

**Azim Premji Foundation Study on School Closure:
Questionable Quality & Reckless Claims**

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A recent study by Azim Premji Foundation (APF) titled “Right to Education Act (RTE), 2009 and Private School Closure in India” has received wide media coverage and ignited debate over the impact of RTE on private schools.² The study claims that only five private schools have closed down in seven states and one union territory that it studied—four in Karnataka and one in Uttarakhand. Anurag Behar, CEO of APF, declared that any research reporting otherwise is “false or ludicrously exaggerated.”³

The study says “the notion of ‘hardship to students’ seems to be only a deliberate ploy to foment emotional response.... [School closure] doesn’t cause as much hardship as is being made out, as for every private school that maybe shut down, a government school will be for sure present next door, which is available for the students.” (p. 2) It directly challenges Op-eds of many prominent columnists, hundreds of media reports, research by think tanks such as Centre for Civil Society and the experiences of grassroots organizations such as the National Independent Schools Alliance (NISA) and Associated Managements of English Medium Schools in Karnataka (KAMS).

The possible impact of RTE on the closure of private schools is a critical policy issue, especially when the parents have deliberately chosen the fee-charging schools over the free government schools. Therefore, the study deserves closer review and analysis, which is the objective of this detailed assessment. Instead of doing a newspaper column, we decided to do a full review of their research processes, methodology and overall soundness of research. The basic purpose is not so much to challenge their conclusions but to assess the research that serves as a basis for arriving at those conclusions.

We are also motivated to do a detailed review by the fact that far more field research needs to be done in education in India. APF is the largest education foundation and we would very much like to see them take up this challenge by investing in high quality research. Sound research, and particularly policy-relevant sound research, is a public good and we need more think tanks and foundations producing it.

We embarked on our mission: We read the study once, twice, thrice. We thought we must be missing something—this is a study produced by India’s largest education foundation. After all those readings and discussions, we came to the inescapable conclusion: the quality of the APF study is alarmingly poor. It is hard to believe that the most well-endowed education foundation in the country, which also runs an education university, would consider this study worthy of publication. Moreover, the CEO of the Foundation, who presumably has read the study, would consider it appropriate to ridicule all other research and experiences, and even declare them as almost lies, on the basis of this study. It is really a sad day for research, for the quality of public debate and for the quality standards of APF.

Let’s begin with some basics of field research—sampling, source of information, cross-verification of data.

²<http://www.azimpremjifoundation.org/sites/default/files/Right-to-Education-Act-2009-and-Private-School-Closure.pdf>

³Anurag Behar, ‘Reality of School Closures,’ *Mint*, 18 February 2016, <http://www.livemint.com/Opinion/nd3HbSousJ84BbJtlomlHN/The-reality-of-school-closures.html>. See also Rohit Dhankar, ‘A Lesson in Hidden Agendas,’ *Hindu*, 26 March 2016, <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/a-lesson-in-hidden-agendas/article8397088.ece> A reply to Dhankar by one of the authors is ‘Ideology Masquerading as Research,’ <http://spontaneousorder.in/ideology-masquerading-as-research/>

Sampling of Districts

How do you select areas to study the impact of RTE on private school closure? The APF selected seven states and one union territory because that is where the “Foundation operates” (p. 3). Out of total 206 districts in these 8 states, APF selected 69 for the study. In Bihar, all 38 districts are part of the study, while in Telangana only 1 district out of 10 districts is included. How were these districts selected, what were the parameters or how was the randomization done? The study leaves these and other such questions unanswered. The district sample is not representative of the states and therefore, the results are not generalizable.

Take for example the claim that, no private schools were shut down in Madhya Pradesh. In response to a question in the Parliament, the HRD Minister on 5 August 2015 said: “Punjab reported closure of 1170 schools, Himachal Pradesh 4 schools, Madhya Pradesh 998 schools and Puducherry 1 school due to failure to maintain norms under the RTE Act.”⁴ It is possible that in one district of MP that APF studied, no school had closed down, however, that can’t be generalized to claim that no school was closed down in the state. More accurate claim here would be—although it won’t have the impact APF desires—that only five private schools have closed down in 69 districts out of 688 districts in India.

Source & Quality of Information

The source of information for school closures is “Azim Premji Foundation’s field teams from different government sources in the districts.” Actually, the study and Mr. Behar make a point of reminding the readers repeatedly that while others rely on secondary sources, they have their ‘feet on the ground’. They went to the actual “sources where such data is generated in that region” (p. 4).

There is no information in the study about the interviewed government officers who are the only source of data on school closures. How many officers did they speak with in each district? Names of officers may not be appropriate but some information is required under any ethics of research. As simple and basic as the date of conversation and the name of the APF field staff could be given.

Many obvious questions arise about the accuracy, authenticity and completeness of the data. We, as readers, do not know the number or designations of the officers interviewed. To be able to assess the completeness of the school closure data, it is important to have some information about the length of the tenure of the officers interviewed. Was the interviewed officer in her current post for one month, six months, a year or since April 2010 when the RTE came into force? Did the officer give information during the period he was in the post or from the date of enforcement of RTE? The date of enforcement of RTE will not be the same for all the states in the study. The states were supposed to draft State RTE Rules to implement the central Act and they drafted and notified their rules at different dates. The APF report not only falls short of answering these questions but also makes one wonder about the level of awareness among researchers involved about the issues raised above in using the school closure numbers. May be no one is supposed to question them since they are the only ones with their feet firmly on the ground.

⁴ <http://164.100.47.192/loksabha/Questions/QResult15.aspx?qref=21663&lsno=16>

Lack of Reason for Closure

The study repeatedly says “even for these five schools, *we could not fully ascertain if RTE is the reason for closure*” [p. 2, (our emphasis)]. But did the APF team not talk directly with district officers? Didn’t they ask officers why these schools were shut down? The study is silent on this crucial issue.

Could they have not tracked down the school owners, teachers or parents to find out why the schools were closed? And hundreds or thousands of schools had not closed down as the others claimed—only four schools in one Yadgir district of Karnataka and one school in the Bageshwar district of Uttarakhand. So, the APF team had to track down a total of five schools in two districts out of 69 districts they studied. But they chose not to invest their energy in finding out the reasons for the closure.

Cross-Verification of Data

The APF field teams seemed to have asked government officers about the closure of private schools and took those numbers at face value and drew their conclusions. Notice that this is just verbal information given by an officer to a member of APF team. How does one know that the numbers reported are actually as the officers gave? The field staff could have made a mistake in noting down the number. It is a common practice in field research to verify—to triangulate—numbers. Did the researchers involved in the study make some random calls or visits to verify numbers? The study remains silent on most of these questions.

Was the verbal information APF received from government officers cross-checked with other sources? Did APF file any RTI query to get a written reply? Ideally RTI query could have been filed in all 69 districts and given APF’s relationship with local governments, they probably would have received answers from most districts. However even for a few districts, RTI would have given cross-verification and confidence in the numbers given by the officers. Moreover, since they had ‘on-field teams’, could they have not asked local communities, NGOs working in education, schools or parents about school closure for cross-verification? They failed to utilise their feet on the ground for thorough and sound research. They unfortunately only saw value in using their feet on the ground to score debating point.

Reliability of the Source

One more common sense question: Do APF researchers expect every district officer to know and keep track of all private schools (and all government schools) in his district at any given point in time and also over the tenure of his office? They walk into his office and ask the number of private schools that have closed down: Do the APF researchers wonder how accurate that answer is likely to be? Many of the private schools are unrecognized and operate under the radar of the officers as much as possible. They are in the nooks and corners of slums and bylanes, the areas that most government officers are not known to be very familiar with.

Closures without Government Notice

The study also talks about notices given to schools in the 69 districts and points out that 7156 schools have received notices. However, it fails to ask whether there could be reasons for a school to shut down other than a government notice. Deepalaya school in Delhi closed down not because of any notice but because they did not want to continue as a school in violation of the new law. Pratham ran about 387 learning centres in 2010-11 but the next year's annual report does not mention any learning centres. Did Pratham close down the learning centres because of RTE?

Several hundred small schools run by various NGOs for the children of migrant workers have closed down either because of direct pressure from government authorities or because they simply did not want to continue illegally. The NGOs Vidhayak Sansad and Janarth worked with sugar cane workers (Sakhar Shalas) and brick kiln workers (Bongal Shalas), Mobile Creches worked with construction workers, while Santulan worked with stone quarry workers. Many small schools supported by NRIs in their home villages closed down because the NRIs did not want to receive any legal notice from India. Probably most of these schools were not on the government record or even considered a school, so officially they didn't exist nor closed down. How did APF study account for such schools?

Claims Outside the Research

An op-ed article is, by definition, an opinion piece, but a research paper is expected to limit its comments on the issue about which the research is done, for which there is evidence provided in the study. The APF study has new primary data on two issues, number of schools closed and the number of schools that received notice from the government. All the rest of the data is secondary, from other sources. One would reasonably expect the study to focus on those two issues. However, the study makes comments and often, repeatedly, on almost everything related to (evil) private education and the government's (sympathetic and magnanimous) treatment of private schools. In the interest of space, we offer just a few quotes to show the many ideological statements hiding behind the two-bit data.

"[F]or every private school that maybe shut down, a government school will be for sure present next door, which is available for the students." (p. 2) Really? Every private school has a government one next door? What's the basis for such a claim?

"[T]hese notices are clearly an 'ask' for the schools to fulfill the norms within a certain period of time and not a closure notice' (p. 5). How do they know it is a 'ask' and not a closure? Did they interview school owners to find out how they saw the notice? Or is it their personal opinion that school owners should treat it as an 'ask'?

The claim that wins our prize: "[T]he notion of 'hardship to students' seems to be only a deliberate ploy to foment emotional response.... [School closure] doesn't cause as much hardship as is being made out..." Just ask the kind of research that is required to support such a claim.

Conclusion

Those of us who do a little of primary research in education in India fully understand the difficulties and challenges. The scale and diversity of the education landscape makes field research a daunting task. And given the lack of reliable data, one is thankful to anyone who does the hard work of putting together new data. It is to be commended that APF, the largest education foundation in India, is using its vast staff to collect such data. However, as the current study shows, unless APF maintains high standards of research, the hard work of the field staff has little real value. The feet have to be properly guided by sound research design and more open-minded research questions.

While collecting data from the ground about private school closure, they could have simultaneously gathered data from government officers about how many government schools have been merged or closed down and what happened to the students of closed private as well as government schools. What breaks the heart is that the quality of their research design and execution is so poor. What we find most depressing is the complete lack of awareness that their research quality is substandard and the arrogance of the claims made on the basis of such poor work. Our time and energy in writing this critique, which frankly is disproportionately more than what apparently went into the study, would be worthwhile when APF begins to use its academic and financial powers to do genuine research and not a pretense of it to make obviously ideological proclamations. It serves no one—not even to their ideology.