Development and Change
Published on behalf of the Institute of Social Studies, The Hague

The Social Contract and India's Right to Education

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ABSTRACT

India's 2009 Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act presents an idealized social contract which assigns roles to multiple actors to uphold a mutual duty, or collective responsibility, to secure children's access to a quality school education. This article explores how the social contract assumed by the RTE Act misrepresents the conditions required to enact mutual responsibilities as well as actors' agreement to do so. Qualitative data from Bihar and Rajasthan show how state actors, parents, community groups and teachers negotiate and contest the RTE Act norms. The analysis illuminates the unequal conditions and ever-present politics of accountability relations in education. It problematizes the idealization of the social contract in education reform: it proposes that if the relations of power and domination through which 'contracts' are entered into remain unaddressed, then expressions of 'mutual' responsibility are unlikely to do other than reproduce injustice. It argues that policy discourses need to recognize and attend to the socially situated contingencies of accountability relations, and that doing so would offer an alternative pathway towards addressing structural inequalities and their manifestations in education.

INTRODUCTION: EDUCATION, ACCOUNTABILITY AND THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

Ideas of 'accountability' have become central to policy and research on improving primary education systems across the global South (Gorur, 2017; Yan, 2019). Within the field of education and international development, there has been a discernible shift from understanding accountability as resting with single actors or institutions (such as teachers or schools) to

The authors thank the Economic and Social Research Council and Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office, UK, for funding the RAISE project under the Raising Learning Outcomes Programme (Grant No. ES/P005802/1). They are grateful to the RAISE teams in Rajasthan and Bihar, with particular thanks to Rahul Mukhopadyay, Preeti Mishra and Priyanka Saxena for their leadership in the field, and to all the researchers for undertaking data generation and contributing to the interpretation of findings. They also thank the journal's anonymous reviewers for their detailed and constructive comments.

Development and Change 53(4): 888–911. DOI: 10.1111/dech.12715

foregrounding 'systems thinking' in educational reform, which recognizes the complexities of multiple interacting components of the education system (Bruns et al., 2011; Education Commission, 2016; Ndaruhutse et al., 2019). That is, there is recognition in policy discourses and among scholars that education systems are constituted by students and teachers, parents, communities, interdependent actors and institutions in civil society, private sectors, governments and international organizations, who are enmeshed in, respond to, and produce, different conditions and outcomes of learning (see, for example, DFID, 2010; Education Commission, 2016; GoI, 2009; Gorur, 2017; McGee and Gaventa, 2011; Pritchett and Pande, 2006; Yan, 2019).

Embedded and sustained within this turn towards systems thinking in global education policy discourses are, however, normative expectations of actors' buy-in to, and responsibility within, particular pathways of reform. This is exemplified in the influential 2017–18 UN Global Education Monitoring Report (GEMR) on 'Accountability in Education: Meeting Our Commitments', which posits that since 'Education is essentially a shared responsibility' (UNESCO, 2017: 6), 'ensuring inclusive, equitable, good-quality education is a collective enterprise in which all actors make a concerted effort to meet responsibilities' (ibid.: 6–7). The same argument and expectations are found in Indian education policy discourse (GoI, 2009).

Although the interdependence and responsibilities of multiple actors are invoked in current discussion of educational accountability, there is relatively little debate about the normative assumptions made by discourses of 'responsibility'. The working of education systems tends to be conceptualized as the sum of different actors' efforts, whose 'genuine commitment' is essential to accountability (see UNESCO, 2017: xiv). This problematically obfuscates the politics of education reform. By assuming that specific 'commitments' are universally agreed, and that goals are shared, this way of understanding a 'systems' approach erases the possibility of differing, contestable and contingent understandings of the project of formal schooling that the education 'system' needs to account for and be shaped around.

Such preoccupation with the alignment and incorporation of multiple actors in education may go some way in explaining why, even after the turn towards 'systems thinking', a functionalist stance persists within influential research by accountability theorists and policy makers in the field. This stance tends to decontextualize specific 'components' of education systems — typically the practices of differing actors — and to analyse the performance of one such 'component' (very often, teachers) in relative isolation from other actors in the system (see, for example, Bruns et al., 2011; Muralidharan, 2012; Muralidharan and Sundararaman, 2011; Panda, 2016; Pritchett and Murgai, 2006; Yan, 2019). Then, 'deviation' from presumed norms of 'responsibility' is cast as a deficit of particular actors — a lack of commitment or an absence of responsibility — which shores up mechanisms for external monitoring and control within the depoliticized, technicist

discourse of improved governance in the neoliberal 'development' frame (Fischer, 2019; Gorur, 2017; Yan, 2019).

This article departs from this tradition and, in contrast, focuses on the normative assumptions of accountability that underpin purposive reform effort and the situated social relations which mediate conditions of 'responsibility' for children's education. It adopts a relational approach which foregrounds the interdependence of multiple actors — akin to a systems-thinking approach — but which, significantly, does not assume alignment or consensus among them. Instead, the article is alert to the contestations of norms and interests that constitute education systems and may lead to divergences rather than alignments between actors in respect of policy goals. These contestations — the ever-present politics of reform — offer crucial insights into the workings of power within education systems that current framings of 'accountability' in global education policy discourses too often overlook, much less address.

The article is based on research conducted within a larger research programme on Raising Learning Outcomes (RLO) funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.[1] The third call of the RLO programme invited research on 'accountability' in education, a focus that is itself representative of the turn towards understanding the system elements, contextual factors and dynamics that shape the delivery of education in the global South.

The research focused on India's Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (hereafter the RTE Act) (GoI, 2009), which provides an illuminating case study of accountability relations and insights into how a nationally mandated framework — a signal legislation that explicitly specifies norms for elementary schooling — is reshaped, contested and enacted in specific contexts.[2] Furthermore, the RTE Act's very recognition of education as a *right* compels consideration of the extent to which the normative moral force that it relies on is assumed and upheld in such contexts. In our reading, the RTE Act articulates a 'social contract' insofar as it explicitly sets out obligations for differing groups of education system actors to act collectively, with differential but mutual obligations, to realize education as a fundamental right. Although the state, as legal duty bearer, is ultimately responsible for educational provision, the RTE Act specifies duties and responsibilities for parents, schools, teachers, non-state agencies and local authorities. We thus see the RTE Act as an idealized contract of mutual duty that brings actors into accountability relations with each other.

In the broadest sense, a social contract is an agreement, implicit or formally articulated, that establishes normative obligations for participation within a social (in this case education) system. The notion of shared

1. For full RLO project details, see: https://raise.leeds.ac.uk/
2. The RTE Act defines 'elementary education' as education from the 'first class to eighth class' (GoI, 2009: Sec. 2).

responsibility that underpins the idea of a social contract has prompted recognition of the potential, for example, to reframe the global development agenda in contractarian terms (Birdsall, 2008), including in the education sector (UNESCO, 2021); to sharpen analysis of state–society interactions (see critical discussion in Loewe et al., 2021); and to deepen social accountability within social protection interventions (Hickey and King, 2016). For our analysis of accountability relations, we draw on literature on social contract theory from within political philosophy and, specifically, the proposition — which has emerged from interventions by feminist and critical race theorists — that an idealized social contract *misrepresents* the mutuality of agreement and equality of participation of actors and may thus perpetuate unjust outcomes. For example, Carol Pateman's (1988) *The Sexual Contract* draws attention to how original social contract theory, developed by Grotius, Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, philosophers of the liberal state in the 17th and 18th centuries, excluded women and has been used to uphold oppressive patriarchal orders. Charles Mills (1997) builds on Pateman's work in his book *The Racial Contract* to argue that systems of racial domination have denied all people from being considered full moral and political persons and thus the social contract does not proceed on equal participation. Mills suggests that it is precisely by obfuscating these systems of domination within idealized theories of flattened, 'mutual' obligation that a social contract perpetuates systems of domination. This is, in his terms, its 'chronic injustice' (Mills, 2014: 27).

These critiques of the social contract provoke reflection on the assumptions of 'responsibility' made within policy and research on accountability in education in India and beyond. They suggest that any concept of accountability that proceeds on an idealized duty of actors, and then also envisages that these actors work unproblematically together, not only misrepresents the conditions required to enact the contract's specified responsibilities, but also misrepresents actors' agreement to do so. The implicit assumption of symmetry of power in an idealized social contract does not reflect the complex social relations that shape educational access, participation and exclusion. Indeed, the flattening out of power in discourses of 'responsibility' arguably perpetuates an assimilative logic in education policy through which 'access' to education is equated to being 'incorporated' into a dominant schooling system, even if this incorporation has adverse effects on marginalized communities (Dyer, 2012).

Idealized notions of the right to education are, this article proposes, almost certainly bound to fail if the social inequalities, exclusions and dispossessions that condition their enactments are not squarely addressed within their very frameworks. How, then, can discourses of accountability address more fully the situated social relations and asymmetries of power that mediate responsibility and mutuality in education? To explore this question, the article examines the contract of mutual obligations around India's right to education, as envisaged in the RTE Act, and how it is mediated in

specific contexts. In highlighting the conditionalities and negotiations of the RTE Act, we do not argue against rights-based approaches to education per se. Rather, the article cautions against the misrepresentations of mutual agreement and responsibility that are too commonly found in education development discourse, specifically in literature that invokes accountability in functionalist terms, or simplistically identifies implementation gaps. It contests this stance in its argument that such appeals to an idealized social contract fail to see the conditionalities of policy enactment, not least owing to the lived realities of social and educational inequalities, and thus fail to be themselves accountable to such injustices.

How the RTE Act frames the contract, by setting out the duties and responsibilities of state officials, teachers and parents, is examined next. We then explain the research approach and empirical context and go on to show how the responsibilities that the RTE Act sets out are mediated in specific contexts, illustrating how differently configured but ever-present relations of power shape accountability relations and challenge the RTE Act's notions of mutuality.

RESPONSIBILITY IN INDIA'S RIGHT TO EDUCATION ACT

India has a long history of constitutional commitments, policies and programmes acknowledging the right to education, yet the RTE Act, ratified in 2009, is the first central government legislation to confer this right by law. It legislates that 'Every child of the age of six to fourteen years shall have a right to free and compulsory education in a neighbourhood school till completion of elementary education' (GoI, 2009: Sec. 3.1).

The 2009 RTE Act was part of a series of welfare rights legislations in the early 2000s; it was preceded by the Right to Information Act and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in 2005, and the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act in 2006. The rights legislations emerged through the agency of social movements, judicial activism and civil society organizations (Ruparelia, 2013) in a situation of increasing inequality, democratic widening and depoliticizing economic growth, and with governments unable to sufficiently address basic challenges of livelihoods and social safety nets (Jacob, 2016).

Elementary education was made a shared duty of central and State governments in 1976, when its status changed from being a 'State subject' to being a 'concurrent subject' of the federal polity (Dyer, 2000). Reflecting this status, the RTE Act specifies financial and programmatic responsibilities for central, State and local governments (GoI, 2009). For example, the Act requires governments to develop and enforce standards of training for teachers, to guarantee timely prescription of curriculum, to ensure and monitor admissions, attendance and completion of elementary education, and to oversee the functioning of schools within their jurisdiction

(ibid.: Sec. 7–8). The state's duty to provide universal access to education not only in terms of infrastructure but also with respect to enabling participation is signalled through the RTE Act's emphasis on providing 'neighbourhood schools' and ensuring disadvantaged children 'are not discriminated against and prevented from pursuing and completing elementary education' (ibid.: Sec. 9).

Reflecting the notional social contract discussed above, the RTE Act places responsibility for realizing the universal right to education not only on state actors, but also on parents and guardians, schools and teachers, and School Management Committees (SMCs) (GoI, 2009). For example, it states that 'it shall be the duty of every parent or guardian to admit or cause to be admitted his or her child or ward … to an elementary education in the neighbourhood school' (ibid.: Sec. 6). In a wider context of the growth of school markets, the RTE Act's requirement that private unaided schools reserve a quarter of their seats for disadvantaged children without charging fees (which are recouped through state subsidy) means that, despite its emphasis on 'neighbourhood schools', parents are responsible for securing access to schools via mechanisms of consumer 'choice' (Mehendale et al., 2015). Further duties of parents and guardians specified by the RTE Act include being active participants in their child's schooling via SMCs.[3] SMCs are given statutory powers to monitor schools' performance and utilization of government grants, and to prepare and recommend school development plans (GoI, 2009). As Maithreyi and Sriprakash (2018: 360) suggest, the RTE Act calls on parents to have a threefold duty, positioning them as: '(a) agents who should be morally compelled to send their children to school; (b) participants of educational management and monitors of school functioning; and (c) rational consumers who are required to secure their educational "rights" through school choice'. In doing so, 'access' to education is not conceived solely as a matter of state 'provision', but also as contingent on parents being active participants and consumers of schooling.

The RTE Act also sets out the responsibilities of teachers and schools, and standards for teachers' employment. It enshrines in law a prescribed student–teacher ratio, minimum qualifications required for teacher appointments and working hours for teachers. The social and pedagogical duties it lays out for teachers include maintaining regularity and punctuality in attending school; conducting and completing the curriculum within a specified time; assessing the 'learning ability' of each child and supplementing additional instructions as required; and working closely with families and communities to ensure student enrolment, access and regularity of attendance (GoI, 2009: Sec. 24.1). The RTE Act makes clear that teachers have manifold responsibilities, not only within classrooms, but also 'other duties

3. Section 21 of the RTE Act specifies that at least three-quarters of SMC members should be parents, of whom 50 per cent should be women, with proportionate representation for disadvantaged groups (GoI, 2009: Sec. 21).

as prescribed' (ibid.), which have historically involved administrative work of the state, although the RTE Act now prohibits the deployment of teachers for non-educational purposes (ibid.). It also states that 'a teacher committing default in performance' of duties shall be liable to disciplinary action (ibid.: Sec. 24.2). Researchers of Indian schooling have long critiqued policy discourse for constructing teachers as 'implementing agents' of state interests against their declining social status, professional de-skilling and intensifying systems of monitoring and control (Batra, 2009; Majumdar and Mooij, 2011). This functionalist stance is underlined by the RTE Act's articulation of teachers as key 'implementing agents' of the right to education, called upon to have obligations or duties that are both numerous and enforceable.

When the responsibilities of the state, parents and teachers are read together, the RTE Act lays out the 'collective' responsibility or mutual duty required across the education system. In its approach, the right to education in India is made contingent on multiple actors fulfilling specified duties. In this sense, the RTE Act can be read as a social contract that delineates idealized 'roles' and 'functions'. This signal legislation, importantly, acknowledges that schooling systems are co-constituted, but the appeal to 'ideal' notions of collectivity elides other forms of relationship, interdependence or mutuality — as well as constraints, inequalities and contestations. It is through the reification of a supposed collective responsibility — a contract which sets out who should do what under the guise of mutuality — that the RTE Act functions in unequal ways. Given the deeply structuring regimes of social and material inequality in India, as elsewhere, 'obligations' are not entered into under just or necessarily consensual terms; thus the myth of the social contract as a 'mutual' agreement is revealed. At the same time, responsibility is decontextualized and individualized, reducing any shortfalls in the schooling system to a lack of responsibility among individual actors or to a 'gap' in implementation. We pursue this argument in the sections below.

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND APPROACH

The RAISE research project is a mixed-methods, multi-site study of accountability relations in elementary schooling in India. It examines how norms for educational provision, as set out in India's RTE Act, are reshaped as they interact with competing ideas and conditions across and within four scales of the education system: families, communities, schools and the educational bureaucracy. Across these four scales, we studied accountability relations that concerned educational access, participation and monitoring. This article focuses on the theme of access, defined as a process by which all social groups, irrespective of caste, class, gender and other social markers, have equal and equitable opportunities to utilize school without any hindrance or barrier. Our definition mirrors the 'accessibility' dimension of the

'4A' rights framework (Availability, Accessibility, Acceptability, Adaptability) proposed by Katerina Tomaševski (2001), and particularly its concern with 'discriminatory denials of access' (ibid.: 12) to compulsory education. Specifically, here we are concerned with the social relations that shape the possibilities for a child's presence in school — the 'regular attendance' that the RTE Act envisages (GoI, 2009: Sec. 24).

This study was carried out in the States of Bihar and Rajasthan. At State level, against India's average adult literacy rate of 74.04 per cent, Bihar averages 63.8 per cent (male 73.4 per cent, female 53.3 per cent); Rajasthan's average rate of 67.1 per cent is slightly higher, albeit still well below the national average, but the gender discrepancy is greater (male 80.5 per cent, female 52.7 per cent) (NIEPA, 2017).[4] In both States, approximately 5 per cent of children aged 6–13 are out of school. The transition rate from the primary stage (Grades 1–5) to the upper primary stage (Grades 6–8) in Bihar is 76.1 per cent — India's lowest (GoI, 2018) — compared with 91.6 per cent in Rajasthan. These statistics contradict the state's claim that 'the problem of access has been largely solved' for primary and upper primary schools (GoI, 2019: 65). Furthermore, enabling access to school is a pre-condition for, but no guarantee of, learning (Kaffenberger and Pritchett, 2021). In both States, while low learning levels have been reported annually for over a decade in the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), the 2018 (pre-COVID-19) ASER reported a deterioration in learning outcomes in the primary grades (ASER, 2019). Fewer than 40 per cent of Grade 5 students in government schools across both States could read a Grade 2 level text, while over three-quarters of all Grade 5 students could not do basic (Grade 2 level) arithmetic operations (ibid.).

Both Bihar and Rajasthan have a high proportion of groups recognized by the state as India's most socially and educationally disadvantaged populations. In Bihar, 15.72 per cent of the population is classified as Scheduled Caste (SC), 1.3 per cent as Scheduled Tribe (ST), and 17.6 per cent are Muslim; in Rajasthan, 17.8 per cent of the population is classified as SC, 13.5 per cent as ST, and 9.0 per cent as Muslim (NIEPA, 2017). Children from these communities have the lowest rates of attendance and the highest rates of dropout from primary schools (NIEPA, 2017; UIS, 2016).

Our empirical research was carried out in Patna District in Bihar and Udaipur District in Rajasthan. Within each District, we drew up one urban and one rural cluster, informed by transect walks and open-ended interviews with key informants such as village leaders and school principals which added geographical and social nuance to data already in the public domain. Each cluster comprised six schools and the villages/neighbourhoods that access each school. The total sample comprised 24 schools

4. The official source draws on the 2011 census (GoI, 2011).

(6+6 = 12, x 2 = 24), purposively constructed to include government, low-cost private, NGO and religious provision.

The analysis in this article draws on qualitative data generated between October 2018 and August 2019. We conducted semi-structured interviews with teachers and principals of all schools in each cluster, village and community leaders in school locations, and representatives of private school management and the state education bureaucracy, particularly District and sub-District officers. We observed Grade 2 and Grade 5 classrooms in each school for three days and talked with teachers and parents about what we observed; we attended formal school meetings and events in the community such as enrolment drives; and we carried out focus group discussions (FGDs) with parents in all the clusters. Data generated by these methods were discussed and triangulated by each field team and then with the full project team, in an iterative process of reflection, data generation and qualitative analysis.

In the rural cluster of Patna District, parents are typically landless labourers, with unstable livelihoods in agriculture and the service sector. They belong to different caste groups that largely fall into the SC and Other Backward Classes (OBC) categories. Generally, fewer than 20 per cent (and sometimes no) students from 'general' castes attend government schools in this cluster. The urban cluster is in a commercial and residential neighbourhood with several informal settlements (*bastis*) and market areas, where most of the adult population are in the informal service sector. One prominent social grouping in the cluster is the Musahar community, which constitutes 31 per cent of Bihar's SC population (and among whom the average literacy rate is below 20 per cent, with the female rate a maximum of 2 per cent; Singh, 2018).

In Udaipur District, in Rajasthan, schools in the rural cluster serve a predominantly ST (Gameti community) population (52 per cent), alongside 7 per cent SC (predominantly Meghwals), Rajput, Brahmin and OBC communities. Most parents are either subsistence and dairy farmers or they work as labourers in agriculture and the service sector of nearby towns. Many men migrate out to access work in construction and textile industries in neighbouring Gujarat. The urban cluster is a large, heterogeneously populated area that falls across three wards of Udaipur and includes several informal settlements. The fathers of children using schools in this cluster mostly work as rickshaw drivers, daily wage labourers, or vegetable vendors, and mothers work as domestic maids, home-based handicraft workers, or in tailoring.

ACCESS TO SCHOOLING AND RELATIONS OF RESPONSIBILITY IN SOCIAL CONTEXT

This section discusses how the responsibility of securing children's access to schooling was conceptualized and negotiated in the specific contexts of

the research sites. While the RTE Act is, as we argued above, based on the idealized duties of actors, the empirical data show how these duties are continually called into question, reworked and contested. Access to schooling is mediated by parents, teachers, school administrators and community groups through complex relations of incentivization and exclusion, investments and discrimination, and authority and expectations. We see these relations not as anomalies of the education system but as constitutive of its everyday workings.

The Responsible State: Incentivization and Exclusion

The RTE Act sets out the state's legal obligation to ensure universal access to education to all children aged 6–14. Although India claims to have attained near-universal enrolment in primary education (95 per cent, according to data from the 2016–17 Unified District Information System for Education or UDISE[5] (MHRD, 2019; see also NIEPA, 2017), regular attendance and equitable participation in schooling remain uneven.

A key means by which the state had been enacting its 'responsibility' in the eyes of research participants was through 'incentivizing'. Incentives, in the form of various programmes and schemes ('facilities') specifically for marginalized communities, were seen to address barriers to access in material ways, as a discussion among members of a women's self-help group in a rural village in Patna suggests:

> A woman said that the fact that government provided all the facilities to send children to school has had an influence. Girls receive scholarships; food is made available at the school. [Another] woman told us that her children get money for uniform and books from the school. Another woman said that money for a bag was recently provided to them. The school had asked them to use the money to buy school bags for their children.[6]

In our field sites, as is reported across India (ASER, 2019), attendance and participation of girls continue to lag behind those of boys. While the average national drop-out rate for girls at primary level, at 3.88 per cent, is decreasing, it increases at upper primary (4.60 per cent) and reaches 16.88 per cent at secondary level (GoI, 2018). Our participants reported that targeted government incentives for girls have had a noticeable impact on girls' enrolment and attendance. For example, a government primary school teacher in Patna, reflecting on 16 years of service, said: 'Girls' enrolment has increased especially due to government facilities like increase in scholarship

5. Initiated in 2012–13, UDISE integrates the District Information System for Education for elementary education with the Secondary Education Management Information System (SEMIS). UDISE covers more than 1.5 million schools, 8.5 million teachers and 250 million children.
6. Notes from interviews, community FGDs, rural cluster, Patna District, 4 January 2019.

money to INR 1,300. Schools have not just increased enrolment of girls, but also attendance'.[7]

The widespread acknowledgement that the state is actively providing numerous 'incentives' to encourage educational enrolment and attendance led some participants to point out that this not only offered material support to children and families, but had also generated a common 'awareness' of schooling. Members of another women's self-help group, this time in an urban community of Patna District, reflected on this change: 'Now it is not like that, everyone is aware of education'. Another woman added, 'government is providing everything, so why should we send our girls to sweep, why not send them to school?'.[8]

These remarks express a widespread awareness of schooling, recognition of the facilities offered by the state to enable enrolment, and an apparent consensus around the universal project of mass education. The state is constructed in these participants' discourses as socially protective and making investments in particular sections of communities that have been systematically excluded from schooling, notably girls and children from poorer families. Some parents, however, offered a sharp critique of the state's strategy of improving 'enabling conditions' in this way, challenging the use of 'incentives' as a means to achieve buy-in to poor-quality government schools. In an FGD in Patna District, parents whose children attended low-fee private schools called government incentive schemes to support school access 'propaganda': '[The parents] felt that it was a "state propaganda" to keep the people busy with incentive schemes so that people don't question the quality of education. [The government] does not want the people to put their mind to education. Bicycles, clothes and food are all provided for free. Government has made everyone useless'.[9] Here, we see how parents who were not using the government schooling system were critical that the state's 'responsibility' to provide not just access to schooling, but good 'quality' education was being side-stepped through its emphasis on incentives for enrolment and attendance.

Pursuing this line of argument, we find that while the state is active in setting out numerous incentives to encourage access to schooling, access is conditioned by children and their families being able to avail themselves of particular schemes and programmes — and not all of them can. Systematic discrimination, namely entrenched casteism, excludes communities from participating equally in the supposed social contract in order to 'realize' their rights. For example, the secretary of an SMC of a rural school in Patna District described how members of the Musahar community are unable to access incentive programmes such as Direct Cash Transfers (DCTs)

7. Interview, government school teacher, urban cluster, Patna District, 8 April 2019.
8. Interviews, community FGD with women's SHG, urban cluster, Patna District, 16 April 2019.
9. Notes from interviews, community FGD, urban cluster, Patna District, 16 April 2019.

for purchasing school uniforms, textbooks, bicycles, etc: 'Most needy students don't avail of DCTs … most of [the] disadvantaged sections don't have [bank] accounts, and as a result, don't get money. Especially the Musahar community are worst affected by DCT. Bank officers do not cooperate to open accounts [as] banks don't want to open a bank account for very small monetary transactions'.[10]

The incentives-based system that the state relies on to enable access, and which translates state responsibilities into individual buy-in to the state's schemes, shores up social inequalities that reproduce educational exclusion. This was made clear by a teacher who had been working in a rural government school in Patna District for six years: 'Government asks for bank account, Aadhaar card,[11] now you tell me, how many families from lower caste will have bank account and now government wants bank account for their kids. There are many families in Musahar community who do not go to bank. … 80 per cent of Musahar children do not get the government money'.[12]

The head teacher of a low-fee private school in rural Udaipur District also pointed to the difficulties of producing documentation that is 'acceptable' to the government, this time in relation to receiving state reimbursement for the 25 per cent of places that the RTE Act mandates all private schools reserve for children from the 'economically weaker and disadvantaged groups in the neighbourhood' (GoI, 2009: Sec. 12.1). The head teacher stated that the money for this 25 per cent of admissions has not been paid for two years since the government added the rule that school details must match up with the Aadhaar cards of the students. He said that 'authorities are striking out names even at small mistakes also. For correction in Aadhaar card, one has to go to up to [nearest town] and pay up to INR 250. Parents of these children neither have time nor money to get that done'.[13]

Financial incentive schemes and programmes, although aiming to mitigate the costs of schooling on families and promote educational choice, are only accessed by those able to produce Aadhaar cards, bank accounts and other such bureaucratic documentation. These state-mandated formalities for receiving incentives exclude many children, who are often the most disadvantaged; they are part of the 'red tape' of bureaucracy and structural violence that are widely experienced in India (Gupta, 2012), but have disproportionately adverse effects for the marginalized.

Furthermore, individualized conditionalities are built into the state's enactment of its responsibility for securing children's right to education.

10. Interview, SMC Secretary, rural cluster, Patna District, 4 January 2019.
11. The Aadhaar card is an identity card issued by the Unique Identification Authority of India to all citizens who have satisfied the verification process laid down by the Authority. Any individual, irrespective of age and gender, who is a resident of India, may voluntarily enrol to obtain their Aadhaar number. See: https://uidai.gov.in/what-is-aadhaar.html
12. Interview, teacher, rural cluster, Patna District, 7 December 2018.
13. Interview, head teacher, private school, rural cluster, Udaipur District, 5 December 2018.

Participants described how state-led incentives and cash transfers are conditional on a student's 'regular' attendance, referring to the state-mandated required attendance of at least 75 per cent of the academic year (see also Ghatak et al., 2016; Verma et al., 2014): 'If a child from a poor family comes regularly, then she can get the money for dress, books and scholarship. They will also get proper nutrition in the mid-day meal. Also, the ones who are regular will learn better than others'.[14]

The state sees itself as responsible for providing educational incentives to improve access, but these are, paradoxically, also dependent upon students' regularity of attendance. Financial and non-financial incentives for school enrolment and attendance are made conditional on students complying with the expectations of a 'regular' child that is implicit in the RTE Act. Attendance is assessed via the daily register, a record that determines whether a child fulfils the condition of regularity of attendance. Written evidence of learner presence at school, which, in itself, is often an unreliable source, serves as a proxy for parents' 'mutual' commitment; regularity of student attendance is a decontextualized metric, disconnected from the social context and, in our sites, the dominant relations of poverty and caste that give rise to marginality.

For children to attend schools, and to meet the expectation of regularity, there are many struggles to overcome. In our research sites, as across India, children were observed to be an integral part of family livelihood strategies, whether they earn an income or not. Children are often found working on farms, caring for cattle, engaged in agricultural work, or at home cleaning, collecting water and fuel or taking care of younger siblings. In Udaipur, a teacher who had been working in a rural government primary school for nearly 25 years, said: 'Here, the children come from poor families, they are children of labourers. They don't study at home. They are not regular in coming to school either. This is how the situation is in the village'.[15]

A state education official in Patna, who was a former head teacher with nearly 30 years of experience, reflected:

> [There are] only two kinds of people coming in to government schools; one is from *mazdoor* (daily labourers) people and the second is *majboor* (helpless) people … they are daily labourers, they don't have time to teach their children; they are going for work, so most of the time their children don't come to school; they stay at home, they do housework like cooking food, caring for siblings and other works. Because of this, the children are not coming regularly to school.[16]

Norms and expectations for school attendance and participation consistently overlook and erase these contexts and livelihoods in ways that, inevitably, perpetuate the 'access problem' (GoI, 2019) and call into question the RTE Act's projection of the 'responsible' state. Incentive programmes do not

14. Interview, head teacher, government school, urban cluster, Patna District, 4 April 2019.
15. Interview, teacher, rural cluster, Udaipur, 19 February 2019.
16. Interview, Block Resource Person, rural cluster, Patna District, 8 January 2020.

foreground the state's responsibility to provide quality schooling; rather, they incentivize parents' and children's requirement to participate socially in specific ways via schooling. This locates the persistent policy problem of school access with individuals, eschewing the 'mutuality' of responsibility idealized by the RTE Act.

The Responsible Parent: Educational Priorities in Contexts of Poverty

The RTE Act explicitly positions parents and guardians as responsible for sending their children to school. However, teachers, educational administrators and community leaders often constructed parents as unable to see the benefits of schooling and appropriately prioritize it. Their discourses of the state as making investments in schooling through its numerous incentive schemes and programmes tended to position parents as not reciprocating in their duties. The sense of misplaced parental 'priorities' was expressed, for example, by the head teacher of a rural government primary school in Patna, who had been in this post for 10 years: 'Here [in government schools], fathers go out to work. Mothers are usually housewives; they look after the household chores. Parents prioritize household chores over the education of their child. They would spend time in cooking, cleaning rather than getting their children ready for school. They don't care where their children go'.[17]

The discourse around lack of parental reciprocation had echoes at community level, too, as expressed for example by a male community leader — a landowner in a rural village in Udaipur — who placed the responsibility for children not attending schools squarely on the shoulders of 'careless' parents: 'Government is giving all; we do not have to pay for anything. Just send the children to school, yet people are not wise. When the government is doing so much, one should take advantage of it. It is not poverty; it is parents being careless'.[18]

Government officials would also often place the blame for irregular student attendance on parents, even while acknowledging that family livelihood strategies are important in shaping educational access. It is common, in this shifting of blame, to find that officials assume that parents lack 'awareness' of the importance of schooling — a discourse that, as we showed above, is not dominant among those closer to children's daily lives. For example, a District-level education officer of Bihar State emphasized that parents are responsible for student attendance, but that many lack an 'understanding' and 'awareness' of education: 'Livelihoods are the most important aspect for communities and that cannot be denied. There is still a lack of understanding about the importance of education … [and] a lack of awareness

17. Interview, Head Teacher, rural cluster, Patna District, 11 December 2018.
18. Interview, Community Head, rural cluster, Udaipur District, 28 January 2019.

about education among parents. Those who are aware are sending their children to schools and educating them'.[19]

For many parents, however, this is not a matter of carelessness or lack of understanding; rather, their agency is constrained by their own exclusion from school. For example, as one mother in an urban cluster of Udaipur pointed out: 'I am illiterate, Madam, the father is also illiterate. All of us are illiterate, we only know how to put our signature. Teachers ask us to pay attention to children's studies. I said, I am illiterate, what can I do; you pay attention to her'.[20]

Parents, then, are faced with the expectation of making significant commitments to education despite structural barriers and competing livelihood demands. School teachers and community members are sometimes sympathetic to this tension. A female teacher in an urban local government primary school in Patna called for the government to have a better understanding of what shapes parental priorities in education, since 'studying does not help feed hunger':

> There are children from slum areas nearby who do not come to school regularly. The family income is too low, so children have to support them [parents]. Some have agriculture lands, not many, but small holdings and they cultivate vegetables and other things. Since school is in the morning shift [6–11 am], some children are unable to attend school as they are engaged in supporting their parents in their fields or taking the produce to the market; for them it is their livelihood. Studying does not help feed hunger; it is a ground reality and government must understand this.[21]

A similar observation on livelihood challenges shaping children's abilities to attend school was made by a rural government primary school teacher in Udaipur: 'There is no one at home. Mother has gone to work, Father has gone to work; [the children] will have to look after their younger siblings. If there is anyone left at home, they have to take care of them too. On top of this, the children also have to work. Then how can they attend school?'.[22]

Parents also described this tension vividly. For example, an FGD with a predominantly Musahar community in rural Patna illustrated how poverty and gender norms circumscribe school attendance: 'Nahi, koi nahi jata (No, no one goes [to school])'. When asked why they do not send their children to school, a mother immediately replied, 'Who will do the work? The girls do all the household work. You can see so many young boys going by train to Patna every day. It is not because they [parents] wish to send them, it is because of poverty that the children have to go'.[23]

Such accounts point to the ways in which parental 'responsibility' is enmeshed in regimes of inequality. Parents are on the one hand seen as careless

19. Interview, District Project Officer, Patna District, 28 August 2019.
20. Interview, parent, Urban cluster, Udaipur, 28 December 2018.
21. Interview, teacher, urban cluster, Patna, 7 March 2019.
22. Interview, teacher, rural cluster, Udaipur, 21 February 2019.
23. Interviews, community FGD, rural cluster, Patna District, 21 January 2019.

for not sending children or prioritizing schooling and on the other hand are caught in a cycle of poverty that schooling is expected to interrupt, yet also perpetuates. Further, as Deepta Chopra's work (2019: 1710) on women's empowerment policies in India shows, unpaid care work is invisibilized in favour of a focus on participation of women in the labour force, which leads to displacement of care tasks onto the shoulders of other members of the household, particularly young girls.

Even if, via its offer of the potential of a changed future, schooling competes successfully with immediate livelihood requirements, it nevertheless reproduces systems of social domination, namely casteism. For example, a male teacher from a rural government primary school in Patna described the caste hierarchies that shape his school and its oversight, questioning commitment to the education of those who are low in the caste hierarchy, and summing up the whole system as a poverty trap:

> Government education system is a holistic approach to push poor children into traps of poverty. Nothing more … I am giving you an example from this school. The head teacher is from [land-owning, non-SC/ST] caste. And the Cluster Resource Coordinator is also from [the same] caste. Most of the teachers in this school are from upper castes. Would they want to educate lower caste children? School gives them a midday meal, children come here to eat only.[24]

The everyday experience of religious and caste-based discrimination, as well as gender-based harassment in school, is described by a Muslim mother of a Grade 1 child in Patna District: 'Boys play truant in schools and harass students. So I don't send my girls to school. We are backward [caste] and school is in a forward [caste] community. So children from our community get harassed in school. Forward communities never give respect, but we have to give respect to those communities'.[25]

Here we see not only how the normative expectation of sending children to school is challenged in the most direct terms but also how it is linked explicitly to discrimination. The RTE Act calls on parents to be responsible for sending their children to school, but parents are having to navigate the terms of schooling inclusion (Dyer, 2012); that is, they are being asked to enter into the social contract of educational rights on unjust terms. Indeed, parents also discussed how, despite the RTE Act's commitment to establishing 'neighbourhood schools', travelling to school poses a safety risk for children. In an FGD with a Musahar community in the Patna rural cluster, caste-based harassment was highlighted, alongside road safety:

> School is away from the community. There are two ways to get to school: one by road, which has problems of safety because of the number of vehicles on the road, so we are fearful of sending our children by road. The other way is by the field, but while going by field, the children have to cross the upper caste neighbourhood [and] children from the upper caste

24. Interview, teacher, rural cluster, Patna District, 17 December 2018.
25. Interview, parent, rural cluster, Patna District, 1 February 2019.

> community beat and harass our children. It usually happens and because of this, our children don't go to school.[26]

The RTE Act's notion of the 'neighbourhood' school is a spatial norm that reflects a long-standing state preoccupation with ensuring that a school is 'accessible' by reducing the distance from home to school (Dyer, 2000). This norm does not map onto social geographies of place; rather, it obfuscates a social landscape in which many children experience caste-based discrimination in accessing schools. While socio-economic dimensions of inequality, such as caste, gender, class or livelihoods, are often viewed as factors 'external' to schools, our data show that the accessibility of schools is significantly shaped by these social realities. In respect of mutual responsibilities within the RTE Act's social contract, parents who do not enforce attendance when they know that emotional and physical harm is integral to their children's experience of schooling can also be construed as enacting responsibility for the well-being of their own children.

The empirical data presented here show that idealized notions of mutual responsibility of the RTE Act fail to recognize the structural barriers that differentially shape parental agency and action relating to school attendance. These data belie the assumption of individual choice and autonomy accorded to parents in the RTE Act's social contract. Our focus on school attendance illustrates that 'access' involves navigating competing priorities linked to contexts of poverty and social discrimination, where schooling itself is part of what some participants characterized as a 'trap'. Through its articulation of their responsibilities in the RTE Act, the state seeks to incorporate parents into an unequal education system and assumes an alignment of priorities; and, in so doing, it misrepresents the conditions and consent of participation in the social contract that the RTE Act projects.

The Responsible Teacher: Authority and Expectations

The RTE Act constructs teachers' part in the social contract by setting out specific duties and responsibilities for them. Its projection of the responsible teacher, however, is often called into question by the perceptions that parents, and other actors, have of teachers, and by the state's own ambiguities in relation to teachers' roles, democratic authority and professional autonomy (Ramachandran et al., 2008; Ramachandran et al., 2018).

Parents often cast teachers as authority figures, since teachers have high educational status, are appointed by the state, and are frequently engaged in government work that is not related to schooling, which is a persistent reminder of their 'official' status. That these authority figures have an obvious responsibility for imparting knowledge, but do not necessarily do so,

26. Interviews, community FGD, rural cluster, Patna District, 31 January 2019.

was starkly expressed in an FGD with women in Patna's urban cluster: 'Parents give birth. Who should give knowledge? Teachers. But in government schools, teachers are not giving knowledge'.[27]

Expectations that teachers should come to school and teach were often not met in our sample sites: complaints of a lack of teaching in government schools were widely heard across all four sample clusters. For example, the mother of a Grade 5 girl in an urban government primary school in Udaipur explained: 'There is no learning happening [in school] … teachers spend a lot of time on their mobile phones, and they bring their young children to school. There is a lot of "time pass" in school'.[28]

As authority figures, teachers appear to be able to ignore their responsibility for children's learning. The president of a rural SMC in Patna described teacher conduct that, in his view, was linked to endemic truancy among schoolchildren: 'Teachers don't enter class themselves when the bell rings, don't give the children their full attention when in class, and are probably relieved when the children leave, so they can leave early themselves'.[29]

In interviews and FGDs across our research sites, parents reported that teachers were often absent from school; or, as these excerpts suggest, present at school yet absent in terms of fulfilling their role as a teacher. While parents were widely compliant with the expectation that they would send their children to school, they were aware that, in the type of school that is accessible to them, teachers are often not discharging their responsibility as educators. For many parents, these patterns of behaviour by authority figures reinforce their own inferior social position. For them, schooling binds them even more tightly to systems of class, gender and other social inequalities. In the longer term, as Jeffrey et al. (2004) have argued, disadvantaged social groups may reassess the value of investing in formal schooling if the gains expected from it fail to materialize.

Government schools are now widely associated with very poor-quality provision (French and Kingdon, 2010; Kingdon, 2020). Although the RTE Act envisages that, within the marketized school system, parents can choose an alternative, poverty prevents them from being able to exercise such choice. This is the position in which one parent of a Grade 1 student in a rural government school in Patna, who herself was not able to read or write, finds herself: 'You go to school now, you will see most of teachers are talking in the grounds [outside the building]. Teachers don't go into class. We are poor, so we are forced to send our child to government school'.[30]

Yet, while parents' discourses show that teachers often do not meet the expectations that parents have of them as educators and authority figures, teachers are themselves negotiating the conflicting expectations of their own

27. Community FGD, urban cluster, Patna District, 16 April 2019.
28. Interview, parent, urban cluster, Udaipur, 24 January 2019.
29. Interview, SMC President, rural cluster, Patna District, 4 April 2019.
30. Interview, parent, rural cluster, Patna District, 1 February 2019.

positioning. The RTE Act expects teachers to support access in general, and attendance in particular. It requires teachers to visit families to encourage enrolment and investigate absence, and to support an engagement with schooling among families for whom, as we have seen, the conditions of participation, and consent to it, often do not align with the ideals of the social contract that the RTE Act sets out. For teachers, too, there is an assumed consent to a role that is itself constituted by multiple intersecting social relations, norms, policies, duties and expectations. The divergences that teachers experience are well illustrated, for example, in relation to the role assigned to them of 'counselling' and 'changing mindsets' of families, as expressed by a female Grade 5 teacher in an urban government school in Patna:

> A child stays only 4–5 hours with a teacher and [the] rest of the time he/she is with their parents. If the student is not coming to school for even 10 days in a month, then the student lags behind in the syllabus and it becomes very difficult and time consuming to complete the syllabus. It is very challenging. If a teacher is expected to change mindsets of the majority, it is not easy. When can we teach if we keep doing counselling to families? But government expects us to visit families and make them understand. A teacher is not a certified counsellor and government must understand this. Government is closing its eyes and sleeping.[31]

Here we see how the misalignment of norms and expectations around the work of teachers positions teachers amidst competing priorities. The words of this teacher also point to her difficulties in 'completing the syllabus', which is how teachers across India often understand their responsibility for children's learning. This is a massive task amidst the diversity of learners in their classrooms, and when learning is structured by the norms of an age-for-grade curriculum that ignore that diversity. In an era of emphasis on performance measurement (Gorur, 2017), teachers are widely held responsible for the low learning outcomes that are reported for government schools (see discussion in Kundu, 2019; Muralidharan et al., 2017; Ramachandran et al., 2018). Yet, across the schools in our research sites, we observed that the enabling conditions of basic materials to support teachers in promoting learning, such as good-quality blackboards, story books, teaching aids and teachers' guides, were not in place.

In contrast with the idealized functions assigned to a teacher in the RTE Act, a teacher's role in practice involves constant negotiation of divergent expectations, in contexts where teachers are deprived of professional authority and adequate material conditions (Ramachandran et al., 2018). The state's projection of itself as a 'responsible' actor, and its visible enactment of this with respect to socially disadvantaged children around the incentive schemes discussed earlier, requires that responsibility for the failings of its schools must be assigned — but not to itself. The behaviour of teachers as illustrated above lends itself to being interpreted as representing multiple failures of teacher responsibility, which then allows teachers to be singled

31. Interview, teacher, government school, urban cluster, Patna District, 7 March 2019.

out as scapegoats for poor system accountability for learning. Our focus on relations of accountability leads us to propose, instead, that such behaviour can be read as signals of the misalignment of norms and the troubled consent of teacher participation in the RTE Act's social contract.

CONCLUSION

This article has analysed India's RTE Act as a 'social contract' that assigns to multiple actors — parents, teachers and officials of the state at various levels — a mutual duty to uphold the provision of education as a fundamental right. Although the RTE Act's normative stance is that actors collectively meet this fundamental aim, our empirical analysis reveals that the underpinning logic of its social contract obfuscates existing hierarchies, perpetuates educational inequalities and, indeed, legitimizes new exclusions. The implicit assumption of symmetry of power in an idealized social contract, as expressed in the RTE Act, is profoundly misleading and ignores the complexity of social relations and systems of domination that shape educational access in a country as highly diverse and plural as India.

While issues of accessing state incentive schemes intended to enable and promote educational inclusion might be understood as administrative or implementation difficulties, we have suggested that — despite their intent to enable inclusion — these schemes impose conditionalities that perpetuate exclusion. We saw that teachers are constantly negotiating the conflicting expectations of them — reflecting the ambiguity of their role as educators and state-sponsored promoters of schooling among communities that are socially and economically deprived — and that teachers sometimes refuse the responsibility of even entering the classroom, in their rejection of the assumption of consent to the RTE Act's social contract. With respect to parents, we saw that relations of power and domination, such as casteism and poverty, shape children's differential access to, and experience of, schooling — and, indeed, the choice of school that the RTE's contract suggests every parent can exercise. Some parents, then, refuse the contract, and elect not to send their children to school at all, while others are drawn into an education system that offers the hope of addressing inequalities while itself perpetuating them (Jeffrey et al., 2004).

Despite its discourse of collective responsibility, the RTE Act foregrounds a notion of accountability that implies that particular actors within the education system are accountable for failures and shortfalls. This reflects a functionalist orientation of governance in India which lends itself to interpreting failures of the collective task of education as a lack of responsibility of one actor or the other. This orientation reduces the manifold social relations and processes that create educational inequalities into static entities (Eacott, 2018) and makes invisible the situated social relations, and their

ever-present politics, that shape the contours of responsibility and mutuality.

Taking the case of India's RTE Act, this article has proposed that if the relations of power and domination underlying such 'contracts' remain unaddressed, then expressions of 'mutual' responsibility are unlikely to achieve anything other than reproduce injustice. We have empirically demonstrated a fundamental problem with how the social contract — here, around educational rights — assumes and misrepresents consent to, and parity of, participation. The normative and idealized social contract assumes a just and equal society where there is a mutuality of agreement, equity of voices and equality of participation of all stakeholders. In reality, such social contracts tend to exclude the most marginalized from participation, silence their voices and perpetuate systems of domination that rationalize social inequalities and injustices within the guise of progressive language. It is this flattening of relations of power, by drawing in isolated actors and aligning them into an already unequal system, that we argue is misrepresentative.

Rather than catalysing change, a concept of accountability that is rooted in an idealized, reductive and misrepresentative contract of mutual obligations serves to perpetuate educational inequalities and exclusion, as well as the apportioning of blame (Gorur, 2017). The idealized social contract forecloses opportunities for recognizing the non-ideal world we live in and therefore for reckoning with different pathways to justice. With this in mind, we argue that reform efforts that promote the right to education and seek to improve provision of quality schooling could be more equitable if they shift away from assumptions that change will result from focusing on actors who are isolated from their spatio-temporal contexts, and if they attend to the relationally embedded and political nature of accountability. This more radical approach to accountability in education systems offers a much-needed alternative pathway towards addressing systemic inequalities and their manifestations in schooling.

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