

RTE Access to Poor Students: Cases of Four States

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The RTE Act, 2009, was one of the landmark laws in primary education. But the implementation of the Act has been facing many challenges across the states in the country, especially the implementation of the provision for 25 per cent reservation in private and unaided schools for children belonging to economically weaker sections. This part discusses the school admissions under 25 per cent reservation of the RTE Act in four major states during the academic year 2019–2020.

Case of Tamil Nadu

Tamil Nadu is the most urbanised state in the country with a good track record of school infrastructure facilities for primary education. Under the RTE Act, there is a provision for 25 per cent reservation of seats for poor students. Out of the total reserved seats of 1,21,809 in about 8,000 private and unaided schools for the current academic year 2019–2020, the school education department could fill only 69,739 seats or 57.25 per cent. About 49,000 children did not get seats to study this academic year, depriving them the opportunity to have access to quality primary education.

In the previous years, the percentage of seats filled under the 25 per cent reservation provision showed variation. It was 58 percent for 2018–19, 77 percent for 2017–18, 83 percent for 2016–17, 81 percent 2015–16, 75 percent for 2014–15 and 47 percent for 2013–14 (see Table 1). The cumulative performance of the last seven-year period reveals that the total reserved seats in private and unaided schools availed by economically weaker students of the society were 68 per cent or 5,65,475 seats only. In Tamil Nadu alone, the economically poor students did not get 2,61,493 reserved seats in private schools in the last seven years. These unfilled seats are nothing but lost opportunities for these children.

Table1: Students Admitted in Private Schools in Tamil Nadu under the 25% Reservation Provision of the RTE Act from 2013–2020					
Sl.No	Year	Available Seats	Students Admitted	% of Seats Filled	Seats Unfilled
1	2013–14	1,07,157	49,864	47	57,293
2	2014–15	1,16,004	86,729	75	29,275
3	2015–16	1,17,232	94,811	81	22,421
4	2016–17	1,19,043	98,474	83	20,569
5	2017–18	1,25,209	95,858	77	29,351
6	2018–19	1,20,514	70,000	58	50,514
7	2019–20	1,21,809	69,739	57	52,070

	Total	8,26,968	5,65,475	68	2,61,493
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Source: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chennai/tamil-nadu-government-didnt-consider-all-1-19-lakh-rte-applicants-rti-reply/articleshowprint/70458640.cms>

It was also noticed that in many districts in Tamil Nadu, especially in urban areas, parents enrol their children in private nurseries or primary schools based on the popularity of the schools and their quality and standards of teaching. If a private school in their neighbourhood does not have satisfactory quality, the parents do not mind choosing other private schools by paying the fee irrespective of whether they get seats under RTE or not. Parents care for quality and opportunity for their children more than the provisions of the RTE Act. Partly, this is also the main reason for unfilled seats (2,61,493) reserved under the RTE for poor children.

In other words, the government deprives these children of access to primary education and forces their parents to pay higher fees for education. The per-child expenditure reimbursed to private schools in Tamil Nadu was `25,155.21 (Class I), `25,184.34 (Class II), `25,383.05 (Class III), `25,392.64 (Class IV), `25,425.10 (Class V), `32,897.26 (Class VI), `33,066 (Class VII) and `33,146.03 (Class VIII). However, the actual reimbursement to private and unaided schools varies across seven years.

Case of Madhya Pradesh

According to the Government of Madhya Pradesh, the total reserved seats available under the RTE in the current academic year (2019–2020) for the admission of economically poor students in private and unaided schools were 2.47 lakh. Out of these, the state government could fill only 1,77,835 seats or 71.99 per cent (95,495 boys and 82,340 girls), from a total of 2.35 lakh applications received. Out of 1,77,835 admissions given in private schools, 1,26,269 students belonged to the BPL category while 38,208 and 11,836 students were from the SC and ST, respectively. Ninety two children were handicapped.

The total number of unfilled seats was 70,000, which means poor students were deprived of basic quality primary education. The total number of seats available for poor students in private and unaided schools has declined by 50,000 to 2.47 lakh seats in the current year (2019–20) from 2.97 lakh seats in 2018–2019. Annually, about `4,419 was reimbursed to private schools per child. This amount could be way below than the actual cost of primary education in private and unaided schools, and this could be one of the major reasons for the failure of filling all seats in private and unaided schools.

Cases of Maharashtra and Karnataka

In Maharashtra, the total seats declared available for 25 per cent reservation under the RTE in private and unaided schools for the current year (2019–20) were 2.44 lakh, of which only 1.27 lakh seats or 52.04 per cent were filled. And nearly 1.17 lakh seats or 47.95 per cent were unfilled

due to various reasons. The per-child expenditure reimbursed to private schools was about `17,670 per year.

In Karnataka, 6 lakh children were studying in over 12,000 schools under the RTE Act. The State has amended the RTE rules of 25 per cent reservation which states that **students from weaker sections and disadvantaged communities can avail reservation in a private school only in the absence of a government or aided school in their neighbourhood**. Because of this amendment, the admission has declined in the current year drastically from 1.52 lakh seats in 2018–19 to 18,401 seats in 2019–20. Thus, the government itself paves the way for thousands of poor children being deprived of quality primary education. The private schools complained that they will be forced to charge poor children's parents, if the government does not reimburse the dues to them. Under the RTE, the reimbursement amount for each child is `8,000 for pre-primary schools and `16,000 for primary and above classes.

The above four states are only few examples. If the entire country is taken into consideration, there would be millions of unfilled seats and poor children denied of primary education under the nose of democratic governments. The Act enacted by the Union Government has a clear mandate but the implementation of the provision for 25 per cent reservation drastically varies from state to states without any valid reasons.

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Views expressed are personal and need not reflect or represent the views of Centre for Public Policy Research

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