4

INDIA

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Introduction

School types in India and low-cost private education

As commercial institutions that derive profit from providing education to a non-elite clientele, private schools have a history of more than two decades in India. In the 1970s, fees were abolished in government schools and public funding extended to a section of private schools, which came to be known as 'aided' schools. 'Unaided' private schools raise their own revenues through fees and fall in two categories – recognised (or complying with a number of conditions) and unrecognised. Recognition entitles schools to issue terminal grade completion certificates and certain government provisions, including scholarships.

Both recognised and unrecognised schools are accessed by the poor. It is the numbers of latter that has grown the most. These schools are distinct from other categories, such as schools set up by philanthropic organisations, NGOs and faith-based organisations; they rely solely on the fees collected and their functioning is governed by market mechanisms rather than ideological or religious disposition. Their rapid growth in a country where government schools offer free education (and other incentives) is as much due to their entrepreneurial efforts as the self-evident dysfunctional nature of the government schools.

From the 1990s, the Government of India launched large-scale primary and elementary education programmes that focused on generating demand and increasing provision. The result was a dramatic increase in the school-going population, but also parental dissatisfaction at the quality of government schools (though in some parts of the country there were also innovative and effective government efforts). Local entrepreneurs capitalised on this and began offering a competing, low-cost product/service. A sizeable section continued to be enrolled in both the government and private schools, using one for entitlements (such as midday meals or uniform) and the other for education. Though widely reported, data on this is unfortunately not available.

Since such a great range is available, the study looks at the following low-fee private schools:

- Those used by the poorest, fee-paying population in any area; and

- Those charging a monthly fee roughly equivalent to a little over two days' earning for a typical daily wage worker of the area.

Tracking the scale and nature of the phenomenon

The Government of India has an elaborate mechanism to collect educational statistics, with data relating to numerical and financial information on schools, examination results and the participation of specified groups. Many national and state bodies are also involved in collecting and analysing data at different levels. Delays, reliability and usability of the data are the main limitations observed. In 2003, the District Information System for Education (DISE) was introduced as the national EMIS and has now emerged as a stable and comprehensive data source. It is limited in that it does not have data on unrecognised schools, though it does have information on recognised schools (which offers the trends unfolding across the country). Despite limitations, DISE remains the one comprehensive data source. Some of the outcomes of analysing DISE data and other available research are below:

- Around 16.86 per cent (or 189,512) schools are privately managed, of which 33.46 per cent are aided schools. The proportion of children attending unrecognised schools varies from around 5–40 per cent in different states.
- Over the past few years, private schools have grown consistently both in number and in the proportion of the education sector that they represent.
- Though private schools have better infrastructure on paper, in reality they offer very poor conditions. Government schools are also closing the infrastructure gap.
- Government primary schools had an average of 2.63 teachers per school compared to 4.74 in private schools. The latter are, however, paid a fraction of the salary that a government teacher gets.
- Private schools have an enrolment somewhat higher than their share of schools, implying that they are 'eating into' government school clientele.
- There is a preponderance of disadvantaged groups (girls, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes) in government schools.
- A study of unrecognised schools in Punjab reveals that the share of unrecognised enrolment to total enrolment in recognised and unrecognised schools is as high as 26 per cent, and that the existing GER of 51.73 per cent would alter to 66.27 per cent were the enrolment into unrecognised schools taken into account. This clearly casts doubt on any planning exercise that only uses data on the registered schools as its basis.

Collecting data on unrecognised schools, finding ways of recording dual enrolment, collecting information on socio-economic background students and fees charged, and involving private schools as partners in universalisation emerge as requirements.

The demand for low-fee private education

Such research as is available confirms that the number of private schools has grown dramatically over the last decade. Apart from a compound annual growth rate of 9.5 per cent in enrolment in (primary) private schools between 1986 and 1993, the number of private-unaided primary schools increased six-fold and private-recognised schools three-fold between 1970 and 2002. Another study notes that 28 per cent of the rural population had access to fee-charging private primary schools in the same village, of which 50 per cent had been recently established and which had 40 per cent of the private school enrolment.

It is also apparent that the poor are increasingly accessing these schools. Parent perceptions of better quality and greater accountability of such schools obviously inform this decision. Scholarships for the poor in private schools in some states and the lure of an 'English Medium' education also have an impact. Though some researchers have welcomed this development, others have lamented that the mushrooming of these 'teaching shops' reflects the state's willingness to allow a 'private solution to a public deficiency.'

Case studies

Field visits were undertaken to a rural and a peri-urban location in India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, which ranks low on the Educational Development Index. All the rural schools visited were located close to, and had a high degree of migration from, government schools. They had fees ranging from 30–50 Indian rupees (Rs)[1] and functioned for considerably more days than did government schools. They had minimal, crude and cramped accommodation with hardly any facilities. A few educational 'props' such as learning material and even a computer were randomly on display, but not seem to be in use. These schools focus on *appearing* to be good schools in the eyes of consumers (often illiterate parents), who rely on these trappings to assess the quality of a school against its competitors.

Teacher-pupil ratios in the schools ranged from 1:40 to 1:50, with children coming from the most marginalised sections, from families with low socio-economic status. Most teachers had secondary education, but no other professional qualifications. Salaries in Uttar Pradesh were well below the minimum wage for unskilled labour and ranged from Rs.500–800 per month. Teachers looked upon this as a means to gain experience as they prepared for other jobs and teacher turnover is high; however, this does not trouble the schools since more teachers continue to be cheaply available.

Children are required to buy textbooks (unlike in government schools) and teaching is centred around lecturing or 'explaining' the lesson, with little effort to ensure that children have understood. Homework is heavy (though children do not have help at home). High teacher turnover prevents any continuity and teachers employ corporal punishment regularly to ensure compliance.

Parents of only a half to two-thirds of the children are able to pay even the low fees, and schools try to obtain government scholarships; these are released for the whole year, though after many delays and much commission. This compensates the schools somewhat. During vacations, teachers are not paid although fees are still being collected. Managers may make as little as Rs.2,000 a month. Often schools are opened by those from a 'higher' caste or social position, whose 'dignity' does not allow them to take up wage labour or petty shop keeping. This preserves their social standing. Also, as schools construct rooms one-at-a-time (when money comes in), they may eventually become 'owners of a large building', which serves as an incentive.

In urban areas, no child was found being provided with free education, and fee collection was regular. Extras such as uniforms (which schools were able to insist upon), transport and other charges added to the burden of parents. Interviews with parents brought out that a fee-paying school is considered to be worth it only when the child is ready, and also when he/she seems to be learning. One parent felt that, 'The quality of teaching or how well teachers teach depends on whose child it is. Teachers pay attention to those who are better off or whose father has some power .... When it comes to our children, they don't bother....'

Supply and quality issues

The quality of private school education is difficult to assess, with achievement tests being used as a proxy for quality of education. This is also limited to smaller samples, since there are no comparable nation- or state-wide tests. A study in one part of Delhi found children scoring 72–246 per cent higher than those in government schools. Another study in Lucknow, which took measures to control for social and personal factors, found that the performance of private school students was (statistically) significantly higher.

Given the miniscule coverage of such studies, many issues need to be researched further. Do private schools provide a greater 'value addition'? How do 'good' government schools compare with 'good' low-fee private schools? What would achievement results show if the tests/examinations went beyond mechanistic aspects of learning? And what is the quality of these schools per se?

In terms of school efficiency, research shows that despite higher unit costs, government schools had lower outputs, greater wastage and stagnation, and made much poorer use of resources compared to private schools.

It cannot be the poor quality of government schools alone that allows private schools to spring up, however. Competitive resourcefulness also plays a role. As the village saying goes, 'new private schools open once the crop is cut and there is money to invest.' A network of financial relationships and opening a 'coaching centre' near a government school are initial steps, along with the lure of scholarships. In many states, however, private schools prefer to remain unrecognised, since they can then

get away with ignoring government conditions and paying teachers one-fifth the government salary.

With around half the children unable to pay fees regularly, the school tends to function at a subsistence level. Various researchers have called the monthly salaries of private school teachers inhuman as they range from Rs.600–2,000 across India. Despite this, the absence rate of private teachers is similar to or lower than that of government teachers.

Many researchers have also lamented the extremely poor quality of the private schools. At present the only effort to improve the quality of low fee schools is the EQUIP (Educational Quality Improvement Programme) of Catholic Relief Services (CRS) in UP. Between 2002 and 2007, EQUIP has been implemented in around 100 schools. It organises schools in clusters and enables indicator-based and phased improvement over a long period. A clear improvement in enrolment, as well as quality parameters, including learning levels, is visible. More important, there are several instances of increased community support to these schools.

Impact on the system

There are at least five areas where the impact of the private schools may be felt on the government school system:

1. Declining enrolment in government schools. In around a quarter of the districts across the country, enrolment in government schools is actually declining (without an increase in the number of out-of-school children).
2. Subsidies to the private sector and duplication eat into government resources. Both explicit subsidies (such as direct transfers to schools) and implicit subsidies (such as land at concessional rates) add up to 'massive' levels. Dual enrolment, too, leads to duplication of resources, and needs to be researched further.
3. Planning for universalisation is rendered incomplete, because indicators such as GER and NER do not take into account children enrolled in unrecognised schools.
4. Inequity is increased as the system's performance decreases: as more powerful families withdraw from the public system, its accountability decreases. Those remaining are the more vulnerable groups, who are seen as receiving a 'favour' rather than a public service that is their right. They are blamed for not providing sufficient inputs to their children. As one of the parents interviewed said, 'How well teachers teach depends on whose child it is...'
5. Finally, the notion of education itself is diluted: this is because private schools cater to a 'pop' notion of what a good school should be, which tends to be more about appearance than reality. Unfortunately, the government is trying to imitate private schools by adopting some of their questionable practices, including the teaching of English from the first year of schooling.

Options ahead

Given that regulation of private schools focuses on inputs rather than processes or outcomes, it is difficult to envisage an improvement resulting from a tightening of such regulation. Discussion on options ahead tends to revolve around the following (limited) possibilities:

1. Bringing about a common school system – which tends to defy reality given the extent to which the private schools have grown.
2. Compelling private schools to offer free places to the poor – which requires schools to be discrimination-free and classless, which society itself is not.
3. Ensuring that the private system is properly regulated – which has not generated results over the last few decades.
4. Letting the market determine or facilitating an 'aided choice' (such as vouchers). However, the market tends to favour the 'pop' (and questionable) notion of education. Offering a completely subsidised social good, education establishments of the government are not open to the kind of 'pressure' that competition might lead to. Given its huge scale, the government system is not one that can be wished away.
5. Improving the government system – which, as the poor quality being attained by the government's EFA programme reveals, is not so easy.
6. Improving the private sector – which is also difficult, because as long as the schools can make a profit they have no incentive to improve.

In this context, the recently passed Right to Education Bill asserts every child's right by ensuring a school in every child's neighbourhood and the provision of free education to all children in government schools. However, it does not seek to alter the present provision through private, aided and unaided schools. It does make certification mandatory, which brings about dangers of corruption and undue interference in management. The Bill is also mired in debates and political pressures and at the time of writing had not been operationalised.

In a situation such as this, it is sustained and low-key action that is more likely to work. Three possibilities are indicated:

1. Collecting data from unrecognised schools, building their confidence in order to enable this;
2. Supporting the improvement of quality in private schools and their emergence as partners in universalising education; and
3. Developing process and outcome parameters for **all** schools to attain and educating parents to generate public insistence on quality. Building institutional capacity to attain these standards would be critical, as would involving stakeholders

such as parents and community representatives in monitoring the quality of the system.

Such democratic, decentralising steps might lead the multiple stakeholders to ask appropriate questions and enable them to work towards answers most suited to their contexts.

School types in India and low-cost private education

Private schools

As commercial institutions that derive profit from providing education to a non-elite clientele, private schools have a history of more than two decades in India. Up until the early 1970s, both government and private schools charged the same fee levels. Then in the early 1970s, key central legislations led to fees being abolished in government schools and the extension of public funding to private schools through grant-in-aid, which resulted in such schools also abolishing fees. Such private schools that received government funding came to be known as 'private-aided' or just 'aided' schools. They are managed by private bodies, but it is the government that selects and appoints the teachers, and regulations that apply to government schools are also in force. Thus these schools are virtually an extension of the government school system.

Contrasted to these, there are private-*unaided* (or just 'private') schools that generate their revenues through fees and are managed entirely by private bodies without any government intervention. Private schools also fall into two categories: recognised and unrecognised. Recognised private schools are those that comply to a number of conditions laid down by government (such as having their own – rather than a rented – building; having trained teachers who are paid salaries according to prescribed norms; not being located within five kilometres of a government school; and several other requirements). Recognised schools are also required to provide information to the government from time to time. In practice of course, recognition is often obtained by means other than complying with the prescribed conditions. It is commonly known that hardly any private schools that get recognition fulfil all the conditions of recognition.

Schools seek recognition because this entitles them to issue the transfer certificates needed by students to take admission into upper primary and higher classes, as well as to be eligible to receive some government provisions, including scholarships for certain categories of students. The biggest benefit of recognition, though, is that it confers a degree of legitimacy and leads to a more positive perception in the eyes of the consumers, and hence increases the likelihood of higher enrolment, leading to higher revenues.

Study of Unrecognised Schools in Punjab by Arun Mehta

'So far as recognised schools are concerned, examinations are conducted either by the school itself or by the local School Board. No information, however, is available in this regard so far as examination results reported by unrecognised schools are concerned. However, it is a common practice that children continue to enrol in unrecognised schools till terminal grade but they appear in examination conducted by a recognised school/ board. Examination, if conducted by unrecognised schools, is not recognised elsewhere. This raises the issue of dual enrolment. Children in a terminal grade enrolled in an unrecognised school are also enrolled in a recognised school, without which they cannot appear in examination conducted by a recognised school or board. They attend unrecognised schools all through the year, appear in examinations conducted by recognised schools and if passed, transit to recognised schools for further studies. This is a general perception that needs to be further probed and examined. This also raises a vital question: why do parents prefer unrecognised to recognised schools? They are ready to pay tuition and other fees, provided that quality education is ensured, or it may be because of English as the medium of instruction.'

Source: Mehta, 2005.

Schools accessed by the poor for their low fees belong to both the recognised and the unrecognised sector. However, it is apparent that the informal, unrecognised sector is the one that has witnessed the greatest growth and has emerged as a major avenue for education among the poorer sections. In keeping with this, the study focuses upon the informal private sector (the unrecognised private schools serving the poorest sections of India's population) to the fullest extent possible.

Poor-oriented, profit-based private schools

Apart from being distinct from aided and recognised schools, unrecognised private schools are also different from other categories of schools that the poor might send their children to. One major category of such schools is those set up by philanthropic organisations (usually trusts) and NGOs (both charitable and 'development' oriented). Such schools typically address the needs of identified groups of poorest or most disadvantaged children, such as those in slums or tribal areas, or children with disabilities. Sometimes schools set up by trusts favour specific communities (e.g. Gujarati children) or language/ethnic groups (such as Sanskrit schools or schools with a south Indian language as a medium of instruction being established in north India, where these languages are not spoken).

A number of NGO-run schools are intended to be 'innovative' and *adapt* the existing curriculum, pedagogies and materials or develop their own. However, the main sources of funding for these organisations remain donors – members of the public, philanthropists, donor agencies and even governments. Commitment to the needs of the poor and a strong ideological orientation (especially in the NGO schools) also tends to be visible. Of late, some corporate bodies have also stepped in to set up hundreds

of schools for the poor, as part of their corporate social responsibility. Again, the costs of such schools are underwritten by these mammoth corporate bodies, which have emerged as part of India's recent 'growth story'.

A second category of schools for the poor are those of religious/faith-based organisations. Among these, both 'traditional' (or religion-oriented) and 'modern' (or relatively secular) forms may be observed. Hindu organisations run '*gurukuls*', which offer education with an emphasis on scriptural knowledge; they also run 'Sanskrit schools', which focus on the classical language and knowledge. *Madrasas* are commonly available to poor Muslim communities across the country (there being Boards of Madrasa Education in many states). They are often the only resort for poor Muslim children, especially girls who may be allowed to attend the *madrasa* rather than the local government school.

Religious organisations also run 'modern' or secular schools that follow the state curricula, incorporate many practices of high-end private schools and charge a moderate fee. These schools are heavily subsidised by their parent bodies, are informed by the zeal and fervour of those who run them and have an openly religious orientation along with offering secular education. (However, both Christian and Hindu organisations also run many elite schools that charge high fees.)

From all such schools, therefore, the low-fee private school stands apart. It is distinguished by relying solely on the fees collected as a source of survival, and those who start such schools may have no background in education or any particular concern with it, since this is mainly a business opportunity. Such schools are compelled to attract and retain children through a range of means (which might sometimes include the actual education that takes place in them). Their functioning is governed by market mechanisms rather than any specific ideological, intellectual, religious or spiritual disposition or slant. Economic efficiency overrides all other considerations, and aggressive positioning among potential clients is what helps them compete with a large number of other inexpensive schools in the vicinity with very similar features. That the number of such schools has grown dramatically over the last two decades in a country where a widespread government education system offers free education (and other incentives) is as much due to their strenuous entrepreneurial efforts as the increasingly self-evident dysfunctional nature of the government school system in India.

The emergence of the inexpensive schools

Interestingly, in some ways the government system has actually contributed to the growth of low-fee private schools.

Starting from the 1990s, the Government of India launched large-scale primary and elementary education programmes that laid tremendous emphasis on enrolment of children (in fact, these efforts are still under way). Demand was generated through community awareness efforts throughout the country, using village contact

programmes, the electronic media, partnering thousands of NGOs, establishing village education committees (or other groups such as mother-teacher associations) and of course opening a large number of schools (only with provision actually being there could many communities consider education for their children). Apart from community mobilisation, a range of incentives was also made available as entitlements, especially to the poorest sections of society – such as midday meals, free textbooks, uniforms and the like. All this activity led to a dramatic growth in the school-going population, while also raising parental awareness and aspirations. Thus from 1999–2005, the number of primary schools in India grew from 642,000 to 767,520, with enrolment (in primary schools) increasing from 113.61 million to 131.69 million. In the same years, the GER moved from 94.9 to 108.6 for the primary level.

As government schools opened rapidly across the country and people began sending their children to them, parental dissatisfaction also began to be evident. The poor quality of the government schools was reflected in the frequently absent or 'present-but-not-teaching' teacher, low levels of learning attained by children ('my child can't even write his name after three years in school'), and the highly visible corruption that the community began to see in its dealings with the school (whether with the midday meal or other entitlements, or vis-à-vis the village education committees).

It must be said that not all government schools/efforts were of such poor quality; indeed in many states innovative measures led to a vibrant educational scenario, with one project even leading a reduction in private school enrolment in Kerala. However, *public perceptions of the poor quality of government schools* were also an extension of existing notions about government provision – for example, government health services have always been considered poorer than private ones, with people preferring to pay for the chance to regain their health rather than continue to be *'ill for free'!*

Local entrepreneurs stoked this dissatisfaction and began to offer a competing, low-cost product/service. As economic growth led to more people emerging above the poverty line and others moving into higher income brackets, the number of those who could now consider paying (a low fee) for education also began to increase. All this became possible since it was actually the government programmes that generated the demand for education.

This is also reflected in large-scale dual enrolment, whereby children draw entitlements from the government school while actually studying in a private school. (This data is unfortunately very difficult to obtain, though it is widely reported across the country). One outcome of dual enrolment is of course duplication and wastage of effort and resources (e.g. government expenditure on teachers is being made irrespective of whether they have sufficient students or whether those students are learning – indeed a recent government publication points out that the average primary student takes *9.08 years compared to the ideal of 5 years to graduate* (Mehta, 2007 [DISE,[2] Analytical Report 2005–06]). Equally critical is that the situation has led to a

distortion in the notion of education among a large section of the poor, where it is the trappings and appearance of a school, rather than the actual outcomes in the form of desired learning, that are taken to be education. Private schools have successfully created this 'image-oriented' notion, and have reaped its benefit (this is elaborated upon in later sections).

What is a low-fee school?

What would be called an inexpensive school or a low-fee school? Different researchers have used criteria such as comparison to a day's wage or similar reference points (Muralidharan & Kremer, 2006). The variation in such schools, however, is so great that such reference points lack the elasticity to cover this. Two ways of looking at these schools are as follows:

- *Low-fee private schools are typically those used by the poorest fee-paying population in any area.* Those poorer than these groups will be able to send their children only to government schools, or not educate them at all. There is also a degree of overlap in the sense that these groups definitely need and desire the entitlements available in the government system (such as the midday meal or uniforms), leading to dual enrolments. Perhaps the best term for the poorest fee-paying groups is the 'emerging poor'. Often the economic conditions and the commitment to education of these groups is of a borderline nature, implying that children may move out of schools, shift to government schools or even sit at home until another push takes place.
- 'Low-fee' may be seen as a range where the lower-middle- to lower-income groups (almost up to those bordering the poverty line) send their children. In the schools that were visited, the monthly fees (along with other school related expenses) tended to be around 2(+) days' earnings for a typical daily wage worker of the area.

Tracking the scale and nature of the phenomenon

Data availability and quality

While the Government of India (GoI) has an elaborate mechanism to collect educational statistics and release them on an annual basis, its focus has tended to be mainly on data related to government schools. The data collected is related to numerical and financial information on schools, examination results and participation of specified groups such as scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. At the state level, Directorates of Education have specialised planning and statistics cells responsible for collecting, processing and disseminating data. These are supported by a skeleton staff in the office of the district education officer. This data is collated by the Ministry of Human Resource Development at the national level and published on an annual basis, though the time lags involved reduce its usefulness. As the Statistical Commission appointed by the Government of India in 2000 noted, 'There are major

deficiencies of data,... [which] include: poor quality of data collected by the statistical system, inordinate delays, lack of effective checks, incomplete coverage, inconsistent data, poor implementation of provisions of Acts, low priority and general apathy to statistical activities, inadequate infrastructure and staff for statistical work, and lack of computerisation and its use in data compilation, processing and dissemination of data produced by different agencies.'

In 2003, the District Information System for Education (DISE, described later) was introduced as the national EMIS and the country is in a transition stage where the GoI's annual statistics have not yet been abandoned, even though DISE is in place. Apart from this, many national and state bodies are also involved in collecting and analysing data at different levels. The more readily accessible ones are mentioned below:

- All India Education Surveys of the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT), conducted every five years (though running behind time for the last three surveys), provides information on accessibility and availability of various types of facilities in schools. This survey often tends to be an unwieldy exercise, since it is implemented with the support of state education departments and lacks a permanent structure.
- The Census of India is conducted once a decade and provides comprehensive household-level data at various degrees of aggregation/disaggregation. It includes information on school attendance among the school-age population (at least on a sample basis).
- National Sample Surveys (NSS) conducted by the National Sample Survey Organisation collect information from selected households on a sample basis, with each round focusing on specific areas of social and economic activity. The NSS data classifies respondents' educational and other characteristics by social and economic status (e.g. distribution of households by their educational attainment cross-classified by income fractile group). Unfortunately, this data is not always available in full form to researchers, and the validity of NSS data has not yet been established through independent research.
- Surveys conducted by different national bodies from time to time. Organisations such as NCERT have conducted surveys of learning achievement across the country. Similarly, the All India Educational Administration Surveys are conducted by the National University of Educational Planning and Administration (NUEPA). A major NGO, Pratham, has also conducted a 'citizen's survey' called the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), involving a large number of NGOs across the country.
- State-level educational statistics. These are considerably more detailed than those available at the national level, though they vary from state to state. Only Punjab and Orissa (and to some extent Andhra Pradesh) have included unrecognised private schools in their data collection exercises (and have found that they

account for at least one-fourth the children attending school). Again, inadequate and ill-equipped staffing affects the timeliness and reliability of the data.

Each of the sources mentioned above has major limitations of its own, apart from the fact that private schools (even the aided ones) are not covered. While the data available has been examined (and used in places), this study relies mainly on the DISE, which is described below.

District Information System for Education (DISE)

It was in the mid-1990s that a computer-based EMIS was initiated in India with the launch of the large-scale District Primary Education Programme, which eventually covered half the country. This EMIS, renamed DISE by 2000, focused on creating a database on all key variables related to access, participation, teachers, facilities and infrastructure. In 2003, DISE was extended to the entire country as the official data reporting system for elementary education (DISE, 2006). By 2007, it provided a fairly stable and comprehensive time series data, which is regularly made available on an annual basis.

DISE data is collected from schools through sub-district structures (cluster resource centres and block resource centres), with data capture formats, definitions and concepts being uniform across states. Data is entered and compiled in DISE software at the district level from where it is aggregated at state and national levels. Over the last decade, DISE coverage, at least for the government educational system, has been near universal, with details of 1.04 million schools and 4.17 million teachers being available on a number of variables. Information is increasingly available over the Internet, moving towards enabling planners and decision-makers at various levels to access it. The nodal body, the National University of Educational Planning and Administration (NUEPA), also publishes this information and its analyses for wider dissemination, while raw data is available to researchers. In the last three years, DISE has also begun to include information on private schools (though the focus is mainly on aided private schools).

Limitations from the study's point of view

Some of the limitations of DISE arise due to its scale and varying skill levels of the EMIS staff, along with frequent changes of personnel in some states. Outsourcing of data entry also affects accuracy of information. A critical issue is that in some respects the coverage is not complete – with the major omission being that of private-unaided schools (and other categories, such as open schools or other kinds of informal provision being made available). Nor have many of the (recognised) private schools chosen to respond to DISE efforts (and there is no legislation mandating provision of such information). Even among private schools' data, since neither school fees is included nor the socio-economic background of the students, it is not possible to

Lack of Data

Many researchers have been frustrated by lack of data. Here, for instance, is Kingdon (2005):

'Analysis of education in India in general and of private and public schools in particular is hampered by the lack of availability of data. Despite recent improvements in the educational database in India, there is a serious paucity of reliable educational data in India. Firstly, the official data collection exercise on schools (both annually and in the periodic 'All India Education Surveys') collects information only on the so-called 'recognised' schools. Thus, large numbers of private schools are not included in the official data since they are 'unrecognised'. Secondly, coverage of even the recognised schools is incomplete. For instance, coverage of various types of special schools is patchy across different states, such as Central Schools, Army Schools, Education Guarantee Schools, schools registered with national examination boards, etc. Thirdly, enrolment figures in school-returns data are unreliable because failing/unpopular publicly-funded schools exaggerate their student numbers in order to justify their existence. Fourthly, no national-, state- or district-level data are collected on student learning achievement in primary and junior education in private and public schools; while exam boards do have achievement data for **secondary** school level, these are not publicly available to researchers and in any case, they are not linked to student, teacher and school characteristics.

extract information on whether the needs of the poor and the marginalised are being served, and to what extent.

In some state reports, consistency of data is also an issue; specific information (e.g. school-age population or age and grade of children) may also be missing. The DISE national team has used projected values from other sources to overcome these lacunae. Since entitlements such as midday meals and even the posting of teachers are linked to enrolment figures, it is possible that school personnel are sometimes wary of revealing changes that might be occurring due to the proliferation of low-fee private schools. During field visits, it is certainly apparent that the system is unable to take into account children who are enrolled in the government school (for entitlements) and actually attend the low-fee private school (for education). At times, the district and state authorities too wish to project a certain image of the state and may manipulate figures such as the percentage of children enrolled in government schools.

Despite these limitations, DISE remains the one major source of information about the school system, and the indicators it captures do provide sufficient basis to infer the evolving status of the primary and elementary education system in India. Indeed, the quality of information available in DISE is so much more recent, comprehensive and reliable than all other sources, this study uses DISE data as a major source in the sections that follow.

Data on private schools from DISE 2005–06

In the figures given below, the reference to private schools is limited to *recognised* private schools, and the ones that *chose* to share information with DISE. In that sense, although these figures provide a broad picture of the spread and nature of private schools, they are by no means an accurate representation of the situation on the ground. At the same time, a fair proportion of these recognised private schools are low-fee ones where the poor send their children. Also, as indicated earlier, children in unrecognised schools might be enrolled in recognised schools in terminal grades for purposes of obtaining valid certification, in which case data from the recognised schools might incorporate some children of unrecognised schools as well. For these reasons, and because it is the only comprehensive data source that is available, DISE is being used to identify (at least indirectly) the scale and nature of the phenomenon. Later, some state-specific available data is presented.

The bulleted points below quote the relevant data from DISE analysis.

Spread of schools

- Of the total 1,124,033 schools in India (i.e. those captured in DISE), around 83.14 per cent (or 934,521) are government-run schools, with around 16.86 per cent (or 189,512) being privately managed (i.e. they include both the aided and the unaided schools).
- Within privately managed schools, 33.46 per cent (or 63,411) are private aided schools, with the remaining 66.54 per cent (or 126,100) being private unaided schools.

The number of unrecognised private schools is not available on a national basis. However, a study conducted by Aggarwal (2000) in four districts revealed around 25 per cent children attending such schools and he estimated that across the country the figures would vary from 5–40 per cent.

- The state-wide distribution of schools run by private-aided management is as high as 56.19 per cent in Kerala.

It is not as if private schools are concentrated in areas considered to have poor quality education/system. In the case of Kerala, which is fairly high up in the Educational Development Index (an official ranking of states on various parameters), the number and percentage of private schools is the highest. Similarly, other highly-ranked states such as Karnataka also report a high percentage of private-aided schools.

The percentage of private schools is growing

- Government schools can be run by a variety of different government departments in India. The proportion of government schools run by the Department of Education consistently declined from 61.06 per cent in 2002–03 to 57.64 per cent in 2005–06.

- On an average, 63.44 per cent of the total primary schools are being run by the Department of Education itself compared to 68.46 per cent of the total independent upper primary schools being run by it.
- The percentage of schools being run by the Tribal/Social Welfare Department is only 4.51 per cent of the total schools.
- The share of schools under local authority management has declined, from 20.89 per cent in 2003–04 to 19.85 per cent of schools in 2005–06.
- Over a period of time, schools run under private-aided as well as private-unaided management have increased.
- Between 2004–05 and 2005–06, the number of private schools that reported data under DISE operations increased by 31,253 schools, which was 20.51 per cent of the private schools during the previous year.

The number of private schools being reported in DISE has been increasing over the last three years – this points not only to the increased coverage of DISE, but also to the increase in the numbers of private schools.

Infrastructure

- Irrespective of the school type, schools imparting elementary education across 604 districts in 2005–06 had an average of 3.8 classrooms.
- All schools together have an average of 39 students per classroom (rural 40 and urban 35 students per class). Government schools have a student classroom ratio of 40:1 against 29:1 in the case of schools managed by private management.
- Of the total of schools that do not have buildings, as many as 96.94 per cent of such schools are being run by government management.

'Don't Ask, Don't Tell'

The surprise is not in the absolute number of private schools, but their proliferation rate. Nearly 50 per cent of the rural private schools accounted for in the (2006) study conducted by Harvard economists Michael Kremer and Karthik Muralidharan were established after 2000, and nearly 40 per cent of private school enrolment is in these new schools Regulatory gaps and dissatisfaction with government schools are the key factors driving the demand for private schooling. There is already evidence of such a surge in Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Karnataka, Meghalaya and Delhi. In seven districts of Punjab, 86 per cent of the private schools are unrecognised. A majority of these private-unrecognised schools are operating outside the scope of policy-makers' radars. It is a 'don't ask, don't tell' situation. Officials think of it as a fringe phenomenon. Consequently, these schools do not make it into any of the education statistics compiled by education departments.

Source: Mandava, N. p.23 (2007)

It might appear that the infrastructure figures favour private schools. What is not captured in the figures is the actual space available – most private schools are little more than an extension of the owner's house and have small, hovel-like rooms with little light and ventilation. Children sit crowded in and there is no space for the teacher to move. Such sub-human conditions are not 'noticed' by children and their parents – school managers tend to think that they come from such poor conditions themselves that this is not so bad for them! Similar conditions have been reported by other researchers as well, especially De, Noronha & Samson (2002).

Basic facilities

- Only 83.07 per cent schools (including all categories) had drinking water available in 2005–06 compared to 80.60 per cent in the previous year.
- As compared to 81 per cent schools under government management, more than 93 per cent schools under private management had drinking water facilities.
- As compared to 70.57 per cent of private schools with common toilets, in the case of government management this figure is as low as 48.95 per cent.

The government system is rapidly catching up in terms of infrastructure and facilities, with the countrywide implementation of the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (as the country's EFA effort is known). With the formation of Village Education Committees and School Management Committees drawn from the parents and the community, money for school repairs, construction and maintenance is being routed through these groups. Thus, in the last few years government school infrastructure has begun to match or exceed that available in low-fee private schools. However, poor maintenance of the new infrastructure, due to lack of ownership and motivation on part of teachers, at times tends to negate the gains made.

- It is interesting to note that the percentage of primary schools with a ramp is higher (16.35 per cent) for schools under government management than those under private management (9.43 per cent).

This is mainly due to the recent emphasis on inclusion of children with disabilities in government schools, and the provision of grants for construction.

- More schools in urban areas (58.07 per cent) arranged medical check-ups for the students than schools in rural areas (52.80 per cent).
- The percentage of privately-managed schools (57.07 per cent) that arranged medical check-ups was slightly higher than government managed schools (52.71 per cent).

Staffing

- Schools managed by government have a much higher percentage of single-teacher schools (14.13 per cent) compared to privately-managed schools (2.87 per cent).

- A little more than half of the total schools are yet to be provided with regular headmasters. Fewer schools in rural areas (46.04 per cent) have headmasters than schools in urban areas (52.65 per cent).

Teacher-related indicators

- More teachers are available in urban areas and in private schools. The availability of teachers in rural areas is 3.76 teachers per school, while in urban areas it is 7.40 teachers per school. In schools managed by government there are 3.62 teachers per school, while in those managed privately there are 7.10 teachers per school.
- The average number of teachers in government schools is about half of the average number in privately-managed schools.
- All primary schools managed by government had an average of 2.63 teachers per school compared to 4.74 teachers in privately-managed schools.
- The percentage of women teachers in government schools has been low at 35.77 per cent; this compares to 47.72 per cent in the case of private schools.

Teacher-related indicators is clearly one area where private schools are better off. A vast majority of government schoolteachers handle multi-grade situations compared to those in private schools (exact figures are not available, but this may be inferred; during field visits too, no private schoolteacher was found teaching more than one grade at a time, whereas this was commonly seen in government schools). Also, it is not only the greater number of teachers per school, but their actual presence (with a higher teaching time) that makes a difference. Private schools achieve these numbers by paying teachers far less than the government schoolteacher, and appointing them on a short-term basis.

Teacher-pupil ratio

- Irrespective of school types, an improvement in teacher-pupil ratio has been observed during the period 2002–03 to 2005–06.
- All schools together show that Bihar, with 65 students per teacher, had the highest ratio and Sikkim, with 15, the lowest ratio. Bihar also has a high teacher-pupil ratio of 47 even amongst schools with private management.

Enrolment-based indicators

- The average government enrolment is as high as 90.75 per cent (of children from the school's catchment area). This compares to only 59.10 per cent for private management schools.
- 83.14 per cent of schools in India are managed by government and 16.86 per cent are managed privately.

Teacher Characteristics

A key question that follows the discussion on teacher pay in private schools is that of understanding who the private schoolteachers are, and the reasons for their being willing to work at such low salaries. Field visits suggest that the availability of these inexpensive teachers in villages is being driven by local educated youth who are typically unable to find jobs, unwilling (and seldom needed) to work in agriculture, and who are not looking at teaching as a long-term career. Teaching suits these youth well because the short working day of 4–6 hours allows them the time for further study via correspondence (distance-education) courses or in colleges that open at suitable times. The short working days also allow them to look for other, longer-term jobs on the side, and finally teaching provides them with both income and respectability while they look for other, long-term options.

.... The private schoolteachers are on average more than 10 years younger than their counterparts in the public sector, and are twice as likely to be from the village where the school is located. They are more likely to have a college degree, but also much less likely to have a professional teaching certificate. This suggests that even though they are more educated, they are not looking at teaching as a long-term career option.

This probably helps to explain why teacher absence is not even lower in private schools, given the high likelihood of action being taken for repeated absence. Since private schoolteachers are being paid a much lower wage and are often looking out for other, long-term options, there is little 'efficiency wage' cost of being fired. Thus, if pursuing other opportunities requires a certain level of absence (and an accompanying probability of action being taken) this is a trade off that the private schoolteachers are probably willing to make. However, in spite of the low wages, we see that private schools have lower teacher absence and higher teaching activity than the public schools – especially in the same village.

Source: Muralidharan & Kremer (2006) pp. 14–15.

- However, enrolment in privately-managed schools is somewhat higher than their share of schools. All government schools together had 72.61 per cent of the total elementary enrolment (primary and upper primary).
- About 90 per cent of primary schools in 2005–06 were under government management, with an enrolment of only 82.78 per cent.

The above data clearly shows that private schools are 'eating into' the clientele of government schools. If one takes into account dual enrolment, the overlap is likely to be much higher, implying that the number of children attending government schools is much less.

There is also some information that runs counter to what is reported in DISE. A countrywide sample survey of households conducted during July-October 2005 (SRI-IMRB, 2005) collected data from a sample of 87,874 households and found the following:

> Among those who are reported to be attending school in the age group 6–13, an overwhelming 84.2 per cent are in government schools, 13.3 per cent in

private-recognised schools, 1.8 per cent in private-unrecognised schools and 0.7 per cent in AIE (alternative and innovative education) centres, *Madrasas*, etc.

These figures do not fully account for the sheer number of private schools and it is likely that households reported government enrolment (for fear of losing out on entitlements) where a child was actually attending a private school.

Education for the disadvantaged

- The percentage of girls' enrolment in government-managed schools was found to be higher than in privately-managed schools.
- Notably, at all levels, government has been the main provider and caterer of the educational needs of both scheduled caste (SC) and scheduled tribe (ST) children. The percentage of SC enrolment in primary classes is as high as 84.39; schools under private managements had only 15.61 per cent of the total SC primary enrolment, and only 11.40 per cent of such enrolment in upper primary.
- Both SC and ST enrolment together had a share of 80.34 and 85.80 per cent respectively in primary and upper primary levels of education in schools under government management.

This information reinforces the commonly held view that people prefer to educate their daughters in government schools and pay fees for their sons' education. It also indicates that government school is clearly the main recourse for the more disadvantaged groups. Conversely, private schools are educating those who have more supportive conditions at home and in society. The struggles that parents undertake to educate their children are also a sign of parental will, which likely impacts the nature of the child's participation in school. Thus improved levels of learning attained by these children are not necessarily a function of the school alone (all things not being same). Research that argues in favour of private schools on the grounds of the learning achievement of children may not be taking into account that two very different kinds of student populations are being compared.

A study of unrecognised private schools in Punjab

In 2005, the state of Punjab expanded its DISE to cover unrecognised schools. As a pilot, this was implemented in seven of the 17 districts of the state. An analysis of this data was completed by Mehta (2005) of NUEPA, and is extensively quoted below to highlight the kind of information that such data might throw up in many parts of the country. Unfortunately, the fee charged was not included as an indicator, nor was the socio-economic background of students, which makes it difficult to separate the information pertaining to the low-fee private school. The present data includes high-fee, unrecognised private schools (such schools opt to remain unrecognised since they do not wish to come under government purview in any manner and rely

on their own reputation for success), which may tend to skew the analysis somewhat. [Comments in square brackets are the authors' own interpolations.]

From Mehta's Punjab study

The main objectives of the present study are to examine the pattern and number of unrecognised schools and enrolment in them.

The *school and teacher related indicators* reveal that unrecognised schools differ from recognised schools mainly in the following aspects:

- Unrecognised schools are less rural than the recognised schools;
- Unrecognised schools have slightly higher percentage of co-educational schools than the recognised schools. [This increases the consumer base];
- Unrecognised schools are generally more than one-teacher schools compared to recognised schools, which have relatively more single-teacher schools;
- Unrecognised schools have more favourable student-classroom and teacher-pupil ratios than the recognised schools;
- Unrecognised schools have a much greater percentage of female teachers than the recognised schools;
- Although the majority of the teachers in the unrecognised schools do not possess any professional teaching qualification, teachers in unrecognised schools are still better qualified than teachers in recognised schools;
- The percentage of English-medium unrecognised schools is much higher than the percentage of English-medium recognised schools; and
- Unrecognised schools do not have provision for in-service training of teachers, whereas more than half of the recognised school teachers had received in-service training during the previous year.

With regard to *facilities in unrecognised schools,* it is observed that:

- Unrecognised schools have more pre-primary sections attached to them than the recognised schools;
- School facilities are generally better in unrecognised schools than in the recognised ones; and
- The following aspects are more favourable in unrecognised schools compared to recognised schools: average number of instructional rooms, rooms in good condition, single-classroom schools, average number of teachers, computers in schools, common and girls' toilets, electricity connection, drinking water facilities etc.

Enrolment indicators reveal that unrecognised schools differ from recognised schools in the following aspects [authors' emphases]:

- *A large number of children are enrolled in unrecognised schools, which is more than 37 per cent of total enrolment in recognised schools;*
- *Against every three students enrolled in recognised schools, more than one is enrolled in unrecognised schools;*
- *The share of unrecognised enrolment to total enrolment in recognised and unrecognised schools is as high as 26 per cent;*
- The percentage of boys' enrolment in unrecognised schools is a bit higher than girls' enrolment;
- Compared to a GPI (Gender Parity Index) in elementary enrolment of 0.88 in recognised schools, the same in unrecognised schools is low at 0.68;
- For every 100 boys there are only 68 girls enrolled in unrecognised schools. [This is in keeping with the general perception of 'government schools for daughters, private schools for sons'];
- Percentage of enrolment in grade 1 in total primary enrolment is a bit higher for unrecognised schools than for recognised schools. [This indicates that parents often start children's education in such schools before shifting them to recognised schools as terminal grades approach];
- Average enrolment in unrecognised schools is higher than in recognised schools;
- Of the total SC enrolment, 9.25 per cent are enrolled in unrecognised and 90.75 per cent in recognised schools;
- More than 37 per cent of the total 947,000 out-of-school 6–14 year olds are enrolled in unrecognised schools. [This data reveals the extent to which the state government's universalisation effort may be functioning in the dark];
- *Against a GER of 51.73 per cent, the corresponding GER based on both recognised and unrecognised enrolment is 66.27 per cent;* and
- The percentage of children passing out terminal grade 5 and 8 with 60 per cent and above marks is higher in unrecognised schools than in recognised schools.

Improving data availability

The various limitations in available data have manifested themselves in the sections above and cast serious doubt on India's educational planning exercises. As Arun Mehta points out in the Punjab study quoted above:

'It is evident from enrolment statistics presented above that planning exercises based on enrolment data only from formal education system is not adequate. Unless enrolment in unrecognised sector is considered, the true picture of universal enrolment will never be known. The estimate of out-of-school children based on enrolment in

recognised schools is a gross over-estimation of true number of out-of-school children.'

Given the apparent extent and rapidity of the phenomenon, much greater research is needed on the low-fee private school. Over the last three years, of the literally hundreds of research studies commissioned across India under the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA, or the EFA programme), only four focused on private schools at all, and none specifically on unrecognised ones.

While the data availability situation has improved greatly over the years, especially with the introduction of DISE, a number of improvements still need to be built upon what has already been achieved. These improvements are suggested below:

- Clearly, data on unrecognised private schools needs to be collected, and fairly urgently. Although this is a challenging task, an administrative infrastructure already exists in the form of cluster and block resource centres, which would enable the government to extend the coverage of DISE to unrecognised schools (as was shown by the Punjab study, which needed just six months to obtain this information in seven districts). With the surge in IT-enabled and mobile services in India, these could easily be used to ensure rapid and accurate collection of data (e.g. the use of cheap, hand-held PDA-type devices using touch-screens instead of paper would reduce both cost and time, while increasing reliability, since a second round of data entry would not be involved).
- How can dual enrolment be recorded? This is a task in itself and needs to be addressed by a specialist group; what is apparent is that it is this particular factor that is compromising UPE data the most, thus affecting resource allocation and planning. (Such information would of course raise the policy issue of whether entitlements should still be issued to children who are paying fees to attend other schools, since the government is paying also for provision such as teachers, space and material that are not being utilised.)
- Capacity enhancement of personnel involved in data collection, analysis etc. at various levels is also needed in order to ensure the necessary coverage, reliability and consistency. At the same time, it is noted that there is insufficient use of available information to support planning and decision-making. Towards this, too, personnel at various levels need to be oriented in actually using the data they are responsible for.
- It is crucial to include the socio-economic background of students, as this would permit the kind of disaggregation needed (at present, it appears that political/administrative sensitivities have led to this not being permitted in DISE). This also makes it difficult to assess the degree of 'value addition' that the different categories of schools bring to children.
- Since information on fees and other requisites that families have to pay for is not collected (even from recognised schools), this makes it difficult to assess the cost

to learners, or to take an informed view on the nature of provision (e.g. should 'school vouchers' be supported?) or the effectiveness of expenditure on education.

- All schools, government or private, recognised or unrecognised, tend to suspect government's reasons for data collection and fear penal action on some ground or another. At the same time, it is not mandatory for schools to share information. This naturally makes it difficult to obtain information, and there is a need to see schools as partners in the educational-planning process. Ways and means of reaching out to schools that would involve them in data collection (rather than their merely being subject to it) are needed, along with 'confidence-building' measures to convince schools that the purpose is not to ferret out flaws.

Some research questions

Among the key questions that need to be addressed, and might be better addressed if adequate information is made available as above, are:

- Why do schools choose to remain unrecognised?
- Why do parents choose unrecognised schools (sometimes over recognised ones), and why is such a strong rejection of the government school system visible even with provision of entitlements? This question has been addressed by different researchers and is much discussed; perhaps the answers are self-evident, but tracking children and the reasons for their shift still needs to be undertaken.
- Can the community or its representatives in the various school management committees be involved in understanding and using data regarding their children to bring about improvement?
- What factors are likely to enhance school performance and enable children to attain higher learning levels across both scholastic and non-scholastic objectives (the latter are not recorded anywhere at present)?

The demand for low-fee private education

The growth of private provision

Private schools have recorded a spurt in growth over the last decade and different researchers have recorded this phenomenon.

- In 1999, the Public Report on Basic Education (PROBE) pointed out that '36 per cent of the children in Uttar Pradesh, one of the poorest states in India, actually attend private schools', a number that might be difficult to verify now. Interestingly, this was regarded as a 'positive sign of the rising demand for education.'
- In his study 'Public and Private Partnership in Primary Education in India' Aggarwal (2000) observed that the enrolment (to primary classes) in private-

aided schools rose at a compounded annual growth rate of 9.5 per cent between 1986 and 1993, while the corresponding figure for government/local body schools was 1.4 per cent. He estimated that the number of unrecognised schools was doubling every five years.

- While the number of private-unaided primary schools increased six-fold and private-recognised schools three-fold between 1970 and 2002, the number of government and local body schools fell by over 10 percentage points during the same period (Majumdar, 2003; Srivastava, 2007).

While the exact extent of low-fee private schools is difficult to ascertain, the scale may be estimated looking at data emerging from studies such as those by Muralidharan & Kremer (2006) and the Pratham ASER report (2005), of nationally representative samples of rural India. These showed the following:

- 28 per cent of the rural population had access to fee-charging private primary schools in the same village;
- 16.4 per cent of children aged 6–14 attended fee-charging private schools;
- nearly 50 per cent of these schools had been recently established (that is, 5 or fewer years before the survey); and
- nearly 40 per cent of private-school enrolment was in these recently-established schools.

In urban areas, the numbers and proportion of enrolment in private schools is widely believed to be significantly higher.

One school of researchers has welcomed this proliferation of private schools as a viable alternative being accessed by the poor. Prominent among them is Prof Tooley (2000), the title of one his studies itself capturing this view: 'The private sector serving the educational needs of the poor'. However, such 'mushrooming' does not find favour with everyone, with some taking an aggrieved tone at the state's willingness to allow a 'private solution to a public deficiency' (Majumdar, 2003), or at the encouragement of such 'teaching shops' by the government. The fact that the ideal of the common school system, long promised in various policies, has been relinquished and 'different types of schools for different sections' allowed to emerge (Srivastava, 2007) is also lamented. There is a feeling also that in pursuit of their own agendas, international donors (who were allowed entry to the education sector from the mid-1990s) have further stratified primary education (e.g. by supporting 'alternative education' models, or 'education guarantee' schools that are less equipped than formal primary schools in terms of staffing and infrastructure), compromising the quality of education that deprived children receive.

The inferiority of private schools also comes in for criticism. Srivastava (2007) points out that 'the situation has worsened further thanks to the unregulated mushrooming of English-medium nursery and primary schools, where classes are held all in one

room, on rooftops and under thatched roofs as feeders to the "teaching shops".' Similarly, the SV Chittibabu Commission report (2003) on Tamil Nadu found nearly 23 per cent of the private schools to be unrecognised, 10 per cent of urban schools and 16 per cent of rural schools functioning in premises smaller than 1,000sq.ft (93m^2), with 57 per cent of the teachers being untrained, and 67 per cent of them being paid less than Rs.2,000 a month.

Private school clientele

In their 2006 study, Muralidharan & Kremer found that though the parents of children attending private schools were more educated and possessed a higher level of assets,

> 'the absolute level of education of the parents of the children attending private schools is actually quite low. For instance, 20 per cent of the private school students are first-generation learners, which while lower than the 30 per cent in public schools, is still quite significant. Thus while private schools cater to the better off in the rural areas, many of their students come from disadvantaged backgrounds. This is consistent with the results of Tooley and Dixon (2003) who mention that the majority of private schools in India cater to the poor (though their observation is based on an urban study)...'

A survey conducted by the Centre for Civil Society (in 2007) found that:

- 14 per cent of children from socio-economic class (SEC) C, D, E households sent their children to private-recognised schools;
- 28 per cent of children from SEC C households sent their children to private-recognised schools; and
- 14 per cent of children from SEC C households go to private Hindi-medium schools.

Note: The SECs – socio-economic classes – for this study were defined as being:

C = petty trader who has completed his/her high school

D = petty trader with up to four years of school education only

E = illiterate person

Interestingly, this survey also found the following:

- Of the 95 per cent of government schoolteachers who had children in schools or colleges, 37 per cent were sending their children to private schools.

Why the poor choose private schools

With millions of parents making the choice of paying for their children to attend private school even in a context where relatively lower cost or even free government

education is available, the reason is fairly obvious. As the PROBE report (1999) pointed out:

- Poor parents perceive the quality of the private schools to be higher than that of government schools;
- This is not restricted to perception, and the quality is actually higher in terms of:
  - level of teaching activity and time spent on teaching
  - higher levels of teacher activity and closer attention to students; and
- The greater accountability of private schools to parents also results in better quality of education.

In the process documentation of EQUIP, a programme to bring about quality improvement in a group of low-fee private schools in UP, Catholic Relief Services (2006) lists the following reasons articulated by parents for sending children to private schools:

1. Government schools often have insufficient teachers posted to them.
2. If teachers have indeed been posted, they are often absent, with the most quoted reason being their involvement in supporting 'administrative' duties.
3. The dysfunctional nature of the government school is also visible in poor daily attendance rates. [Recent surveys have put daily student attendance rates in government schools in UP as being below 60 per cent.] The poor quality of education in these schools and the need to supplement family incomes, e.g. by working in the fields, keeps students away. Consequently, parents who are willing to make the effort to educate their children conclude that such a school is not for their children.
4. Private schools also offer a scholarship of Rs.300 per annum (from the Social Welfare Board) for a percentage of children, which lures parents. Schools also admit a number of children for free or adjust the fees against the scholarship amount when it does come.

Professor Tooley, in his study 'Serving the needs of the poor: the private education sector in developing countries' (2001) also notes the existence of 'a significant number of scholarships – that is, free places for even poorer students. The free places were allocated by the School Correspondent on the basis of claims of need checked informally in the community. Five of the schools had between 15 and 20 per cent of students in free school places.'

Apart from the economics of demand and supply, Mehta (2005) points out that yet another reason for the demand for these schools is that they are popularly known as 'English-medium' schools, and it is this that attracts parents.

Case studies

Background

In order to study the situation of a small set of low-fee private schools, the authors selected clusters of schools located largely in two areas of Uttar Pradesh (UP). As India's largest state, as well as among those considered the least developed educationally, UP is critical to India's universalisation efforts.

Schools in two kinds of settings were observed and analysed. The first, in rural areas, were located around 35–42km from Lucknow, the state capital. The second set was located in a peri-urban area in the National Capital Region, near an industrial township. Apart from observation visits, interviews with a cross section of stakeholders and analysis of available documents were relied upon.

Rural schools

School profile

Four rural schools were visited, 35–42km away from Lucknow. The schools were established from 1974–2007. Although each of these villages had government schools, they also had a large number of private schools.

All schools, whether private or government, were located in close proximity, often being adjacent or just across the street from one another. Clearly, there had been migration from the government to the private schools. School managers also reported that a large number of students were still enrolled in the government school, and drew entitlements (such as uniform, scholarships or books, and at times also meals) from there. (Although the researchers could not gather data on the exact extent of this phenomenon, such dual enrolment is widely reported across the country, as cited elsewhere in this book.)

Private school principals and managers attribute the migration of students from government schools to theirs to repeated/regular absence of government schoolteachers, and because 'even when they come, they do not teach' since they have a permanent job (i.e. a lifetime appointment). This was apparent as the researchers passed the government schools. One manager pointed out how the government

Table 4.1 Rural village schools

Village	*Government schools*	*Private schools*	*Reported attendance in government schools*
Tikaitganj	4	10	Poor
Niguar	1	2	Poor
Rewan seewan	1	4	Good
Sansanwar	3	7	Poor

schoolteachers in the school opposite his school arrived two hours late (since the bus from Lucknow arrived at that time) and left well before school ended (again, to synchronise with the bus timings).

The private schools were all individually owned, with the owner (often called the 'manager') appointing a principal to run the school. Owners had an education up to class 12 or a Bachelor's degree (BA), while the principal's education was usually BA or a Master's degree (MA), graduate or postgraduate.

All schools, except one, were to receive government 'recognition' soon after the time of writing. Only one school had classes up to primary, while others had up to class 10, either in one location or in the form of a 'branch' nearby.

The admission fee charged in the schools was Rs.50 per month, with only the most remote one not charging any admission fee. The monthly fee for primary-elementary classes was Rs.30–35, while for classes 9 and 10 it was Rs.60. No other fees were charged through the year.

The schools run from 7.30/8.00am to 1.00pm, with fewer holidays than government schools (to demonstrate that they are 'different' from government schools). In fact, the private schools claim to be working for as many as 280 days per annum; government school officially have only 220–240 days, of which they actually function for around 180 days or less (due to various reasons).

Infrastructure

In terms of space and facilities, the private schools had the absolute minimum. Three categories of infrastructure could be seen: rooms, thatched structures with no walls and open-air space. All spaces were narrow and congested. Where there were rooms, they had been crudely put together (i.e. unplastered bricks joined with mud). Every inch was covered with tables/benches or mats, children sitting elbow to elbow, with no space to move about. These rooms were about as wide as a (narrow) corridor would be, with poor ventilation and low lighting. The sheds had no walls, being supported on bamboo/brick pillars, but were equally congested. Open-air space was not really available (i.e. space for children to play outside). Two of the schools had small, open-air classroom space only. During the rain, these classes cannot be held. No toilets were in evidence, though all owners claimed that they were 'under construction'.

The private schools were not really 'compounds' – rather they existed more as a collection of rooms/spaces not necessarily connected with each other, with rooms having been constructed as and when money came in. Hence, no boundary walls/gates were visible in any school, with one or two rooms being an extension of the owner's house.

On the whole, though, children did not display any discomfort. It is likely they have no expectations/experience of better infrastructure.

A few charts and books could be seen, although none of the schools had a library. One school had a computer, which staff claimed to use with children; however, it was quite obvious that this was more of a 'selling point' rather than something for actual use. Interestingly, none of the schools had electricity, with the computer being placed in a room in the owner's house adjacent to the school.

Appearances attract enrolment

In the running of the private schools, a background in education or any other real competence in the field is not considered important. On being asked his qualifications in a routine manner, one of the principals-cum-managers informed the researchers that he failed in his grade 12 exams and consequently opened the school the next year.

One clear impression was that since there is a great deal of competition among private schools, it is more important for them to *appear* to be good schools or at least to acquire the reputation, rather than actually *being* good schools. The school signboard unfailingly emphasises how it is an 'English-medium' school (irrespective of the fact that no teacher can speak/understand English). A building and a gate, where affordable, testify to the 'solidity' of the school. 'Trappings' that would classify these as schools are strategically displayed – a chart or two above the principal's chair, thick registers on the desks (with most pages blank), the computer mentioned earlier, a few teaching aids and the like. There was little evidence of these trappings actually being put to use – education is actually being *staged*. Schools use some of the above devices to distinguish themselves from the competition. Indeed, some of the managers of the visited schools were emphatic that the visit of the researchers would show the public that their school was better 'since it is being visited by outsiders.'

Students

The private schools had student populations ranging from 250–650, which was easily more than the daily attendance in any government school nearby. Where the school taught only up to primary level, the number of students was around 250. Only in one school was the number of boys and girls equal, while in others, the number of boys was much greater. Except in the nursery class, boys and girls were seated separately. A typical class had only one section, with 30–40 students. As a whole, schools had teacher-pupil ratios from 1:40 to 1:50.

Children came from families considered to have low socio-economic status – mainly poor and marginalised sections, including those from scheduled castes, illiterate/uneducated and/or minority communities (mainly Muslim).

Without exception, the capacity of the target population to pay the fees was low to very low.

Teachers

Private schools had between 5–15 teachers, typically one for 40–50 students. In all such schools, the ratio of female teachers was marginally higher than in government schools and one of the managers stated that they preferred to have more female teachers since this leads to better teacher retention; parents are also more comfortable sending girl children to school if there are female teachers. Teachers usually have a higher secondary education (i.e. class 12), with only one or two teachers having completed a college degree (BA). There was no teacher with any professional qualification or pre-service training. Nor are teachers oriented in any way: and just start teaching from the day they join a school.

The salaries low-fee private school teachers are paid can only be described as inhuman. Most teachers are paid Rs.500–800/month, a few are paid Rs.800–1,000 and only one teacher was found to be paid Rs.1,500. Unemployment being so high among the educated, getting teachers to work at this rate (below minimum wage, which is Rs.100/day for unskilled labour as per government notification) is not difficult. Teachers also feel that they are gaining some experience (if not money) rather than sitting idle (they would not take up wage labour since they are 'educated'). One motivation for teachers is that their experience might help them in the selection tests conducted by the state Public Service Commission, which need to be cleared by any aspirant for a stable government job. For teachers, therefore, work in such schools is merely a stepping-stone to other opportunities and there is naturally a very high turnover rate. This also results in a fair proportion of teachers being new and inexperienced, and therefore cheaply available.

There is no real 'contract' between teacher and school, and neither party needs to give any notice for termination. This leaves teachers vulnerable to being dismissed at any time. Schools can deal with turnover without much difficulty, since there are always many educated unemployed persons available; thus, the situation is definitely weighted against the teacher in many ways.

This surplus of teachers is not likely to dry up for quite some time to come. This is because the general unemployment rate in India is very high. Those with 10–12 years of education do not wish to work in agriculture, wage labour or skilled labour and do not have access to vocational/technical education. Hence the market is full of a large number of unemployed youth on the lookout for experience, if not actual work/jobs. At the same time many states, such as Karnataka, have far too many trained teachers (who have been through pre-service courses), but insufficient jobs in government schools – which have a higher salary and far better employment terms. The annual government schoolteacher intake in this state would be in the region of 8,000 (less in some years), while the supply of newly-trained would-be teachers is around 60,000–80,000.

Education/classroom 'processes'

Children's attendance in private low-fee schools varies greatly on a daily basis, ranging from 50–90 per cent. In one school, a large number of the children were absent since they had to be present the next day in clean uniform for the Independence Day function (15 August) and, having only one set of clothes, they were washing them that day.

There is no concept of a clear curriculum or syllabus, with only the textbooks serving as a means of determining what needs to be done. Textbooks from local private publishers are used in private schools. Unlike in government schools, children are required to buy these textbooks, which strain the budget of these families. (Private textbook publishers provide many incentives to these schools for 'selecting' their textbooks.) The only exception is in class 5, for maths and Hindi; here, government school textbooks are used since children appear for the government school board examination at the end of class 5.

Teaching is not always very structured, with there being only a loose timetable that is often not adhered to. Teachers enter the class and start teaching from wherever the lesson had been left off previously. 'Teaching' usually means lecturing/'explaining' the lesson, with little scope for ensuring that all children have followed what is going on. Homework is given and even 'seen' (if not corrected), though there is usually no family help available to children at home. The high turnover of teachers also prevents any continuity through the year.

A major emphasis is on 'discipline', with corporal punishment being meted out to both boys and girls.

Relations with parents, community

The private schools in the case study try to organise quarterly (and in one case monthly) meetings with parents, though often it is school issues that are discussed rather than children's progress, and attendance is usually poor. There are some instances of community contribution in the form of a fan or a couple of chairs having been donated to the school. As one principal said, however, 'That they send children to our school, is their contribution.'

The economics of a low-fee private school

Though the monthly fee is about as low as it is possible to charge (it amounts to less than half of a day's minimum wage fixed for unskilled labour), the levels of poverty are such that many families are unable to pay, at least not regularly. In a typical month, the fees may come in for only around half the children. That is, if 600 students are enrolled, only around 300–400 will pay the fees. There is also a charitable disposition, and students who are unable to pay the fees tend to be treated a little more kindly than in the government school – as they come from 'our own community'.

Since there are government provisions for scholarships for poor students (Rs.300/ year for primary students, and Rs.480 for those in higher classes), the schools try hard to obtain as many of these as possible. The scholarship money comes direct to the school; they deduct the fee and pass on the remainder to the family. Often this might amount to a relatively large sum coming in one go, say Rs.5,000 for around 10 children who have been taught free for a whole year. This source of income compensates the schools somewhat. Such scholarships are not always sure, however, and schools pursue them vigorously throughout much of the year (often government schools are given preference over private schools, and it is as much 'networking' as merit that results in securing the scholarships).

Vacations are yet another source of income. Both government and private schools have only about a month's vacation during summer, and break during winter as well. Fees are taken from children during this period, although teachers' salaries are not paid during this time (especially during the summer vacation).

Typically, for 600 children there are around nine teachers. The salary of three will be a little higher (Rs.800–1,000 per month), five being paid between Rs.500–800, with the manager him/herself getting around Rs.1,000 per month. Schools also spend Rs.5,000–10,000 for maintenance, repair etc. annually (the building is so poorly made that it needs this). Managers also take a fee from the teachers they send for in-service training conducted anywhere. All-in-all, around Rs.2,000 is saved per month, and Rs.5,000–7,000 during the summer months.

This is not always sufficient as an economic motive, since a skilled labourer could earn more. However, there is a notion of 'dignity' attached to running a school, something 'educated' and 'civilised' that is accorded higher status. Many of the schools are opened by those of 'higher' or more 'powerful' castes who would find it difficult to take up wage labour/small business such as shopkeeping since that is considered to be of low status; indeed, they can take up such opportunities only if they migrate to other areas, such as cities. Neither do they have the skills or resources other than their social position, and setting up a school provides an avenue that 'saves face' and even builds on the legitimacy of their social standing, despite a complete lack of professional background in education.

There is another motivation for those who start these schools – it is the opportunity to become the 'owners of a large building' over a period of time. In the beginning when the school is unknown, it tends to have fewer students and limited inflow of money. Rooms are thus built over a period of time, as and when the money comes in. So while school owners may not earn much money, they do become owners of a building(s) over a period of time, depending on how 'successful' the school is (measured in numbers of students and the years it has run without closing down).

Finally, owners also hope that one day theirs will become a 'recognised' school and the government will make them a semi-aided/aided institution, which will then fund their requirements (except the building).

Peri-urban schools

School profile

Three schools were seen in the National Capital Region of Delhi. School 1 was located in an urban residential area; schools 2 and 3 were in urban villages, with school 2 being in an unauthorised residential area (with very inferior living conditions, but not yet declared a slum) next to a 'posh'/more upmarket area. School 3 was a little more remote, being located in a peri-urban area, not yet touched by the 'modernity' visible in other parts; most people here commute daily to upper-/middle-income areas to work as domestic help/wage labour. All schools were around 20–30km from central Delhi. School 1 has children from a middle-class background, with the accompanying 'push' to go to school. School 2 has children from poor families, a majority working as domestic and support staff in the houses in the richer area.

Though there are other government schools in the region, urban and peri-urban areas appear to be less well serviced by the government school system than rural areas. (This is partly due to the greater emphasis on rural areas in the two major countrywide primary and elementary education programmes of the GoI, i.e. the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) and SSA).

As in the rural areas, low-fee private schools in urban and peri-urban areas are individually owned (as contrasted with the high-fee private schools that are usually trust owned).

School 1 (Noida Sector 19)

From among all the schools observed, this urban low-fee school came the closest to approximating the high-fee private school. Established in 1987, the school is managed by a couple (but owned by the husband), and a principal has been appointed (since the government directive is that the owner cannot be the principal). The school has been recognised by the government and has classes from grades 1 to 12.

The school charges an admission fee of Rs.150, along with a monthly fee of Rs.400. This might appear higher compared to other areas, but would be considered low-fee in this context: regular private schools charging in the range of Rs.1,500–Rs.5,000 per month in this area while those considered high-end charging over Rs.10,000–25,000 per month.

The school hours are from 8.30 am–1.45 pm, with the usual holidays as in other private schools. The total number of teaching days amounts to 180–200, again like other large private schools.

Infrastructure

The school has a large building, with sufficient indoor as well as outdoor space. This is considered an outward sign that the school is established and has been running for a long time. This school also started small; as in the case of rural schools, it added a little every year so that during the course of a decade an impressive property has been created.

All classes have a room to themselves (in rural schools they often share a room) and the usual charts and teaching aids are visible in most rooms. Functional furniture (desks and chairs) is available in all rooms, and the school has seven computers, which are kept in a separate computer room.

The school has separate toilets for boys and girls, and its electricity connection is backed up by a power generator.

Students

The total number of students in the school is around 1,600 (with an almost even distribution of boys and girls), with there being three sections per class, and 40–50 students per section. Children come mainly from lower-middle-class families, with around 200 students (only boys) from lower-income groups and mixed ethnicities and castes. Parents send children here because the fee is lower than other private schools. The school also has a separate section for poorer children, where they teach in Hindi. Unlike rural schools, there are no reports of parents not paying fees or of any children being educated for free.

Teaching/classroom 'processes'

As in most other schools, the main classroom processes consist of explaining the lessons, doing exercises, with an occasional project (i.e. something made/done at home, and displayed in school). The curriculum followed is that of the Central Board of Secondary Education. The 'English medium' school essentially prescribes textbooks written in English, with a few words in the language being used now and then by teachers and children.

There is no reported interaction with parents on a regular basis.

Teachers

The school has 25 teachers, which leads to a teacher-pupil ratio of above 1:60. Teachers must be trained (i.e. possess pre-service training – either NTT [Nursery Teachers' Training] or B.Ed, MA /MSc for higher classes).

Teacher salaries are around Rs.2,000 – although they are required to sign on a higher amount, which gives the owners greater income tax relief. Teachers are not allowed to talk to each other during working hours! Asked why they teach in this school,

answers included experience, money and to pass the time (since some teachers would have little else to do otherwise).

School 2 (Village Aggapur)

School 2 is an individually-owned school established in 2002 and is located in a peri-urban area. It is recognised by the government and has classes from grades 1 to 10. Beyond class 6, there are only a few children in each class. Rooms for classes 11 and 12 are under construction, after which the school will be extended to these classes.

The school fees are Rs.170 per month, with no admission fee being charged. However, Rs.20–30 per month is charged towards power back-up, toilet construction, furniture and other such expenses. Parents also pay up to Rs.100 per month for transport (by cycle rickshaw, since none of the low-fee private schools has a bus).

Infrastructure

While school 2 has a compound and a boundary wall, the quality of construction was very much like that of the rural schools. The owner lives in two rooms in the building, which is essentially narrow and congested, with very little space. There is a little outdoor space, rooms for all classes, and toilets. A power generator is available, paid for through the extra school fees.

Children sit on stools and tables in the classrooms, which have a few (dull) charts and pictures, inappropriately placed and certainly not used. The school has a computer (for older students), with a different class getting the opportunity to use it every day. Some of the classrooms also had a few books.

Students

The total number of students is around 400 in school 2. In class 4 (a typical primary class), there are 17 boys and 20 girls. Each class has one section, with 35–40 students in each. Students come from low-income families, whose monthly income would be around Rs.3,000–4,000 per month.

Teachers

With eight teachers in the school, the teacher-pupil ratio is around 1:40 to 1:50.

Teachers seemed to be teaching regularly in school 2, with some impact on students (in terms of their ability to respond and awareness of what was being taught). Few of the children have resources or support at home. Parent interviews revealed satisfaction with teachers.

Students revealed that some of them take extra tuition (from tutors in the neighbourhood or teachers from the school), especially in terms of help with homework, and this supplements the salaries of teachers somewhat.

School 3 (Village Surajpur, UP)

School 3 is located in an urban village and caters to the population located in a single, large habitation. It was much worse off than schools 1 and 2 in terms of infrastructure. It had even less parental involvement in children's education, since most working adults had to commute long distances daily for work and did not have the time/resources to focus on their children's education.

In most other respects, school 3 was closer to the rural schools – it was marginally better than they were, but much worse off than school 2.

Although there is much variation in the backgrounds/locations of these private schools, they all share the same shortcomings. While the buildings and their design are very similar (they do not even have the cosmetic appearance of being a school, looking as they do like any other structure), their other shortcomings (and strengths) are similar.

For the poorest parents who face enormous financial hardships and make desperate efforts to send a child to school, it is the extras that pinch hard, such as the spending on transport (cycle rickshaws packed with children are not very safe or reliable), uniforms etc. In the urban areas the schools are able to insist on uniforms, whereas in rural areas parents are often too poor to be able to afford school wear and schools are unable to enforce this rule.

In rural areas, schools are smaller, closer to each other and compete with one another much more aggressively. At the same time, they also tend to have an informal alliance, wherein they avoid taking steps to deliberately/unnecessarily affect the others' business (such as opening a branch near a flourishing school).

Interviews

Two parents of children in schools 2 and 3 in the peri-urban areas were interviewed, a father from the first and a mother from the second. In terms of occupation, income and social background they represent the typical parent who sends their children to low-fee schools. Their views, too, represent the considerations that lie behind school choice.

Interview with parent (father of child in school 2)

Both the mother and father of the child are illiterate and have never studied in school. The father works as an odd-job man, taking whatever work is available – from working as gardener, guard and rickshaw puller, to mason, or house painter, with occasional tailoring work. His wife works as a domestic help. The family income adds up to around Rs.3,500/month. Being caretakers of a partly constructed house, they live in a shed in its backyard, which reduces their expenses.

The couple have three children, of which one child (a son) is not yet of school-going age. The younger daughter is enrolled in a school run by a religious organisation, while the older one was studying in class 4 in school 2. The children do not earn any income for their parents.

The father felt that in the government school children 'only sit around and no studies take place'. (He did not know where the nearest government school was). He originally put the older daughter in the religious organisation's school, because they provided free uniform, books and food for the first three years; he then moved her to school 2, and is going to do the same for the second daughter. In his opinion, the studies are not as good in the religious organisation's school – however, the child learns how to go school, gets used to the routine, learns how to 'sit' in the class; in any case, how much do children learn at this age, he feels. So given the free provisions, it is fine to start at the religious school. Later, when the child is, according to him, ready to learn, then the private school fee (Rs.170, which started at Rs.100) is worthwhile.

He feels the school is doing well; earlier there were not many children, but now it is 'full'. All subjects are taught. His daughter comes back home and works on her own, because no one in the family is literate and can help. Sometimes, his brother, who is a little educated, helps.

Interview with mother (parent of child in school 3)

Neither parent is literate, never having been to school. The family income is around Rs.4,000 per month. The couple have four children. The oldest daughter, 17 years old, dropped out of school very early and now works full-time as a domestic help. The second daughter, around 15, studied up to class 5; she works full-time as domestic help with the mother. Her third daughter was recently moved from private school to a government school (because her husband had stopped working and they found it difficult to raise money for the fees). Her youngest child, now in school 3, is about to be moved to the government school (because the child (a son) had not learnt to read or write at age 9, and she saw no point in spending any more money).

Because she was not at home much of the day, due to her work as domestic help in many houses, she was not able to supervise the children or even be sure if they attended school regularly; this was another reason for putting them into government school, where 'it does not matter if they do not attend every day'. She leaves home at 7am, earlier than the children leave for school, and her son in particular often misses school.

She said, '*The quality of teaching or how well teachers teach depends on whose child it is. Teachers pay attention to those who are better off or whose father has some power or if the person is socially known to them. When it comes to our children, they don't bother....*'

Although this mother does think of her children's education, she is unable to separate it from other issues that bother her such as the unsafe environment in the village, especially for girls and women, her husband not having/taking up work, and the slow transition of her family into an unhappy one.

In urban areas, it is men who tend to lose their jobs more frequently and to be without work, mainly because even if domestic work were available, they would not be able to take it up. There are few other employment opportunities. Thus, this off-on employment of the low-income urban/peri-urban father tends to affect the child's enrolment/continuation in private schools.

In urban areas, expenses on education are also greater in terms of uniforms, books and stationery, transport, school demands (for different facilities provided such as toilets, power back-up, computers etc.), private tuition and the like. This has its own role to play when deciding whether a child's education is 'worth it'.

Interview with child (student in school 2)

This child, a student in class 4, was the oldest daughter of the parent interviewed for school 2.

This was her fourth year in the school. She enjoyed being in this school, and especially being with her friends (she did not have friends around her home, since the family lived as caretakers of a partly constructed house in a higher-income residential area). She also felt that the lessons were good in the school and that the teachers teach well. What she did not like was the corporal punishment. Beatings of both boys and girls by teachers and the principal are common. They are also told to stand with their hands up for a long time and 'half the children are scared all the time'. The school is also strict about rules such as wearing uniforms (children without school wear are turned away).

The child does not have any help with her homework and does it herself. In fact, there is plenty of homework to be done, even during vacations. When asked if they are taught in English (since this claimed to be an English-medium school), she said that no one speaks English, only a few words are used.

Supply and quality issues

The 'worth' of government education

In the survey conducted by the Centre for Civil Society (2007), the respondents were asked:

- Based on the quality of education, infrastructure and facilities etc. available in the school, if you have to pay for it from your pocket, what would you be willing to pay for government school education?

On average, parents are willing to pay nearly Rs.66 for a government school.

To the second question:

- How much do you think the government is spending per child per month on education?

Most parents felt that the government spends around Rs.100 per child, nearly 37 per cent feeling that government spending was around Rs.50!

The study estimates that in reality government schools cost taxpayers 'on a conservative estimate, Rs.800) per month per child! Government school education is valued by its consumers at less than one eighth of what it costs the exchequer. The discord between the perceived value of government schools and the actual value is indicative of the quality of the education provided. Rs.800 has not translated into quality worthy of that amount for the consumer.'

How much are people willing to pay?

What people actually pay for education in low-fee private schools, though, is very different from the perceived value of government schools. Unfortunately, little information or research is available on the actual fees charged by private schools in different areas. The Centre for Civil Society (2007) survey quoted above found the following:

- The average fees charged by the private primary schools surveyed was Rs.241 per month[3];
- 42 per cent of them were charging fees between Rs.100 and Rs.200 per month;
- 45 per cent of the parents of children studying in government schools mentioned that they had to spend money on private tuition; and
- On average, parents were spending nearly Rs.2,200 on private tuition and Rs.1,100 on transport per year for their child's education.

In the case studies included in this chapter, it can be seen that the fees range from Rs.30 to Rs.400 depending on the area and the reputation of the school.

The quality of private school education

Given the investment that parents make into private school education, what are the 'returns' they obtain? Although the 'better quality' of private schools might be intuited, claims that this equals better quality **education** are difficult to substantiate since there is no commonly agreed upon set of indicators of education (as a holistic development of the child). Most claims to quality are limited to comparison of scholastic performance in cognitive or subject-based tests, with the scores being used as a proxy for quality of education. It is within this limitation that the following research is presented.

School Observations
Three government (primary) schools
Schools observed in: Chitrakoot, Barabanki and Auraiya districts

Main observations:

- New infrastructure was visible in all the schools in the form of new school buildings that had replaced old ones. In one school, the school grounds had a newly-built kitchen for the midday meal, which is now an entitlement for all children, though it was not in use since it had neither doors nor water.
- Toilets were in a deplorable condition.
- The school registers showed high enrolment, although the number of children actually present in the schools was found to be much fewer.
- In two out of the three government schools visited, the number of staff posted was three, but there was only one teacher present. All children from classes 1–5 sat in one classroom. The teacher was found to be 'minding' the students, rather than teaching them.
- The one teacher present was usually the *Siksha Mitra* (or the community/'para' teacher, who is less qualified and paid much less than the regular teacher).
- Other than the *Shiksha Mitra*, no other teacher prepared TLM (teaching-learning material). No teaching material (other than textbooks) was used in the higher classes (though there is a separate grant for purchase of TLM and in-service training emphasises its use).
- The concept of a 'period' or break between lessons was not followed in the schools. In one school visited, the school time was divided into pre-lunch and post-lunch sessions, with one subject being taught pre-lunch and another post-lunch.
- Children did not seem to know what lesson was being taught to them in any of the schools observed.
- Teachers used the cane regularly on children.
- A total of 20 days' in-service training in a year was earmarked for all teachers. In practice, however, on average a teacher underwent 8–12 days of training in a year. During the trainings, teachers were taught how to prepare a lesson plan. In practice, however, they did not prepare such plans.
- The schools were periodically evaluated by the *nyaya panchayat* (the local self-government body), which assigned a grade to the schools. No one (not the teachers, principal nor the Block Resource Centre Co-ordinator) seemed to know what grade had been assigned to the schools being observed, which included a government primary school located on the same campus as a Block Resource Centre.

Source: Catholic Relief Services, 2006.

The study 'Mobilising the Private Sector for Public Education', co-sponsored by the World Bank Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University (2005) points out that with schools being affiliated to different examination boards (each with its own curricula and examinations), learning achievement data across school types and states does not exist. Hence:

> 'school effectiveness studies in India are based on small surveys of schools in individual states, rather than on nationwide or even state-wide data....Thus,

studies of the relative effectiveness of public and private schools in India have had to rely on standardised achievement tests carried out by the researchers themselves in small samples of schools. These studies have been carried out in different parts of India (Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh, respectively) but they share the common conclusion that private school students outperform their public school counterparts even after controlling for the schools' student intakes'.

As mentioned above, the study by Tooley (2005b) in North Shahadara (Delhi) tested around 3,500 children in mathematics and English, and 'found that children in unrecognised private schools on an average scored 72 per cent higher in mathematics than government school students, 83 per cent higher in Hindi and 246 per cent higher in English.'

In his study of the unrecognised schools of Punjab, Mehta (2005) analysed examination results in terminal grades 5 and 7. While the overall 'pass' percentage was similar across recognised and unrecognised schools, the percentage of children scoring 60 per cent and above was higher in the case of the latter.

Kingdon's (1996a, 1996b) study researched in some detail the question: 'Is the popularity of private fee-charging schools in India to be explained by their superior quality?' This compared the three types of schools – private-unaided, private-aided and government schools – in urban Lucknow, in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Data was collected from 902 students of grade 8 (13 to 14-years-old), in 30 schools from the three school categories. Kingdon also took measures to control for social and personal factors. The results were revealing, with the private-unaided students scoring almost twice as highly as the government and private-aided schools in both mathematics and reading (on the raw scores). This edge diminished somewhat when the scores were corrected to account for social and personal factors, though it did remain statistically significant. For example, post correction, the private-unaided schools were still 27 per cent more effective at teaching mathematics than the other schools.

Some research questions

Given the size of the school system, research on the quality of low-fee private schools appears to have analysed a tiny proportion, though it does lend credence to the general notion that students get to 'study' more in private schools. Apart from greater research to confirm this, other questions need to be addressed:

- Do private schools really provide a greater 'value addition' to poor students compared to government schools, who have even poorer students and a greater proportion of first generation learners?
- How well do 'good' government schools perform when compared to 'good' low-fee private ones, especially if the overall quality of education is emphasised rather than scholastic achievement alone?

- If achievement tests are to be used as a proxy for quality, what kind of tests should really be used? At present, achievement tests (as well as school examinations) typically tend to focus on a limited number of lower-order, mechanistic learning objectives (e.g. spelling rather than expression). Thus, such tests seldom assess critical learning goals in subjects. So a question that might need addressing is: how would the comparative advantage of private schools alter if critical learning goals were properly assessed? (In recent research by the author, there is some indication that private schools might not have as strong an edge in such a case, since they tend to rely on rote memorisation and 'exam preparation' and might emerge to be as 'bad' as government schools).
- Finally, while private schools might 'score' when compared to those from a near-dysfunctional government school system, it is still worth exploring what the quality of these schools is *per se*.

School efficiency

Apart from test and examination results, another aspect of school quality is in terms of school efficiency. In her study of aided, unaided and government high schools of Mysore, Josephine (1999) identified patterns of resource usage that are likely to apply to schools in general. Her key findings indicated the following:

- Private institutions had lower unit costs when compared to government schools – 'they pay less to teachers, may operate shift systems, use teaching-aids, laboratories and libraries more efficiently.'
- Despite higher unit costs, government schools had lower outputs, as a result of greater wastage and stagnation. Unlike parents of children in private schools, parents of children in government schools took less care to ensure their children's attendance, and much higher dropout rates were observed in government schools.
- In terms of examination results, the pass percentage was the greatest in English-medium private schools (the least being in government schools). The English-medium schools also registered better marks, at a lower unit cost than in government schools (though, of course, the high private costs were not taken into account). Josephine also documents that students enrolled in higher performing schools came from higher socio-economic strata, and apart from having a better home environment, they also used private tuition in greater measure.
- Government schools made poor use of available resources (for example, poor maintenance of libraries) and funds (e.g. delays in purchase of lab equipment, leading to cost escalation and the school being deprived of the resource for the duration), thus failing to get 'optimum return for the money spent'.

The dynamics of opening and running private schools

The manner in which private schools open is as much a social as a business or administrative process. Catholic Relief Services (2006) in the documentation of EQUIP describes it in detail below:

- New private schools open in the villages all the time. The saying in the villages goes, new private schools open once the crop is cut and there is money to invest! Moreover, private textbook publishers provide incentives such as school furniture, blackboards etc. to these private schools, which make it easier for school managers to run the school. In return, private schools have to use the textbooks promoted by the publishers.
- School managers compete with each other in villages to enrol school-age children in their respective private schools.
- 'Recognised' school status helps to attract children. Benefits include government scholarship for children enrolled in a recognised private school, in addition to the implicit benefit of studying in a recognised school. However, 'recognised' school status does not come easily to these schools. Although the fee for applying for 'recognised' status is not very high, the 'commissions' (bribes) for processing the application are three to four times that amount. Moreover, the waiting-time before the school gets 'recognised' status is very long.
- The usual practice is for coaching schools (a private school normally opens initially as a coaching or tuition centre) to locate themselves adjacent to a government school. The students who study in these coaching or unrecognised private schools are those that are enrolled in the adjacent government school. In the government school, teacher absenteeism is high, so these children attend the coaching school. More importantly, government school children receive scholarships regularly because the money is routed through the *panchayat* (the local self government body). Further, parents understand that a coaching school is run purely with a commercial objective; hence they pay their children's tuition fees. In this way, coaching schools thrive in rural areas (eventually 'graduating' to being private schools).

Why private schools prefer to remain unrecognised

While private schools in some states (as in UP) seek recognition for the benefits such as government scholarships that it brings, in large parts of the country such schools appear to *prefer* not being recognised. Mehta (2005) points out that it 'is not mandatory to obtain permission from the local administration to open a school. It is rather strange to note that to open a grocery shop, some sort of permission/registration is needed but to open a school, no such permission is essential.'

Being 'unrecognised' allows schools to get away with paying teachers between one-fifth and one-tenth of government salary levels. Mehta observes that such schools

'avoid conditions laid by administration with reference to qualification, training and pay structure of teachers, curriculum, medium of instruction and textbooks.'

Fees and scholarships as major preoccupations

Once the school starts, scholarship and fee issues come into play, tending to remain on-stage for much of the year. Catholic Relief Services (2006) captures the yearly drama in the extensive extract below:

'Parents and private school managers compete with each other for the scholarship money that the government provides for children's education. Children are the worst sufferers of this tussle between parents and private school managers, which unfolds as follows:

- Teachers' salary in the private schools is dependent on fees received from children. Around 50 per cent of the students are unable to pay school fees due to economic reasons. Only in very small parts of the state is this percentage a little better at 30 per cent.
- Parents pay the school fees regularly for a few months, and then reach a point when they are unable to pay. So they wait for the government scholarship to pay up, which sometimes takes up to three years to come. The scholarship amount that the child finally receives is for one year and not three years. When the scholarship money does come, it is sent to the parents via the school address. Negotiations then take place between the parents and the school over how this money is divided. The parents seek to be reimbursed for the fees they have actually paid whilst the school seeks to be reimbursed for the fees they waived. As the money received is usually not sufficient to cover both, this involves a fair deal of bargaining on both sides. The school thus receives fees for fewer months than the child actually attends.
- More than parents, it is in the interest of private schools to follow-up with the government on the yearly scholarship money due to the school children when it is delayed. This is because it is out of this money that teachers' salaries have to be paid, since parents will often fail to pay school fees regularly.
- Invariably, private school managers end up paying huge commissions (bribes) at different levels of government to obtain the scholarship money. Despite this, only a few influential school managers succeed. The remaining private schools that fail in their efforts to organise the scholarship money are forced to drop the names of defaulting children (who have not paid school fees) from the school register. Consequently, school enrolment falls and the management is unable to pay teachers' salaries; the result is that teachers begin to leave.
- Often parents themselves remove their children from the school when the scholarship money arrives (which is usually for a year), especially if their children's school fees are overdue by more than a year. In such situations, parents prefer to

put their children in another school, as they are unable to pay the school fees for the period beyond one year and all in one go. The same story repeats itself in the new school into which the child is admitted.

- Sometimes a "personal} relationship with a school manager influences parents' decisions regarding school choice. Often a child is withdrawn from a school if a parent's friend opens a school in the village. The child is admitted to this friend's school, the "friend" normally being someone who loans money to the family during times of need.'

Subsistence-level education

As may be gathered from the sections above, education in low-fee private schools is essentially 'subsistence-level' education and a preoccupation with economic survival permeates all activities in such schools. One very visible reflection of this is in the background of teachers and the salaries paid to them. In his study of 878 unrecognised private schools in 13 blocks of Haryana, Aggarwal (2000) observed that teachers were, in general, unqualified and poorly paid and had received no training.

The situation of teachers in Tamil Nadu, a state ranked much higher on the Educational Development Index (EDI) than Haryana, was not much better. The SV Chittibabu Commission (2003) found nearly 23 per cent of private schools to be unrecognised, with 57 per cent of the teachers being untrained and 67 per cent of these being paid less than Rs.2,000 a month.

In Uttar Pradesh, ranked nearly at the bottom of the EDI, teacher salaries may be as low as Rs.600–800, which is simply not enough to meet day-to-day needs. This naturally leads to high turnover of teachers in such schools. Interestingly, in one of the schools visited by Catholic Relief Services (2006) the teacher turnover was low 'because teachers of this school long ago invested in the school; financial investments were made toward 'aided school' status from the government, which is yet to come. These teachers are, therefore, not likely to leave the school.'

Studies such as the PROBE report (1999), the Pratichi Trust Report (2002) and Pratham's ASER (2005) report that the low cost of hiring teachers in rural private schools (who are often paid just one fifth of what government schoolteachers are) allows these schools to 'pass on' the savings thus made to parents through low fees.

In their study on teacher absence in India, Kremer et al (2004), compared teacher absenteeism in government versus private schools. Some of their key findings were as follows:

- 25 per cent of teachers were absent from school, and only about half were teaching, during unannounced visits to a nationally representative sample of government primary schools in India;

- Teachers in private schools and contract teachers, who face very different incentives, have similar or lower absence rates while being paid a fraction of government teachers' salaries;
- Regular teachers in rural government schools typically get paid about three to eight times more than their counterparts in rural private schools; and
- Private schoolteachers are only slightly less likely to be absent than public schoolteachers in general, but are 8 percentage points less likely to be absent than public schoolteachers in the same village. This is because private schools are disproportionately located in villages with particularly high absence rates in government schools.

School Observations
Two private (primary) schools
Schools observed in Hardoi and Deoria districts

Main Observations:

- Of the two schools visited, one was a 'recognised' school while the other one was not.
- Children's enrolment had come down in both the schools over the years (from 250 to 140 students in a period of five years, and 300 to 110 students in a period of 10 years for school 1 and school 2 respectively). In one case, this was due to the opening of a government junior school in the village.
- School attendance was 50 per cent for school 1 and 90 per cent for school 2 on the day of the school visits.
- The school fees varied between Rs.15 to Rs.20 in the two schools.
- Children enrolled in the schools belonged to all caste categories.
- Classes were held in the open due to the lack of an adequate school building.
- Textbooks from local private publishers were used in the schools, except for class 5 math and Hindi textbooks, which were government school textbooks. This is because after reaching grade 5, children appeared for government school board examinations. Children had to purchase these textbooks, which placed an economic burden on the parents.
- In one school, only boys had been provided with desks and benches. Girls in the same class sat on the ground.
- Teachers' salaries depended on the regular payment of school fees, and there were fewer teachers where students had failed to pay school fees. As a result, the remaining teachers had to manage more than one class in these schools.
- The concept of a 'period' or break between lessons was not followed in the schools.
- Teachers were untrained.
- Teachers carried a cane all the time. Discussions with children revealed that they were regularly punished in the age-old ways: Boys become '*murgha*' (cock), and are made to crouch on the ground, head between their legs, to remain in that position for a long time. Girls became *'kursi'* (chair); they are made to stand with bent knees for long periods.

Source: Catholic Relief Services (2006)

While the poor functioning of the government school system is apparent in such information, the study also points to the possibility that 'the entry of private schools leads to the exit of politically-influential families from the public school system, and further weakens pressure on public schoolteachers to attend school.'

A study by De et al (2002b), in UP, Bihar and Rajasthan found that the new private schools fared no better than the dilapidated government schools. The little extra space in the school manager's house served as the school, and children were cramped into dingy, small rooms. Being a recognised school made it no better, and such schools had no teaching aids or other facilities such as a library. 'If at all there was a playground, it was the 10 feet by 10 feet ($9m^2$) courtyard of the house. Very few schools had trained teachers. The state of the unrecognised schools was even worse.'

In their survey of private provision in eight states, Mehrotra and Parthasarathi (2006) found that the 'new neo-liberal mantra' of private sector education does not contribute to gender and social equity. 'Despite their better physical facilities, their teachers are poorly paid and trained; and although their outcome and process indicators are better than for government schools, they remain unregulated and offer a poor alternative to low-quality government schools.'

Improving the quality of low-fee private schools

Many advocates of the low-fee private school tend to ignore a crucial aspect – the fact that the bad is being chosen over the worse does not make it good! Before such schools offer a worthwhile education, considerable effort needs to be made to improve their overall quality. One such effort that worked at improving the quality of around 100 low-fee private schools in UP has been EQUIP (the Educational Quality Improvement Programme) supported by Catholic Relief Services (2006). EQUIP organised schools in clusters wherein resources could be shared, and developed indicators for quality (in consultation with teachers and managers) that were rolled out in a phased manner, with development of teacher and manager capacity alongside. Over the years 2001–2006 a transformation was witnessed in these schools. While the physical environment improved greatly, classroom processes become more active and greater learner involvement was visible. Enrolment (and therefore the revenues) in these schools surged, which enabled sustainability and growth, even though the fees charged were no more than those in neighbouring schools. A comparative study of the learning levels attained in EQUIP schools versus non-EQUIP, low-fee private schools is underway, and preliminary analysis of results indicates that children in EQUIP schools outperform their counterparts in other schools on a range of indicators. Interestingly, this programme does not appear to have required a heavy investment. In EQUIP's documentation, it is noted that the 'EQUIP budget per child per year works out to Rs.700. With this low budget, EQUIP seems to have made significant changes in the schools covered by it....'

An unanticipated outcome was the degree of community support that EQUIP generated. For example, given the lack of space for group work, most of the EQUIP schools opted for outdoor seating. For around two months a year, children and teachers were affected by strong winds, prompting the community to discuss with management the possibility of a good school building with adequate space. Parents were also willing to pay higher school fees in such cases.

On occasion, the community has demonstrated its support even more strongly. Catholic Relief Services study (2006) points out the example of Chitrakoot cluster, 'where parents of a cluster school stood their ground in the face of pressures from a competing new private school whose influential school manager insisted parents remove their wards from this cluster school, and instead send them to his non-cluster school. The parents who had begun to relate to EQUIP and the education quality benefits it delivered, fought for their children to remain in the cluster school.'

Impact on the system

Given the scale of growth, the impact of the burgeoning private school sector may be felt on the government education system on at least five fronts, the last two being 'softer' though equally critical areas. These five areas are detailed in the sections below.

Declining enrolment in the government system

The poor, who constitute by far the largest group in India, are voting with their feet and meagre resources against the government education system. The impact of this can be seen in the slowing down of the growth of the system. As the table below shows, in 180 districts in 2005–06 *enrolment in government schools is declining*. This represents over a quarter of India's total 604 districts. Most states appear to be facing this situation, and the number of states thus affected has increased the last three years. A decline in the growth rate of child population does not explain the phenomenon, given the number of children who are still out of school. Kerala, the state ranked the highest in the Education Development Index in India, has actually been forced to close down schools across a number of districts for lack of demand.

Subsidies to private sector and duplication eat into government resources

In his paper 'Public Subsidies in Education in India', Tilak discusses the subsidies given to private (aided) schools, a sector that has grown over the last decade:

> 'There is a large private sector in education, which receives state support. Subsidies to such private institutions include both explicit subsidies and implicit subsidies. Implicit subsidies take the form of provision of land at concessional prices, tax exemptions on income and tax exemptions on material used for the

Table 4.2 Number of districts where enrolment in classes 1 to 5 in government schools declined over the previous year

State/Union Territory	*2003–04*	*2004–05*	*2005–06*
Andhra Pradesh	22	14	20
Assam	2	2	4
Bihar	12	1	9
Chandigarh	–	1	0
Chhattisgarh	3	6	7
Delhi	–	–	3
Gujarat	8	12	1
Haryana	6	7	12
Himachal Pradesh	11	6	12
Jammu & Kashmir	–	–	2
Jharkhand	3	3	1
Karnataka	17	21	25
Kerala	9	8	0
Madhya Pradesh	14	3	7
Maharashtra	14	26	1
Meghalaya	–	3	5
Mizoram	–	–	1
Nagaland	–	–	1
Orissa	5	17	11
Pondicherry	–	–	1
Punjab	–	1	12
Rajasthan	25	8	3
Sikkim	–	–	2
Tamil Nadu	20	14	12
Uttar Pradesh	3	5	3
Uttaranchal	5	7	7
West Bengal	10	16	17
Total	**189**	**181**	**179**

Source: DISE, 2005–2006

construction of schools etc. Explicit subsidies are direct transfer payments to schools and colleges. Such explicit subsidies form a significant proportion of the total education budget. More than one-fifth of the government expenditure on elementary education (primary and upper primary) goes in the form of subsidies to private schools at elementary level. The corresponding proportion is nearly 50 per cent at secondary (including senior secondary) level... Massive subsidies of this kind to private schools are felt to be actually leaving very little for government education institutions. Private schools prosper at the cost of

government schools and this phenomenon is described as "private enrichment and public pauperisation"' (Tilak, 2004).

The issue of dual enrolment mentioned earlier (where children are enrolled in government schools to claim entitlements, but actually study in a private school for functional education) also results in considerable wastage. Resources such as teachers, supplies for midday meals and a host of other entitlements are provided on basis of numbers enrolled. This strains the system to its limits and increases the flow of resources into the system, without actually benefiting children in educational terms. Since the phenomenon has not been researched, it is difficult to estimate the degree of wastage involved in this duplication. Nevertheless, this is an impact that the system cannot afford to sustain for long.

Planning for universalisation is rendered incomplete

Mehta (2005) concludes in his study of unrecognised schools in Punjab:

- 'Indicators, such as gross and net enrolment ratios based upon the data collected only from the recognised schools, present only half the picture of universalisation of education.... Unless such data concerning unrecognised schools is also available, a realistic picture of universalisation can never be obtained.
- Planning to enrol all children out of the formal education system will never succeed as many of them are already enrolled in unrecognised schools. Therefore, while developing elementary education plans, enrolment in recognised as well as unrecognised schools should be considered.... Until such time [as this information is available], the planning exercise in its present form will be of limited use and will be treated as an incomplete one.'

Inequity is increased as the system's performance decreases

The growth of the private school system, as mentioned earlier, tends to result in more and more powerful families reducing their dependence on the public system. This, in turn, reduces the accountability that the government school demonstrates, since teachers and officials perceive parents from the most disadvantaged groups as being powerless. The class difference between those in charge of the system (officials, heads, teachers) and the general student population is now almost uniformly wide, leading to less 'sympathy' on the part of service providers. The perception that the government system is now less valued (as the more 'valuable' clients have gone) also acts as a disheartening disincentive. A common reaction observed in recent years might be dubbed 'blaming the victims'; in this case, the community might be held responsible for the poor state of affairs in the government education system. Thus in recent years it has become common to hear teachers and officials blaming parents – for dumping such 'poor stuff' on to them, or not being in a position to fulfil their responsibilities (such as helping children with homework or providing reading material) or being apathetic with regard to ensuring their children's participation in the poor quality education offered to them.

As the most vulnerable groups resort to the government system, teachers and others appear to be thinking of education as a favour – instead of a public service – being provided to the poor and the marginalised. The attitude commonly witnessed is 'having never ever had any access to education, they should be grateful that they are getting at least this!' The fact that education is a service, and the *right* of all children (as enacted by the Indian Parliament in the Right to Education Bill in 2005) tends to get overlooked. In this context, it is worth quoting again the parent interviewed during our case study, who said: 'The quality of teaching or how well teachers teach depends on whose child it is. Teachers pay attention to those who are better off or whose father has some power or if the person is socially known to them. When it comes to our children, they don't bother....'

The notion of education itself is diluted

As the low-fee private schools have marketed themselves to consumers whose ability to assess the education offered is limited (but aspirations of social mobility are not), they have succeeded in creating a 'pop' notion of a good school based on stereotypes. Some of these stereotypes are that a good school is one that has: a building; computers; offers 'English medium'; requires a uniform with a tie, a school bag and a water bottle; maintains 'discipline' through punishment; ensures memorisation; gives plenty of homework; and of course runs regularly. The competition among these schools, as mentioned earlier, is about who *appears* to be better. In this battle of appearances, government schools have emerged the losers to the extent that new efforts at infusing energy or innovation are evaluated by the community in light of the model rampant in the private sector. Thus efforts at banning corporal punishment in government schools or enabling home language use in the classroom are at times *resisted* by the community, on the grounds that this is not what the private schools (or 'good' schools) do.

In an almost unnoticed way, many state governments have decided to 'if you can't beat them, join them'. Many practices of private schools – such as weekly or monthly tests, increased homework or the use of workbooks to promote drill – are being brought into government schools. This is in a context where the National Curriculum Framework (2005) specifically advocates the use of constructivist pedagogy, with which such inputs may not be consistent.

However, the worst impact is that many state school systems have decided to imitate private schools by introducing the teaching of English from grade 1. Policy documents state that this is with a view to 'upgrade' the quality of schools and reduce the migration to private schools. Across the country, distortions are visible as states develop and introduce dated primers to be taught by teachers who themselves have no knowledge of English (beyond perhaps the alphabet). Such time as might have been spent on acquiring basic literacy in the mother tongue or numeracy is now compromised with the effort to learn another language alongside, one that has no reference in spoken form. The difficulties faced by teachers in this near impossible

task dishearten them and affect their performance in the teaching of other subjects as well.

In sum, the successful 'selling of the superficial' by the private sector has indeed led to a dilution – both in the notion and practice of education itself.

Options ahead

Private schools are now so much a part of the Indian education sector that wishing them away would be just that – wishful thinking. At the same time, anticipating that a mere extension of existing regulation (which provides government recognition to schools willing to undergo the administrative and commission-giving ordeal involved) would improve quality is equally self-deceptive. A majority of the private schools, both of the elite and subsistence-level educations, find it more expedient to manage without this recognition, rendering the entire system of regulation meaningless. As Mehta (2005) noted, it is more difficult to open a grocery shop than a school.

One difficulty with the parameters used in regulation is that they are all input-related (space, competence of teachers, availability of materials etc.) rather than process-oriented (the *manner* in which the available inputs would be used) or outcome-oriented (the nature and levels of learning that would be attained at the end of given periods). Thus it is possible to have all the required quality parameters and still offer poor education. While the board examinations usually held at the end of grade 5 in many states act as some sort of benchmark, the examinations too, as mentioned earlier, focus on the more limited aspects of learning. Thus even 'teaching to the test' does not lead to high-quality education.

Options

Any discussion on the issue of private- and government-run schools in India rapidly becomes contentious, with the different contenders typically adopting one of the following six positions, each simplistic in its own way:

1. State cannot abdicate its responsibility; a common school system should be brought in to ensure a more equitable access to education;
2. Private schools (since they make use of subsidies) must be compelled to offer free places to children from the poorer sections;
3. Regulate the private school system; keep it on a tight leash to ensure it doesn't exploit the poor;
4. Let the market determine, let consumers (parents) choose. Better still, facilitate aided choice (e.g. through a voucher system);
5. The government system must be improved; or

6. Improve the quality of the private school system; after all what they offer is also very poor.

Each of these positions is also an option in terms of future action. These are discussed below.

The first position clearly defies feasibility, although the Government of Bihar did set up a commission that has submitted a report on the subject. As of the time of writing, the provisions are on paper. Recently attempts have been made (especially in Delhi) to implement the second position, but success as been sporadic and limited. Despite the strength of legislation and a full department to ensure regulation, the flow of the poor into Delhi's more elite schools has been more of a trickle; in the less elite schools, meanwhile, the poor remain absent. Apart from resistance from schools themselves (including in legal form), it is unrealistic to expect that learning spaces will acquire a discrimination-free and classless character that society itself is not able to adopt. Consequently, the poor themselves shy away from the thought of their children being with those from another social class.

The third position is of course what current regulations were supposed to ensure, but have so far failed to achieve over the last several decades.

The fourth option has recently begun to acquire a number of proponents. Prominent among them are Tooley and the Centre for Civil Society. Among those advocating the 'cause' of the private schools, Tooley (2005) is the most forthright:

> 'All of this suggests that if one is interested in serving the needs of the poor in India, then trying to reform the totally inadequate, cumbersome and unaccountable government system is unlikely to be the best way. Instead, reform the regulatory environment to make it suitable for the flourishing of private schools for the poor, help build private voucher schemes using overseas and indigenous philanthropy, and encourage public voucher schemes, so that parents can use their allowance of funding where they see the schools are performing well, rather than wasting them in unresponsive state schools.'

Apart from being founded on the belief that higher test scores is what education is all about, this option also runs the danger of the market not favouring the poor. Aided choice (e.g. through a voucher system) assumes that there are enough suppliers to ensure the competition needed to lead to better quality. While the poorest areas still remain underserved in many ways, the 'pop' notions of school quality referred to earlier might endanger the very idea of education being advocated by the state. (Here there is a conflict between the economists, who hold that however bad it is, education makes a difference for the better, and the educationalists, who consider that bad education is a like a disease no one should want to spread).

The belief that faced with the loss of clientele, government schools would improve, is also naïve. While opening some public services to the private sector has led to some improvement in government operations, this is not the case across the board

and tends to work where consumers already pay for the service concerned (e.g. utilities), the day-to-day interface with the consumers is minimal (as in phone services) and the loss of revenue would be high. The functioning of schools is more complex on unit as well as systemic levels. Unlike utilities, classrooms do not function on procedures but principles, which makes the processes (i.e. the service offered) site- or child-specific rather than standardised – thus making it difficult to improve delivery through across–the-board instructions. Hence, there is no guarantee of economic principles 'sorting the problem out'. Having long been seen as a social good, the economic viability of education has never been a critical factor, since it is almost entirely subsidised by the government. In fact, the recent closure of government schools in Kerala due to lack of demand has not had much impact in terms of the desire to improve. Rather, the 'nefarious' practices of the private schools have become the villains, instead of the poor standards of the government schools.

As in the case of private schools, wishing away the government system is hardly an option. In a recent meeting with the Confederation of Indian Industries on Right to Education, the economist Amartya Sen responded to 'a few speakers bemoaning the lack of infrastructure and government's failure'. He made it clear that deficiency in education and health could not be met by the expansion of private schools. Sen was also critical of the voucher system and said, 'Public education is as indispensable as public health care, no matter what supplementary role private schools and private medical care can play' (Press Trust of India, 2007).

Indispensable though the government system is, the option of improving it (number 5, above) is easier said than done. The government's flagship programme, the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*, has now reached a critical point where the last few years have repeatedly shown unacceptably poor levels of learning being attained by children in government schools. A fair number of small and large projects within SSA are underway even now to bring about qualitative improvement. It is the system's inability to recognise and address the increasing diversity of student population (e.g. children who traditionally never attended school – working children, those with a disability, girls from many social groups etc.) that is rendering many efforts futile. Also, a host of governance issues is now more apparent than ever before – corruption, whimsical or thoughtless decision-making, rapid turnover of projects due to inability to wait for results (education is a long gestation activity!), poor implementation and equally poor monitoring. Thus option 5 is being attempted and probably will continue to be attempted for the foreseeable future.

Option 6, improvement in the private school sector, faces a different set of problems. As long as private schools continue to rake in fees, improvement is not on the horizon. Schools 'doing well' often set role models for other aspiring schools, thus reinforcing the 'pop' model of a good school. Any effort to bring about a change ends up having to run counter to this well-established set of 'social inclinations'. In EQUIP (mentioned earlier), considerable engagement with the community was required before qualitative changes were accepted by the paying public as being worth paying for.

One lesson, therefore, is that the focus for improvement has to be as much on the consumer as on the school itself.

The Right to Education Bill

It is in an 'options environment' of this kind that the Right to Education Bill was passed by the Indian parliament in 2005. Some of the above options do find reflection in the Bill. Highlights of the Bill relevant to private schools (Parliamentary Research Service, 2005) are:

- The 86th Constitution Amendment Act added Article 21A affirming that every child between the age of 6 and 14 years has the right to free and compulsory education. The Right to Education Bill seeks to give effect to this Amendment.
- The State shall ensure a school in every child's neighbourhood. Every school shall conform to certain minimum standards defined in the Bill.
- Government schools shall provide free education to all admitted children. Private schools shall admit at least 25 per cent of children from weaker sections; no fee shall be charged to these children. Screening tests at the time of admission and capitation fees are prohibited for all children.

The Bill does not seek to alter the provision of education through the present combination of government schools, aided schools and unaided (private) schools. Some critics have held that adopting the 'common school system' would have been a better option. Others feel that the non-elite private schools, including unrecognised schools, have contributed significantly to the spread of education, and it may even be more cost efficient to encourage these than government schools.

The Bill makes certification from a 'Competent Authority' mandatory before setting up a private school, something that critics feel may lead to corruption and undue interference in school management. Norms (such as teacher-student ratio, physical infrastructure etc.) have been spelt out that would need to be fulfilled by all schools as a pre-requisite for being recognised – and all non-government schools have to be recognised by a Competent Authority or shut down.

At present, the implementation of the Bill is mired in debates and diverse pressures in different directions and it is not clear how the various provisions will be made operational.

Sustained, low-key action towards quality improvement

In the kind of situation described above, there is little scope for radical departures. In a policy-rich nation that is usually found wanting in implementation, even new legislation (such as the Right to Education Bill) does not lend itself easily to improvement efforts. An 'equal and opposite reaction' from society, vested interests and the system itself seeks to co-opt the reform and 'restore' the level to as close to status quo

as possible. Such a reaction is also often visible in governance reforms attempted in education, where change has tended to be short-lived before eventually merging in the status that was quo earlier!

So where does this leave those who want to see the most vulnerable groups access the best possible education system? Probably the answer lies in identifying a number of small, doable steps and implementing them over a long period. Three such directions of action are presented below:

1. Mehta (2005) highlights the importance of collecting data from unrecognised schools:

   'Let there be the same set of Data Capture Formats for all schools, i.e. recognised and unrecognised schools. Evidence suggests that even recognised private schools do not happily provide information. They generally suspect that information collected will be used in taking action against them. The unrecognised schools should therefore be given promise of anonymity.... Confidence-building measures over time will help.... convince unrecognised schools.

   'In many states, registration and recognition of private-unaided schools is not mandatory. Therefore, officials have no way of knowing their numbers. The states should widely disseminate provisions for recognition and should make concerted efforts in recognising all eligible unrecognised schools. ... Let states initiate special drives so that all unrecognised schools are registered.'

   Should this step be implemented, schools that today operated 'under the radar' will no longer do so, which in itself might have a salutary impact. This will also make it possible to enable universalisation efforts to be planned in partnership with the private sector and avoid the resource duplication that exists presently, with little outcome to show for it.

2. A useful set of suggestions has emerged from Muralidharan & Kremer (2006):

   - 'Our results have a number of implications. First, efforts to improve the quality of education in India should consider the private as well as public sector – especially since the former are disproportionately located where the public system is failing. For example, policy-makers might consider the possibility of offering short training courses to raise skills among private schoolteachers.
   - Second, the disparities between private and public schools highlight some potential areas for reform in the public sector. The huge salary differential suggests that many public schoolteachers may be receiving enormous rents.
   - Finally, there may be scope for public-private partnerships in education, whether in the form of voucher programmes or otherwise. One issue with voucher programmes is whether there will be an adequate supply response,

but the evidence suggests that private schools are already widespread in rural areas and that new schools can be created rapidly.

- There is substantial scope for carefully-designed policy experiments aimed at leveraging the private sector for universal quality education, and it is important to follow these experiments with rigorous evaluation to provide systematic evidence for future policy decisions in this regard.'

3. A set of feasible, less radical measures that have the potential to succeed instead of leading to disruption is described below.

   - Since the 'pop' notion of a school is emerging as the de facto standard in operation, 'consumer education' would help in 'counter marketing'. Perhaps one critical step that may be taken relatively easily is to frame process and outcome parameters to ascertain and attain quality for *all* schools, government, aided or unaided private schools, without offering the choice to evade being assessed against such parameters. In this, it is not standardisation but standards-orientation that is sought, with scope for context-based implementation.

Once framed, such standards should be widely publicised to let people know about what to expect and what is the minimum they should get for their money/effort in a private **or** government school. The intention would be to generate a clear demand and public insistence on qualitative processes and real learning outcomes (as opposed to mere marks). One recent (contextual) standards-development effort of the Government of India entitled Advancement of Educational Performance Through Teacher Support (ADEPTS), initiated with the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) support, involved the development of *performance* benchmarks for teachers and teacher-support institutions, at the district and sub-district levels (Shukla, 2007). The willingness shown by many states to 'roll out' such standards is an encouraging sign that the system may eventually orient itself to function in a more standards-oriented manner.

- An accompanying requirement would be to build the capacity at various levels to attain these standards. Teachers, managers and state/district-level institutions would need a range of inputs spread over a long term. *At present the institutional capability and strength needed to effect such capacity development remains the single greatest weakness of the Indian system.* Investment by the government and support from external funding should be welcome in this regard.

- Finally, the assessment of quality might work best were it in the hands of those who have a real stake in children's education – parents and communities. There is a need to empower as well as build the capacity of local bodies to assess quality of education through a massive programme. Such community-based monitoring could provide the system real-time informa-

tion on the status of schools, which could then use its resources to bring about improvement rather than supervision.

Idealistic though it might seem, in a democratic polity it is by reducing rather than increasing control that such improvement may be brought about. Naturally, this would need to be backed by efforts to capacitate all involved. Given the massive scale of the system and the nature of educational enterprise, perhaps the way forward is to enable a transfer of *concern*, rather than just a set of *instructions*. This generation of ownership and capacity at various levels might lead the multiple stakeholders to ask appropriate questions and enable them to work towards answers most suited to their context.

Notes

1. £1 was equivalent to Rs.78.76 as of January 2008.
2. The District Information System for Education (DISE, described in the next chapter) was introduced as the national EMIS, a database on all key education variables related to access, participation, teachers, facilities and infrastructure. In 2003, DISE was extended to the entire country as the official data reporting system for elementary education.
3. At the time of the survey, the rupee was valued at around Rs.45 = $1. The minimum wage fixed by the government was around Rs.100.