms of disadvantage, encompassing social, cultural, economic, geographical, linguistic, and gender-based factors.

As global education systems grapple with the complex interplay between access, equity, and social transformation, the RTE Act's provision for EWS reservation emerges as a potent tool to challenge the deep-rooted nexus of inequality, exclusion, and polarization within educational frameworks (Davies, 2005). This assertion assumes heightened significance as improving educational equity, particularly within impoverished urban contexts, demands a thorough examination of educational identity and agency vis-à-vis critical elements like scope, redistribution, recognition, and power (Raffo, 2011).

The journey to institute EWS reservation in Indian education has not been devoid of challenges. As the nation and stakeholders awaited its nationwide implementation, the policy's realization and ensuing debates are spotlighted. This discourse unfolded through the lenses of contending groups, involving representatives from private schools and Social Jurist, a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) advocating for the EWS. This dynamic interplay occurred within the realm of state-level committees mandated to formulate guidelines for the admission of EWS children. Through this complex landscape, diverse stakeholders came to the forefront – from NGOs championing social justice to court interventions enforcing contractual obligations. The court played a role in directing the government to adopt effective strategies for policy implementation, while private schools devised methods to safeguard their interests. This multifaceted spectrum illustrates the intricate web of contractual obligations between state institutions and private entities. In tandem, insights from interviews with EWS parents provide a glimpse into ground realities, underscoring the lived experiences of those directly impacted by these policies.

However, the narrative reveals a dual perspective. While some strategies employed by private unaided schools inadvertently exacerbate class divisions, familial social biases often perpetuate gender disparities. These facets illuminate the complex interplay of socio-economic factors in educational policies, underscoring their potential to shape both progress and new challenges. In essence, the journey to implement EWS reservation under the RTE Act elucidates the dynamic interaction of diverse stakeholders – government, NGOs, private institutions, and families – shaping the contours of educational equity and social justice. The ensuing policies

and practices address pressing inequalities while occasionally contributing to new complexities, thereby weaving the evolving tapestry of India's educational landscape.

This paper attempts to generate evidence from a private school in Delhi regarding the nuances of inclusion of students from economically weaker section (EWS). The study records experiences of students from EWS category, non-EWS students and teachers and does an analysis of their responses to understand the experiences and challenges for inclusivity of students from different backgrounds.

Historical Overview of EWS Reservation

The historical trajectory of EWS reservation under the Right to Education (RTE) Act reveals a complex evolution driven by the pursuit of educational equity and social justice. The inclusion of Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) reservation within the RTE Act signifies a deliberate effort to address historical disparities in access to quality education. The journey of EWS reservation finds its roots in a series of significant events. The inception of this provision can be traced back to the "Unnikrishnan Case" of 1993, a landmark Supreme Court judgment that recognized the right to education as a fundamental right derived from the right to life enshrined in Article 21 of the Indian Constitution (Alston & Bhutta, 2005). This legal precedent laid the groundwork for later developments in educational policy.

The year 2010 marked a watershed moment with the implementation of the RTE Act, which crystallized the nation's commitment to ensuring education as a fundamental right for all. The introduction of EWS reservation within this legislative framework was an extension of this commitment. This reservation provision aimed to extend the benefits of quality education beyond economic barriers, aligning with the global discourse on education as a catalyst for social mobility and development.

The introduction of EWS reservation was met with a mix of anticipation and challenges. The provision sought to reserve 25 percent of seats in private schools for students from economically weaker backgrounds, reflecting a proactive approach to dismantling economic barriers. However, its effective implementation at the state and national levels necessitated deliberations and negotiations involving private institutions, government bodies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and legal interventions. The historical overview of EWS reservation also underscores the multidimensional nature of the policy's impact. While its intent was to provide equitable access, it also highlighted the intricate balance between private institutions' autonomy and the government's responsibility to ensure social justice. This tension prompted discussions on contractual obligations and the rights of various stakeholders involved.

In summary, the historical trajectory of EWS reservation within the RTE Act is a testament to India's commitment to realizing the transformative power of education. This journey reflects not only the legal and legislative aspects but also the broader socio-economic dynamics that influence policy formulation, implementation, and impact. The historical overview underscores the nuanced evolution of EWS reservation as a vehicle for equalizing educational opportunities, even as challenges and debates continue to shape its interpretation and execution.

Impact of EWS Reservation on Education System

The introduction of Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) reservation under the ambit of the Right to Education (RTE) Act has generated a series of significant impacts on the education system of India. This policy intervention has triggered transformations that span from equitable access to education to the broader structural dynamics of educational institutions.

One of the most noteworthy impacts of EWS reservation is its role in democratizing educational access. Prior to this provision, private education often remained a privilege accessible primarily to the economically privileged. The inclusion of EWS reservation has acted as an equalizing force, enabling children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds to access quality education in private schools. Kumar and Gupta's (Kumar & Gupta, 2018) research in Rajasthan and Singh and Sahay's (Singh & Sahay, 2020) study in Delhi underscore how this policy has resulted in increased enrolment rates among EWS students, heralding a new era of inclusivity. However, the impact of EWS reservation extends beyond mere enrolment numbers. Chatterji (Chatterji, 2011) highlights the need to shift the discourse from enrolment to educational quality. While the policy has succeeded in opening doors, ensuring that these doors lead to meaningful learning experiences remains a challenge. The policy's impact on teaching quality, infrastructure, and support mechanisms demands ongoing attention to create an education system that delivers on its promise of equity.

EWS reservation has also catalyzed changes in the structural fabric of educational institutions. Shah (Shah, 2019) delves into the intricate negotiations between private institutions, government bodies, and NGOs involved in implementing the policy. This interaction highlights the evolving relationships between stakeholders, shaping the way schools' function within the policy framework. The policy's introduction has prompted discussions about autonomy, accountability, and the role of private institutions in promoting social

justice. Furthermore, the policy's impact extends to social dynamics within educational spaces. Shah and Nair (Shah & Nair, 2018) emphasize how EWS reservation facilitates interactions among students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. This phenomenon not only promotes social mixing but also challenges hierarchical divisions that often characterize educational institutions. This impact goes beyond the immediate academic realm, fostering a more inclusive and empathetic environment.

In conclusion, the impacts of EWS reservation on the education system are multifaceted and far-reaching. From expanding access to addressing questions of quality, from redefining stakeholder relationships to reshaping social dynamics, the policy has sparked transformations that extend beyond classroom doors. As policy implementation continues to unfold, a holistic understanding of its impacts will be essential for shaping a more equitable and just education system.

Challenges in Implementing EWS Reservation

The implementation of Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) reservation under the Right to Education (RTE) Act has undoubtedly opened doors to educational opportunities for marginalized children. However, this transformative policy has not been devoid of challenges. An examination of the literature reveals a range of complexities that have emerged in the process of operationalizing EWS reservation within the Indian education system.

One of the foremost challenges pertains to the practical execution of the reservation policy. Shah (Shah, 2019) highlights the intricate negotiations required between private institutions, government bodies, and NGOs advocating for EWS rights. These negotiations often revolve around issues of administrative feasibility, identifying eligible candidates, and ensuring the transparency of the admission process. The complexity of these interactions underscores the necessity of clear guidelines and effective communication channels. Furthermore, while EWS reservation may address issues of access, it also brings to the fore concerns related to the quality of education. Chatterji (Chatterji, 2011) emphasizes that the success of the policy should not be measured solely by increased enrolment rates. The quality of education received by EWS students is equally significant, demanding attention to teacher training, curriculum, and infrastructure. The challenge lies in ensuring that the policy's impact extends beyond enrolment statistics to meaningful learning experiences.

An equally critical challenge is the awareness and communication gap. Kumar and Gupta (Kumar & Gupta, 2018) point out that many eligible families remain unaware of their rights under EWS reservation. This lack of awareness, particularly in rural and economically disadvantaged areas, restricts the policy's potential impact. Effective communication strategies and outreach programs become imperative to bridge this information gap and enable deserving children to benefit from the policy. Additionally, the literature underscores concerns about the potential unintended consequences of EWS reservation. Shah and Nair (Shah & Nair, 2018) highlight how the mixing of students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds could pose challenges related to social integration and inclusion. Moreover, the policy's success hinges on the equitable distribution of reserved seats across private institutions, which could potentially vary due to geographic location, financial capacity, and other factors.

Therefore, while EWS reservation is a transformative policy, it presents a range of challenges that require careful consideration. From the intricacies of policy execution and administrative negotiations to addressing issues of educational quality, awareness, and potential unintended consequences, these challenges necessitate a holistic approach to policy implementation. The evolving discourse surrounding EWS reservation reflects the ongoing efforts to strike a balance between inclusivity and practical realities within India's education landscape.

Case Studies of EWS Reservation in Education

A comprehensive understanding of the impact of Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) reservation under the Right to Education (RTE) Act can be gleaned from an exploration of case studies that shed light on real-world applications of this policy. These case studies offer invaluable insights into the nuances, challenges, and outcomes of implementing EWS reservation within the education system. National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT, 2014) found that the EWS reservation had led to a significant increase in the number of children from EWS backgrounds enrolling in private unaided primary schools. The study also found that the reservation had led to a decrease in the number of children from EWS backgrounds dropping out of school.

Kumar and Gupta (Kumar & Gupta, 2018) conducted a case study in Rajasthan, a state in India, to analyze the challenges and opportunities arising from EWS reservation. Their findings highlighted the positive impact of the policy on increasing enrolment rates among economically disadvantaged students in private schools. The study showcased how EWS reservation acted as a bridge for these children to access educational institutions that were previously beyond their reach.

Singh and Goyal (Singh & Goyal,2016) found that the EWS reservation had had a mixed impact on the academic performance of children from EWS backgrounds. The study found that children from EWS backgrounds who were admitted to private schools with higher academic standards did see an improvement in their academic performance. However, children from EWS backgrounds who were admitted to schools with lower academic standards did not see any improvement in their academic performance. Singh and Sahay's (Singh & Sahay,2020) case study in Delhi further corroborated these observations. Their research delved into the impact of EWS reservation on private school enrolment in the urban context. The study demonstrated that EWS reservation had a tangible effect on enhancing enrolment figures, underscoring the policy's potential to address the issue of educational exclusivity.

Srivastava (Srivastava,2017) argued that the EWS reservation is a necessary step to address the growing inequality in India. However, she also argued that the reservation needs to be accompanied by other measures, such as improving the quality of government schools, in order to be effective (Dreze & Sen,1995). Shah (Shah,2019) presented a case study on the implementation of EWS reservation in private schools in Delhi. This study provided a deeper insight into the negotiations and dynamics between private institutions, government bodies, and NGOs advocating for EWS rights. It underscored how the real-world implementation of the policy involved intricate discussions on administrative feasibility, transparency, and stakeholder collaboration.

Furthermore, the case studies have highlighted the broader societal implications of EWS reservation. Shah and Nair's (Shah & Nair,2018) research examined the potential of EWS reservation to promote social mixing and interaction among students from diverse backgrounds in private schools. This case study revealed the transformative potential of the policy in fostering a more inclusive and empathetic learning environment.

In a nutshell, case studies of EWS reservation provide a granular view of the policy's impact, challenges, and potential. These studies illuminate both the policy's successes in increasing enrolment and access and its challenges in terms of quality assurance and implementation intricacies. The insights garnered from these case studies offer valuable lessons for policy-makers, educators, and stakeholders as they navigate the path toward equitable education.

Methodology

A case study of the private school: Modern School Barakhamba Road was conducted. Students from EWS category, non-EWS and teachers were interviewed to understand the level of awareness of the EWS reservation under RTE (right to education) act, and their experiences.

Modern School is a co-educational, private school in New Delhi, India. It was founded in 1920 by Lala Raghbir Singh, a prominent Delhi-based businessman and philanthropist, who desired an institution that combined the "best of ancient Indian tradition with the needs of the times." It was the first private and coeducational school established in Delhi after the capital of the British Raj shifted to the city.

The school motto is "Nyaymatma Balheenien Labhya," which translates to "Self-realization cannot be achieved by the weak". The school enrolls about 2,500 pupils, most admitted directly from its junior branch, the Raghbir Singh Junior Modern School. Modern School, Barakhamba Road is consistently ranked well among Indian schools. Although primarily a coeducational day school, the school provides campus housing for boys.

Experiences of students from Economically weaker sections (EWS)

In an interview of 10 children, most of them lived in the slum areas on the outskirts of Delhi or in areas which are not much developed such as Daryaganj, Shadipur, Hari Nagar. One child reported that he's living with his aunt and uncle in their house while his family resides in Haryana so as to receive education in this school. Their parents are not very literate. Fathers usually have a service class job such as that of a clerk, employee, working at the railway stations, mostly government jobs.

They don't have a standing business and have to work everyday to earn their daily income. They have a hand-to-mouth life, just enough money to spend on basic needs such as food, clothing, etc. Though one child said that his father runs a small business and they are doing very well now. Further, mothers are not earning, and are housewives, hence take care of their families.

Hindi is the most common language spoken at their homes. Other languages such as bihari, Haryanvi, urdu and even English are spoken at some homes. All of them got their admission in the school through the reserved quota that is availability of 25% seats under EWS category. Hence, it is clear that the school follows this RTE Act properly.

One student said: "There is nothing more unequal than the equal treatment of unequal people". Another child said that they got their admission through the sports quota as they held state level rank in one sport or the other. 50% of them said that they feel comfortable sitting in a diverse classroom but the other half stated the opposite. They said that they would prefer having a separate classroom where they are surrounded by children of their economic background. They felt underprivileged in the presence of the other high end, rich families'

kids. Seeing them, they were constantly reminded of their own poverty and challenges. They couldn't see themselves as equals and felt conscious of themselves. One child said that "whenever I see those rich and privileged children using new books, stationeries, pencil boxes, bottles and tiffins, I crave those things more and more".

Moreover, they often found it difficult to ask questions or raise doubts in class in front of everybody because they constantly felt judged, turning them into big introverts. Most of them found their studies hard and difficult to comprehend sometimes. But they were able to manage by the help of teachers who made a constant effort to help these children. Teachers took extra lessons, explained everything one on one, provided worksheets and questionnaires to help them understand the topics. Apart from academics, they could even go up to the teachers in case they had any other difficulties related to family issues, financial problems or if someone bullied them and the teachers would listen to their grievances and provide them with the best solutions.

One incident, worth mentioning, is of a child who was academically very weak. In his mid-terms, he failed in two subjects. He lost all his confidence and motivation but this one teacher made an effort to help this child and literally transformed him. The child scored 85% in his final examinations which was truly unbelievable and an applaudable achievement for the child as well as the teacher. The child felt "like a miracle had happened".

However, a few students said that some teachers remain biased towards other children and neglect the EWS children. During the start of every academic year, the school provides them financial aid by giving them the course books free of cost, school uniform at a lower price and a kit of stationary supplies for the term. When asked about their relationship with their fellow classmates and peers, there was silence, sadness and inferiority complex on their faces. They found it difficult to socialise and interact with the other children. Most of them had friends who belonged to the EWS background only. They said that being friends with the general category children was rather a strenuous and demotivating job. Their consciousness wouldn't let them talk to other children. They felt discriminated against, judged, looked down at and ignored. They couldn't keep at par with the conversions of the rich kids, their language, their style, their attitude and their obsession with the materialistic world.

Experience of Non-EWS (general category) students

These children mostly live in well-established neighbourhoods and societies. In an interview of 15 children, 4 boys live in the hostel inside school premises while their families live outside Delhi. One child was from Tamil Nadu and one was also from Nepal. They come from literate and educated families. Some parents are doctors, some are engineers, some are CA and a variety of other business and professional backgrounds. 50% of the children surveyed had both their parents working and the other half had only one of the parents working, mostly the father. All of them had got their admission through the normal admission procedure i.e. lottery, sibling case etc. It must be highlighted that 6 children had got in through other sources such as donation.

More than half of the children said they were not comfortable being friends with EWS children and don't talk to them. However, 5 children disagreed and said that they had no problem in being friends as "everyone is a human being and while making friends you don't see the person's financial status but you see their nature". All of them agreed that they would certainly make an effort to help these children in studying. For eg. helping them make notes, understand a chapter or provide them with their previous term books and notebooks.

Only 10% of children felt that they should have a separate classroom while others believed that learning in a diverse classroom would create a better learning atmosphere and understand different cultures and backgrounds. EWS children are in no way affecting their learning capacity so there's no reason for them to be separated. Nobody thinks that the teachers in school are biased towards the non-EWS children. Every child is treated equally. There are no special privileges or opportunities given to non-EWS children within school. In fact, some teachers put more effort to help the EWS children.

All of them said that even though they don't believe in untouchability and discrimination, there still exists inequality in the way the EWS children are seen. One student said: "We cannot see them as equals because in the end they don't have the resources, privileges and financial status available to the general public". All of them firmly believed that they certainly do have more facilities and opportunities than the EWS children in the outside world. They have the money to take private tuitions, study abroad, do extra courses and summer programmes to enhance their learning.

However, the general category children remain frustrated over the fact that the reserved quota deprives the general category of equal rights in government sectors. The cut-off for admissions into schools/colleges for the EWS category is comparatively low and even though the population of general category is more, there are less seats available for them. So, they think that it is unfair to them and criticise the idea of a reserved quota for EWS children in government jobs. It must be noted that while all criticise the idea of reserved quotas, none of

them wish to be born into an economically weak family. They literally fear this thought and wonder how they would even “survive”.

Experiences of Teachers

Out of the 5 teachers interviewed, 3 had been teaching in this school for 15-20 years while 2 of them had recently joined. All the teachers take great effort to help the EWS children. They take extra classes to explain the chapters, provide notes and question banks. They also make an endeavour to understand these children emotionally. If any children feel discriminated against or burdened with family or other personal issues they can freely communicate with the teachers and feel better. The teachers provide solutions and care to these children. No teacher feels biased towards other students and treat everyone equally.

Teachers feel that in a few cases, the EWS students are not able to comprehend the subject as much as the non-EWS students. They find it difficult to understand and write the answers and are not as quick and sharp as the other students. However, this is not the case of all EWS students. They have seen exceptions where some EWS students have performed even better than the non-EWS. Likely, the children who are weak in their studies require special attention and aid from their teachers.

All the teachers disagreed when asked if the EWS children should have a separate classroom. To enhance the learning process, it is very important to have a diverse classroom. It helps everyone to learn from each other. If EWS children have a separate classroom, it will slow the process of integrating equality. The EWS children will feel sidelined and it will make them more conscious of themselves. In a diverse classroom, they can interact, socialise and talk to other children too. This may inspire them to work harder to have a secure and successful future.

Teachers said that it is not very frequent that a EWS children come up to them relating doubts and questions. It is mostly that the teacher has to approach the child. Teachers feel that these children are not very vocal about their opinions. They are reserved and quiet. They are shy to speak in front of the class. Once, there was a speaking skills assessment of English in which children had to speak on a topic for a minute in front of the class. Everybody could do the given task but this one EWS girl was reluctant to do so. When it was her turn to speak, she started shivering, her words stuttering and she turned dumb, unable to speak. She got really nervous. The teacher encouraged her a lot. The classmates too tried to help but she just couldn't speak.

In the field of education inclusion involves a process of reform and restructuring of the school as a whole, with the aim of ensuring that all pupils can have access to the whole range of educational and social opportunities offered by the school (Mittler, 2000).

Conclusion

The journey through the literature on Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) reservation under the Right to Education (RTE) Act has illuminated a multifaceted panorama of policies, challenges, and impacts that intricately shape India's educational landscape. This comprehensive study underscores that EWS reservation is not a mere policy enactment; it embodies a catalyst for societal transformation, advocating for equitable access to education and redressing historical inequities.

The study underscores the significance of the RTE Act and its integration of EWS reservation as a formidable instrument for dismantling economic barriers that have long thwarted access to quality education. The provision to reserve 25 percent of seats in private schools for EWS students has significantly broadened the horizons of educational opportunity for those who were previously marginalized due to financial constraints. The intricate interplay between policy formulation and execution reveals the complexities of policy implementation. The negotiations between private institutions, government entities, and NGOs unveil the dynamic nature of policy execution, necessitating considerations of administrative feasibility and stakeholder collaboration. Additionally, the study unveils the potential of EWS reservation to challenge social divisions accentuating the transformative potential of this policy on societal integration.

While EWS reservation has ignited transformative impacts, it has encountered challenges along the way. This study illuminates the hurdles posed by awareness gaps, potential unintended consequences, and the imperativeness of effective communication strategies. In conclusion, this study on EWS reservation weaves a compelling narrative of a policy-driven educational transformation. It signifies a concerted endeavor to rectify disparities and provide marginalized children with the tools for personal growth, empowerment, and societal progress.

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