

Doctoral Dissertation

**The Rise of Private School Markets and Parental Choice: Cases from
Dhaka, Bangladesh and Delhi, India
(Summary)**

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There is growing concern worldwide about parental choice in sending children to public or private school. This problem is not limited to developed countries; it is also a concern in developing countries. This study focuses on Dhaka (Bangladesh) and Delhi (India), where there is growing concern about the role of private schools. There is no clear definition for private schools established and most have blurred description. However, for this study I would like to define private schools as those schools that use English-medium instruction (EMI), use national and/or international curricula, operating for-profit (low-fee to high-fee), are run by individuals, corporate enterprises, national or international organizations, or controlled by governments, they typically draw their income from parents and their survival depends on attracting clientele. These are private unaided (PUA) recognised and unrecognised schools. They may be restricted with minimal guidelines from the government, however, not entitled to receive government grants-in-aid. PUA schools are often considered a pure form of private schools, and this study bases its discussions on these PUA recognised and unrecognised schools and deals with them as private schools.

This study deals with two areas using a comparative lens (it is an exemplar of “illustrative” comparison (Bereday, 1967)) that have rarely been explored. Its geographic focus is on Dhaka and Delhi. There have been extensive studies conducted on private schools in India, whilst research on private schools (using EMI) in Bangladesh is incremental. The recent growth of private schools in developing countries especially in Bangladesh and India has raised key issues of ‘*public versus private schooling*’ and the study was inspired by the question of why and who are accessing these schools and how do the schools influence these parents? Therefore, the overriding concern of this study lies in parental choice and private schools’ strategies in the marketplace in Dhaka and Delhi.

In Dhaka, Bangladesh, data were collected from 309 participants from 17 schools from October to November 2015 and data were gathered from 72 participants from Delhi in India from February to March 2016. The data presented are primarily based on school and household surveys and observation. The data utilised for the study were collected from principals, teachers, parents, students and were gathered from structured questionnaires, in-depth interviews, field notes, brochures, school websites, and newspapers. In Dhaka, I distributed structured questionnaires to principals and only 3 principals agreed to complete the questionnaire; 73 teachers from 11 schools participated in the survey; 105 parents from 11 schools participated in the study (data was collected from the parents on school premises) and 128 students from 7 schools completed the survey questionnaire. Additionally, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 parent participants and 5 teachers. I distributed questionnaires and interviewed 13 principals, 24 teachers and 35 households in Delhi. The parent participants selected for the study sent their children to 22 private schools, and the data on principals and teachers were gathered from 13 of the 22 schools. The interview was

conducted with all the participants in Delhi. Data from the students was not collected due to their age (schools only offer lower grades).

I with the help of research assistants walked around the research areas (Dhaka and Delhi) to look for schools and entered the schools to obtain permission from the authorities. After obtaining permission, we distributed the questionnaires to the principals and teachers and conducted in-depth interviews with them. We adopted a snowball sampling method (e.g., we asked the participants to provide names and contacts of other schools to conduct research) to collect data. We visited the case study schools multiple times in both Dhaka and Delhi. In Delhi, we visited the households to collect data. We dictated each question to the participants (often). I prepared the questionnaires in English, and the questions were orally translated to Bangla, Urdu and Hindi because most of the participants could not converse in English.

New Institutional Theory (NIT) has been applied to examine the issues of concern. However, in order to understand ‘NIT’— other theories such as rational choice theory, world society, marketisation in education, market theory, organisational analysis, and political behaviour of economic perspectives are equally significant and are appended to underscore NIT in a broader demographic and socio-economic context. Therefore, together with NIT, the above-mentioned perspectives (especially market theory) are also accentuated to comprehend parental choice and schools’ strategies in the marketplace in a wider institutional environment and have been set as parameters to seek an explanation for the diverse reasons for choice and identify private schools’ strategies in attracting potential clientele. Having taken various theoretical perspectives, I was able to repudiate any unnatural consequences and contemplate the issues of concern deeply. Because of the use of theory, various themes emerged and contributed to understanding parental choice and private schools’ market from a different vantage point.

Findings on the school level in the both the context show, schools seem to have unclear goals and objectives as they are more concerned with image production rather than improving ‘core technologies’ such as instructional method or hiring certified teachers. Schools’ strategies suggest many case study schools in Dhaka and Delhi are operating within a ‘*counterfeit model*’ (CM). The CM can be defined by the way schools pretend to operate in disguise of established schools, i.e. pretending to forge other schools’ model that has not only gained legitimacy but is also considered as a ‘renowned’ (established) school. The market position of schools are often determined by their outward image and parents often fall prey to the images of schools.

In Dhaka, private schools are emerging as a popular new educational sector. In addition to English language demand, private schools’ strategic business planning and market forces,

which emphasise deficiencies in the supply chain of Bangla-medium schools, have motivated parents to send their children to private schools using EMI. Parents are extremely satisfied with these private schools. Parents in Dhaka prefer market values such as improved structural changes (e.g., English proficiency skill and state of the art technology). Elitism, urbanisation, the effect of globalisation, and a need for transnational identity lead many people to choose English-medium education.

On the contrary, in Delhi, private schools are used as interim schools through the primary or elementary grades because of the perceived danger of sending younger children to distant government schools. Once the children reach higher grades (grade 5 or 8), the parents usually withdraw them from private schools and send them to government schools. This finding contradicts studies that show that parents choose private schools over government schools based on perceived quality and their use of an EMI. Moreover, they seek a school with all grades available, fee-free, sincere teachers who would not only teach effectively but are dedicated, affectionate and will instil discipline in the children. Parents are extremely discontented with private unaided schools with regard to school fees, teachers' credentials and the way teaching and learning are conducted. While they prefer government schools, they choose private schools because of their convenience and faith-based teaching. Findings suggest parents in Delhi, prefer co-operative values such as moral education, religious teachings, and discipline.

The empirical evidence also indicates, in the Dhaka context, parents make an escape route and willingly sending their children to private schools for future opportunities — thus making an '*inclined choice*' or an '*active choice*'. Whilst in the Delhi context parents are participating in the choice process — not necessarily on their own accord. Obstacles on various factors such as school, geography (school distance, transportation, convenience, and social composition (group belonging)), socio-political aspects lead them to choose private schools — they are participating in '*choice by default*' therefore, a private school is not their optimal choice.

Findings indicate schools and parents try to accumulate benefits with a like-minded attitude. Schools in Dhaka attract the parents through glossy physical plants and placing advertisements of their facilities and success in their prospectus or schools websites and the parents try to use those presentations to their comprehensive choice. In Delhi, because schools cannot (in most cases not allowed) open higher grades, therefore, they attract their potential clients with Arabic scriptures on the wall, religious teachings (enticing them with religious sentiments), and establishing schools close to family homes. The marketing messages vignettes illustrate how the schools '*influence*' the parents. Parents on the other hand, try to utilise these to their benefits by giving their children religious education at a

young age and also minimising the transaction cost such as ensuring safe access, having (both parents (mothers in most cases) and children) to travel less distance, and getting an opportunity to train the children with discipline and safeguarding them from substance, physical and verbal abuse. Therefore, it can be suggested that school choice and preference of parents and schools' strategies in the marketplace are discrete (there is no uniformity — 'divergence') as they are based on the socio-economic, geography, socio-cultural and socio-political constituent. In essence, the institutionalised setting in Dhaka is higher (moderate) than in Delhi, as parental choice in Delhi is needs-based (faced with constraints) whilst, parental choice in Dhaka is driven by "imagined" opportunities.

References

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