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BOTH the public discourse and policy debate around the provisioning of basic 'education to all' has for far too long remained captive to polarized views. None, however, is more distressing (and harmful) than the one on public (state) and private (non-profit/for profit) schools. Even as many parents, rich and poor, dissatisfied with and mistrustful of the quality of the public education system, are increasingly withdrawing their wards and placing them in private schools, votaries of public education remain convinced that the private sector, driven primarily by the profit motive, will 'under-produce' education, particularly for the poor.

Unsurprisingly thus, government policy and rules make it inordinately difficult to start a private school unless, of course, the promoter is well-heeded, connected and unscrupulous. Neither side is willing to admit the existence of wide diversity in both public and private schools – not just in terms of quality or associated costs but equally, the motivation driving the provisioning. Equally, it does not help that though we have a reasonable idea of both the inputs into and outcomes of public schooling, there is little empirical research on the private provisioning of education.

Now that the government has announced its decision to notify the Right to Education Act, it is important to revisit the debate. Otherwise, given what we know about the rules being framed to govern the act, we may well be ringing in the death knell of private education in the country. A recent book, *The Beautiful Tree* by James Tooley, Penguin, 2009, makes a compelling case that deserves serious consideration.

Unlike most votaries of private education, Tooley focuses attention on a new, and relatively under-explored phenomenon, private schools for the poor. Even more interestingly, he discusses schools that are set up, not as charity, but by entrepreneurs hoping to make a reasonable living by providing a much needed service. Even as much of his data comes from urban schools in the old city of Hyderabad, he also provides accounts from similar schools in contexts as divergent as Ghana, Nigeria, Zimbabwe and rural China.

The results are surprising. In the main, private schools, both recognized and unrecognized, are characterized by smaller class sizes (lower pupil-teacher ratio), higher teacher commitment (teacher attendance) and their students score higher on standardized tests in key curriculum subjects than do children in government schools. Only in matters of infrastructure, par-

ticularly playgrounds, are public schools superior. And finally, the higher standards in private schools are maintained for a small fraction of the per-pupil teacher cost in government schools, i.e., they are more cost-efficient and effective.

If true, the fact that students are shifting from public to private schools should come as no surprise, even though the former are free and the latter not. And note, a large chunk of this demand is being met by schools in marginal settlement areas, with poor infrastructure and teachers with far lower formal qualifications than their public school counterparts.

Critics would immediately argue, and not without justification, that Tooley's data base is both insufficient and possibly flawed. They point out that the really poor *cannot* afford to pay fees, that such schools 'exploit' the teachers, rarely deploy creative pedagogic methods and so on. Their primary attraction lies in the fact that they all teach English, which government schools at the primary level do not. Relying on such 'fly by night' schools to properly educate our children would thus only subject them to a grave injustice. In any case, the RTE Act, once notified, will not only legalize all private, unregistered schools, since it lays down strict criteria for what constitutes a school or teacher, the new arrangements, once in place, will substantially correct the infirmities of government schools, in particular curb teacher absenteeism by making them accountable to empowered parent associations.

There is indeed much to celebrate about the RTE Act, if all that it promises does come about. A properly functioning public school system would without doubt undercut the demand for private schooling, for why would anyone want to pay if the service is available free? But, public systems have so far been notorious under-performers and difficult to reform. If this is factored in, would we still be equally enthusiastic votaries of exclusive public provisioning?

So, if private schooling is meeting, even in part, the need and desire for education, would it not be better to make them into partners in a national enterprise – simplify regulations for registration, make available easy credit for infrastructure improvement, help with teacher training, and so on – instead of treating them as pariahs? Surely, relying on inefficient government monopoly is no answer.

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