

Social stratification in India along the lines of caste, ethnicity and religion is also reflected in educational attainment with a vast quantity of literature documenting inequalities therein (GoI 2006; Govinda 2002; PROBE Team 1999; Thorat and Newman 2009). These inequalities have been a cause of concern to both the government and civil society. The government has put in place strong, affirmative action policies to redress many of the historical injustices. Some of these have received strong public support but others, particularly those regarding reservation of seats in colleges and universities, have led to resentment and protests from more privileged sections of the society (Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998). Nonetheless, after more than 60 years of implementing policies aimed at restoring this imbalance, and some decline in educational inequalities, the gap still remains wide (Desai and Kulkarni 2008).

Educational imbalances in India deserve particular attention because traditional social disparities based on notions of pollution and impurity¹ that governed caste relations are rapidly being transformed into class inequalities through differential educational attainments. Although a number of studies describe various aspects of social distance and discrimination between different castes in diverse areas of life (Bayly 1999; Deshpande 2011; Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998), economic disparities are perhaps the most pernicious, resulting in perpetuating the cycle of inequality across generations. While educational inequalities are not the sole determinants of economic status, they play an important role in creating disparities in earnings. Caste-based differences in education, income and other aspects of well-being have long been recognised. In recent years, similar religion-based imbalances have also been observed where Muslims are particularly vulnerable when compared with other religious groups such as Jains, Zoroastrians, Hindus, etc. (Basant and Shariff 2009; Desai and Kulkarni 2008; GoI 2006).

PUBLIC POLICY AND EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES

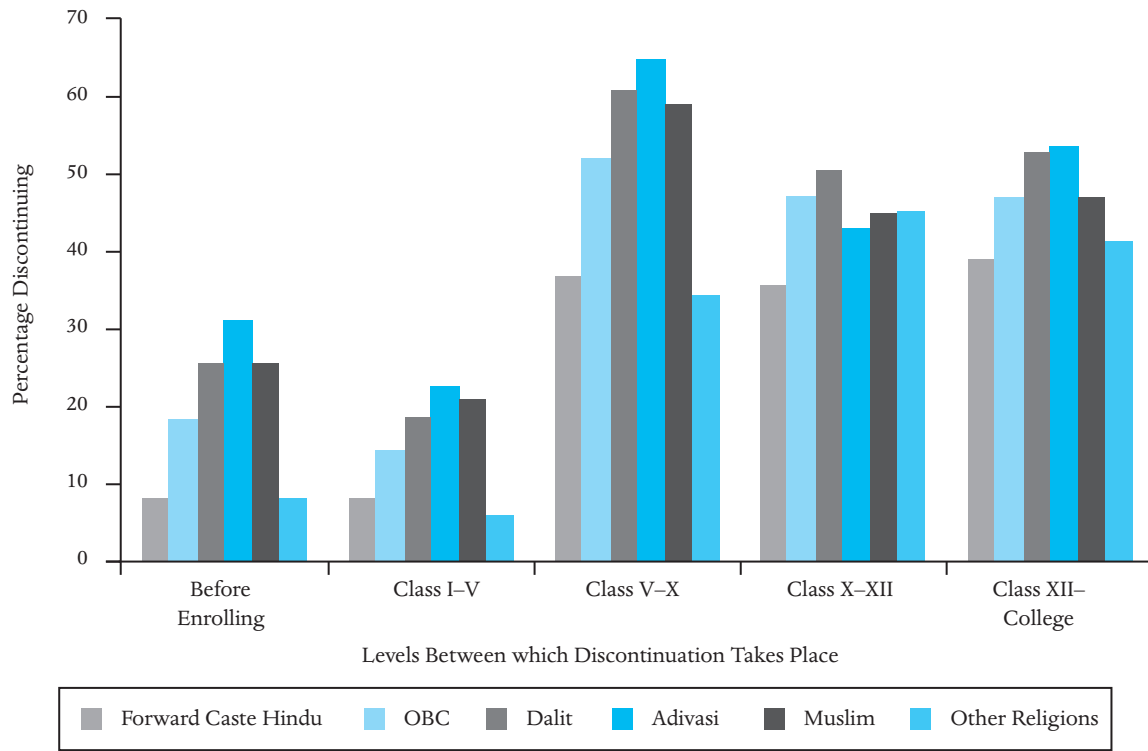
Public policies attempt to address these inequalities in two ways:

- (a) by providing scholarships and other incentives to reduce financial stress on the family and to increase the motivation to continue education; and
- (b) by providing preferential admission in colleges and advanced professional programmes through reservations or quotas. While some attempts at setting up special schools or hostels for children from marginalised communities have also been made, these have relatively been limited in scope.

Policy intervention, particularly in the case of the highly controversial reservations or quotas in college admissions, comes much too late in the educational path of students. Figures 4.1 and 4.2, charting school discontinuation rates circa 2005, provide interesting insights. Drawing on data from the India Human Development Survey (IHDS) conducted in 2004–05 by researchers from the University of Maryland and the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER), it shows the rate of leaving school/college at a given education level for boys from different social backgrounds (Desai et al. 2010).

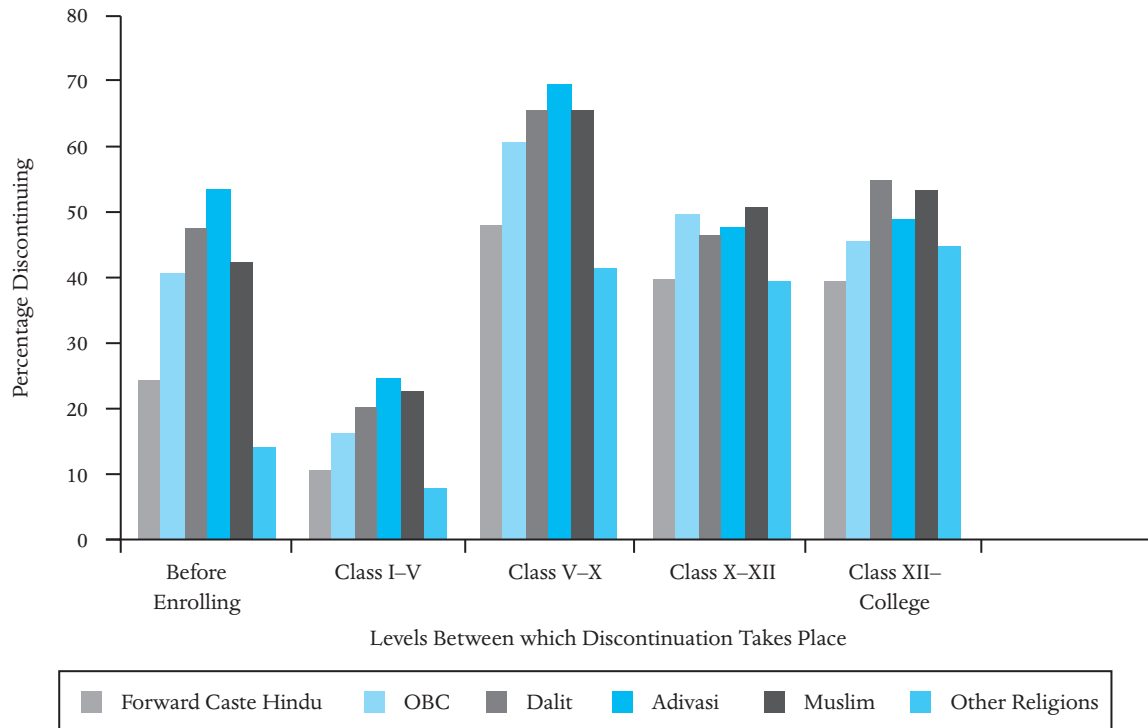
These figures show that the largest differences between forward caste Hindus and disadvantaged groups like dalits, adivasis and Muslims appear to lie primarily in school entrance and before completion of Class X. The differences decline on progression to the next level — on completion of Class X. Most minority students who have been able to pass the early hurdles have developed skills and may have intelligence, fortitude and motivation far exceeding their more privileged peers, which increases their chances of success and reduces the inequalities in educational outcomes. They may also belong to the more privileged sections of the dalit, adivasi, Other Backward Class (OBC),

FIGURE 4.1 Education Discontinuation Rates, by Educational Level and Social Background for Men



Source: Desai et al. (2010: 89).

FIGURE 4.2 Education Discontinuation Rates, by Educational Level and Social Background for Women



Source: Desai et al. (2010: 89).

or Muslim communities and may be less likely to be subject to prejudices and disadvantages faced by their less-privileged brothers and sisters.

These observations are consistent with the finding from international literature on comparative education (Raftery and Hout 1993; Shavit and Blossfeld 1993), which also notes greater inequalities in education at early stages. Unfortunately public policies, when it comes to addressing educational inequalities, tend to focus more on higher education instead of on early education, possibly because they are easier to address. In this paper, different dimensions of early educational experience will be examined in order to understand the forces shaping educational inequalities.

GLASS HALF-FULL OR HALF-EMPTY?

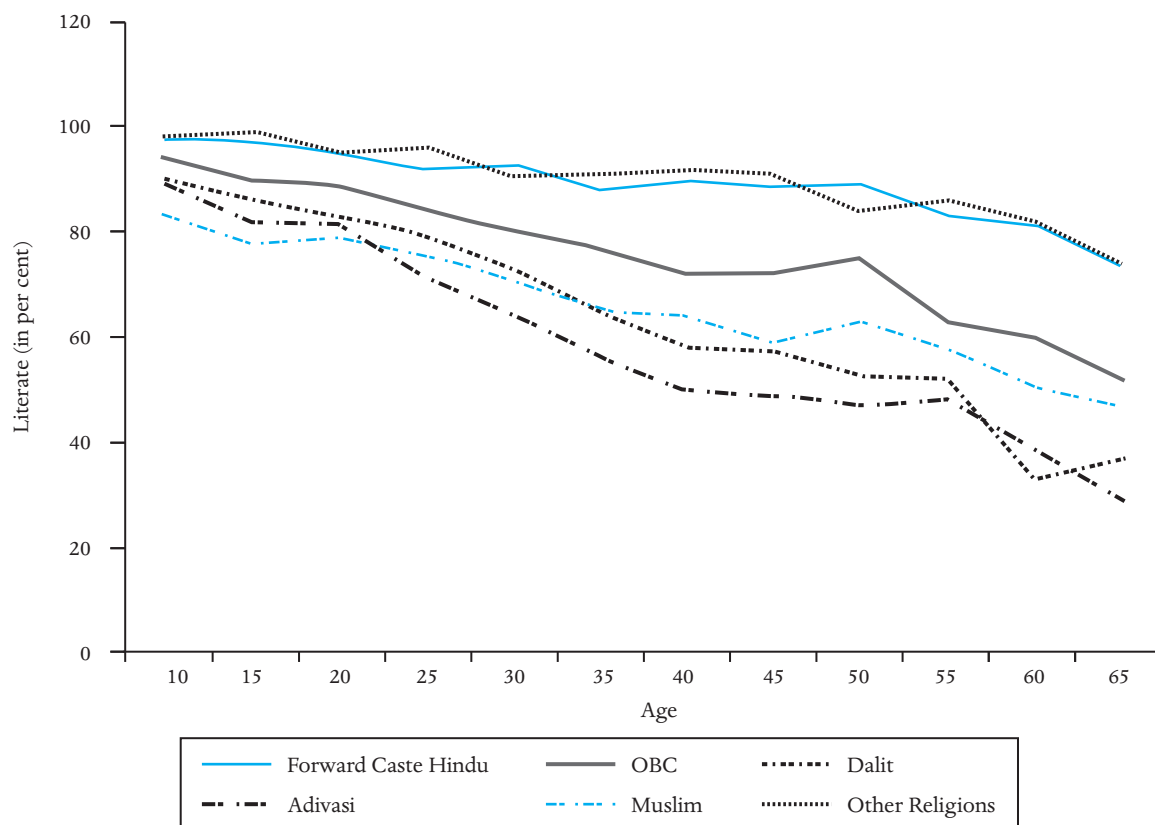
The picture of educational inequalities in India is not uniformly bleak. Substantial narrowing in basic literacy rates has taken place. Statistics on rudimentary literacy are typically obtained by asking individuals or their family members whether they can read and write a sentence. In this, the IHDS, like the *Census of India* and other surveys,

documents the convergence between various social groups. To some extent this convergence is attributable to rising school enrolment among all sections of society, and to some extent is a statistical artefact generated by the higher education groups, forward caste Hindus and smaller religious groups such as Christians, Sikhs and Jains reaching near 100 per cent literacy rates (Figures 4.3 and 4.4).

More detailed studies also show that the gap is closing in some areas. An analysis of the National Sample Survey data between 1983 and 2000 states:

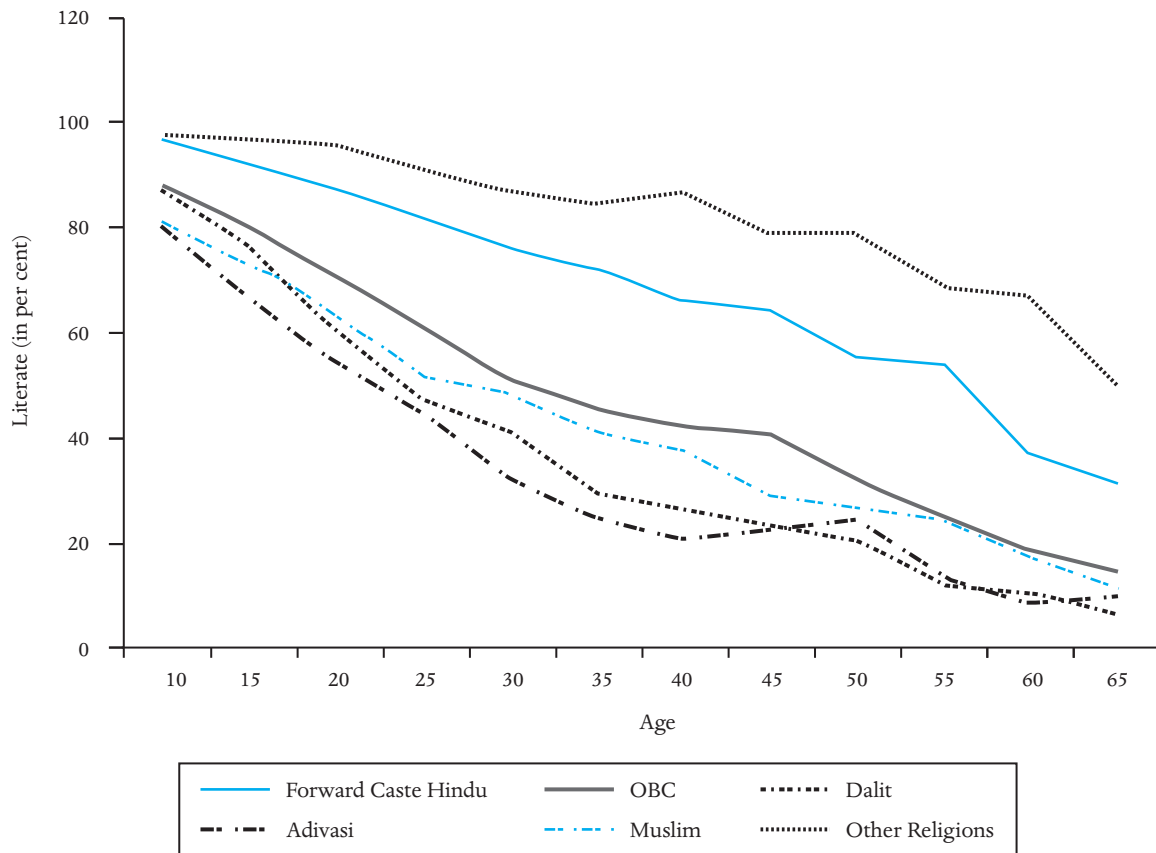
[These results suggest that holding] other factors [household income, place of residence and household size] at their mean values, for upper caste Hindu and other [Sikh, Jain and Christian] males, the probability of ever enrolling in school increased from .715 in 1983 to .858 in 1999–2000, an increase of about 14 percentage points. Over the same period, enrollment for dalit males increased by 20 percentage point in their probability of enrollment, and that for adivasi males increased by 21 percentage points. This has helped to narrow the disparities between high caste Hindus and dalits/adivasis... Among females, the corresponding gain in primary enrollment for upper caste Hindus... is 25 percentage points, compared with 33 percentage points for dalits and 35 percentage points for adivasi (Desai and Kulkarni 2008: 259).

FIGURE 4.3 Literacy Rates for Males, by Age



Source: Desai et al. (2010: 77).

FIGURE 4.4 Literacy Rates for Females, by Age



Source: Desai et al. (2010: 77).

However, in spite of this limited success, disparities in educational experiences of children between social groups persist. Table 4.1 shows differences in experiences of children aged 6 to 14 from various social groups documented by the IHDS. It is important to note that these data refer to the period before the Right to Education (RTE) Act was implemented and some of the parameters such as repeating or failing a class may be less relevant now.

Table 4.1 documents that dalit, adivasi and Muslim children fare far worse on all the mentioned indicators when compared to forward caste Hindus and other religious groups with OBCs falling somewhere in the middle. The disadvantages of Muslims are particularly noteworthy since their economic status is often at par with the OBCs (Desai et al. 2010), but when it comes to education, they are far behind OBCs and closer to dalits and adivasis.

INEQUALITIES IN SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Although inequalities in educational attainment are well recognised, there is a tendency to assume that these

inequalities are caused by differential poverty levels across social groups. Since dalits and adivasis, and to a lesser extent Muslims and OBCs, are poorer than the forward castes and other minority groups (ibid.), it is assumed that the need for children to work in order to support the family income instead of going to school, and inability to bear ancillary school costs such as for transportation or purchase of books may lead to lack of school attendance. Hence, the policy focus, such as the emphasis in the RTE Act, has been on increasing school attendance. Ensuring attendance is necessary but it is equally important to recognise the inequalities in learning outcomes.

Even when children from disadvantaged backgrounds attend school, their skill development seems to lag behind their peers. The IHDS administered short reading and arithmetic tests to children aged 8 to 11 years. These tests, designed by Pratham (2005) and extensively used in their *Annual Status of Education Report*, are very simple and measure the ability of children to read a short paragraph of two or three sentences in a language most comfortable to them and to subtract one two-digit number from another.

TABLE 4.1 Educational Experiences of Children (6 to 14 years), IHDS, 2004–05 (in per cent)

	<i>Never Enrolled</i>	<i>Dropped Out</i>	<i>Now in School</i>	<i>Absent 6+ Days in Previous Month</i>	<i>Repeated or Failed a Class</i>
All India	10	5	85	20	6
Forward Caste Hindu	3	3	94	15	5
OBC	9	4	87	21	5
Dalit	12	5	83	22	8
Adivasi	16	7	77	19	9
Muslim	17	8	76	21	5
Other Religions	2	2	96	4	4

Source: Desai et al. (2010: 91).

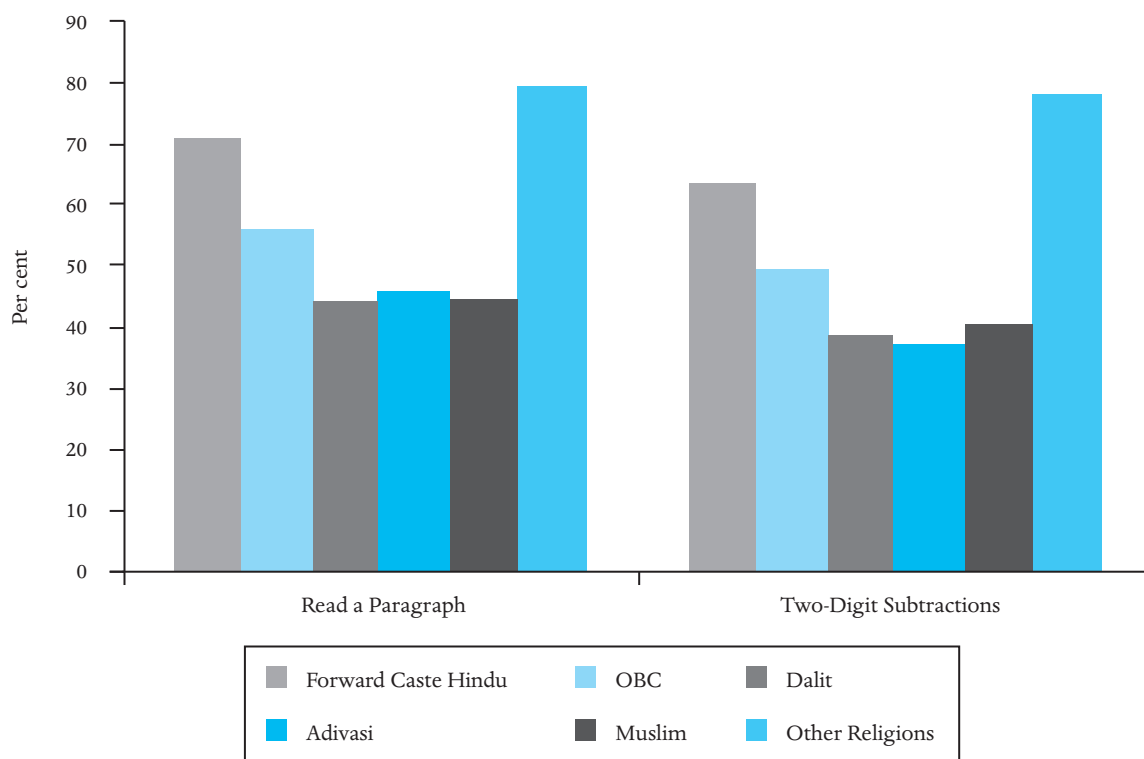
Only 54 per cent children could read this short paragraph (at Class-II level) and only 48 per cent could subtract. However, among forward castes this number was 71 per cent (for reading) and 63 per cent (for subtraction), while for dalits, adivasis and Muslims it was about 44 per cent each (see Figure 4.5).

At least some of these differences are attributable to differential parental investments in children's education. As Table 4.2 demonstrates, among the IHDS sample, forward

caste children are far more likely to attend private schools, take private tuitions, and in general have greater access to a variety of financial inputs, such as textbooks.

However, it would be a mistake to attribute higher skill attainment of forward caste children and those belonging to minority religions as a sole function of greater parental investments. It is of no doubt that forward caste children are more likely to attend private schools and are associated with slightly higher skill attainment (Desai et al. 2009b), but even

FIGURE 4.5 Differences in Learning Outcomes, by Social Background for Children Aged 8–11



Source: India Human Development Survey, 2004–05.

TABLE 4.2 Social Inequalities in School Expenditure for Children (6 to 14 years), IHDS, 2004–05

	<i>In Private School</i> (in per cent)	<i>In Private Tuition</i> (in per cent)	<i>Average Annual Expenditure (in ₹)</i>			<i>Total Expenditure (in ₹)</i>
			<i>School Fees</i>	<i>Books, Uniform and Transport</i>	<i>Private Tuition</i>	
All India	28	20	481	606	178	1,265
Forward Caste Hindu	40	27	904	924	346	2,174
OBC	26	20	398	543	149	1,090
Dalit	17	18	271	471	134	876
Adivasi	15	9	203	392	73	669
Muslim	33	19	428	521	130	1,079
Other Religions	54	27	1,446	1,370	224	3,040

Source: Desai et al. (2010: 91).

when controlling for the type of school attended, children from dalit, adivasi and Muslim backgrounds show a lower ability to read and subtract. As Table 4.3 demonstrates, among children in private schools, 81 per cent of those from the forward caste can read a short paragraph as compared to 58 per cent of those from the dalit community. A similar difference has also been seen in government schools, i.e., 65 per cent as against 42 per cent.

Since parental education and income play an important role in shaping resources, access to private schools and tuitions, as well as a home environment that fosters learning, it is important to control for parental education in examining social differences in children's learning outcomes. However, even when controlling for income, parental education and family size, caste and religious differences in learning outcomes remain large (Desai et al. 2009a).

Given the limited research on what causes low levels of skill development among children from more vulnerable backgrounds, it is difficult to conclusively suggest remedies. However, the research that exists points to teacher indifference (towards) or outright discrimination (against

children from minority groups) as well as school policies, such as the medium of instruction being the state language rather than tribal languages or Urdu (Nambissan et al. 2002; PROBE Team 1999). Increasing reliance of schools on parental input may be another means through which generational disadvantage may persist. Parents with similar educational and economic backgrounds may still differ in their interpersonal, cultural and social skills of transferring educational and income gains onto to their children. This difference could lie between first-generation parents (dalits, Muslims, adivasis) with high income and education levels and, say, high-caste Hindu parents, with a tradition of good-quality education going back many generations in their families. No one can complain about the importance of involving parents in school governance. Parents are the best advocates for children and their involvement can only help children's education. However, there is a fine line between parental involvement in school governance and transferring some of the school responsibilities to the home. With the growing importance of homework in the Indian educational system, children who are first-generation learners are often

TABLE 4.3 Differences in Learning Outcomes, by School Type for Children Aged 8–11 Years (in per cent)

	<i>Private Schools</i> (Only Enrolled Children)		<i>Government Schools</i> (Only Enrolled Children)	
	<i>Read</i>	<i>Subtract</i>	<i>Read</i>	<i>Subtract</i>
All India	69	64	50	43
Forward Caste Hindu	81	78	65	55
OBC	69	64	53	45
Dalit	58	54	42	36
Adivasi	60	60	47	35
Muslim	55	49	41	38
Other Religions	82	81	76	76

Source: Desai et al. (2010: 93).

left without adequate support systems at home because parents themselves are not sufficiently educated to be able to help them. Since a vast proportion of first-generation learners are dalit, adivasi and Muslim children, excessive reliance on homework perpetuates this historic generational disadvantage.

PUBLIC POLICY IMPLICATIONS

It is well recognised by demographers that the largest improvements in life expectancy can be achieved by focusing on infant mortality rather than mortality reduction at older ages. Saving the life of one child adds about 70 years to his/her life, saving that of a 60-year-old may only add another 15. Similarly, reduction in educational inequality at the primary education stage can have a long-lasting impact and could be the most leveraged investment a society can make. However, Indian public policies are excessively focused on reducing inequalities in college education, possibly because interventions at younger ages are harder to identify and implement. Nonetheless, for a substantial reduction in educational inequality, we must focus on primary education. In order to do this, four types of activities are needed:

- (a) *Ensuring that educational policies do not inadvertently exacerbate pre-existing inequalities:* It is important to ensure that the RTE is implemented in a way that reduces the reliance on parental inputs or resources and increases the role of schools in providing education. In systems where a great deal of reliance is placed on homework and/or private tuitions, children whose parents are unable to provide the required supervision are likely to be left behind. A couple of RTE provisions may well have such unintended effects. First, the RTE requires that newly-enrolled children be placed in classes appropriate to their age, regardless of their skill level. Second, children cannot be retained in Classes I–VIII. This places a tremendous burden on the teacher. When coupled with the fact that children who start school late are often from dalit, adivasi or Muslim backgrounds, this may lead to lower skill growth among those who start out later than their classmates. A number of studies have suggested that overambitious curricula without concomitant support to teachers lead to low levels of growth in learning outcomes (Pritchett and Beatty 2012) and inappropriate placement is likely to place too high a burden on teachers. One of the ways of dealing with this challenge may be to have remedial training before or after school hours.
- (b) *Special programmes for children from disadvantaged groups:* Research suggests that children often lose ground during school vacations, particularly if they come from

families where reading materials are not available. Having special programmes during summer vacations and other holidays for children who are in danger of falling behind or need remedial classes can help alleviate some of these problems. Rayat Schools, an interesting programme in Maharashtra, has sub-schools attached to normal ones for children who have dropped out or fall behind. Additionally, programmes designed to keep girls in school that involve cash payment to parents on completion of Class XII could be extended to dalit, adivasi and Muslim children.

- (c) *Identifying specific problems faced by disadvantaged children in school:* Many studies are underway to identify the specific reasons for lower learning of disadvantaged children at school. Recent studies have shown that: (i) teachers are being indifferent to teaching these children and checking their class/homework; (ii) in case of shortages and even otherwise these children do not receive free books and uniforms like other children; (iii) other children in the class tease and trouble them discouraging them from attending school and teachers do not intervene most of the time; and (iv) these children are often made to sit separately in class, drink water from separate vessels or play in separate areas. Such discriminatory and exclusionary practices are highly demotivating and discouraging for the children and hence need to be identified and teachers and staff trained to not only be more sensitive but be pro-active in paying special attention to children from these groups.
- (d) *Better monitoring of existing programmes:* A number of existing programmes (such as the Mid-Day Meal Scheme) fail to deliver the intended benefits and services. The food distribution is found to be discriminatory with food not given or served in separate utensils or with separate seating arrangements (Thorat and Lee 2005). Increasing the involvement of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that focus on dalit, adivasi or Muslim issues in programme monitoring may ensure that benefits are appropriately distributed while raising the awareness level in the community about its educational needs.
- (e) *Research on school performance and teaching techniques:* Very little attention has been directed towards classroom processes that put some students at a disadvantage, or effective teaching techniques that can reduce the gap. For example, we know little about whether schools for only children from minority communities can remedy the educational disparity. A number of innovative programmes already exist. For example, schools have been set up by Navsarjan in Gujarat with specially designed curricula for dalit children. Evaluation of these curricula and monitoring of outcome may help inform larger educational reforms.

Evidence suggests that there are clearly a set of factors specific to children from minority communities which unless explicitly understood, specified and made part of the educational reform process, would make this new initiative less effective in delivering to children from these groups

and bridging the education, and eventually, income gap. In addition, the time and levels/standards at which these specific interventions are to be made is also important and need to be made part of the education reforms.

NOTE

1. The Hindu concept of 'purity and pollution' refers to the notion or idea that the lowest of castes are impure and any contact or

association with them is polluting for the castes higher than them in the stratification, and hence they are termed 'untouchables'.

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