

# Poor Schools

*In India, many private schools are poorer than state schools but offer a higher quality of education.*

**By James Tooley**

Any visitor to the ‘slums’ of any of the big cities in India will be struck by the sheer number of private schools. There seems to be one on almost every street corner or down every alleyway. These schools are wholly private in every way, and are clearly not élitist institutions.

The fees at these schools are low, although even fees ranging from about 50¢ to \$1.50 per month are not insignificant for the urban and rural poor in India.

Government schools are available, usually for free, and at many, free rice is provided at lunch time. So the key question is: why do parents prefer to send their children to unaided and often unrecognized private schools (which itself brings disadvantages to students) when there are government schools available?

Usefully, there is some recent government-sponsored research which partly provides the answers and which makes us view the private schools in a much more favourable light — a view which has been backed up by my own research in these schools.

The *Public Report on Basic Education in India* (PROBE Team, 1999) looked at primary education in poor villages in five Indian states, both public and private. It paints a disturbing picture of the ‘malfunctioning’ which is taking place in government schools for the poor — but not, it turns out, in the private schools.

The state schools were found to suffer from poor physical facilities and high pupil-teacher ratios, but what was most alarming was the low level of teaching activity taking place.

When researchers called unannounced on their random sample of government schools, only in 53% was there any ‘teaching activity’ going on. In fully 33%, the headteacher was absent. The investigators found it particularly worrying that children in the first class seemed to be ‘systematically neglected.’

“The PROBE survey came across many instances where an element of plain negligence was ... involved.

“These include several cases of irresponsible teachers keeping a school closed or non-functional for months at a time; a school where the teacher was drunk, while only one-sixth of the children enrolled were present; other drunk teachers, some of whom expect pupils to bring them *daru* [drink]; a headteacher who asks the children to do domestic chores, including looking after the baby; several cases of teachers sleeping at school; ... a headteacher who comes to school once a week; another headteacher who did not know the name of a single child in the school....

“Inactive teachers were found engaged in a variety of pastimes such as sipping tea, reading comics, or eating peanuts, when they were not just sitting idle.

“Generally, teaching activity has been reduced to a minimum, in terms of both time and effort. And this pattern is not confined to a minority of irresponsible teachers — it has become a way of life in the profession.”

Clearly, poor infrastructure and apathetic parents are a problem. The overly academic imposed curricula are paralyzing to teachers and students alike. Teachers are burdened with excessive paperwork, and there is ‘un-supportive’ and inadequate management. But the deterioration of teaching standards is not just to do with disempowered teachers.

Significantly, the low level of teaching activity occurred even in those schools with relatively good infrastructure, teaching aids, and pupil-teacher ratios.

All of these failings highlight the underlying problem in the public schools — namely, the ‘deep lack of accountability in the schooling system.’

Crucially, these problems *were not found in the private schools*. The PROBE team found a considerably higher level of teaching activity there, even though the work environment was not necessarily better and the teachers were being paid significantly less than the state teachers.

“This feature of private schools brings out the key role of accountability in the schooling system. In a private school, the teachers are accountable to the manager (who can fire them) and, through him or her, to the parents (who can withdraw their children).

“In a government school, the chain of accountability is much weaker, as teachers have a permanent job with salaries and promotions unrelated to performance. This contrast is perceived with crystal clarity by the vast majority of parents.

“As parents see it, the main advantage of private schools is that, being more accountable, they have higher levels of teaching activity. This is confirmed by the PROBE survey: in most of the private schools we visited, there was feverish classroom activity.

“Most parents stated that, if the costs of sending a child to a government and private school were the same, they would rather send their children to a private school.”

The findings of the PROBE report suggest that poor parents are willing to pay for their children to attend unaided private schools because the quality of education offered in these schools is (in fact, not only in perception) higher in the private schools, in terms of the level of teaching activity and the commitment and dedication to students.

*(Adapted with permission from the Preface to the Second Edition of The Global Education Industry. Dr. Tooley is the director of the E.G. West Centre at the University of Newcastle, [www.ncl.ac.uk/egwest](http://www.ncl.ac.uk/egwest))*