

# Parental Motivations in Sending Children to School in a Paradoxical Indian Learning System of Declining Learning Curve and Increasing Enrolment: A Case Study of West Bengal

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## Abstract

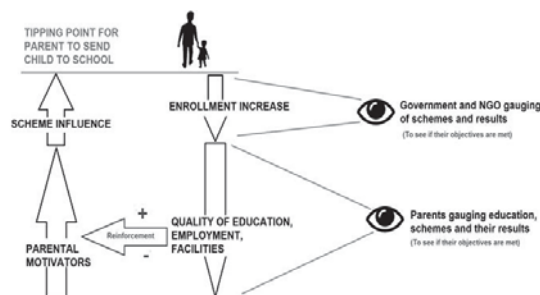
Current studies explain the growth in enrolment in Indian primary schools to be a result of 'cost-effective' incentivized education by the Indian Government. However, this does not explain why parents living below the poverty line (BPL) are forgoing higher opportunity costs and sending their children to school, especially in the context of a declining learning curve. This study investigates the motivating factors among BPL parents and the relative significance of incentives in shaping their decisions regarding their children's enrolment. This study also reveals qualitative and quantitative data based results showing Right to Education (RTE) Act's (2009) 'free and compulsory primary education for all' motivating millions of 'very poor' first generation learners to enroll. However, in these households, incentivized education is not sufficiently cost-effective to substitute child labor. Furthermore, The Right to Education Act's No Fail Policy is shown to have negatively impacted learning in government schools.

**Keywords:** Schools, Indian Education System, Students, Motivators

## 1. Introduction

This research sets out to investigate the gap in the research area of qualitative understanding and explaining the causal mechanisms through which the parent's choices lead to child enrollment. King, Keohane and Verba (1994) suggest that qualitative research can add depth to quantitative research by going beyond established correlations and instead investigate causation from descriptive inferences.

The question to be asked is what motivates parents despite falling learning curves to send their children to primary school (whilst increasing opportunity costs – in form of substitutable child labor). The motivation for the question stems from lack of analysis in current research available in gauging parents' viewpoint towards education system, and plain focus upon government frameworks and policies reflecting only increase in enrolments (Fig 1).



**Fig 1:** Research motivation: Understanding Parental motivators – the missing link towards successful policies

The millennium has witnessed the introduction of new policy interventions in India's elementary education system and better implementation of existing ones. These include amendments to the Child Labor (Prohibition and Regulation) Act of 1986 in 2006 and 2009, the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (the Education for All Movement) at the turn of the new millennium,

the Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS) in 2001 as well the Right to Education Act (RTE) in 2009. The RTE not only made education compulsory and free, it also mandated the 'No Fail Policy' (NFP) till the completion of primary school i.e. Class VIII (age 13 years). Each one of these factors has contributed to the promising enrolment figures. Various national employment schemes, such as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) and the National Skills Development Corporation's (NSDC) schemes have also made education an attractive option for millions wanting to avail these schemes.

Hence, in the context of alternate economic opportunities for children (in form of child labor) available to parents, the larger question which this research addresses is why are parents (particularly from poor households) sending their children to school when the learning curve is declining?

## 2. The Unexplored Paradox

Despite policy interventions and the significant progress in bringing millions of out-of-school children to enroll in primary school and achieving enrolment rates as high as 96% in 2014 (Pratham, 2015), the Indian education system has a new challenge in form of the declining learning curve. While 65.5% children attending Class IV could read at least Class I text in 2010, only 49.2% could do the same in 2014. In 2010, 55.1% children in Class IV could subtract. This figure has plummeted to 32.3% in 2014 (Pratham, 2015).

In the context of this paradoxical scenario of increasing primary school enrolment and the declining learning curve, it therefore becomes crucial to evaluate the motivators for educational choices, especially in the cases of children whose families constitute the 269.8 million that live Below Poverty Line (BPL) (Planning Commission, 2013).

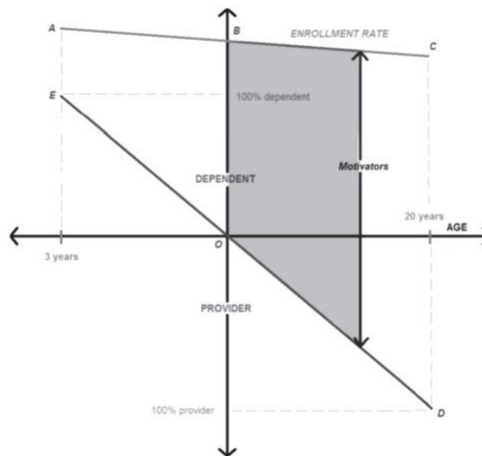


Fig 2: Dependent - Provider Model

The dependent-provider model (Fig 2) identifies the puzzle that this research seeks to solve. Based on the premise that a child is considered to be either a 'dependent' or a 'provider' (or a mix of both) in a family, the two ends of the dependent and provider axis indicate whether a child is perceived to be 100% dependent, or is perceived to be a 100% provider by the parents. The importance and urgency for role-reversal (dependent to provider) vary in extent depending on the socio-economic and local factors influencing households (i.e. earlier and important in extremely poor households).

When a child is a dependent (which exists up to a particular age that is indicated at O), the parent feels compelled to provide for the child. For BPL families, this is representative of the point of time where a family would benefit from a scheme such as Mid-Day Meal Scheme and supervision at school while parents are away at work. Till this point, parents are expected to provide for their child (area ABOE explained by Mid-Day Meal Scheme). When the child reaches an age of O and beyond (unexplained phenomenon is the 'grey' area BCDO), the child is no longer a dependent and is in fact a provider, capable of working. Here, the 'provider' role of a child would be far more beneficial compared to an incentivising scheme, especially to a BPL household. Nawani (2014) is also of a similar opinion that incentives offer only a partial relief

to poor parents' financial problems.

The objective of this research is to understand the process and mechanisms through which parents make educational choices for their children and analyse this in light of increasing enrolments and a declining learning curve. At the same time, the research aims at finding an explanation to this paradox, especially in poor households, where opportunity costs are a significant sacrifice.

### 3. Research Question

Fig 3 explains how the questions of enrolment will not be limited to the success of schemes unlike previous studies. Motivators and aspirations need to be assessed from the perspective of region (urban-rural), community, income groups, parental dynamics (i.e. whether the mother or the father is the key decision-maker) and the gender of the child in order to analyze their impact on perceptions and importance of these one-size-fits-all schemes. Perception of the quality of education for meeting future aspirations has also been considered in the design.

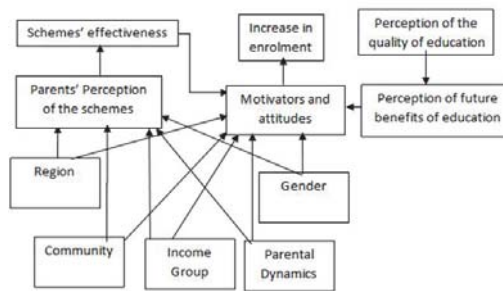


Fig 3: Process tracing: parental motivations

### 4. Conclusion

This research not only identified a paradox emerging within the elementary education system but after extensive fieldwork in rural and urban West Bengal, filled this gap in research.

School participation in poor households has been oversimplified to be dependent on the cost of education (direct and opportunity cost). A dichotomy exists, even within BPL households regarding schooling. While government incentives and policy initiatives have accounted for massive enrolment among the 'very poor' first generation learners of BPL households, there are many living below the poverty line who are sending their children to schools for factors besides the reduced cost of education vis-à-vis these schemes. These include high aspiration levels and the need for respect, findings which have emerged from this study.

Existing research has discounted the strong motivating factor of rising aspirations in the paradigm change of enrolment in India. The rise in enrolment among the poor has been explained by researchers as a consequence of various schemes and policies, excluding the critical role played by parents at the decision-making level.

This study has led to the discovery that the increase in enrolment among these 'very poor' and illiterate, combined with growing aspirations among other BPL parents (particularly the historically disadvantaged Muslims, who are now enrolling in mainstream government education instead of *madrasas*) has impacted the learning curve due to the complex nature of challenges faced by first generation learners. This situation, combined with the government to private school migration among the APL households with high aspirations, has further contributed to declining mean learning outcomes in government schools in the recent years. Views about the declining learning curve as a failure of the government education system have not taken these factors into account.

However, there is still scope for the government to improve the existing education system. A segmented learning curve showing variance rather than mean will help in capturing the complexities of different socio-economic groups. This will help in problem identification which can further be addressed through target-based schemes. The education system can become truly inclusive by providing educational support for the first generation learners and introducing languages such as Urdu for the Muslims in all government schools. While the Right to Education has increased enrolment, education can become a reality once every child's right to aspire is recognized.

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