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State Intervention in Strengthening School Education:
Insights from an Empirical Study

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Abstract

This working paper examines the ongoing debate on the role of the state in school education, focusing on the relationship between the state and the market in the provision of schooling. It explores how increasing government investment influences the education landscape, particularly in contexts where private schools are already widespread, even among low-income households. The paper traces the historical decline of state involvement in education since the 1980s and 1990s, and the concurrent rise of neoliberal influences. Further, drawing on insights from fieldwork conducted in an urban slum, the paper analyses how the increased involvement of the government in education influences public perceptions of government schools among parents of school going children living in urban poverty.

1. Introduction

The debate surrounding the issue of the role of the state in education is not a new one. With various positions being held on the extent of the involvement of the government in educational provision, it is pertinent to delve deeper into the different issues involved and unpack the ideas of the state and the market in the context of education. Further, it is important to analyse how the provision of school education is affected when the state takes on an active role in public service provision, especially with regard to increasing financial and non-financial investments in education. Such an analysis becomes even more relevant when increased state involvement occurs in a conspicuous manner in an environment where private provisioning of schools is already widespread, even for those belonging to poor households.

In this context, Delhi offers itself as an ideal site to inquire into these questions as the city has witnessed a sustained increase in government expenditure and involvement in education (PRS Legislative Research, 2016). Thus, Delhi becomes a suitable location to examine whether state commitment to improve the government education system affects the larger education “market.” Moreover, the study area for this research being located in an urban slum—or JJ

cluster—in Delhi, facilitates the emergence of valuable insights into the perceptions of parents belonging to economically and socially marginalised communities.

This paper, thus, aims to explore the debates surrounding the nature of education in terms of being a right as against being a commodity, and the effect of a global turn towards neoliberal ideas, especially in the area of educational provision. Further, through an analysis of the decadal shifts in education policy in India, a gradual decline in state involvement in the domain of education is observed, especially since the decades of the 1980s and 1990s. In such an environment, the effect of the increased involvement of the Delhi government in the education sector and its impact on the perceptions of parents regarding public and private education are also discussed. Fieldwork for this study was conducted in an urban slum or *Jhuggi Jhopdi* (JJ) cluster in the East Delhi district of the city of Delhi from July 2021 to April 2022. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the parents of children studying in classes 1-8 in order to understand their perspectives on the education of their children.

2. Public vs. Private Provision

Debates about education in India and globally continue to revolve around its fundamental nature—whether it should be treated as a universal right or a purchasable service. While international human rights law upholds education as a basic right requiring state responsibility, the spread of neoliberal economic frameworks has encouraged its treatment as a tradable commodity. While most national constitutions recognise education as a right, yet global trade regulations simultaneously classify it as a marketable service, creating a structural contradiction between the understanding of education as a human right and as a commodity (Tomasevski, 2005).

In India, this tension is visible in the implementation of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act of 2009, which established education as a legal entitlement for children aged 6 to 14 and laid out state and institutional obligations regarding infrastructure, teacher-student ratios, and admission procedures. The Act also mandated that private unaided schools reserve 25% of their seats for students from economically weaker and disadvantaged groups. However, critics have pointed out persistent inequalities within India's education system. Structural disparities between elite private schools and government schools, inconsistencies in teacher pay, limited age coverage, and inadequate state reimbursements have hindered the Act's capacity to promote genuine equality (Jha & Parvati, 2010; Kingdon & Muzammil, 2015; Mehendale, 2014; Sadgopal, 2010).

Despite the constitutional recognition of education as a right, public education quality has stagnated. Government schools continue to perform poorly on learning outcomes, while private schools—including low-fee ones—have rapidly expanded, even in rural areas (Bhat, 2017; Muralidharan & Kremer, 2008; Srivastava, 2007). The significant rise in the share of private unaided schools in India signals a growing shift towards market-driven education. This shift raises questions about whether education remains a right accessible to all or a privilege limited by affordability. Thus, even though the moral and legal basis for treating education as a public good remains strong, the growing presence of private providers and market logics continues to blur its boundaries as both a right and a commodity.

This debate can be better understood through the framework of neoliberalism, which promotes the extension of market principles into all spheres of life, advocating for competition, privatisation, and reduced state intervention. In education, this ideology manifests in the growing influence of private providers and the transformation of schooling into a profit-oriented enterprise.

The global shift towards privatisation of education gained momentum during the 1980s and 1990s, parallel to broader economic transformations favouring deregulation and state withdrawal from welfare sectors. Influential economists like Milton Friedman provided intellectual legitimacy to this shift by proposing the conversion of public education into a competitive market. Friedman argued that privatising schooling would enhance efficiency, expand choices for parents, and stimulate improvement through competition (Friedman, 1995). His ideas reflected the neoliberal conviction that free markets can best deliver efficiency, innovation, and individual freedom, even in areas traditionally considered public goods.

At the same time, as Mitja Sardoc notes, neoliberalism has continuously evolved its rhetoric. By co-opting terms like “justice,” “fairness,” and “equality,” neoliberal discourse often disguises its market-driven agenda as one that serves social welfare. This strategic rebranding creates the illusion of egalitarianism while reinforcing structural inequalities by prioritising profit over social inclusion (Sardoc, 2021). In developing nations such as India, this ideological shift has been reinforced by international financial institutions—particularly the World Bank—which have actively promoted privatisation and public–private partnerships in education (Mundi & Menashy, 2012).

In India, the 1980s marked a turning point in education policy. While earlier decades saw expanding state investment, the 1980s witnessed stagnation in public spending on education

(Tilak, 2006; 2007). By the early 1990s, India's economic liberalisation further accelerated these transformations. Facing a balance-of-payments crisis, the Indian government adopted structural adjustment policies under the guidance of international lenders, opening up sectors—including education—to private participation and foreign funding. Krishna Kumar has described how the language of public policy itself underwent a shift in this period, with the use of terms like “liberalisation,” “privatisation,” and “market-friendliness,” signalling India's ideological realignment (Kumar, 1998). The 1991 reforms thus not only liberalised trade and industry but also redefined education as a sector compatible with private investment and efficiency-based evaluation.

The impact of these reforms became increasingly visible through the rapid expansion of private schooling in India. The Public Report on Basic Education (PROBE) found that the spread of private schools was closely tied to the deterioration of government schools. Poor infrastructure, teacher absenteeism, and administrative neglect were identified as major reasons why even parents from low-income households began turning to private options despite financial hardship, across rural and urban areas in India. (PROBE Team, 1999; Tooley and Dixon 2006).

The growth of private education in India, particularly in the form of low-fee private (LFP) schools that cater to low-income households (Srivastava, 2007), thus reflects broader neoliberal tendencies that valorise efficiency and competition over equality and public welfare. While these schools may appear to provide short-term solutions to state failure, they reinforce systemic inequalities by entrenching a two-tier education system—one for those who can pay and another for those who cannot. Moreover, the state's lethargy in upholding its constitutional obligation to provide quality education for all deepens this divide.

In the current context, where both government and low-fee private schools cater predominantly to children from disadvantaged backgrounds, understanding parental perceptions becomes crucial. Parents' perspectives are often shaped not by ideological preference but by necessity, as they navigate between dysfunctional government institutions and under-resourced private alternatives. This question assumes even greater significance in light of recent efforts by some state governments, such as Delhi, to reform and revitalise public education.

3. Increased Public Investment in Education

Delhi presents a noteworthy exception to the broader national pattern of declining public investment in education. The Delhi government significantly increased budgetary allocations for the education sector by raising it to 24% of the total planned outlay in 2015-16, nearly

doubling the proportion from previous years. This commitment was maintained in subsequent years, making education the single largest recipient of Delhi's annual budgetary spending, even in the budget for the year 2023-24.

Some of the other reforms in the area of school education that were highlighted by the government included decentralising authority by empowering principals and teachers, creating a mentor–teacher programme, revitalising School Management Committees to involve parents in school governance, and introducing innovative curricula such as “Happiness Classes” and the “Entrepreneurship Mindset Curriculum” (Sisodia, 2019). The government's stated goal was to foster holistic learning, student well-being, and community participation alongside infrastructural improvements, and independent evaluations have largely validated some of these achievements (Boston Consulting Group [BCG], 2020).

However, not all evaluations have been uniformly positive. A 2019 report by the Praja Foundation highlighted declining enrolment in Delhi government schools—an 8% drop between 2013-14 and 2018-19. It also noted high dropout rates after Standard 8, despite official claims of rising pass percentages. The report argued that high pass rates were achieved by failing large proportions of students in Standards 9 and 11, thus filtering out weaker students before board examinations (Praja Foundation, 2019). Critiques from educationists and activists have also focused on other dimensions such as reinforcing inequality by grouping students by learning level, classroom surveillance via CCTV cameras, and the growing influence of corporate-funded NGOs such as Pratham Education Foundation and the Central Square Foundation. The government was also accused of pushing out students who repeatedly failed secondary exams into open schooling systems, many of whom eventually dropped out entirely (Nehru, 2019; 2020).

Despite such criticisms, the Delhi government was widely recognised for reinvigorating public interest in education and making it a central political issue (Sahoo & Ghosh, 2022). This led to a change in the perception of government schooling in Delhi, particularly among those belonging to economically and socially disadvantaged families.

4. Changing Perceptions – Insights from the Field

While discussing the transformation of government schools, a parent who had studied in the same school as his children reflected on how drastically conditions had changed since his own schooling in the 1990s. He recalled how classrooms then lacked even basic infrastructure: students sat on the ground as there were no desks or chairs, and teachers wrote lessons on a

part of the wall painted black. Many classrooms did not even have proper roofs—only makeshift coverings that left students sweating through Delhi’s harsh summers. The sight of fans, whiteboards, and air conditioners in classrooms today, he said, would have been unimaginable during his time. For families like his, who had experienced the dismal state of government schools in earlier decades, such infrastructural improvements symbolised a remarkable transformation.

The mere availability of amenities like fans, functioning blackboards, clean toilets, and improved building structures was enough for residents of the JJ cluster to view government schools in a far more positive light. The emphasis placed by the Delhi government on upgrading physical infrastructure and school environments had clearly influenced local perceptions. Parents spoke admiringly of better-maintained campuses, tidier classrooms, and access to extracurricular facilities—features that had long been associated only with private schools.

Beyond infrastructure, there was also a noticeable shift in how teachers engaged with students. Many parents described this as the most meaningful change in recent years. Teachers were now more punctual, present in classrooms throughout lessons, and more attentive to students’ progress. This marked a departure from the past, when teachers were often accused of neglect—leaving students unattended, gossiping in staff rooms, or even napping during class hours. A college student who had graduated from a Delhi government school noted that this improvement was largely due to administrative pressure and monitoring by education officials. For many parents, the fact that teachers were now visibly teaching rather than being absent felt like a major victory. It also revealed how modest their expectations were, and how even small reforms could profoundly alter public perceptions of government schools.

Here, it is relevant to note that while increased investment in school education definitely enhanced perceptions of government schools, several other factors also contributed to parents preferring government schools. One such factor was the array of financial benefits on offer. In line with the RTE Act, students in these schools received free textbooks, notebooks, uniforms, and midday meals. During the COVID-19 pandemic, dry rations replaced cooked meals, ensuring continued support for families. Every student was provided with a bank account, and monetary allowances for uniforms and stationery were transferred directly to these accounts.

In addition, both central and state governments had instituted scholarship schemes targeting students from economically weaker backgrounds, particularly girls and those from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, and minority groups with annual family

incomes below Rs. 3 lakh. These scholarships, often deposited in fixed accounts, were made available once students completed schooling or reached adulthood. Such measures significantly reduced the financial burden of education for low-income families and helped discourage child labour by keeping children in school. Parents in the JJ cluster were acutely aware of these benefits and cited them as decisive reasons for preferring government education.

Economic relief, however, was not the only factor shaping preferences. Many parents attached symbolic value to government schooling, viewing certificates and transfer documents from public institutions as carrying greater legitimacy. One of the respondents stated that government-issued mark sheets and transfer certificates were more widely recognised, particularly since many low-fee private schools in Delhi operated without formal recognition. For families like hers, government schooling ensured official validation of their children's academic records. Another parent, shared a similar story. Her brother had studied in an unrecognised private school until class eight, but when financial hardship forced a switch to a government school, he was denied admission because his private-school transfer certificate was not accepted. The family had to send him back to their village to continue his studies. This experience reinforced her belief that while private schools might offer better English education, government schools remained indispensable in higher grades for their recognised credentials. Such experiences shaped a common perception in the community that public school documentation had greater "value," especially when students later applied for higher studies or government jobs.

Parents also praised the introduction of mechanisms that improved school accountability and child safety. Many valued the system of daily attendance tracking, through which teachers would call or message parents if their child was absent. For one of the respondents, who had himself dropped out of school as a teenager, this simple measure offered reassurance that his children would not repeat his mistakes. He appreciated how the system helped parents monitor their children's whereabouts and reinforced the seriousness of attending school.

Safety at school gates emerged as another major point of satisfaction. The presence of security guards who restricted unauthorised entry and prevented students from leaving during school hours gave parents a strong sense of protection. For families living in informal settlements where safety concerns are constant, such visible security measures symbolised the government's commitment to their children's well-being. Parents often compared this to private schools, saying that public schools had finally reached similar standards of care and vigilance.

Collectively, these developments explain the renewed confidence in government schooling among low-income families. Improved infrastructure, visible teacher engagement, financial aid, credible certification, better communication systems, and enhanced safety measures together contributed to improved public perception of government schools. While many parents still acknowledged the appeal of private schools, especially for English-language education, they now saw government institutions as viable and respectable options. The narratives of families in the JJ cluster underscore how tangible improvements in basic amenities and administrative functioning can significantly rebuild trust in public education. For people who once regarded government schools as neglected and inferior, the transformation was a welcome change.

5. Conclusion

This working paper examines how the idea of education as a universal right has been gradually challenged by the rise of neoliberal ideologies that prioritise market logic, competition, and efficiency. Under neoliberalism, education has increasingly been viewed not as a collective social responsibility but as an individual investment, giving rise to the commodification of schooling. This global ideological shift has had profound implications for how education systems are structured and financed.

In tracing the Indian experience, the paper highlights how the 1980s and 1990s marked a turning point in state involvement in education. The period of structural adjustment and economic liberalisation saw a reduction in public spending on social sectors, including schooling. As the state withdrew, private actors began to fill the vacuum, resulting in the rapid expansion of private educational institutions. Particularly notable was the rise of low-fee private (LFP) schools, catering to children from low-income households. Against this backdrop, the case of Delhi stands out as a significant counterexample. In recent years, the share of the Delhi government's budget allocated to education rose dramatically to nearly one-fourth of total expenditure, reflecting a renewed political and financial commitment to government schooling.

The study of the JJ cluster provides important insights into how these reforms were perceived at the community level. Parents who had previously viewed government schools as neglected institutions began to see visible changes—better classrooms, cleaner facilities, more engaged teachers, and increased accountability. For low-income families, the continuation of welfare measures such as free uniforms, textbooks, and scholarships further strengthened the appeal of

government schools. Over time, these tangible improvements reshaped public attitudes, making government schools appear not only functional but also desirable and trustworthy.

Thus, the paper demonstrates that the state's renewed engagement in education can meaningfully counter neoliberal narratives that privilege privatisation and market solutions. It highlights how the state retains the power to reassert education's public value and reimagine its role in social justice and collective well-being.

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