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## The dilemmas of school choice: do parents really ‘choose’ low-fee private schools in Delhi, India?

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### ABSTRACT

The growing number of private schools in India, especially those accepting children from underprivileged households, has been considered demand driven. In contrast to this understanding, this paper argues that low-income parents in Okhla and Badarpur in Delhi, India, are compelled to send their children to private unaided recognised and unrecognised schools. These schools are used as interim schools during primary or elementary grades because of the perceived danger of sending younger children to distant government schools. Our findings show that parents encounter school choice dilemmas in three stages. Parents prefer sending their children to government schools, but being Muslim, they also prefer faith-based teaching in an Islamic environment, which they expect from government schools but not from private schools. Moreover, they prefer schools that offer all grades, do not charge fees, and have honest teachers who teach effectively, are dedicated and affectionate, and will instil discipline in their children.

### KEYWORDS

Private schools; government schools; school choice; South Delhi; India

### 1. Introduction

There is growing concern worldwide about parental choice in sending children to public or private school. This problem is not limited to developed countries; it is also a concern in developing countries. Research based on developing countries shows that parental choice of private schools is mainly due to perceived quality, English-medium instruction (EMI)/international language and an inadequate supply of government schools (Alderman, Orazem, and Paterno 2001; Heyneman and Stern 2014; Kingdon 1996; Tooley and Dixon 2007). This paper focuses on India, where there is growing concern about the role of private schools, especially schools attended by children from low-income groups. This study was inspired by the question of whether low-income parents – in this case, Muslim parents in a Muslim community (a minority group in India) – truly choose private schools over fee-free government schools for their children. However, because the community is made up of Muslim parents, we address the preferences of Muslim parents specific to this context

**Table 1.** Schools by management, Delhi 2015–2016.

Management	Primary only	Primary with upper primary	Primary with upper primary and higher secondary	Upper primary only	Upper primary and higher secondary	Primary with upper primary and secondary	Upper primary with secondary	Secondary only	Secondary with higher secondary	Higher secondary only	Total schools
Department of Education	0	1	416	18	466	11	97	0	0	0	1009
Tribal/Social welfare department	1	1	2	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	5
Local body	1726	3	26	0	0	8	0	0	0	0	1763
Private aided	48	11	92	12	68	11	14	0	1	1	258
Private unaided	979	886	559	5	9	225	6	0	0	0	2669
Other government	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	5
Central government	0	1	39	0	2	4	0	0	0	0	46
State total	2755	904	1135	35	545	260	117	0	3	1	5755

Source: District Report Card 2015–16 (U-DISE 2016a).

**Table 2.** Case study school profile ( $n=13$ ).

School	Year established	Recognition status	Education level/ (grades)	Number of students (approximately)	Number of teachers	Tuition fee
A	1988	×	Pre-nursery-8th	250 (800)*	12	Rs. 650–800
B**	1998	✓	Pre-nursery-10th (Pre-nursery-8th recognised)	1200	60	Rs.900–1100 (grade 9th-10th:1500)
C	2010	×	Nursery-8th	500	27	Rs. 1200–1400
D	2011	×	Pre-nursery-5th	42	6	N/A
E	2009	×	Playgroup-6th	300	20	N/A
F	2010	×	Pre-nursery-2nd	190	12	Rs. 1000
G	2010	×	Pre-nursery-5th	150	10	Rs. 400–500
H	2013	×	Nursery-3rd	90	6	Rs. 1000–1500
I	2002	✓	Nursery-8th	1100	26	Rs. 500 (KG 1 and 2)***
J	2013	×	Nursery-8th	400	24	Rs. 800–1000
K	2001	×	Pre-nursery-8th	500	24	Rs. 200–600
L	2000	✓	Pre-nursery-5th	400	17	N/A
M	2009	×	Nursery-8th	170	11	Rs. 550–1000
Average				407.0769	19.61538	

Notes: Based on field data. Obtained from schools' principals. \*This School A has four branches operating in other areas in Okhla; case study school has total 800 students in all four branches. \*\*School B has recognition until grade 8 but also offers grade 9 and grade 10 in a different location in Okhla. Including the secondary section, this school has 1200 students and 60 teachers. \*\*\*School I only provided tuition fees for kindergarten (KG) 1 and 2 and refused to provide tuition fees for higher grades. Schools D, E, and L refused to provide their tuition fee structure; therefore, they are marked as not available (N/A).

**Table 3.** Schools' physical facilities.

	Number of schools ( $n=13$ )	
	Available	Unavailable
Pucca building (concrete building)	13	–
Blackboard	13	–
Desk and chair	13	–
Playground	4	9
Experimental (Science) lab	2	11
Computer lab	1	12
Library	2	11
Separate toilet for male students	12	1
Separate toilet for female students	12	1
Pure drinking water	11	2
Other (significant school supply)	cognitive lab (1), smart class (smart board) (2), private vans (1), karate lesson (1), air-conditioned room (1), electricity backup (1).	

Notes: Based on field data. Drawn from principals' questionnaires.

within the final discussion. This paper argues that parents are compelled to choose low-fee private (LFP) schools for the primary years due to the perceived danger of sending younger children to distant government schools. Private schools are used as interim schools; parents transfer their children to government schools in later years (grade 5 or grade 8). On parental choice, Härmä (2011) argues:

The concept of preference, i.e., the school type that parents would like (in the absence of constraints) to access for their children, is held to be separate from the actual choice made by parents, as indicated by the school the child attends, which may often not be the parents' preferred school. (350)

Hence, there is a need to examine parents' actual demand for schools for their children and to identify parents' school choices and preferences in the Indian context.

**Table 4.** Demographic characteristics of the parents.

Parents participants	No. of Parents ( <i>total</i> = 35)	Participants	Spouse
Gender			
Male	20		
Female	15		
Educational background			
Primary		10	8
Lower-secondary		7	10
SSC (10th/secondary)		1	3
Higher secondary		4	4
Bachelor's (BA/BSC)		4	1
Master's (MA/MSC)		2	0
Other		0	0
No education		7	9

Note: Based on the author's calculation

'The proportions of students in private schools in urban areas of many states in India is higher than in any developed country' (Shah and Veetil 2006, 3). Studies conducted in Delhi (Ohara 2012), Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan (De et al. 2002), Calcutta (Nambissan 2003), and Andhra Pradesh (Woodhead, Frost, and James 2013) report that LFPs are growing at an exponential rate. Given the growth of these schools and their large number and diversity of students, it is important to consider parents' actual school preferences. Tooley and Dixon (2006) contend that parents have a strong preference for private schools, which are accessible and affordable to the poor. This claim is ambiguous because the literature (PROBE Team 1999; Srivastava 2008; Watkins 2000) also shows that private schools are not affordable or accessible to the poorest of the poor. Tooley, Dixon, and Gomathi (2007) argue that private schools often offer students free and concessionary places. On the contrary, our findings show that parents have a lower preference for private schools because of the burden involved in paying school fees. Studies conducted by Rose and Adelabu (2007) in Nigeria, Härmä (2009) in India, and Akaguri (2014) in Ghana found that low-fee, for-profit private schools remain out of reach and are not affordable for the poorest households. This situation raises a serious concern about equity for the poorest households that choose private education for their children.

Our study identified three stages of the school choice process for the poor. The first stage is the choice between government schools and private schools. If parents choose a private school, they move to the second stage, which is whether to choose a recognised or unrecognised school. However, because the parent participants are Muslim, there is a third stage in which they face the dilemma of choosing between schools that offer secular or Islamic teaching. Because India is a multi-religious society, parents – especially religious minorities – are often concerned about losing their religious faith in the context of many other religions. Therefore, when choosing schools, the participants of this study also looked for schools based on their faith rather than religious schools *per se*. Few studies have addressed these three stages (dilemmas) of the school choice process. Guided by these questions, this paper examines how the households in the research area choose schools.

## 2. Types of private schools in India

Indian private schools mainly belong to two types: private aided (PA) and private unaided (PUA). Private aided schools fall into the quasi-government category. They began as privately

**Table 5.** Socioeconomic characteristics of parent participants.

Socio-economic indicators	Evidence from the data		
	Participants (n)		Spouse (n)
Parents' occupation (n)	Private sector (6), driver (1), businessman (3), teacher (1), electrician (2), mechanic (1), day labourer (2), launderer (1), grocery store owner (1), carpenter (1) tailor (2), homemaker (14)		Driver (2), teacher (1), grocery store owner (1), salesperson (1), carpenter (3), tailor (3), woodcutter (1), vendor (1), embroidery worker (1), factory worker (1), homemaker (20)
Household income (average)	Rs. 8429 (ranging from Rs. 3000–Rs. 25,000)		Rs. 4061 (ranging from Rs. 1000–Rs. 15,000)
Household expense (average)	Total Rs. 11,643 (ranging from Rs. 3000–Rs. 25,000)		

Notes: Based on the author's calculations. Private sector jobs include newspaper circulation managers, clerks, proofreaders, journalists, sub-editors, and receptionists at *Jamaat-E-Islami, Hind's Dawat* newspaper. Household income only represents participants who are working. The household income of housewives is shown as Rs. 0, and two spouses' (tailors) income is missing as their income is not stable.

managed and funded schools and currently receive government grants-in-aid; thus, they have lost the greater part of their former autonomy (De et al. 2002, as cited in Härmä 2011). These schools represent only 5% of schools in Delhi, catering mainly to the better off among lower middle-class clientele, unlike government schools (Ohara 2013). In contrast, PUA schools are run independently and draw income mainly from tuition fees and are further categorised as recognised and unrecognised. Recognition of all schools is legally required and allows students to receive government stipends and schools to issue transfer certificates (Kingdon 2007, as cited in Härmä 2011).

The other type, ‘unrecognised’ schools, is excluded from official statistics. These schools are required to meet certain minimum standards to be recognised by the government, which most do not meet in practice; hence they are unregistered and unrecognised (Mehrotra and Panchamukhi 2006). A large number of private primary schools in India are unrecognised (Kingdon 2007). Tooley and Dixon (2003) assert that many PUA schools are unrecognised at the primary level because there is no need to be recognised at this level in order for children to take state examinations. Students from private unrecognised schools cannot take any state or central examinations (Goyal and Pandey 2009).

In Delhi, local authorities such as the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) grant recognition to the primary sections, and the Directorate of Education (DoE) does the same for middle to senior secondary schools. Both recognised and unrecognised unaided schools are also run by many registered societies and trusts. According to the official Delhi School Education Act of 1973 and the Delhi School Education Rules of 1973, elementary-level students from unrecognised schools could transfer to recognised schools with an affidavit by their parents stating the child’s schooling history. However, when transferring to recognised schools at the secondary level, students must have valid transfer certificates (official school record) issued by a recognised school; otherwise, they have to pass a public examination set by the DoE (Ohara 2013).

Private unaided schools are often considered a pure form of private schools, and this paper bases its discussions on these PUA recognised and unrecognised schools and deals with them as private schools. Table 1 presents schools by management type in Delhi.

### 3. Parental choice of LFP schools: context and debates

We initiated our study with the question of whether parents choose private schools for their children. Equally important are the circumstances under which parents opt for private schools. Hence, we considered many factors that allow parents to engage in the school choice process.

Dissatisfaction with government schools is a driver of the demand for and uptake of private schooling (Kingdon 1996; Muralidharan and Kremer 2008; Srivastava 2008). Quality is also associated with school facilities, such as well-established infrastructures, smaller class sizes, low teacher-student ratios, and improved teaching and learning materials. Mehrotra and Panchamukhi (2006) state: ‘The quality of school buildings, one-class-room schools, drinking water or toilet for staff and students (especially for girls), government schools come out looking worse than private unaided ones’ (438).

Parents perceive the quality of private education as better than public education (Kingdon 2007). Higher teacher absenteeism in government schools (Kingdon 2007; Muralidharan and Kremer 2008) than in private schools (Mehrotra and Panchamukhi 2006) and other

factors are believed to increase parental demand for private schools, such as better teaching activity (Härmä 2009; Singh and Sarkar 2012; Tooley and Dixon 2006), lower pupil-teacher ratio (Goyal and Pandey 2009; Mehrotra and Panchamukhi 2006) and higher pupil test scores (Goyal and Pandey 2009) in private schools. The issue of the quality of private schools has been raised by other scholars (Nambissan 2003; Rose and Adelabu 2007; Watkins 2000).

Baird (2009) and Woodhead, Frost, and James (2013) argue that private schools are associated with aspirations for higher social status and improved opportunities for future employment, whereas Srivastava (2008) argues that: 'there are no data on the relative advantages, if any, LFP school completers experienced with regards to employment opportunities' (202).

Many other scholars claim that the use of English as the medium of instruction is one of the reasons for the poor to choose private schools (Baird 2009; Kingdon 1996; Muralidharan and Kremer 2008; Tooley and Dixon 2007). However, Sarangapani and Winch (2010) assert that English as a medium of instruction is not necessarily a meaningful factor in parental demand.

Another determining factor is the proximity of schools to families (Ohara 2012; Srivastava 2008; Woodhead, Frost, and James 2013). The closer a school is located to a family's household, the more convenient it is for parents to select the school. Private schools are increasing rapidly, and Tooley and Dixon's (2003, 2006) findings show the presence of these schools on every street and back alley in urban areas. The Unified-District Information System for Education (U-DISE) State report card 2015–16 (U-DISE 2016b) indicates that Delhi has 2826 government schools and 2925 private schools. According to U-DISE 2014–15 (U-DISE 2015), in South Delhi, there are 430 government schools and 391 private schools. However, the report does not discuss unrecognised private schools, and the true number of private schools is much larger than reported. A survey conducted in 2012 by the MCD of Delhi suggests there are 1593 unrecognised schools in Delhi (Government of NCT of Delhi 2012). Ohara (2013) states: 'The proportion of private unaided schools in Delhi is higher than any other state and union territory in India, suggesting the rapid growth of fee-charging schools in Delhi at elementary level' (155).

Studies suggest that demographic indicators such as education and family income are significant factors in school choice (Muralidharan and Sundararaman 2013). Family income remains a crucial issue in determining the spending pattern for education, particularly for low-income families. The question of whether the poor can access and afford these schools raises serious concerns. Findings from Mehrotra and Panchamukhi (2006) on eight states in India show that the financial burden is much higher on households that send children to private unaided schools than to government schools. Findings from Uttar Pradesh (Srivastava 2008) and Andhra Pradesh (Singh and Sarkar 2012; Woodhead, Frost, and James 2013) show that access to private schools is limited due to financial constraints. Hence, it is evident that the poorest households still have financial constraints with regard to access to private schools. However, there are ambiguities in fee payment to both government and private schools. Fees are paid not only to private schools but also to fee-free schools (Akaguri 2014). Parents encounter direct, indirect and opportunity costs in both public and private schools.

Because the participants of this study were Muslim, we also examined studies that focus on Muslim communities' demands and preferences. Studies conducted in Muslim communities in Hyderabad, India, by Tooley and Dixon (2003) and in Lahore, Pakistan, by Alderman, Orazem, and Paterno (2001) show that schools serving Muslim communities are



secular and often taught in English as a result of an increasing demand from parents, while Srivastava's (2008) findings show that Muslim families chose lower-fee religious schools (*madrasas*) for their children. Findings from Hyderabad and Mumbai claim that Muslim parents prefer private schools for their children due to the linguistic advantage that these schools may confer on children for future employment (Baird 2009; Tooley and Dixon 2003). The question of whether the entire Muslim community prefers English as a medium of instruction is debatable and must be contextualised. However, in addition to language, other factors are associated with parental demand. Heyneman and Stern's (2014) findings from Pakistan and Tanzania suggest that parental preference for low-cost schooling also has a religious emphasis. Due to the negligence of the government, Muslims in India choose private schools, as evidenced by the Sachar Committee report (government of India 2006, as cited in Sarangapani and Winch 2010).

Previous research has addressed many issues in the LFP sector. However, less attention has been given to parents' actual inclination towards and demand for private schools. This research will address parents' (specifically Muslim parents') preferences for schools in Okhla and Badarpur in South Delhi.

#### 4. Data and methods

Data were gathered from poor settlements in South Delhi in India from February to March 2016. This study was conducted in Okhla and Badarpur. These areas share similar characteristics in that both are underprivileged Muslim communities. The first author hired a research assistant to gain access to the schools and to improve communication with the participants. The research methods utilised in this paper include qualitative methods, in-depth interviews, field notes, and documents. The data presented in this paper are primarily based on school and household surveys and observation. We distributed questionnaires and interviewed 13 principals and 35 households. The parent participants selected for the study sent their children to 22 PUA schools, and the data on principals were gathered from 13 of the 22 schools. All of the parent participants had more than one child; in most cases, they did not send all of their children to the same school as some of the schools that their child attended included only lower grades. Of the 22 schools, only 4 schools had recognition status. One school offered primary to secondary sections (recognition until grade 8 only), nine schools offered primary to upper-primary grades, and 12 schools offered primary grades only. All 22 schools offered EMI, and 21 schools operated in an Islamic environment.

We walked around the areas to look for schools and entered the schools to obtain permission from the authorities. After obtaining permission, we distributed the questionnaires to the principals and conducted in-depth interviews with them. We adopted a snowball sampling method to collect data (e.g., we asked the principals to provide names and contacts of other schools to conduct research). We visited the case study schools multiple times. We dictated each question to the principals. We prepared our questionnaires in English, and the questions were orally translated to Urdu and Hindi because most of the principals could not converse in English. To obtain better insight into parental preferences, we also considered the schools' supply-side influence. To examine the schools' operating mechanisms, we attempted to collect information on the schools' legal status and how the schools were performing in terms of enrolment, school tuition fees, governing body, school facilities, and teachers' educational background.

Thirty-five households were surveyed. A similar convenience method was applied to collect data from the parents. We translated our questionnaires into Urdu for the parents. We asked the parents general information about their educational (including spousal education) and socioeconomic background, the number of children attending government and private schools, the amount they paid per child, whether they paid a private tutor or coaching centres, and the fees for these services. We also asked the parents whether they were satisfied with the teachers' performance. The most pivotal questions concerned the reasons for choosing private schools and not choosing government schools, the satisfaction level with their school choices, and their career aspirations for their children. However, it was not possible to examine all the data; therefore, not all data were utilised for the study.

#### **4.1. Research sites**

##### **4.1.1. Okhla**

This is a densely populated suburban and primarily Muslim community in South Delhi. The research setting was Abul Fazal Enclave phase I and phase II and Shaheen Bagh in Jamia Nagar. These are unauthorised colonies (Government of NCT of Delhi 2016). The residents of these colonies mainly speak Urdu, their mother tongue. The area mainly comprises industrial areas and an underprivileged area where government facilities are not available to the community. The nearest government school is located in an area known as Jasola.

##### **4.1.2. Badarpur**

This area is also located in South Delhi, which is approximately 7.8 km from Okhla. The research setting was in Khadda Colony, Jaitpur extension part II, which is an impoverished area and an unauthorised colony (Government of NCT Delhi 2016). We found that the settlers remained out of the reach of government facilities. The nearest government school is in 'Molar Band', which is 3.0 km from Jaitpur extension part II.

### **5. Results and discussion**

#### **5.1. School characteristics**

Data regarding school characteristics were gathered from 13 principals from 13 schools. Of these schools, only three are recognised PUA. The other schools are unrecognised because they do not meet the registration criteria. Although many principals, who also happen to be the owners of the schools, claim that they have applied for registration with the government, many also state that it was not possible to apply for registration to the government because the schools do not meet the recognition criteria. For example, Ohara (2012), in her study on the legitimacy of unrecognised schools, stated that unrecognised schools do not conform to the norms specified by the Indian government, such as land requirements, teacher salaries, or educational facilities. As a result, many of the schools are affiliated until grade 8 and do not have an affiliation for the higher grades. Therefore, we asked why the schools are affiliated only until grade 8. One principal/owner of a school said:

Under the criteria, the schools that have gained recognition from the government may not be operating according to the rules and regulations. Therefore, when the inspectors come to observe the schools (for approval of all grade levels), they find that the schools are not running according to the prescribed set of rules. Moreover, they understand that private schools are

increasing day by day, and so interest in the government schools may be lost; this is why they do not recognise the schools after grade 8.

Another reason that a researched school might not obtain recognition is due to the location in an unauthorised colony. The same principal told us that even after paying bribes, his previous school did not obtain recognition because the government authority said that the school was located in an unauthorised colony. The principal mentioned that the government officials stated that the school does not meet many requirements, such as water supply: ‘There is no water supply in the entire area, so how can the government say that the school does not provide water?’ Hence, the schools that operate in the research areas are struggling to meet the requirements and gain recognition status. However, three case study schools have been able to obtain recognition despite being in unauthorised colonies.

The majority of the schools do not own the premises; the owners usually rent or lease apartments to conduct their classes, and the rent for these schools is usually between Rs. 35,000 and Rs. 47,000.<sup>1</sup> Most of the unrecognised schools studied in the area do not have improved infrastructures and do not meet other basic requirements. The classrooms in the schools are very small. Sarangapani and Winch (2010) argue that the small sizes of the rooms can explain the lower teacher-student ratio. In addition to these points, we contend that if there are too many private schools in one neighbourhood, the teacher-student ratio will be low because parents have a vast array of schools to which they can send their children.

Regarding teachers’ qualifications, principals of the schools informed us that a minimum requirement for hiring a teacher is a bachelor’s degree. The principals stated that all the teachers had bachelor’s degrees and a few had master’s degrees. However, these statements contradict parents’ statements. We found that the teachers at private schools did not have educational training, although some of the principal participants in the study said that they had qualified teachers with professional degrees. However, the parent participants stated that none of the teachers in the private schools (research area) had any professional training. One of the principals said: ‘None has a B.Ed. [chuckles] .... Please ask them to show you their certificate; ask them for proof.’ Another principal said: ‘If I hired a B.Ed. teacher, then I would have to pay a minimum of Rs.12000–Rs.15,000, and in that case, I would need to increase the school fees.’<sup>2</sup> If I increase the fees, then the parents would not be able to afford it. That is why I hire teachers who have higher secondary certificates or are studying in a university (before graduation).’ He said that most schools follow this trend. The parents mentioned that teachers at private schools earn Rs.2000–Rs. 3000 and questioned why professionally trained teachers would teach at these schools. Tables 2 and 3 presents the case study schools’ profile and their facilities.

## **5.2. Population characteristics (both areas)**

In both Okhla and Badarpur, the majority of the population is Muslim and migrated to these areas from other states and districts to earn a living. Tables 4 and 5 presents demographic characteristics and the socio-economic characteristics of the parent participants.

## **5.3. Parental rationale**

We attempted to identify why and under what circumstances parents decide to send their children to a private school. To examine this issue, we identified the three stages of the dilemma that parents must address when choosing a private school for their children.

### 5.3.1. *Choice between government schools and private schools*

Parents often face a perplexing situation because they have an array of schools from which to choose, from government schools to private schools, which include a vast range of types. In this study, parents were not given the option to choose from government or private schools because there were no government schools in their area (government schools were located in other areas in Okhla and Badarpur; due to limited seating and busy roads, parents did not prefer to send their children to these schools). However, in the neighbourhood, there are private recognised and unrecognised schools from which to choose. Because government schools are not located in the vicinity, the parents feel insecure about sending their younger children, especially girls, to distant government schools (also highlighted in Chugh's [2005] findings in a colony in Okhla). When we asked the parents why they chose private schools, a parent participant responded as follows:

The government school is very far from my house. My children are very small. This school [that her children attend] is located very close to my house. We do not go out far from the house. The nearest government school is in Jasola, which is quite far from my house, and it is difficult for my children to walk along the main roads due to heavy traffic, but I will transfer them to a government school once they reach the higher grades.

The parent participants' choices also depended on the schools that were located in the neighbourhood. It would be difficult for the parents to bear the transportation cost if they chose government schools. Moreover, the fathers are engaged with work; therefore, the mothers escort their children to and from school. During our interviews with the parents, we found that many women in the Muslim community are not allowed to go far from their homes without their husbands or blood relatives. Thus, the children are too young to go to school by themselves when the schools are far from their homes. However, when they reach the higher grades, the parents feel secure enough to send their children to government schools despite their distance from the families' homes.

Because the research area includes illegal unauthorised settlements (which have emerged without the permission or authorisation of the government), government schools are not established. However, parents have said that neglect by the government has encouraged them to choose private schools even when they are extremely dissatisfied with these schools. Despite living in unauthorised colonies, where government schools cannot be established for obvious reasons, parents expect the government to build schools so that their children do not have to be sent to private schools. All of the parent participants were dissatisfied with the way these schools functioned. The parents were concerned about teaching activities (the schools hired teachers with no professional training, and the parents believed that the teachers were not highly educated), tuition fees, and other costs incurred. The government schools also require a birth certificate to enrol a child, and many poor parents cannot enrol their children due to the lack of this document. One parent enrolled his daughter in grade 5 in a government school with the help of an *Aadhar card* (identification card) but could not admit his son because he was in a higher grade and government schools do not accept the identification card in higher grades. In contrast, private schools do not require birth certificates to enrol children.

It is often argued that government schools require private tuition; that is, it is necessary to hire home tutors or for the children to go to coaching centres. These factors sometimes act as a barrier to free government education. Interestingly, the participants of this study revealed that regardless of whether they sent their children to private schools, the children still required home

tutors or coaching centres; therefore, they strongly preferred the government schools. Moreover, because most of the private schools teach the lower grades, they are required to transfer the children to a private school in which all grade levels are taught or to a government school that is located far from their area. However, private schools that teach higher grades usually charge exorbitant tuition fees compared to other private schools. Therefore, parents generally select government schools over medium- or high-cost private schools. Parents want dedicated teachers in the schools who will not only treat the students with care but will also instil discipline in them. In our findings, parent participants said the following:

If the government provides security and teachers become responsible, everybody will start sending their children to government schools. People want to access facilities from the government because we pay taxes, but we are helpless because the teachers at government schools do not teach the children and express no affection towards them. They do not stop the children from doing bad things (consumption of illegal drugs, use of abusive words, and fighting). Nobody wants to pay tuition fees to schools. We all want government schools, but due to the insincerity of the teachers, we do not send the children to government schools.

The children don't study in government schools, they become spoilt. They start drinking in school. They always fight and use abusive language. If you just stand outside the government school, you will see the children fighting and using abusive language. The situation has become so bad that the children beat up the teachers in government schools. They break a fan, and when the teachers ask them why they broke it, the children say [a slang word: deleted for ethical purposes]. Now can you tell me how we can send our children to government schools?

Although the parents reject government schools for the teachers' insincerity and the prevalence of drugs, physical and verbal abuse, they would choose a government school if one existed in their area because this proximity would allow them to observe their children's activities (that is, whether they take drugs or engage in verbal or physical abuse). Parents would hire a tutor or send them to coaching centres because they believe that teachers at government schools do not teach well. The parents want dedicated teachers who will treat the children warmly. They are aware of government schoolteachers' credentials; this factor encourages parents to send their children to government schools at which children can learn effectively, even though they are aware of the shortcomings in these schools.

Another complication that arises in choosing private schools is that most only cover the years until the beginning of primary education. The parents are conflicted about sending their children to private schools because after a few years of schooling, the children need to be enrolled in a school that teaches all grades. Thus, parents face a difficult situation in having to choose private schools as most of the schools cover the years up to the primary or elementary grades. Therefore, we asked the parents where they sent their children for their primary or elementary years. One parent responded:

This is the biggest problem. Private schools charge high fees that we cannot afford to pay, while on the other hand, no teaching takes place in government schools. So we are stuck in between. If we are not able to afford the private school tuition fee, we unwillingly transfer the children to a government school. Then the children will get stuck for 1–2 years in government schools because no teaching takes place.

In the absence of government schools, parents choose to send their children to private schools. They find that the teachers at private schools are dedicated and affectionate to the children; however, parents – who pay fees – are generally not satisfied with the teaching quality. Unlike government schoolteachers, teachers' jobs at private schools are not secure. Therefore, the teachers pay attention to all the children. In addition, many parents cannot

send their children to government schools because of the lack of seats in government schools. During the initial enrolment phase at government schools, parents found that there were too many children in one classroom and that many were sitting outside the classroom because the school could not accommodate them due to classroom space.

Despite the government schools' failure to provide dedicated and sincere teachers, the parents are all willing to send their children to government schools because they are aware of the benefits of public education. The parents are aware that private school teachers do not have professional training and are not highly educated, and the parent participants are not satisfied with the way the teachers at these schools teach. The parent participants stated that because the schools are located in the neighbourhood and because the teachers in the schools are mainly from their locality, they know that the teachers are not highly educated: 'The teachers receive low pay, are untrained and possess only a higher secondary certificate,' said one parent. Likewise, another parent said, 'The teachers are not well educated, and my son still cannot write his name or the names of his family members'. Parents also stated that the schools hire teachers with low qualifications so that they can pay them low salaries.

Thus, our findings reveal that while parents favour and have a choice to send their children to fee-free government schools that offer all grades, parents observe children consuming drugs, fighting and abusive language at these government schools. Therefore, these parents look for an environment that is free from drugs and from verbal and physical abuse. Because other children are exposed to drugs and abusive language at these schools, most parents do not send their children to government schools during the primary years and instead choose to send them after grade 5 or grade 8 because at later age, children will be mentally strong enough to resist the pressures of drugs.

### **5.3.2 Choice between recognised and unrecognised schools**

As the inadequate supply of government schools drives parents to choose private schools, another concern arises regarding whether to choose a recognised school or an unrecognised school. Parents experience difficulties in choosing their preferred school because students studying in unrecognised schools cannot take state examinations and, in most cases, these schools offer only lower grades; in contrast, recognised schools are highly competitive and charge high tuition fees. Moreover, switching from an unrecognised school to a recognised school is difficult because the certificate of an unrecognised school is not valid. Other problems related to unrecognised schools is the Section 18 (1) of the Right to Education Act 2009, which says that without obtaining a certificate of recognition, unrecognised schools cannot continue to function or expand; the year 2013 was set as a deadline to cease functioning. The National Independent Schools Alliance's data on school closures in Delhi as of October 2016 show that 16,300 schools were closed in 2015, whilst 1893 schools received closure threats (<http://nisaindia.org/data-on-school-closures>). Certainly, this an alternative concern for unrecognised schools, which may be shut down at any time.

For most parents belonging to low-income groups, recognised schools are beyond their reach. These parents go through a continuous process of changing schools and, due to financial constraints, they usually send their children to unrecognised schools. Parents are extremely dissatisfied because recognised schools charge a disproportionate fee for enrolment. In addition to school fees, indirect costs are incurred; consequently, parents continually switch schools. School fees are not parents' only problems; other costs are incurred with school fees. A parent participant told us:



The educational system needs reform. Private schools charge high tuition fees. Some receipts are printed on paper (*pakka slip*), while others are only verbal (*kaccha slip*). If the verbal receipts are not given, then it is easier for the children to study.

In this case, the parents restrict their spending in other essential areas.

‘My three children are going to a recognised school, and I have been asking them to reduce one of their tuition fees, but the school authority is not listening and instead advised me to change schools,’ said one parent. The parents often find it difficult to pay the school fees. Moreover, as the children reach higher grades, the fees increase. Private schools not only charge high fees but also have a number of other drawbacks. One parent told us:

There are two boards in Delhi: CBSE [Central Board of Secondary Education] and the home centre. Now, the home centre is failing their students in science subjects and is transferring them to the commerce track and admits students from other schools to the science track (which is still considered the most prestigious stream) because they (the recognised schools) will be able to obtain more fees from the students coming from other schools. They take whoever pays more in fees and transfer their own students to the commerce track.

The same parent participant has changed schools four times. When we asked him the reason for switching schools, he told us that the first school his children attended was a recognised school that charged high tuition fees. He could not afford the fees, causing him to change schools. The switching of schools quite frequently reflects the way that parents cope with mental anxiety. Parents prefer recognised schools because all grades are available, but due to financial constraints, most parents send their children to unrecognised schools.

### 5.3.3. *Choice between secular schools and faith-based schools*

Vasavi (2003) stated:

The government’s continued neglect of schools and the failure to provide adequate financial support has led to the growth of a market in education. There are now a range of schools types that vary in terms of medium of instruction, type of management, school-board affiliation and religious orientation. (76)

Through a household survey, this study identified parents’ demand for faith-based schools that may use any language of instruction. As the parents could not choose schools and had to settle for private schools, they found it preferable if the schools emphasised the use of Arabic or Urdu. Many studies have focused on EMI as one of the key reasons for choosing private schools in the developing world. Based on other studies, it has been presumed that the majority of parents choose private schools because of the linguistic advantage. Our observation shows that EMI gains importance when parents have high aspirations for their children’s employment. However, EMI loses significance when parents are uninterested in the school’s medium of instruction. As our findings show, 34 of the 35 parents felt that their children’s career decisions depended on the children. During the study, we observed that the parents were interested in religious (Islamic) studies and did not have strong ambitions for their children’s future. With regard to future employment, one parent participant told us:

It depends on Allah [God] and him [the child] what he will be in the future, but people should have good intentions regarding education. I do not have any career aspirations for him. He can be anything – an engineer or a doctor or a good human being who can help other people. He should learn to be disciplined and polite.

Similar sentiments were offered by other parents.

Some parents also expressed dissatisfaction with the reduced emphasis on religious subjects in government schools. Therefore, we asked the parents whether they were interested in religious studies, and if so, why they did not choose a religious school, such as a *madrasa*, for their children. In response to this, the parents said that they wanted a modern education in an Islamic environment. Our findings suggest that most of the parent participants did not send their children to private schools because of EMI but rather because of an emphasis on religious studies in Arabic. One parent said, 'I chose this school because they put an emphasis on Islamic studies, and after grade 7, the school is going to offer an 'A'lima course (an extensive study of Islamic history, Islamic law, Arabic, etc.).'

The parents told us that in a private school, the children can learn multiple languages, such as Urdu, Arabic, and English, and can become well versed in religious prayers. Many parents said that they were not keen on teaching their children English but instead wanted them to be proficient in Arabic and Urdu. Accordingly, they said that English instruction was not the reason for choosing a private school. The Arabic language may not offer students an advantage in higher education and employment, but in many cases, the Muslim community is keen on learning and preserving the language. We asked parents, 'Do the government schools use Arabic or Urdu or teach religious subjects?' The parents replied, 'Yes, they do, but they do not emphasise these topics.' One principal of a school said:

When the parents have to transfer their children to other schools [to access higher grades], I always discourage the parents from sending their children to schools that do not match our [Islamic] ideologies. I encourage them to send their children to schools that teach Islam-related topics and offer an Islamic environment.

Thus, the parent participants looked for schools that were in close proximity to them. Because they had to settle for private schools that were in the vicinity, they also sought schools that offered an Islamic environment because they expected benefits in return for the fees they paid.

#### **5.3.4. Are LFP schools affordable?**

Regarding the concessionary places, one of the teachers informed us that 'offering free and concessionary places is a rare practice and is exercised only in the case of close friends, relatives or teachers who are teaching in the schools.' In the course of our study, we found that parents are extremely discontented with the schools' tuition fees. In addition to the school tuition fees, other costs are incurred. For example, unlike the government schools where only prescribed books are allowed to be taught, private schools offer a wide collection of books. Parents are pleased with the different types of books that are taught in the school, and they want affordable tuition fees to meet their expenses. One of the parents said that he had to pay Rs.3503 for grade 6 textbooks; if his children attended a government school, he would have to pay Rs.700–Rs.800. He also stated that the government sells a textbook at Rs. 80 while the private school sells a textbook at Rs.350–Rs.420. Parents are also required to pay other costs, such as uniforms, picnic trips, excursions and annual functions. The school uniform is also expensive: the cost of the school shirt is Rs. 340 and the trousers are Rs. 480. The respondent said, 'I have never worn expensive dresses, and with this amount of money, I could have bought two dresses.'

Scholars often neglect to mention how schools punish students if tuition fees are not paid on time. The parent participants in this study complained that because they were poor, it was often difficult for them to manage the fees, so they were sometimes unable to pay



the fees on time. As a result, the school penalised their children by asking the children to stand outside of the classroom or to leave the school. This is a serious issue and is a concern for all parents because the children must remain at home if fees are not paid on time. One parent participant said:

If tuition fees are not paid on time, the children are not allowed to sit for the exam, and even if the children are allowed to sit for the exam, the report card is not given to the parents until and unless the fees are paid.

Another parent stated that he had to take his children out of school because he had a fight with the principal, who accused him of not paying one year's tuition fees. The parent participant informed us that he had asked for the documents to prove that he had not paid the tuition fees. The school could not produce the documents, which led to a breach of trust. Consequently, the parent withdrew his children from the school and is currently sending them to a coaching centre for admission to a new school. This is another burden to the parents because the procedure to be admitted to a school is not simple; parents need to send their children to a coaching centre to prepare for the admission test, which costs more money.

## 6. Conclusion

This study began with a debate about whether parents truly choose LFP schools for their children. We focused on various factors associated with choosing these schools and parents' satisfaction level with the private educational system. We examined three phases of the dilemma that parents face during the enrolment of their children in schools. The unavailability of government schools in these two colonies has encouraged parents to choose private schools, which have left them disappointed. The government indirectly drives them to attend private schools due to the government's inability to build more schools to accommodate these children, who would otherwise be left with no education.

Private schools using EMI have no real connection to school choice among the participants. Due to the children's young ages, the parents send them to these schools; once the children reach higher grades (grade 5 or 8), the parents usually withdraw them from private schools and send them to government schools.

Likewise, we found that private schools in the research areas are not affordable to the poorest households. These schools' increased fees greatly affect families' daily lives because other expenses become compromised. Therefore, an inadequate supply of government schools has forced parents to choose private schools. Private schools are located in close proximity to communities, which makes parents more likely to choose them. They do not feel secure sending their children to schools that are not located close to their family homes. Although parents are happy with the private school teachers' care for their children, they are discontented with these schools' fees, their teachers' credentials, and the way teaching and learning are conducted in these schools. While they prefer government schools, they choose private schools because of their convenience and faith-based teaching.

## Notes

1. Income and expenses are listed in Indian Rupees (Rs).
2. At the time of this study (February–March 2016) these schools charged \$5–\$18.

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