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Leveraging schools for political influence

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Caption:Primary school in the state of Haryana, India. Credit: Blair Read

Doctoral student Blair Read links rise of private education in India to local political competition, signaling potential erosion of public services.

"When I began graduate school, the issue of states losing control over their central functions piqued my interest," says Blair Read, a sixth-year doctoral candidate in political science. To tackle such a broad agenda, she zeroed in on the case of private schooling. "It has exploded worldwide, especially in lower- and middle-income countries, and I'm trying to explain the phenomenon—the politics behind what is

happening and how it might change the political landscape," she says.

With survey and field work skills sharpened by on-the-ground research in East Africa, Read has fashioned an ambitious dissertation project investigating the expansion of private schools in India, a trend spurred by the jockeying of politicians. One intriguing finding: places with more competitive elections have more private providers.

The shift from public to private schooling "follows a consistent political logic, and helps us understand the politics of education in a context where inequality, intolerance, and incohesion have increased in tandem with the explosion of private providers," Read notes.

With the help of public datasets and interviews with government officials and school leaders across India, Read's research is revealing how in India, and by extension, other nations of the Global South, "education is a political project as much as it is a human capital project."

New schools as political projects

The Indian education system "varies a ton based on where you are," says Read. Both the central and state governments are involved in building and supporting government schools. There are also many private schools, some collecting tuition, and others funded by benefactors. In states such as Kerala in the south, 50 percent of students attend private schools. In regions where government schools lack the budgets for maintenance, or even basic educational programs, private schools are proliferating—often with the support of influence-seeking politicians.

"India is a country with a lot of bureaucracy and red tape, and you need the help of someone on the inside to open a school, or help parents pay fees," says Read. "These are politicians who want to make a show of being the big guy to help you get things done, who can work with the

private sector on funding, and expand education without necessarily having to engage the bureaucracy."

By combing through a census of 1.2 million primary schools, and by examining electoral data from the last 50 years of state-level elections, Read has discovered that "when electoral competition increases, and elections become won by smaller margins, there is a greater expansion of private schools," she says. Read hypothesizes that "increased competition means that politicians face much more pressure to provide services."

Seeking leverage among constituents, politicians can relatively swiftly subsidize or find capital to build infrastructure, add teachers, or reduce family tuition burdens—all highly visible activities with great appeal to parents and other citizens.

Political behavior

Through interviews conducted in the field pre-COVID and more recently via WhatsApp, Read is trying to understand how these politicians operate. "One private school manager described a [politician](#) approaching him with platitudes about supporting education," recounts Read. "It was clear to this manager that the politician was looking to use [school](#) contributions to establish himself in the community, and gain recognition."

Read's thesis will document these interactions in fine-grained detail, "I want to know how (and when) these politicians use their influence to expand services, and how they deal with the pressure of elections," she says. "I want to get the big picture of their varied motivations and incentives."

The rapid expansion of private schools in India and other developing nations matters for several reasons, Read says. One is the issue of equity.

"The people who go to private schools are generally more affluent, less likely to be from lower castes, and more likely to be sons than daughters," she says.

Another reason: "School is how states distribute ideology, and it is fundamental to how states operate."

Read notes that "there is systematic and anecdotal evidence that a lot of private schools are run by Hindu nationalist activists, as an effective way to bring people into the Hindu fold," she says.

Read is concerned that this ceding of education and other services from public to private hands may over time result in a loss of faith in government. "There's research suggesting people have developed a perpetual bias against public services, assuming they are lower quality than private—even when they are not," she says. "States can't do much without citizen buy-in, and if government services don't seem valuable, it can affect the state's ability to function."

From citizen to politician

Read confesses she is surprised to have landed in an area of research investigating "why politicians do things in certain ways," she says. She went to Tufts University with the idea of majoring in international relations, but after a course in comparative politics immediately decided on a political science major, with a particular focus on problems in labor and gender. Her first foray into field work was in Indonesia, where she conducted field interviews that led to a senior thesis on household bargaining power and political preferences.

After Tufts, she worked in MIT's political science department as a research support associate, and began the quantitative classes required for graduate study. "I was putting a toe in the water, and realizing that I

could see myself in academia." After she was accepted into the political science doctoral program, she deferred a year, working for MIT GOV/LAB. Read spent 10 months in Tanzania and Uganda designing research about electoral participation during those countries' general elections.

"When I began my coursework, I was focused on citizens and holding governments accountable," she says. "Now I'm focused on the politicians' side and their strategies."

Read hopes that her examination of political influence-building and the rise of private schools in India will spark discussion about the potential erosion of faith in government services. She is excitedly planning a return to India, after a prolonged pandemic interruption, where she intends to continue documenting the expansion of different types of schools and the role of politicians in this expansion.

"It's a long game," she says. "My goal is to use social science to improve policy implementation, working on questions of small-scale interventions that could make government work better."

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