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RESEARCH ARTICLE

ROLE OF PRIVATE SCHOOL IN PRIMARY EDUCATION IN INDIA

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Abstract

The introduction of Right To Education Act was aimed at improving the quality and reach of primary education in India. This paper, through secondary research aims to explore the role played by private schools in furthering the government's objective. It compares the effectiveness of private schools in attracting students and their viability. It assesses the profile of both students and teachers that get associated with private schools. Finally the paper evaluates how the learning outcomes of private schools compare that with its government counterparts. Through the comparison the author analyses some of government policies and their current relevance. It also indicates the possible future focus areas for the any policy changes of RTE.

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Introduction:-

The fact that education contributes significantly to nation building is undebatable. However the question arises whose responsibility is it to provide the basic education? Is it solely that of the State or does private school also have a role to play? Leaving it only to the state would promote "natural monopoly" according to Friedmann(1962/82). He also argues that presence of choice of private schools can lead to a class divide and stop children from diverse backgrounds to mingle. It also prevents using education as a unifying force which can be done solely by the state.

If both private and government schools need to coexist, is one better than the other in imparting education. A study of the role and impact of private schools in developing countries (Ashley et al, 2014) found strong evidence of private schools having better teachers but only a moderate correlation between better learning outcomes and private schools. Other studies have revealed the mushrooming of private schools in developing nations and their performance being better than the state run ones, albeit marginally (Kingdon 2008)

In India with the introduction of Right to Education, 2010, the onus of providing free and compulsory education to every child between the age of 6 and 14 is clearly on the government, both centre and state. The Act however recognises the role of private schools and mandates it to reserve 25% of its seat for the economically backward section of the society.

The Act while promising 'free' and 'compulsory' education is silent on the quality of learning the child receives, although the Act does provide for some measures like pupil-teacher ratio and appointment of trained teachers which contribute to the quality of learning. In spite of all the good intentions of the government it will be interesting to see whether the private schools are competing or complementing the government schools in meeting the objective set out in the RTE.

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What role are private schools playing in India and does the government have any expectations from them? Are private schools competing or collaborating with each other? Are the rules of the game same for both and is the comparisons fair? Have both being able to solve the primary education challenge in the country? What role need the policy makers play to ensure effective primary education? This paper tries to explore the above questions.

Comparing Government And Private Schools

An effective education system needs to ensure that there is adequate number of schools which provide the opportunity for education. Next, the success is determined by the number of students who are availing these opportunities, in other words the enrolment and drop-out rate. Even after meeting these criteria the objective of education can fail, if the student is not absorbing the age appropriate learning objectives. We will try to compare the above factors for both government and private schools in India.

Growth of Elementary Schools in India

Schools in India are broadly divided into government and private schools. However private schools can be further subdivided into Government aided private schools, Government recognised private school and finally unrecognised private school. There is very limited data on the last type though they may constitute a significant portion of private schools in India.

Data on schooling overestimates the extent of private schooling in India as it includes the government aided schools in this category which functions more like government school. The data however excludes the unrecognised private school and hence may underestimate its extent (Kingdon, 2017).

Out of the 1.45 million elementary schools in the country, private schools constitute 22% at 0.32 million. This however does not include the numerous unrecognised private schools which can be anywhere between 300000 to 400000 (Sadagopan, 2015). Over a four year period of 2010-11 to 2013-14 the total number of government schools in India rose by 16,376 while the number of private schools increased by 71,360 (Kingdon, 2017).

The average size of a government elementary school in India fell from 122 students per school in 2010-11 to 109 students per school in 2014-15. In contrast the average student per private school increase from an already high 202 to 209 during the same period (Kingdon, 2017).

Clearly number of private schools have grown faster and also have been able to attract students. They have grown at the cost of government schools.

Enrolment of Students

The overall enrolment of children between the age of 6-14 has always been high. In 2018 it reached a record 97.2% (ASER, 2018). The percentage enrolment of girl students too have seen a significant improvement. In 2006 89.7% of the girls in the age group 11 to 14 were attending school. That number has now grown to 95.9%. Similarly between the period 2008 and 2018 the percentage of girls in the age group 15 to 16 attending school grew from 80% to 86.5%. (ASER, 2018).

The extent of enrolment in private schools have outnumbered the government schools. In spite of the number of government schools being increased during the period 2010-11 to 2013-14 the total enrolment fell by 11.1 million while for the same period the enrolment in private school increased by 16 million. (Kingdon 2017). As can be expected the enrolment of students in urban private schools (58%) is higher than in rural areas (24%). (Desai, 2009). The enrolment in private schools have seen a steady rise for more than two decades. In 1996 it was 10% which reached 28% in 2005. (Sadagopan, 2015) According to DISE 2013-14, out of the nearly 200 million children enrolled in elementary school, 39% are enrolled in private schools, 34% in private unaided schools. ASER Report 2018 confirms the growth of private school enrolment during the period 2006-14 but have plateaued since then.

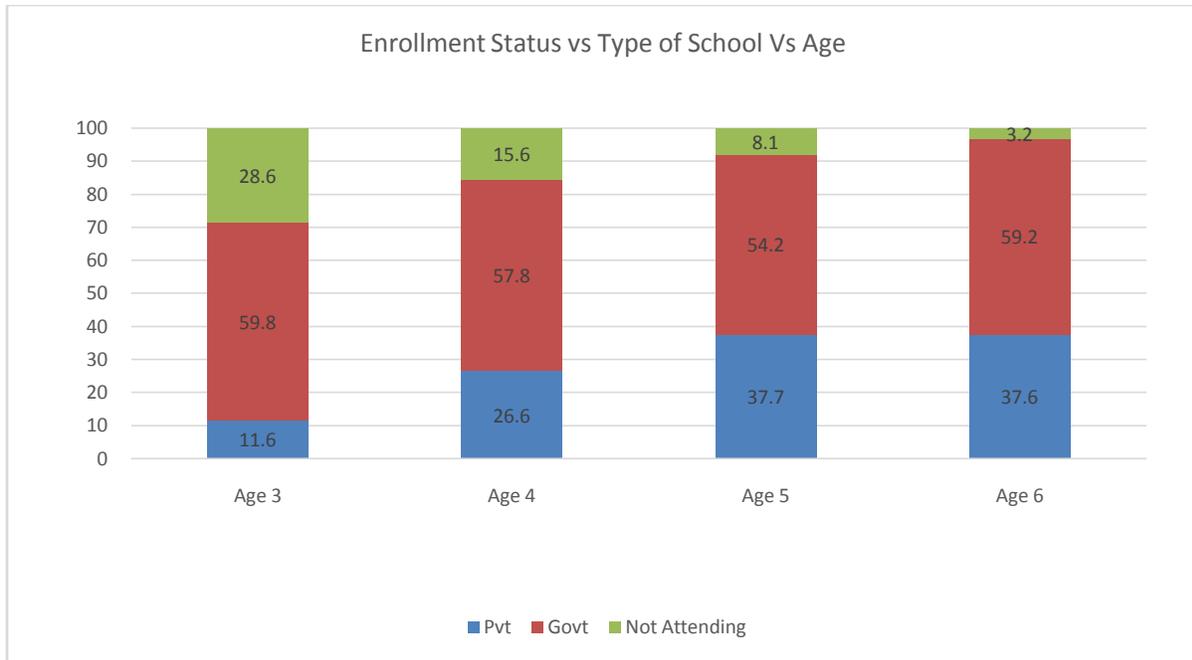


Chart 1:- Enrolment vs Type of School vs Age. (ASER Report, 2019).

The proportion of students attending private school increases with age. The new entrant to school seems to be joining the private schools. This trend corroborates the finding that enrolment in private schools between the age of 6 and 14 is higher than government schools. The trends actually starts early.

While one of the goals of RTE of education for all has been successful in terms of enrolment of students, a major part is contributed by private schools. Clearly private schools have been successful in attracting students in the age group 6-14 years and can be safely said to have weaned them away from government school. This calls for questioning the effectiveness of schemes like the mid-day meal which besides improving health was also aimed at enhancing school enrolment.

Student Profile

After decades of popularising education the effect is being felt as the need for education is getting established. Parents are not only sending children to school but they are sending them early. In this pre-school segment too the influence of private schools is on the rise. However the government

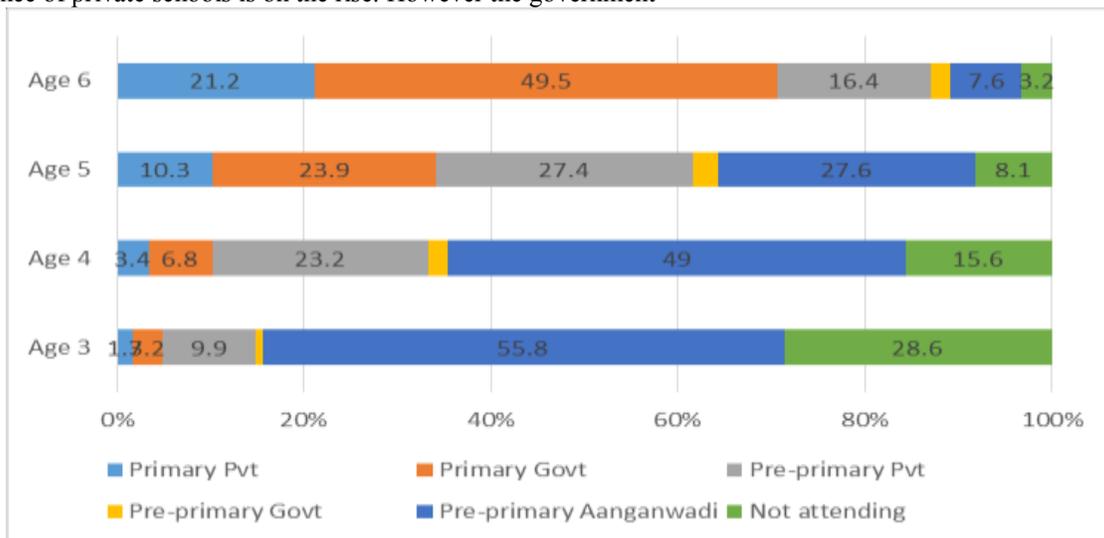


Chart 2:- ASER sponsored ‘anganwadi’ system is still a predominant choice of early school goers. Report 2019.

The gender bias against girls attending private school is prevalent in most developing countries (Ashley, 2008). In India too, the gap is evident amongst 4-5 year old while it increases amongst 6-8 year olds. In India education is seen as an investment and private schools are still seen as a better place for learning English and be more employable. This privilege in rural India is still reserved for the male child.

	Government Schools		Private Schools	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
4-5 year olds	50.4	56.8	49.6	43.2
6-8 year olds	52.1	61.1	47.9	38.9

Table 2:-ASER Report, 2019.

Children in Std I in government schools are younger than those in the same grade in private schools. The Government school still tries to adhere to the norms set by the Education Policy of a 6 year old attending Std I. The private schools are far more flexible in this. This however has a bearing on the learning of the students which we will explore later. Also the spread of age in one class in a private school is higher, posing challenge for the teacher to impart learning to a heterogeneous group.

Students in Class I	4-5 yr olds	6 yr old	7-8 yr old
Government Schools	26.1	43.5	30.4
Private Schools	15.7	38.9	45.4

Table 3:- ASER Report, 2019.

It is also seen that the chances of a student getting enrolled into a private school increase with the education levels of the mother. This too can be attributed to the perception of a private school being better equipped to teach the student. With the marriageable age of women in rural India going up, it's cause can be deduced to time spend in education. This augers well for primary education as a number of students not enrolled go down with mother's education level. However the primary beneficiary of higher mother education is the private schools.

Mother's Education	Govt School	Private School	Not enrolled
Not attended School	71.9	23	5.1
Std I-V	69.5	26.7	3.7
Std VI-VIII	60.7	36	3.3
Std IX-X	50	48.4	1.6
Std XI or more	25.4	73.1	1.3

Table 4:- Based on ASER, 2019.

Hence the profile of a student attending private schools will probably be a male, older than their counterpart in government school and high chance of mother having attended higher classes in school than that of a government student

Quality of Teaching

What makes the Private schools more attractive than the government ones?

Teachers hold a key role in imparting education to the students. The quality of teachers and effective use of pedagogy will ensure good education. While there is no published data on teacher quality, qualification and their salary can be used as surrogates.

Teachers in private schools were much more likely to be younger, female, less experienced than government school teachers and less likely to have professional teaching qualifications. (Desai, 2008; Muralidharan, 2015). Private school teachers are paid a fraction of their government school counterparts. Numerous studies across three decades have shown a widening gap between the two.

Study

Pvt School pay as a %
of Govt school pay
47%

Jain (988)

Kansal (1990)	39%
Govinda& Varghese (1993)	49%
Bashir (1994)	46%
Kingdon (1994)	42%
Singh& Sridhar (2002)	20%
Muralidharan& Kremer (2006)	20%
Kingdon& Banerjee(2008)	8%
Goyal& Pandey (2009)	8%
Antony & Chaudhry (2014)	3%

Source: Kingdon, 2017

Table 1

Such a disparity in salary would point to a disproportionate difference in quality of education. Unfortunately the performance of the students follow a different trend . Private school students perform better even though marginally over their government school counterparts.

One of the reasons why private school teachers pay is so less is because the private schools teachers salaries are market determined as against government fixed salaries for public school teachers. If we were to consider the market of all school teachers through the salary levels, one may deduce that the best teachers (higher paid) are joining the government schools. Unfortunately the performance of students tell a different story.

Private schools however hire more teachers, have better teacher to student ratio and have a longer school day, a longer school year, lower teacher absence, higher teaching activity, and better school hygiene.(Muralidharan, 2015)

Quality of Learning

A longitudinal view of performance over the years show a disturbing trend. Over the years ASER data suggest that not only are the levels of learning low, but that the trends in learning levels are not encouraging. While the negative trend between 2008 to 2012 have been reversed, the improvement have been very slow and gradual. The dip can be attributed to the Government's implementation of RTE in 2010 which led to heavy enrolment of students. Not all such students had the pre-requisite orientation.

	Class V	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018
Reading	Govt	53.1	50.7	41.7	42.2	41.7	44.2
	Pvt	67.9	64.2	61.2	62.6	63.0	65.1
Division	Govt	34.4	33.9	20.3	20.7	21.1	22.7
	Pvt	47.1	44.2	37.8	39.3	38.0	39.8

Table 5:- Standard V Student performing Stand II level Reading and Division

(ASER, 2018)

The above table however shows the stark difference in government and public schools. The difference over the past decade has increased significantly.

An assessment of international TIMSS tests conducted by Education Initiatives (2010) helped create a global comparison. The findings are similar to those in ASER Report. Learning levels are low, and in particular scores on questions that require application of concepts are consistently lower than those on questions representing rote learning. Globally too India is at half the global mean (Muralidharan, 2013).

While published data on student performance in Government and private schools is limited, we do have some raw data from ASER reports. This along with the data used from IHDS 2005 by Desai et al (2008) show that overall quality of education in primary school is low though it is marginally better in private schools.

At a pre-school level for students of Age 5 the performance at tasks related to language, cognitive and numerical is as follows

	Task	Government	Private	Not enrolled
Language	Picture description	63.7	76.6	50.2
	Listening comprehension	23.5	40.4	17.4
Cognitive	Sorting	77.5	87.2	62.1

	Spatial awareness	62.2	76.7	51.7
	Seriation	41.2	58.8	29.7
	Pattern recognition	43.4	49.9	30.1
	Puzzle	45.0	58.9	23.0
Numerical	Counting objects	36.8	57.6	20.7
	Relative comparison	53.8	71.2	37.8

Table 6:- Performance of Students with different schooling (ASER Report, 2019)

The better performance of the students in private schools can be attributed to the difference in background of a government and private school student in terms of age, economic strata and parents education. Numerous studies by Desai et al (2008), French and Kingdon (2010) , Singh (2015) and Muralidharan and Sundararaman (2015) have shown that after these parameters have been controlled by different methods, the difference in government and private schools falls but does not disappear.

The Key Differentiator

It is undisputed that the trend of increasing private schools in the country is becoming stronger every year. These schools are able to attract students across socio strata in both urban and rural India. Though these are fee charging schools, the cost of education is substantially lower than their government counterparts mainly arising out of lower teacher's salary. The perceived benefits offered by these schools are substantially lower. Besides charging a fee they do not provide free books or uniforms, neither do they provide free mid-day meals. Interestingly the quality of learning outcomes are also not substantially higher than government schools. In spite of these apparent disadvantages they are weaning away students from government schools.

The one big factor that works heavily in their favour is their ability to impart English as a language. This is still seen as an elitist characteristics and aspirational for most parents. Unfortunately other than this visible impact there is no way for a parent to discern the efficacy of a private school. The fact that parents are abandoning the government schools in favour of private ones in spite of benefits being provided should be a cause of concern for the government and its policies

Exploring the Government Approach

The intent of government policy and the progress made in various parameters is undisputed. Since the implementation of Right to Education Act, the pupil-teacher ratios; the fraction of schools with toilets and electricity or with midday meal programs; and the overall measure of school infrastructure has improved significantly (Muralidharan, 2013)

Most of these measures are aimed at higher enrolment of students which it has succeeded in achieving. However none of these measures impact the quality of learning and there aren't any formal ways of measuring them. While infrastructural development is critical for promoting education there is no significant correlation between it and student performance and only a small impact to student enrolment. (Muralidharan 2013) .

While the government is paying high salaries to government school teachers there are no measures to test their impact nor any incentive for them to perform. Private schools are able to achieve similar or slightly better results with teachers who are paid a fraction of the government counterparts and are less trained. Research has failed to find a correlation between either teachers training or teacher's salary to student learning. (Kingdon & Teal 2010; Muralidharan 2011). The difference comes down to the longer time spent with students. High teacher absenteeism is a bane for most government schools and is also a critical factor for parents choosing private schools over them.

Grants provided by government has ignored the students' requirement and improving pedagogy. Investments on mid-day meal for attracting students, or building toilets in school to improve infrastructure or enhancing teachers' salaries might have been the necessary first step towards universalising education, but has failed to deliver the basic purpose of education – learning. Repeated research has failed to establish even a moderate correlation between these factors and students' learning.

What Can The Government Learn From Private Schools

The comparative study between the government and private school can provide significant indicators to the government. Firstly schools can be run at a much lesser costs without compromising on the quality of education

imparted. With less qualified teachers at a fraction of the cost of their government counterparts the private schools are able to impart equally good if not better education.

Secondly, parents are not looking for “free” service. The purpose of schools is to impart education and parents understand that. Free uniforms, mid-day meals cannot offset lack of teacher’s presence in class or perceived worth of learning English at school. Even the economically weaker sections of the society are willing to spend money to get quality service.

Thirdly, government school can be governed more effectively. Grants in itself cannot ensure success. High absenteeism amongst government teachers reduce the time spend with the students, thereby impacting their learning. Private schools are able to manage their limited financials better and ensure higher return of their money.

Recommendations:-

The initial focus of RTE was to improve infrastructure and enhance enrolment. That having been achieved the focus now needs to shift towards addressing the serious learning deficit that exists. Table 5 & 6 adequately defines the problem. There is a huge shortfall that needs to be fulfilled. The success of the use of remedial action (Banerji, 2007) has provided some hope. The ‘balasakhi’ approach can be adopted. Just like anganwadis in the pre-primary stage level, selected volunteers can be formalised to support the teachers in bridging the gap.

The use of technology to improve pedagogical impact needs to be introduced. Such an approach will ensure uniformity of inputs provided and can help to reduce the gaps that exists between states. Besides, a personalised and ‘intelligent’ learning system can support the student and help the learner learn at her own speed. This will significantly help reduce the current gap between expected learning standard and actual learning. Such modules will aid the teachers to cater to the wide variance that exists within a class.

The teachers need to be made accountable for the students’ learning. With a secure job and no incentive for performance the government school teachers have no apparent motivation to commit to the learning outcome of the student. The performance of the teachers too need to be monitored. A number of issues that affect government school education like teacher absenteeism can be impacted by the setting the right goals for RTE and a corresponding measurement system.

The Government has a strict set of guidelines for ‘recognising’ private schools. They are always under the threat of being ‘de-recognised’. A similar governance mechanism does not exist for government schools. The government needs to set up monitoring systems for government schools to make them accountable for learning.

Conclusion:-

The mushrooming of private schools in India is a clear indication of an unfulfilled need left unattended by the government schools. These schools are not only growing to bridge this gap but is also eating into the government school enrolment. While both these schools have been successful in enhancing enrolment of primary level students, they have failed in delivering age appropriate learning outcomes. Such deficit in early years retards the growth of the student.

The focus of the government now needs to shift from input to output measures. Other than ASER Reports there are very few reports that measure learning outcome regularly. An immediate shift in measuring different parameters will drive a different set of behaviours. Teachers too will be measured on their effectiveness. Educationists need to re-craft the course design with impactful pedagogy. Interventions to improve governance will increase accountability.

Between government and private schools, India has developed an excellent infrastructure to deliver education. With some changes in priority, education can be the lever to create a demographic advantage for India in the world.

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