

# School Choice in Rural India

## Perceptions and Realities in Four States

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Indian parents are faced with more choices of schools, but with less information on schools and schooling. The study across four states in rural India suggests that perceptions of teaching–learning, discipline, and safety of children in schools determine school choice among parents. Expenses are a critical consideration for parents who send children to public schools, while the English medium is important for parents of children going to private schools. However, parental choices of low-fee private schools are often not based on accurate information, and parents emphasise many educationally unimportant but aspirational factors. The marketing efforts of schools and cultural aspirations of parents reinforce each other, allowing for a situation in which actual educational outcomes can be subordinated, or worse, undermined.

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The elementary school system in India, since the 1990s, has seen significant expansion in terms of the growth in the reach of the public school system and the parallel growth of private schools.<sup>1</sup> Even then, the public school system continues to be the main provider of schooling, especially for historically marginalised population groups and hitherto underserved areas. Much of the growth in the private school system has been led by the mushrooming of low-fee private schools,<sup>2</sup> first, in urban and peri-urban areas, and subsequently, in many other places, including rural India. As a result of such a rapid and often inadequately regulated school expansion, parents are faced with more choice, but also encounter inadequate quality information.

It is in this context that contested opinions and arguments around school choices have emerged in educational policy debates. One such set of arguments underscores a market-based approach to school education where more options for schools would ensure competition among schools and weed out inefficient schools. This argument implicitly disadvantages public schools (Shah and Miranda 2013). However, the idea that parental choice would lead to optimal school outcomes has been critiqued by others. These studies have argued that a simplistic understanding of parental choice ignores how mechanisms of choice actually operate in the context of disadvantaged communities and, more importantly, have adverse implications for equity of education in the context of an already stratified schooling system (Härmä 2011; Srivastava 2007). Also, it has been shown that market-based solutions have not worked in countries like the United States (Ravitch 2010, 2013), and more so in school systems already characterised by existing inequities (OECD 2016: 123–27).

Implicit in the notion of choice of schools is also the idea that private schools can be a viable and better alternative to the public education system. However, the advantages of private schools have been disproved in recent rounds of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and finds mention in a World Bank report on the status of learning in school systems across the world (OECD 2016: 126; World Bank 2018: 176). These empirical findings are also consistent with fundamental philosophical ideas underlying education, particularly around education not being a marketable good (Winch 1996). The best available evidence suggests that there are no clear differences in learning outcomes between public and low-fee private schools (Chudgar and Quin 2012; Karopady 2014; Muralidharan and Sundararaman 2015).

In this context, the Research Group at the Azim Premji Foundation is executing a set of studies that will contribute to the ongoing debates around public and private school education. The objective of this particular study is to understand how parents make school choices, what considerations are critical in choosing a school, and how these factors map to the objective reality of schools.

In order to do this, we undertook a three-part field study. First, we surveyed 1,210 families spread across 25 villages in 10 districts across four states in India to understand the factors involved in school choice and how parents assess schools. Second, we surveyed principals and teachers in 121 public and private schools in these sites and observed the processes at schools to ascertain the match between parental perceptions about schools and the objective reality of education in these schools. Analysis of this data showed interesting patterns related to the nature of school choice and private school processes. Third, we used detailed qualitative interviews and examined some of these specific issues. This was conducted with a sample of parents sending children to public and private schools from different wealth quintiles as well as a sample of head teachers and teachers from the private schools covered under the first two parts of the study across different locations.

The sites for the study were purposively chosen so that they were from rural locations that have several public and private schools in the vicinity. Although not representative of the particular districts, states or the country, the survey provides a glimpse into how large sections of rural Indian parents perceive school quality as well as think about and exercise school choice.

The study finds that school choice is complex with a range of diverse factors that are important for different parents. Perceptions of teaching–learning are the most important factors across parents. In addition, many parents also consider discipline and safety as important. The language of instruction, that is, whether the school was English medium was more important for parents who chose private schools, whereas, expenses mattered more for parents who chose public schools.

In terms of the distribution of preferences between private and public schools in the vicinity, the study finds that parental preferences are not concentrated in specific schools, whether private or public. The most preferred school in the vicinity where parents would like to send their children, across 25 villages, was almost as likely to be a public school as a private school.

Analysis of parental perceptions vis-à-vis school realities gathered from the school survey shows a huge mismatch between the two in low-fee private schools. Although parents report that children are going to English medium schools, the reality for most such children is that they are not being taught in English. Similarly, although parents report selecting schools because they care about the quality of teachers, on average, they end up picking schools that have lesser qualified teachers than other schools.

Data from the qualitative interviews reinforce the complicated nature of school choice. Among other things, this is revealed in the reconsideration and revision of initial choices made by the

parents, and their switching, both within types (from one private school to another) and between types (from private school to public school). Some parents are also seen to continue with the already chosen private schools, despite their revalued perceptions of these schools, due to their aspirations for cultural capital.

The qualitative interviews also offer possible explanations for the mismatch between parental perceptions and school realities. At one end, parental choices of private schools are seen to be strongly determined by aspirational criteria such as children acquiring a smattering of English and having proper dress and behaviour. In addition, these criteria also reveal a form of social distancing from the poorer families accessing public schools by those parents sending their children to private schools. At the other end, low-fee private schools carry out systematic marketing and image-building efforts for enrolments in neighbouring villages. These marketing efforts highlight the very same criteria parents are seen to aspire for. As a result, visible non-educational quality parameters are reinforced by both parental aspirations for cultural capital and market-oriented practices of private schools.<sup>3</sup>

**Methodology**

The study was conducted in 10 districts across Chhattisgarh, Karnataka, Rajasthan and Uttarakhand. These are places where the Azim Premji Foundation has an active presence and has been working for some time.<sup>4</sup> One block per district was chosen and most of the blocks are those in which the respective district headquarters are located. The specific site for the study in each block was a delimited geography comprising a set of villages (that is, a group of neighbouring villages comprising at least two to three villages) based on pre-specified criteria.<sup>5</sup> A total of 1,210 families (consisting of 2,464 children) and 121 public and private schools were covered in the survey (Table 1).

**Table 1: Families, Children and Schools Studied in 10 Districts**

Districts*	Baloda Bazar	Dhamtari	Janjgir Champa	Raigarh	Raipur	Yadgir	Tonk	Dehradun	Udham Singh Nagar	Bageshwar	Total
Villages	3	3	3	2	2	2	2	4	2	2	25
Families	120	120	121	120	120	121	120	120	128	120	1,210
Children	248	226	250	219	274	255	214	289	272	217	2,464
Public schools	6	8	9	6	5	5	5	5	6	6	61
Private schools	2	5	9	4	3	7	12	6	4	8	60
Public school teachers	34	41	36	35	34	32	52	19	35	25	343
Private school teachers	28	53	74	50	55	57	147	63	29	116	672

\*The specific sites in all districts were rural.

Source: Authors' own research.

A family survey tool was used for the first part of the study. While it was designed as a survey tool, its aim was to elicit from the families a nuanced understanding of the issues framing the key research questions. Important questions around opinions about local schools and choices were asked to elicit both a broader set of responses that parents had as well as their primary

response. For example, when parents were asked about the preferred school of choice in the vicinity for their children, the parents were asked to provide the top three reasons and then the main reason for their opinions. The responses to these questions were open-ended and the survey team later classified the responses into one of the 15 categories. For instance, when asked about the reasons for their opinions on school choices, parents could provide “teachers” as a reason for their preferred school of choice. However, the survey team was trained to further probe into what parents were referring to when they said “teachers”: the attributes of teachers and their abilities, or teaching–learning related processes, or other processes such as discipline. It was these probed responses that were finally coded and analysed.

The analysis of data from the family survey tool was followed by the development and implementation of a school information tool. The parameters for data collection were guided by the preliminary findings from the analysis of family data. The aim was to analyse primary data on the schools vis-à-vis secondary data collected on the schools from parental responses.

Preliminary analysis of the quantitative data revealed interesting patterns on issues such as the nature of school choice, private school processes, and understanding of English medium instruction. A qualitative component was undertaken to probe deeper into some of these patterns. The quantitative data was used to generate a sample group of parents, from different wealth quintiles, sending children to public and private schools, as well as a sample of head teachers and teachers from the private schools across the different locations. Semi-structured qualitative interview schedules were used to collect data from this sample group comprising 50 parents, 12 head teachers, and 24 teachers. The data was analysed using thematic analysis.

### Complex Nature of School Choice

Existing research suggests that supply (school options available), perception of quality of education, medium of instruction, affordability or cost, non-educational benefits, social barriers, and gender of the child are some of the important factors that affect parental choice of schools (Streuli et al 2011; Hill et al 2011; Härmä 2010). Furthermore, for parents, quality of education has also been shown to be an unclear category that refers to different things such as school infrastructure, examination results, discipline, and counter-intuitively, even higher pupil–teacher ratios (Hill et al 2011; Kaur 2017; Srivastava 2007). In the family survey, we explored this by asking a range of open-ended questions to capture parental preferences of schools and the school choice process. Parents were asked two different types of questions related to choice. The first pertained to the preferred school in their vicinity, that is, the specific school they would want to send their children to and the second question was regarding the school to which they actually chose to send their children.

We analysed parental preferences for schools in the immediate vicinity. We calculated the proportion of parents expressing their inclination for other schools in the vicinity within

the neighbouring two to three villages after excluding the preferences of parents for schools that were not in the immediate vicinity. The average of this preference across sites was 20%, which revealed that parental preferences for schools in the immediate vicinity were not concentrated in specific schools, either private or public. Also, in 14 of the 25 villages across the 10 sites, the most preferred school in the immediate vicinity was a private school, while in 11 villages, a public school was the preferred option. There were four villages in two sites where all the top three preferences were private; otherwise, for the rest of the 21 villages, public schools invariably figured among the top three preferences. In 13 villages, public schools figured more among the top three preferences as compared to 12 villages where private schools figured more among the top three preferences.

An analysis of the reasons provided by parents behind school choice across all nearby schools, not necessarily within the neighbouring two to three villages, showed multiple considerations that vary across parents. We find that some reasons are important for all parents; while others seem to be more important for parents who prefer private schools over public schools and vice versa.

Table 2 presents the main reasons provided for parental preferences between specific schools in neighbouring areas to

**Table 2: Main Reasons behind Parents Preferring Specific Schools (%)**

	Public Schools	Private Schools	Total (%)
Infrastructure	2	3	3
Facilities <sup>#</sup>	3	1	2
School reputation	5	3	4
Safety and security	12	8	9
Inclusiveness	5	1	3
Encouragement and support	3	0	2
Expenses	16	2	8
Forms of schooling*	2	2	2
School administration <sup>@</sup>	2	4	3
Teacher characteristics	10	6	8
Teaching–learning	28	36	33
Discipline	8	12	11
English medium	3	18	11
Other medium of instruction	0	1	1
Others	2	2	2

Figures have been rounded to the nearest integer.

<sup>#</sup> Facilities refer to school provisions beyond basic infrastructure and requirements such as the provision of school transport.

\* Forms of schooling included preferences related to single/co-educational status, continuity across levels of schooling, and boards of affiliation.

<sup>@</sup> School administration refers to school–parental linkages on issues such as information sharing between parents and school.

Source: Authors’ own research.

which they would like to send their children. Their perceptions of teaching–learning formed the most important category (33%) of the reasons among parents to send children to a particular school. Perceptions of discipline (11%) and safety and security (9%) in schools were also found to be important across parents.

The relative emphasis given to some of the other reasons mentioned as important were seen to be different among parents preferring public schools and private schools. Expenses were a much stronger reason for parents whose preferred choice was a particular public school as against a private school (16% as opposed to 2%). On the other hand, English medium, that is, the language of instruction, was

a much stronger reason for parents who indicated a private school as their preferred choice (18% vs 3%).

An analysis of the preferences of parents was also done based on their mention of the corresponding reason as one of the top three reasons behind preferences of specific schools

nearby to which they would like to send their children. This analysis revealed patterns similar to Table 2.

More than half (51%) of the children in our sample attend public schools and the rest go to private schools. Seventy-one per cent of children belonging to the bottom asset quintile go to public schools, while only 17% of children belonging to the top asset quintile go to public schools. We did not find any significant differences in the factors that parents consider when choosing schools for boys and girls.<sup>6</sup>

Parents' perception of teaching–learning was seen to be very important for both sets of parents, that is, those choosing public schools as well as those choosing private schools. Similarly, their perceptions of safety and security, discipline and teachers'

**Table 3: Reasons behind Parental Choices of Public and Private Schools**

	Public Schools (%)	Private Schools (%)
Infrastructure	2	2
Facilities	6	1
School reputation	2	4
Safety and security	12	12
Inclusiveness	6	1
Encouragement and support	4	1
Expenses	26	2
Forms of schooling	2	1
School administration	1	3
Teacher characteristics	6	5
Teaching–learning	23	37
Discipline	6	11
English medium	1	16
Other medium of instruction	1	1
Others	3	3

Figures have been rounded to the nearest integer.

Source: Authors' own research.

For most of the poor families with children going to public schools, these schools were seen to be a default choice in terms of affordability. A father of five children from Tonk in Rajasthan said, “We are very poor; so we did not think about other schools and chose government school. Poor children study in government school only.” For many of these families, public schools were nearer to their homes than private schools and could address their safety-related concerns while keeping their children occupied during the time they were away for livelihood opportunities.

The deteriorating quality of private schools, as expressed during the interviews by parents sending their children to private schools, mostly centred on teaching in the English language and discipline. One such parent from Raigarh in Chhattisgarh said,

The books (in private schools) are in English and teachers teach in English, which helps children learn better. There are activities that get organised by the school in which children participate and need to communicate in English. Teachers talk in English outside the class with children and also among themselves, as I have seen during parent-teacher meetings.

That discipline is a valued quality among parents and private schools was also seen in the responses from private schools, as

the director of a private school in Raipur in Chhattisgarh said, “Another thing we stress upon is discipline. We believe this helps children do better in their results. But we also maintain discipline in terms of dress for girls, timing of the schools; our school is known for discipline. Most parents value discipline. However, some also complain about it to be too strict.”

### Equivocal Choices, Shifting Preferences

Parental preferences in favour of public or private schools seem to be contingent. Parents often reassess their initial choices and switch schools based on this reassessment. Cultural capital often compels parents to continue with suboptimal school choices.

A number of families in relatively less difficult economic circumstances were sending their children to private schools due to the fee waivers and the 25% quota for economically weaker sections and disadvantaged groups under the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009.<sup>7</sup> Though good education (*acchi padhai*) was a stated criterion in terms of school choice, the actual choices appeared to be equivocal. A father of three children from Baloda Bazar in Chhattisgarh, who was sending two of his three children to a low-fee private school and one to a public school, said, “In both the schools there is good teaching-learning. That is why when two of my children said they wanted to go to private schools I sent them there and when one said he wanted to go to government school, I sent him there.” Not all of the parents were happy with their choices. A father of two children from Tonk, who had left the decision of school choice to his elder brother (who took such decisions in the family) and had enrolled both his children in the low-fee private schools his elder brother sent his own children to, said,

She (elder daughter) is in Class 2. But she does not know her multiplication tables and cannot read properly while other children going to the government schools are doing better. So, I am thinking of transferring my children to the government school from next year. Despite paying fees that are difficult for us to afford, learning is not happening in the current school.

Likewise, some of the relatively economically well-off families sending their children to private schools did not seem to be unanimously satisfied with the quality of education in the schools they had enrolled their children in. They reported the need to switch from one private school to the other in the neighbourhood, and also to more distant places, as their expectations from the first school were not met. A few others, although dissatisfied, continued with the same private schools as these seemed to serve their expectations of cultural capital. For example, a father of three children from Dhamtari in Chhattisgarh said,

We chose this school for our children so that they could learn and speak both English and Hindi. The principal had told us during the admission that this school is an English medium school and the medium of teaching is mostly English. We thought that the children will be able to learn and speak English and Hindi which did not seem possible here in the village. Let alone English, you will not believe, one of my children studying in Class 4 is unable to properly read sentences even in Hindi. We (he and other parents) have often made complaints to the teachers regarding the level of this learning happening in the school.

However, when asked whether nearby public schools would be a better choice in such a situation, the parents suggested that private English medium schools were better in inculcating culture in terms of manners and ways of being and speaking, including the ability to speak in English.

We compared parental perceptions about two specific school characteristics—medium of instruction and teacher characteristics—with how these characteristics were seen to actually manifest at the school level. These school characteristics were collected through an independent school information tool that included both discussions with key respondents in the schools and focused school observations on specific school processes.<sup>8</sup> We found that parental perceptions did not match with the reality of the schools for the chosen characteristics. We present results for each of these two characteristics examined separately.

### Medium of Instruction

The medium of instruction—whether the school was English medium—did emerge as an important and valued characteristic, especially for parents sending their children to private schools. However, the study finds that there is a large discrepancy between parental reporting of English as the medium of instruction, the official medium of instruction as reported by schools and the actual medium of instruction in practice in schools. About 39% of the children who go to private schools were reported as going to English medium schools by their parents. However, only 22% of the children who go to private schools have English as their official medium of instruction (as reported by the school authorities). And school observations revealed that the percentage of children going to private schools that actually use English as a medium of instruction is only 10%.

In other words, as can be seen from Table 4, only 25% of parents' perception of English as the medium of instruction in their children's schools matches with reality. More than half (57%) of the children who are supposed to be going to English

**Table 4: Official and Actual Medium of Instruction for Children Whose Parents Perceive That Their Children Are Studying in English Medium Schools (%)**

	Official Medium of Instruction	Actual Medium of Instruction
Hindi	43	52
Kannada	5	5
English	52	25
Mixed	0	18

Source: Authors' own research.

medium schools are actually studying in the dominant regional language: Hindi or Kannada. Around 18% of these children go to a school that have books in English, but with teachers translating those into the dominant regional language while teaching (categorised as "mixed" in Table 4).

Even when we looked only at the responses of parents who said that the school being English medium was among their top three reasons for choosing the school that their child went to (this being 25% of parents sending children to private schools), the same discrepancy was observed. School observations revealed that only about a quarter of their children went to schools where the actual medium of instruction was English.

Insights into this discrepancy can be gained from the qualitative interview data. There was no clear understanding

among parents as to what English medium meant or what made it an important criterion for their choice of schools. For some parents, English medium seemed to convey a pressure to conform to prevailing public sentiments about the popularity of private schools over public schools. As a father from a Rajasthani family who had shifted to Yadgir, Karnataka, shared,

Recently my friend asked me, "In which school are your children studying?" When I said they are studying in one of the popular English medium schools, he felt proud and said I have done a good job by sending my children to that school. I was appreciated and respected by our community people, hence sending my children to private school is a prestige issue.

Most parents were seen to associate private schools with processes that seemingly imparted a sense of distinctiveness to the ways of being of their children. This could be in the form of discipline, being well-mannered (in terms of dress and ways of speaking), and being in an environment where English was in use, either in the form of textbooks or as the spoken word. For example, one such parent, a father of two children from Dhamtari, shared his opinion about the neighbouring public school as follows,

Let alone English, teachers in government schools mostly speak in Chhattisgarhi language. Hindi is only spoken sporadically, that too during classroom transactions. Moreover, majority of the children come ill dressed. Children are also often seen using abusive language. You can easily think how badly it will impact the overall nurturing of my children.

Such an implicit distancing, from what wealthier parents perceived to be the public school environment, was evident in their portrayal of the public schools' environment as being unsuitable for their children through expressions such as "schools with abusive and ill-mannered children," "children from well-to-do families do not go there," and "children are not dressed well or do not keep clean."

However, it is difficult to adhere to the promises made by English medium schools. Most of these schools shared that it was challenging to hire well-qualified English teachers, and more generally, good teachers. Some resort to hiring teachers from faraway places (for example, Kerala and West Bengal), but are always unsure whether these teachers will return to the school after vacations to their native places. Others make do with unemployed youth from the nearby villages. The limited ability of the schools to fulfil their claims of English medium education was also apparent in the teaching-learning practices. As teachers from one of the schools in Yadgir expressed, it was difficult for them to deal with students in English, especially students in Classes 1 to 4. The teachers stated that they gave more homework and provided extra classes for those children who struggled to understand English. This practice of giving more homework seemed to satisfy parents who could not provide home support and insisted on teachers giving more homework. At the same time, teachers across these schools complained about parents not being able to provide adequate support at home due to their own unfamiliarity with English. Many parents send their children

to tuition classes although, according to the teachers, the schools provided good education.

### Teacher Characteristics

In our school survey, we collected information on academic and professional qualification, and years of experience of all teachers employed in these schools. First, the data collected points to

**Table 5: Teacher Characteristics in Public and Private Schools (%)**

	Public Schools	Private Schools
Academic qualification		
Below graduate	7	15
Graduate	30	40
Postgraduate and above	64	44
Professional teacher qualification (any)	99	71
Teaching experience		
1 year or less	2	20
1 to 2 years	2	18
2 to 5 years	9	35
More than 5 years	87	27

Source: Authors' own research.

stark differences between public and private schools when compared with individual teacher characteristics. Table 5 shows that public school teachers are by far better qualified academically (64% have postgraduate degree as compared to only 44% for private schools), professionally (almost all public school teachers have some professional qualification,

whereas 29% of private school teachers do not have any professional qualification), and have more teaching experience than their private school counterparts (the average public school teacher has an experience of 14 years as compared to only five years for private school teachers).

Second, when parental perceptions of teacher characteristics were compared with school-level data of individual teacher characteristics, there was a mismatch between the two for private schools. There is a mismatch between the importance assigned to teacher characteristics by parents and the reality of teachers in the schools. The children of parents who identify teacher characteristics as an important attribute, that is, have that among the top three reasons for their choice of schools, do not necessarily go to schools with better teacher characteristics.

As Table 6 shows, while there is a match between parents' perceptions and realities in public schools on teacher characteristics, such as academic and professional qualifications of teachers and their teaching experience, there is a strong mismatch on these characteristics for parents sending their children to private schools. For this analysis, parents were grouped into two categories: those who considered teacher characteristics to be important in governing the choice of their children's school, and those who did not consider teacher characteristics

**Table 6: Teacher Characteristics—Parental Perceptions vs School Realities**

Schools	Parental Perceptions	Proportion of Graduate Teachers (%)	Proportion of Teachers with Professional Qualifications (%)	Average Teachers' Experience (in months)
Public	Parents for whom teacher characteristics are important	96	98	169
	Parents for whom teacher characteristics are not important	92	98	164
Private	Parents for whom teacher characteristics are important	76	64	74
	Parents for whom teacher characteristics are not important	87	74	79

Source: Authors' own research.

to be important. Schools chosen showed lower percentage of academically qualified teachers (76% vs 87%), lower percentage of teachers with professional qualifications (64% vs 74%), and lower average experience of teachers (74 months vs 79 months) for the group who thought teacher characteristics were important as compared to the group who thought it was not important. In other words, parents who thought teacher characteristics were important do not choose schools that in reality have better teacher characteristics as compared to those who thought teacher characteristics were not important for their school choice decisions. These numbers were also lower than the average across the sample of private schools which had 84% teachers who are graduates and 71% teachers who are professionally qualified.

### Parental Aspirations and Marketing Practices

Our research suggests some of the possible reasons for mismatch between parental perceptions and school realities. Most of the private schools shared that they organised systematic enrolment drives to advertise their schools and generate admissions. These enrolment drives were undertaken by teachers during the summer vacation. Describing these enrolment drives, a teacher from a private school in Raipur said,

We visit the villages with the help of our current students' parents. We contact the sarpanch and other influential people from the village. We reach villages in the school vehicle which has a loudspeaker. We gather people in one location and tell them about our school. Then, the teachers are divided into groups of two each for door-to-door visits in the village. We collect the information on children in the families, take their phone numbers and then finally explain the school's activities and admissions to them.

During these door-to-door visits, printed pamphlets highlighting the main features of the school are distributed to the parents.

The pamphlets and school education drives stress on the conveyance for children, closed circuit cameras in school, early admission discounts, sibling discounts, English writing and speaking skills, cultivation of good manners, habits and thoughts, computer education, computer-aided classes, extra-curricular activities, weekly or daily tests, and good academic performance in board examinations. In order to build their image, these schools also advertise their provision for good education at low fees, use of English language for routine conversation, no usage of local language or dialects in schools, and the importance laid on discipline and traditions.

Parents also seem to be aligned with these more visible but debatable parameters of educational quality. Prominent among these parameters was *sanskaar*, an idea of culture in the private schools that referred to the dress, behaviour, and ways of speaking in these schools, as compared to the public schools. Parents, referring to the manner in which children in private schools were supposedly able to conduct themselves as compared to those in public schools, were often found to say, "And children here (that is, in private schools) are more well-mannered." Mandatory conversation in English in private schools vis-à-vis the use of local language and dialects in public schools and strict discipline and monitoring of activities and whereabouts of children in private schools seemed to complement these ideas of "sanskaar." One of the parents from Tonk, from

among the families who were in a position to afford low-fee private schools but opted to send their children to a public school, seemed to aptly summarise this broad approach in choosing between public and private schools among parents, “Government schools are good today as well. But people usually think that children of poor people study in government schools. Hence, other people do not send their children and choose private schools.”

### In Conclusion

This article illuminates a number of important educational issues and debates, with particular reference to the idea of parental school choice and critiques the uncritical endorsement of market-based policies such as school choice and vouchers.

The findings of this article challenge the simplistic notion that parental choices are well-informed and based on the most important educational criteria for assessing schools. The role of multiple factors and the influence of both practical and educational considerations in the parental choice show that school choice is an inherently complex process. The ambivalence and shifting perceptions, even of parents who can afford private schools, towards the quality of education in the schools in

their neighbourhoods, further underlines the complexity of school choice.

Moreover, the study reveals significant mismatches between parental perceptions of the characteristics of specific schools and the realities therein. Our analysis suggests that parents are misled and are also misinformed about the characteristics of private schools. Parents sending their children to private schools aspire for cultural capital and private schools respond to these aspirations through market-based practices. Therefore, visible but non-educational parameters get emphasised in decision-making, which parents seem to conflate with the quality of teaching–learning in these schools. Critical parameters of educational quality, such as teachers’ capacity, get inadequate attention in the process.

A better understanding of the nature of this information asymmetry between educational practices and realities of schools, especially low-fee private schools, and parental perceptions about their educational quality is required. A more nuanced understanding of parental school choice, mainly in terms of their decision-making process that arguably involves consideration and synthesis of multiple factors based on their constraints, priorities, and available information is the need of the hour.

### NOTES

- 1 Public schools and the public school system refer to government schools and the government school system respectively.
- 2 Low-fee private schools are also known as budget private schools or affordable private schools. There is no agreed-upon definition of low-fee private schools in the literature (for example, Srivastava 2013). The private schools in our study had a median value of annual direct costs of ₹4,500, as reported by parents, and were schools mainly catering to the working classes and rural households. These schools were at the bottom of a hierarchy of the highly segmented private school system catering to different income groups in India. The reference to private schools in this study pertains to such schools and the terms low-fee private schools, budget schools and private schools may be used interchangeably.
- 3 The study understands “quality of education” as a normative and multidimensional concept informed by fundamental components of an education system such as aims, curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and school processes (Dhankar 2002; Winch 1996). It is with reference to this that parental perceptions of quality not aligned to such a concept are understood as non-educational.
- 4 The Azim Premji Foundation primarily works to support continuous professional development of public school teachers in these areas and largely on processes and platforms that can engage teachers voluntarily. There is no significant direct work with either schools or families in these areas.
- 5 The following criteria were used to select the research sample: (i) the presence of a balanced mix of public and private schools, and a minimum of 10 schools in total; this was to ensure a diversity of school options (both public and private) for the study; (ii) availability of accessible transport for the relevant village community; this was to ensure the non-inclusion of atypical remote villages that would not offer a diversity of school options; and (iii) population of around 1,500–1,800 households; this was to maintain a balance between available resources and a sample target of around 120 families from each site.

- 6 School choice might also differ by caste and religion of the parents. However, our study did not reveal any significant differences based on these demographic factors.
- 7 This refers to Section 12(1)(c) of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 that provides for inclusion of children from disadvantaged and weaker sections in private unaided schools.
- 8 These observations were qualitative observations of short duration and not extended and prolonged observations of school processes. It would have been interesting to study other characteristics such as teaching–learning processes, discipline and safety, the perceptions of which are also significant factors for school choice. However, that would require a methodology that was beyond the possibilities of this study.

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