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# Access versus integration: the benevolent undermining of an Indian desegregation policy

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## ABSTRACT

Efforts to desegregate schools have consistently been undermined by privileged parents finding ways to avoid undesirable schools. In some contexts, a more complex picture is emerging, where 'progressive' privileged parents choose 'diverse' schools but still reproduce segregation. We demonstrate how the desegregation aims of an Indian education policy are similarly undermined by seemingly well-intentioned privileged actors. India's Right to Education Act of 2009 requires private schools to educate disadvantaged children for free. The architects of this policy imagined that it would not only provide access to quality education for disadvantaged children, but also desegregate schools. Beneficiaries of the policy share the policymakers' vision of desegregation. However, various elite and middle-class actors prioritise access over integration, and assert that segregated classrooms may be in the best interests of underprivileged children. This highlights how desegregation policies can fail not just as a result of direct opposition but also through discourses of benevolence.

## KEYWORDS

Desegregation; class; education policy; school ethnography; India

## Introduction

One morning in August 2019, in the large hall at Arcadia, one of Lucknow's most expensive private schools, neatly uniformed six- and seven-year-olds sat fidgeting on the gleaming marble floor. Smartly attired parents and teachers perched on plastic chairs. On the stage, 14 tiny boys and girls lined up behind desks like news anchors were poised for a 'panel discussion' on inequality. After some songs, a video, various efforts to define equality and an exercise in fairly distributing toffees, a teacher asked, 'How do you feel about the children you see on the streets who don't go to school and must work, while you get to play and study?' 'Sad,' was the response. 'Why don't they go to school?', another teacher probed. 'Because they are poor,' a boy replied. 'What is our school doing?' the teacher continued. 'There is something our school is doing to make everyone equal'. She explained that Arcadia educates girls who come from families who can't afford school fees in an afternoon school called Asha. A small voice piped up from the stage: 'Why don't they come in the morning with us? Why only in the afternoon?'. 'Where

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would they fit? They can't fit if they all come in the morning. Also, the girls work in the morning,' was the Director of Arcadia's swift reply.

After the panel discussion, parents were invited to share their thoughts. A father said that in his time, people believed in sympathy, but his children were empathetic, and tried to put themselves in the other person's shoes. Another father spoke about how parents generally experience paying school fees as a burden, but with Arcadia, it never felt like that because the money went towards paying the fees of the Asha students, and in this way 'we are doing something for society as well'. The Director concluded by reflecting on how the transformative power of education needs to be harnessed to create change: 'The lessons of equality are as important as math or science'.

Curiously absent from the morning's discussions was the fact that the school is implementing a policy – Section 12(1)(c) of India's Right to Education Act – which entails underprivileged students studying for free in the same classrooms as fee-paying students. One aim of this policy is to ensure that children at elite private schools such as Arcadia are made aware of their own privilege. In this paper, we argue that while moral discourses of concern for the poor can be deployed, as they were that morning in Arcadia, in support of underprivileged children being educated, such discourses can also be used to assert that this should happen separately from privileged children.

The powerful discourse of equality that was evident at Arcadia that morning has been observed by scholars in elite schools in many contexts. Such discourses manifest in a range of practices that we call 'equality projects', including social justice pedagogy, which aims to educate privileged students to be aware of injustices and to feel empowered to address them, and 'community service' wherein students engage in volunteer or fundraising work with marginalised communities. In India, elite schools are also increasingly running 'outreach schools', separate schools for the underprivileged such as Arcadia's Asha (Ashley, 2005; Thapliyal, 2016). Often these equality projects entail 'performative altruism' (Chidsey, 2020), highly visible acts of doing good that legitimise the social and moral standing of the privileged. Equality projects in elite schools enable students to present themselves as good people and strengthen their college applications and curriculum vitae (Gaztambide-Fernández & Howard, 2013; Sriprakash, Qi, & Singh, 2017). Equality projects also enable schools to disavow their 'well-documented role in reproducing privilege' and instead present themselves as 'socially responsible institutions' (Kenway & Fahey, 2015, p. 112).

As a demand that all private schools ensure at least 25% of students are from underprivileged families, Section 12(1)(c) can be contrasted with such equality projects in elite private schools. Indeed, scholars have noted that elite Indian private schools' enthusiasm for outreach schools contrasts with their strong resistance to Section 12(1)(c) (Ashley, 2005; Sriprakash et al., 2017), a resistance that suggests 'the charitable urges' underpinning outreach schools 'have never extended as far as caste-class integrated institutions' (Thapliyal, 2016, p. 28). Arcadia is an important case study in this context as it not only runs an outreach school but is also implementing Section 12(1)(c). However, the disjuncture between a discourse of equality and a practice of privilege reproduction evident in the equality projects of elite private schools is reflected in the literature on desegregation too. Although Bonal and Bellei (2018) argue that 'privileged groups have always found ways to avoid undesirable schools' (p. 13), there is mounting evidence that a certain sector of privileged parents value 'diversity' and are choosing to send their children to

schools with a racially, ethnically and/or socio-economically mixed student body. In such contexts, segregation persists, but is reproduced through a complex tussle between valuing and resisting diversity, rather than through straightforward avoidance (Reay et al., 2008; Vincent, Butler, & Ho, 2017). In the United States, for example, White parents who claim to value the racial diversity of their child's school support school policies that result in children being 'streamed' into racially segregated classrooms within the school (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Tyson, 2011).

In this paper, we draw on ethnographic fieldwork conducted over several months in 2019–2020, to demonstrate that the tension between Arcadia's role in reproducing privilege and its identity as committed to social justice is reconciled through a particular narrative about Section 12(1)(c) – that underprivileged students suffer from an inferiority complex in these elite schools, and accordingly they should either be invisibilised in classrooms, or taught separately. For Arcadia, providing access to quality education for underprivileged children was the priority and integration risked feelings of inferiority. This perspective was shared by bureaucrats and members of civil society but contrasts with the aspirations of underprivileged parents whose children attend private schools under Section 12(1)(c). While they certainly desired access to the kinds of English-medium education provided at schools like Arcadia, they asserted that access without integration would result in feelings of inferiority and an inferior quality of education. We argue that narratives of benevolence serve to 'de-contest' segregation. A radical rights-based integration policy that aimed to tackle structures of privilege reproduction in schools is re-framed as an opportunity to 'uplift' individual children and their families through access to private schools.

### **Privatisation of schooling in India and the Right to Education Act**

In 2009, India passed the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, making education a fundamental right of every child. One element of the Act that has attracted significant public attention is Section 12(1)(c), which stipulates that all private schools must ensure that 25% of new entrants are from the 'Economically Weaker Section' and 'disadvantaged categories'. This enables underprivileged children to be educated in private schools without paying fees up until Class 8 (typically age 14).

Section 12(1)(c) emerges from a long history of hierarchy and inequality in an Indian education system that has its roots in colonisation (Seth, 2007). When a British system of education was introduced, access was initially limited to privileged groups who resisted the expansion of education for poor, low-caste children, including by stopping an early precedent to the 2009 Right to Education Act – the 1910–1911 Free and Compulsory Education Bills introduced by Gopal Krishna Gokhale (Rao, 2013). Following Independence, government investments in education were primarily targeted at tertiary education and significant progress towards the universalisation of education was not made until the 1990s (Thapliyal, 2016), a period that also saw rapid growth in the number of private schools and the proportion of children they cater for.

Today, nearly half of children in urban India attend private schools, many of which are low-fee private schools (LFPSs), charging fees of around INR500 per month (Kingdon, 2017). LFPSs attract low-income families with the promise of English-medium education but provide a quality of education whose superiority to a government school education

remains a matter of debate (Kumar, 2018; Srivastava, 2013). In an expanding high-fee schooling sector, schools that were established before Independence to serve the political elite and aristocracy are now competing with schools with international curricula catering to the new business and professional elite (Rizvi, 2014; Sriprakash et al., 2017), and (usually slightly less elite) schools affiliated to India's Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE). The result of these changes is a highly stratified and segregated school system that leaves socially disadvantaged groups in the lowest quality state schools (Chopra & Jeffery, 2005), while each private school generally caters to a narrow socioeconomic band because of differential fees and practices of screening and selecting pupils (Juneja, 2014).

Section 12(1)(c) of the Right to Education Act sought to address this hierarchised segregation. The policy specifically requires underprivileged students to be educated in the same classrooms as fee-paying students. In various official documents, the aims of Section 12(1)(c) are explained as follows:

Admission of 25% children from disadvantaged groups and weaker sections in the neighbourhood is not merely to provide avenues of quality education to poor and disadvantaged children. The larger objective is to provide a common place where children sit, eat and live together for at least eight years of their lives across caste, class and gender divides in order that it narrows down such divisions in our society. (Government of India, 2012, pp. 7–8)

The architects of Section 12(1)(c), thus clearly articulate the aims of the policy in terms of integration and not just access.

Unsurprisingly, given the long history of segregated schooling, there has been strong opposition to Section 12(1)(c) from the private sector, particularly from high-fee private schools whose exclusivity and profitability is threatened to a far greater degree than LFPs. In 2010, a group of private schools launched a Supreme Court case arguing that the Act unconstitutionally impinges on their right to run their schools without undue government interference. In 2012 the Supreme Court declared that the 25% quota was in the public interest and a reasonable restriction on private schools (*Society for Unaided Private Schools of Rajasthan v Union of India & Another*, 2012). However, many private schools continue to resist implementing the Act, resulting in a proliferation of court cases at the state and national level (Srivastava & Noronha, 2014), and likely contributing to the absence of Section 12(1)(c) from the 2020 National Education Policy. Although some states have started to fill a significant portion of Section 12(1)(c) seats, there have been many implementation and enforcement challenges, and some states have not implemented the policy at all (Government of India, 2017). In this context of private school resistance and state inaction, Arcadia is an ideal case study not because it represents a common approach to Section 12(1)(c), but rather because it is a rare example of an elite school running an outreach school and also implementing Section 12(1)(c).

## Method and context

This paper draws on an ethnography of three private schools in Lucknow, capital of Uttar Pradesh. Lucknow was chosen as the site for this research because Uttar Pradesh is implementing Section 12(1)(c) (not all states are), it is among those Indian states with the highest prevalence of private schooling, and has had the steepest growth in private

schooling (Central Square Foundation, 2020, p. 28; Kingdon, 2017, pp. 6–7). As direct opposition to Section 12(1)(c) was already well documented, we chose three schools whose principals described themselves as sincere in their efforts to implement the policy as effectively as possible. These principals said they gave admission to all underprivileged students who were allocated to their school by the government. In this paper, although we draw on interviews from all three schools when we discuss the views of parents whose children are beneficiaries of Section 12(1)(c), we provide a detailed case study of just one of the schools, which we call Arcadia, and introduce a second school, Little Blossoms, very briefly to provide some contrast.

Arcadia is located in an affluent area of town and has some of the highest fees in the city – around INR5000 per month. It is a large CBSE-affiliated school with multiple ‘sections’ in each class from Nursery to 12th grade. The school prides itself on its progressive values. It integrates children with disabilities into ‘mainstream’ classrooms and runs a separate Hindi-medium afternoon school for disadvantaged students on the same grounds, which we call Asha. This ‘outreach school’ long precedes the Right to Education Act and was an independent initiative of the school, not prompted by government policy.

Our fieldwork began in August 2019 and was disrupted in March 2020 by the global coronavirus pandemic. By this time, we had conducted a round of semi-structured interviews with principals and teachers (six from each school) and were part way through a second round of interviews with them. We had conducted a round of semi-structured interviews with parents (six Section 12(1)(c) beneficiaries and six fee-paying from each school), and with support staff (five from each school). The second author of this paper, Joyeeta, had conducted a round of classroom observation at Arcadia and Little Blossoms, which involved sitting for a few hours at a time over several days in pre-primary and junior school classes that included students who were Section 12(1)(c) beneficiaries. We also attended school events and teacher meetings. In addition to our research in and around the schools, we conducted key informant interviews with policy makers, academics, bureaucrats, politicians, development professionals, representatives from private school associations, journalists and activists, all of whom had been involved with Section 12(1)(c) in some way. Research was conducted in a mix of Hindi and English.

Class categories are particularly difficult to define in India (Donner & De Neve, 2011). Fee-paying Arcadia parents were government officials, professionals such as dentists, and successful businesspeople. Many of them had postgraduate qualifications and spoke fluent English. They have significantly more economic and cultural capital than the majority of the Indian population and for this reason the literature on elite schools is relevant. However, most self-identified as middle-class, reflecting the blurred boundaries between the middle-class and the elite (Baviskar & Ray, 2011; Jodhka & Naudet, 2019) and the fact that many had middle-class lifestyles by global standards. Although teaching is not a well-paid profession in India, class status is a selection criterion for teachers in upper middle-class schools (Gilbertson, 2014) and teachers at Arcadia generally had a high-earning spouse. Like Arcadia parents, then, teachers too belonged to middle-class and elite families. Because of the ambiguous boundaries between middle-class and elite, we use the term ‘privileged’ to describe Arcadia teachers and fee-paying parents wherever possible. To describe parents and children who were Section 12(1)(c) beneficiaries, we use terms such as low-income and underprivileged. We also refer to them as RtE parents and students to reflect local terminology, although we

acknowledge that this label is problematic because all students are impacted by the Right to Education Act and are arguably thus all RtE students. 'RtE' parents had occupations such as driver, daily-wage labourer and domestic cleaner. To qualify for Section 12(1)(c), these families must have a household income of less than INR100,000 per year or be from disadvantaged categories such as Scheduled Castes (Dalit, castes against whom untouchability was practiced) or Scheduled Tribes (*adivasi* or Indigenous people).

In terms of the policy context, patterns of state inaction and private sector opposition to Section 12(1)(c), described in the previous section, are evident in Lucknow too. The Uttar Pradesh government only began implementing the Act following pressure from civil society and has a poor record of reimbursing private schools for the RtE students they admit (Chandra, 2018; Right Walk Foundation, 2020). Furthermore, the world's largest school, City Montessori School, which has most of its branches in the city, has been embroiled in a series of court battles over its refusal to admit students under Section 12(1)(c) (Pandey, 2017). Although these rather clear-cut roadblocks to the implementation of Section 12(1)(c) are relevant context to our research, our focus has, for the most part, been on those who present themselves as committed to the successful implementation of this desegregation policy. Our aim is to demonstrate that a desegregation policy can be undermined not just by direct opposition but also by benevolence.

### **Caste-class benefaction**

The practices of privileged benefaction that we describe in this article emerge from long colonial and postcolonial histories. Local traditions including *seva* (service) and *dana* (giving) have intersected with global practices of charity, philanthropy and development (Watt, 2005). There has been a recent resurgence in elite and middle-class led civil society initiatives, embedded in notions of 'good citizenship' understood in terms of contributing to economic and social development (Irani, 2019; Subramanian, *in press*). The questions about education raised in this article are thus situated within a broader interrogation of the balance between public good and class reproduction in contemporary middle-class civic engagement (Baviskar, 2011).

Although we focus on class in this article, Uttar Pradesh has particularly large Dalit and Muslim populations and these identities have long been highly politicised in this state. Caste and class are intertwined such that upper-caste networks and practices often consolidate class privilege. We write of class in this paper because caste was invisibilised in the contexts of our fieldwork, but we acknowledge that discourses and practices of castelessness are themselves a mechanism through which caste privilege is reproduced (Deshpande, 2013; Subramanian, 2015). Further, the discourses of benevolence we describe in this paper have also been observed in the context of caste relations through concepts of *seva*. Such benevolence has been contested in Uttar Pradesh through politics of Dalit *samman/izzat* (pride) and equality, grounded in the language of rights (Ciotti, 2012). This caste politics has parallels in the ways RtE parents demand equality and respect, but privileged actors reframe relations in terms of benevolent patronage. Religion was spoken of more openly than caste during our research, with some Muslim parents expressing concern that private English-medium schools are Hindu spaces. But this is not an issue we have space to address here and is not particularly pertinent to the specific discourses of difference and equality described in this paper.



## Inferiority complexes

Studies of desegregation efforts in the US have shown that schools ‘operating with the best of intentions, can produce less than optimal results’ as contradictions emerge ‘in the daily interaction among school policy, everyday practice, and racial ideology’ (Lewis & Diamond, 2015, p. 13). Our research in Lucknow identifies a particular class discourse that underpins the contradictions between Arcadia’s ostensible commitment to equality and its limited support for desegregation – the notion that underprivileged students will suffer from an inferiority complex in elite schools. As with the racial ideologies associated with (de)segregation in the US (Lewis & Diamond, 2015, p. 145), part of the power of a discourse of inferiority complexes is that it appears compassionate.

A common narrative since the passing of the RtE Act has been concern that RtE students may not fit in at the private schools where they receive a free education. For example, in an article published in *The Hindu* just before the Act was passed, Kumaraswamy and Alok Mathur (2010) write that such children ‘would be faced with difficulties that stem from the contrast in social markers such as dress, possessions, parental profiles, etc’, which ‘could seriously affect the self-esteem of underprivileged students.’ Kumaraswamy and Mathur go on to suggest that it would be in the interests of RtE students for them to study in a separate school, and for only those who excel to be integrated into schools with fee-paying students.

Similar concerns about feelings of inferiority among RtE students were expressed frequently at Arcadia. One Arcadia principal explained that when the school was first informed about Section 12(1)(c), the main concern among teachers was that RtE children would develop negative feelings from seeing other students with things that their own families could not afford. Arcadia has dealt with this by trying to ensure that there are as few as possible moments in the everyday life of the school where class differences become visible. To avoid elite students bringing expensive stationery and opulent lunches to school, stationery is provided, and students are told to only bring ‘*roti sabzi*’ (bread and vegetables) in their lunchboxes. Across India, students bring sweets to school on their birthdays to distribute among classmates and teachers. To avoid this becoming an opportunity for status display, at Arcadia all students distribute the modest sweets provided by the school on their birthdays.

Apart from attempting to reduce visibility of differences, the teachers in the school also adopt a strategy of non-acknowledgement of differences. We heard the line ‘we don’t differentiate’ again and again in interviews with Arcadia teachers. In this excerpt from an interview with an Arcadia teacher, her repetitiveness about not differentiating illustrates how central this notion is to her self-presentation as a good teacher.

As a teacher, I don’t differentiate children. I forget *ki* [that] these are RtE children. If management does not tell me these are the RtE children, I do not know ... Actually, we teach all the students equally. We don’t differentiate. We don’t differentiate. *Matlab* [Meaning] it doesn’t come to my mind also *ki* [that] these children are RtE ... it doesn’t come at all. Because once we are teaching, we forget everything, so it doesn’t come at all in my mind.

Most teachers responded to our questions about dealing with differences between RtE and fee-paying students by insisting that differentiation does not occur because the children are too young to notice such differences (as it is a new policy, the oldest RtE students are still in primary school), and even the teachers forget which are the RtE children. Like



teachers in Sarada Balagopalan's (2009) research, Arcadia teachers suggested that discussing inequalities promotes divisiveness.

This concern for the distress felt by RtE children who study in proximity to more privileged children was not altogether unfounded. Our interviews with RtE parents suggest Arcadia teachers and school leaders were right to believe that RtE students and their families wanted a level of invisibility. Research with older RtE children contains confessions of insecurities (Sarin & Gupta, 2014), and RtE parents in our study shared some concerns about the potential insecurity their children might feel in elite private schools. However, the invisibilization approach also serves the interests of Arcadia.

According to Bonal and Bellei (2018), even fairly moderate school desegregation policies 'have faced enormous resistance from private schools, which feel threatened, given that their educational projects are based on homogenous communities' (p. 13). A 'we do not differentiate' approach enables Arcadia to operate as though they have a homogeneous upper middle-class student body. Teachers continued to imagine the school community as homogenous, often describing all families as coming from upper middle-class homes. This forgetting of RtE families was also evident one day during classroom observations when Joyeeta witnessed a normalising of middle classness by stigmatising working-class professions. The teacher teased students for behaving like barbers on one occasion and vegetable sellers on another, forgetting that for the RtE children these occupations would not be laughable. This image of homogeneity is helped by the fact that there are only one or two RtE students in each class, far fewer than the 25% mandated.

Arcadia's success in maintaining an image of upper middle-class homogeneity was evident in the fact that the fee-paying parents we interviewed were unaware that Arcadia was implementing Section 12(1)(c). The policy is no secret. It has been in force for ten years, stories about it appear in the newspaper periodically, and there is even a very popular Bollywood movie about it. But it is not something that Arcadia school leaders had actively drawn attention to prior to our research.

There was a contradiction, however, between the school policy of 'we do not differentiate' and the discourse of inferiority complexes. The school was bifurcated between the majority who asserted there was 'no differentiation' at all and the minority who contended that differentiation was so rife that segregation was preferable. One Arcadia principal, for example, said that: 'the RtE should not be mixed with the regular children, especially our school type of children because what we are doing a kind of injustice to them'. Another Arcadia principal reflected on the difficulties the school had experienced mainstreaming Asha students and asked, 'Why can't they make the government schools so robust and healthy that these children can go there?' and later asserted: 'In fact RtE students if they were to join our [Asha], I'm telling you they would flower. But nobody wants to put them in [Asha]. Why, I don't understand.' A fee-paying mother said 'RtE is fine. They should also be given equal opportunity to study', but 'it would be better to make a separate classroom for them'. A discourse of concern for the well-being of underprivileged students thus enabled Arcadia teachers, school leadership and fee-paying parents to maintain an image of 'good people' while making an argument for segregation. In the following section, we demonstrate how this support for segregation conflicts with the politics and aspirations of RtE parents.

## The politics and aspirations of RtE parents

The outreach school at Arcadia is key to shoring up a narrative of caring segregation. As we saw in the opening vignette, Arcadia teachers and leaders are very vocal about Asha. Many fee-paying parents we spoke to said that they chose the school in part because of its liberal values, and they felt good about the fact that their high fees were being used to fund Asha. However, in interview after interview, RtE parents rejected segregated classrooms. They did not apply to schools that had a reputation for teaching RtE children separately, and post-admission a common anxiety was that the school would discriminate against their children and teach them in separate classrooms.

There were several dimensions to RtE parents' concerns with segregated classrooms. They categorically identified the practice as rooted in discriminatory attitudes (*bhed bhav*). They worried that their children would feel humiliated at being taught separately on account of their parents not having paid their fees. For example, when asked about separate classrooms, an RtE mother commented: 'They'll come home and ask, "Why are we made to sit separately?"' There was also an assumption that if taught separately, their children would be provided an education of inferior quality. Another RtE parent said, 'There is this idea that if rich people come, teachers come', meaning that if only poor children are in a class, teacher absenteeism becomes an issue. These concerns are borne out by a vast body of research that shows that 'services for the poor are poor services' (Keefer & Khemani, 2004). In short, it was clear that integration was valued by RtE parents, and they saw segregation as a greater source of feelings of inferiority than integration.

RtE parents and other family members expressed a clear language of social right to dignity and legal right to an equal education. This was not an uncomplicated belief in social equality, however. An RtE father who was fiercely against segregated classrooms reported taking his child to play at a distant park to avoid the working-class children from their own locality. His description of the neighbourhood children resonated with middle-class critiques of working-class families with references to 'bad language' and substance abuse. His desire for desegregated classrooms could thus be read also as an example of aspiration for social mobility and a desire to adopt middle-class culture. Such aspiration was also evident in the value RtE parents attached to the fact that their children were studying in English-medium rather than Hindi-medium schools, something that was reiterated across interviews.

Both elements of RtE parents' desires for integration – a politics of rights and dignity and an aspirations for middle-classness – were rejected by middle-class and elite actors. Regarding aspiration, an Arcadia principal said: 'I don't understand why it has to be an English medium school ... They say select the college that suits you. Do not select the college that's supposedly good.' This is consistent with Leya Mathew's (2018) analysis of 'aspiration shaming' by middle-class actors who denigrate the desire for English-medium education among disadvantaged families as misguided and status-seeking. In our research, privileged actors went one step further and framed the relationship the underprivileged have with education as an uncomplicated desire for good infrastructure and teaching associated with private schooling, agnostic to concerns of social mobility through sharing space with middle-class children or being accorded social dignity and equal respect. This was most explicit during an interview with a

researcher from well-respected think tank in Delhi. She mentioned that some schools are educating RtE students in separate classrooms, a clear violation of the RtE Act, but asserted that this was not a major problem because low-income parents just want access to a better quality of education than they could hope for in a government school. In the following sections, we demonstrate that this prioritising of access over integration characterises both Arcadia's and the state's approach to implementing Section 12(1)(c).

### **From rights-based integration to benevolent access**

Along with 'inferiority complexes', a second benevolent discourse that justifies a less transformatory implementation of Section 12(1)(c) is the notion that only RtE students benefit. The architects of Section 12(1)(c) envisaged that the policy would have benefits not only for RtE students, but also for fee-paying students who would 'learn through their interaction with the children from families who haven't had similar opportunities, but are rich in knowledge systems allied to trade, craft, farming and other services' (Government of India, 2012, p. 8). The notes accompanying the Act make it clear that the teacher has a role in ensuring that RtE students can be learnt from:

The often voiced concern about how the 25% children from disadvantaged groups and weaker sections can cope in an environment where rich children exist can be resolved when the teaching learning process and teachers use these children as sources of knowledge so that their esteem and recognition goes up and they begin to be treated as equals.

The potential for RtE students to be sources of knowledge is a key rationale for the 25% ratio. The notes accompanying the Act assert that if the proportion of RtE students was lower, then 'their participation in classroom interaction will be neither strong nor sufficiently manifest to enrich the overall experiential learning taking place in any given subject area. Only a critical mass can play such a role'.

Rather than seeing RtE students as 'rich in knowledge', Arcadia teachers spoke about RtE students' poor language skills, the lack of support with homework from RtE parents, and (occasionally) their impolite manners, traits identified in other accounts of teachers' perceptions of underprivileged students in India (Sriprakash, 2013). There were strong parallels between their representations of RtE students and narratives of the 'culture of poverty' of Black students in the US (Lewis & Diamond, 2015, p. 145) as well as concerns about 'rough' working-class students expressed by privileged parents in the UK (Reay et al., 2007) and Australia (Vincent et al., 2017).

Arcadia teachers did not describe themselves as having a role in facilitating a process of reciprocal learning. By invisibilizing RtE children, the 'we do not differentiate' approach reduces the possibility that fee-paying children will learn from them as envisaged by the architects of the policy. Arcadia's no-differentiation approach places the burden of transformation on the RtE parent and student – they must adapt to the middle-class culture of the school – rather than the teacher – who must adapt her teaching to a more diverse classroom. Discussions with teachers, school leaders and fee-paying parents about whether RTE students 'fit in' were very focused on attributes of the RtE students and their families. The same critique that Sriprakash et al. (2017) direct at outreach schools in India applies here: 'success is when "they" become more like "us" – despite the

class closures and structural inequalities which counter such assimilation' (p. 1031). Absent is the possibility that private schools may need to change (including in ways that may not perfectly suit the privileged) to better cater for the underprivileged.

Most of the fee-paying parents at Arcadia did not see integration as a way for their children to learn from working-class children – 'I don't think there could be any benefit' – and some felt that integration could have negative effects for their children, expressing concerns like teachers' about language, behaviour and parental support. For example, one mother said she thought Section 12(1)(c) was 'a good step' but when asked specifically about integrated classrooms, she said 'As a parent? Honestly I would not want that'. She grappled with a tension between being a good citizen – supporting Section 12(1)(c) – and what she perceives to be good mothering – segregating her child from working-class children (see Reay, 2008, p. 1078 for examples of privileged parents expressing similar tensions in the UK). Teachers' and parents' deficit view of RtE students played a role in reframing Section 12(1)(c) as an act of benevolence with benefits only for the poor rather than a right with broad social benefits; as a policy that provides quality education for underprivileged children through access to private schools, rather than one that provides quality education for all children through integrated classrooms.

A brief comparison with another, albeit less elite, private school in Lucknow highlights the contrast between a focus on access and a focus on integration. 'Little Blossoms' has taken more RtE students – the full 25% – and runs separate after-school homework help classes free of charge for them. The school has made changes to ensure teaching caters to all students, they talk openly about Section 12(1)(c) and all fee-paying parents we spoke to were aware of the policy. Whereas Arcadia adopts a narrow vision of access which entails private schooling becoming available to underprivileged children, Little Blossoms also looks at adaptability – where the institution transforms to meet the needs of all students. Predictably, these changes appear to make middle-class parents uncomfortable; teachers report that the school has experienced middle-class flight.

The benevolent focus on access that characterises Arcadia's approach is not uncontested. The Director gave this explanation of her efforts to advise teachers on the approach they should adopt towards RtE and Asha students: 'I don't want this to be a charitable thing, that "oh these poor kids we're doing so much for them". I said "No, we can't have that attitude ... none of this condescending stuff" ... They should think of what to do with their unearned privilege'. She spoke also about the challenges of 'sensitizing' middle-class and elite teachers and students: 'Middle class upwards – in the wealth sense I'm using it – they're very insular and very upwardly mobile; so heck they're very thrilled with their privilege and want more'. Other research in elite schools has also shown that some teachers and school leaders recognise the risks of condescension, paternalism and self-interested CV-building in 'equality projects' (Chidsey, 2020, p. 727; Kenway & Fahey, 2015, p. 109). And yet these schools perpetuate practices of elite closure and privilege reproduction.

### **Access as state implementation strategy**

Arcadia is not unique in its emphasis on access rather than integration. The state has drawn private school teachers in as policy actors, framing them as key to ensuring students from different backgrounds can learn together and from each other. However,

the state has made no provision for training teachers to take on these more diverse classrooms, leaving them with few resources and no public language to describe their predicament. Teachers we spoke to at Arcadia knew very little about RtE – its aims, who was eligible, etc. – and across the three schools, teachers who had recently completed their Bachelor of Education reported that Section 12(1)(c) had barely been mentioned in their training.

Some bureaucrats similarly put the emphasis on access rather than integration when discussing Section 12(1)(c), and this shaped their response to enforcing the policy. For example, one bureaucrat we spoke to in Lucknow described the overarching aim of Section 12(1)(c) as ‘greater access’. We asked about integration, and she replied ‘Yes of course that’s there, but access comes first.’ Because she saw access as the most important goal of the policy, she was not overly concerned about schools that taught RtE students separately: ‘Ideally we would want them to be assimilated and in the same classrooms. But in any case, despite the fact, they’re getting access and getting access to good schools, good teachers’. She was similarly willing to look the other way when schools only took a few students, rather than ensuring that at least 25% of their new entrants’ classes were RtE students as stipulated in the policy. When we asked her whether it is up to schools to self-report how many seats they have available for RtE students, she responded ‘Yes. And we all know that what they report is not true. But we have to get them going.’

The prioritising of access over integration that characterises both Arcadia’s and the state’s approach to implementing Section 12(1)(c) undercuts the moral imperative of desegregation by suggesting that the underprivileged are indifferent to it, much as the ‘inferiority complex’ thesis suggests that underprivileged families actively reject desegregation. In both cases, a veneer of benevolent concern for the underprivileged masks the appropriation of their voices to endorse privilege reproducing practices. Sriprakash et al. (2017) contend that particular ‘uses of equality’ in elite private schools ‘can “block hearing” about alternative political/economic arrangements for egalitarian social change’ (p. 1023). We argue that a particular vision of equality – characterised by access rather than integration – evident not just in our one elite school case study school, but also in the media and in the discourse and practice of bureaucrats, ‘blocks hearing’ about the significance of a ‘critical mass’ of 25%, such that continued segregation rather than more thorough implementation appears to be the more viable solution to the problem of the ‘inferiority complex’.

## Conclusion

In running an outreach school and implementing Section 12(1)(c), Arcadia does more than most elite private schools towards educating the underprivileged. Arcadia deploys exemplary strategies to ensure RtE children are not visibly different in the classroom. The school also continues to revise its approach to RtE implementation – in December 2019, several months into our fieldwork, Arcadia made Section 12(1)(c) publicly visible in a way that we had not observed previously when a skit in the school’s annual function explored the challenges faced by an RtE student. However, as Leya Mathew and Ritty Lukose (2020) contend, ‘The seduction of the moral is its alleged disregard for the material in a context of heightened commodification, while the challenge of the moral lies in relocating it outside the sphere of benevolence and back in the politics of material and

symbolic redistribution’ (p. 702). Arcadia distinguishes itself from other elite private schools by prioritising public good over private profit. They actively keep the conversations on class inequality alive among their students, but primarily through the lens of benevolence, and the outreach school lends itself to this vision better than the desegregated classrooms mandated by RtE. The relative silence in the school on RtE and the vision it espouses – of middle-class children having much to learn from RtE children – to some extent robs Section 12(1)(c) of its socially transformative potential, reducing it to a policy for access instead of desegregation.

In this paper we have demonstrated that although desegregation was clearly a central aim of Section 12(1)(c) and important to RtE parents, various privileged actors express concern for and think and speak on behalf of the underprivileged in ways that disrupt this aim. Privileged actors articulate two key benevolent discourses: (1) that it is most suitable to teach the underprivileged child separately from the privileged child as the latter are too different, and (2) that the RtE child must be treated the same as privileged students, a strategy by which the underprivileged child is effectively invisibilised. While these might seem like contradictory positions, both are unified in opposing the ideal of desegregated classrooms with reciprocal learning. Multiple rationales are marshalled to support these positions – by arguing that access to private schools and quality education is more important than integration, and by asserting that segregated classrooms prevent the underprivileged student developing an inferiority complex. Globally, private schools are variously stereotyped as overtly elitist, driven exclusively by profit and with no concern for social justice or as efficient solutions to educating the poor that increase parental choice and reduce the government’s schooling monopoly (Rooks, 2020). Such stereotyping prevents recognition of the more complex processes that are also at play, where seemingly progressive pro-poor schools reproduce inequality while appearing to tackle it.

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