

# Advocacy networks, choice and private schooling of the poor in India

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**Abstract** *This article is about the flows of rhetorics and discourses, particularly those that advocate choice and private schooling, and the role that transnational advocacy networks play in managing and driving these flows. We explore a set of network relations between advocacy groups in the UK and the USA and local ‘choice’ advocates in India, and some of the emerging impacts of local and transnational advocacy on the politics of education and education policy in India. The network advocates school choice and private schooling as solutions to the problem of achieving universal, high-quality primary education. Individual policy entrepreneurs are active in making these connections and circulating ideas. A complex of funding, exchange, cross-referencing, dissemination and mutual sponsorship links the Indian choice and privatization advocacy network, and connects it to other countries in a global network for neoliberalism.*

**Keywords** TRANSNATIONAL ADVOCACY NETWORKS, POLICY ENTREPRENEURS, NEOLIBERALISM, PRIVATE SCHOOLING, EDUCATION POLICY, INDIA

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The two main axes of global trends in education policy are parental choice and the role of ‘private’ schooling, and the reform of state education systems along market lines. The first rests on a set of neoliberal arguments about more or less radical destatalization (Jessop 2002), subjecting state organizations to competition and/or the handing over of service delivery to the private sector. The second is post-neoliberal and reasserts the role of the state, but in a new form and with new modalities involving a reformist destatalization – a shift from government to governance; from bureaucracy to networks; and from delivery to contracting. The two are typically blended together in the pragmatics of reform, and both axes have strident support from powerful transnational agencies – the World Bank, IFC, WTO and the OECD in particular. Both are firmly embedded in the generic nostrums of

international management consultancies and education businesses (see Ball 2007, 2009).

The dissemination of such policies entails both ‘policy entrepreneurship’ *and at the same time* a process of policy transfer, and is a mechanism of ‘policy convergence’. Working with various ‘partners’, consultants and education businesses deliver ‘development’ and aid policy (for potential profit), develop local policy infrastructures and embed prevailing Western policy discourses, either directly or as ‘spillovers’ into the local policy systems.<sup>1</sup> This is what Kelsey (2006) calls ‘regulatory re-territorialisation’, which increases the political power and regulatory influence of state, societal and transnational agents who are able to exert control over territorial assets and produces infrastructures that are amenable to further business penetration. In general, the UK and USA are probably the most active sites of both axes of reform, and are reform laboratories from which experiments are exported around the world. They are also important sites for the articulation and export of the rhetorics and discourses of reform.

In this article, we are interested in the flows of these rhetorics and discourses, particularly those that advocate school choice and private schooling as solutions to the problem of achieving universal, high-quality primary education in India. In particular, we identify the role played by transnational advocacy networks (TANs) and the particular activities of one individual policy entrepreneur (IPE) – James Tooley – in managing and driving those flows. This involves mapping a set of network relations between advocacy groups in the UK and USA and local ‘choice’ advocates in India. In doing, so we hope to show how these particular policy networks ‘work’. We also want to indicate some of the complex and blurred relationships between advocacy, philanthropy and business within these networks. We then go on to sketch some of the emerging impacts of local and transnational advocacy on the politics of education and education policy in India; finally, we indicate some ways in which local and international businesses take up the spaces and opportunities the advocacy discourse creates for involvement in educational services delivery. We do not set out here to debate questions of private schooling or choice – we have researched them extensively in other settings (see Ball, 1997, 2001, 2003) – or seek to interrogate the evidence mobilized in the processes of advocacy, though we have concerns about some of the knowledge claims made.

Our data here involve the use of secondary sources of various kinds mostly accessed through internet searches. These include the websites of advocacy groups, business information websites and newspapers reports. The range and variety of sources was extensive and we were able to draw on multiple sources for virtually all the examples and events to which we refer. We drew all the materials that refer to nodal and influential individuals within the advocacy networks from sources in the public domain and in many instances employed direct quotations from the individuals in question. Our ‘method’ relies on simple network mapping techniques and the attempt to identify the capacities of the network actors in terms of relationships, finance, ‘research’, promotion and publicity. In this respect we are guided by Dicken et al. (2001: 93) who point out that the task of network methodology ‘must be to

identify the actors in these networks, their power and capacities, and the ways through which they exercise their power through association within networks of relationships’.

### **Transnational advocacy networks**

TANs are typically discussed and portrayed within a paradigm of progressive policy solutions, vulnerable constituencies and community empowerment related to human rights and environmental issues in particular. The Centre on Law and Globalisation defines them as ‘fluid and open relationships among knowledgeable, committed actors (individuals and organizations). These relationships span nation-state boundaries. They differ from other types of networks in that they exist to promote principled causes, ideas and values. They exist to change international policy as well as make these changes real in the day-to-day lives of ordinary people’.<sup>2</sup> TANs are ‘communicative structures’ organized around the ‘shared values’ of their members (Keck and Sikkink 1998). These definitions clearly apply to the advocacy work of ‘policy entrepreneur’ James Tooley, which draws directly on his commitment to the Hayekian argument that markets are both liberatory and progressive. Furthermore, TANs can be part of a reshaping of political processes at supranational, national and subnational levels, although as a number of analysts have pointed out their activities and impacts vary between nations in relation to institutional arrangements, policy settings and degrees of democratization, especially when considering transitional or late developing societies (Dalton and Rohrschneider 2003; Held and McGrew 2004). We argue that such reshaping is occurring in relation to the politics of education in India. TANs provide a network of relations for the diffusion of knowledge and information and typically seek to pluralize political authority. They are a ‘third force’ (Florini 2000) and often an extension of domestic social or political movements. Keck and Sikkink (1998: 25) see TANs as changing national government behaviour through the exchange of norms, ideas and discourses. They also see them as working to change public perception of social problems – which again are very apposite in the case we discuss in which, in part at least, there is a contribution being made to the construction of consent in relation to the neoliberal project (Cavett-Goodwin 2008; Harvey 2005). Keck and Sikkink identify four types of TAN strategy – information politics, symbolic politics, leverage politics, and accountability politics (see below). TANs work ‘underneath, above and around the state’ (Wapner 1996) but their success, according to Keck and Sikkink, depends on the strength and depth of their networks and the vulnerability of the target state or organizations.

The TAN literature tends to neglect the role of individual policy entrepreneurs (IPEs). Mintrom and Vergari (1996) suggest that policy entrepreneurs perform three functions. They identify needs and offer innovative means to satisfy them; they bear financial and emotional risks in pursuing change where consequences are uncertain; and they assemble and coordinate networks of individuals and organizations with the talents and resources needed to achieve change. The personal resources the IPE needs ‘include intellectual ability, knowledge of policy matters, leadership and team-building skills, reputation and contacts, strategic ability, and tenacity’ (Mintrom and

Vergari 1996: 424); James Tooley would score well on all counts. The mainstream literature on TANs only indirectly alludes to the role of financial power, but it is a crucial factor in our case.

### **The context**

Unlike the UK and USA, India is a late ‘liberalizer’; policies of structural adjustment and liberalization were initiated in the early 1990s and only recently has this country been recognized as a key economic player in the global arena. The spread of market relations and discourses has been relatively slow. Nonetheless, there are immense possibilities for the transfer of policy/discourse through the activities of ‘policy entrepreneurs’, who are strategically positioned and backed by powerful financial and political interests in the early globalizing countries. In a recent interview Krishna Kumar sketched out a set of relations between liberalization, privatization and modernization in the government of India and suggests that education has become ‘a significant arena to study liberalisation’ (LaDousa 2007: 139) and that ‘privatisation has become a major force’.

India is a long way from achieving universal elementary education. According to recent estimates, around eight million children in the 6–14 year age group remain outside any form of school provision and the enormous network of state funded schools (more than 900,000) are generally seen to be of poor quality and in need of financial and academic support. India is struggling to meet its EFA (Education for All) goals. This provides fertile grounds for the use of forms of ‘accountability politics’ by choice advocates. A small but expanding market in private unregulated (officially ‘unrecognized’ by the state) elementary schools has emerged in response to the growing demand for better quality (English medium) education by lower-middle class and poor parents who are willing to pay for this education for their children. All this creates ‘opportunities’ for private investment in elementary education in India – both in expanding the market for private schools for the poor and ‘improving’ the quality of state-funded schools. It is also important that state resources for elementary education, as well as aid from international organizations/donors, are directed to government schools. A discourse of ‘school choice’ that incorporates concerns of equity and quality for the poor can help create a policy environment that redirects funds from the state and donor organizations to private schools, for instance through vouchers. It can also encourage private markets in schooling for the poor if there is evidence to project such educational entrepreneurship as a profitable venture. ‘For-profit’ schools are presently illegal in India.

Advocacy for school choice and the market to meet the demand for schooling by the poor has hence a critical role to play in India. Since 2000 the involvement of the private sector, along with NGOs and corporate players, has received guarded mention in a couple of policy documents – but official policy still fights shy of openly acknowledging the role of the market in schooling for the poor. It is only very recently that statistics on private ‘unregulated’ schools have been collected and their existence formally acknowledged. Acknowledging/encouraging the private market for

elementary education for the poor remains politically sensitive and the main political parties are likely to meet with considerable opposition. Thus, two of the key tasks for advocacy groups have been to destabilize the opposition to private provision of schools, and to bring some credibility to the existing extra-legal (unrecognized) schools.

In the following sections we outline some of the key features of the complex local and transnational advocacy network that is articulating choice and privatization policies for Indian education. Important in all of this are interlocking relations, the reiteration of ideas, flows of funds, opportunities for promotion, publicity and points of access to arenas of education politics and policymaking. These are features of the strength and depth of this network, focused on a clear set of shared values and common goals. All the strategies identified by Keck and Sikkink are evident here.

### India's 'policy entrepreneurs'

British academic James Tooley, a professor from the University of Newcastle, UK, is a key 'nodal' intellectual in choice advocacy in India. He is deeply embedded in the infrastructure of neoliberal think tanks and institutes in the UK and USA and has important links to various businesses, philanthropists and charities that promote the market. Tooley is an IPE *par excellence*. He has played a key role in building and shaping school choice discourse in India and occupies a variety of roles and positions in the networks that link individuals and organizations presently pushing the 'project' of neoliberalizing India's schools (see Figure 1). He also has access to considerable financial resources. As a former consultant of the International Finance Corporation,<sup>3</sup> Tooley directed the global study of investment opportunities for private education in developing countries for the IFC – the private finance arm of the World Bank. This led to the publication *The global education industry* (Tooley 1999).<sup>4</sup> Some of the research for that publication was undertaken in poor settlements in the city of Hyderabad in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh in India. Tooley's objective was not only to show that state-run schools there were not performing, but also that the poor were accessing private schools (which he felt was being inadequately acknowledged). He wanted to show that these people were willing to pay for education, that these schools were low cost but more efficient and better performing than government schools and were also socially committed (they provided free places to the needy). He also argued that private schools were making a profit and, if invested in or supported financially, for instance with low-cost innovative technology, they would be a potential area for business expansion.

One way in which pro-market, pro-choice advocacy works is through the circulation and recirculation of ideas and joining up points of articulation. Foundations, think tanks and the media are important in the take-up and dissemination of ideas and their establishment within policy thinking. From a very narrow base of research findings, Tooley has been able to reach a wide and varied audience. He has done this through academic journals (including the *Oxford Review of Education*, *Journal of Education Policy* and the *International Journal of Educational Research*), a huge

range of online sites, media interviews, as well as lectures and talks aimed at parliamentarians (in the USA and UK) and policy makers and other groups in India. There has been extensive media coverage of his exploits (particularly among pro-market newspapers, magazines and websites). In 2006 James Tooley won an essay competition sponsored by the *Financial Times* and the International Finance Corporation for his essay 'Educating Amaretech' (called the 'Gold Essay') which summarized his research on the role of the private sector in educating the poor (Tooley 2007). He received a prize of US\$ 30,000. The prize and his main findings on the poor and private schooling were widely reported. The Templeton Foundation provided a grant of US\$ 800,000 for Tooley's comparative study of private schools in five countries, including India, upon which he based the essay. This essay is a good example of what Keck and Sikkink (1998) call 'symbolic politics', which involves the use of stories or symbols that make sense of advocacy claims for distant audiences.

A number of US, UK and Indian foundations that espouse the philosophy of the free market have drawn attention to and disseminated Tooley's work, which has provided a key point of focus for their efforts in relation to India and other countries. Almost all these are interlinked through the Atlas Economic Research Foundation 'Freedom Network' – 'the means for free market organizations to share information and connect with like-minded organizations throughout the world' (<http://atlasnetwork.org/>). The Heritage Foundation, the Philanthropy Roundtable and the *Wall Street Journal*, among others, have reported on and commended Tooley's work. Andrew J. Coulson, director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom (part funded by Atlas) and author of *Market education*, has also given fulsome praise to Tooley's research (Coulson 2007). The Hoover Institution, Fraser Institute, Mackinac Center, Institute of Economic Affairs (of which Tooley is a member), and the National Center for Policy Analysis have also published Tooley's writings or written about his private school projects and features of his work. Other supporters include the School Choice Campaign, India (strapline – Fund Students, Not Schools! – which features on the Atlas Economic Research Foundation website), *Policy* (published by the Centre for Independent Studies), the Mont Pelerin Society (regional meeting in Goa), the *UNESCO Courier*, Opportunity International, India Together, the Educare Trust and the Liberty Institute.<sup>5</sup> The Liberty Institute published Tooley's paper 'The enterprise of education opportunities and challenges for India' (2001).

The Liberty Institute, the School Choice Campaign India (run by the Centre for Civil Society) and the Educare Trust are the main sites for school choice and privatization advocacy in India, but increasingly school choice/private schooling advocacy networks also include investment companies and venture capitalists looking to new market opportunities in India. Tooley (2005: 1) argues that:

crucially, because the private schools serving the poor are businesses, making a reasonable profit, they provide a pioneering way forward for investors to get involved too [and that] investing in a chain of schools – either through a dedicated education investment fund or through joint ventures with educational entrepreneurs – could help solve the information problem for poor.

He also suggests using the ‘micro finance’ model to fund small entrepreneurs to set up schools that will give adequate returns. In ‘Educating Amaretech’, Tooley cites Prahlad’s observation that the hamburger chain, McDonald’s, inspired the founder of the Aravind Eye Care System (which provides cataract surgery for large numbers of poor people in India) because ‘a consistent quality of hamburgers and French fries worldwide results from a deeply understood and standardised chemical process’ (Prahlad 2004, cited in Tooley 2005: 9). According to Tooley, ‘there is every reason to think that a similarly “deeply understood and standardised” learning process could become part of an equally successful model of private school provision, serving huge numbers of the poor’ (Tooley 2005: 9). Moreover, since private entrepreneurs already provide, ‘free and subsidized places for the poorest, sensitively-applied targeted vouchers could extend access with equity on a large scale’ (Tooley 2005: 9).

Weidrich points to Tooley’s suggestion to set up ‘Education Quality Zones (EQZ)’ where there are ‘more relaxed rules and regulations regarding education’ along the lines of the economic priority zones (EPZ) that the Indian government established ‘to foster entrepreneurship and innovation’ (Weidrich 2007). Some leaders of Indian industry have also advocated ‘setting up special education zones’ to free education from ‘the control of bureaucracies and regulating bodies’.<sup>6</sup>

In February 2007, the ‘philanthropic arm’ of Orient Global, a Singapore based investment firm, established an education fund of \$100 million. The chairman of Orient Global is said to have created this fund after reading Tooley’s essay, ‘Low-cost schools in poor nations seek investors’ in the *Financial Times* (17 September 2006). The Global Education Fund expects to target the market for private schooling for children from low-income families in India; Tooley is the president of the fund. Coulson (2007) reports that the education fund

will follow a three-pronged strategy: invest in publicly listed and private enterprises that will further its mission while helping to sustain it over time (e.g., the Fund has acquired a 9.4 per cent stake in India’s NIIT educational chain); conduct research and development for a pilot chain of budget private schools for the poor in India; and make grants to existing private schools to aid in their expansion and protect them from sudden political or economic shocks.

Kalra (2007), writing in the blog *liveMint.com*, quotes Tooley as saying ‘We have started looking at investment opportunities in private schools running in slums’. It goes on to say that ‘Tooley did not disclose details of his business model, but said he was exploring tie-ups with microfinance providers, such as Hyderabad’s SKS Microfinance and Basix, to offer loans to entrepreneurs who wish to open schools in low-income areas’ (Kalra 2007).

Two other key PEs in the school choice/private schooling advocacy network are Pauline Dixon and Sugata Mitra, both working alongside Tooley. Dixon is a research associate at the University of Newcastle. Her doctoral degree awarded in 2003 was for her work on ‘The regulation of private schools for low-income families in Andhra Pradesh, India: an Austrian economic approach’. She was international research

coordinator in the Templeton Project (2003–05) directed by Tooley. A number of her publications focus on her work in India<sup>7</sup> and, with Tooley, she co-authored a chapter on private education and the poor for the 2006 *Index of Economic Freedom*, published by the Heritage Foundation and *Wall Street Journal* (Tooley and Dixon 2005).<sup>8</sup> She taught on and wrote a course entitled ‘Educational freedom: a global perspective’, which won the Freedom Project that the Atlas Economic Freedom Foundation managed and the John Templeton Foundation funded.<sup>9</sup>

Capitol Hill and the Heritage and Templeton foundations have invited Dixon to speak on her research on private schooling for the poor and she has been associated with a project funded by the Centre for British Teachers (CfBT), namely ‘Private Schools for the Poor’ (2001–02). Dixon is currently working as project leader, along with Tooley and Mitra, of the Orient Global Project (2007–09). Mitra, who was a research scientist with the National Institute for Information and Technology (NIIT), received accolades for his ‘Hole in the Wall’ (HIW)/minimally invasive education’. *Edutopia (What works in Public Education)* (an information gateway run by the George Lucas Educational Foundation) hails him as the ‘inventor of the off-the-wall idea for Hole-in-the-Wall Education: put a free computer workstation in the wall of a poor New Delhi neighborhood, and the local children will quickly learn to use it through their own curiosity and experimentation’ (Rubenstein 2007). The George Lucas Educational Foundation named Mitra one of the ‘Global Six of 2007’.

Mitra argues that HIW education is more effective (and of course much cheaper) than regular government schooling and is appropriate for the poor. ‘With backing from NIIT, the Indian government, the ICICI Bank, and the International Finance Corporation, Delhi, Mitra and NIIT founded “Hole-in-the-Wall Education” and set up 250 computers in 110 locations throughout India and later in Cambodia’ (NIIT also operates in Africa and Fiji). Mitra asserts that: ‘research shows that Hole-in-the-Wall users performed nearly as well on computer skills tests as children who had learned through a formal class, and their engagement and performance in school improved as well’. In his lectures and writings, Tooley often refers to Mitra’s low-cost technology as appropriate for teaching poor children. Mitra is now Professor of Educational Technology at the University of Newcastle. He ‘aims to spread this model around the world to boost the learning and life skills of children, particularly those living in poverty and with few educational resources’.<sup>10</sup> Mitra’s research could be seen as one of many aspects of the use of ‘leverage politics’, namely the mobilization of powerful actors in support of networks goals.

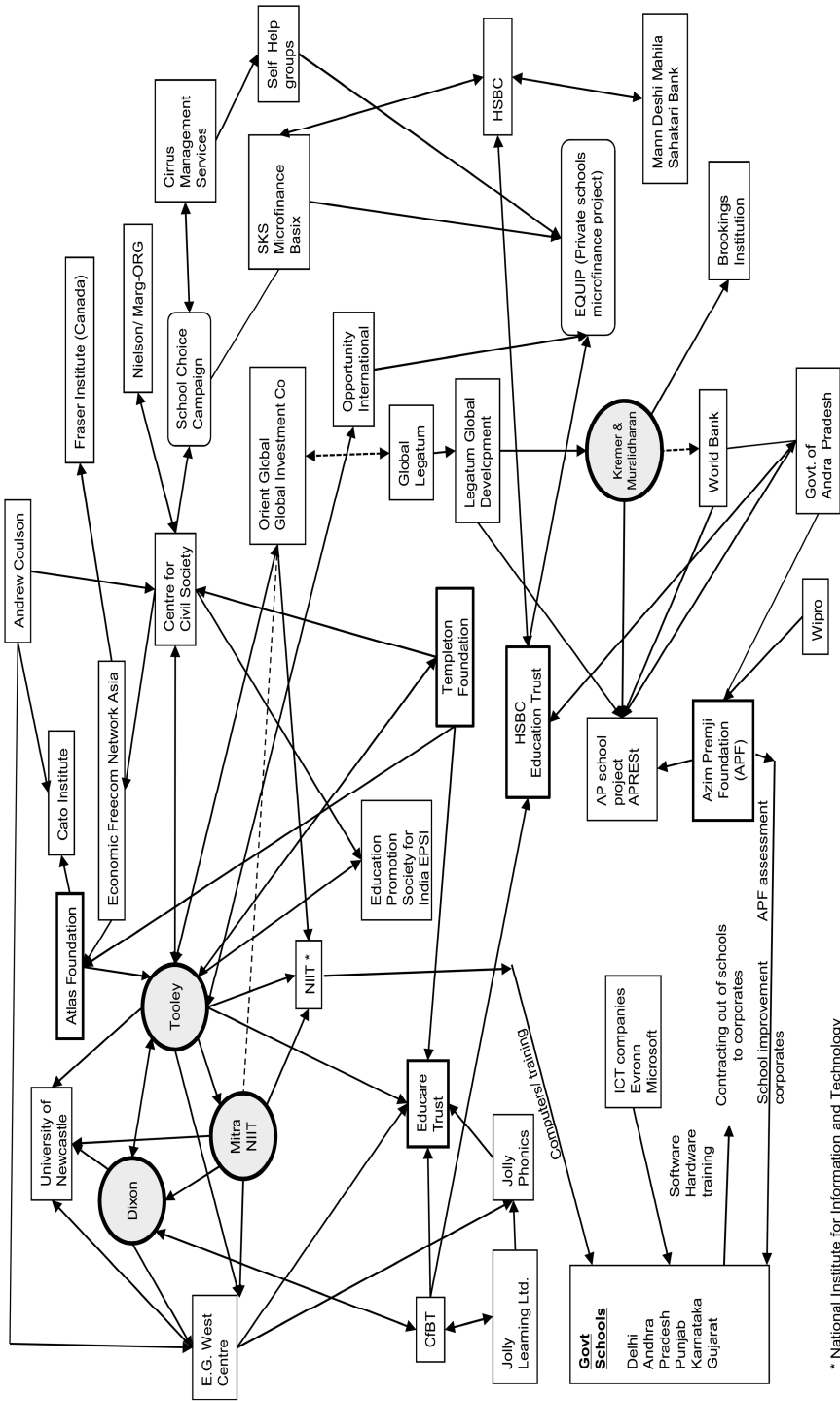
### **Choice and schooling: local organizations and advocacy**

In the last few years, a number of local organizations have emerged with the express objective of promoting school choice and private schooling for the poor in India. Foremost among them is the Centre for Civil Society (CCS), which sees itself as a think tank concerned with ideas:

but we don’t run primary schools, or health clinics, or garbage collection programs. We do it differently: we try to change people’s ideas, opinions,



Figure 1: Summary of networks linking intellectual entrepreneurs and advocacy organizations



\* National Institute for Information and Technology

mode of thinking by research, seminars, and publications. We champion limited government, rule of law, free trade, and individual rights. We are an ideas organisation, a think tank that develops ideas to better the world.<sup>11</sup>

CCS sees its mission as: ‘building a campaign for school choice in India. The need to create a discourse on choice in education, state the case for private schooling among the poor and giving poor parents the freedom to choose’. The case for ‘deregulation and delicensing of private schools, legalizing for-profit schools, and microfinance and venture capital for budget private schools’ is stressed. The web site goes on to say that ‘today it is virtually impossible to start a legally recognised school. Also, since many of the schools for the poor are unrecognised, they cannot get a bank loan to improve their infrastructure like any other enterprise.’

CCS deploys research evidence to bolster its case. One can download Tooley’s Hyderabad research and Eva Weidrich’s essay ‘Vouchers: is there a model for India?’ from the CSS website (Wiedrich 2007). Tooley has also undertaken a study of access to private schooling among poor families in settlements in East Delhi for CCS along the lines of his Hyderabad study, and comes up with similar findings (Tooley and Dixon 2005). The Goodrich Foundation, Thomas B. Fordham and the Templeton Foundation supported the study. More recently, market research companies AC Nielsen and ORG-MARG, Delhi carried out a CCS survey, ‘Education for the Poor’. The study ‘tried to gauge customer satisfaction with government school education’. Tooley is also a senior research fellow with CCS.<sup>12</sup> CCS is a member of Economic Freedom Network Asia (EFNA) which is linked to the Fraser Institute and the Liberal Institute of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation in Berlin (both part of Atlas Foundation ‘Freedom’ network). We summarize the networks linking intellectual entrepreneurs and advocacy organizations in Figure 1.

As part of the CCS ‘School Choice Campaign’, launched in January 2007, poor children across seven states in India are awarded educational vouchers. In Delhi, parents in poor settlements were asked to apply on behalf of their children and around 400 were chosen through a lottery. The vouchers, worth up to INR 6000, were awarded at a venue frequented by the cultural elite of the city and was reported by the media. Significantly, the chief minister of Delhi state was present to give away the vouchers. The CCS website appeals to prospective donors in India, the UK and the USA to contribute to the voucher fund and forms for donations are posted on the website.<sup>13</sup>

The CCS claims that the response has been ‘overwhelming’, their ‘biggest support is from dalit and tribal activists’, and that the campaign is ‘gaining ground in Bihar, Delhi, Jharkhand, Orissa, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal’. It (India Together 2007) goes on to say:

Most people realise that the aspirations of the poor are no different from us and they too want their children to attend English medium private schools which will lift them out of their present poverty and give them a decent future. Also, the moment the poor become a bit less poor, they escape the system of government schools.

A private management company, Cirrus Management Services (CMS), is managing the ‘campaign’ and taking it to states where it has links with community-based organizations built around micro finance loan programmes. M. S. Ashok of Cirrus says that his organization ‘hand-holds self-help groups in seven states including Tamilnadu, and has decided to leverage its reach to start a voucher programme’. He goes on to say that they are ‘working with a group of individuals and corporates to develop and finance private schools across rural India, initially across 700-plus villages, to be scaled up subsequently’.<sup>14</sup> CCS (and other proponents of school choice), however, realizes that it is critical for voucher programmes to have the support of the government if they are to succeed. Raj Cherubal, CCS vice president observes that ‘for the voucher programs to be widely available, the government has to embrace them, or the idea will not scale. ... If Pilot projects are started in every state, the Government could use them as examples to consolidate and ultimately take over the voucher scheme.’

*The Educare Trust (ET)*

The Educare Trust is a ‘non-profit agency’ registered in 2002 by James Tooley (along with ‘other members associated with private unaided schools’) under the Indian Trust Act, 1882.<sup>15</sup> Tooley carried out his Templeton funded study (2003–05) through the trust. The director of the trust, Gomathi, worked with Tooley earlier on a CfBT project (on private schools for the poor) and subsequently on the Templeton project. The trust also carried out research relating to the use of ‘Jolly Phonics’ for the ‘improvement of English literacy teaching in private unaided schools’ (as a component of the Templeton project). The trust has a ‘marketing manager’ to market the ‘Jolly Phonics English Literacy Programme’ and computer programmes along with Sugato Mitra. Director Gomathi ‘coordinates the scholarship and micro-finance programme. She along with Professor Tooley introduced the voucher scheme and micro-finance in Hyderabad and it is running successfully’. Micro-finance loans are extended to private schools. Pauline Dixon is the international adviser to ET. It has a scholarship fund called E. G. West Scholarships, which is designed to help economically deprived children in rural and urban India to pursue education in private unaided schools. According to the E. G. West website:

The Educare Trust is the only foundation committed to helping the poor to achieve self-reliance through accessing private education. Professor E. G. West was a renowned British educationalist, who conducted seminal research on private education as a vehicle for helping the poor to help themselves, in Britain, the USA and developing countries. The Scholarships are named in memory of his enduring influence.<sup>16</sup>

James Tooley is director of the E. G. West Centre, which is based at the University of Newcastle.

Other organizations that contribute to the dissemination of these policy ideas

include the Economic Freedom Network Asia mentioned earlier, of which CCS is one of the two members from India. In 2005, the Education Promotion Society of India (EPSI) was established to serve as a ‘catalyst Education Promotion Organisation between Government, Academics and the Industry’. Though its focus is higher education, the EPSI has entered the arena of school policy and advocates private schooling for the poor. In 2005, the EPSI organized a dialogue on ‘Private schools serving the poor: a global perspective’ with the Centre for Civil Society. Tooley was invited and he ‘shared his findings from Global study of Asia, Africa and China on Private Schools for the poor’.<sup>17</sup>

### *AP School Choice Project*

One of the pro-choice advocates’ main tasks is to demonstrate that children involved in the voucher programmes in private schools perform better than do their peers in government schools; in fact, a study is underway in Andhra Pradesh that seeks to show this. This, the Andhra Pradesh Randomized Evaluation Study (APRESt), brings together a number of organizations and individuals and reflects the interests that inform the spread of private markets in education in India (Figure 1).<sup>18</sup> The project is a ‘three-way partnership’ between the government of Andhra Pradesh (GOAP), the Azim Premji Foundation (APF) – the philanthropic arm of the corporate giant Wipro and closely involved in government initiatives to improve primary education outcomes – and the World Bank. It aims to ‘pilot alternative policy options to improve rural primary education and rigorously measure their impact in rural areas of Andhra Pradesh’. The partners have signed a memorandum of understanding: ‘to continue to pilot and rigorously evaluate (using randomized allocation of programs) the most promising options in primary education policy over a period of 5 years under the APRESt’.

The APRESt design involves:

offering scholarships that would allow them (poor children) to shift to schools of their choice (if they wish to) in addition to the option of continuing in the existing government school. Such a program would provide opportunities for children from disadvantaged families to attend private schools. The research study involves a rigorous evaluation of the impact of school choice both on children who receive the choice as well as on the aggregate impact on education outcomes for all children in villages where the school choice program is implemented.

Both the scholarships as well as the evaluation of the study are being funded by Legatum Global Development, the lead financial partner for the project.<sup>19</sup> The orientation of the APRESt is evident in the statement that: ‘policies that hope to leverage the existence of private schools for universal quality education need to be designed on the basis of rigorous evidence regarding the relative performance of public and private schools. *The Andhra Pradesh School Choice Project aims to provide such evidence*’ (our emphasis). Further, APF, GOAP and the World Bank will

also be ‘instrumental in ... helping the results *feed into the policy process* [our emphasis] through the institutionalization of APRESt in GOAP’s education program’ (Educare Trust website). The project will be evaluated by Kremer and Muralidharan of Harvard University (they are both CCS ‘School Choice Scholars’), and Sundaram (World Bank).

We have already noted the interests and involvements of business in private school and school choice advocacy. In the following sections we indicate some of the forms of participation of commercial providers, large and small, in the politics and economics of privatization, their involvements in the choice advocacy network and some of the ways in which advocacy groups and business interests ‘work together’ to open up new policy spaces for privatization and private provision.

### **Microfinance and microschoools**

The nomenclature in relation to schools established by private entrepreneurs for the poor is that of ‘budget private schools’ or ‘micro schools’. Budget schools are described as ‘low cost private schools serving the poor’. CCS asserts that, ‘contrary to popular concerns about their low quality, children from these schools outperform their government school counterparts in key curricular subjects – even after controlling for background variables.’<sup>20</sup> ‘Micro schools’ is used to refer to schools established by ‘educational entrepreneurs’ (what the Cato Institute calls ‘edupreneurs’). The reference here is to schools established with micro-finance loans and the discourse is primarily one of entrepreneurship and social enterprise.

However, whether as ‘budget private schools’ or ‘micro schools’, the driving force behind these schools is profit rather than the broader aims of education. Organizations such as Opportunity International and Global Legatum, which are in the microfinance business, appear to see micro schools as a promising area of investment. Opportunity International, founded in 1971, was one of the first microcredit lenders to offer small business loans, savings, insurance and training in basic business practices to women and men living in chronic poverty. ‘Opportunity International provides small loans – sometimes as little as \$50 – and other services that allow poor entrepreneurs to start or expand a business, develop a steady income, provide for their families and create jobs for their neighbours’. The Opportunity International website quotes Tooley as saying, ‘I am thrilled that Opportunity International is expanding schools for the poor. I have seen the benefit that these schools bring to an entire community – the parents, the families and especially the children who are getting a quality education from teachers who are dedicated and committed.’<sup>21</sup> In turn, Opportunity International refers to Tooley’s ‘groundbreaking research’ to legitimate its loan programme. Christopher A. Crane (CEO, Opportunity International) suggests that microschoools can transform the lives of the poor, adding that they ‘are usually located right in the neighborhoods where the poor are concentrated. ... As a result, parents tell us they feel safer sending their daughters to these schools. This will help break the discriminatory cycle that has existed against girls in many poor countries.’<sup>22</sup>

Also involved in the micro-finance-micro school advocacy is the HSBC Education

Trust and CfBT. In 2004 the trust 'signed a memorandum of understanding with the Centre for British Teachers (CfBT) to launch a project called EQUIP (Enabling Quality Improvement Programmes in Schools) that will facilitate private schools to get micro finance from HSBC'. The agreement (The Hindu.com 2004) gives CfBT a lead role in:

identifying schools on the basis of an evaluation of the potential of the school for improvement. ... Schools that are approved by CfBT will receive loans for infrastructure. ... These schools will have to take a CfBT-designed School Improvement Plan ... and the progress will be monitored through an Education Management Information System.

The loans ranged from Rs 50,000 to Rs 5,000,000. The project aimed to enable government-recognized private schools that admitted children of low-income families to get financial aid from the bank to improve their infrastructure. This was in the nature of a 'pilot project, to be implemented in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu' and 'later be rolled out across the country'. *Business Line* (19 July 2004) reported that 'about 30 private schools in the city have shown interest in joining the initiative. Of them, 16 will be given loans in the first phase.' The minister for school education of the AP government was purported to have asked HSBC 'to expand the scheme to government schools that form more than 80 per cent of the 91,000 schools in the State' (The Hindubusinessline.com 2004).

The micro finance-micro school model has also given a fillip to private companies offering advisory services for social business. Intellectap is one such company linked to the Legatum-APRESt project. Intellectap was set up in 2007 with equity investment from micro-finance company Global Legatum. We have already referred to the other micro-financers SKS Micro Finance and Basix (Figure 1).

### **The state, Public Private Partnerships and government schools**

The language of Public Private Partnerships (PPP) began to appear in education policy documents in India in the late 1990s when corporate organizations expressed their interest in participating in efforts towards Education for All; CCS advocates PPPs on its website. Some policy makers in India see information technology as a panacea to improve the quality of education in state-funded schools and a means of addressing the aspirations of poor parents. As part of PPPs in education, IT companies such as Solaris, Java, Oracle, NIIT and Everonn have easy access to schools. They train both pupils and teachers in IT, signing agreements with state governments. NIIT, Sugata Mitra's parent organization, is nodal player in the growth of the state-school education business and in educational software development. It is reported to have a 'presence in 2000 Government schools in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and Karnataka' (The India Street.com 2007).

Various state governments are formally entering into partnerships and signing memoranda of understanding with companies such as NIIT to supply computers and train students and teachers. Other companies such as Evronn and Microsoft are also

finding a foothold in the new education business sector. The official website of the government of Punjab state declares that it is:

encouraging the participation of [the] private sector for providing good quality education by giving a package of incentives in the form of land at cheaper rates along with other facilities. The Punjab State Government has proposed to set up a chain of *Adarsh Schools*, at least one in each Block, for providing high quality education even at village level. ... Every school is allowed to lease out spare land to the private contractors, for cultivation. The income so received from this is spent on the development of the respective school.<sup>23</sup>

The Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) is purportedly involved in initiatives (with Coca Cola India, Bank of America and Honda Siel) for 'quality improvement' of education for poor children in slums in Delhi; it apparently 'facilitated linkages between the State Government and Member Companies for IT-Enabled Education', which may merely mean bringing computers to schools/training teachers to use them. It has helped by signing an MoU between Microsoft and the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) to train teachers at 1000 MCD schools in Delhi. 'The idea is to empower the teachers to use IT as a tool for classroom teaching.'<sup>24</sup> There is today a large and growing market for IT in schools and a policy climate that is beginning to encourage the participation of the corporate sector in this sphere in the name of 'improving' the quality of education.

There is a range of corporate effort in school education especially at the elementary stage and private participation in government-run schools in the provision of infrastructure and facilities, the supply of midday meals as well as involvement in the development of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Information technology in schools is also a key area in the entry of the corporate sector – through the provision of computers and software as well as technical support and training. Foundations established by corporate houses such as the APF (Wipro) and Pratham (ICICI) are an increasingly visible presence in the arenas of education policy making and in initiatives aimed at quality improvement in government schools in some states. Companies such as NIIT and Everonn are more narrowly focused on IT provision and training to schools. In addition, a number of corporate houses have set up philanthropic foundations that specifically state that their interventions in education are 'not for profit'.

A more recent phenomenon is for state governments to contract out 'under-performing' schools to corporate foundations. In addition to organizations that work mainly in or with government schools, foundations are also running schools. For example, the Bharati Foundation (funded by the mobile phone company Air Tel) will be running 50 government schools in Rajasthan as part of the School Improvement Programme in that state. The foundation intends to establish 1000 Satya Bharati schools across India. The wife of the CEO of Infosys (a leading corporate organization) established *Akshara*, an NGO that runs schools for the poor in Bangalore. This area is seriously under-researched and little information is available from websites.

## **Discussion**

The Indian choice and privatization advocacy network is linked by a complex of funding, exchange, cross-referencing, dissemination and mutual sponsorship – the latter involving various aspects of what Keck and Sikkink (1998) call ‘information politics’. The Centre for Civil Society, the Educare Trust, EPSI and the Liberty Institute (India) are key points of the local articulation and flow of the choice policy ideas in India. They are also, directly or indirectly, engaged in a bigger enterprise of neoliberal state reform and in redefining the boundaries of the policy process – policy channels are being diversified.<sup>25</sup> As the website of the Liberty Institute ([www.libertyindia.org/about.htm](http://www.libertyindia.org/about.htm)) puts it:

The Institute particularly seeks to improve our understanding of market processes; to identify the factors that may have restricted the evolution of the market and ways of overcoming those factors; to estimate the costs – social and economic – of curbs on the market forces; to propose market-based alternatives to government regulations in the economy.

As we have sought to show, the Indian pro-choice think tanks are also linked to a number of other co-belief organizations in other countries in a worldwide advocacy network for neoliberal ideas. The Centre for Civil Society, the Educare Trust and the Liberty Institute (India) are members of a global network of neoliberal organizations whose mission is to ‘export’ choice and markets around the world. They are linked to the Atlas Economic Research Foundation, which has its headquarters in Arlington Virginia. Atlas has launched or nurtured 275 such think tanks in 70 nations around the world and believes that ‘the prospects for free societies all over the world depend upon “intellectual entrepreneurs” in civil society, who wish to improve public policy debates through sound research’. Its mission is ‘to discover, develop and support “intellectual entrepreneurs” worldwide who can advance the Atlas vision of a society of free and responsible individuals’ ([atlasnetwork.org](http://atlasnetwork.org)). This is a formidable network of power, influence, ideas and money, which presents a simple message easily understood by politicians and policy makers in diverse locations. The involvement of local business interests adds further strength to the network.

Think tanks often have very specific and effective points of entry into political systems. However, Stone (2000: 216) points out that: ‘the authority and legitimacy for think tank involvement in global affairs is not naturally given but has been cultivated and groomed through various management practices and intellectual activities.’ She goes on to note that ‘in some cases, however, the think tank scholarly “aura” and independence may be misleading ... in reality ideas become harnessed to political and economic interests.’

As noted earlier, for the most part research and writing on TANs has focused on areas of human rights and environmentalism. Here we have begun to sketch a particular example of a TAN that is working to disseminate neoliberal ideas and specific neoliberal policies, and in doing so they are, in as yet modest ways,



reshaping the Indian state and the governance of education in India. The work of this TAN follows very clearly Brenner and Theodore's (2002) conception of two distinct but dialectical moments in the dissemination of neoliberalism; that is, critique, and attempts to change public perception of policy issues, followed by the 'creation of a new infrastructure for market-oriented, economic growth, commodification, and the rule of capital' (Brenner and Theodore 2002: 364). Government education policy and government schools are subject to a sustained critique, often based on 'research' evidence (research and evaluations are locked within closed circles created by the privatizers and their allies). Alongside this, new educational opportunities are being created for some sections of the poor in India, while at the same time new opportunities are being opened up for small and big business. The network members' shared libertarian values is a key resource in all this. The activities of this TAN are interacting with and expanding the discursive and policy spaces within which educational businesses, voluntary organizations and charities can flourish – increasingly supported by commercial and philanthropic microfinance and multinational investment. These discourses also seek to expand the range of policy choices available to the Indian government and naturalize within Indian politics key neoliberal technologies, including contracting out and public private partnerships. Within this field of education in India, what is being attempted through the work of the network is a shift from 'proto' to 'roll-back' neoliberalism (Tickell and Peck 2002), both in terms of the creation of a business infrastructure for private education and pressure for legal changes to enable private for-profit schooling and vouchers. The Indian state is vulnerable in this area of policy given its 'failures' around universal provision and EFA goals and is therefore highly susceptible to the politics of a TAN that is very well-funded and backed by a variety of powerful and influential local and transnational voices.

What is also important in the work of this TAN is that the concern and focus on India, especially as far as James Tooley is concerned, is not merely because of the potential for profitable markets in schooling for poor children. These developments will also generate evidence and political support that demonstrate to the West – that 'for-profit' education can work and 'if India can do it so can we' and lead to a reassessment of the role of the state in education in Western countries. The E. G. West Centre website has Tooley ([www.ncl.ac.uk/egwest/](http://www.ncl.ac.uk/egwest/)) arguing this quite clearly:

Certainly stories of the educational entrepreneurs in the slums, battling against hostile government and real poverty, can provide inspiration to the school choice movement in the West. But I also think it can provide more than that. ... What West did for the school choice debate in the 1960s and 1970s, the evidence from India and elsewhere can do for the school choice debate now: if the evidence reveals the poorest worldwide achieving better educational outcomes without the state, then this must help inspire and buttress appeals for increased school choice in rich countries now. It also raises anew the question: what is government doing in education at all.

Tooley reiterates this on the *Outlook Business* website where he asserts that ‘a silent revolution is brewing in low-cost private school chains. In the next wave, they might even “colonise” the West’.<sup>26</sup>

This article represents our first attempt to map and analyse the work of this particular TAN and to adumbrate some critical questions about its activities in India but there is a need for more research into the methods, processes and consequences of this ‘silent revolution’ in Indian education and its more general effects on and within the Indian state.

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### **Notes**

1. The complexity of these roles, relationships, models of working and underpinning principles makes it difficult to distinguish between public and private in a simple way.
2. [http://clg.portalxm.com/library/keytext.cfm?keytext\\_id=113](http://clg.portalxm.com/library/keytext.cfm?keytext_id=113), accessed 24 March 2010.
3. The World Bank has had more than a decade of close association with state-run primary education in India through the bank-supported District Primary Education Programme (DPEP).
4. See website: <http://www.ncl.ac.uk/ecls/staff/profile/james.tooley>, accessed 24 March 2010.
5. Liberty Institute was established in 1996 in Delhi, India, as a ‘non-profit organization’. It sees itself as ‘an independent think tank’ dedicated to ‘empowering the people by harnessing the power of the market’; it declares that ‘we seek to uphold the four institutional pillars of a free society – Individual Rights, Rule of Law, Limited Government and Free Market’ (<http://www.libertyindia.org>, accessed 4 January 2010).
6. <http://news.education4india.com/2037/nasscom-chief-for-setting-up-special-education-zones/>, accessed 24 March 2010.
7. See <http://www.ncl.ac.uk/egwest> for list of publications
8. [http://psdblog.worldbank.org/psdblog/2006/01/index\\_of\\_econom.html](http://psdblog.worldbank.org/psdblog/2006/01/index_of_econom.html), accessed 24 March 2010.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid. – for all quotes on/by Mitra.
11. See <http://www.ccsindia.org>. Quotations are from the CCS website, accessed 24 March 2010.
12. <http://www.ccsindia.org/ccsindia/Newsletter/feb-mar07.htm>. J. Tooley, K. Muralidharan, A. Coulson and M. Kremer are also mentioned as school-choice scholars, see <http://www.schoolchoice.in/aboutus/scholars.php>, accessed 24 March 2010.
13. <http://schoolchoice.in/support/fundvoucher.php>, accessed 24 March 2010.
14. Ibid. for details and quotes.
15. See [www.educaretrust-India.org/about.html](http://www.educaretrust-India.org/about.html) for all quotations.
16. See <http://jamestooley.blogspot.com/2006/01/education-trust-eg-west-scholarships.html>, accessed 24 March 2010.
17. [http://epsfi.org/about\\_activities.htm](http://epsfi.org/about_activities.htm), accessed 24 March 2010.
18. Details about the project and quotes are from Andhra Pradesh School Choice Project Proposal, see <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EDUCATION/Resources/278200-1121703274255/1439264-1178054414297/karthikmuralidharan.pdf>, accessed 24 March 2010.

19. Legatum Global Development is an 'international private investment organisation' and 'part of the Legatum group of companies that has been investing in the world's capital markets for over 20 years and whose mission is to create a legacy of enduring investment success, while applying the same principles of effective capital allocation to promote sustainable human development', see [www.legatum.org/](http://www.legatum.org/), accessed 24 March 2010.
20. See [www.ccsindia.org](http://www.ccsindia.org).
21. [www.opportunity.org/Page.aspx?pid=202](http://www.opportunity.org/Page.aspx?pid=202), accessed 24 March 2010.
22. [www.opportunity.org](http://www.opportunity.org).
23. See <http://punjabgovt.nic.in/education/GovernmentPolicy.htm>, accessed 24 March 2010.
24. <http://www.indianamericancouncil.org/afc/education.htm>, accessed 10 May 2008.
25. The global networks in which these local organizations are situated carry other concomitant discursive baggage, including conservative religious ideology (for example, Templeton Foundation and Opportunity International), anti-statism, anti-welfare, radical forms of liberty, the 'enterprise narrative' and in some cases, anti-global-warming stances.
26. See <http://business.outlookindia.com/>, 23 August 2008.

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