

Even poorer families in India increasingly opt for private schools

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The study highlights an emerging educational gender gap whereby sons are being given preferential treatment over daughters.

(Phys.org) -- A study examining children's schooling in Andhra Pradesh, India, has revealed a dramatic rise in the number of parents opting for fee-paying private schools over state-funded government schools. Even low-income families are 'voting with their feet', according to the new research led by the University of Oxford.

Researchers tracked 3,000 children who were randomly selected from different social and economic backgrounds in Andhra Pradesh. They found that in 2002 about one quarter (24%) of seven and eight year olds attended private schools, but by 2009 the rate had almost doubled to 44%.

The study suggests that the trend is fuelled by the availability of private

schools with low fees, and the [perception](#) among [parents](#) that children will make better educational progress in private schools. Parents said they valued English-medium teaching offered by private schools, whereas government schools mostly teach in the regional language, Telugu.

The research is part of the Young Lives project, which is tracking the development of children in four countries, including India. The research team compared two cohorts of children of different ages – an older cohort born in 1994-1995 and a younger cohort in 2001-2002. The findings are published in the *International Journal of Educational Development*.

The study finds that children in urban areas were more likely to be educated in private schools than government schools, and this was true even for the poorest groups. This is partly due to availability of choice in urban centres, with children having less distance to travel than those in rural areas. A child in the older cohort was 16 times more likely to have attended a private school between the age of five and eight years if they lived in an urban rather than a rural area.

However, the researchers found that this urban-rural gap is beginning to shrink: while 10% of seven to eight year olds from rural areas were privately educated in 2002, by 2009 this had gone up to 31%.

Although access to private schools is increasing for relatively poorer families, the study points out that even 'low' fees are out of reach for the very poor. It also highlights an emerging gender gap whereby sons are being given preferential treatment over daughters. 97% of girls in the older cohort had not attended private school by the age of eight, compared with 92% of boys.

By the age of 15, 91% of girls were still not privately schooled,

compared to 77% of boys at the same age showing that a significant proportion of boys moved to private schools at a later stage. These gender gaps were emerging much earlier for the younger cohort, which the authors argue is the result of the very poorest parents making hard choices about which of their children they can afford to send to fee-paying private schools.

The study concludes that state-funded government schools are perceived by parents to be of lower quality, noting that one problem particularly cited by parents was absenteeism amongst teachers. Of the older cohort, nearly three quarters attended a government school in 2001 at the age of five or six, but by 2009 only half of them were still in government schools; nine per cent had transferred to a private school and a quarter (26%) had dropped out of education altogether.

Lead author Martin Woodhead, Associate Research Director at Young Lives at Oxford University and Professor of Childhood Studies at the Open University, said: 'The schooling of India's children has developed to become far more market-driven than in the past. Many more parents are opting out of free government schools to pay for a private education for their children, even if it means making sacrifices. Those on a very limited budget are finding they have to grant privileges to one child over another.

"While private schooling may provide a short-term solution to the educational needs of children in India today, it is unlikely to be the best means of providing education for all [children](#) in the longer term as its benefits are not equally shared, but according to gender, location and income.

"Our study suggests that there needs to be a reform program for government schools to make sure they deliver quality education. Regulation of private schools is also essential, including increasing

access to the most underprivileged, as well as those who can afford to pay. India's Right to Education Act is a step in the right direction, and we wait to see how effective it will be."

Provided by Oxford University

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