

# PRIVATE SCHOOLS IN INDIA: EXPERIENCES OF DALITS AND ADIVASIS

## Executive Summary

At 12.7%, Scheduled Tribe children have the lowest rates of participation in private schooling among all communities followed by Scheduled Castes; this trend is accelerating risks widening the gap between the Dalit and Adivasi groups and Upper Castes. Sending even one child from the family to a private school will cost 27% and 23.3% of the total income of ST and SC households at the secondary level of education respectively. The language of merit, ability and hard work that dominates elite private schools is shaped by class, gender and caste. 37% of children from SCs faced harassment or abuse by either school staff or their peers during the pandemic. While reservation under section 12-1c of the RTE Act may have indeed reduced socioeconomic stratification in private schools, schools' attitudes reflect prejudice against working-class and marginalized community parents. This is unfortunate given the research highlighting that having poor classmates results in wealthy students being more likely to display generosity, 'prosocial' behaviour, and egalitarianism. Some schools are further run explicitly by caste associations and others, particularly residential schools for tribal learners, are aimed at "assimilation" of India's Adivasi populations. Evidence of the impact of private schools on learning remains somewhat ambiguous and there is evidence of teacher bias in student evaluations and the role that private tuitions play in supporting learning for the elites. By perpetuating existing social inequalities, private schooling defeats one of the main purposes of universal elementary education – breaking the old barriers of class, caste and gender in Indian society. The paper makes recommendations to regulate private schools to address discrimination against Dalits and Adivasis and strengthen the voice of parents. In the end, it is critical to strengthen the public education system by enhancing spending on education to 6% of GDP with a view of gradually ensuring all government schools eventually meet the norms of Kendriya Vidyalaya schools.

## Introduction

Education is a public good and has a clear role in accelerating economic growth, reducing inequality and ensuring the socio-political transformation of society. It has played a significant role in the struggle for empowerment of India's marginalized communities. Non-state schools run by social reformers were at the forefront of the early struggles of the Adivasi and Dalit movements<sup>1</sup> and part of the struggle to establish "national" schools as part of India's independence movement<sup>2</sup>.

The last few decades have, however, witnessed a massive growth in the number of private schools and the share of children enrolled in them. The proportion of private schools<sup>3</sup> in elementary education rose from 19.49% in 2007-08, 22.74% in 2014-15<sup>4</sup> and stood at 28% in 2020. Almost 50% of children are now enrolled in private schools. This growth has altered student demographics and changed the nature of non-state schools making them more commercial and largely not at the forefront of the mission of social reform.

<sup>1</sup> <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/opening-of-the-first-school-for-girls-by-savitribai-phule-and-jyotirao-phule-malvika-asher/LAGldJFS0eAbKw?hl=en>

<sup>2</sup> <http://54.251.36.70/apsc.public/resources/pdf/56.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Private school consists of both private aided and private unaided recognised schools

<sup>4</sup> <http://udise.in/Downloads/Publications/Documents/ElementaryFlash2014-15.pdf>

Given these trends, it is critical to examine the impact of growing private school provision on the education of historically marginalized Dalit and Adivasi communities. The present analysis offers an overview of the evidence on this issue. It is geared towards interested policymakers, members of civil society, particularly those working with Dalits and Adivasis, and academics working on these issues. Some recommendations are also made with a view of ensuring equitable education of marginalized communities.

### The legal and policy framework

India's legal and policy frameworks call for an educational system that is non-discriminatory. Article 29 (2) of India's Constitution stipulates that no citizen shall be denied admission into any educational institution maintained by the State or receiving aid from State funds on grounds of religion, race, caste or language. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (RTE Act), provides specific protections for disadvantaged groups including Dalits and Adivasis; both are also included in the list of Socially and Economic Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) in the new National Education Policy 2020. Despite this, as the subsequent document highlights, India's education system is, to a significant degree, stratified based on caste and class lines.

Attempts have been made to correct this. The RTE Act's section 12(1)(c) sets aside 25% of seats in private un-aided schools for children from "economically and socially weaker sections" of society. This is aimed to promote desegregation in the Indian schooling system by obliging children from elite and poor and socially marginalized communities to study in the same schools. The RTE Act, thus, sought to simultaneously promote social justice through forcing the mingling of heterogeneous groups of students and removing the filters that private schools used to maintain exclusivity<sup>5</sup>.

### Private Schools and the Dalit and Adivasi Communities: The Evidence<sup>6</sup>

#### Unequal Enrolment: Exclusion of Dalits and Adivasis from private schools

At 12.7%, Scheduled Tribe (ST) children have the lowest rates of participation in private schooling among all communities (U-DISE 2019)<sup>7</sup> followed by Scheduled Castes (SC) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). Even controlling for parental income and education, Dalit children are substantially less likely to be enrolled in private schools in India<sup>8</sup>. Being a Dalit or Adivasi reduces the probability of private enrolment by about 4- 8%.<sup>9</sup>

This trend has been accelerating over time and risks widening the gap between the Dalit and Adivasi groups and Upper Castes<sup>10</sup>. The growth in the number of private schools in India has not resulted in more equitable enrolment patterns along gender, caste and class lines<sup>11</sup>. In rural areas, in particular, the increase in the number of private schools and private enrolment appears to have simply maintained the social, economic, and demographic status quo instead of opening new opportunities for India's marginalized communities. In urban areas, some caste gaps may have been bridged at lower primary levels, but there is no consistent support for private enrolment becoming equitable over time<sup>12</sup>. An education system mediated by the market is bound to be skewed against the socially marginalized.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Radhika Gorur & Ben Arnold (2020): Regulating private sector schooling in the global south: the case of India, *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, DOI: 10.1080/03057925.2020.1766947

<sup>6</sup> A separate Policy Brief addresses the gender impact of privatisation of education.

<sup>7</sup> <https://centralsquarefoundation.org/State-of-the-Sector-Report-on-Private-Schools-in-India.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.485.7699&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

<sup>9</sup> [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2883736](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2883736)

<sup>10</sup> <https://ncspe.tc.columbia.edu/working-papers/OP222A.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2016.1217688>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03054985.2016.1217688>

<sup>13</sup> <https://thewire.in/books/indias-hierarchical-education-sector-precludes-the-creation-of-a-meritocracy>

This sorting starts early. Children who attended private pre-schools are 2.2 times more likely to succeed in completing secondary schooling than those children who did not attend any pre-school<sup>14</sup>. Economically better off parents prefer private schools and preschools over public provision. One study found a 1% increase in annual household income increases the probability of sending children to a private preschool by 33% points<sup>15</sup>; the same study also found caste origin to be associated with private preschool enrolment.

Furthermore, Dalits and Adivasis, when they attend private schools are likely to be enrolled in Low Fee Private Schools. These are often of low quality, are run by individuals from their homes<sup>16</sup> and employ unqualified, short-term contract teachers<sup>17</sup> raising serious concerns regarding the quality of education in these schools.

Further, private school attendance is the default option in the absence of nearby or otherwise safely accessible government schools, especially for very young children and girls<sup>18</sup>. The current rationalisation policy of the government under which government schools have been merged further risks exacerbating the problem of access by pushing children into private schooling<sup>19</sup>.

### **Financial exclusion: Cost of Private School Education as a barrier to Dalit and Adivasi enrolment**

Family per capita income is the most important predictor of whether a household chooses a public or private school across India. Using per capita consumption as a proxy for income, a doubling of per capita income increases the probability of choosing a private school over a public school by about 10%.<sup>20</sup> A study in Uttar Pradesh showed that the likelihood of a child in the second quintile accessing a low-fees private school was two times the chance of the poorest child, and for children in the third and fourth quintiles, the likelihood increases to approximately 7.5 times. In the richest quintile, the likelihood of a child attending low fees private schools was 10.7 times that for the poorest child<sup>21</sup>

Dalits and Adivasis are among the poorest social groups in India with 25% and 35% falling below the poverty line respectively<sup>22</sup>. As per the Socio-Economic Caste Census (2011) data, the highest-earning member in 83.55% of SC and 86.53% of the ST households earned less than Rs. 5,000.<sup>23</sup> Dalit and Adivasi households respectively earn 21% and 34% less than the national average annual household income, while Upper-Caste households earn nearly 47% more than the average.<sup>24</sup> The common expenditure on children for education such as school fees, private tuition, stationery, uniform, books, transport, etc., increases the financial burden on the parents. So, there is a clear connection between parental economic status and the type of school of the child.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Singh, R. & Mukherjee, P. (2015). Determinants of successful completion of secondary education: Evidence from Young Lives, Andhra Pradesh.

<sup>15</sup> <https://ijccep.springeropen.com/track/pdf/10.1186/s40723-020-00068-0.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> <https://ccs.in/sites/default/files/attachments/faces-of-bps-in-india-report2018.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/aug/12/low-fee-private-schools-poverty-development-economist?CMP=share\\_btn\\_tw](https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/aug/12/low-fee-private-schools-poverty-development-economist?CMP=share_btn_tw)

<sup>18</sup> [http://www.idfc.com/pdf/report/2012/Chapter\\_8.pdf](http://www.idfc.com/pdf/report/2012/Chapter_8.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320056186\\_School\\_Closures\\_and\\_Mergers\\_A\\_Multi-state\\_study\\_of\\_policy\\_and\\_its\\_impact\\_on\\_public\\_education\\_system\\_-\\_Telangana\\_Odisha\\_and\\_Rajasthan\\_2017](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320056186_School_Closures_and_Mergers_A_Multi-state_study_of_policy_and_its_impact_on_public_education_system_-_Telangana_Odisha_and_Rajasthan_2017)

<sup>20</sup> [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2883736](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2883736)

<sup>21</sup> <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED508748>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.rbi.org.in/scripts/PublicationsView.aspx?id=19887>

<sup>23</sup> [http://www.ncdhr.org.in/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/10-NCDHR-national-factsheet\\_weclaim\\_April-May-2020.pdf](http://www.ncdhr.org.in/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/10-NCDHR-national-factsheet_weclaim_April-May-2020.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> <https://thewire.in/books/indias-hierarchicaleducation-sector-precludes-the-creation-of-a-meritocracy>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.iosrjournals.org/iosr-jhss/papers/Vol.%2022%20Issue9/Version-7/C2209071420.pdf>

According to NSSO, the annual expenditure for education at the primary, upper primary and secondary level of education in government schools is Rs 1,253, Rs 2,181 and Rs 4,078<sup>26</sup> for the corresponding level of education. In comparison to this, the corresponding expenditure in private schools is Rs 14,485, Rs 17,360 and Rs 20,804<sup>27</sup>. The annual average household income of SC and STs are 75,216 and 89,356 respectively.<sup>28</sup> This means that sending even one child from the family to a private school will cost 19.25 per cent of the total income of ST households at the primary level, 23 per cent at the upper primary and 27 per cent at the secondary level of education. Similarly, for SC, 16.2 per cent of the total household income will be spent in primary, 19.5 of the income for upper primary and 23.3 for secondary level of education. As such, Dalits and Adivasis, being poorer are likely to be automatically excluded from fees-charging private schools.

### **Other forms of marginalization contributing to exclusion of Dalit and Adivasi students in private school enrolment**

A mix of geographical, household level and individual factors<sup>29</sup> contribute to the relatively lower enrolment of marginalized community students in private schools. The rural and urban residence is a clear factor<sup>30</sup>. ST students are 8.4% points less likely to attend private schools in rural areas, while this figure is 11.8% in urban areas. This is explainable in terms of the higher cost of attending private schools in urban areas, thus excluding SC and ST households.<sup>31 32</sup>

### **Private schools serving niche caste interests**

India's non-state sector has increased access for the most privileged groups first, then extended it to the relatively more privileged within the Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes.<sup>33</sup>

Research points towards instances when caste associations for wealthy castes organise private schools and colleges as well as charitable trusts through which members obtain scholarships and loans for higher education. Caste and ethnic fragmentation have a detrimental impact on educational provision by unaided private schools<sup>34</sup>. Private schools are likely to be dependent on contributions from the local community at least in the initial stages; these funding networks are likely to be, at least partly, caste-based. As a result, while these schools may be ostensibly open to all, members of the caste establishing the school receive priority in admission.<sup>35</sup> The educational field thus fragments not just into "public" or "private" but creates a marketplace of schools catering to niche constituencies of specific caste groups within the SC, ST, OBC and Upper Caste communities<sup>36</sup>. Private schools, thus created, may also use the language of instruction or other identity markers to establish a 'niche' within the wider school market to shape parental choice<sup>37</sup>. The PROBE report<sup>38</sup> highlights how a focus on Sanskrit has been instrumental in attracting Brahmin students to one such private school. As such, the

<sup>26</sup>[https://www.mospi.gov.in/documents/213904/301563//KI\\_Education\\_75th\\_Final1602590967945.pdf/4d0dcdc4-a8f0-0795-df06-be25f2b3a6f7](https://www.mospi.gov.in/documents/213904/301563//KI_Education_75th_Final1602590967945.pdf/4d0dcdc4-a8f0-0795-df06-be25f2b3a6f7)

<sup>27</sup>[https://www.mospi.gov.in/documents/213904/301563//KI\\_Education\\_75th\\_Final1602590967945.pdf/4d0dcdc4-a8f0-0795-df06-be25f2b3a6f7](https://www.mospi.gov.in/documents/213904/301563//KI_Education_75th_Final1602590967945.pdf/4d0dcdc4-a8f0-0795-df06-be25f2b3a6f7)

<sup>28</sup> [Wealth inequality, class, and caste in India: 1961-2012 \(ideasforindia.in\)](https://www.ideasforindia.in/wealth-inequality-class-and-caste-in-india-1961-2012)

<sup>29</sup> <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/rode.12305>

<sup>30</sup> PK Choudhury (2020) in J. B. G Tilak (ed.), *Universal Secondary Education in India*, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-5366-0\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-5366-0_6)

<sup>31</sup> [10.1177/2321023020963445](https://doi.org/10.1177/2321023020963445)

<sup>32</sup> <https://centralsquarefoundation.org/State-of-the-Sector-Report-on-Private-Schools-in-India.pdf>

<sup>33</sup> Gérard, 2020 cited in GEM 2021

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.isid.ac.in/~epu/acegd2018/papers/BhartiNandwani.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3379882/pdf/nihms382410.pdf>

<sup>36</sup> To cite this article: Howard M Jones (2017): Social hierarchy and enrolment in government and private schools in rural India: longitudinal evidence from a Rajasthan village, *Oxford Review of Education*, DOI: 10.1080/03054985.2017.1391762

<sup>37</sup> [https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/files/81279184/Gurney\\_2017\\_manuscript\\_accepted.pdf](https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/files/81279184/Gurney_2017_manuscript_accepted.pdf)

<sup>38</sup> [https://users.nber.org/~rdehejia/!@%\\$devo/Lecture%2011a%20Education/supplemental/Probe%20-%20202.pdf](https://users.nber.org/~rdehejia/!@%$devo/Lecture%2011a%20Education/supplemental/Probe%20-%20202.pdf)

experience of schooling, far from addressing historic social divisions, creates and reinforces social divisions in society.

The language of merit, ability and hard work that dominates elite private schools is shaped by class, gender and caste<sup>39</sup>. The lack of formal spaces to discuss issues of caste and class in private school classrooms means that opportunities to challenge existing privilege and familiarize students with India's subaltern histories are lost. The absence of caste in children's conversations risks being mistaken for the absence of caste itself. Schools, therefore, continue to act as catalysts in the social reproduction of power and privilege.

### Exclusion in private schools

Few ethnographic studies of private schools exist.<sup>40</sup> Oxfam India's research<sup>41</sup> on the status of private schools during the course of the pandemic has shown that 37% of children from Scheduled Castes faced harassment or abuse by either school staff or their peers. On average, Upper Castes students experience lower harassment in primary and lower secondary school than their lower caste peers<sup>42,43</sup>.

Students from Dalit and Adivasi communities find themselves in a difficult situation. On the one hand, they are not happy with the functioning of government schools; on the other, they find it extremely difficult to cope with the multiple demands of private schools such as higher fees and subtle class and caste-based discrimination.<sup>44</sup>

Further, information on the experience of students from these communities can be gleaned from the status of implementation of 12(1)(c) of the RTE Act. Researches point towards a positive impact of reservation for EWS in private schools on enrolment of Dalits and Adivasis in private schools; one study found a 29% and 11% increase in SC and ST enrolment respectively in private schools in Karnataka between 2012-13 and 2013-14<sup>45</sup>. A study in Andhra Pradesh shows that while Dalit students were equally likely to apply for the quota, they were less likely to accept the same if awarded; despite this, the fraction of students who belonged to Scheduled Castes was considerably higher than the fraction of SC students in a typical private school. This suggests that reservation may have indeed reduced socioeconomic stratification in private schools<sup>46</sup>.

While explicit and immediately visible discrimination has not been reported in the majority of studies related to private schools, this could be a result of discrimination being more hidden. Physical segregation of students along caste lines has been reported in Indian classrooms in general. Thus, children from lower castes tend to be seated at the back of the class due to the teacher's preference of having 'intelligent' students in the front row, who usually belong to the Upper Castes<sup>47,48</sup>.

<sup>39</sup> <https://theswaddle.com/casteism-still-thrives-in-elite-schools-in-india-what-would-anti-caste-education-look-like/>

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/01425692.2021.2003181>

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.oxfamindia.org/knowledgehub/oxfamianaction/status-report-education-during-pandemic-government-and-private-schools>

<sup>42</sup> <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2015.10.004>

<sup>43</sup> Tilak, Jandhyala B. G., & Sudarshan, R. M. (2001). Private schooling in rural India. Working Paper Series No. 76. New Delhi: National Council of Applied Economic Research.

<sup>44</sup> Dalits and Choice of School: A Sociological Study of Private Schools in Telangana State, Silveru Harinath and Nagaraju Gundemeda accessed from <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0038022921993969>

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[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/283518059\\_Right\\_to\\_education\\_and\\_inclusion\\_in\\_private\\_unaided\\_schools\\_A\\_n\\_exploratory\\_study\\_in\\_Bengaluru\\_and\\_Delhi/link/5f73a4dca6fdcc00864830e6/download](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/283518059_Right_to_education_and_inclusion_in_private_unaided_schools_A_n_exploratory_study_in_Bengaluru_and_Delhi/link/5f73a4dca6fdcc00864830e6/download)

<sup>46</sup> <https://academic.oup.com/qje/article/130/3/1011/1931887>

<sup>47</sup> <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1759-5436.2003.tb00058.x>

<sup>48</sup> <https://in.one.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/wps0101.pdf>

Studies located in private schools show the existence of a belief amongst schools that parents of weaker section children are disinterested and uninvolved in their child's education.<sup>49 50 51</sup> However, Sarin & Gupta's<sup>52</sup> study shows that this attitude reflects prejudice against working-class parents. They argue that while parents want to contribute, they are unable to do so as the notices issued from schools are in English instead of their vernacular language. Furthermore, there is a prevalence of stereotypes about the poor among teachers and the school such as the notion that "Economically Weaker Section" children engage in violence and use abusive language<sup>53</sup>. Sarin & Gupta's study corroborates this where the phrase 'coming from a slum' was used as a derogatory identifier for any student dressed untidily.

At the same time, instances of egregious discrimination have regularly hit the national headlines.<sup>54555657</sup> Furthermore, a fairly significant minority of respondents continue to highlight discrimination. 3.9% of schools in Karnataka were found to have separate seating of "RTE Children" in classrooms.<sup>58</sup> While 86.4% of Headteachers in a study in Karnataka reported being happy with the RTE 12(1)(c), 31.9% of them stated that they would not have been admitting "RTE children" given a choice. In another study in Delhi, 13.5% of principals were found to be not in favour of the quota claiming that students thus admitted are more prone to fight with other children, use abusive language and have difficulty following what is being taught. Thus, while teachers may have accepted the need for admission of children, this may not have completely overcome inherent biases.

Apart from the discriminatory practices, some private schools have reportedly demanded fees for tuition and extra-curricular activities, not allowed RTE students to join online classes and opposed the government order against fee collection during the COVID-19 lockdown.<sup>59</sup> This, combined with administrative challenges like delayed reimbursement to private schools, has meant that in 2020, despite 33 states/UTs having notified the eligibility criteria for weaker sections and disadvantaged groups for admissions in private unaided schools, only 17 States/UTs were admitting children under the clause<sup>60</sup>. This is unfortunate given the research highlighting the positive impact of integration for both the rich and poor students. Research in India has shown how having poor classmates results in wealthy students being more likely to display generosity, 'prosocial' behaviour, and egalitarianism, and less likely to discriminate against, and be more willing to socialize with, poor students<sup>61</sup>.

<sup>49</sup> Geetha, T. (2014). Politics of the Policy, Teachers' Assumptions and the Existences of Children from Economically Weaker Section in a Private School, Delhi. *Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science*. Volume 2, Issue 5 (9-16)

<sup>50</sup> Mehendale, A., Mukhopadhyay, R., & Namala, A. (2015). Right to Education and inclusion in private unaided schools. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 50(7), 43.

<sup>51</sup> Sarin, A., & Gupta, S. (2013). Quotas under RTE: Leading towards an egalitarian education system?. <https://ideas.repec.org/p/iim/iimawp/12132.html>

<sup>52</sup> Sarin, A., & Gupta, S. (2013). Quotas under RTE: Leading towards an egalitarian education system?. <https://ideas.repec.org/p/iim/iimawp/12132.html>

<sup>53</sup> Geetha, T. (2014). Politics of the Policy, Teachers' Assumptions and the Existences of Children from Economically Weaker Section in a Private School, Delhi. *Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science*. Volume 2, Issue 5 (9-16)

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/bangalore-school-snips-hair-of-rte-quota-students/story-aYvKlgAYfAolaaWsvNgYpO.html>

<sup>55</sup> <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bengaluru/rte-taskforce-gets-12-plaints-a-day-on-discrimination/articleshow/59292148.cms>

<sup>56</sup> <https://newsable.asianetnews.com/karnataka/rte-untouchability-in-schools-a-menace-to-be-tackled-on-priority>

<sup>57</sup> <https://indianexpress.com/article/education/pune-ews-families-accuse-dps-of-discrimination-school-says-it-only-took-step-to-help-students-5227970/>

<sup>58</sup> <https://kmea.karnataka.gov.in/storage/pdf-files/Reports%20and%20other%20docs/RTE.pdf>

<sup>59</sup> <https://www.indiaspend.com/how-reservation-in-private-schools-isnt-working-for-poor-children/>

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.indusaction.org/wp-content/uploads/The-BSR-2021.pdf>

<sup>61</sup> <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.20180044>

### **Adivasi culture, language and private schools**

The previous decades saw the growth of residential schools for tribal learners with a broad view to ensure “assimilation” of India’s Adivasi populations. While many of these schools provide free education, they also impose rigid discipline, promote alien “knowledge” learned by rote, adopt dominant regional languages and take children away from their traditional culture and traditions. Explicitly or implicitly many of these seek to remove tribal students from their community life and end up instilling negative stereotypes about the community.<sup>62 63</sup> Several of these schools belong to specific religious denominations (both majority and minority) and have explicit cultural transformational agendas instead of simply promoting the realization of the right to education. Some of these schools are minority educational institutions<sup>64</sup>. Only 8.76% of total students in minority schools belong to socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds<sup>65</sup>.

The National Curriculum Framework (2005) observed that ‘special stress is needed to ensure that there are maximum opportunities for those who wish to study in their mother tongue, including tribal languages and linguistic pockets.’<sup>66</sup> National Education Policy 2020, too, reiterates the fact that young children learn and grasp nontrivial concepts more quickly in their home language/mother-tongue and further commits to providing education in their mother tongue.<sup>67</sup> However, private schools continue to advertise themselves as ‘English medium’<sup>68</sup> and teach in English, leading to exclusion of children from the tribal community. Private English medium schools are considered to be superior to government schools because the ability to speak English is seen to be critical to better jobs<sup>69</sup>. The discrepancy between the language spoken at home and the language of instruction constitutes a barrier to schooling for children from Adivasi and other marginalized communities.

### **Ambiguous evidence of the impact of private schooling on learning**

Evidence of the impact of private schools on learning remains somewhat ambiguous. Thus, while some research suggests gains in literacy among 10–14-year-old SC and ST children through enrolment in private schools,<sup>70</sup> other research points out that receiving a voucher for five years of private schooling lowered Hindi scores, with no impact on mathematics or English.<sup>71</sup> A study into the effect of enrolment under the RTE Act’s 12(1)(c) suggests that in Andhra Pradesh there are no differences in performance between voucher winners and losers on the school subjects of math, English, science/social studies and Telugu (native language)<sup>72</sup>. While there is some evidence to suggest that there may be a gain in

<sup>62</sup> <https://www.thehindu.com/society/children-from-tribal-communities-are-being-corralled-into-mass-schools-that-are-wiping-out-cultures/article33818793.ece>

<sup>63</sup> <https://www.survivalinternational.org/factoryschools>

<sup>64</sup>

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/261693807\\_Educating\\_for\\_Inequality\\_The\\_Experiences\\_of\\_India's\\_Indigenous\\_Citizens](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/261693807_Educating_for_Inequality_The_Experiences_of_India's_Indigenous_Citizens)

<sup>65</sup> <https://taleemiboard.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Impact-Report-on-Minority-Institutions-by-NCPCR.pdf>

<sup>66</sup> Sreekanth, Yagnamurthy (4<sup>th</sup> January, 2021). *English as medium of instruction at school level in India: Opportunities and dilemmas*, ‘Paper presented in 8<sup>th</sup> Annual International Conference on Humanities & Arts in a Global World’, Athens Institute for Education and Research, Athens, Greece.

<sup>67</sup> National Education Policy, 2020

<sup>68</sup> Nambissan, Geeta B. “Private Schools for the Poor: Business as Usual?” *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 47, no. 41, Economic and Political Weekly, 2012, pp. 51–58, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41720245>.

<sup>69</sup>

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329062650\\_Chapter\\_13\\_Multilingualism\\_of\\_the\\_Unequals\\_and\\_Predicaments\\_of\\_Education\\_in\\_India\\_Mother\\_Tongue\\_or\\_Other\\_Tongue\\_Languages\\_in\\_Education\\_and\\_Glocalization](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329062650_Chapter_13_Multilingualism_of_the_Unequals_and_Predicaments_of_Education_in_India_Mother_Tongue_or_Other_Tongue_Languages_in_Education_and_Glocalization)

<sup>70</sup> <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/46074/1/66284887X.pdf>

<sup>71</sup> <https://www.younglives.org.uk/sites/www.younglives.org.uk/files/ESP-WP-No69-09-08-2015-Bhattacharya%20et%20al.pdf>

<sup>72</sup> <https://academic.oup.com/qje/article/130/3/1011/1931887>

self-efficacy through enrolment under 12(1)(c), this effect was not found for SCs.<sup>73</sup> Fundamentally, teachers share biases prevailing in society. One social experiment shows that teachers score the work of students assigned to be lower caste by 0.03 to 0.08 standard deviations lower compared to that assigned to high caste students.<sup>74</sup> The ability to afford private tuition also contributes to improved learning. The time spent by a child on private tuition leads to an increase in the probability of secondary school completion by 0.36% with every one hour increase in the time spent on tuition per week.<sup>75</sup>

### Relationship between government and private schools

The 1986 National Plan of Education and the subsequent Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and its successor Samagra Shiksha<sup>76</sup> have contributed to universalized education through the creation of low-quality schools while leaving the option of private education outside the public mainstream for those able to afford it. As schools opened their doors to children of disadvantaged backgrounds, the elites moved to private schools. Accordingly, over the subsequent decades, as enrolment rates grew, so did the largely unregulated English-medium low fees private schools which attracted those with higher purchasing power, leaving girls, Dalits and Adivasis in government schools (PROBE, 1999, 2006). By perpetuating existing social inequalities, private schooling defeats one of the main purposes of universal elementary education – breaking the old barriers of class, caste and gender in Indian society<sup>77</sup>.

There is a high preference for private schools among SC and ST communities, possibly a reflection of the poor quality of government schools aimed at the poor<sup>78</sup>. Paradoxically, however, 19% of those from an Upper Caste background were found to prefer government schools<sup>79</sup>. The parental choice for private schools declines significantly when the quality of the government school is higher.<sup>80</sup> What parents fundamentally want is good schools for their children.

### Recommendations and way forward

If India is to address inequality, it would need to address educational inequality. This would need to start with its schools. In the words of India's 1964-66 National Education Commission popularly called the Kothari Commission, "The National System of Education (must) bring the different social classes and groups together and thus promote the emergence of an egalitarian and integrated society. (However,) instead of doing so, education itself is tending to increase social segregation and to perpetuate and widen class distinctions. This is bad not only for the children of the poor but also for the children of the rich and the privileged groups (since) by segregating their children, such privileged parents prevent them from sharing the life and experiences of the children of the poor and coming into contact with the realities of life, also render the education of their own children anaemic and incomplete."

<sup>73</sup> <https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2018-05/BSG-WP-2017-022.pdf>

<sup>74</sup> <https://www.ijstor.org/stable/23358248>

<sup>75</sup> D. Kumar (2020) in J. B. G Tilak (ed.), Universal Secondary Education in India, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-5366-0\\_10](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-5366-0_10)

<sup>76</sup> [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Nisha-Thapliyal/publication/295256995\\_Privatized\\_Rights\\_Segregated\\_Childhoods\\_A\\_Critical\\_Analysis\\_of\\_Neoliberal\\_Education\\_Policy\\_in\\_India/links/5b44189a458515f71cb8983d/Privatized-Rights-Segregated-Childhoods-A-Critical-Analysis-of-Neoliberal-Education-Policy-in-India.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Nisha-Thapliyal/publication/295256995_Privatized_Rights_Segregated_Childhoods_A_Critical_Analysis_of_Neoliberal_Education_Policy_in_India/links/5b44189a458515f71cb8983d/Privatized-Rights-Segregated-Childhoods-A-Critical-Analysis-of-Neoliberal-Education-Policy-in-India.pdf)

<sup>77</sup> <https://users.nber.org/~rdehejia/!@%devo/Lecture%2011a%20Education/supplemental/Probe%20-%202.pdf>

<sup>78</sup> DOI: 10.1177/2321023020963445

<sup>79</sup> DOI: 10.1177/2321023020963445

<sup>80</sup> <http://oii.igidr.ac.in:8080/xmlui/bitstream/handle/2275/299/WP-2013-025.pdf?sequence=1>

### The national and state governments would need to

- Ensure private school regulatory frameworks address discrimination against Dalits and Adivasis and cover multiple dimensions of intentional and default discriminations. The frameworks need to go beyond fee regulation alone.
- Enforce measures to address the screening of students from marginalized communities and ensure non-discrimination, safety, equity and inclusiveness in private schools. Set up a grievance redressal system to report discriminatory behaviour, and take adequate punitive action when complaints arise; complaints' children should be protected from repercussions.
- Strengthen spaces for parental voice in private schools by creating structures similar to School Management committees in private schools. These need to have representation from marginalized communities and be empowered to step in to protect the rights of students. Existing structures for parental participation in private schools like management committees<sup>81</sup> must be strengthened.
- Build space for the introduction of anti-caste pedagogy in private school curricula that draws on the experiences of Bahujan educationists like Savitribai Phule, BR Ambedkar and Periyar. Education must act as a tool for social transformation and empowerment and curricula in all schools need to draw on the concept of critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire.
- Introduce social and equity audits in all schools, including private schools, to ensure that the education system incorporates policies and provisions that can address the learning disadvantages of children from marginalised sections.
- Undertake orientation on the Preamble and other provisions in the Constitution to analyse privileges inherent in society and promote values of equality, fraternity and social justice among both children and teachers.
- Undertake compulsory orientation of private school teachers, other school personnel and school management on anti-discrimination guidelines and anti-peer bullying measures to ensure that those from low income and caste backgrounds are not victimized. Steps need to be taken to monitor private institutions to redress any bullying behaviour by either peers or teachers.
- Amend current regulatory frameworks to include representatives from marginalized communities on the board of trustees and other governance structures like managing and selection committees<sup>82</sup> created for the administration of private schools.
- Encourage the inclusion of representatives of marginalized communities in the trusts and other governance structures created for the administration of private schools.
- Support SCERTs to review the textbooks used in private schools to ensure their adherence to the National Curriculum Framework to avoid bias against marginalised communities in the curriculum and ensure their adequate and appropriate representation.
- Encourage the use of mother tongue, including tribal languages, as the medium of instruction, at least in the early grades in private schools. Steps need to be taken to ensure that pedagogic practices in residential tribal schools are in line with the cultural practices of indigenous learners.
- Ensure all schools, including private schools, comply with the minimum norms of quality laid down under the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009.

<sup>81</sup> The managing committee refers to the body of individuals entrusted with the management of any recognized private school. Thus, the Assam Non-government Educational Institutions (Regulation and Management) Act 2006, and the Delhi School Education Rules 1973 provide for the representation of parents in private schools' managing committees.

<sup>82</sup> The Delhi School Education Rules 1973 provide for the creation of a selection committee for recruitment of teaching staff in private schools. This has to include three members of which two are to be educationists. One of the educationists could be from the marginalised community or if the number of members in the committee could be increased to include representation from marginalised community.

- Map the number of seats available school-wise under 12-1c, share the information about the same in the public domain, identify unfilled seats and track the extent of retention of children from marginalized communities. It should further ensure timely reimbursement to the schools for the children enrolled under 12-1c.
- Regulate fees levied in private schools, including any excess charges being taken from students from marginalized communities admitted under Section 12-1c of the RTE Act. Steps need to be taken to ensure that children from marginalized communities are not penalized for their parents' inability to pay fees.
- Strengthen the public education system by enhancing spending on education to 6% of GDP with a view of gradually ensuring all government schools eventually meet the norms of Kendriya Vidyalaya schools.

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