

Schooled by the State

People's dive into Education
Financing in India



Introduction

The journey of education provision in India has been defined by debates between public and private partners. Whether K-12 education should be the sole responsibility of the State or should also involve private provisioning has divided lawmakers. Historically, non-State entities dominated the Indian education landscape. Since independence, the emphasis switched to State-led education. As India integrated into the global economy post-1990, the demand for education grew, outpacing government supply, and private institutions emerged to fill the gap (Davies 2018). Over time, policies evolved from being silent on private education to seeking its regulation. The Right to Education (RTE) Act 2009 foregrounded the State's responsibility to ensure access to education.

The RTE Act mandated private schools reserve 25% of seats for children from economically weaker and socially disadvantaged backgrounds, with the Government sharing the financial burden. It also established the concept of neighbourhood schools, ensuring access to education for children in their vicinity. The RTE Act also laid down criteria for teacher-student ratios, infrastructural standards, and instructor certifications towards improving the overall quality of education.

The number of private schools in India has grown exponentially in the past decade: seven in ten new schools since 2014 were private schools (UNESCO 2022). Recognised and unrecognised private schools have emerged as crucial contributors to realising universal education aspirations. According to the 2016 International Social Survey Programme, at 46%, India is among the countries with the lowest support for public provision of education (UNESCO 2022). Findings from our study confirm the widespread prevalence of parental preference for non-State education providers in India. We critically reviewed literature on education provision in India, studied key arguments supporting and opposing private provision, and tested them through field interviews. Recognising parents as pivotal stakeholders in primary education, we conducted interviews with parents in low-income settlements of Delhi to gather insights into the public perception of State provision versus State financing of education. We also examined the impact of the current regulatory framework on private actors.

While many scholars assert that the Constitution emphasises the State's direct management of educational institutions, this paper seeks to explore the extent to which the Constitution exclusively mandates State-led school provisioning and whether alternative interpretations allow for varied mechanisms of educational support. To comprehensively explore this question, we have structured our paper into distinct sections. The first section contextualises significant events, terms, Acts, and provisions that have shaped the evolution of education into a Fundamental Right in India. The second section includes an in-depth review of existing literature on education provision. This section is further divided into sub-themes, each centred around a key argument either supporting or opposing private provision. Within each sub-theme, we critically engage with the arguments and then present our findings to test their validity. Lastly, a distinct yet interrelated discussion examines the regulation of private actors and the intricate navigation of the current regulatory framework.

State-Led versus State-Financed School Provisioning

Despite early recognition of the value of education, it was frequently relegated to the periphery of official priorities in the years following India's independence. Framers of the Constitution chose to primarily address education through the Directive Principles of State Policy rather than as a Fundamental Right. Their focus remained on poverty alleviation, industrial development, and social cohesion. The landmark legislation that elevated the right to education to the status of a Fundamental Right within the Constitution of India, Article 21A, was introduced in 2002 under the 86th Amendment. But what is the nature of the State's responsibility in ensuring this right?

Constitutional view

The Constitution of India does not distinguish between “providing education” and “providing for education”. Article 41 provides that the

“State shall, within the limitations of its economic ability and growth, provide efficient provisions for safeguarding the rights to labour, education, and public assistance in unemployment, old age, sickness, and disablement, and other circumstances of unreserved want” .

The Article itself does not explicitly State what falls under the responsibility of the Government regarding how to guarantee this right. Article 45 makes a more stringent demand on the state to provide education to all children up to the age of 14 years “within a period of ten years,” regardless of the State’s economic conditions (Prasad 2020).

For a clearer answer, we revisited debates, discussions, and drafts in the run-up to the Constitution adopted in 1950.

The debates suggest a preference for diversity in education and opposition to a common schooling system. These words from a speech by V. S. Sarwate indicate how the Constituent Assembly underscored the pivotal role of private stakeholders in the educational sphere:

“Anybody who has the interests of education at heart would note with sorrow that there is not sufficient private effort in the field of education. The State should encourage private enterprise and promote private schools that can make experiments and find out new methods, a new system of education. That is the desideratum and not uniformity in this way” (Constituent Assembly, 1949).

Sarwate further noted, “There should not be any uniformity in education, as uniformity kills the individual.” H. V. Kamath argued against heavy State interference in education and supported private actors due to their efficacy: “I have in mind certain institutions in this country which are doing very good work, wholly privately run but run on efficient lines without any Government interference” (Constituent Assembly 1949).

The Constituent Assembly envisaged that private actors take over much of the burden under State financing. This was concretised by a clause in a Draft Constitution “39. Private schools organised as a substitute for public schools shall be subject to State regulations, supervision and control and shall have to satisfy educational and academic standards and follow general curricula prescribed by the State” (The Socialist Party 1948).

This clause clearly supports the notion that private schools, with due oversight, can substitute the role of public schools to satisfy the educational needs of the State, paving the way for a State financing solution. Although this draft was not finally implemented, it reflects the inspirations of the framers of the Constitution. Similarly, the Karachi Resolution of 1931 endorsed private actors for substituting the responsibilities of the public sector: “(6) All citizens have equal rights and duties in regard to wells, tanks, roads, schools and places of public resort, maintained out of State or local funds, or dedicated by private persons for the use of the general public” (“Karachi Resolution” 1931).

This resolution makes it abundantly clear that, as with other public goods, private actors can provide for the educational needs of the general public as well.

Surprisingly, despite historical endorsements, the successive five-year plans were silent on fostering private provision in India. They focused on bolstering primary education, increasing enrolment, enhancing quality, and addressing socio-economic disparities and gender imbalances but overlooked the role of private educators.

Jurisprudence

Landmark judgments, both before and after the enactment of the RTE Act 2009, have echoed a strong Constitutional recognition of education’s importance while acknowledging private involvement. They shed light on the State’s duty to ensure education and the acceptance of private entities as collaborators, especially when governmental capacity is strained.

- *Miss Mohini Jain v State of Karnataka and Others 1992* held that every citizen has the right to education and endorsed the need for private educational institutions in India:

“The State is under an obligation to establish educational institutions to enable the citizens to enjoy the said right. The State may discharge its obligation through State-owned or State-recognised educational institutions. When the State government grants recognition to private educational institutions, it creates an agency to fulfil its obligation under the constitution.”

- *Unni Krishnan, J.P., and Ors v. State of Andhra Pradesh and Ors. 1993* held the Right to Education as inherent in the Right to Life under Article 21; and that private educational institutions receiving State grants “have to abide by all the rules and regulations as may be framed by the Government and recognising/affiliating authorities” while those not receiving aid from the Government “may not be insisted” to charge “only that fee as is charged for similar courses in governmental institutions.”
- *The Society for Unaided Private Schools of Rajasthan v. Union of India (UOI) and Anr. 2012* upheld by majority the Constitutionality of Section 12 of the RTE Act 2009 which mandates all aided and unaided (private) schools to reserve 25% seats for students from economically weaker and socially disadvantaged backgrounds; further held that “the State may decide to provide free and compulsory education... through its own schools or through government-aided schools or through unaided private schools.”

The court cases examined above converge to offer diverse insights into the role of private institutions in India’s education. The cases illuminate the State’s duty to ensure education and the acceptance of private entities as collaborators, especially when Governmental capacity faces constraints.

Thou Shall Provide Education: Arguments in Favour of State Provisioning

Education is a public good

Academics argue that the Government’s role in education stems from the idea that education is a public good (Levin 1987). Some argue that education has positive externalities or spillover effects and, hence, should be supplied by the Government because the market supplies less than the socially efficient quantity. However, the assumption that private provision is inadequate is incorrect given education’s special status. According to Shaw (2010), the demand for K-12 education is so great that it is sufficiently provided. Haddock (2007) points at how, for goods like education, the demand from the “avid demanders” may be adequate to ensure provision for the larger public as well (Haddock 2007).

Further, the Government’s provision, in trying to deliver the socially efficient quantity for this merit good, is still not adequate (Misra and Ghadai 2015). Per the Ministry of Education, 4 lakh private schools catered to 46.5% students, versus 10 lakh public schools that catered to the rest (Ministry of Education 2022). Rather than asking if private provision is theoretically adequate, we should check if the State is allowing for adequate private provision or creating additional barriers. These barriers stem from the regulatory framework as well as the non-profit restriction on private schools.

We found that parents practise institutional agnosticism, i.e. they are not concerned with which stakeholder provides education, as long as the provision is up to par. They prioritise quality over any inherent need for the State to provide education. Furthermore, we found that private actors have to compensate for the inadequacies in State provision. NGOs, filling the gaps left by the public school system, have emerged as a popular choice among low-income households for providing education. A mother from Sangam Vihar, lamenting how the public school does not cater to the special needs of her child, credited a special education programme run by an NGO for her child’s progress. This undermines the perceived inadequacy of private provision propagated in the public good argument.

A significant number of the parents interviewed still believe that private actors come and go, but the reliability and longevity of the Government are unparalleled, and that the Government should manage schools. However, majority believe that private actors can effectively manage general provision and want non-State actors to manage government schools. Almost all shared that private schools were available nearby.

Citizenship goal

Stemming from the argument for the public good, there appears to be a philosophical debate about the benefits of education in developing a “sense of moral, social, and economic responsibility as a citizen” (Grace 1989). This societal benefit claim is supported by the aim of nurturing model citizens, which is perceived as a responsibility of the State. The literature does not provide evidence as to why private institutions cannot instill the same values or why this citizenship goal results in insufficient provision by private entities.

The environment and behaviour observed in public schools do not align with the State’s definition of good citizenship. The vast majority of parents interviewed from public schools reported instances of a poor school environment, disruptive behaviour, and student violence. Teachers echoed these claims. Students damaged school property, such as fans and toilet faucets, engaged in inappropriate comments, and harassed female students and teachers. In Badarpur, a student was murdered by four older boys in a nearby government school. A parent in Hastal, shared that her child often engaged in violence and returned home with his uniform torn on several occasions. A government school teacher in Sangam Vihar revealed that a class monitor had been stabbed by a student in the schoolyard. Another teacher from a Sangam Vihar government school always wore a mask to class because students had circulated her photos and videos online without her consent. She concealed her face because she was concerned that this media could have been edited in a misleading manner.

In contrast, private school parents did not report a single instance of student violence. One public school parent sent her child to private tuition to instill morals and values and promote good behaviour. Tuitions, a supplementary privately provided educational aid, are being used to compensate for the lack of morals and values inculcated in public schools. Evidently, private entities are more successful in instilling better behaviour among students, thereby strengthening the argument for widespread private provision in education.

Affordability of private schools

Scholars like Srivastava and Noronha (2016) highlight how private school expenses surpass those of government schools. There is a prevailing perception that private schools charge high fees (Antony 2014). The unaffordability of private schools is a major concern for parents who aspire to provide their children with a quality education through private institutions. A significant number of parents opt for government schools due to the exorbitant fees charged by private schools. As more parents seek to enrol their children in private schools, the limited supply allows existing schools to raise their fees without impacting demand. The demand for private schools is driven by various factors, including better learning outcomes, increased accessibility, an English-medium instruction, and the provision of extracurricular activities.

A very small percentage of parents who send their children to private schools find the fees to be justified. In addition to tuition fees, households incur significant out-of-pocket expenses for transportation, books, uniforms, meals, exams, private tuition, etc. During the COVID-19 lockdown, many parents struggled to pay the high fees (approximately INR 5,000) demanded by private schools for online classes. Those parents who could afford to send one of their children to a private school often chose the one that was “strong in academics”. They believed that the education their child received justified the high fees and associated expenses.

However, it is important to note that most private schools charge lower fees and cater to disadvantaged sections of the country’s population. Parents choose these low-fee private schools (LFPs) primarily for English as the medium of instruction and the perception of better learning outcomes. Despite concerns about affordability, the demand for private schools remains high. Studies indicate that LFPs in India are established not only for profit motives but also for altruistic reasons.

The regulation of fees of private schools registered as non-profit institutions jeopardises their smooth running and forces them to cut costs. The implementation of the Rajasthan Schools (Regulation of Collection of Fee) Act 2013 forced 18,000 schools in the state to reduce their already very low fees. Setting lower prices creates an entry barrier in the market, leading to a shortage in competition, encouraging fewer entrepreneurs to open schools. Destruction of the private school ecosystem would

lead many students out of school since the government schools cannot accommodate a large number of students (Antony 2014).

Private Schools are Not Accessible

Academics raise concerns about equity in the absence of Government provisioning. Private unaided schools, particularly in rural India, are only accessible to families from a “higher strata”, contingent on household income, caste, and parents’ education, creating far-reaching disparities and a dualism in education provision and progression (Srivastava and Noronha 2016). Private providers may be reluctant to serve certain demographics, especially in more remote settings (Lewin 2007).

This sentiment assumes that all private providers will cater to all students. However, the Indian market is highly fragmented, and competition could enhance outcomes within each fragment. Equity concerns may diminish in a less barrier-ridden regulatory climate in India that promotes education entrepreneurs, instead of limiting choice (Miranda, Narang, and Krishnan 2022). Moreover, Government financial support must provide sufficient incentives to make rural settings conducive to establishing private schools. The question of whether the State’s regulatory framework hinders low-capital entrepreneurs from opening schools, typically in lower-income areas, remains.

We found that many parents chose private schools for their greater admissions accessibility. Private schools will admit you “as long as you have the money,” they claimed. They lamented the heaps of documents, stringent age requirements, and red tape that come with accessing public education, particularly for uneducated parents with low income. They struggle to obtain accurate and comprehensive government documentation. One parent shared how her child’s documents were riddled with errors. Furthermore, public schools are rigid about the age at which a child may start education and, unlike private schools, do not align with parental preferences on this matter. Some public schools were more challenging to gain admission to than others. One parent shared that a government school in Sangam Vihar conducted a lottery to admit students. Other parents shared that government schools kept their children out of English medium sections if they did not study at the “right” school until fifth grade. Private schools did seem accessible, at least until a young age. Most senders to public schools had an inherent pattern of first sending their child to private schools until about fifth grade before transferring them over. In terms of proximity, government schools seemed more conveniently accessible, but almost all parents confirmed that they had access to a private school in the vicinity.

In order to create access for low-income households to otherwise unaffordable, higher-end private schools, the State implemented the 25% reservation in the RTE Act. Schools in their own segment of the market were largely accessible. The reservation policy aimed to provide these parents access to schools that would otherwise be financially out of their reach. Parents in the relatively higher income brackets seemed to have greater access to the RTE Act. Many of the lowest-income households we interviewed (earning less than INR 10,000 per month) did not have access to an RTE reservation for their child. Most of the RTE senders were better placed (over INR 30,000 per month). The widespread perception regarding the inaccessibility of private schools stems from here. Accessibility for low-income households is curtailed by soft barriers as they require a strong community standing, beneficial contacts, and persistence to navigate the existing bureaucracies. This is part of what attracts parents to low-fee private schools (LFPs) (Gurney 2018). This exposes the reality of reservation as counterintuitive to the intended purpose of improving access.

Even if parents are able to overcome all the barriers, the grassroots reality of being part of the 25% echoes drawbacks at every stage. Students experience social and institutional marginalisation and discrimination. One parent shared that her child was previously not allowed to sit at the front of the class because he was under the RTE quota. When the parent approached the teacher regarding the same, she singled out the student and blamed him for disturbances in the class. Most parents had similar experiences. Their children were labelled as the “mischievous ones” and were often disproportionately called out for behavior-related concerns because they were from the RTE quota. The school’s administration questions the practical ramifications of disregarding merit and admission standards under the reservation, which leads to “disturbances” for other students. The State must either act to dismiss these sentiments at their source or address them in the provisions of the RTE Act.

Inequalities in private education

Academics consider education to be a public good that should not be eroded by the commodification driven by choice. They advocate for students from all segments of society to study together, as this uniformity enhances the quality of schools. The idea of school choice is antithetical to the concept of “free and compulsory education” (Tilak 2007). Common schools or neighbourhood systems are seen as the solution (Sadgopal 2010).

We asked low-income parents whether they believed that teachers should also send their children to the same schools as their own. They maintained that, even for those subscribing to free government education, individual choice should be a priority. Instead of common school systems, variety and abundant school choice through private provision found favour with them.

We also asked teachers whether a law should mandate all government officials to send their children to government schools. Most commented that they would be willing to forgo individual choice for the benefits this system would bring to the larger public education system. The political capital of those in power would ensure improvements in the public schools. Some favoured preserving parental choice, arguing that the State should not intrude on their right to choose the school. Teachers’ support for common schools does not imply a rejection of choice but rather a call for improving an otherwise dysfunctional State system. If the State system were as effective as private actors, teachers would not have the same motivation to forgo their right to choose.

Teacher rights and standards

Due to cost-cutting, teacher qualifications, training, and salaries in LFP schools in India leave much to be desired. Many teachers with undergraduate degrees or Class X or XII certificates lack formal teaching qualifications. Only 1.1% of teachers in private schools in India have received any in-service training (Shrivastava 2010). This raises questions about the quality of education provided to the students (Shrivastava 2010; Orgad 2010). There seems to be an acceptance of less-skilled teachers as appropriate alternatives for expanding education to disadvantaged children (Nambissan 2010).

Despite these questionable practices and the low qualifications of teachers, parents still express satisfaction with private schools. They report that teachers pay attention to the children, help them learn and understand, conduct regular tests, and engage in parent-teacher interactions. One parent added that teachers employ play-based learning methods to engage children in the lessons. However, another mentioned feeling burdened with responsibility for the child’s studies since she had to teach numbers and alphabets to the child herself.

Most parents of public school students claim they have concerns about teacher accountability in these schools. They are concerned about the pupil-teacher ratio in government schools. Some mentioned that the children were given no homework and that the teacher asked them to enroll their child in a tuition class. The respondents expressed their desire for the subjects to be taught in English and for the establishment of computer labs for the benefit of the children. Even though English was, to some extent, a medium of instruction in government schools, it did not necessarily translate into the children learning properly. Regular oversight from the principal, the need to hire good teachers, and reducing the teachers’ workload from non-teaching duties to allow them to pay more attention to teaching were some of the suggestions given by parents to increase teacher accountability.

Thou Shall Provide for Education: Arguments in Favor of State Financing

School choice

Härmä (2009) argues that parents currently lean towards private schools despite their slight unaffordability, but they would ideally prefer a well-functioning government system instead. Lahoti and Mukhopadhyay (2019) argue that parental preference for private schools is based on misperceptions

and market-based tactics used by private schools, whereas public schools may empirically be comparable or even better than private schools. Parents prefer government schools even in their current form but are often compelled to send their children to private schools due to proximity and faith-based learning practices (Mousumi and Kusakabe 2017).

However, school choice may not be primarily driven by proximity and faith-based learning factors but rather by parents' concerns for the quality of education their children receive. Information asymmetry between parental expectations and school realities exists in both public and private education (Ferreya and Liang 2012). Structural solutions to improve information dispersion are needed in both mediums so that parents can make more informed decisions. Parents place more emphasis on quality rather than the type of school they send their children to. The above finding is crucial in considering whether policy should focus on improving public education or explore State financing of private operations.

Several government school parents admitted that they would send their children to a private school if finances were not a consideration. They believe that private schools offer superior and better education than government schools. They added that the curriculum taught in private schools is relatively more comprehensive. It helps build a strong foundation, and more attention is paid to high learning standards. They are not compelled but wish to send their children to private schools, but are unable to do so due to financial constraints. Some had to shift their child from a private school to a government school due to financial constraints. The gap left by expensive private schools and underperforming public schools in India is filled by LFP schools. They act as the middle ground for many low-income households that cannot afford expensive private schools and do not want to compromise on the quality of education in low-quality public schools. In a hypothetical scenario, when parents were offered a grant of INR 2,500 to finance their child's education, most parents chose to send their children to private schools over public schools. Although, several parents noted that INR 2,500 would not cover fee hike and other expenses of private education, they were willing to bear the rest of the costs themselves.

The vast majority of public schools in India still predominantly use regional languages of instruction, whereas private schools claim or attempt to use English, which is the reason for parental preference. Furthermore, teacher accountability, which holds greater importance in choosing a school, is significantly better in private schools despite the teachers being less qualified (Rakshmita and Jashmin 2018). Private school teachers are more accountable due to concerns over job security (Dixon and Tooley 2005). Parents stated that with private schools, their children can begin learning at an early age as these schools admit two-and-a-half-year-olds. They consider private schools a better choice than government schools for providing high-quality education to young children. Additionally, the *de facto* average pupil-teacher ratio reported from private schools (1:40) is much better than that in government schools (1:90). Parents believe this helps students receive more attention, better care, and allows teachers to be more adept at understanding the individual needs of the children. Interestingly, one of the parents asserted that their child, who performed well academically in a private school, experienced a decline in performance when transferred to a public school.

A parent commented how Sangam Vihar was “not a good place” for educating a child in a government school. Parents of young children voiced concern for their “child's safety”, which led to sending them to nearby government schools. The parents would send their children to any school, as far as the school was nearby and would solve the proximity issue.

Public provision is dysfunctional

Government spending on elementary education has increased considerably over the last few decades. However, this increased spending has not translated into improved learning outcomes (Pritchett and Aiyar 2014). Learning levels have been declining since the introduction of the RTE Act. A study by Banerjee et al. (2011) demonstrated that colourfully designed teaching and learning materials in reading and mathematics had no impact on the learning achievements of rural Indian students. Härmä (2009), identified a common sentiment among parents: “With the government, there is no incentive.” The consequences of such a state of government schools led to an increase in dropouts from these schools between 2014-15 and 2016-17 (Praja Foundation 2019).

Many parents shared concerns about learning levels and apathy in government schools. They noted that many children could not even write their names after four or five years in a government school.

Parents also expressed concerns about grievance redressal mechanisms in government schools. They reported that parent-teacher meetings (PTM) in government schools were infrequent compared to private schools, often occurring only once or twice a year. Grievance responses from government schools included comments such as “We have too many children” or “Your child is weak.” Parents said they often felt dismissed by teachers with statements like, “We will look into this,” and “If you want to complain to us, you should teach your child yourself first.” There were also mentions of a divide between parents and teachers, with comments like “An uneducated person cannot present a grievance to an educated teacher.” Furthermore, parents raised concerns and suggested improvements, such as hygiene, clean drinking water, and proper infrastructure, including benches and classrooms.

An overwhelming majority of both private and public school parents enrolled their children in private tuition classes, believing that these classes offered a more effective learning experience compared to schools. These extra classes were embraced in various settings. Parents were satisfied with the cost of these classes, reflecting a perceived good return on investment. This highlights parents’ preference for private providers in delivering higher-quality education. The overall tendency to choose tuition suggests how private actors are filling the gap left by public provision.

Competition and innovation

Competition between public schools and private schools with State financing would address equity concerns while promoting competition within public provision, thus improving public outcomes (Coulson 1999). Studies, such as the one by Levin (1987), criticise the effectiveness of private actors when comparing their overall performance, primarily due to the different types of students served by the public schools. However, these studies overlook the long-term impacts of competition. Competition will promote efficiency between actors due to market forces that make these actors compete for the finite pool of capital, leading to efficient outcomes in the long run (Shah and Shah 2017).

Bhatty (2022) build a case for a strong State system to facilitate meaningful non-State participation, making coexistence of public and private players necessary. The State must proactively support the entry of private actors for this competition to emerge. This will begin with the State infrastructure setup that incentivises private schools to emerge (Pal 2010).

Efficiency of private provision

There is an efficiency argument for private provision, particularly with cost differentials. The accounting cost efficiency losses in public versus private schools make up 0.2% of India’s GDP, while economic costs, estimating differences in learning outcomes, create efficiency losses of about 2.8% (Pritchett and Aiyar 2014). Bhatty et al. (2015) caveat cost comparisons by drawing attention to the highly paid public school teachers, who are, in fact, administrative employees that carry out non-teaching tasks such as election duty and census enumeration. Additionally, the academically weaker and rural demographics that government schools educate are more expensive to educate at large.

The second consideration is learning outcome differentials. In their initial study, Muralidharan and Sundaraman (2011) cite results from their Andhra Pradesh voucher experiment to show some discernible advantages of private learning. Other scholars like Tooley (2016) have also highlighted the learning outcome advantages for the fee-paying private school children.

There is presently no framework that historically compares the two providers in cost, and we look forward to this in future research. When we asked parents about a hypothetical question regarding allocating an INR 2,500 grant in a world where government schools also had fees, most preferred private provision. They believe they can get a greater output on the same expenditure from a private school compared to a government school, supporting notions of cost efficiency. Further, a majority of parents confirmed that they find the private school their child attends offers value for money. On the other hand, public school parents believed that the State is spending enough, but it is all getting “eaten up” in transit rather than reaching their children. Thus, public school parents are dissatisfied with cost efficiency.

A Functional Public-Private Partnership in Education Provision

The primary issue with the implementation of a privately-dominated education system appears to be the lack of government oversight and ownership over the private actors and their methods. The so-called self-financing or unaided institutions have their own rules and regulations and are the least regulated by, and least accountable to, the government (Tilak 2011). For this reason, academics consider LFPs to be of poor quality, especially in more remote, low-income parts of the country. Endow (2019) states that, apart from poor educational outcomes, additional hidden costs borne by these children include many hours spent in unhygienic surroundings, limited or no access to sports activities, and essentially missing out on holistic development. However, under a stratified schooling system, this tension of accountability between private actors and government senders is to be quelled by a functional regulatory framework that holds private players accountable (Mehendale and Mukhopadhyay 2018).

The RTE Act aims to provide such a framework through its very strict set of guidelines and directives towards private actors. Unfortunately, this appears to be having the opposite of the intended effect. Initially, the long list of amenities and high-capital requirements created unsustainable pressures for LFPs. This ended up, through the State's regressive course of action, creating a perverse incentive for private actors to not even pursue State registration. The private actors are so far outside the State's supervision that, in many instances, the schools are not even meeting basic requirements. The State bears responsibility for this lack of accountability from private actors.

In our field interviews, we encountered a parent of a differently-abled child. She shared how the current system hurts parents like her the most. This is because private schools, including the one her child attended, were able to receive licenses through manipulation or corruption in the dysfunctional regulatory framework despite not having a ramp for her wheelchair-bound son. This goes to show how the laws were so strict for private actors that the State has completely alienated itself from them. The State is not even able to ensure basic facilities like ramps for differently abled children. This speaks to the failures of the State in enforcing standards of equity through its overly ambitious goal-based governance. A drastic change in the regulatory climate is necessary for any real conversations surrounding a functional public-private partnership in education provision.

Conclusion

Although the findings suggest a varied stance among parents, a definite preference for private services emerges when financial considerations are not taken into account. This highlights openness to government financing, emphasising the need to explore such options. Nonetheless, public provision continues to play an important role in ensuring access to education for all. The inconsistency in delivering promised advantages has created a trust gap among citizens, both in terms of obtaining periodic public financial benefits and trusting private actors within this framework.

Surprisingly, the majority of parents support the continuation of State provision. The tendency to transfer children to public schools after a few years in the private sphere reflects a pragmatic attitude, with parents selecting each system based on their individual circumstances. Yet, the disparity in quality across public schools highlights the difficulties in drawing broad conclusions. The disparate experiences recounted by parents based on their preferred public school underscore the need for caution. The key inhibition for State provision traditionalists surrounds the need for equity and availability in education. More research is needed to determine whether the existing tight regulatory framework exacerbates perceived inadequacy in low-capital private schools or is intrinsic to any instance of private provisioning.

In essence, the role of the State in education in India is still a source of complexity and dispute. This study underscores the importance of a balanced strategy that takes into account both parental preferences and the critical safety net offered by public service. As education influences the nation's future, ongoing research and careful policy considerations are required to ensure equal and effective educational opportunities for all early learners.

Methodology

Our primary research involved conducting semi-structured interviews with 56 parents across four sites in Delhi: Hastal (West Delhi), Sangam Vihar (South Delhi), Baljeet Nagar (Central Delhi), and Badarpur (South-East Delhi). Employing a combination of purposive and snowball sampling, we selected parents based on their monthly household income (ensuring representation from low-income households) and the age of their enrolled children. Initially, we approached *Anganwadis* in the sites and expanded our sample through snowballing. We posed questions to the parents regarding their experiences and satisfaction with the schools their children attend, their perspectives on the morals and values instilled in their children through schools, the affordability and accessibility of these schools, their thoughts on private provision, discrimination, and the State's responsibility, among other topics. Additionally, we interviewed seven government school teachers to corroborate specific findings and gain insights from their perspective.