UNDERSTANDING THE MARKETING STRATEGIES OF PRIVATE SCHOOLS IN A PROVINCIAL TOWN IN RAJASTHAN, INDIA

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ABSTRACT: *This paper, based on an empirical study of private schools (n=35) and families (n=105) in select localities (n=3), explores how diversified school market(s) operate in Alwar city in Rajasthan in India. It observes that private schools execute a range of strategies, both ethical and unethical, to influence parents and attract admissions. School strategies range from the most modern methods such as advertising through local television channels, WhatsApp, Facebook, roadside billboards, wall-paintings, door-to-door visits, etc., to the invoking of primordial affiliations such as kinship ties, caste, and religious identities to reach out to parents. Schools use promises like offering better English-medium education, ensuring the safety and security of children, strict discipline, and providing coaching to prepare students for admission to prominent government schools and the engineering and medical institutes of the country as marketing strategies to help them flourish in a competitive education market.*

KEYWORDS: *school market, private school, EdTech, education, strategies*

INTRODUCTION

The school system in India is one of the largest in the world with over 1.56 million schools and more than 251 million students enrolled (DISE 2017–18). About 26% of all schools (20% in rural and 60% in urban India) are private. Private schools claim a share of over 40% of enrolment at the elementary level in India. As per DISE (2017–18), the enrolment share of private schools has

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crossed the majority figure of 50% in many Indian states/Union Territories (UTs) and reaches as much as 82% in Goa, 73% each in Kerala and Jharkhand, 72% in Puducherry, 65% in Maharashtra, 63% in Manipur and 62% in Tamil Nadu. Denoting this scenario as a "high degree of privatisation in the K-12 universe[2] compared to [in] other geographic[al] entities such as the United State of America (USA), or the United Kingdom (UK)" the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry report (FICCI 2014: 10) notes that "the number of private schools has grown at a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 4% in the last five years, which is much faster than the growth rate of public (government) schools." The report projects that the "private sector share is likely to reach 55–50% of overall enrolment by 2022" (ibid.). In explaining this ensuing growth trajectory, India Brand Equity Foundation (IBEF 2021) notes four important points.

– First, "India has the largest population in the world, with 580 million in the age bracket of 5–24 years, presenting a huge opportunity [for] the education sector. India has over 250 million school-going students, more than any other country."
– Second, "the large English-speaking population allows easy delivery of educational products. India was ranked 50 out of 100 countries [on the] English Proficiency Index 2020."
– Third, "100% Foreign Direct Investment (via automatic route) is allowed in the education sector. The Government of India has [implemented] initiatives like [the] National Accreditation Regulatory Authority Bill for higher education and the Foreign Educational Institutions Bill."
– Fourth, "India [has] huge potential for [the] technology-based delivery of education and global private investments." To substantiate this point IBEF (2021) notes that "[the] education market in India is expected to grow to the tune of US$ 225 billion by Financial Year 2025. The Indian EdTech market size is expected to reach US$ 30 billion by 2031, from US$ 700–800 million in 2021."[3]

India during the COVID-19 pandemic[4] experienced a boost in its education market based on the use of smart network technology. Besides many oligopolistic EdTech giants like Byju's, Vedantu, Oda Classes, and unacademy, many small new investors opened start-up ventures. Byju's, an India-based global EdTech

2 K-12 refers to the system of schools from kindergarten to senior secondary level.

3 https://www.ibef.org/industry/education-sector-india [Last access: 03 05 2022]

4 The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) initially occurred in China in 2019, but subsequently spread across the world, tragically taking the lives of millions in multiple waves.

giant, is making its presence felt abroad in countries like the USA, UK, Australia, Brazil, Indonesia, and Mexico by buying small EdTech companies and opening "e-learning based schools" (Peermohamed 2021). India increased its K-12 school market during the COVID-19 pandemic in two interrelated ways; first, like many other developing countries, budgetary expenditure on education was slashed to the tune of 65% after the COVID-19 outbreak (World Bank 2021), thus paving the way for the market to pitch in. Second, due to the COVID-19-induced lockdown and social distancing measures, e-learning systems, although associated with "uneven access and social disparities" (Meo–Chanchal 2021; ASER 2021), made a significant breakthrough in facilitating pupils' education at their convenience. IBEF notes that "India is the second largest market for e-learning after the USA. The online education market in India is expected to grow by US$ 2.28 billion during 2021–2025, growing at a CAGR of almost 20%. The market grew by 19.02% in India in 2021."[5]

Jha (2018: 42) argued that "education is increasingly becoming like other industries in which production is increasingly deterritorialised … the consumer is definitely not king. The consumers are voiceless children, and their parents an insecure lot who want to buy everything possible to make their children's future secure." The presence of numerous types of private schools, service types, and EdTech solutions have made the K-12 universe a diversified market that thrives incessantly due to being couched in neoliberal state policy and business practices (Tilak 2011; Sarangapani 2018). The education market in India has got an edge due to the presence of a gigantic 300-million-plus consumerist middle class, a striving aspirational lower class, and the prevailing demand for an English-medium education and the skillset required for obtaining a job in a promising competitive global economy. To capitalise on such aspirations, education providers act smartly by offering a range of educational services at competitive prices, associated with umpteen promises, to attract parents and expand their market base. This expansion, however, needs to be examined and understood in India's social context, especially in terms of its deep-rooted social inequalities (De et al. 2002; Jha 2018; Singh 2018) and the need to address the issues of equality, quality, and quantity – an unresolved and elusive triangle of interests that defines the Indian education system (Naik 1975). This paper attempts to increase contextual understanding of how suppliers (schools) strategize to create a niche for their products (education) and sustain their competitive edge in education market(s) that operate in an urban social milieu.

5 IBEF website, page titled *Education & Training Industry in India*, under *Snapshot*, chapter *Market size* https://www.ibef.org/industry/education-sector-india.aspx [Last access: 03 05 2022]

CONTEXTUALISING THE GROWTH OF THE SCHOOL MARKET IN INDIA

The growth of the competitive school market in India is often linked to the broad policy shift that took place in the 1990s, a decade when developing countries across the world started liberalising their economies under the influence of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) induced by global financial institutions. Notably "owing to the stipulations of [the] International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan, the Government of India dismantled its protectionist economic policies, internal licensing and redistributions schemes" (LaDousa 2014: 7). This scenario altered the "political economy of education" and led to the creation of a "discursive framework" within which education has been thoroughly commercialised (Mukhopadhyay–Sarangapani 2018: 9). Further driving this process, India's aspirational middle class, shifting norms of consumption, and the pervasive dream of social mobility associated with new (global) economic opportunities was a significant push factor. In sync with this emerged the local advocates of "school choice" in collusion with larger global networks, media, and neo-liberal states who advocate a free school market, especially low-cost private schooling for the poor.[6] Examining this connection between local and the global, Nambissan and Ball (2010: 6) note that "[t]he Liberty Institute, the School Choice Campaign India (run by the Centre for Civil Society) and the Educare Trust as the main sites for school choice and privatization advocacy in India, but increasingly school choice/private schooling advocacy networks, also include investment companies and venture capitalists looking to new market opportunities in India." In connection with this institutional support, individual policy entrepreneurs (IPE) like James Tooley, Pauline Dixon, and Sugata Mitra proactively worked to establish a free-flowing schooling market (Nambissan–Ball 2010). Due to the combined effect of national and global intuitional school choice advocacy networks, IPE, and the embracing of the free market economy, terminology and concepts such as public-private partnerships (PPP), the outsourcing of educational services, education entrepreneurship, joint ventures, low-cost schools for the poor, education start-ups, and philanthropic drives became part of the policies and practices of the Indian state.

Nambissan and Ball (2010: 4) note that "since 2000 the involvement of the private sector, along with Non-Governmental Organisations and corporate players, has received guarded mention in a couple of policy documents, but official policy still [remains] shy [in terms of] openly acknowledg[ing] the role of the market in schooling for the poor." Various provincial governments such

6 The terms 'low-cost school' and 'low-fee school' are used synonymously.

as those of Delhi, Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, etc. have openly entered into memorandums of understanding (MoU) with private companies about a range of issues such as creating infrastructure for government schools, arranging mid-day meals for children, training teachers about information technology tools, and developing curricula and assessment tools (Nambissan–Ball 2010). The Indian government in its recently released *New Education Policy – NEP 2020*[7] vouched for a "tight but light" form of regulation of private schools that is wholly in sync with its pre-existing neo-liberal agenda of encouraging a free education market (Tilak 2021; Jha 2018; Nambissan 2012). Both central and provincial governments[8] have made only fragmented attempts to regulate[9] various activities of private schools such as increases in annual tuition fees, reserving seats for children from economically weaker strata of society, and the provision of infrastructure as per the *Right to Education Act – RTE 2009*[10] to ensure greater accessibility and regulate the education system. Such regulations do not deal with wider structural issues such as governance, funding, curricula, and pedagogical practices (Sarangapani 2018) nor dynamic frames like the "school ethos" which contextually engages with schools' systemic attributes and "everydayness" (Kapoor 2018: 242). Rather than taking holistic care of education, reducing expenditure and increasing revenue have become the rule of thumb. The budget presented amid the pandemic in February 2021 involved significant cuts in expenditure on school education (*Right to Education Forum* 2021).[11] Governments have adopted PPP, contracted out underperforming schools, and, more recently, merged schools to reduce the state's presence and indirectly encourage the private sector.

The Indian state is the largest education provider, with 74% of children enrolled in government-run schools at the elementary level, although the private sector with its schools-for-profit is incessantly growing as a significant stakeholder (DISE 2017–18). In principle "[while] the presence of for-profit educational institutions is not legal in India, profit is finding a place and legitimacy through various avenues, policy itself being one of them" (Jha 2018: 44). Due to the force

7 *The National Education Policy of India 2020 – NEP 2020*

8 Education is part of Concurrent List in the Indian Constitution which means both Union and provincial governments can make laws about education.

9 A few provincial states in India such as Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Bihar, etc., have implemented regulations such as putting a cap on the maximum permissible annual increase in tuition fees by private schools (Karelia 2019).

10 *The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 – RTE 2009*, https://www.education.gov.in/en/rte .

11 http://rteforumindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Ministry-of-Finance.pdf [Last access: 30 11 2021]

of pervasive neoliberal ecology, some provincial states have even "deregulated schools to a greater extent" to help them to run their business (Sarangapani 2018: 156). Consequently, a "new discursive regime" has emerged whereby the concepts of quality, efficiency, and accountability have been attached to private schools (Mukhopadhyay–Sarangapani 2018). The binary that private is "good" and the government is "bad" is becoming embedded, although the private education sphere is "diversified" and there is no strong empirical evidence that all private schools are good (Singh 2018). Mukhopadhyay and Sarangapani (2018: 11), in imagining the private route as a pure "business model," note that "these school[s] range from those offering international baccalaureate school education programmes at astronomically high fees [to] the elite to a spectrum of schools with a graded fee structure that cater to the highly segmented new middle classes […] to the low-fee paying unrecognised schools [that cater] to those from the lower rungs of the stratified social order aspiring to reach the middle classes." Private schools are for those who can pay and government schools are for those who cannot. Government schools are seen by many as a "last resort," as over the last decade they have become the "only [resort] for the extremely marginalised sections of the population […]" (Mukhopadhyay–Sarangapani 2018: 12). Taking demand-side factors into account, researchers have found that unequipped[12] and partly dysfunctional government schools are unable to meet the expectations of rising middle classes or the struggling lower classes that see middle-class status as desirable and obtainable through a job-oriented English-medium education (De et al. 2002; LaDousa 2014; Sarangapani 2018; Singh 2018; Kumar–Choudhary 2020). Many scholars see the desire for social mobility obtainable through an English-medium education and private schools with specialised coaching classes as a major driver of the flourishing of private schools (LaDousa 2014; Sarangapani 2018; Harinath–Nagaraju 2021).

THE IDEA OF SCHOOL-MARKETING STRATEGIES

Unlike public (government) schools, private schools operate at liberty, working according to their own terms and conditions and admitting students selectively to suit their market interests (French–Kingdon 2010; Jimenez et al. 1991). Chubb and

12 As per the *Right to Education Forum* report (2019), "only 12.7% [of] schools in India complied with RTE 2009 norms such as [the] student-teacher ratio, boundary walls, functional toilets, [and provision of] drinking water." http://rteforumindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Year-9-Stocktaking-Report-RTE-Forum-draft.pdf [Last access: 30 11 2021].

Moe (1997: 1067) observe that "private schools do provide services in exchange [for] payment and [are] hence engaged [in] pleas[ing] their consumer students and parents." On the other hand, public schools are squarely regulated and work along predefined policy lines. Rather, "[p]ublic schools must take whoever walks in the door, they do not have the luxury of being able to select the kind of students best suited to organizational goals and structure – it is the latter that must do virtually all the adapting if a harmonious fit is to be achieved" (Chubb–Moe 1988: 1079). Private schools make special effort to build a name and fame for their brand as the "best" amongst parents. Such proactive advocacy has led to the emergence of binary views of "government schools versus private schools" that gives preference to the latter and paves the way for the realisation of their intended market expansion goals and profit-making. Private schools "by virtue of trust and shared values" (Ball 2007: 85) not only widen their networks but sharpen their competitive edge by weaving a "narrative of enterprise and entrepreneurism" (Ball 2007: 148). Jennings (2010: 244) notes that "schools use multiple methods to enrol a higher achieving student population, including signalling to families during the recruitment process, using the city's data management system to their advantage, creating alliances with junior high schools, and learning the ranking preferences of the students." Each school uses a combination of strategies to negotiate and convince parents by promising that their "delivery of education" will be productive and exceedingly remunerative for their children in the future (St. John–Ridenour 2001). Private schooling in India involves "diversified markets" each with their own "entrepreneurial localities" (Ball 2007: 148). Being the least regulated type, such schools have huge leeway to tap into and reap profit by influencing parental decisions to attract admissions based on numerous 'selling points' such as English-medium education, useful courses, good grades, co-curricular activities, the security of children, guarantees of a place in prominent higher education institutions, and better job opportunities.

RESEARCH METHOD, OBJECTIVES, AND FIELD SETTING

This study, exploratory in nature, attempts to understand the marketing strategies of private schools in a small provincial town of Rajasthan in Northern India. It seeks to explore how the private school market operates in aspiring urban India today, and attempts to answer a few pertinent questions, including what are the methods schools employ, as competing suppliers, to attract parents? In what ways do schools negotiate with parents? What are the practices and strategies schools adopt and use to influence parents, and what are the different

practices schools are engaged in to increase and sustain their profits in the competitive education market operating in Alwar city?

Alwar, "a medium-sized city" (Lall 2001), is located in the National Capital Region (NCR), mid-way between Jaipur, the capital city of Rajasthan, and Delhi, the national capital of India. Before the independence of India in 1947, Alwar was the administrative seat of the princely state of Alwar. Mishra (2012: 35) notes that "after 1949, control of city administration transferred from princely rule to the state government." As per the census of 2011, the city has a population of 381,400. Alwar, through various "master plans," has been re-planned as a counter-attraction for potential migrants to Delhi with the aim of transforming the city into a dynamic urban growth centre (Mishra 2012). In recent decades, Alwar city has emerged as an important centre of education with regard to industrial centres and the number of educational institutions in the region (NCR Planning Board 2021). Schools and school-plus-coaching operations, some with brand names and/or national franchisees, have mushroomed in the city. Rajasthan has emerged as one of the centres of the rapid uptake of the privatisation of education in the country. Over 48% of children are attending private schools in the state (DISE 2017–18). However, on a regional basis children attend private schools in greater proportions in urban areas. In Alwar city, over 85% of children are enrolled in private schools (DISE 2015–16). Alwar city is witnessing a thriving market of school-plus-coaching[13] and has been growing along the lines of Kota, another of Rajasthan's cities known nationally for its preparatory school-plus-coaching operations (Rao 2017).

SAMPLING AND DATA COLLECTION

Data was collected from private schools (n=35) of different types to elicit detailed information about their strategies for operating and competing in the growing education market in Alwar city.[14] Schools from all parts of the city were

13 School-plus-coaching is a unique type of school that combines both schooling and coaching. It is one of the highly sought-after choices of parents, especially of those who wish to send their wards to elite higher education institutions of the country to study professional courses in the field of medicine, engineering, and business after schooling. School-plus-coaching is seen as an 'all in one,' or 'one-stop solution' by parents.

14 The researcher's engagement with the field started way back in 2009. However, the data presented in this paper are from the year 2016 when the researcher concluded his doctoral thesis. However, the researcher is continuously in touch with the field, especially regarding his forthcoming longitudinal research on school choices and their impacts on Muslims.

covered. However, areas such as Surya Nagar, Divakiri, Mannaka, Hasan Khan Mewati Nagar, Ambedkar Nagar, Lal Kuan, and Malviya Nagar were especially the targets in terms of collecting data from families on their choice of schools, planning, and strategies. Data from sampled families (n=105) belonging to three selected localities (namely Divakiri, Mannaka, and Surya Nagar) were collected to understand parental views about the operation and strategies of private schools. Besides parents in selected localities, various stakeholders such as owners of schools (n=15), members of school management (n=15), teachers (n=40), parents (n=105), and educational authorities (n=5) in the city administration were also contacted to obtain relevant data and identify narratives and their views about this issue. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to identify schools and families. This was done with the purpose of zeroing in on families with school-going children and reaching out to schools of various types to meet the aim of the study. The typology of schools was created based on their fees (high, moderate, and low),[15] management (government, government-aided,[16] and unaided), and medium of instruction (Hindi and English). These factors were adopted, with due deliberation after collecting the data, to devise a typology of schools in the city. However, this typology is not exhaustive and is limited to a small-town context in India.

The study covers schools from grades one to twelve. Despite having observed differentiation in the nature of the functioning of schools and parental expectations related to the grade/level of school/children, the study identifies some similarities in terms of business interests, selecting intake, networking, and competitive strategies of the schools. However, a notable difference was witnessed in the case of school-plus-coaching operations, which often networked with junior/other private or government schools in and around the city. This approach to grade-10+ schooling makes distinct sense, especially concerning school-plus-coaching as it prepares students after completion of the tenth grade for admission into the elite institutions of the country, including the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), the All India Institute of Medical Sciences

15 Fees of 500 Indian Rupees (INR) and above, within the range of 300–500, and less than 300 per month were considered high, moderate, and low, respectively, for the purpose of this study (1 USD = 76.52 INR, as of May 5th, 2022).

16 Schools receiving financial aid, especially for the salaries of teachers, are known as government-aided (private) schools. The government partially regulates these schools by putting a cap on tuition fees and enforcing norms like the teacher-student ratio, curricula, and provision of mid-day meals to students, etc. Government-aided schools collect tuition fees and other charges for infrastructural development, stationery, etc., to make up for costs not covered by the government grant, thus they generate considerable income. Government-aided schools normally charge moderate fees.

(AIIMS), Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs), etc. In-depth interviews with an interview schedule having both closed and open-ended questions and participant observation were employed for primary data collection from the relevant stakeholders. Additionally, informal discussions and interviews ranging from 40 minutes to 190 minutes (in some cases spread over two to three days given the availability of the interviewee) were conducted at the respondent's house or a place convenient to them. Interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed into English. Pseudonyms have been used to secure the privacy of respondents.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

School publicity and networking

Private schools, driven by the market, take generating publicity seriously as they believe in proactively influencing families' decisions concerning their choice of school for their wards (Cucchiara–Horvat 2009). Schools prospectively plan and implement various strategies to ensure market gains. However, since schools differ in terms of their economic standing, type of management, medium of instruction, location, tuition fee, etc., so do their strategies for influencing the targeted clientele. For instance, Ramcharan Yadav, owner of a school-plus-coaching operation in Alwar, when explaining the significance of informing parents said that he "prefers to distribute pamphlets, [use] wall paintings, and street announcements to inform parents […and] survive in the competitive market." According to Ramcharan Yadav, parents need information about schools as they compare them. Hence, schools must showcase their past results, especially those of students who graduated with distinction/merit on board examinations and/or in a higher rank on entrance tests for admission into the Indian Institute of Technology-Joint Entrance Examinations (IIT-JEE), All India Engineering Entrance Examinations (AIEEE), All India Pre-Medical/ Pre-Dental Entrance Test (AIPMT), and Common Proficiency Test (CPT). Schools also inform parents and attempt to create an impact through WhatsApp, Facebook, roadside billboards, attractive pamphlets/flyers, wall paintings, etc. Hari Gandhi, principal of a low-cost private school in Alwar, shared that "the result of the school speaks for itself and it attracts parents. News spreads from one family to another family within a short time. Though word of mouth makes a huge difference, we do also ensure that information must reach parents, no matter what means we have to adopt." As indicated in Table 1, private schools

adopt various strategies to influence parents and attract admissions in the targeted localities.

Table 1. *School strategies for influencing parents*

	Strategy	Type of school
1	Publishing information in newspapers and magazines	High-fee schools and school-plus-coaching operations
2	Advertisements on local television channels	High-fee schools and school-plus-coaching operations
3	Networking with other/junior schools	High-fee and moderate-fee schools and school-plus-coaching operations
4	Facebook	All types of schools and school-plus-coaching operations
5	WhatsApp	All types of schools and school-plus-coaching operations
6	Roadside billboards	High-fee and moderate-fee schools and school-plus-coaching operations
7	Wall paintings in residential areas	Moderate-fee schools, low-fee private schools and school-plus-coaching operations
8	Announcements through a loudspeaker in localities/streets	Moderate-fee charging schools and school-plus-coaching operations
9	Pamphlet distribution	Moderate-fee schools and school-plus-coaching operations
10	Door-to-door campaign[17]	Moderate-fee schools, school-plus-coaching, and low-fee schools
11	Invoking identities related to caste[18], religion, and domicile	Moderate and low-fee schools, and school-plus-coaching operations

Source: Based on field data.

Not all schools are equally equipped to spend resources on marketing strategies. Some schools, especially the high-fee charging ones, use expensive methods such as advertising on local television channels, in newspapers, and on

17 Government schools occasionally adopt this method at the start of the academic year as part of an admission drive to increase the enrolment ratio according to state-policy-mandated instructions.

18 Caste constitutes the basic social structure of Hindu society in India. It is based on a four-fold hierarchical Varna system: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra, arranged in a fixed order in terms of honour. While Brahmins (priests) are at the top of the ladder followed by Kshatriya (warriors), and Vaishya (businesses), Shudra are situated at the lowest level and are engaged in semi-skilled and manual-labour, often labelled as 'polluted' occupations, serve the castes above. Each caste is a hereditary and endogenous group. Caste-like structures are also found in other religions in India such as Islam, Sikhism, and Christianity. However, the caste system has been undergoing a noticeable transformation in the last couple of decades mainly due to modern education, affirmative action, and constitutionalism-driven representative democracy.

attractive billboards along major roads of the city, whereas the low-fee schools use relatively cheaper options like wall paintings, distributing pamphlets, and door-to-door campaigns. Low-cost schools focus on nearby clientele and prefer to approach parents directly through teams of teachers. They invoke informal ties based on caste, kinship, religion, and nativity as the chief connecting points with parents. When the researcher asked a respondent parent from Divakiri who was sending his children to a local school that had newly opened why he had chosen it, the respondent assertively answered that "if a boy of the locality has ventured to start work, we have to help him." In another instance, a new school was opened by a relative along with a native of the Mannaka locality with the catchy promise to locals that the school would provide religious education (Arabic and Urdu as optional courses) along with modern education. This invocation of religion helped the school management to connect and negotiate with Muslims in Mannaka. Additionally, the management of local schools (owners) often personally visit families on occasions such as when a member of the family is ill, has met with an accident, or returned from a pilgrimage, and also at times of festivals, ceremonies, or celebrations. Evidently, offering religious education and personal relations conjointly act as major influences. During fieldwork, the researcher often observed that school management undertook informal visits with the help of a native, relative, or friend in the locality, as these visits strengthened ties with families in a neighbourhood, locality, or community by involving caste, religion, and nativity.

Many schools (both high and moderate fee-charging), especially the school-plus-coaching operations, network with various junior private or government schools in and around the city. They do so by offering scholarship-related tests to attract parents and admissions at the start of the academic session. During scholarship tests, the schools rank children, award scholarships, and distribute prizes on the spot in the form of attractively designed and coloured printed calendars, diaries, and wall clocks with the name and logo of the school along with photos of gods and goddesses. According to Sompal, owner of a school-plus-coaching operation, "the distribution of prizes with school information printed on these items helps generate publicity about the schools." He further informed that "people [promoters of schools] use printed items [that people like to keep safe] as these items (especially calendars and diaries) have pictures of gods or goddesses on them. Nobody would like to hurt gods or goddesses." In this form of outreach to parents, schools purposively rank children and assure graded fee concessions based on the marks they obtain in scholarship tests. If a child gets a higher score (ranging from 80 to 90%), schools waive 60% of the fee, whereas if the child obtains above 90% some schools fully waive the admission and tuition fee. For instance, Raj Academy, a school-plus-coaching

operation with the tagline "the only alternative for the best education at a low fee," besides offering graded fee concessions based on students' scores obtained in the last qualifying examination, gives a 100% concession to one student in each cohort of every academic year. Such well-calculated yet seemingly generous price-setting strategies[19] that involve offering incentives and benefits help schools to negotiate and convince parents. Notably, such acts by schools appear to be powerful means of enhancing their market power by increasing the pool of clientele by "collu[ding] or co-operat[ing] with […] rival groups" (Davies et al. 2002: 94).

English, quality education, and South-Indian teachers

English is "linked with middle-class jobs, social distinction and the elite status" (Nambissan 2012: 53) and is one of the factors of attraction used by private schools in Alwar. English-medium schooling is seen as the most saleable factor by school management. Prem Malwani, principal of a private school, says "parents are rushing to admit their children to our newly opened English-medium school. Many parents from our own Hindi-medium school are shifting their ward/s to our English-medium school." The study witnessed many cases of school management converting their Hindi-medium schools into English-medium ones, while some English-medium schools opened within the compounds of pre-existing Hindi-medium schools or in commercially important locations around the city.[20] Given the status of and demand for English, De et al. (2002: 532) note that "schools take pride in their teaching of English – the nursery rhymes, the 'good morning' and the grammar, or train children to say 'papa' instead of 'baap.'[21] English is often equated with quality education (Nambissan 2012). Most parents believe that children taught in English are well-mannered and brighter than ones who are taught in the Hindi medium.

19 The pricing strategies of schools are defined with respect to their nature of ownership, number of teaching/non-teaching staff, overall expenditure, and the socioeconomic profile of clientele. Fees in elite English-medium schools are thus obviously the highest (as they cater to the rich and have better infrastructure and adequately qualified teachers), unlike low-fee private schools which have a low profile and cater to lower-middle to lower-income groups (Philipson ed. 2008: 41). The rests of the schools fall in-between these two extremes.

20 Many schools were found to impart education in English medium only until the 5th year, teaching only a few subjects in English while the rest are taught in Hindi. A major reason for this is said to be the unavailability of teachers qualified to teach in English.

21 A vernacular term used to mean "father" most frequently used among Meo Muslims in Alwar.

Christian missionaries in Alwar city are popular as they provide "good" English-medium education. Parents trust Christian missionaries for their honest management and for maintaining a disciplined atmosphere. Notably, most missionaries in Alwar come from the southern parts of India. Most parents whose children attend missionary schools agreed that "missionaries are honest and they are especially good at speaking and teaching English." The concepts "South Indian" and "missionaries"[22] were equated with quality (English) education. Interestingly, employing South Indian English teachers or designating a school as a Christian missionary English-medium school is part of the strategy of some schools of promoting their delivery of quality education[23]. Many schools in the city are named the Kerala[24] Academy, Christian missionary school, Christian English-medium school, etc., and promise to impart "high quality" English-medium education. Hence, being a "missionary school," "English medium" and having a "South Indian teacher" to teach English combined are considered a guaranteed means of thriving in the competitive education market in the city.

Promising full security and responsibility for children

The security and safety of children seem to be some of the major concerns of parents which private schools readily capitalise upon. Notably, transportation, crossing roads, maintaining discipline, and in some cases controlling and/or remediating the difficult behaviour of children were found to be issues of critical concern among parents. Schools that openly declare their policy is addressing such parental concerns, deemed a "duty of care" (Winch 2018: 74), gain a competitive edge in the city education market.

Ramcharan Yadav, principal and owner of a private school, said that "we take total responsibility for the child from school to home and vice versa. The safety and security of the child is our responsibility." He adds that "parents do appreciate it, and they send their children to our school. Parents look forward to getting such assurances from the schools and we offer these." Chancellor (1928: 724) aptly argues that "parents send their children to private school

22 Parents use the terms "South Indian" and "missionaries" interchangeably mainly because missionaries (Christian) in Alwar come from South India.

23 This is truer for high and moderate-fee-charging schools than for low-cost schools. Many parents in Mannaka and Divakiri stated that low-cost schools employ a good number of teachers only at the beginning of the academic session.

24 Kerala is a provincial state in South India.

because these schools [use] busses to fetch and drop children, which relieve parents of the fear that their children might get injured in accidents or their grown-up daughters kidnapped by goshawks [sic!]." Interestingly, concern for the safety of the child goes to the extent that many schools lock the main gate of the school until the close of the day to increase discipline and help correct any deviant behaviour by children. Schools take pride in claiming that they will discipline difficult children and the same is promised to parents whenever the school feels it is relevant and necessary to convince parents. Teachers on door-to-door campaigns often plead with parents to give them at least "one chance" to reform difficult children. Ashraf Khan, a daily wage labourer from Mannaka, informed us that "school is good as it has put my children on track, as expected." He further added that "[my] children have learned good manners. There is a rule in the school that the children do *salaam* [pay respect] first when they come home from school or meet elders of the family anywhere." Rambati, a homemaker in Divakiri, said "teachers came to my home and pleaded with me to give them one chance to discipline my notorious and difficult child and then see the result." She said, "when the teacher came, my son climbed up a tree, the teachers themselves got him down and took him to school. They took total responsibility for the children." However, the researcher came to know of many instances when children from private schools, especially low-cost ones, transferred to government schools and dropped out due to poor learning outcomes, school fees, the child's lack of interest or failure, or other household engagements especially in the case of a female child. Nevertheless, private schools thrive by proactively engaging in perception building and creating a "brand name" that gives parents hope and promises full security and responsibility for their children.

Showing off, lucrative promises, and prospective geographies

People find it lucrative to invest in and profit from the school market. People with odd educational qualifications such as Bachelor of Legislative Law (LLB), Master of Science (M.Sc.), and polytechnic certificate holders, etc., who are not necessarily trained to teach are opening and managing schools. The ownership of many schools, especially low-cost ones, is temporary and profit centred. Schools are often sold or transferred from one owner to another, and some are closed at the very moment the owner gets a government job and/or is unable to withstand the competitive nature of the school market. Karamchand, a teacher, and coordinator in a private school, once had his own school. He eventually had to close it down as he could not sustain it due to the severe competition.

He said that "parents like big show-off [schools]." Expansive claims (partly only on paper), huge buildings, attractive decorations, and infrastructure are used as means of attracting parents. Hence, "[…plentiful] resources and strategic machinations to attract parents are some of the […] prerequisites [for] surviv[ing] the cut-throat competition in this field" Karamchand ruefully claims.

Geographical location, imbued with caste, religious, and domicile-related identities, influence school strategies and their market base. Prem Malwani, principal of a private school, said "many parents, especially Meo Muslims and upper-caste Hindu families, avoid [my] school as it is located in a Scheduled Caste (Shudra[25]) locality." The phenomenon of "labelling and avoiding certain locations" is frequently used by many schools in the city in their own favour. Some elite schools avoid taking on children from certain locations as these are inhabited by people of castes and religious groups considered polluted, inferior, and unwanted. Children of the Meo and Meena[26] communities are considered notorious and are thus not admitted to certain schools in Alwar. Lubienski et al. (2009: 624) observed that "schools avoid areas with students who may be most likely to damage their market position." Schools focus on certain areas of potentially great business value, especially those which are home to people with uncontested identities and stable earnings. Areas like Surya Nagar, Hasan Khan Mewati Nagar, and Malviya Nagar in Alwar city are considered desirable by many elite schools as these localities are largely inhabited by a prospectively better (upper-caste) or suitable (middle-class) clientele. Narayanan (2013: 4) observes that "private schools choose a place where they are better accessible to people and where they can more easily service a large clientele." To specifically target the burgeoning middle class in the city, private schools, especially high-fee charging ones, have started opening branches near the Delhi-Tijara highway in Alwar city. The study finds two main reasons for this. First, schools consider the middle-class townships or gated communities that are developing the near Delhi-Tijara highway as prospective entrepreneurial localities. Second, since Delhi-Tijara Road is a national highway transportation route, facilities are available near this road to the city and nearby rural areas. Geography thus plays a critical role in how choices are made both by parents and schools (Bell 2009).

25 A term used for low caste groups often considered untouchables in caste hierarchy among Hindus in India.

26 Meena is scheduled tribe community found in Rajasthan and its nearby states in India. Meena tribe was given scheduled tribe status in 1954 to provide them reservation in employment and educational institutions.

Lipman (2012: 13) argues that schools run themselves as 'businesses' by strategically framing their policies to earn [a] profit and sustain [their] product[s] in the market [for] schooling. Schools use numerous propositions to convince parents. Interestingly, some schools, especially the low-fee charging ones, promise to prepare children for admission to Navodaya Vidyalaya.[27] For instance, Rajaram, a scrap worker in Divakiri, chose a school because it promised to prepare his child to pass the admission test for Navodaya Vidyalaya. Schools make various promises which at times remain on paper, such as guaranteeing better marks, the availability of teachers for all subjects, better English-medium education, and norms mandated by RTE 2009.[28] Nambissan (2012: 54) observed that "the failure to enforce and monitor the regulatory framework within which private schools are to function has left the educational landscape open to corrupt practice and manipulation as they survive [by] wooing clientele by dictating their own norms, negotiating with quality." Sarangapani's (2018) study of the education market in Hyderabad identified similar instances of corruption via the nexus between bureaucracy and school authorities, paving the way for compromises over quality and equity.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that private schools use numerous strategies to attract parents and make a profit in the competitive market of education. Schools' strategies differ in terms of their financial profiles and the nature of the targeted clientele. High-fee schools use expensive means like advertising through newspapers, attractive roadside billboards, or local television channels, whereas moderate and low-fee schools use relatively cheaper means like pamphlet distribution, door-to-door visits, wall paintings, and street announcements. Schools also use more basic approaches such as appealing to kinship ties, religion, and nativity as well as more modern means like television and social media to reach out to parents. They believe in creating a "niche" by offering services on-demand like low-cost English-medium education, tuition, coaching, scholarships, graded fee concessions, transportation, security, and assurances about improving child behaviour. Schools freely and competitively define the

27 Navodaya Vidyalayas are government run co-educational residential institutions for classes VI to XII. These schools are managed by Navodaya Vidyalaya Smiti, an autonomous body under the Ministry of Education, Government of India. See https://navodaya.gov.in/nvs/en/Academic/school-administration/facilities-in-jnvs/students/ .

28 https://www.education.gov.in/en/rte [Last access: 01 12 2021]

price at which they offer education services and smartly market their products (education) using a variety of strategic approaches to promote their services. Schools assiduously offer "hope" and promise quality education, admission into elite higher education institutions, and support dreams of offspring getting a high paid job in the thriving global economy as chief "selling points." Market-driven schools impart education in exchange for payment, further pushing socio-economically underprivileged groups to the margins, thus raising concerns about equity and equality. Over the decades, the growing school market has metamorphosed into a most polymorphous and polytypic entity. Low-cost private English-medium schools and school-plus-coaching operations are profound manifestations of this burgeoning diverse school market(s) in India.

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