Can online portals get marginalised children into private schools? Lessons from India

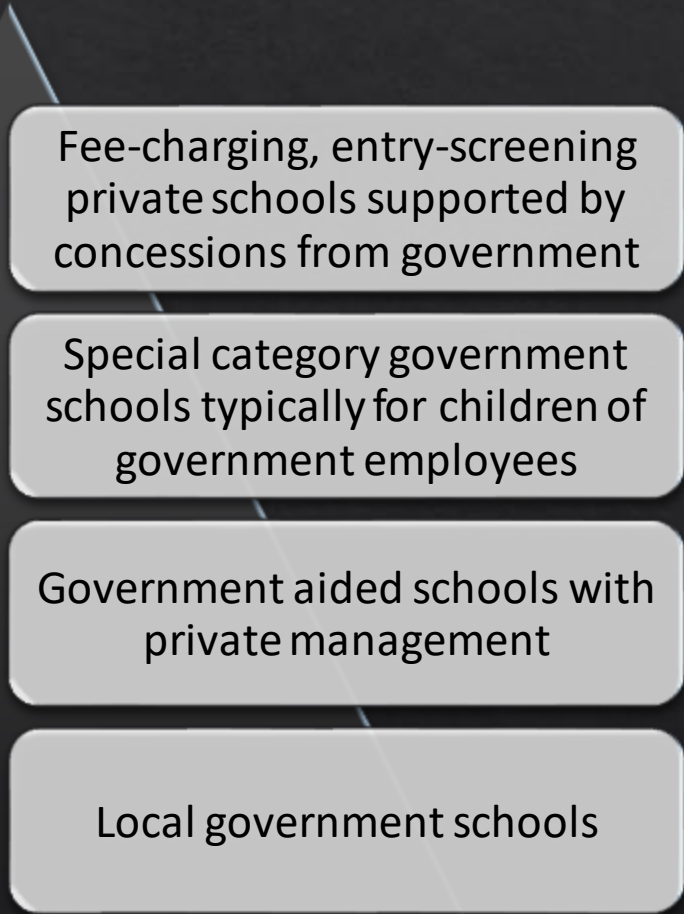Shrikant Wad | Moray House, The University of Edinburgh

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Presentation for in-person and online audience at the RISE Conference 2022, University of Oxford

In this presentation -

1. What policy are we talking about?

2. How is it implemented?

3. What is the role of digitisation, the online portals and algorithms in this policy implementation?

4. How have we studied it? What are our key concerns?

5. What are the main findings of this study?

6. What can we learn from these findings?

Policy context: social segregation in India's schools

Fee-charging, entry-screening private schools supported by concessions from government

Special category government schools typically for children of government employees

Government aided schools with private management

Local government schools

Hierarchy of access to Indian schools

⬥ Govinda, R., & Bandyopadhyay, M. (2008). *Access to elementary education in India: Country Analytical Review*. Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity (CREATE).

⬥ Nambissan, G. B., & Ball, S. J. (2010). Advocacy networks, choice and private schooling of the poor in India. *Global Networks*, 10(3), 324-343.

⬥ Alcott, B., & Rose, P. (2015). Schools and learning in rural India and Pakistan: Who goes where, and how much are they learning?. *Prospects*, 45(3), 345-363.

⬥ Alcott, B., & Rose, P. (2017). Learning in India's primary schools: How do disparities widen across the grades?. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 56, 42-51.
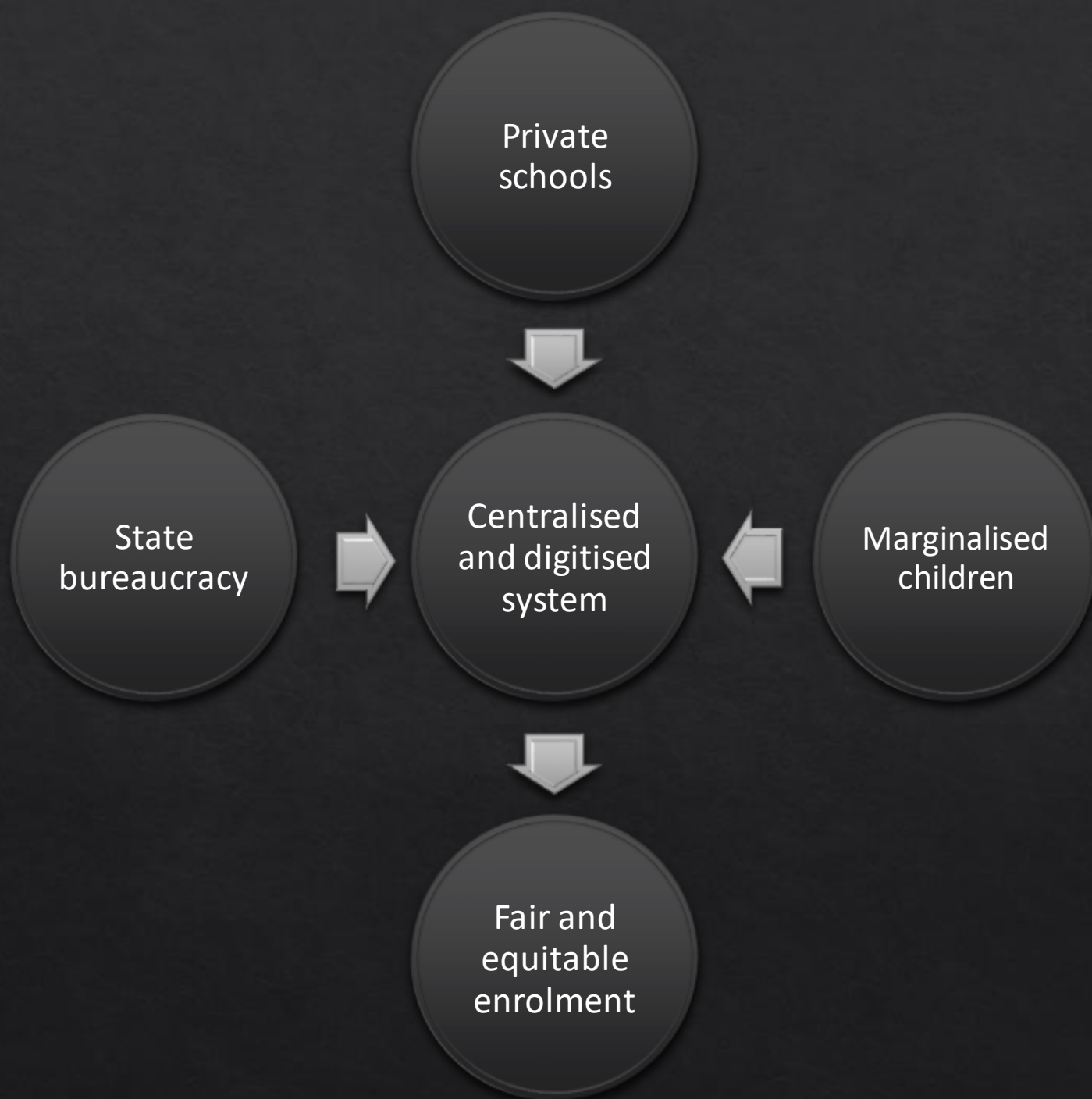
Affirmative action policy: challenging the segregation

Minimum quota for assimilation of privileged children with their marginalised peers

25%

75%
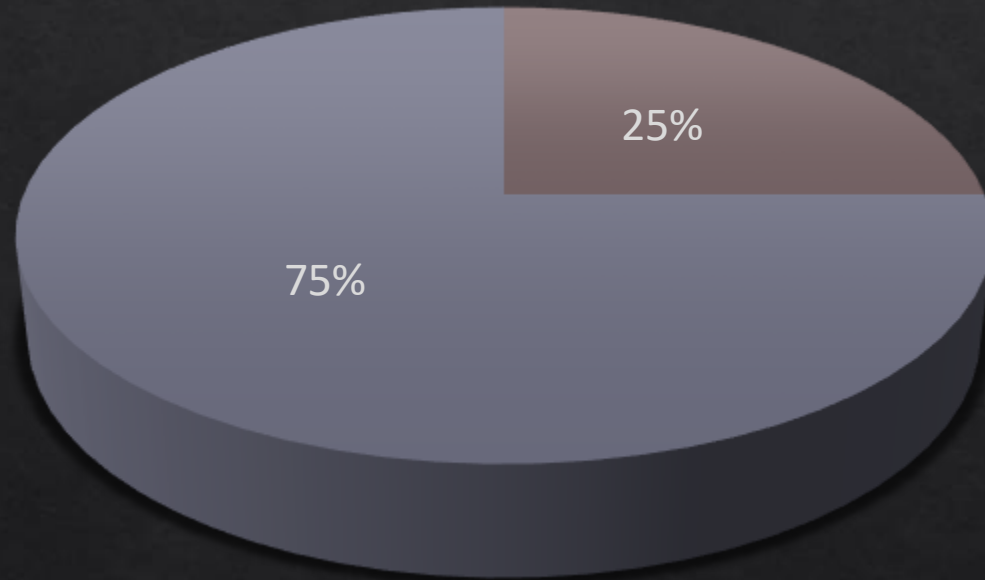
- Disadvantaged children, enrolled through centralised system, fee covered by government
- Children from fee-paying households, enrolled directly by the school

⬦ Section 12(1)(c) of the Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009), i.e., RTE mandates that **unaided nonminority private schools set aside at least twenty-five percent of their entry level seats for children from *weaker and disadvantaged sections of society*.**

⬦ Implemented in only 1 out of 8 Union Territories and 11 out of 28 States

⬦ More about the implementation and its administrative, legal, and financial aspects: Sarin, A., Dongre, A., & Wad, S. (2017). *State of the Nation: RTE Section 12(1)(c)*. IIM Ahmedabad.

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Case of algorithmic policymaking in India's private school enrolments

Private schools

State bureaucracy → Centralised and digitised system ← Marginalised children

Centralised and digitised system → Fair and equitable enrolment

Fairness

Justice

Speed and accuracy

Exclusivity

Bureaucratic convenience

Administrative efficiency

How did we study this policy implementation?

Conceptual framework

Social justice, going beyond the distribution of rights, requires a reorientation of social relations through policies, procedures, and formal and informal rules that govern organisations (Gewirtz 1998)

In policy implementation, digital technologies act as guarantors of fairness and neutrality (Mounier, 2012), where the architects of the online portals assume the role of street-level 'digital bureaucrats' (Busch & Henriksen, 2018).

Despite the "politics" that surrounds them, debates and decisions on program designs are often left to "technical" experts, including "outsourced" actors beyond the realm of democratic accountability (Janssen & Kuk, 2016).

How did we study this policy implementation?

Data collection in four States: Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Rajasthan

Scoping review of policy literature

Documentation and testing of the 4 online admission portals

Structured interviews of

      6 software engineers (purposive selection),

      9 education department officials (purposive selection),

      4 civil society organisations representatives (purposive),

      8 school administrators (opportunistic sampling), and

      16 parents (opportunistic sampling)

What did we investigate in the analysis?

- We assess the systems for their distributive effects and search for key features that can improve their reach and accessibility.

- Particularly, we identify the **technological decisions** which

  - reduce bias against disadvantaged groups who may have difficulties using the online portals,

  - widen the "choices" for successful applicants, and

  - reduce administrative burden on citizens.

- Further, we identify key **institutional features** of the education departments that

  - create a conducive environment for inclusive digitisation.

Key findings and inferences

How do the online portals receive and recognise applicant data?

	Maharashtra	Madhya Pradesh	Karnataka	Rajasthan
Form submission mode	Online only	Online or offline (same form, at a school or govt. office)	Online only	Online (one form for all schools) or Offline (one form per school)
Submission of evidence for Eligibility, Age, and Location	Certificates to be uploaded along with the application	Certificates to be uploaded along with the application	Certificate numbers to be uploaded with the application	No upload. Documents verified at the school level.

How do the algorithms process data to allot private school seats to marginalised children?

	Maharashtra	*Madhya Pradesh*	*Rajasthan*	*Karnataka*
Preferences	All preferences are equal, no order	Ordered	All preferences are equal, no order	Ordered
Basis of prioritisation	Neighbourhood	Neighbourhood	Neighbourhood	Neighbourhood and applicant category
Randomisation sequence	School-vacancy-led, i.e. moves from one school to another	Application-led (all top preferences at a time)	Application-led (Applicant-school preference combinations)	Application-led (One application at a time)
Allotment per applicant	Multiple and confirmed	Single and confirmed	Multiple and tentative	Single and confirmed

"Best" practices? – technological decisions

We have discussed the technological decisions and practices in the four States with their merits and demerits.

- Do you agree with our inferences?

- Can you reflect on the question and rank the four systems?

Which key technological decisions help

- reduce bias against disadvantaged groups who may have difficulties using the online portal?

- widen the "choices" for successful applicants?

- reduce administrative costs and logistical burden on citizens?

"Best" practices? – institutional features

What institutional features accompany progressive embrace of technology?

◈ Placement of IT engineers within education departments

◈ Engagement of local political leaders in portal implementation

◈ Active role of civil society organisations in voicing and redressing grievances

Does your understanding of education systems in the Global South support our claims?

Thank you!

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