

Private and Public Schooling The Experience of Rural Punjab in School Education

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Abstract

Present study qualitatively analyses some of the critical issues of the rising demand of private school education in Punjab more specifically among rural community. Focus group discussions are administered with teacher activists and educational administrators to generate data. After thematic analysis six major themes such as quality education and infrastructure facilities, attractive propaganda of private schools, insecurities of parents due to agrarian crises, English as medium of instruction, ostentatious culture, and deterioration of the status of government school teachers have emerged that all collaboratively accelerate mushrooming of private schools in rural areas of Punjab.

INTRODUCTION

Due to new-liberal practices adopted in India after nineties, the scope of state activities was redefined and school education was claimed to be a private good allowing for the participation of the private sector in state endeavors. Consequently, the structure of education sector of the whole country has changed drastically with the change in relative proportion of different types of

service suppliers (more particularly private) in the school sector and this has highly captured the education sector. This change is more profound in some states like Punjab where education sector has got divided into parallel public and private streams. Government schools have become schools for children of the most poor and low-ranked caste groups, while better off children (upper caste, urban and upper middle class middle

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class) are increasingly accessing private schools, resulting in a new form of social inequality (Vasavi, 2003; Singh, 2007; Srivastava, 2006; Kainth, 2016; Singh, 2016; Gill, 2017; Kaur, 2018; Toor, 2019). It is insufficiently appreciated that even at the elementary levels there are a bewildering variety of schools today and each offering different services, course content and catering to different strata of the population. This is disturbing that children from different strata are increasingly being bunched in different type of schools, partly as a result of market forces and partly as result of policy. Therefore, the situation of school education in the state is compounded by the growth of multiple schooling systems and emerging segregation of children. Above mentioned hierarchies in educational provision and access are thus, mirroring social hierarchies and these developments in education system are neither proper nor equitable (Harma, 2011) creating hindrances in achieving the goal of an egalitarian society.

EMPIRICAL BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Statistically speaking, over the past few years, there has been a steady drop in enrolment rates in government schools of the state and a steady increase in enrolments in private schools as there has been upsurge of private schools. Looking at the interstate variations in the extent of utilisation of private

schooling, Muralidharan and Kremer (2009) in their nationwide survey reported that Punjab had one of the highest percentages of villages with private schools as compared with all-India averages. Kingdon (2017) analysed data of the National Sample Survey (2014–15) and concluded that 33.5 per cent rural and 56.2 per cent urban and overall 44.4 per cent six to eighteen years old children attended private schools in Punjab during 2014–15. State Elementary Education Reports Cards (NUEPA and GoI, 2003–04 to 2016–17) of various years have shown that percentage share of government schools were 99.96 per cent in 2003–04 and diminished to 72.69 per cent in 2016–17 whereas percentage share of private schools were 0.04 per cent in 2003–04 but increased dramatically and reached to 26.33 per cent over subsequent period. This may look like a small figure as in percentage but is still fairly large in real terms. Initially, more particularly in 2003–04 at the time of starting years of SSA, large chunk of students were getting education in government schools (1239961) of Punjab which was 99.92 per cent (1238960) of the total enrolment, however within the period of fifteen years proportion of private schools in total enrolment proliferated rapidly and reached at 46 per cent in 2016–17. Annual Status of Education Report (Rural)–2018 also revealed that 52.2 per cent children in the 6–14 age groups go to

private schools in rural areas against 46.7 per cent to government schools in the state. This trend is also well documented that majority of school students in many states are either attending private schools or seeking paid tuitions (Aggarwal and Jha 2001; ASER, 2012; Sharma and Saini, 2012; Mohanty and Acharya, 2016; RTE Forum, 2015–16; Kainth, 2016).

It is observed from research work that phenomenon of private schooling is quantitatively explained in multitude of studies but this particular issue is not explored qualitatively more particularly in rural set up. Therefore, through this paper an attempt has been made to qualitatively analyse some of the critical issues of the rising demand of private school education in Punjab specifically among rural community as a whole. Consequences and efficacy of private education are mainly discussed with the educational personnel who are working directly with schools, teachers and communities. Findings of this study tries to unravel the factors based on which rural parents decide which type of schooling is required for their children and why parents are now abandoning government schools in spite of free and quality inputs.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main aim of the study is to explore factors promoting private

school education in rural areas of Punjab.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Focus group research is one kind of qualitative research methodology is used in this study for in depth exploration of determinants of school choice in rural community of Punjab. This type of research is primarily used in the social and behavioural sciences, and usually involves some type of interview with people, either in groups or one-on-one (Gordon and Langmaid, 1988).

SAMPLING

Selecting participants who share a similar perspective toward the topic is the most common strategy for producing the kind of group composition that will generate active exchanges (Morgan, 2008). Therefore, by following the principle of homogeneity that is common interest for school education, educational administrators (DEOs or BEOs) along with teacher activists from every district of Punjab has been interviewed. The study is conducted in eight focus groups in different villages of Punjab in various districts namely Gurdaspur, Patiala, Sangrur, Tartarn, Nawashahar, Ferozepur, Mukatsar, Moga, Mansa where number of private schools in rural areas is higher as compared to urban areas (District Report Card 2016–17). The total sample size is

40 respondents including DEOs or BEOs (21) and teacher activists (19). The age range is 35–62 years and 45 (75 per cent) participants are male. Focus group discussions (FGDs) are comprised of 5–6 respondents and one session has been varied from 2 to 2.5 hours. The period of data collection for this study is July to January 2017 to July to January 2018.

RESEARCH TOOLS

Focus groups as a form of qualitative interviewing are conducted through a semi-structured focus group interview schedule which is developed after try-out on the individuals who directly work with schools, teachers and communities. Questions related to trend of private schooling, social exclusion and the policies or actions for school education as a whole more particularly for public education are prepared which are modified after field testing. The central question is why are government schools in rural Punjab losing thousands of students each year. All other questions are interrelated to this fundamental question. (See Table 1).

ANALYSIS OF DATA

Focus group discussions with teacher activists of various teachers' organisations and educational administrators are duly recorded in field diaries and supplemented with field notes and observation of the investigator. Permission to

record the focus group discussions is sought prior to conducting them. After conducting all the focus group discussions, the voice files are sent to a private company for transcription. After that most widely used approach of thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006) is completed on transcripts of FGDs. This approach involves six steps from generation of initial codes, identification of broad categories, defining and naming of themes and followed by presentation and discussion of results.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Data of FGDs have depicted that school choice decision is a combination of both demand and supply side factors. These factors reported by large majority of respondents are produced into six themes which are presented in Table 1 and explanation is thematically presented in the following section.

Theme 1: Quality education and infrastructure facilities is emerged from the question 'why rural masses have prevalent assumption that it is the private schools that provide better and quality education?'. This theme is framed on the basis of six codes and two categories (Table 1). All the respondents have comprehended that on supply side quality of physical infrastructure of the school such as condition of school building, clean drinking water and hygienic toilet facility, well equipped classrooms, libraries, laboratories, transportation

Table 1: Thematic Analysis of Causes of Rising Demand for Private Schooling

Code	Category	Theme
Question 1: Why rural masses have prevalent assumption that it is the private schools that provide better and quality education?		
Good building	Physical characteristics	Quality education and infrastructure facilities
Adequate classrooms		
Furnished classrooms		
Clean drinking water	Ancillary facilities	
Libraries and laboratories		
Transportation facility		
Question 2: What type of market strategies do private schools use to increase their enrollment?		
Hoardings on roads	Advertising	Attractive propaganda of private schools
Attractive sign boards		
Advertising through mass media		
Participation and organisation of extra-curricular activities	Understanding of customer behaviour	
Development of attractive school brand		
Engaging of influencers		
Question 3: Why this trend of private schooling is more prominent among rural parents?		
High expectations of parents	Parental aspirations	Insecurities of parents due to agrarian crises
Economic pressure		
Farming sector is no longer profitable	Reducing reliance on agriculture sector	
High cost of production		
Question 4: How does rising demand of learning of english make contribution in escalating demand of private schools?		
Education in English is need of the hour	Employment	English as medium of instruction
Without English learning no employment		
With English students can easily clear IELTS	Immigration	
English will help in adjustment overseas		

Question 5: Although there are number of government schools which are giving excellent results, still why do people think that their children should study only in private schools?		
Status symbol	Show off culture	Ostentatious behaviour
Prestige issue		
Social acceptance		
Government schools for poor and disadvantaged ones	Social exclusion	
Concerned about social circle of children		
Superiority complex		
Question 6: What is the role of government school teachers in this process of preferring private schools over government schools ?		
Negative professional behaviour	Lacking accountability	Deterioration of the status of government school teachers
Teacher absenteeism		
Neglecting duties		
Lackadaisical attitude	Irresponsible behaviour	
Lack of job commitment		

Source: Focused group discussions with respondents

facility have emerged as the most significant detriments for the selection of private schools. It is the parents who are equating well furnished buildings, colourful uniforms, and transportation facilities of private schools to quality education. In this context, one participant stated: "Education has become business now. Today, private schools have AC classrooms, AC buses and ordinary high fees. Private education has taken away education from larger section of the society. But the problem is that parents believe that costly education is quality education." This first theme of looking quality education through infrastructural facilities supported by Mehta, 2005; Mehrotra, 2006 who

have concluded that private schools have better infrastructure facilities as compared to government schools and it is the infrastructure of the school to some extent is said to be important criteria in shaping school choices for all social classes (Ahmad and Sheikh, 2014; Singh., Monga, and Kaur., 2015).

Theme 2: Attractive propaganda of private schools is framed from the question 'what type of market strategies do private schools use to increase their enrolment?'. From the discussions of this question six codes are generated which are further classified into two categories such as advertising and understanding of customer behaviour (See Table).

Respondents have pointed out that parents are made to perceive that pricey schools are the only route of good education through advertisements. Private players of the state are very much mindful about apprehensions of parents and perceive a child as their customer and knowledge of customer behaviour is the main strategy of market. Therefore, private managements use attractive propaganda in form of hoardings on roads, attractive sign boards, advertisements through mass media to lure rural parents and they are quite successful to some extent to create an illusion of quality education and able to make out that children learn well only in private schools.

Theme 3: Insecurities of parents due to agrarian crises have emerged from the question 'why this trend of private schooling is more prominent among rural parents?'. Table 1 show that data derived from FGDs on this question is classified into four initial codes and two categories that is parental aspiration, reducing reliance on agriculture sector. All the participants viewed that it is the expectations of parents due to agrarian crises that lead rural parents to private system of schooling. The reason may be that rural society has lost faith in agriculture occupation, stagnant production, high cost of inputs and decreasing income from agriculture attributed to this attitude. They normally want their children should join non-farming sector and

feel that they have already spent their life in hardships and their children should lead a better life. Inspired by this hope, rural parents prefer to send their children in these schools and invest heavily on their education but parents are not aware about the actual learning of their wards.

Theme 4: English as medium of instruction has come forward from the question 'how does rising demand of learning of English make contribution in escalating demand of private schools?' Table 1 exhibits that the fundamental reasons of demand of this burgeoning of English medium schools are employability and immigration which are main categories of this theme. Dataset from interviews have depicted that private schooling is also directly related to English as medium of instruction and the absence of English medium in government schools is also one of the main arguments for out-migration to private schools. Parents have developed a mindset that without English efficiency their children will remain unemployable in this competitive world as English is the need of the market. Recently, the trend of international educational migration has also persuaded parents to enrol their wards in English medium schools. English Language Proficiency tests such as IELTS, PTE, CELPIP are mandatory to work and study in many foreign countries that has resulted in increase in English medium schools. Parents think that if a student gets education in English

medium, this will more likely increase the chance to crack these tests which are nowadays considered to be the most preferred way of international migration. Therefore, every parent of the state who can afford or cannot afford wants to provide education in these so called English medium schools. This trend of English medium schools is also represented in various reports on elementary education and concluded that more than forty percent school students in the state has English as their medium of instruction. (NUEPA and GoI, 2016–17).

Theme 5: Ostentatious behaviour has appeared from the question ‘although there are number of government schools which are giving excellent results, still why do people think that their children should study only in private schools’. This sub-question during FGDs have generated four codes and two categories which are reported in Table 1. Majority of respondents have opined that pretentious mindset of Punjabi society also boosts this demand of private schools because these schools are considered as a distinction of social class in the rural areas. Parents are relating private schools with their status symbol and perceive it more prestigious than sending their kids to public school. Many reported that parents think that they do not want their children should study with children of migrants or poor parents studying in government schools, because they are concerned about

impact of influence of peer or social circle on the behaviour of children.

Theme 6: deterioration of the status of government school teachers is structured from the question ‘what is the role of government school teachers in this process of preferring private schools over government schools?’ Responses derived from participants are developed into five codes and two categories which further have lead to theme that with passage of time status of government school teachers have degraded significantly. One of the respondents have said that before nineties teacher of a village school enjoyed huge respect and perceived as deferential figure. Village school was the epicenter of all religious and cultural activities of the rural community. Not a single marriage or religious ceremony was completed without the participation of school teachers. One time food was sent to schools just as a token of love and respect from that particular family. However, after the dawn of privatisation, people were made to think that teacher community lacks sincerity, accountability and punctuality. Eventually, people have started to show less faith in public system as private managements that assures not only discipline, commitment and but also follows result oriented approach. Therefore, lack of accountability on the part of teachers and also lack of monitoring mechanism in public school system are held responsible for this growing demand of private education.

Points of concerns: From interpretation of data it is clear that above mentioned six themes are the legitimate reasons in shaping school choice in rural community of Punjab. However, this trend of private schooling is creating serious concerns for Punjabi society. Due to relegation of poor children in to government schools, school education now has not been regarded as an equaliser or an instrument for developing shared attitudes and social characteristics but rather known as way of differentiating one class from other classes. It does not connote that private schooling is not good for rural community, but affordability is mammoth issue here. Families are spending major share of their income to pay fees to these schools. Apart from the miscellaneous expenditure incurred on admission fees, uniform, stationery, private schooling also entails additional cost in form of other monthly expenses such as transportation charges, activity charges are quite high and parents are putting themselves a lot of financial hardships just to give quality education to their offspring. It is seen that the exorbitant high fee structure of the private schools has adversely affected the socio-economic status of rural households. The burden of indebtedness increased 18.50 per cent of on the rural families to meet the financial requirements to provide private education (Singh., Monga, and Kaur., 2015). Lower middle class parents are making huge

sacrifices to enable their children to pursue their studies in English medium schools. Moreover, after sending their children to expensive schools, still arrange private tuitions for children. This is debatable issue here that what is the need of tutors or private coaching after sending their children in these schools that are considered as the best schools according to parents?

Additionally, all the policies and programmes of universalisation of school education recommend for availability of schools within safe and accessible distance from the habitation where a child lives. According to RTE-2009 norms a primary school should be within one kilometer and an upper primary school should be radius of three kilometers, unfortunately privatisation of school education has changed the definition of physical access of school as on a nursery school child (three to four years old) on an average daily commutes twenty to thirty kilometers in school vans to reach their respective schools which are situated at nearby towns or cities and spends two hours of the day in travelling. Yellow coloured buses of private schools with name of school, affiliation board along with medium as English written boldly on the sides can be seen lining up like swarm of bees early in the morning to pick children from villages to schools. Hence, knowingly or unknowingly these travelling hours can give physical and mental exertion to growing ones that creates a great deal of imbalance in study-play time.

SUGGESTIONS FOR BRIDGING GAP BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND PRIVATE SCHOOLS

Therefore, it is crucial here to clarify some misconceptions which are associated with this phenomenon of choosing government schools over private schools.

Undoubtedly, getting quality education is everybody's fundamental right and it is the duty of government to provide quality education in schools. However, firstly it is the duty of the society which has to decide what type of education is required for future generations. Society should be made to think that private schools may be better in infrastructural facilities but this does not mean that the quality of the teaching-learning experience is much better than in government school. Moreover, it is noticeable that these schools cannot be seen as important players to achieve the goals of UEE (Tooley, 2001) as RTE is not adopted in private schools in true spirit (Kainth, 2014). Parents must understand that teachers in these schools are poorly trained, less qualified and less paid as compared to government school teachers but better in terms of regularity of attendance of teachers and their instruction is attractively packaged (Srivastava, 2006). Hence, there is urgent need to change the perception of parents who look quality schooling from prism of private schools and to look at effectiveness of private schools in terms of achieving the

aims of education for all and quality education.

Secondly, there is a belief that students have marginally higher learning levels in private schools (De., et al. 2006). There is need to see with reference to research studies that have indicated minor differences in the learning levels of children from private schools and government schools are only visible when socio-economic background is kept constant. When socio-economic background of the children studying in private and public schools are considered in analysis, the large raw learning-gap between private and public school falls (Kingdon, 1996; Desai. et al. 2009; Goyal, 2009; French and Kingdon, 2010; Chudgar and Quin, 2012; Muralidharan and Sundaraman, 2015; Singh, Monga, and Kaur, 2015 and Azam, Kingdon and Wu, 2016). ASER reports on the basis of evidences on the differences in learning outcomes of government and private schools also revealed that even though private schools consistently perform better than government schools, this is not a fair comparison because it is a well known fact that children who go to private schools come from relatively affluent backgrounds and tend to have more educated parents.

Educated community should have to play pivotal role towards the proper functioning of the government schools in these circumstances. They know the reality but are not willing to take any initiative. Time

has come for the higher education faculty to come out of their self made cocoons of seclusion from other levels of education and try to involve themselves in the social process of education. Otherwise apathetic attitude of educated community directly or indirectly will tarnish the social set up of the society. They should work at ground level to explain to the rural parents the real differences in learning achievement of private and government schools and inform them that teachers in government schools are more qualified as compared to private school teachers.

Furthermore, it is necessary to build the national system on the lines of the common school system. In this connection, the recent Allahabad High Court judgment (August 18, 2015) which directs for admitting the children of Government employees, people's representatives and other receiving perks and benefits from the government in public schools needs a special mention. This judgment should not only be implemented forthwith in Uttar Pradesh but it should be extended to cover all states of India. The experiences from the other public services show that when a service is accessed by people from all ranks of the society particularly the elite; the quality of such service improves.

The goal of quality education cannot be achieved without strengthening the public education system. Private and public schools can co-exist,

but greater efforts can be made to improve public education system. Finally, it is also needed for policy makers to address all issues emerged from FGDs of present study to regain the faith of Punjabi society in governmental system. Also, they should analyse data according to the demographic profile of students on the basis of gender, social group and location in both government and private schools in order to effectively compare enrolment rates and learning achievement in both government and private schools to provide incentives accordingly. In short, instead of permitting over burgeoning of private, ill-equipped, profit oriented, unrecognised, teaching shops in the nook and corners of every village or cities which misguide rural masses, government should develop clear and specific plans to provide quality education for children of government schools by amalgamating the themes of this study with other factors such as optimum level of learning outcome, maintaining gender-caste hierarchies, and socio-economic stratifications by keeping in mind socio-regional contexts.

Rural transformation is tantamount to the transformation of schools in rural areas into powerful centers of learning, in such a way that children, parents, and the whole community look at schools as the pivot of transformation. Hence, it is essentially required to regenerate the lost image of 'village

government school' and make it 'a vital force of rural development' and should necessitate the special attention of policy makers and planners to make government schools socially reproductive and socially transformative rather than disjunctive. Ultimately, if we are able to save government schools and able to increase participation of all social and economic classes in schools, it can become as a universal remedy to unravel the nexus of rural distress in the long run.

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