

Low-Cost Private Schools for the Poor in India

Some Reflections*

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A key feature of elementary education in India post-2000 is the rapid spread of private unregulated/unrecognised schools. What has been particularly significant, especially since the last decade, is the advocacy for private schools for the poor and the 'edu-business' that is riding on it. These are schools referred to as 'budget' or Low-Fee Private (LFP) schools¹ that are projected as responding to the growing demand of poor families for 'good quality' private English-medium education. In this chapter, the evidence and claims about budget/low-cost/LFP schools in India have been examined. It has been pointed out that while the picture one has of this sector is fragmentary and requires systematic study, the low-cost private schools being advocated for the poor and the emerging edu-business around it have serious implications for the right to education of their children.

THE LOW-COST PRIVATE SECTOR IN ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

There has been a significant growth of the private sector in elementary education in India especially in the last two decades.² From around 10 per cent of enrolment in the 6–14 years' age group in private unaided schools in 1996,³ the proportion increased to as much as 28 per cent in 2005. According to the Indian Human Development Survey (IHDS) carried out in 2005, as many as 51 per cent of children in urban areas and 21 per cent in rural areas were enrolled in private unaided schools.⁴ There are also variations across states, with Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh having a high proportion of enrolment in private schools as compared to Assam and Himachal Pradesh (Desai et al. 2010).

* This chapter, based on the available research studies, as well as websites where discussions, comments and articles about these schools feature, is a revised and edited version of Nambissan (2012).

Though unrecognised (unregulated) private schools that cater to low income families are seen to have increased rapidly, there are as yet no reliable estimates of how many such schools there are today. A. C. Mehta (2005) provides information on the number of unrecognised schools in seven districts of Punjab. He reports that around 86 per cent of the 3,058 elementary schools in these districts were unrecognised in 2005 (cited in Juneja 2010). Majority of these unrecognised schools appear to have mushroomed after the mid-1990s and especially after 2000. It was found that of the 2,640 unrecognised private schools identified in the Punjab districts in 2005, 'only 16.4 per cent of them were established before 1986. 26 per cent were established between the years 1996–2000, almost 30 per cent were established between 2001 and 2005' (ibid. 18–19).

The IHDS does not make a distinction between private schools according to 'recognition' status. However, since it is a household survey, families accessing the low-cost school sector also come under its purview. This is reflected in the data on access to private unaided schools by different income quartiles. Among the economically weakest sections, as well as in households that have little or no schooling, and among socially vulnerable sections (with considerable overlap among all three), there was a small but significant proportion of children who were accessing private unaided schooling in 2005. The IHDS reports that 15 per cent of enrolment of children aged 6–14 years in the lowest income quartile, as compared to 52 per cent in the top quintile, is in private unaided schools.⁵ Also mentioned is that as many as 13–15 per cent of children in these schools came from families where members had no schooling or had not completed primary level of education. Who are these families, what quality of schooling do their children receive, how do they perform? In the following section some of the findings from studies conducted on low-cost private schools have been brought together to try and build a picture of this

sector and the contexts in which families that access budget/unrecognised schools make their choices.

LOW-COST SCHOOLS: A PROFILE

The available research on the low-cost private unregulated sector is fragmentary. The most publicised study is the one carried out by James Tooley et al. (2007, 2010. See also Tooley 2009) in Hyderabad from 2003–05. The findings that emerged from the research have been used as a reference point by others who have studied and commented on budget schools. The main results can be summarised as follows: Private unregulated budget schools were run at a low cost — with minimum infrastructure and resources, and teachers on contract who were paid a fraction of the salaries their counterparts received in government schools. These schools charged low tuition fees (less than \$2/₹100 a month) (Tooley et al. 2007: 548). They were hence seen to meet the demand from poorest of families for private, good quality education in the medium of English at a low fee. Per pupil costs were shown as higher in government as compared to private schools, with teacher salary comprising a major component of cost in the former. Using standardised tests on a ‘random sample’ of schools and children, Tooley et al. claimed that their research provided ‘evidence’ to show that budget schools were ‘better performing’ than state schools at a far lower cost, and hence were cost-efficient (Tooley et al. 2010: 134–35). Market principles that informed these schools — choice and competition — were seen to lead to greater accountability as well.

Tooley et al.’s research (ibid.) has been followed up by Ross Baird (2009), Shruti Joshi (2008) and others who have reiterated his findings, especially in relation to the preference of the poor for low-cost schools as against government primary schools. Studies in villages by Prachi Srivastava (2007) and Joanna Harma (2011) have also pointed to the ‘universal preference’/‘popular choice’ by poor and disadvantaged households for ‘low fee private schools’. Karthik Muralidharan and Michael Kremer (2008), in a survey of rural schools in some states, have highlighted higher teacher attendance and greater teacher activity in private as compared to government classrooms as indicators of better quality of teaching in the former. It is also said that as low-cost schools provide ‘free places’ to those who cannot afford to pay the fees, and are conveniently located within poor settlements and hence are more easily accessible especially to girls, they score on equity considerations as well (Nambissan and Ball 2011: 177). It is argued that in the light of the poor performance of government schools and the ‘evidence’ made available regarding low-cost private schools, the latter should be allowed to function free of

regulations. Further, government funds should be directed through vouchers to parents to enable them to exercise choice in relation to their children’s education. Equally highlighted is that budget schools are presently making modest profits. With the necessary financial support, low-cost teaching technology, creating school brands and chains and so on, they can be a good business proposition for private investors. Budget school advocates emphasise that there is a fortune to be made from schooling for the poor — as C. K. Prahlad (2005) says, at the ‘bottom of the pyramid’ (see Nambissan and Ball 2011).

Studies by advocates of schooling for the poor, particularly Tooley and his associates, have been the basis for building the school choice discourse in India as well as advocacy for the promise of edu-business from this sector. However, scholars have raised conceptual and methodological issues that suggest that the evidence from Tooley et al.’s research may be less robust than is claimed (Ross and Dyer 2008; Sarangapani and Winch 2010). One major criticism is that there is a failure to factor in the heterogeneity within government and private schools, particularly in relation to the levels of education (primary/upper primary/secondary classes) offered by the school as well as its age (when it was established). P. M. Sarangapani and C. Winch underscore that:

[a]mong the most important determinants of the role that... education providers could play in the education market are their ‘stability’ as indicated by their age, their ‘scope’ or the level of education that they offer, and their medium of instruction. Segregated tabulated data of all schools surveyed (by age, level and medium, in addition to management type) are very necessary in order to understand the complexities of their existence and functioning (2010: 506–7).

Given that the rapid spread of unrecognised schools is a post-2000 phenomenon, the age of the school needs to be factored in as this bears upon infrastructure and resources made available as well as the kind of teachers recruited.

However J. Tooley et al. (2010) compare the performance of students across broad management categories of schools — government, government-aided, private unaided recognised, and private unrecognised schools. Their analysis shows that ‘pupils in private unrecognised and recognised schools, when controlled for age, pupil’s IQ, and class average IQ, achieve higher scores in mathematics and English than equivalent pupils in government schools’ (ibid.:117). However, they fail to control for the diversity within these broad categories of schools in relation to the level of education (primary, upper primary or secondary classes) offered by the school. More than 80 per cent of government schools in their study offer only five years of primary education. This is true of a much smaller proportion of unrecognised schools (60.8 per cent that provide nursery sections as well) and a minority

(25.5 per cent) of recognised private schools (Tooley et al. 2007: 546). In other words, only 17.2 per cent of government schools offered up to secondary schooling as compared to 39.2 per cent of unrecognised schools and as many as 74.3 per cent of recognised private schools (ibid.). Composite government schools that offer primary and secondary classes are preferred, including by poor parents, as they provide continuity in their children's education (Juneja 2010; Nambissan 2003). Primary students in these schools also have better access to facilities and resources as compared to those that offer only primary classes (Nambissan 2003). How do Class IV students from low-income families in government secondary schools perform as compared to children from similar backgrounds enrolled in private recognised and unrecognised schools offering the same level of education? Or, how do Class IV students perform in schools that offer only Classes I–V across different management categories? However, Tooley et al. (2010) do not make such comparisons. Their results are hence misleading.

P. Rose and C. Dyer observe that Tooley's research 'lacks any attempt to define what is meant by the "poor"', and further that '[i]t is extremely unlikely that those attending even these low-budget private schools are among the chronically poor' (2008: 23). Indeed Tooley's 'poor' appear to be largely from lower middle class fractions, who are self-employed and own petty businesses, organised sector workers, and those with relatively regular sources of income rather than families in extreme poverty. Contrary to what is claimed by Tooley and others, majority of those who are actually at the lowest end of the economic hierarchy are more likely to enrol their children only in government schools as they charge no tuition fee and provide free textbooks and other essentials as well as mid-day meals. Rose and Dyer's scepticism about whether it is the poorest that are largely accessing low-cost schools is borne out in Jyotsna Lall's study of 'small fee' schools in Jaipur city (2000). Parents accessing the lowest fee schools (under ₹100 per month) for their children were mainly peons, vegetable vendors, factory workers and auto-rickshaw drivers. Where schools charged a higher fee (even between ₹100 and ₹300 per month), parents were either from lower middle class or middle class backgrounds (Lall 2000: 25). Harma's (2011) study of LFP schools in Uttar Pradesh focused on whether these schools were 'pro poor and equitable' as was being claimed by budget school advocates.⁶ Harma also found that the proportion of Muslim and lower caste children (30 per cent) enrolled in LFP schools was far lower than non-scheduled caste Hindu children (68 per cent). Further, she observed that 'less than one third of the children of unskilled workers attend LFP schools, while 55 per cent of farmers' children and over three quarters of skilled workers children do so' (ibid.: 352–53). This indicates that affordability of school fees is a key factor influencing

enrolment in LFP schools, and though Harma had categorised these schools as 'low fee' the fees were obviously not low enough at least from the perspective of a large section of the families studied.

Contexts of Choice

Larger institutional and social contexts appear to shape the choices and decisions that low income families make about schooling and how they allocate resources and opportunities among children. Broad generalisations about the 'poor' that appear in the research on the low-cost school sector must hence be viewed with caution. The availability of government schools and their perceived quality are highlighted as reasons why low income parents aspire to private schooling for their children. Baird (2009) observes that the lack of availability of government schools in urban 'slums' led the parents to low-cost schools. In north Mumbai slums the 'poor' had access to only private schools as the nearest government school was often over two hours away from students' homes. Private schools were within a kilometre of their homes (ibid.: 12). In a number of studies 'distance' has been posed as a factor in the choice of schools, especially for very young children and girls (Harma 2011; Srivastava 2007).

A range of socio-cultural factors together with mobility strategies influence parental decision-making on schooling for their children. The aspiration for English-medium instruction among low income parents has been highlighted by pro-LFP school proponents as a key factor that drives the demand for low-cost schooling. This is largely because of the linkages they draw between the knowledge of English, middle-class jobs, social distinction, and elite status. The fact that government schools impart education in the regional language makes them less attractive than private schools that advertise themselves as 'English medium'. Baird observes that 'the vast majority of low income parents I interviewed believed that if their child can speak English, he or she would be guaranteed a middle-class job' (2009: 21). However, the fact that teachers in these schools often do not know English themselves makes the quality of instruction suspect as well as belie parental aspirations that their children will learn the English language.

Sarangapani and Winch (2010) dwell at length on the specific context of schooling in Andhra Pradesh as well as of Muslims in Hyderabad among whom Tooley et al. (2010) have done their research. This does not allow for generalisation of the latter's findings to all 'poor'. Sarangapani and Winch note that Andhra Pradesh is an educationally backward state, but the market plays a key role in the education sector, as seen in private schools and colleges and a large 'shadow school industry' in the state (ibid.: 512–13). By 2000 neoliberal policies had clearly entered different spheres of the state sector. Hyderabad has been called the cyber city and has become

a major Information Technology (IT) hub. Within the state Sarangapani and Winch point to the minority status of the Muslims in relation to their religion and language, and the complex historical and social factors as well as neglect by the state that have led to their alienation from government schooling (2010). A closer reading of Tooley (2009) shows that the early unrecognised schools in the Charminar area (that formed the site of the Hyderabad study) were established by school managers not merely with business interests in mind, but more importantly with a sense of doing good to members of the community in tune with what their religion expected of them. The schools that Tooley first visited (vividly described in the first chapter of his book, see *ibid.*) were established in the mid-1970s and 1980s. By 2000 these were secondary/high schools that imparted education in English. Their teachers were well-educated young women and men (who failed to get regular employment) and were committed to teaching other members of their community (*ibid.*).

Religion is seen as a factor ‘propelling private school enrolment’, and hence one of the factors underlying choice. Referring to his Hyderabad study, Baird observes that,

Several schools visited in the case studies had optional subjects in Arabic, separate rooms set aside for prayer time, and facilities (such as pre-prayer washrooms) to accommodate Muslim children. Also, religion can also be highly tied to other factors that explain parental choice: for example, Muslim parents in Hyderabad speak Urdu, and most schools in Andhra Pradesh are Telugu-medium (2009: 22–23).

This specific context of schooling cannot be generalised as typical of the ‘poor’ (Sarangapani and Winch 2010).

The failure to enforce and monitor the regulatory framework within which private schools are to function has left the educational landscape open to corrupt practice and manipulation. While there is a formal institutional framework within which recognised schools function, Srivastava points to the existence of a ‘shadow institutional framework’ that is used by private unrecognised schools (2008: 452). She elaborates that this is a ‘codified yet informal set of norms and procedures’ used to ‘manipulate and mediate the formal policy and regulatory framework for their benefit, and forms part of the de facto LFP sector, a sub-sector of the greater private unaided sector’ (*ibid.*). She observes:

Fundamentally, the most detrimental consequence of playing by the shadow rules is that it fuels and is fuelled by perverse incentives. This can contribute to an even greater culture of bribery and corruption in the education sector, decaying the greater institutional environment for education provision (*ibid.*: 471–72).

Low-income families are extremely vulnerable in such a situation. Harma’s study schools appear to have been established after 2000 and are primary-level schools. She mentions that

since the fieldwork for this study was carried out in winter 2005–06, four out of 16 sample LFP schools have closed down, with the continued existence of another 2–3 schools found to be financially precarious, as reported by the schools’ owners in a follow-up visit (Harma 2011: 351).

A study of ‘small fee’-charging private schools for the less privileged was carried out by A. De et al. (2002) in six urban and rural locations in educationally disadvantaged districts of Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan in 1999. Their observations were:

We came across a schooling situation of great fluidity: entrepreneurs wooing poor parents, schools breaking up or closing down because of manipulation among this group or because of over-supply. In rural areas the prospect of opening a private school is exciting for the local notables including the sarpanch (*ibid.*: 5234).

Pointing to what they characterised as a ‘government retreat’ through the absence of schools and their poor quality, they find that the educational terrain is left to private entrepreneurs who are able to flout norms and negotiate ‘quality’ of schooling offered so that it is only marginally better than that offered in the government school in the vicinity. Low-income parents who are unhappy with government schools find that the choice is between ‘low quality and no quality at primary level — and the enrolment in the new schools (low-cost schools) is mainly at this level’ (*ibid.*). They go on to say that though

Parents often helplessly observe while their child struggles through government primary school it is only fair to point out that there were also cases where parents were disillusioned with private schools and moved helplessly from one to the other and even went back to the government school (*ibid.*).

THE BUSINESS OF LOW-COST SCHOOLING⁷

Today, there is powerful advocacy for the spread of low-cost schools in India that is enmeshed in transnational networks and linked to local pro choice organisations (Nambissan and Ball 2011). The transnational roots of advocacy for school choice and educational markets for the poor in India can be traced back to United Kingdom (UK) and United States (US), to foundations, think tanks and organisations that propagate a free market philosophy. There are also important links with businesses and business philanthropists (*ibid.*). In India, organisations such as the Centre for Civil Society, Liberty Institute and Educate Trust are also part of

these networks and have been key actors in the campaign for school vouchers and parental choice; school choice/private schooling advocacy networks also include investment companies and venture capitalists looking to new markets in India (Nambissan and Ball [2011] for details).

The major focus till around 2008 was the building of Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs) of organisations and individuals towards advocacy of parental choice and vouchers. The objective appears largely the creation of policy climate favourable to legalising unregulated schools and to direct state funds through vouchers to 'budget schools'. The de-regulation of low-cost private schools was a major thrust of advocacy efforts in India. Efforts were also directed to creating a market for schools through school chains that were expected to yield profit from the low-income market segment. Investment companies, microcredit organisations and banks were encouraged to provide finance for existing and new schools (Tooley 2009). In 2007, the Singapore-based billionaire Richard Chandler from Oriental Global created a \$100 million education fund with Tooley as its president. The education fund was set up (a) to target the market for private schooling for low-income families, (b) for research and development for chains of budget schools and extending grants to private schools, and (c) to explore appropriate technology for schooling. Microfinance organisations such as SKS Microfinance and Basix stepped in to offer loans to educational entrepreneurs who were now being referred to as 'edupreneurs' (Nambissan and Ball 2011). Grey Ghosts Ventures (GGV) also set up the India School Finance Corporation (ISFC) to provide funds to creditworthy low-cost schools. In 2008 it was reported that ISFC along with Deutsche Bank and Budget International Academies had 'committed \$80,00,000 in investment to develop scalable systems that use new capital to strengthen local expertise and delivery systems that will eventually provide millions of poor children in the developing world with *high quality education*' (emphasis mine).⁸ It must be remembered that this was also the time when elementary education was made a fundamental right (RTE 2009). Whether the low-cost scalable systems and standardisation of quality advocated for poor children would provide them an education of equitable quality is the moot question. Some of the evidence has been examined in the next section.

Around 2009–10 we see signs of corporate players beginning to establish schools/school chains and build brands to 'sell' low-cost schools in India. Their entry appears to be based on research by their advocates that showed that budget schools were a profitable venture but required specific marketing strategies. Richard Chandler came in to establish the Rumi budget schools in 2008 along with Tooley and his associate Mohammed Anwar. Career Launcher, well known for setting up the high end 'coaching' or preparatory

institutes for entry to elite institutions, established the Indus Budget Academies. The SKS Microfinance group set up the Bodhi schools, while Reddy Labs had their Pudami schools. All these were mainly primary-level schools, some with pre-school and early middle-school classes. Interestingly, all of these were set up in Hyderabad/rural Andhra Pradesh. About the same time Policy Innovations (PI) and Grey Matter Capital (GMC) sponsored a study in Hyderabad (the city where Tooley did his research) to study the leading role that GMC could play in the low-cost school market (PI and GMC 2010). They also explored the possibility of parental demand for GMC ratings of what were now being called 'Affordable Private Schools' (APS) — schools that charged a tuition fee of up to ₹800 per month. Business prospects for new 'market entrants' in educational services were also studied (ibid.). Educational services that have been listed as top priority (based on a survey of APS 'shoppers'/parent 'consumers') are: private tuition classes, computer classes and computers. Computer classes were flagged as the 'new English' by PI and GMC, meaning that these services were most in demand by a parent (ibid.: 63–64). By 2011 the promise of the low-cost budget school market bubble appeared to have burst. The poor quality of teaching in low-cost schools, problems of sustainability and scalability were proving to be costly for the companies in edu-business in this sector. Career Launcher closed down its Indus Budget Academies in less than two years of its establishment. Nupur Garg (2011) has quoted the project director explaining why the organisation was forced to close its 'budget' schools:

Indus Budget Academy had struggled to reach financial sufficiency. Based out of Delhi they could not establish relationships with local communities. Their enrolment rates continue to remain low (10–30 enrolments in a year) and at a monthly fee of \$4, Career Launcher lost a fair amount of money before they exited (ibid.: 29).

More recently there appears to be an effort by some players in the low-cost market to rework strategies and look for greener educational pastures — the buzz words being Affordable Private Schools and Educational Service Providers (ESPs). Garg observes that

Education Service Providers have become an increasingly important part of the Indian education eco system and this segment has been seeing rising private sector interest. ESPs offer a range of services including teacher and management trainings/workshops, curriculum management and teaching activities and methodologies. They target improved educational experience for students through improved teaching methods and teacher trainings (ibid.: 35).

Chandler for instance has now entered the APS market to provide educational services (as Rumi Schools of Excellence)

to schools that cater to the upper segment of the low-cost private education market — ‘the middle of the pyramid’. Tooley (as discussed later) has also entered the market for educational services.

Corporate players appear to be looking towards higher-fee school markets that are likely to yield greater profits than budget schools catering to the near bottom of the economic pyramid. For instance, after its Indus Budget school fiasco, Career Launcher is now ‘planning their second phase involvement in rural schools, though this time, they intend to charge a fee in the range of \$10–12 per month’ (Garg 2011: 29). There are also international players who are investing/co-investing in chains of schools in the higher-fee/affordable (though still referred to as ‘low fee’) private school sector. These include SONG Investment Advisors (Song), Omdiyar Network, Google and Clinton Global Initiative. Some (including Tooley) are involved in similar for-profit school chains (Omega schools) in Africa as well. Career Launcher, Omdiyar and Song are also targeting middle-class parents. For instance, Career Launcher has its K-12 Indus World Schools in two-tier cities. Song advisors have invested in Gowtham (low-cost schools) as well as Chaitanya schools for the elite. It is important that all these corporate groups strongly advocate a more conducive regulatory environment for the private school sector (ibid.).⁹

The movement of low-cost school players in and out of segments of the private school market is likely to have serious implications for the education of children, especially from low-income families. It is surprising that the voices of parents who enrolled their children in these new schools with aspirations of quality education at relatively low cost (though the tuition fee in most schools appears to be well over ₹250/₹300 per month, likely to be unaffordable even for the near poor) are not heard in any of the reports, studies or websites.

THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION

The most critical issue in schooling today is that of quality. As has been highlighted by budget school advocacy, it is because of aspirations for ‘quality’ education variously perceived by different social classes that there has been a shift from government to private schooling. English-medium schooling is often equated with ‘good education’ by low-income parents, a fact exploited by players in the private sector who are advocating low-cost schools for them. There have been scattered references in the literature to fluidity of enrolment across the state and low-cost private sector schools (De et al. 2002). Low-income parents are seen to move their children between schools in search of good education for them and are constrained by its availability, cost and sustainability.

Studies are silent about the quality of the teaching–learning process in the low-cost schools. The teacher, the target of budget school advocacy and of making such schools cost-efficient, has also received inadequate attention and there are few references to their perceptions and experiences or career pathways. De et al. (ibid.) speak of educated youth being brought to these schools to teach and willing to work for a pittance. Teachers in Lall’s study were mainly young women for whom teaching was a ‘time pass’ activity, a stepping stone to some other vocation and not a career in itself. While teachers were mainly graduates, there were some who had passed secondary school. Very few were trained teachers. They were paid very low monthly salaries, ranging from ₹400–2,000, the latter likely in higher classes, and for teaching specific subjects (Lall 2000: 19).

The nature of curriculum transactions and classroom processes in low-cost schools are yet to become the focus of research, and reports on what happens in these schools is usually anecdotal. The schools that Tooley visited in 2000, which form the basis of his advocacy for budget schools are secondary and high schools that were already part of the ‘Federation of Private Schools Management’, which was lobbying for a more ‘conducive’ regulatory framework (2009). Descriptions of these schools in his book give us a glimpse of the perspective of school managers and their concern with the quality of the teaching and learning process. He tells us that Peace High School was founded by the present manager’s mother in 1973. She motivated the manager to help his community saying that he should consider the ‘less blessed people in the slums, and that his highest ambition should be to help them, as befitting his Muslim faith’ (ibid.: 8). The school offered kindergarten to Class X and the fees ranged from ₹60–100 per month. Tooley describes the morning assembly, which like any regular private school had announcements, readings from newspapers, demonstrations of interesting activities by students, and so on. These schools made a modest profit, but Tooley was told by the manager that ‘profit wasn’t a great issue for them, but certainly they viewed themselves as businesspeople, as well as people who served the poor’ (ibid.: 9). Another school founded in 1982 had a school manager who taught mathematics and also trained his teachers before they began teaching in his school. Tooley’s description of one such teacher (who had a master’s degree in organic chemistry) is reflective of the older schools in the community:

She was clear, lively, animated, and engaged her class throughout. There was nothing labored about her approach; the whole lesson moved forward smoothly. She taught without notes and seemed completely on top of her subject. At the end she summarised the lesson, expertly managing the class so that all seemed to have understood, and set a three-part homework assignment (ibid.: 11).

Tooley's associate, Anwar, also had a high school and was holding a 'science fair' for other schools at the time of the former's visit. It was these teachers that Tooley was impressed by in early 2000. Unfortunately the budget school advocacy in which he has played a key role is based on a different kind of teacher: minimally qualified, low-skilled and easily replaceable. This has serious implications for the quality of education on offer.

Lall (2000) observed primary classrooms in the 10 'small fee' private schools that she studied in Jaipur city in 2000. Her report provides some descriptions of curriculum transactions and teacher-student relations in these schools. Unlike what Tooley has described, in none of the schools was the pedagogy anything more than reading from the text and copying of answers by children from the textbook into their notebooks with copious amounts of unfinished lessons given as homework. Teachers in these schools lacked training and as mentioned did not see teaching as a career, but a temporary activity. Teachers who were not equipped to teach first and second generation of school goers and were not competent in the English language had to meet the high expectations of school managers who were competing for students and parents who wanted to see some signs of learning and speaking English in their children. Working under pressure, it is not surprising that corporal punishment was reportedly frequent when children did not meet their teachers' expectations:

The approach to teaching all the subjects is the same — the syllabus should be completed and the children prepared to perform in the examinations... Very rarely were children asked to participate, even in the rote learning by giving examples. Their participation was limited to repeating a few definitions when asked for and copy things from the blackboard. Activity based teaching was an unheard of concept. Most of the children are quite conditioned in schooling, understand the code quite well, and behave accordingly. They also know the result of not conforming... We have observed children being slapped hard right across their faces for doing some extra worksheets in their workbook, for asking sometimes innocuous questions. (ibid.: 35).

From available reports, the quality of education in the post-2000 low-cost schools that offer largely primary-level education is likely to be a serious concern. Teachers are largely untrained, an increasing number whose basic educational qualifications are barely beyond secondary/higher secondary school. They are on contract and their salary is linked to classroom presence. Market surveys/credit ratings by corporate players have also voiced scepticism about the quality of instruction in budget schools (Chandrasekaran 2012; Joshi 2008). In 2003 Tooley had observed that teachers who were paid a fraction of the salary received by regular government school teachers were doing a better job at teaching than the

latter. In 2010 Tooley himself admits to shoddy teaching and rapid turnover of teachers — who leave these schools for a mere raise of ₹100/200 (Chandrasekaran 2012). His associate Anwar acknowledges that 'in some low cost schools (not his) teachers are so under qualified, that they cannot speak in English let alone teach in English one of the biggest attractions for parents in the lower income segment' (Garg 2011: 31).

What are the solutions offered by the new players in the low-cost school sector to address the key concern of improving teacher performance in terms of pedagogy and classroom transactions? Tooley, now a player in the low-cost education market himself, says that he is 'hoping to treat two primary ailments without stretching his purse: shoddy instruction and teacher attrition' (Chandrasekaran 2012: 1). He along with Anwar has set up Empathy Systems to provide educational services to a chain of low-cost schools to improve their quality. Chandrasekaran notes that '[a]t Empathy schools, detailed lesson plans are used to combat higher teacher turnover, so that new teachers can immediately fill in the shoes of their predecessors'. As Tooley explains: '[a] low-cost teacher training model ensures that you are not investing in instructors so much that the whole system collapses when they leave' (ibid.). His company Empathy Systems provides low-cost tools to teachers to improve the 'quality' of their teaching. The model seen as particularly relevant for low-cost education markets is 'para skilling', defined as 'disaggregating complex processes into simple, routine and standardised tasks. These can then be undertaken by less skilled workers, with the desired reduction in costs and a simultaneous increase of volume and output'. In schools this effectively means breaking down of curricular and pedagogical processes into simple routine and standardised tasks so that they can be handled by 'less skilled' but suitably trained individuals' at low salaries (Karamchandani et al. 2009: 57–58). Rather than ensuring that teachers in these schools are professionally trained and equipped to teach children from poor and disadvantaged families, the effort appears to be to reduce teaching to simple standardised set of tasks that can be handled by anyone who is 'suitably trained'. In other words, the effort appears to be to cut costs and 'teacher proof' the schools so that the teacher herself does not matter.

Given the value that parents place on private schooling (good education), the ethics of advocating low-cost schools as providing 'high quality education' must be questioned. Baird recalls that:

[a]cross Hyderabad and Mumbai, parents repeatedly cited the overwhelming importance of education as a reason why they would spend large proportions of their income to send their children to private school—if they felt that private education was

providing their children with the best available educational needs, they would make financial sacrifices to do so. Poor families spend up to one third of their income sending their children to private school because they value education so highly. Many parents that I spoke with have sold, pawned, or mortgaged comforts to send their children to private school, if it meant that the child's education would be substantially better (and some families I spoke with sold land that had been in their family village for generations). This variable is difficult to operationalise in a model, though. Individual level data about the value of education, such as state-wise public opinion surveys, are not available (Baird 2009: 37).

Unfortunately low-cost private school advocates who use that variable (parental aspirations) to advocate such schools have turned a blind eye to these aspirations as they look for ways to maximise profits through low-cost schooling. There is also a systematic attempt to denigrate public systems of education that overwhelmingly cater to most vulnerable and disadvantaged families who have never been factored into the budget school advocacy.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing discussion draws attention to the unregulated private school sector in India. Over the last decade this sector that has been the target of advocacy groups that are projecting the low-cost school market as a cost-efficient, high quality and equitable solution to the education of the poor. It is also showcased as a site for viable business options. The advocacy is driven by powerful financial and political (pro-market) interests that are linked together through transnational networks, and is couched within a neoliberal discourse of school markets for the poor through school choice and voucher programmes. These are programmes that are yet to show reliable research evidence of having worked elsewhere in the world.

As highlighted, much of the 'evidence' on low-cost schools is weak and the picture we have is very fragmentary. However, the available studies suggest that the drive toward profits and cutting down of costs have detrimental implications for teachers, curriculum transactions and the very purpose of education. 'Para skilling', that is being acclaimed as a model for training of teachers in low-cost schools, is merely the 'drilling' of young people to perform the role

of 'less skilled workers' who will transact a narrow set of skills — standardised, homogenised and mechanical skills that do not provide a meaningful and holistic education for children. The fact that private and corporate players are content largely with offering only minimalistic primary-level schooling with a promise to poor parents that their children will have access to good quality English-medium education is a clear case of discrimination against these families. Further, many of the corporate players in the low-cost school sector are simultaneously offering middle and elite sections of Indian society a qualitatively different package of education: K-12, well-resourced schools that will yield high profits. These trends are reflective of a democratic and ethical deficit in the spread of the new unregulated private schools.

The non-state sector has played a critical role in the spread of elementary education in India. The history of schooling, especially in the colonial period and early post-Independence decades, bears witness to these efforts. Today the RTE Act (2009) provides a framework within which the private sector can meaningfully participate in the education of children. In fact it shows the way ahead for the corporate players who wish to provide 'high quality' education to children of the poor and thereby carry out their social responsibility. However, the Act requires that all schools meet basic norms that have been laid down in relation to indicators of quality and commitment to social justice. Not surprisingly the private school advocates and new players in the market are leading the efforts to lobby to see that they are not covered by the RTE (2009).¹⁰

As discussed, there are powerful financial interests involved in the private school sector in India, recently estimated to be a \$70 billion recession-proof industry (Jhingan and Mohanty 2008). Hence we are likely to see well-organised efforts to influence policy-makers to create more 'conducive' regulatory environments to enable profits to be made from the private education sector across the board. In this context, low-income parents aspiring to private education for their children are likely to be most seriously affected. The framing of education as a fundamental right has brought the education of children within the perspective of judicable rights and non-discrimination back on the agenda. It is important that the rights of all children and especially of the poor are protected and serious research and policy attention be drawn to the unregulated school sector.

NOTES

1. 'Budget'/Low-fee schools are terms that have emerged in the literature on private schools for the poor. These are not clearly defined but broadly refer to unregulated private schools that are accessed by low-income families as they charge what are

seen as lower fees than regular private schools. Budget schools were identified as those that charged less than around \$2 (less than around ₹100) a month. Gradually the term 'low fee' private school was used. Studies using this term do not make clear how

- 'low' is 'low fee' and who decides this. The term 'low cost'/'budget' has been used to underscore that these schools are run at minimal costs.
- Data from the District Information System for Education (DISE 2009–10) shows that in 2009, around 20 per cent of recognised schools in India were under private managements. Of these 14 per cent were unaided schools (NUEPA 2011). The number of private unaided schools does not include unregulated/unrecognised schools.
 - As is well known, there are private schools that receive financial assistance from the state. In 2005 these schools accounted for 5 per cent of enrolment in the school-going age group (Desai et al. 2010).
 - The IHDS (2005) covered 41,500 households in urban and rural areas across India and focused on indicators to assess human development. For details, see De et al. (2010).
 - In the light of the popular assumption that the middle classes were no longer accessing government educational institutions, it must be emphasised that IHDS reports that in 2005 a fairly large section of children from relatively better-off families in the fourth (67 per cent) and top (48 per cent) income quintiles continued to send their children to government-run/aided elementary schools (see *ibid.*).
 - Harma's study was carried out in 2005–06 in a 13-village cluster in western Uttar Pradesh. Her sample comprised 250 households randomly selected from the primarily agricultural village with the majority 'farmers or landless day labourers'. Sixteen LFP schools in the villages were included in the study (2011).
 - The discussion on private low-cost schools and the players in this market draws on information from Garg (2011) as well as relevant websites: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/global-development/2012/jul/03/pearson-invest-private-education-africa-asia>; <http://www.sedfny.org/portfolio/success-stories/song-success-story.html>; and <http://www.indusworldschool.com/> (accessed 12 April 2010).
 - http://www.clintonglobalinitiative.org/commitments/commitments_search.asp?Section=Commitments&PageTitle=Browse%20and%20Search%20Commitments&id=304699 (accessed 20 May 2012).
 - See also the following websites: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/global-development/2012/jul/03/pearson-invest-private-education-africa-asia>; <http://www.sedfny.org/portfolio/success-stories/song-success-story.html>; and <http://www.indusworldschool.com/> (accessed 12 April 2010).
 - See <http://schoolchoice.in/blog/?cat=12> (accessed 25 June 2012).

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