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Public vs. private schooling as a route to universal basic education: A comparison of China and India

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A B S T R A C T

This article examines whether focusing primarily on public schooling can lead to more rapid achievement of universal basic education (UBE) than relying on a mixture of public and private schooling. Through a structured, focused comparison, we find China's greater emphasis on public schooling has contributed to higher enrollment, attendance, graduation rates, gender parity, and proportion of students entering higher education than India, the country with the world's largest private sector in primary and secondary education. This comparison suggests that greater emphasis on public schooling in developing countries may lead to more rapid UBE attainment than encouraging privatization.

Keywords:
India
China
Privatization
Universal basic education
Millennium development goals

1. Introduction

In the twenty-first century, universal basic education (UBE) is widely recognized as a global human right as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (1976), and major international conferences held in Jomtien (1990) and Dakar (2000) promoting "Education for All" (EFA). UBE is a cornerstone of the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2013a), but as of 2013 only two out of nine global developing regions identified by the UN were on track to achieve UBE by 2015 (UN, 2013b).

Whereas historically countries have taken several generations to universalize basic education (Benavot and Resnik, 2006; Dickson et al., 2010; Hughes and Irfan, 2010), the MDGs endeavored to rapidly implement global primary education within the space of just fifteen years. Such a rapid expansion of schooling systems is unprecedented in world history leaving us with the puzzle of how to achieve UBE in such a short time frame?

One possible strategy is to focus on the private sector as a route to universal basic education (Andrabi et al., 2015; Das and Khwaja, 2015; Tooley, 2009; Tooley and Dixon, 2007; Tulloch et al., 2014; Kramer and Overbey, 2014), an approach promoted by many international organizations and transnational advocacy networks (Collins and Wiseman, 2012; Nambissan and Ball, 2010). Yet some argue heavy reliance on the private sector will fail to meet the schooling needs of rural areas, marginalized groups, and the ultra-poor (Lewin, 2007). An alternative strategy is to rely on national public school systems to enroll all or most children of school age (Kosack, 2012; Weiner, 1991).

Since Dakar, however, the global education for development agenda has clouded the lines between pro-private and pro-public approaches. In the early 21st century an international compact or "third way" was established between proponents of private schooling and their skeptics (Daun and Mundy, 2011; Thérien, 2002; Ruggie, 2003) whereby "the Breton Woods institutions [World Bank and International Monetary Fund] now address poverty and equity issues regularly, while the UN organizations are less skeptical of the role of the market and private sector in development" (Mundy, 2006, p. 29). According to the Dakar Forum on EFA, the "third way" includes private schooling as a complement to public schooling to supply the ever increasing demand for education (Kitaev, 2004). Emerging from this agenda is a blueprint for "ideal" governance involving public-private partnerships, increased school choice, decentralization, reduced unit costs, and an increase in the use of standardized tests (Daun and Mundy, 2011; Mundy, 2006). Despite the seeming incursion of privatization into the education for development framework, private school proponents, such as Tooley and Dixon (2006, 2007), believe that underlying biases against private schools limit their incorporation into MDG goals.

Others vehemently disagree, pointing out that the present global compact is spurred by policy frames that provide simplistic solutions largely limiting policy options to those neo-liberal in orientation (Srivastava, 2010a), that privatization has been the focus of international education policy since the 1990s (Rose, 2005), and that the goals of the present agenda parallel those of the Washington Consensus (Mundy, 2005). During this period of convergence between public and private approaches, we feel it is important to ask which approach is likely to lead to faster implementation of UBE.

The goal of this paper is to address this question. Beginning with a literature review on the implementation of UBE, we contrast approaches emphasizing a mixture of private and public schooling with the more traditional approach emphasizing exclusively or primarily "public" schooling which we define as over 90% of school-age children attending elementary schools managed by local or national governments[1]. We then analyze major trends in the educational development of two countries pivotal to UBE because of their very large populations: China and India. As discussed below, we find the public school route taken by China linked to faster implementation of basic education, higher levels of school attendance, and higher levels of gender parity than the mixed approach followed by India.

1.1. Literature review and hypotheses

Scholars have analyzed universal basic education, a term referring to the completion of primary and lower secondary schooling[2], from normative, historical, and public policy approaches. Often known as "compulsory education" (Bloom, 2006; Weiner, 1991), basic education in most countries comprises the first eight to nine years of a person's formal education. UBE is highly valued because of its benefits to individuals and society. First, the economic returns to primary education are positive and higher than returns to secondary and higher education (Tilak, 2001). Primary schooling is the first step on the formal education ladder and helps develop individuals' skills, values, general knowledge, and socialization. Basic education has positive impacts on health and accelerates the demographic transition toward lower fertility (Baker et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2012). It is likewise a means to promote tolerance and national cohesion as people with more formal education have greater social mobility, make better civil servants, and tend to be more politically active. In addition, mass education leads to dramatic improvements in agriculture, infrastructure, economic productivity, social services, and technology (Lutz and Samir, 2011). By contrast, the costs to society of low education include high unemployment, crime, civil conflict, drug abuse, violence, poor health, lost government revenue, lost income, and high costs of public assistance (Belfield and Levin, 2007).

Historically, most industrialized countries universalized basic education over multiple decades through the use of public schooling systems as the exclusive or predominant provider of basic education (Benavot and Resnik, 2006; Lewin, 2007). The primary argument in favor of encompassing public school systems is that the state is the only organization in society with the capacity and incentive to provide sufficient education resources, equalize opportunities, build national cohesion, and hold parents accountable for their children's truancy (Weiner, 1991).

Mehrotra (1998) case studies of 10 high-achieving developing countries (countries that were successful in rapidly expanding UBE and reaching gender parity early in their development process) likewise support the role of government schooling as vital to UBE. He identifies five key factors that aid developing countries in expanding their enrollment. First, in each successful country the government operated basic social services, including health sector interventions to ensure adequate nutrition as well as policies that promoted the agency of women. Second, primary education was seen and treated as a responsibility of the state. In nine out of ten successful countries, the share of pupils enrolled in a private primary school was less than 10% in 1975, and for some countries, such as South Korea (1%) and Cuba (0%), the private sector was basically non-existent. Third, successful countries spent more on education compared to their regional average and this expenditure was targeted on primary education. Another study similarly found that in Malawi and Uganda enrollment rates rose sharply once the state took responsibility for free primary education and increased its share of education spending (Lincove, 2007). Targeting spending toward primary education and away from higher education (which often provides only for a select, already highly privileged group in developing countries) is essential to meeting UBE (Smith, 2011). For example, higher education spending as a multiple of per pupil expenditure for primary education in high achieving countries like Botswana (40), Mauritius (22), and Zimbabwe (17) was well below the average of 62 for Sub-Saharan Africa in 1980 (Mehrotra, 1998). Fourth, successful countries maintained lower unit costs by allocating a lower portion of education expenditure to teacher salaries and by keeping repetition rates low. This enabled high achieving countries, such as South Korea and Malaysia, to spend a greater amount on teaching materials, relative to lower achieving peers (i.e. India). Finally, nine out of ten successful countries had no direct tuition costs for primary education, leading Mehrotra (1998) to conclude that "the reduction of costs to parents of sending children to school seems to have been a primary reason for the rapid expansion of primary enrollment in the selected countries" (p. 478). Elimination of tuition fees also led to greater gender parity as parents did not have to choose between sending their son or daughter to school. Furthermore, the introduction or re-introduction of schools fees in Sub-Saharan Africa has resulted in decreased primary school enrollment without improving education quality (Iscan et al., 2015).

Although most countries successful in attaining UBE have relied primarily on government schooling, in recent years there has been an increase in "private schooling," which we define as schools managed by a non-government entity, irrespective of financing source, and irrespective of whether the school is for-profit or non-profit. Similarly, Kitaev (1999) identifies "private schools" as "all formal schools that are not public, and may be founded, owned, managed, and financed by actors other than the state, even in cases where the state provides most of its funding and has considerable control over these schools" (p. 43). While some may describe schools which are regulated by the state, receive most of its funding from a general tax base, and face restrictions on its profits as 'public systems with subcontracting,' we define public (government) and private (non-government) schools following the Indian government's education ministry whereby "government" schools are those managed by central and state governments, panchayats, municipalities, cantonment boards, and town area committees (MHRD, 2014a). Private schools are divided into two categories: "private aided" schools "managed by an individual, trust, society or other private organization and receiving regular maintenance grant from Government or local body," and "private-unaided" schools "managed by an individual, trust, society or other

[1] We define as "public", schooling which is provided and managed by any level of government including not only central and provincial levels, but also municipal and village level governments. By contrast, we treat "private" schooling as that which is not provided by government even if it may receive funds from the government.

[2] We define "universalization of basic education" as completion of elementary education operationalized as graduation rates or completion rates minus dropouts.

private organization and not receiving regular maintenance grant from Government or local body" (MHRD, 2014a, p. i).

Over the past thirty years, evidence of privatization is visible in the global reduction of state responsibility (Mok, 1999) as globally private school enrollment at the primary level increased by 58% between 1991 and 2004 (Patrinos et al., 2009). Examples of widespread privatization reforms include vouchers in Latin America (Bonal, 2004; Carnoy, 1998), private tutoring worldwide (Baker et al., 2001; Bray and Lykins, 2012) and especially in East Asia (Bray, 2006; Dang, 2007; Xue and Ding, 2009), public-private partnerships in India (Srivastava, 2010b), low-fee private schools (LFPs) in parts of South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa (Andrabi et al., 2008; Aslam, 2009; Härmä, 2009; Srivastava, 2007; Tooley, 2007; Tooley and Dixon, 2006) and the introduction of user fees in places like China and Hong Kong (Mok, 1999).

Proponents of privatization argue this increases access and quality through generating public savings by encouraging those who are able, to exit the system. Public capital can then be reallocated to increase the scale of primary education to include those previously lacking the opportunity to attend school (Colclough, 1996). Another claim is that privatization may expand access to areas where no public schools are present or where government support is not feasible (Lincove, 2009; Robeyns, 2006). Such neo-liberal ideas have been backed by many international donor agencies who view private schooling as a catalyst in implementing UBE (Nambissan and Ball, 2010). Arguably, one such organization is the World Bank, a key player in international education and MDG strategies through its active role in disseminating loans, grants, research, publications, and policy advice (Arnove et al., 2003; Joshi and O'Dell, 2013). For example, Lincove (2009) found that half of the 52 education projects funded by the Bank between 2002 and 2004 included neo-liberal reforms as a condition of the loan. Likewise recent analysis of the World Bank's (2011) education sector strategy failed to find a substantial shift in neo-liberal rhetoric compared to its previous strategy in 1999 (Joshi and Smith, 2012). After reviewing the World Bank's spending portfolio, however, Mundy and Menashy (2012) concluded that the Bank's rhetoric does not necessarily equate to greater financial support for the private sector. Nevertheless, several scholars have argued that the discourse of the World Bank has served to ideologically legitimize the role of privatization in UBE (Ilon, 2002; Kane, 2008; Robertson, 2012).

Turning our attention from theoretical arguments to empirical evidence, the Chilean voucher system has been one of the most widely studied education reforms emphasizing a strong role for the private sector in elementary education. Studying the voucher system between 1989 and 2000, Schiefelbein and Schiefelbein (2002) found increases in student attendance as well as resources dedicated to education. Net total enrollment of 6 to 13 year olds increased to 98%, most of which was accounted for by increased participation of the private sector which in 2000 enrolled 45% of all students. Bettinger (2006), however, found mixed evidence from the voucher system where reductions in repetition rates could not be definitively linked to voucher incentives. The expansion of privatization and increased user fees in Chile has also met with much dissatisfaction among certain social groups leading to widespread student movements and civil unrest in 2011 (Salinas and Fraser, 2012).

Supporters of privatization assert that, when set at the proper price-point, private schools in the form of low-fee private (LFP) schools can potentially make progress in UBE and have done so in countries such as India, Pakistan, and Nigeria (Tooley and Dixon, 2007). For example, the rapid expansion of LFPs in the Indian city of Hyderabad has been linked to government schools' low quality and their inability to meet parental demand (Tooley et al., 2007, Dixon and Gomathi 2007). The government of Bhutan also encourages private schools to reach hard to access populations (Kitaev, 2004).

But does the expansion in private education equate to increased enrollment overall? Some insight to this answer can be drawn from the experience of Pakistan. Identifying its role as "an enabler and facilitator", rather than a sole provider of education, the Government of Pakistan (2004, p. 31) has witnessed considerable growth in the number of private schools since 1993 with 75% of private school enrollment taking place at the primary level (Andrabi et al., 2008). At the middle school level the share of private school enrollment as a percent of overall enrollment exceeded 50% in 2004 (Aslam, 2009). Notwithstanding this expansion in private school enrollment, the net enrollment rates for Pakistan remain well below the South Asian regional average as most enrolled students are males and in urban areas (Andrabi et al., 2008).

Recent evidence from Africa also suggests that even supposedly 'low-fee' private schools attract only the wealthier among the poor. For example, Omega Schools, a private for-profit 'high-volume, low-margin' school chain in Ghana supported by multinational investors has cut costs by hiring un-unionized teachers possessing only high school diplomas and paying them less than one fifth the average wage of public school teachers while maintaining high pupil-teacher ratios sometimes in excess of fifty to one (Riep, 2015). Despite perceptions that Omega Schools might expand access to those currently out-of-school, independent researchers argue its daily fee payment system is neither 'low-fee' nor 'affordable' for the most economically disadvantaged (Riep, 2015). Most importantly, the chain appears to only absorb children who were previously attending other schools with Riep's (2015) study finding, "436 out of 437 students questioned said they had already been enrolled in classes at another school prior to Omega. Only 1 out of 437 had not. This finding refutes any suggestion that Omega Schools are significantly extending initial access to basic education" (p. 19). Findings like these indicating that private institutions are not necessarily committed to UBE are perhaps not surprising, given that private self-financing schools cannot be run at a price point accessible to impoverished households.

These experiences are also corroborated by a rigorous literature review on private schooling completed by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) (Ashley et al., 2014). In their review of 59 studies, DFID concluded that private schools in developing countries are clustered in urban areas, disproportionately attended by boys, and inaccessible to low-income families. Moreover, "financial constraints" are "a key factor limiting or preventing poorer households enrolling their children in private schools" (p. 28), and since these schools are not financially sustainable they are vulnerable to quickly closing down.

Such results raise doubts over whether the poorest and most marginalized (including rural and indigenous populations, females, and those with disabilities) will be able to access and complete a private school education. Too often school access is limited by costs, raising questions on the affordability of private education for the poorest families. Although Tooley and Dixon (2006) suggest that LFPs can provide scholarships or reserve concessional spaces for the poorest families and Tooley et al. (2007) found evidence of fee reductions given at LFPs in Hyderabad, India, Härmä's (2009) research elsewhere in India found this is not always the case. When she interviewed parents about potential scholarships for poor children, the claim that they provide meaningful access was quickly dismissed. The implication is that although LFPs may practice various forms of "fee bargaining" (Srivastava, 2007) to gain market share, concessional spaces at LFPs may be insufficient to achieve UBE (Härmä, 2011) because in general private schools avoid those students that are too costly or hard to reach (Lewin, 2007; Lincove, 2007).

In fact, throughout Asia and Africa, studies repeatedly find the majority of private schools including LFPs are concentrated in urban areas (Andrabi et al., 2008; Ashley et al., 2014; Lincove, 2007; Mok et al., 2009; Tooley and Dixon, 2006; Woodhead et al., 2013). According to one study, the supply of LFPs in Pakistan is largely determined by the availability of inexpensive, educated female teachers (permitting LFP schools to keep expenditures low), thus limiting potential geographic locations where LFPs may take root in contrast to research suggesting that private school supply is driven by demand (Andrabi et al., 2008). Within India, LFPs have also served some populations more than others featuring higher enrollment of males and high caste Hindus and under-representation of low-castes, Muslims, and females (Härmä, 2009).

However, the biggest limitation of LFPs as a means to achieve UBE appears to be that even the least expensive private schools are often cost prohibitive for the poor (Ashley et al., 2014). In other words, they are actually "medium price" rather than "low price" to the poor. For the poorest families in India, LFPs cost 15% (Tooley, 2007) to 20% (Härmä, 2009) of their monthly earnings per child. This finding is similar to Chimombo's (2009) study of Malawi where households at the poverty line spend 30% of their income just to send one child to the cheapest private school and studies in Nigeria which find the costs of LFP schools limit access to the top two income quintiles (Lincove, 2007). In addition, a recent report by Action Aid International and in-country partners in Kenya and Uganda (ActionAid International et al., 2015) found that enrolling their children in the "low-fee" chain Bridge International cost families in the bottom quintile between 25% and 75% of their monthly income. Although the concept of affordability may be challenging to interpret given the "sacrifice mentality" adopted by many families which reprioritize educational needs over household needs such as food and clothing (Srivastava, 2006), it is clear that, especially in poor families with multiple school age children, private schools are not a realistic option (ActionAid International et al., 2015). Moreover, the financial access gap appears to be expanding in some countries. In comparing two cohorts in India born in 1994–1995 and 2001–2002, Woodhead et al. (2013) found an expanding gap in private school access between the poorest rural families and the least poor, leading them to conclude that "in so far as it is unable to offer potential benefits to all children, and especially those children who may remain outside of formal schooling or drop-out early, there is little evidence that growth in the private school sector will make a major positive contribution to the achievement of EFA goals" (p. 73).

Compounded by lack of access to private schools, higher income parents and education advocates may exit public schools leading to under-resourced public schools filled with the most marginalized students (Smith and Rowland, 2014). When competition increases, the most vocal advocates from public schools might simply leave resulting in a decline in public school quality and facilities which may increase student dropout rates (Arnove et al., 2003; Cox and Witko, 2010). As the individuals who flee public education to attend private schools tend to be drawn from the economically advantaged group, private school expansion may reduce the middle class tax base, hindering local school finance (Roemer, 1992). When the middle class exit for private schools, poor students have no choice but to attend government schools or low quality private schools creating a bifurcated system with "an expensive system for the rich and a poor quality one for the poor" (Tilak, 2006, p. 45, see also Bonal, 2004). Several studies have found this historically to be the case in India where government schools disproportionately attend to marginalized students in lower classes (De et al., 2002; Härmä, 2011; Vasavi, 2003).

Gender is also an important issue and studies of private school attendance often observe a preference for sending sons (Ashley et al., 2014). While in Nigeria and Zambia gender parity in private school enrollment has been reached or nearly reached (Lincove, 2007), more substantial gaps are found in India (De et al., 2002; Drèze and Sen, 2002; Tooley and Dixon, 2006), Uganda (Lincove, 2007), and Pakistan (Andrabi et al., 2008). In India, the gender differential is attributed to marriage traditions and dowry burdens which dictate sons be given preferential access to education (Drèze and Sen, 2002) as reflected in a disproportionate dispersion of family resources to boys (PROBE, 1999).

To fully comprehend which path – public education or a mixture of significant private and public schooling – is most likely to lead to rapid UBE, we believe it is also important to understand the upstream ideologies that influence which path is chosen. To those who approach UBE from a relatively egalitarian perspective, basic education is generally considered a public good "where benefits are enjoyed by all members of the community, whether or not they actually contributed to the production of this good" (Labaree, 1997, p. 51). Public goods have three defining characteristics: first, the good is equally available to everyone, second, it is impossible to price an individual out of the good, and third, the good provides benefits for individuals as well as society (Jolly, 2003).

To those who reject egalitarianism in schooling, education may be conceived of as a private rather than public good and this involves "a conceptual shift from education as an intrinsically valuable shared resource which the state owes to its citizens to a consumer product for which the individual must take first responsibility" (Ball and Youdell, 2007, p. 53). From this perspective education may be seen as a personal opportunity (Hill, 2006) as opposed to a human right, and pupils viewed as clients rather than students (Mok, 1999).

Those who treat education as a private good may not feel it is necessary for the state to provide schooling. As Tilak (2006) puts it, wherever private schools flourish, "the government might not feel the need for opening new government schools and as a result, the access of the poor to schools would be seriously affected" (p. 45). When education is treated as a private good it usually increases the cost burden of schooling (Colclough, 1996), pricing many families out of participating (Hill et al., 2008; Torche, 2005), and leading to disproportionate access to school choice opportunities (Lee, 1993; Levin and Belfeld, 2003).

Joseph Stiglitz (1999) further makes the case that when education is reduced to a private good, one in which individuals are only interested in their personal return, basic education will be undersupplied making UBE impossible. If education is a private good, reliant on private investment, inequality may abound because not everyone has the same rate of return on their education investment (Robeyns, 2006). This would prove to be especially problematic in countries where social stratification is already rigid and upward mobility opportunities are limited. As a corrective to this collective action problem, and to ensure supply equals demand, the state can alternatively act as the primary provider.

2. Theory and method

Universal basic education has an equalizing effect on society in that all members go through the same number of years of formal schooling. This basic equalizing effect is present even if the quality of instruction differs across and within schools. Because UBE is a move toward some degree of basic equality, its success and speed of achievement will be contingent upon the extent to which policy-makers and implementers (i.e. political and social elites) favor social equality. In our view there are two ideal-typical poles under which this can be pursued as shown in Fig. 1.

Because of the upstream ideological difference which motivates a public education approach to UBE as opposed to a mix of private

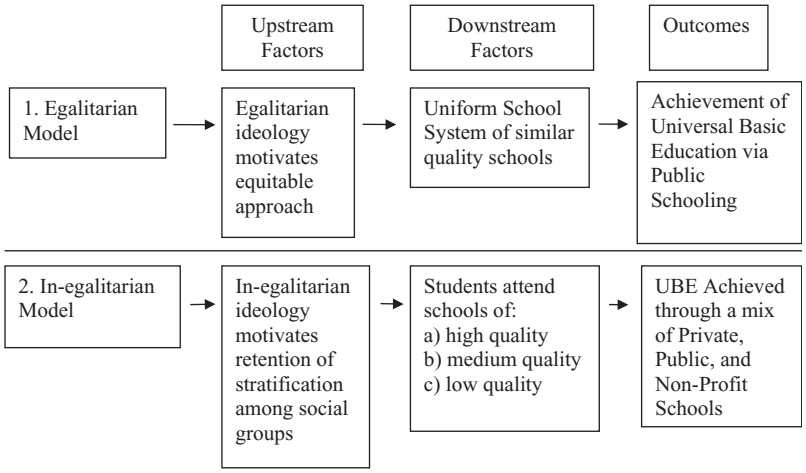

Fig. 1. Egalitarian and in-egalitarian approaches to universal basic education.

and public sector schooling, we can anticipate that predominantly public education systems will have an edge over more privatized systems of basic education when it comes to (a) school completion rates, (b) gender parity, and (c) pupils continuing their studies into upper secondary and tertiary education. As described below, in our view the world's two largest developing countries illustrate both of these pathways: China has taken the more egalitarian route while India has applied a more in-egalitarian approach.

China and India are also crucial cases for UBE because together they make up as much as 45% of the world's primary school-aged children and 35% of the world's population (Population Reference Bureau., 2013; Rao et al., 2003). In both countries, primary school enrollment rates were similar in the mid-twentieth century (Ahmed et al., 1991). In 1949, China had 24 million students and in 1951, India had 19 million students, but "by 1997, net enrolment ratios for primary education were 99 per cent for China and 71 per cent for India" (Rao et al., 2003, p. 156). In the twenty-first century, India is still behind China with higher dropout rates and lower attendance and graduation rates for basic education such that as of 2009, only four Indian states were close to UBE (Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Mizoram, Tamil Nadu) (Mehrotra, 2012).

To better understand the UBE divergence between India and China we used a "structured, focused comparison" approach. This approach asks standardized questions of selected cases over a historical period of interest while focusing solely on information relevant to the research objectives (George and Bennett, 2005). This allows us to analyze divergences between two countries with similarly large populations, the majority of whom live in rural areas. While our qualitative comparative case study is descriptive in nature (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014), it has the advantage of illustrating two different pathways to UBE whereby China has pursued a predominantly public school based approach to universalizing basic education while India has relied more heavily on the private sector.[3]

In our view, the experience of China falls closer to the egalitarian model, a model influenced by the expansion of basic education in two of its neighbors: the Soviet Union and Japan (Pepper, 1990; Vickers., 2009a). Though elementary school quality across China is not and has never been equal, the Chinese system as a whole since the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came to power in 1949 has been motivated by the egalitarian ideology of communism (Burris, 1990). By contrast, India has attempted to follow an in-egalitarian path to UBE as neither the Indian National Congress (INC) nor the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the country's two most prominent ruling political parties, have promoted a strong degree of ideological egalitarianism to counter traditionally widely held in-egalitarian attitudes with the state of Kerala being a major exception (Joshi and Yu, 2014; Joshi and McGrath, 2015). Whereas some believe an in-egalitarian route based on a mixture of public, private, and non-profit schooling is an equally plausible and alternative route to UBE, our theoretical expectation is that this route will be slower and less likely to succeed than an egalitarian approach which emphasizes public schooling. This is because UBE requires not only educating ninety percent of children, but also educating the last ten percent. The last ten percent typically live in areas that are not profitable, hard to reach, and costly to cover. The public sector will most likely have to cover these children if they are to be covered at all, but in a stratified system under which an in-egalitarian ideology remains dominant, there may not be commensurate motivation on the part of the state to cover the last ten percent (Carnoy and Samoff, 1990).

3. Comparative case studies

3.1. The case of China – Public sector route to basic education

China's efforts to universalize basic education have focused on public schools. Since the 1949 victory of the Communists in the Chinese civil war, "Chinese planners have always been concerned about how to build a strong, unified and prosperous nation" (Murphy and Johnson, 2009, p. 450). From 1949 to 1960 Soviet influence was strong in shaping China's education system and, unlike India, China relied heavily on centralized financing of education in the early years (Pepper, 1990). Private schooling at the elementary level was virtually eliminated and state promotion of compulsory primary education and mass literacy campaigns spread education to a wide portion of society starting in the early 1950s (Peterson, 1997). Curriculum was highly standardized and the People's Education Press (PEP) was the sole agency responsible for curriculum design and textbook production (Adamson, 2004). Though emphasis within basic education oscillated between meritocracy and exam-based performance ('expert'), as opposed to class background and ideological commitment to communism ('red'), both camps focused on public schooling as the means to achieve their goals. As shown in Fig. 2, mass expansion of primary schooling took off more quickly in China than in India during its first fifteen years, the same time window as the MDGs, with

[3] We ecognize that in these large countries there are subnational differences in the proliferation of private schools. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper, we believe further research should look into this.

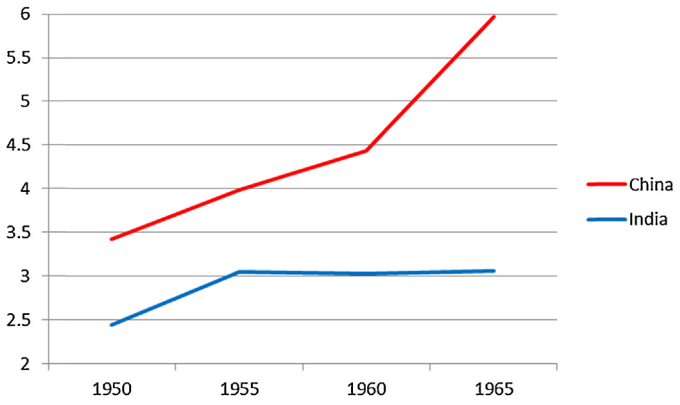

Fig. 2. Number of primary schools (per 1000 children) in China and India (1950–1965). *Data sources:* MoE (1985, p. 21), Guo (2008, p. 201), UNDESA (2011), NSB (2012), Table 20–Table 205. Note: In 1965 the number of schools in China reported by MoE (1985) was actually higher than displayed here. As that figure is likely a typo, we calculated the 1965 data point as the average of the number of schools in 1964 and 1966. "Children" refers to the population group between ages 5 and 14.

Chinese net school enrollment climbing rapidly from 25% to 62% from 1949 to 1957 (Acharya et al., 2001).

When China later embarked on its Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR) (1966–1976), emphasis shifted toward expanding basic education in the rural areas and decentralizing school management. Although many urban schools were shut down during the early years of the GPCR, the number of rural elementary and lower secondary schools increased dramatically as did the number of rural teachers, many of whom were urban dwellers assigned to teach in the countryside. As a result within a decade "the annual number of senior middle school graduates increased from less than 300,000 to well over 6,000,000" (Andreas, 2009, p. 207). Although private sector for-profit schooling was banned, non-profit public schools administered by local commune governments known as *minban*[4] schools flourished during this time. Whereas in 1946, China had 289,000 primary schools enrolling 23.7 million students, by 1983, there were 862,165 primary schools and net enrollment had reached 94% of primary school-age children (MoE, 1985).

After the Cultural Revolution, China retained its emphasis on public schools as the predominant provider of basic education, but returned to centralization and standardization in school administration. The reconstructed system "included 'regular' systems for everything: a preoccupation with fixed, uniform standards; concentration of resources in a few elite schools; school closures to promote quality; relegating 'irregular' solutions to a separate status" (Pepper, 1990, p. 71). A fair number of rural schools were also shut down at the end of the GPCR as education resources were reallocated to urban areas and tertiary education. In the countryside, the focus of education shifted away from learning skills used in rural society to preparing for exams. In 1986, the Compulsory Education Law was introduced with the aim of eliminating child labor under the age of 15 and universalizing nine years of basic education by the end of the century.

As school attendance continued to rise in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the state reduced education funding to rural schools to concentrate funding in "keypoint" (*zhongdian*) schools for top students as well as senior secondary and technical education (Pepper, 1990). As a result, townships were authorized to collect an educational surtax on agricultural and township enterprises and schools were permitted to charge miscellaneous fees to students. As Chinese public finance became more decentralized, wealthier areas were able to cover the cost of their localities' education while poorer areas were forced to hunt for funds and charge additional fees (Li and Bai, 2005). In contrast to India, where public financing of privately managed schools is common, many parts of China witnessed an increase in private financing of publicly managed schools.

Despite growing regional inequalities, China was able to make substantial progress in universalizing compulsory education and eliminating illiteracy which it had nearly completed as of 2011 (UNESCO, 2012; World Bank, 2013). In addition to public schooling, government literacy campaigns were known as one of the "two basics" (*liang ge jiben*) at the heart of educational expansion in China. A focus on standardization also led to merging all provincial education systems into a unified system with six years of primary school (*xiaoxue*), three years of lower secondary school (*chuzhong*), and three years of upper secondary school (*gaozhong*). China also maintained a highly centralized system of curriculum development in the post-GPCR period (Vickers, 2009b).

As China has shifted away from communism toward a capitalist economy, however, the introduction of marketization and privatization across the Chinese economy has made its presence felt in the education sector (Mok et al., 2009)[5]. While radical egalitarianism has been shelved, education has remained important to achieving the goals of the "four modernizations" of agriculture, industry, defense, and science/technology. More recent ideological pronouncements to construct a socialist "harmonious society" have likewise encouraged and legitimated educational expansion to improve the "quality" (*suzhi*) of China's population (Joshi, 2012). Meanwhile neoliberalism has cropped up in China in the form of school choice and choice fees especially at the high school level and in feeder schools into "keypoint" schools (Wu, 2012, 2008). However, choice fees are limited mainly to choices among public schools in China, whereas choice fees end up in the hands of the private sector in India. Private schooling is now permitted at the primary and secondary level in China, but few Chinese students attend private schools.

Why was China relatively successful in rapidly universalizing basic education? First, "China underwent a political and social revolution that marked a sharp break from the past" whereby primary education was prioritized as crucial to ideological dissemination and national development (Rao et al., 2003, p. 159). Second, owing to the regime's egalitarian ideology, the implementation of education policy was taken seriously with considerable "stress on precise implementation of State guidelines" (ibid, p. 164). Third, reformers in China believed schooling was necessary for "the moral transformation" of each individual in society and identifying "*rencai* ('talented men')" who could serve the state bureaucracy and modernize the economy (Vickers., 2009a, p. 592, 593)[6]. Fourth, the state has taken serious measures to prevent teacher absenteeism and student drop outs.

[4] As Ding (2012, pp. 41–42) points out, a *minban* school prior to 1980 referred to "a common collective investment by everyone in a village: everyone enjoyed the right to enter the school and also the obligation to support it." In contrast to private schools which are sponsored by non-governmental organizations and individuals, "*minban* schools were more like collective enterprises in terms of sponsorship—that is, they were collectively sponsored by the neighborhood." Since the 1980s, when China's original *minban* schools were phased out and replaced by centrally administered government schools, the meaning of the term *minban* has since shifted in general usage towards a synonym for private education.

[5] Prior to the 1980s, China relied heavily on *minban* schools in rural areas which were state schools largely staffed by volunteers and community members paid low wages in cash or kind which was very income regressive since it did not happen in urban areas where teachers were on the state payroll. That system largely collapsed with economic growth and too many cases of non-payment and underperformance.

[6] Although China is linguistically and culturally more homogeneous than India, it has substantial national minorities some of whom may regard public schooling as assimilationist.

"In China, teachers and schools see it as their responsibility to bring dropouts back to school. Efforts are also made to address student-specific causes of dropping out" (Rao et al., 2003, p. 164). If students are not attending school, the state can and will prosecute the parents for disobeying the law.

3.2. The case of India – Large private sector in basic education

Over the last six decades, India has chosen a mixed approach to achieving basic education involving a fairly large role for privately managed schools including both publicly funded "private aided" schools and privately funded "private unaided" schools. Article 45 of India's 1950 Constitution bound the country "to provide, within a period of ten years from the commencement of this Constitution, for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years." However, the same document also made education a responsibility of state governments rather than the central government. As a result, financing, curriculum development, and the administration of education were decentralized. From the early years, funding of education differed significantly across Indian states. Reflecting the absence of national standards, the number of years a student was required to spend in primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary also varied by state.

In contrast to China, from the 1950s to the 1970s, basic education was not a major priority for the government of India, which was more concerned with investing in higher education and the development of world-class technology institutes (Mehrotra, 2004; Weiner, 1991). Unlike the egalitarian communist economic model and political authoritarianism under a single political party pursued by China, India opted for an electoral democracy alongside gradualist Fabian socialism which prioritized urban industrialization over basic investments in rural education, health, agriculture, and infrastructure (Acharya et al., 2003; Lal, 1995). As a result the influence of traditional patriarchal and caste-based hierarchies remained strong in the countryside where most of the population lived (Kohli, 1987). However, the mood of the country began to gradually shift in the 1970s. The 1966 Kothari Commission had criticized India's failure to implement compulsory education leading, in 1976, to India's 42nd Constitutional Amendment which brought education into the "Concurrent List", making it a shared responsibility of both the central and state governments. This shift would increase the amount of public funding available for education, but did not absolve the great disparities across regions or the large role of the private sector in schooling, especially in urban areas.

Recognizing the need for more public investment in facilities and teacher training, the Government of India followed its 1986 National Education Policy with investments in a variety of schemes including Operation Blackboard (from 1987) and the National Literacy Mission (from 1990) (Radhakrishnan, 2001; Tilak, 2001). New school construction subsequently reduced the distance between children's homes and their schools by placing primary schools directly in many villages[7] and in 1995, a national-level "mid-day meal" (MDM) program was adopted to help improve overall school enrollment, attendance, and nutrition of primary school children, although results have varied significantly across the states (Drèze and Goyal, 2003; Rutledge, 2012).

Despite these measures, an assessment of India's government progress on compulsory education at the turn of the century observed,

> Achieving universal elementary education within 10 years was included ... in the Constitution of the Indian Republic. The rhetoric continues but the goal remains elusive even after 50 years of planning. Governments, both at the centre and in the states, irrespective of their ideology, have not pursued this objective seriously and with vigour. Resources allocated to education have been woefully inadequate and, with higher education absorbing a rising proportion of allocations, elementary education has remained on a semi-starvation diet. The idea of making elementary education legally compulsory for all children has not evoked much enthusiasm. Some states have enacted the necessary legislation but none has exerted itself to get the law enforced (Vaidyanthan and Nair, 2001, p. 23).

Five decades after India's independence, there were still no reported cases of parents fined or penalized for not sending their children to school, and it was widely believed that official statistics underestimated India's child laborers and "nowhere children" (which combined accounted for almost one third of all children aged 6–14), many of whom were female, who neither attend school nor engage in recorded labor activities (Jayaraj and Subramanian, 2005).

Despite India's slower progress in UBE compared to China, after its 1991 financial liberalization reforms it developed a District Primary Education Program (DPEP) utilizing foreign aid to promote primary education, devolving funds to district education planning committees, and monitoring primary and secondary education through the District Information System on Education (DISE) program (Colclough and De, 2010; Dyer, 2005). Although India's neoliberal turn in 1991 was twelve years after China's neoliberal turn in 1979, it is important to realize that India has received only limited international aid. In fact, since 1997 net aid transfers to India have been negative as repayment costs have exceeded the value of new aid received (Colclough and De, 2010). In both China and India, educational development has not been heavily driven by foreign aid.

At the start of the new millennium, India's national "movement to educate all" (*Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*) (SSA) coincided with the launching of the MDGs to increase resources to universalize basic education. The SSA program has succeeded in expanding the number of schools, hiring new teachers, and increasing student enrollment prompting some optimism, but critics argue its management on the ground has often been weak and the quality of schools and teaching has not been very high with continued high levels of student dropouts, teacher absenteeism, unutilized funds, and low quality teaching (Aiyar et al., 2009; Rogers and Vegas, 2009). The combination of minimal public investment in basic education and low quality government schooling often leads to parental exit, as those who can afford it flee to private schools, including "low-fee" private schools (De et al., 2002; Mehrotra, 2012; Ohara, 2012; PROBE, 1999; Srivastava, 2014; Tooley et al., 2007). However, "low-fee" private schools do not necessarily perform better than their public school counterparts (Chudgar and Quin, 2012) and research conducted by Härmä (2009) found that "while LFPs are greatly preferred under current conditions, what parents actually want is a well-functioning government school system" (p. 151).

The private sector plays a major role in basic education in India with the World Bank finding that "about 40 percent of urban primary schools and more than half of all secondary schools in 1987 were private" (Guo, 2008, p. 207). As shown in Fig. 3, the trend over the past three decades in India has been toward increasing growth of private schools, especially private un-aided schools which increased from 1.6% to 8.6% of primary schools and from 4.7% to 16.1% of upper primary schools (grades 6–8) between 1978–79 and 2009–10 (MHRD, 2014b). Private-unaided schools

[7] Unlike China, there has been less emphasis in India on getting children from rural areas to attend boarding schools for the delivery of elementary education. In India, this is more common in secondary schooling.

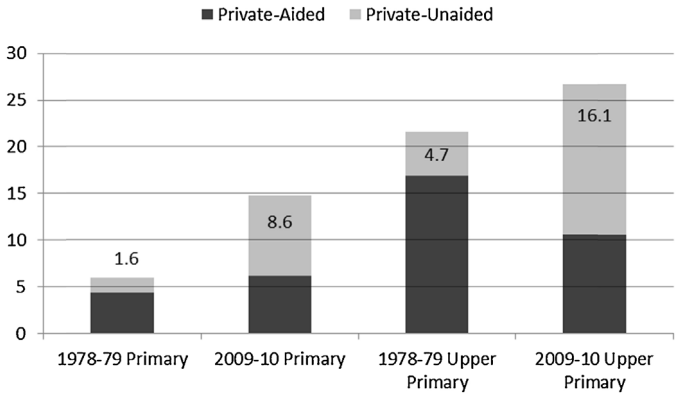

Fig. 3. Private schools as percent of all primary schools in India. *Data source:* MHRD (2014b).

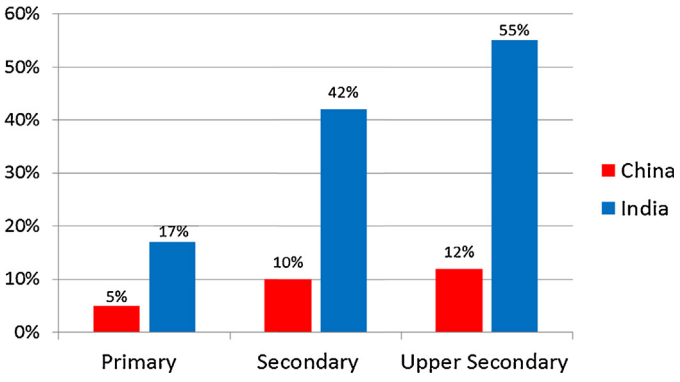

Fig. 5. Private school students (as % of Total Students) in China and India (2010). *Data sources:* UNESCO (2012) and World Bank (2013). Note: Secondary schooling includes both lower and upper secondary schools. UNESCO and the World Bank do not provide separate data on lower secondary schools.

exceed private-aided schools at all levels as shown in Fig. 4. In 2011–12, 11.2% of all primary schools were private (3% aided, 8.2% unaided), 26.4% of all upper primary schools were private (9.5% aided, 16.9% unaided), 59.4% of all secondary/high schools were private (21.8% aided, 37.6% unaided), and 66.1% of all junior colleges/intermediate schools were private (25.8% aided, 40.3% unaided) (MHRD, 2014c). As shown in Fig. 5, UNESCO (2012) estimates that 17% of primary school students, 42% of total secondary school students (both lower and upper secondary), and the majority (55%) of upper secondary school students in India are in private-aided or private-unaided schools. The contrast with China is significant.

Thus far, India has eschewed a common school system (Jha and Parvati, 2010; Mehrotra, 2012), but some argue that India's 2009 Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE) now represents a change in favor of public education by requiring all un-registered LFP schools to close within three years. The Act also requires private unaided schools to reserve at least 25% of school places for economically disadvantaged children with these costs to be reimbursed by the state (Ashley, 2012; Srivastava and Noronha, 2014). While this may expand access, it will not likely be enough to prevent dropouts from groups like street children, the very poor, girls from large families, and rural students from the lowest castes and scheduled tribes. As one study argues "the government seems to be in no hurry to adhere to the spirit of the right to education going by the number of disclaimers that are provided" and "the union government's attempt to shy away from taking primary financial responsibility of implementing the act is in keeping with its reluctance to allocate adequately for the social sector" (Jha and Parvati, 2010, p. 22). While the Government of India will be able to prosecute those running an un-recognized school, based on past experience it seems unlikely prosecutions will occur (Jha and Parvati, 2010). Thus, by not taking major steps to replace private schools with government ones, private schooling is likely to retain its place as a major player in Indian elementary education.

4. Results: Comparing China and India

4.1. School attendance and graduation

As discussed above, China has emphasized public schooling and expanded school attendance and graduation at a faster rate than India where private schools are common. From 1964 to 1982, average years of schooling in China jumped from 3.2 to 5 and from 1982 to 2000 this rose to 7.7, compared to only 4.4 mean years of schooling in India in the early 2000s (Li and Bai, 2005; Tilak, 2006). Chinese school enrolment rates and grade-for-age attainment also demonstrated improvement during the 1990s (Adams and Hannum, 2005) and China experienced a substantial decrease in the rural–urban gap, inter-regional disparities, and overall inequality in per student expenditures due to re-centralization efforts in the 2000s including the Rural Primary School Merger Program (Mo et al., 2012; Zhao, 2009). Although comparable net enrollment data for the two countries is unavailable, Fig. 6 reveals the much higher primary school gross enrollment in China over the period from 1970 to the present. Whereas Chinese gross

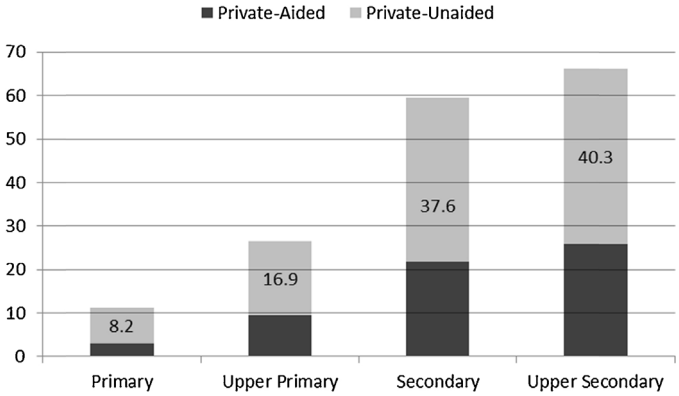

Fig. 4. Private schools as percent of all schools in India by level (2011–2012). *Data source:* MHRD (2014c).

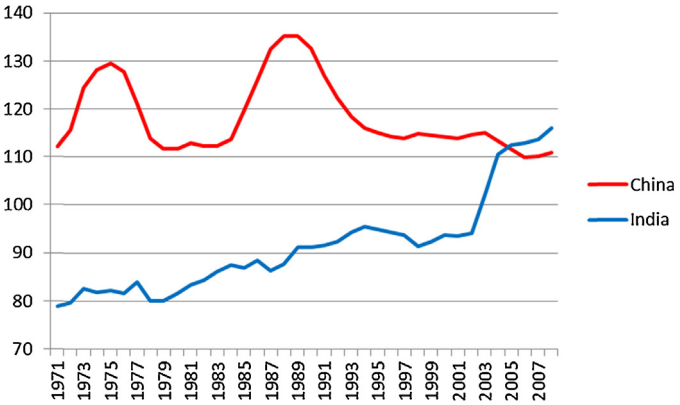

Fig. 6. Primary school gross enrollment ratio (1971–2008). *Data source:* World Bank (2013).

Table 1
Primary school completion indicators in China and India (2006–2010).

Indicators	India	China
Survival rate to grade 4	70% (2006)	96% (2009)
Youth literacy rate (age 15–24)	81.1% (2006)	99.4% (2010)
Youth illiterates	41.27 million (2006)	1.25 million (2010)

Data source: UNESCO (2012).

enrollment has been over 100% since the 1970s, India only reached this level much later in the mid-2000s.

As shown in Table 1, by 2009, China had a 96% survival rate to grade 4 compared to 70% in India. With a youth illiteracy rate below 1%, only about 1 million Chinese youths were illiterate compared to over 41 million in India where the youth illiteracy rate was 19% (UNESCO, 2012)[8]. It must also be remembered that these results are not an artifact of China currently being a richer country than India as much of the increase in Chinese enrollment happened prior to the 1980s. In fact, secondary school enrollment in China increased from 14 million to 68 million from 1965 to 1978 (Pepper, 1990) and in 1981, almost one out of five people (18%) had completed middle school (*chuzhong*) (i.e. upper primary school) in China compared to only one out of twenty-five (4%) in India (Bhalla, 1992) even though Indian per capita income was higher than in China prior to 1985.

4.2. Gender parity

As with school enrollment, China has come closer to achieving gender parity in education than India (Joshi, 2015). Toward the end of the Cultural Revolution school attendance rates in China were around 95% for both boys and girls (MoE, 1985; Pepper, 1990) and since the 1970s, girls' gross primary school enrollment ratio has consistently been over 100. As shown in Fig. 7, India took about 35 years longer to reach this level of girls' primary school enrollment. We must also remember that whereas primary school completion rates in 2009 were 96% in China they were only 70% in India, indicating a large number of dropouts, including many female students.

The narrower gender gap in China reflects broader social transformations that have taken place in China since the middle of the 20th century. China's socialist imperative of pursuing egalitarianism after 1949 extended across both classes and gender, explaining in large part why public schooling predominates in China. Likewise, in higher education, women are much more prevalent in China than in India. Relative success in gender parity compared to most developing countries is not only due to social pressure but also conscious efforts of the state in the design of the education system and in the public school curriculum (Zhao, 2011). Even in the rural northwest, Chinese parents invest equally in girls' and boys' education and mothers frequently express egalitarian views about girls' and boys' education abilities (Hannum et al., 2009)[9]. In India, where compulsory education is not enforced by penalties for non-compliance, parents are more reluctant to put girls in school, especially secondary school (Siddhu, 2011). As a result, China has a much higher female literacy rate than India as shown in Fig. 8.

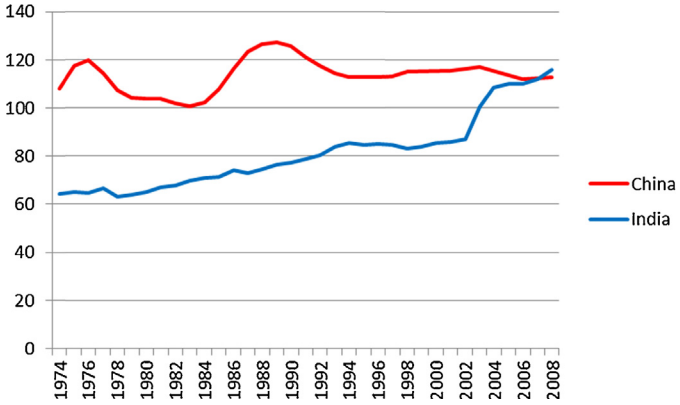

Fig. 7. Primary school girls' gross enrollment ratio (1974–2008). *Data source:* World Bank (2013).

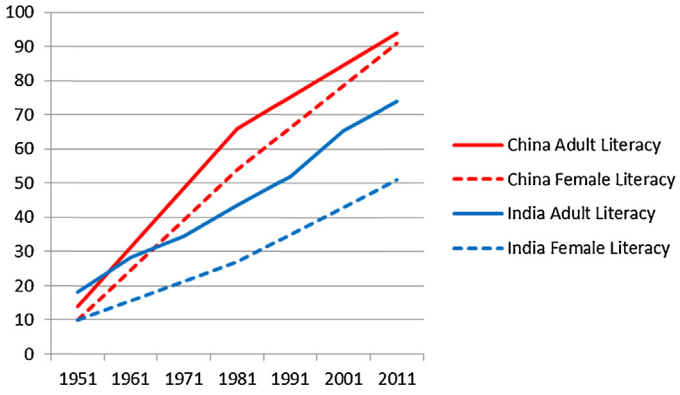

Fig. 8. Literacy rates in China and India (1951–2011). *Data sources:* Guo (2008), UNESCAP (2004) and UNESCO (2012).

4.3. Upper secondary and higher education

Whereas India has faced great difficulty in curtailing dropouts from secondary education (Lewin, 2011), in China enrollment and graduation in secondary schools and higher education exceeds that of India. Fig. 9 displays the large difference in girls' enrollment in secondary school, a gap that presently stands near twenty percent. Furthermore, Table 2 shows that in addition to China having a much higher tertiary enrollment rate (25.9%) than India (17.9%), the country sends and receives nearly three times the amount of higher education students from other countries (Fig. 10).

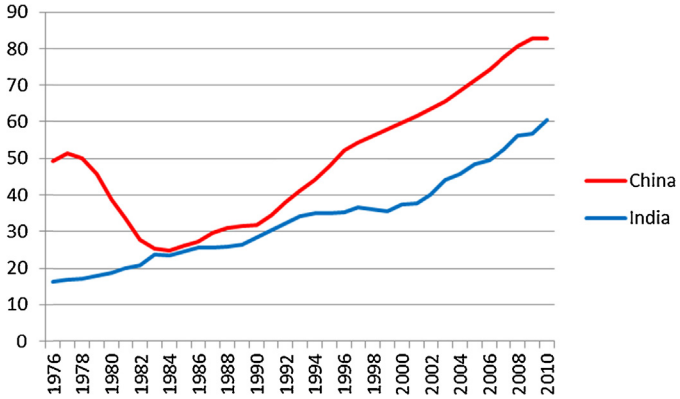

Fig. 9. Secondary school girls' gross enrollment ratio (1974–2008). *Data source:* World Bank (2013).

[8] One can question these estimates, and it has been argued that school dropout rates in China likely exceeded the official rate of 1% (Chung & Mason, 2012), but they were probably still less than the 30% rate in India.

[9] In both rural China and India there are areas with many more boys than girls as a result of sex-selective abortion and infanticide.

Table 2
Tertiary education enrollment in China and India (2010).

Indicators	India	China
Gross enrollment ratio	17.9%	25.9%
Female enrollment ratio	14.9%	27.2%
Male enrollment ratio	20.6%	24.8%
Ratio of female to male enrollment	72.6%	109.5%
International students attracted in 2006	12,374	36,386
Outbound students	200,621	562,889

Data sources: UNESCO (2012) and World Bank (2013).

5. Discussion

This paper has compared the predominately public school model of China with the mixed school model of India, suggesting that the former is most likely to expedite UBE. The speed at which China reached a gross primary school enrollment rate of at least 100% contrasts sharply with the slow and segmented expansion in India. After six decades of declaring the imperative of compulsory education, India is still shy of achieving UBE. Though it is worth noting that one of India's most successful states, Himachal Pradesh, has succeeded in this endeavor "almost entirely on government schools, with relatively little contribution from private institutions" (Godbole, 2001, p. 4612). For the country as a whole, between 25% and 33% of Indian primary school age students did not complete elementary education as of 2010, whereas in the same year elementary education was completed by over 95% of primary school age children in China. Thus, while India is still dealing with the challenges of universalizing primary education, China has more or less already finished this task and has moved on to the task of universalizing lower secondary education.

As mentioned earlier, China nearly tripled its number of primary schools between 1950 and 1965 (See fig. 2). This was made possible by China's commitment to public financing for education. In the early 1950s, Chinese public education expenditure (2.0% of GDP) was three times higher than in India (0.6% of GDP) (MoE, 2006; Tilak, 2006). While spending increased over time in India, by 1960 China still spent double the proportion of national income (3.0%) on public education as India (1.5%) (MoE, 2006; Tilak, 2006). The government of China also invested more heavily on elementary education than in India during the 1960s and 1970s. Even today, India continues to spend less on public schools than China, and since private schools make up a substantial portion of the education market, the Indian government may not feel compelled to increase public expenditure (Tilak, 2006). Results from China and India thus reinforce prior research finding a direct correlation between public elementary education expenditure and school enrollment (Bing, 2008; Bonal, 2004; Poot, 2000).

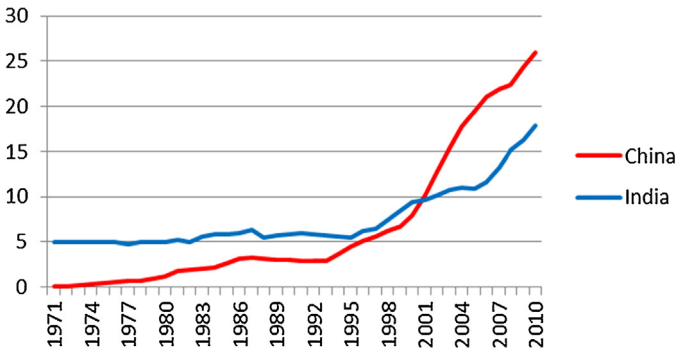

Fig. 10. Tertiary school gross enrollment rate (1971–2010). *Source:* Adapted from Joshi (2015). Note: *X*-axis represents years; *Y*-axis represents percent of tertiary school aged population enrolled in tertiary schooling.

China's early focus on expanding access to basic education also contrasts with India's concentration on higher education. China's early investments in elementary and lower secondary education have now established a strong base to the education pyramid, allowing the government to turn its attention to upper secondary and higher education. As displayed in Fig. 8, India used to have a higher share of students enrolled in higher education but due to its failure to achieve UBE, India has limited the number of individuals with the requisite education background necessary to advance to higher levels and thus has fallen behind China.

6. Conclusion

While there may be multiple routes to UBE, our examination of China and India over the past half-century leads us to believe that a predominantly public education system, with its prerequisite public expenditure, will have much greater success in rapidly implementing UBE. Although the enrollment and attendance gap in basic education between China and India has narrowed over the past decade, the time it has taken India to reach such a level is not compatible with the urgency put forth in the MDGs and other international education initiatives. Whereas China is close to completing UBE, primary school attendance in India was only 76.2% in 2012–2013 (MHRD, 2014a).

In conclusion, the presence of a large private school sector at the primary level may not necessarily prevent UBE, but it may lead to several decades of delay in implementing UBE. Finally, the substantial portion of primary and secondary school students that presently attend private schools in India, in addition to the continued support of privatization by the government – evident in the 2009 Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act and the continued subsidization of private schools – makes us question whether the delay in reaching UBE will be accompanied by the entrenchment of unequal access to higher quality schools.

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