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# Subir Gokarn: Educational reach and grasp

**Analysis of data from a recent NSS survey will provide significant inputs into education policy**

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Over the past few weeks, new data releases have provided a wealth of information about different aspects of the state of the country's development and the diversity of conditions across states. The Socio-Economic and Caste Census, which I wrote about in my previous column, is one of these. Two reports from the 71st Round of the National Sample Survey, carried out during January-June 2014 also add to the data pool. One of these deals with household behaviour and expenditure on health services, while the other covers education. This column provides perspectives on some of the findings of the education survey.

The education survey covered about 66,000 households across the country, of which about 37,000 were rural. It sought information about standard indicators relating to institutional affiliation, attendance, access to incentives such as meals and scholarships and so on. Three indicators, which were of particular interest to me under the "reach and grasp" motif, were physical access, use of supplementary services - private coaching - and access to and ability to use computers and the internet.

I take it as given that, other things being equal, physical access to a school is a significant determinant of whether kids enrol and attend regularly. Minimising travel distance, time and effort required must be a key education policy objective. For many rural households, presumably, there is little room for choice between schools; it is only a question of whether it is physically feasible to attend. Urban households are more likely to have choices, but have to take quality and cost differences into account.

On the physical access criterion, there is both good news and not-so-good news. In rural areas, for the country as a whole, 94 per cent of households had access to primary school facilities (Classes 1-4) within 1 km and all households had access within 2 km. However, there was a sharp drop-off in access to upper primary (Classes 5-8) and, further, to secondary schools (Classes 9-12). Only 67 per cent of households had access to upper primary schools within 1 km. Of course, older kids can physically handle longer commutes; from this standpoint, over 97 per cent had access within 5 km. At the secondary level, only 37 per cent had access within 1 km, while 12 per cent had to send their kids to schools over 5 km away.

There is considerable variation across states on this parameter. Hilly and relatively sparsely populated states, of course, have lower densities. Of the larger states, Telengana has 100 per cent access to primary schools within 1 km, while, interestingly, Kerala reached only 62.5 per cent. Local conditions, including transport services obviously matter. It is also logical to expect a change in the location pattern as kids move from lower to higher segments. However, perhaps we should be thinking of location and access benchmarks for rural schools, which minimise the adverse impact of difficult access on enrolment and attendance. The larger context in which this issue becomes important is the sharp drop-off in enrolment between primary and secondary schools - almost 30 percentage points. How much of a factor is physical access in this transition?

As might be expected, the access problem is much less significant for urban households. Ninety-two per cent have access to primary schools, 83 per cent to upper primary schools and 73 per cent to secondary schools within 1 km of their residence. Here, the issue is of quality and cost. Parents need to have a simple and

transparent quality and cost metric to be able to base their decision on and regulators need to monitor and enforce some basic quality standards.

The second indicator that caught my eye was the prevalence of demand for private coaching. We all have our prejudices about private coaching. Is it a necessary evil or a legitimate substitute for parental and family supplements? Whatever one may see it as, the fact is that it is costly and a source of iniquity across households. Be that as it may, the survey shows, as might be expected, that there is an increase in usage as kids grow older and there is a persistent gap between boys and girls. In the primary segment, 23 per cent of boys and 20 per cent of girls across combined rural and urban households use private coaching. The proportion increases to 28 per cent and 25 per cent in the upper primary segment and 38 per cent and 35 per cent in the secondary segment.

Here again, there are some striking variations across states. In West Bengal, 71 per cent of boys and 63 per cent of girls in primary school rely on private coaching. By contrast, in Uttar Pradesh, only 12 per cent of boys and nine per cent of girls use coaching at this level. Does this reflect different aspirations? Or, differences in the quality of the education system? Each interpretation of these variations will have its own policy implication.

The third indicator that I think deserves deep scrutiny is digital access. We have, of course, separate estimates of telecom connectivity and smartphone usage, which are shaping the larger debate on delivery of benefits. This survey focus provides estimates on household possession of computers and, besides this, internet access for at least one member of the household who is above the age of 14. Six per cent of rural households and 29 per cent of urban households possess computers. Not surprisingly, the less affluent states typically have penetration lower than the national average. On the internet access parameter, the picture is a little more comforting; 16 per cent of rural households and 49 per cent of urban households meet this criterion of access.

From the perspective of using technology to improve access and quality of education, these numbers suggest that it is going to be a long haul. However, this should not deter experimentation and scaling in areas in which penetration is reasonable. Above all, providing computer access to as many schools as possible is imperative.

As the government works its way through to a new education policy, it must draw upon objective analysis of these data as well as the wealth of other evidence on what works and what doesn't that is available. Of all aspects of public policy, the costs of being wrong on education will be both high and persistent across generations.

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