

Expanding the School Market in India: Parental Choice and the Reproduction of Social Inequality

ELIZABETH HILL, MEERA SAMSON, SHYAMASREE DASGUPTA

Since the 1990s, private providers have made a significant contribution to increasing the size of the schooling marketplace. However, qualitative data collected as part of the PROBE Revisited survey in 2006–07 reveals that the expanded school market has become a new locus along which existing social inequalities are being reproduced and entrenched. An analysis of the dynamics of schooling choice in a village in Rajasthan attempts to answer the following questions. One, what determines schooling choice? Two, what is the relationship between the expanded school market and schooling quality within and between government and private schools? The paper thus provides a rich and detailed account of how an expanded school market changes the institutional culture within which parents make decisions about schooling and how education is affecting patterns of social disadvantage.

The paper is part of the PROBE Revisited study focused on exploring changes in the state of primary education in rural India between 1996 and 2006. The study was funded by IDRC, Canada and based at the Institute for Social Studies Trust, New Delhi. The authors acknowledge the contribution of Pranjali Dev, Nancy Lhasungpa and Aparajay Singh to the qualitative studies, and of Anuradha De, A K Shiva Kumar and others in the team to the larger study. Anuradha De, Anomita Goswami and Reetika Khera gave useful comments on earlier drafts of the paper.

Elizabeth Hill (elizabeth.hill@sydney.edu.au), Meera Samson (cordedu@gmail.com) and Shyamasree Dasgupta are with the Collaborative Research and Dissemination, New Delhi.

Recent efforts to universalise primary education in India have seen the proliferation of new schools – government and private. Since the 1990s a variety of government schooling options have become available and there has been a sharp increase in the number of private schools. This large-scale growth in the number of government and private schools across the country is an important development and a contributing factor to the significant improvement in literacy and school enrolment rates for primary school children recorded since the early 1990s (Ramachandran 2004). Growth in the number and type of schools has expanded the education market place and changed the institutional context within which households make decisions about schooling choice. However, schooling choice is not always a “free” choice but one mediated by household and social characteristics. This raises important questions about equity and discrimination in access.

In this paper, we explore two aspects of schooling choice in an expanded education market (1) the factors that shape parental choice in an expanding school market, and (2) the impact of individual household choices about schooling on the structure of education opportunities in the local area, on social inequality, and on exclusion. The paper investigates the issue of schooling choice in the rapidly changing rural context using data collected as part of the PROBE Revisited survey undertaken in 2006 (Anuradha De et al 2011).¹ This was largely a repeat of the PROBE survey carried out in 1996, to find out what had changed in the delivery of basic education over the decade. Both surveys covered a sample of villages from the states of Rajasthan and undivided Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh (referred to collectively as the PROBE states). Himachal Pradesh was surveyed as a contrast. Details of the two surveys are given in Table 1.

Table 1: Details of PROBE Surveys in PROBE States (1996 and 2006)

	PROBE 1996	PROBE Revisited 2006
Number of villages	188	237
Number of households	1,221	1,418
Number of children (6–12 years)	2,363	2,805
Boys	1,377	1,560
Girls	986	1,245
Number enrolled (6–12 years)	1,888	2,660
Boys	1,197	1,498
Girls	691	1,162
Schools with primary section	236	382
Government	195	285
Private	41	97

The 2006 survey was supplemented by a number of village studies. These studies and the larger cross-sectional survey taken together provide detailed information on parental attitudes to government and private schooling and the factors that influence schooling choices. This paper draws primarily on the qualitative study of a village in the Jhunjhunu district in Rajasthan. Before we come to the case study, we discuss some findings of the larger survey in 2006 which are directly related to issues of school choice.

1 1996-2006: Dynamics across the Decade

The 2006 PROBE Revisited survey showed that 79% of children were enrolled in government schools and 21% in private schools (Table 2). This is roughly the same distribution as was found during the 1996 survey (PROBE 1999). However, the primary education picture has remained far from static.

Table 2: Primary-Level Enrolment of Children Aged 6-12 Years in Government and Private Schools (2006)

	Total Number of Children	% in Government Schools	% in Private Schools
All	2,231	79	21
Scheduled castes	508	91	9
Scheduled tribes	167	93	7
Other backward classes	863	77	23
General castes	497	67	33
Minorities	268	78	22
Girls	992	82	18
Boys	1,239	76	24

Source: PROBE Revisited 2006, household survey in PROBE States.

First, the last 10 years have seen a significant increase in the proportion of children enrolled (80% to 95%, see Table 1) indicating a substantial increase in the number of children enrolled in both government and private schools. Looking at which household types choose which type of schooling, we see that children belonging to the scheduled castes (scs) and scheduled tribes (sts) are overwhelmingly represented in government schools (91% and 93% respectively). Among the more privileged caste groups in rural areas, about two-thirds of children from the general castes and just over three-quarters of children from Other Backward Classes (obc) families are also enrolled in government schools (Table 2). Boys were more likely to be enrolled in private schools than girls. Overall, 24% of enrolled boys are in private schools compared with 18% of enrolled girls. While the socio-economic and gender distribution of children between government and private schools is not surprising given the linkages between caste and economic status, and the status of women in India, the expression of social and gender differences within the educational sphere is a concern for social scientists interested in issues of social exclusion, equity and development.

Second, the number of private schools has increased enormously. In 1996, private schools constituted 17% of all schools in the survey; in 2006, they formed 25% of schools surveyed. There was a corresponding decline in the proportion of government schools from 83% to 75% during this decade.

Third, enrolment in private schools is growing in spite of a shift in the cost of private schooling relative to government schooling. The 2006 survey found that since 1996, the average cost of sending a child to a government school (in real terms) has

Table 3: Costs of Government and Private Schooling (1996-2006, in Rs)

Average Annual Costs at Primary-Level	1996	2006
Government schools	318	280
Private schools	940	1,360

Costs are in constant prices (1996-97 prices).

Source: PROBE survey, 1996; PROBE Revisited, 2006 – household surveys in PROBE States.

declined (Table 3), while the cost of primary-level private schooling has risen significantly with the average annual cost rising from Rs 940 in 1996 to Rs 1,360 in 2006 (at 1996-97 prices). At the upper primary level the average cost of sending a child to a private school in 2006 was more than three times that of a government school.

In this paper we explore the dynamics of schooling choice that lie beneath these aggregate trends by evaluating qualitative data collected in the village of Rasola,² Rajasthan. Our focus on the determinants of schooling choice in one village provides a rich and detailed account of how an expanded school market changes the institutional culture within which parents make decisions about schooling and how education is affecting patterns of social disadvantage.

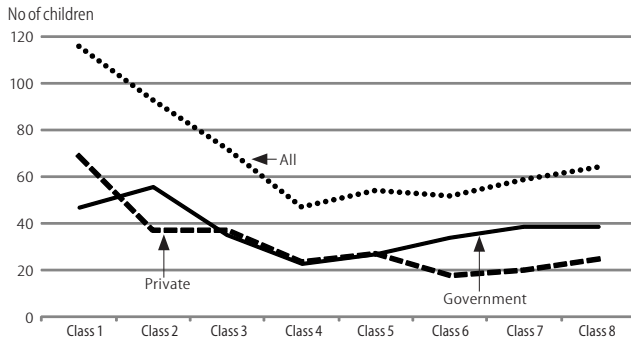
2 Schooling Options and Enrolment in Rasola

Rasola is a village in Jhunjhunu district, one of the more prosperous districts in Rajasthan. Rasola has approximately 450 households and is located three kilometres from the nearest bus stop. Travel to the closest town takes about an hour by jeep and bus. One-third of the households are Swami (obc) and one-third Harijan (sc). The rest are “general caste” households – either Rajput or Brahmin. There are also a few less well-off obc households, who are Jats. The Swamis are mostly large landowners and economically the wealthiest. The Brahmins also own land, although they have smaller holdings than do the Swamis. The Harijan households are mostly landless and tend to work as agricultural labourers. There are two groups of Rajputs – one very well off and quite influential in the village, and the other very poor.

There are currently four schools in Rasola – two government schools and two private, catering to 557 students in classes 1-8. Students come from Rasola and neighbouring villages. The Government Upper Primary School (GUPS) or GUPS (Hindi) is the oldest school, not only in the village but in the locality, drawing students from neighbouring villages. At the time of the survey there were 89 students enrolled in the school, and six teachers. The Government Upper Primary School, Sanskrit, popularly known as the “Sanskrit School”, is located close to the GUPS (Hindi). It has been operating for 20 years and has more than twice the number of students (211 in all) and six teachers. Brahmin children attend the Sanskrit School because they teach Sanskrit and Vedic practices and the school is very much perceived to be “their” school. However, many sc children also attend this school.

J K Public School is the biggest private school in the village and is located close to the government school compounds. The primary section of the school was established in 1996. The school was upgraded to include class 6 in 1998, class 8 in 2001 and class 10 in 2003. The school also has a senior secondary section although it was awaiting recognition at the time of the 2006 PROBE Revisited

Figure 1: Enrolment Patterns in Rasola's Schools

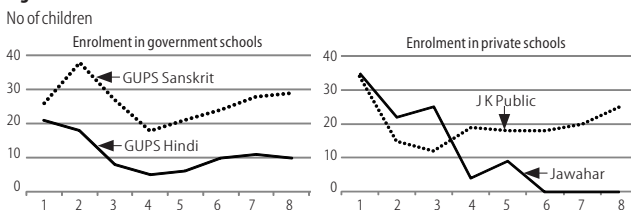


survey. The school had 162 students enrolled in grades 1 to 8, and 10 teachers. Jawahar School is a small upper-primary school registered in 2005 and located within the Swami hamlet in the village. It reported 95 students and five teachers.

The enrolment pattern of students in these schools is presented in Figure 1. Enrolment peaks in class 1 at 116, and is at a low in class 4 at 47 children, before it increases moderately again. It could be that this is a regular pattern and every year there is significant movement out of school altogether between classes 1 and 4. There is also the possibility that some students are considered old enough to be sent to more reputed schools which are out of the village once they have completed grades one-three in local schools. Comparing the share of government and private sector enrolment for classes 1-8 (Figure 1), we see that in the primary years, total enrolment in the two private schools kept pace with the total in the two government schools, but in classes 6-8, the higher proportion of enrolment is in the government schools. Factors influencing school choice obviously vary with the class the child is enrolled in.

Disaggregated enrolment patterns in the four schools show that although there are differences between the schools, the bulk of children in all four schools are enrolled in classes 1 and 2

Figure 2: Class-wise Enrolment Patterns in Individual Schools



(Figure 2). There is very low enrolment in all eight grades in the GUPS (Hindi) school (less than 12 students in each grade after class 2), and relatively higher levels in the GUPS (Sanskrit) and J K Public School. The latter is the only school that provides class 9 and 10 in the village, which may have contributed to the considerable increase in students in class 8. In the other

Table 4: Determinants of Schooling Choice

	Supply	Quality	Annual Cost (Rs)	Social Barrier to Entry	Gender Distribution (%)
GUPS Hindi	Since 1956	Poor	Negligible	No	Girls dominate (55)
GUPS Sanskrit	Since 1986	Good	Negligible	Implicit	Boys dominate (53)
J K Public School	Since 1996	Good	2,000 (class 1-5) 3,500 (class 6-10)	Hidden	Boys dominate (60)
Jawahar School	Since 2005	Average	800 (class 1-3) 1,500 (class 4-5)	Hidden	Boys dominate (55)

Source: PROBE Revisited survey (2006).

private school, Jawahar, enrolment remained substantial only up to class 3, suggesting the school is clearly still in the process of getting established.

3 Parental/Community Attitudes

The mix of schooling opportunities available to households in Rasola provides a useful context within which to analyse attitudes and choices about government and private schools. In general, parents expressed a preference for government schools. They felt that the private schools charged exorbitant fees, and expressed concern about the low standard of teacher qualifications in the private system.³ At the same time, parents and the general community were troubled by the declining standard of government school education. Almost half of all children enrolled in the four schools were attending private schools in 2006 (257 out of 557 enrolled). The apparent mismatch between parental preference for government schooling and the frequent choice to send children to private schools, raises two important questions: (1) what determines schooling choice? and (2) what is the relationship between the expanded school market and schooling quality within and between government and private schools? A close analysis of the dynamics of schooling choice in Rasola provides some insight.

3.1 Determinants of 'Choice'

The qualitative data collected amongst families in Rasola suggests five main variables that influence parental "choice" about which school to send their child to – supply, quality, cost, social barriers to entry, and gender (Table 5).

Table 5: Caste-wise Distribution in the Government Schools

	Total Enrolment	% Scheduled Castes	% OBC and "General Castes"
GUPS Hindi	89	25	75
GUPS Sanskrit	211	47	53
Both government schools	300	40	60

Source: PROBE Revisited (2006).

3.1.1 Supply

Between 1956 and 1986, the GUPS (Hindi) was the only schooling option in Rasola. This changed in 1986 with the opening of a second government school, the GUPS (Sanskrit). Schooling choices expanded again in 1996 with the introduction of the J K Public School and most recently in 2005 with the opening of the Jawahar School. By 2006 the supply of schools had not only increased, but was highly differentiated both according to provider type – government and private – and internally. The government schools are very different from each other – GUPS (Hindi) is a mainstream government school and the Sanskrit School is a specialist school funded by the Department of Sanskrit Education.⁴ The Brahmin community felt a sense of ownership to the school and the headmaster was Brahmin. The special funding and the upper caste orientation of the school fundamentally set it apart from the mainstream GUPS (Hindi).

Considerable differences were also evident between the two private schools. J K Public School had been established for more than 10 years, had

recognition up to class 10, and had applied for recognition for classes 11 and 12. The Jawahar School had only recently opened, and did not have any students enrolled beyond class five. J K Public School was the only school providing education beyond class 8 in the village. Girls who were not allowed or did not want to travel out of the village to government schools reported dropping out altogether if their families could not afford to send them to J K Public for class nine and above.

The expanded supply of schools has produced an enrolment spread with the lowest enrolment in GUPS (Hindi), the largest in the Sanskrit School, and significant enrolments in the two private schools (Figure 2). Parents have clearly engaged with the choices available to them and chose private schooling options for about half of the children enrolled in the primary level. The situation changes at the upper primary level when there is less access to private schooling (Jawahar does not appear to be set up for classes 6-8) and costs increase (community reported annual fees in J K Public to be Rs 3,500 in these classes, Table 4, p 100).

3.1.2 Quality

Faced with a range of schooling choices in Rasola, parental concern about the quality of their children's education was reported to be the original impetus for thinking about schooling options. Our study shows that the quality of the education experience provided at the government and private schools is highly heterogeneous.

The GUPS (Hindi) has a large old school building and compound enclosed by a boundary wall. Although the infrastructure was reasonably good, the school was widely considered to offer very poor quality education. However, this had not always been the case. Parents and community members reported that in the past, the GUPS (Hindi) had been a very good school, and they had been happy to send their children there. Parents were concerned about how a school that was once running well had become so dysfunctional. In particular, there were strong complaints about the low quality of teaching. Parents and the general community reported that staff did what they liked, and teachers hardly taught:

Nineties mein yeh school no 1 par tha par ab theek nahi chalta, master padaate nahi hain, aath vi pass kar le to bhi bachchho ko kuch nahi aata hai.. naukri bhi nahi milti... (in the 90s this school was in the number one position, but now it does not run well, the teachers do not teach, even the children who have passed the eighth grade do not know anything...they do not even get jobs...)⁵

In comparison, the community and the parents in particular considered the Sanskrit School to be a good school, and reported that it was a school for "children who want to learn". The headmaster was a Brahmin from Uttar Pradesh and well regarded by the villagers who said he was "interested in the children's education". The SC community also spoke highly of him. Infrastructure was particularly good – two *pucca* buildings, trees, swings and slides in the playground, and brightly painted classrooms with Hindi, Sanskrit and English alphabets on the walls. The bigger private school, J K Public, had good infrastructure, and researchers reported that at the time of the survey there was a disciplined and organised atmosphere in the school with active teaching in

all classes other than classes 4 and 6, where children were sitting quietly and reading. The smaller Jawahar School had one *pucca* room which was the headmaster's room, and a partitioned and shaded place where most classes were held. The school had no electricity.

As parents talked about the different schools in Rasola, they revealed a common perception of the relative quality of the four schools. School quality seemed to be determined by the personality of the headmaster and his social connections, school infrastructure, exam results, teaching activity, and teacher qualifications. According to these parameters, GUPS (Hindi) was thought to offer a relatively poor schooling experience. This was largely on account of the headmaster who was reported to be often absent from the school, and very inefficient when he did attend – he was accused of drinking, sleeping and playing cards while on the job. Limited teaching activity in the school was also cited as a reason for poor performance, although infrastructure and teacher qualifications were good. The Sanskrit School, however, was thought to provide a good quality schooling experience due to its active and personable headmaster, regular teaching activity and good infrastructure. In particular, parents appreciated how the staff at the Sanskrit School called parents to the school to discuss children's progress and visited students' homes on a regular basis to encourage school attendance. Many parents attributed the differences in the functioning of the two schools to the headmasters. For instance, according to a teacher who had worked at the GUPS (Hindi) for the past 10 years:

Uska Headmaster to kafi tej hai... hai toh banda UP ka...baniyo ke saath kaafi achha sampark banake rakkha hai, woh log bhi school chalane mein madad karte hain. Yahan ka to head teacher Jat hai... UP jaise tej kahan se ho payega?" (the [Sanskrit School] headmaster is quite sharp...he is from UP...he has cultivated good relations with the banyas, they help him in the running of the school. The Headmaster here [GUPS Hindi] is a Jat... how can he be as smart as the man from UP?).

Parents appreciated the role that social networks and the community background of the respective headmasters played in shaping the quality of the education experience available at each school and this informed their schooling choice.

J K Public was also ranked highly by parents on account of being a well-established school with good infrastructure and regular classes up to the secondary level. While Jawahar was deemed relatively average due to its recent establishment, poor infrastructure and inadequate teacher qualifications, it was appreciated for its regular teaching activity.

The enrolment patterns in the four schools (Figure 2) reflected parental perceptions of the quality of the different schools, and in the case of the private schools, their ability and willingness to pay. Low enrolment in the GUPS (Hindi) reflected the community view that the school is comparatively dysfunctional. This is significant given that the school was established in 1956, the medium of instruction was Hindi – the official language of instruction in most schools in this area – and its catchment area for the upper primary grades included neighbouring villages. At the other government school, GUPS (Sanskrit), enrolment remained significantly higher than GUPS (Hindi) for all grades, signifying that it was more popular. Parental demand was also reflected in

the high levels of enrolment at J K Public. Jawahar had only been running since 2005 and had high enrolment till class three but not beyond.

In spite of the clear ranking of the four schools by parents, there seemed to be some ambiguity and contradiction in their views about quality. The pursuit of a good education was the main reason given for choosing one of the private schools, but there was often some apprehension expressed about the quality of the private schooling experience. In fact many parents felt they were choosing between two less-than-optimum options, rather than one good and one bad: *Sheheron ko dekhkar gaon mein bhi private mein bhejte hain par yahan master nahi hain* (people in the village look at [people in the] cities and send children to private schools, but there are no teachers here). Krishna Kumar had enrolled his children in Jawahar Public School but claimed the school was like a *sabzi mandi* (vegetable market)... *Parchi batwai, bus lagai, padhai ke naam par kuch bhi nahi hai* (leaflets were distributed, a bus was started, but little attention is paid to studies). "It is all about advertising", he continued. Rajbeer added, *12 pass ka ek bhi teacher nahi hoga* (there is not a single teacher who has passed class 12). Vijaypal, an ex-sarpanch in Rasola, was very concerned about the quality of teachers in the private schools and argued that only a few teachers had done their BA and BEd. His view was that private schools did not have adequate funds to pay for qualified teachers and this translated into a low-quality education. So even while private education was generally perceived to be better than that offered at the government schools, parents were aware of the structural limitations of private education services.

3.1.3 Cost

The third determinant of schooling choice is cost. While government schools do not normally demand an annual fee, there are costs associated with attending school, for example, the cost of uniforms or books where they are not covered by government scholarships. But even covering this minimal level of cost is a struggle for many parents. Private schools of course cost much more and tuition fee varies widely among private schools. Sending a child to J K Public School costs approximately twice the amount charged at Jawahar (Table 4). Nevertheless, parents chose to send their children to J K Public. This choice reflects in part the rising aspiration of rural parents and the social status associated with attending a private school. It reflects the growing community attitude that private schools offer higher quality education than do government schools and the practical concern parents have about accessing a quality Hindi-medium education. Most parents in Rasola justified the extra cost by pointing to the quality of education they believed they were purchasing for their children. For example, Maniram, a Brahmin, praised the J K Public School saying that they might charge some money but the education provided is of very good quality.

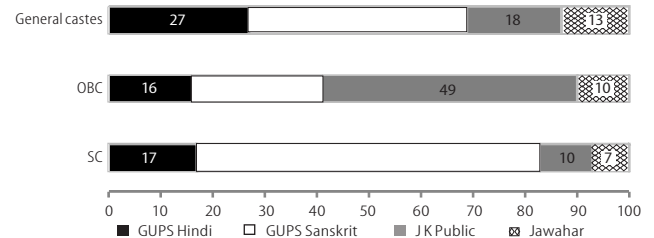
Where there is a choice between a relatively free education and one that costs a substantial amount, it is only the wealthier families that can afford to even think about sending their children to one of the private schools. Given the close correlation between caste and economic status, this means the private schools tend to be dominated by higher caste groups, although there are examples

of low income families managing to send their children to private schools. In a bid to increase its enrolment, the newly established Jawahar School offers fee relief for families with more than one child enrolled.

3.1.4 Social Barriers to Entry

The fourth determinant that shapes schooling choice is social barriers to entry. While children from all the caste groups are represented in each school, the DISE data⁶ show that the overwhelming trend in Rasola is for children from OBC households to be much more highly represented in the local private schools compared to children from general caste and SC families. Fifty-nine per cent of OBC children enrolled in private schools, compared to only 17% of SCs (Figure 3). In this particular village, with a functioning government (Sanskrit) school, only 30% of general caste children are in private schools. While the correlation between caste and schooling type is strong, the large numbers of SC children enrolled in the Sanskrit School and the broader distribution of OBC and "general caste" children between the four schools suggests that apparent social barriers can be partly overcome when concerns about quality are factored into schooling choice.

Figure 3: School-wise Distribution by Caste Group (in %)



Source: DISE, 2006-07.

Social barriers to entry were subtle at the two private schools. Neither school advertised any explicit caste preference; however, the stark correspondence between caste and school choice indicates that there are many informal barriers to freedom of school choice (Ramachandran 2004). The large and well-established private school in the village, J K Public, was catering to as many as 49% of the enrolled OBC children, and 18% of the enrolled "general castes" (Figure 3). The newer private school was catering to 10% of enrolled OBC children and 13% of enrolled "general caste" children.⁷ The OBCs were specifically the Swamis, and the "general castes" were the wealthy Rajputs. Both schools also had a small proportion of children from SC families. While the economically strong castes – the Swamis and the wealthy Rajputs – dominate enrolment in both the private schools, they show that not only is affluence a key determinant of school choice, but that children's education has become something of a status symbol and context within which economic superiority can be displayed.

Data collected by our researchers from the school register in the government schools confirm that children from all the caste groups are represented in the two government schools (Table 5). As a regular government school, the mandate of GUPS (Hindi) is to provide education for all. Relatively few children are enrolled in this school, with the majority (75%) coming from

the poorer families among the OBCs (Jats) and general castes (Rajputs). The head-teacher and some of the other teachers in GUPS (Hindi) were also Jats, which may have had some bearing on Jat families enrolling their children here. Only one-fourth of the children in GUPS (Hindi) are from SC families. While there may not be any particular social barrier to entry, parents do not want to send their children to a dysfunctional school – even if it is comparatively free. Many parents are instead choosing to send their children to the Sanskrit School which had the highest enrolment in classes 1-8 in the village at the time of the survey and surprisingly, SC children formed close to half (47%) of total enrolment.

As a school specifically designed to promote a particular culture and worldview, we would expect that the Sanskrit School might project the most explicit social barrier to entry – especially for SC children. With a mission to promote Sanskrit language and culture, the school clearly caters to Brahmins and one would think it likely that children from non-Brahmin families might feel unwelcome and excluded at the school. However, a substantial proportion of enrolled OBC children were in the Sanskrit School. The notably high proportion of SC children enrolled at the Sanskrit School suggests that schooling choice was particularly nuanced for these families. As a government school, the Sanskrit School provides a low-cost alternative to the lower quality GUPS (Hindi). Many Harijan families spoke of enrolling their children in the Sanskrit School after the headmaster visited their home and invited them to the school.

That SC students are the largest group enrolled at the Sanskrit School suggests that caste barriers might be softening. However, the class-wise enrolment data suggest an even more nuanced picture. Close to two-fifths of SC students enrolled in classes 1-8 are clustered in classes 1 and 2 (39%) compared to a little over

Table 6: Impact of Caste: Enrolment in GUPS (Sanskrit) (in %)

	OBCs and 'General Castes'	SC	SC Boys	SC Girls
Classes 1-2	22	39	35	45
Classes 3-5	31	31	29	34
Classes 6-8	47	30	36	21

Source: PROBE Revisited (2006).

one-fifth of OBC and “general caste” students (Table 6). The situation is even more acute for SC girls, of whom 45% are in classes 1 and 2. This pattern suggests that the Sanskrit School, while initially welcoming, is not meeting the ongoing needs of SC children. This is not surprising given that the focus in the school is a classical language which is no longer in use!⁸ Over time, this may become a barrier that ultimately leads SC children to either drop out or to swap schools. That Brahmins in Rasola, while able to afford private education, were opting for the Sanskrit School reveals the importance they give to caste identity. This further indicates that schooling choice is a way in which language and cultural traditions – symbols of power and prestige – can be maintained.

3.1.5 Gender

During the course of the survey, investigators found many households in Rasola where parents made different schooling choices for girls and boys. In these households, girl children

were enrolled in one of the government schools while the boys were enrolled in a private school. When asked to explain their schooling choices, most parents were coy and unwilling to say why they made different schooling choices for daughters and sons. Sometimes parents explained their choice in terms of the comparative needs of the children, arguing that the child with less aptitude for studies needed to go to the private school because they believed it to be better. This was the argument presented by Rajpal, who sends his daughter to GUPS (Hindi) and his son to J K Public School:

Beta thoda kamzor hai. JK mein kharcha toh jyada lagta hai. Par kya kare...bachcha tez nahi hai... bachcha bolta hai ki private mein hi jaunga (My son is a little weak in studies. JK Public is more expensive. But what to do...the child is not very intelligent...the child says that he will only go to the private school).

Parents may be reserved in their explanations for why their girls and boys attend different schools, but the role of gender as a determinant of school choice is clearly revealed in the gender-wise distribution of students between the four schools in Rasola. Girls dominate enrolment in the mainstream government school GUPS (Hindi) (60%). At the Sanskrit School the gender distribution is more even, although boys dominate marginally. In the private J K Public School, boys make up the majority of students (59%) as they do at the smaller Jawahar School. In Rasola, the emerging correlation between a child's gender and the perceived quality of the school they are enrolled in, suggests that in the context of an expanding school market girls face a new form of discrimination that aggravates total discrimination within the system (Kumar 2006: 45).

4 Schooling Choice and Institutional Culture

Choosing a school is not always a one-off event. Our survey showed that parents often revisit and reconsider their original schooling choice if they feel there has been a significant change in the schooling environment. Parents in Rasola used two main strategies to improve on their original schooling choice – exit and voice (Hirschman 1970). The idea of “exit” reflects the capacity of households to move between educational options. The concept of “voice” captures the agency of an individual/community to effect change in the status quo.

In Rasola, parental use of exit and voice strategies to maximise their schooling choice has produced a highly differentiated school market both within and across the government/private divide. For example, the GUPS (Hindi) was once held in high regard, but the community has been unable to prevent the decline in the quality of schooling offered at this school. In 2003 a group of parents did exercise their voice to advocate for improved education opportunities. Tired of paying high fees at the private school, and unhappy with the quality of teachers and teaching there, a group of Swami parents along with some wealthier Rajput parents held a meeting and decided to withdraw their children from the private schools and enrol them in GUPS (Hindi).⁹ Having done so, the parents felt that the teachers at the GUPS (Hindi) were also not good. They complained to the relevant authorities, expecting these teachers to be transferred. New fans and electricity were provided, but no teachers were transferred. The parents, tired of

waiting for improvements, eventually exited GUPS (Hindi) and readmitted their children in the private schools. Poor parents were also left with no option except to exit GUPS (Hindi). Rajendra, a man from the sc community, reported he had withdrawn his son due to the low standard of education and admitted him to the Sanskrit School. Access to an alternative government school was an important option for sc households who valued education. One of the reasons for the success of the Sanskrit School was the sense of ownership and “voice” Brahmin households were able to exercise here. While the school was a result of a policy directive of the Rajasthan government, the Brahmin community felt a strong sense of ownership and pride in the school and its quality. This produced “loyalty” (Hirschman 1970) to the Sanskrit School amongst the Brahmin households that benefited other (sc) students also.

While exit strategies led to improved education for families able to afford private schools or those willing to attend the Sanskrit School, very poor families who felt disenfranchised from the Sanskrit School found themselves trapped in a low quality school with no real choice except to drop out of the system altogether. This was the case for Nikku and Jhuna who were from a poor Rajput family. Both children had attended GUPS (Hindi) but had dropped out from the school after completing class 8 and 6 respectively. Nikku said “*Padhai wahan hoti nahi, saare ke saare copy khaali padi hain*” (No teaching takes place there, all our books have remained blank). Nikku dropped out of school because there was no government secondary school available in the village and the family was not able to afford J K Public.

The cumulative impact of some parents’ choice to exit a low performing school contributed to the development of a multi-tiered education system in Rasola. As students flow from the “bad” towards the “better” schools, families with less mobility find their access to a functional school restricted as the choices made by some negates choices for others. Increased utilisation of private schools changes the demand for both types of schooling and might, over time, provide an economic and political rationale for a reduction in state financing for education. In this way, the voice, exit and loyalty strategies of households shape not only the education experience of individual students, but can also affect the quality of schooling options available to all. That is, household choices shape the provider and the institutional environment as much as they shape the student and their learning outcomes. Whether the development of a “free/er” market in education is positive or negative for individuals and different social groups is an important question with significant

Table 7: Voice and Exit

II – yes voice, yes exit	I – no voice, yes exit
New models of schooling	Private schooling
III – yes voice, no exit	IV – no voice, no exit
Community schools	Excluded groups and/or second tier schools

Source: Fennell (2007).

implications for social inclusion, and social justice. Fennell (2007) argues that the exit and voice strategies used by households have a collective impact on the quality and quantity of education options available, and that the impact can be either positive or negative for the overall quality of education, social justice and equity (Table 7).

Economic & Political WEEKLY

REFLECTIONS ON EMPIRE

March 26, 2011

Resurrection and Normalisation of Empire	– Rohit Chopra
Taming the Imperial Impulse: Realising a Pragmatic Moral Vision	– Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na’im
Adam’s Mirror: The Frontier in the Imperial Imagination	– Manan Ahmed
Indian Empire (and the Case of Kashmir)	– Suvir Kaul
Imperial Democracies, Militarised Zones, Feminist Engagements	– Chandra Talpade Mohanty
Rethinking News Agencies, National Development and Information Imperialism	– Oliver Boyd-Barrett
Digital Imperialism through Online Social/Financial Networks	– Radhika Gajjala, Anca Birzescu
Pandemic, Empire and the Permanent State of Exception	– Cindy Patton

For copies write to:
Circulation Manager,

Economic and Political Weekly,
320-321, A to Z Industrial Estate, Ganpatrao Kadam Marg,
Lower Parel, Mumbai 400 013.
email: circulation@epw.in

In Rasola, the dominance of the exit strategy and the overall lack of voice parents have been able to exercise within the education marketplace has produced some very negative outcomes for girls, children belonging to the lower castes, and poor households who appear to be trapped in the lowest quality schools in what is becoming a two-tiered market. In the worst cases these children were excluded from the system as they dropped out of school altogether. However, the presence of a functional government school in Rasola – the Sanskrit School – did provide children from the lower castes and girls with some choice for their schooling. The Brahmin community was the only group able to exercise “voice”, and their overall loyalty to the Sanskrit School provided disadvantaged students with an opportunity to access a functional school, even if it did not always meet their needs. The enrolment of sc children in the Sanskrit School has in a small way ameliorated the pace at which old social divisions are reproduced within the expanded school market in Rasola.

5 Expanded School Markets, Patterns of Social Disadvantage

Evaluation of the caste and gender distribution of enrolment among the four schools in Rasola reveals how schooling choice in an expanded market can reproduce and entrench existing social disadvantage. Children from higher castes and economically secure communities dominate private school enrolments, while children from lower castes and economically disadvantaged communities dominate enrolment in the government schools. Eighty-three per cent of sc students enrolled in Rasola’s four schools are in government schools. This trend is repeated and amplified in the results from the 2006 PROBE Revisited household survey, which found 91% of sc students enrolled in government schools. Our study also shows that the government and private school market is highly heterogeneous and that parents are acutely aware of this. The variation in quality of the private schools was in accordance with the fee structures in the two schools. The reasons for variation in the quality of the government schools are more nuanced. It was clear that the dysfunctional government school, GUPS (Hindi), was contributing to children moving to other schools and out of school altogether in

some cases. The functional government Sanskrit School was valued by parents and had become the largest school in the village. In Rasola, access to a functioning government school for the lower caste and economically weak households may work to ameliorate social stratification in some small ways. However, given the specialised nature of the Sanskrit School and the concentration of sc children in classes 1 and 2 this possibility must not be overstated, as it has only marginally reduced the overwhelming correlation between caste status and enrolment in government and private schools. This is even more true in the case of girls from the sc community.

Even where there is a functional government school, albeit a specialised one like the Sanskrit School, a two-track education system appears to be developing where local government schools are deemed to be for the poor, and private schools are attended by a wider dispersion of better-off social groups. This negative relationship between an expanded school market and the development of complex forms of social exclusion and inequity that we have documented in Rasola is also reflected in Ramchandran’s research on primary education (2004). That a child’s caste, community and gender are being reified in the context of public policy developments that explicitly encourage the democratisation of education is a worrying outcome.

Social stratification in education poses a challenge to the state with regard to its duty to promote social equity and education for all. While many explanations of educational disadvantage focus on the supply side of the problem, our research shows that increased investment and expanded education opportunities are not necessarily the panacea for social inequality, disadvantage and poverty. Instead, the PROBE Revisited study shows that social disadvantage can be reproduced within the context of an expanding school market – although the trend can be somewhat ameliorated where a functional government school exists. Without a significant commitment by the state to improve the quality and reach of government education, a dual-track education system in which traditionally excluded castes and classes are only able to access the lowest quality education opportunities may become a permanent feature of the Indian education system aggravating socio-economic inequality (Jha et al 2008). This, of course, must be avoided.

NOTES

- 1 Highlights of the survey have also been published in *The Hindu*, 11 February 2009 and *Frontline*, 25 March 2009.
- 2 The name of the village, the names of schools, and people in the village have been changed to retain confidentiality.
- 3 DISE data for 30 September 2006 reports all teachers in the two government schools have professional qualifications. No teacher in the private schools has professional qualifications.
- 4 Rajasthan is reported to be the only state in the country with a separate department of Sanskrit education. Between 2003 and 2008 Sanskrit education received significant support from the BJP government.
- 5 Veterinary doctor in village.
- 6 DISE data is useful because it provides information on caste wise enrolment in both government and private schools. Our research team could get

information only on total and SC enrolment in government schools.

- 7 The figures are based on DISE data. There was some discrepancy between enrolment figures for Jawahar school reported by DISE and in the PROBE Revisited survey. It does not affect the findings reported.
- 8 Many SC children are likely to be first generation learners who will struggle to make the transition from the dialects spoken at home to spoken and written Hindi in the school.
- 9 OBCs are a strong political force in Rajasthan and do not identify themselves with the Brahmins. It would be natural for them to ensure that their children access a good mainstream Hindi language education rather than the Sanskrit one.

REFERENCES

- De, Anuradha, Reetika Khera, Meera Samson and A K Shiva Kumar (2011): *PROBE Revisited* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press).

Fennell, Shailaja (2007): “Tilting at Windmills: Public-Private Partnerships in Indian Education Today”, *Contemporary Education Dialogue*, Vol 4:2, pp 193-216.

Hirschman, A (1970): *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organisations, and States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).

Jha, Praveen, S Das, S S Mohanty and N K Jha (2008): *Public Provisioning for Elementary Education in India* (New Delhi: Sage).

Kumar, Ravi (2006): *The Crisis in Elementary Education in India* (New Delhi: Sage).

Nagaraj, Anuradha (2009): “Rumble in the Desert”, *Indian Express*, 13 May, available at <http://www.indianexpress.com/oldStory/19363/> accessed 13 May.

PROBE Team (1999): *Public Report on Basic Education in India* (New Delhi: OUP).

Ramchandran, Vimala, ed. (2004): *Gender and Social Equity in Primary Education: Hierarchies of Access* (New Delhi: Sage).