

## The Beautiful Tree



By [James Tooley](#) | Tuesday, May 12, 2009

*Private education might be considered a privilege for the wealthy, but in India it is often considered necessary in the face of an inconsistent public education system. In the first of a series of excerpts from James Tooley's "The Beautiful Tree," the author explores education as a means of economic development on the eve of India's national elections.*

After a stint teaching philosophy of education at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa, I returned to England to complete my doctorate and later became a professor of education.

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## **children to private schools.**

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Thanks to my experiences in sub-Saharan Africa and my modest but respect able academic reputation, I was offered a commission by the World Bank's International Finance Corporation to study private schools in a dozen developing countries.

The lure of faraway places was too enticing to resist, but I was troubled by the project itself. Although I was to study private schools in developing countries, those schools were serving the middle classes and the elite. Despite my lifelong desire to help the poor, I'd somehow wound up researching bastions of privilege.

The first leg of the trip began in New York in January 2000. As if to reinforce my misgivings that the project would do little for the poor, I was flown first class to London in the inordinate luxury of the Concorde.

Forty minutes into the flight, as we cruised at twice the speed of sound and two miles above conventional air traffic, caviar and champagne were served. The boxer Mike Tyson (sitting at the front with a towel over his head for much of the journey) and singer George Michael were on the same flight. I felt lost.

From London it was on to Delhi, Chennai and Mumbai. By day, I evaluated five-star private schools and colleges that were very definitely for the privileged. By night, I was put up in unbelievably salubrious and attentive five-star hotels.

But in the evenings, sifting and chaffing with street children outside these very same hotels, I wondered what effect any of my work could have on the poor, whose desperate needs I saw all around me. I didn't just want my work to be a defense of privilege. The middle-class Indians, I felt, were wealthy already.

To me it all seemed a bit of a con: Just because they were in a "poor" country, they were able to latch onto this international assistance even though they as individuals had no pressing need for it at all. I didn't like it, but as I returned to my room and lay on the 500-thread-count Egyptian-cotton sheets, my discomfort with the program was forced to compete with a mounting sense of self-criticism.

Then one day, everything changed. Arriving in Hyderabad to evaluate brand-new private colleges at the forefront of India's hi-tech revolution, I learned that January 26th was Republic Day, a national holiday.

Left with some free time, I decided to take an autorickshaw — the three-wheeled taxis ubiquitous in India — from my posh hotel in Banjara Hills to the Charminar, the triumphal arch built at the center of Muhammad Quli Shah's city in 1591.

*My Rough Guide to India* described it as Hyderabad's "must see" attraction, and also warned that it was situated in the teeming heart of the Old City slums. That appealed to me. I wanted to see the slums for myself.

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As we traveled through the middle-class suburbs, I was struck by the ubiquity of private schools. Their signboards were on every street corner, some on fine specially constructed school buildings, but others grandly posted above shops and offices.

Of course, it was nothing more than I'd been led to expect from my meetings in India already — senior government officials had impressed me with their candor when they told me it was common knowledge that even the middle classes were all sending their children to private schools. They all did themselves. But it was still surprising to see how many there were.

We crossed the bridge over the stinking ditch that is the once-proud River Musi. Here were autorickshaws in abundance, cattle drawn carts meandering slowly with huge loads of hay, rickshaws agonizingly peddled by painfully thin men.

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My driver let me out, and told me he'd wait for an hour, but then called me back in a bewildered tone as I headed not to the Charminar but into the back streets behind. No, no, I assured him, this is where I was going, into the slums of the Old City. For the stunning thing about the drive was that private schools had not thinned out as we went from one of the poshest parts of town to the poorest.

Every where among the little stores and workshops were little private schools! I could see handwritten signs pointing to them even here on the edge of the slums. I was amazed, but also confused: Why had no one I worked with in India told me about them?

The young men at the bean-and-vegetable counter hailed me and said there was definitely someone at the Royal Grammar School just nearby, and that it was a very good private school and I should visit.

They gave me directions, and I bade farewell. But I became muddled by the multiplicity of possible right turns down alleyways followed by sharp lefts, and so asked the way of a couple of fat old men sitting alongside a butcher shop.

Their shop was the dirtiest thing I had ever seen, with entrails and various bits and pieces of meat spread out on a mucky table over which literally thousands of flies swarmed. The stench was terrible. No one else seemed the least bit bothered by it. They immediately understood where I wanted to go and summoned a young boy who was headed in the opposite direction to take me there.

He agreed without demur, and we walked quickly, not talking at all as he spoke no English. In the next street, young boys played cricket with stones as wickets and a plastic ball. One of them called me over, to shake my hand.

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**The stunning thing about the drive was that private schools**

Then we turned down another alleyway (with more boys playing cricket between makeshift houses outside of which men bathed and women did their laundry) and arrived at the Royal Grammar School, which proudly advertised, "English Medium, Recognized by the Gov't of AP." The owner, or "correspondent" as I soon came to realize he was called in Hyderabad, was in his tiny office. He enthusiastically welcomed me.

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Through that chance meeting, I was introduced to the warm, kind and quietly charismatic Mr. Fazalur Rahman Khurram and to a huge network of private schools in the slums and low-income areas of the Old City. The more time I spent with him, the more I realized that my expertise in private education might after all have something to say about my concern for the poor.



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## **Schools in the Slums of Hyderabad (Part II)**

By [James Tooley](#) | Wednesday, May 13, 2009

Slum-dwellers in India often do not have the means to gain a good education — but private sector pioneers in the city of Hyderabad are working to change that. In the second excerpt from James Tooley's book, "The Beautiful Tree," the author introduces us to some of the men on the frontlines of global education.

Order "The Beautiful Tree" [here](#).

**M**r. Fazalur Rahman Khurram was the president of an association specifically set up to cater to private schools serving the poor — the Federation of Private Schools' Management, which boasted a membership of over 500 schools all serving low-income families.

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**The old Catholic and Anglican schools were still viewed as great schools in the city, so their religious names were borrowed to signify quality to the parents.**

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Once word got around that a foreign visitor was interested in seeing private schools, Khurrum was inundated with requests for me to visit.

I spent as much time as I could over the next 10 days or so with Khurrum traveling the length and breadth of the Old City, in between doing my work for the International Finance Corporation in the new city. We visited nearly 50 private schools in some of the poorest parts of town, driving endlessly down narrow streets to schools whose owners were apparently anxious to meet me.

(Our rented car was a large white Ambassador — the Indian vehicle modeled on the old British Morris Minor, proudly used by government officials when an Indian flag on the hood signified the importance of its user — horn blaring constantly, as much to signify our own importance as to get children and animals out of the way.)

There seemed to be a private school on almost every street corner, just as in the richer parts of the city.

I visited so many, being greeted at narrow entrances by so many students, who marched me into tiny playgrounds, beating their drums, to a seat in front of the school, where I was welcomed in ceremonies officiated by senior students, while school managers garlanded me with flowers, heavy, prickly and sticky around my neck in the hot sun, which I bore stoically as I did the rounds of the classrooms.

So many private schools, some had beautiful names. Like Little Nightingale's High School, named after Sarojini Naidu, a famous "freedom fighter" in the 1940s, known by Nehru as the "Little Nightingale" for her tender English songs. Or Firdaus Flowers Convent School, that is, "flowers of heaven." The "convent" part of the name puzzled me at first, as did the many names such as St. Maria's or St. John's.

It seemed odd, since these schools were clearly run by Muslims — indeed, for a while I fostered the illusion that these saints and nuns must be in the Islamic tradition too.

But no, the names were chosen because of the connotations to parents — the old Catholic and Anglican schools were still viewed as great schools in the city, so their religious names were borrowed to signify quality to the parents. But did they really deliver a quality education? I needed to find out.

One of the first schools Khurrum took me to was Peace High School, run by 27-year-old Mohammed Wajid. Like many I was to visit, the school was in a converted family home, fronting on Edi Bazaar, the main but narrow, bustling thoroughfare that stretched out behind the Charminar. A bold sign proclaimed the school's name.

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**The school was called a high school, but like others bearing this name, it included kindergarten to 10th grade.**

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Through a narrow metal gate, I entered a small courtyard, where Wajid had provided some simple slides and swings for the children to play on. By the far wall were hutches of pet rabbits for the children to look after. Wajid's office was to one side, the family's rooms on the other. We climbed a narrow, dark, dirty staircase to enter the classrooms.

They too were dark, with no doors, and noise from the streets easily penetrated the

barred but unglazed windows. The children all seemed incredibly pleased to see their foreign visitor and stood to greet me warmly.

The walls were painted white but were discolored by pollution, heat, and the general wear-and-tear of children. From the open top floor of his building, Wajid pointed out the locations of five other private schools, all anxious to serve the same students in his neighborhood.

Wajid was quietly unassuming, but clearly caring and devoted to his children. He told me that his mother founded Peace High School in 1973 to provide "a peaceful oasis in the slums" for the children. Wajid, her youngest son, began teaching in the school in 1988, when he was himself a 10th-grade student in another private school nearby.

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**School fees are made affordable to parents who are largely day laborers and rickshaw pullers, market traders and mechanics, earning perhaps a dollar a day.**

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Having then received his bachelor's in commerce at a local university college and begun training as an accountant, his mother asked him to take over the school in 1998, when she felt she must retire from active service. She asked him to consider the "less blessed" people in the slums, and that his highest ambition should be to help them, as befitting his Muslim faith.

This seemed to have come as a blow to his ambitions. His elder brothers had all pursued careers, and several were now living overseas in Dubai, London and Paris, working in the jewelry business. But Wajid felt obliged to follow his mother's wishes and so began running the school. He was still a bachelor, he told me, because he wanted to build up his school. Only when his financial prospects were certain could he marry.

The school was called a high school, but like others bearing this name, it included kindergarten to 10th grade. Wajid had 285 children and 13 teachers when I first met him, and he also taught mathematics to the older children.

His fees ranged from 60 rupees to 100 rupees per month (\$1.33 to \$2.22 at the exchange rates then), depending on the children's grade, the lowest for kindergarten and rising as the children progressed through school.

These fees were affordable to parents, he told me, who were largely day laborers and rickshaw pullers, market traders and mechanics — earning perhaps a dollar a day. Parents, I was told, valued education highly and would scrimp and save to ensure that their children got the best education they could afford.

*Editor's Note: This is the second part in a three-part series from James Tooley's book, "The Beautiful Tree." Copyright 2009 James Tooley. Reprinted with permission of Cato Institute Press.*





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## Private Education and Development: A Missed Connection? (Part III)

By [James Tooley](#) | Thursday, May 14, 2009

Despite documented successes of private school in slums, "The Beautiful Tree" author James Tooley found that many international organizations as well as the Indian government were quick to disregard the phenomenon. In the third excerpt from his book, he relates his experiences with bureaucracy and long-held ideas of the development field.

Order "The Beautiful Tree" [here](#).

**O**ddly, my "discovery" of private schools serving the poor was no discovery at all, or at least not to some people.

Leaving Hyderabad, I returned to Delhi to meet again with World Bank staff before moving on to continue my "field trip" in other countries.

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**Poor parents in some of the most destitute places on this planet are flocking to private schools because public schools are inadequate and unaccountable.**

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I was eager and excited to tell them what I'd discovered in the back streets of the Old City of Hyderabad and to gain their insights on the way forward.

They weren't at all impressed. I met with a group of staff members in their pleasant offices, replete with potted ferns and pretty posters of cute children. Most, it was true, had never heard of private schools serving the poor, and they were frankly puzzled about how schools charging only \$10 a year could exist, except through charity.

And they told me that I had found some nongovernmental organizations working in the slums, opening a few schools, that was all. They told me this, assuming I was simply misguided, even though I had told them it was something else altogether.

However, one of the group, Sajitha Bashir, had herself seen a few private schools in Tamil Nadu — although she insisted there were none in Karnataka, where she was now doing a study, so they weren't a universal phenomenon.

In front of the group, she launched into a tirade against such schools. They were ripping off the poor, she said, run by unscrupulous businesspeople who didn't care a fig for anything other than profits.

This didn't gel at all with what I'd seen in Hyderabad — how could such people devote their weekends to science competitions and cyber-olympics if money was their sole motivation? I was not at all convinced and hesitantly related some details of what I'd found. No one considered my information very significant. Those who hadn't heard of these schools simply shrugged, and the meeting soon dissolved.

Afterward, Sajitha took me downstairs for coffee, clearly trying to be helpful in letting me see the errors of my ways.

So the private schools *might* be there, some might even be better than the public schools, but that's only because they are selective "They take the cream of the cream," she said (and I had to force myself to remember that we were talking about parents earning a dollar or two a day), leaving the public schools much worse off.

Anyway, continuing the theme that only a few were any good, she continued, "Most of the schools are shocking, there is a shocking turnover of teachers, they're not trained, they're not committed, and the proprietors know that they can simply get others because there is a long list of people waiting to come in."

But her main problem, clearly based on well-intentioned personal convictions, was the question of equality. Because some children, the poorest of the poor, are left behind in the "sink" public schools, the private schools were exacerbating inequality, not improving the situation at all, she said.

For that reason, we must devote all our efforts toward improving the public schools, not get carried away by what was happening in a few private schools.

For Sajitha it was clear: If many — or even a few — parents had higher aspirations for their children and wanted to send them to private schools, then "they should not be allowed to do so, because this is unfair."

It's unfair because it makes it even worse for those left behind. This puzzled me. Why should we treat the poor in this homogenous way? Would we — Sajitha and I — be happy if we were poor, living in those slums, and unable to do the best for our children, whatever our meager funds allowed? But I said nothing.

As we parted, amicably enough, she told me that there was quite a bit of development literature about private schools for the poor in any case, and so I shouldn't go on too much about my "discovery" as I had done today, as people would only laugh. She gave me a couple of references to look up.

And she was right. I wondered at my own poor detective work in not having located these references before. Perhaps my own lack of recognition for what was taking place was excusable. In the writings she pointed me to, and subsequent ones that I found, discussion of private schools for the poor was somehow veiled, or referred to tangentially, and ignored in subsequent writings.

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**Some believed that because the poorest of the poor were left behind in the “sink” public schools, the private schools were exacerbating inequality.**

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It was certainly not headlined in any conclusions or policy implications — to which many of us lazily turn when we digest development writings. It was almost as if the writers concerned were embarrassed or bewildered by private schools for the poor.

They could write about these schools in passing, but instead of their leaping out at them as some thing of great significance — as they had to me when I first “discovered” them in Hyderabad — they didn’t seem to impinge in any significant way on the writers’ policy proposals or future discussions.

Even for those who didn’t deny the existence of private schools for the poor, everyone, it seemed, altogether denied their significance.

The more I explored those references, the more baffled I became. It was one thing to argue that “education for all” could be secured only through public education supported by international aid if you were unaware of private schools for the poor.

But as soon as you knew that many poor parents were exiting the state system to send their children to private schools, then surely this must register on your radar as being worthy of comment in the “education for all” debate? Apparently not.

I read the *Public Report on Basic Education* (the PROBE Report), a detailed survey of educational provision in four northern Indian states, with growing amazement. It too was clear that “even among poor families and disadvantaged communities, one finds parents who make great sacrifices to send some or all of their children to private schools, so disillusioned are they with government schools.”

Here was another source pointing to the phenomenon of private schools for the poor — why weren’t they better known then? The PROBE team’s findings on the quality of public schools were even more startling. When their researchers had called unannounced on a large random sample of government schools, in only half was there any “teaching activity” at all!

In fully one-third, the principal was absent. The report gave touching examples of parents who were struggling against the odds to keep children in school, but whose children were clearly learning next to nothing. Children’s work was “at best casually checked.”

The team reported “several cases of irresponsible teachers keeping a school closed or non-functional for several months at a time”, one school “where the teacher was drunk”, another where the principal got the children to do his domestic chores, “including looking after the baby.”

The team observed that in the government schools, “generally, teaching activity has been reduced to a minimum, in terms of both time and effort.” Importantly, “this pattern is not confined to a minority of irresponsible teachers — it has become a way of life in the profession.” But they did not observe such problems in the private schools serving the poor.

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**How could people devote their weekends to science competitions and cyber-olympics if money was their sole motivation?**

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When their researchers called unannounced on their random sample of private unaided (that is, receiving no government funding) schools in the villages, "feverish classroom activity" was always taking place.

So what was the secret of success in these private schools for the poor? The report was very clear: "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."

I read the summaries at the beginning and end of *The Oxfam Education Report*, a standard textbook for development educationalists, and again I found only the accepted wisdom that governments and international agencies must meet the educational needs of the poor.

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The introduction states that there is an educational crisis because governments and international agencies have broken their promises "to provide free and compulsory basic education." Then in the conclusion, I read that there is hope, but only if countries, rich and poor alike, renew their commitment to "free and compulsory education."

As long as national governments spend more, and richer countries contribute billions more in aid per year, then we can achieve universal primary education by 2015. There is nothing exceptional about that, I thought as I read.

But then again, hidden away in a chapter titled "National Barriers to Basic Education," was the extraordinary (but downplayed) observation: "The notion that private schools are servicing the needs of a small minority of wealthy parents is misplaced...It is interesting to note that a lower-cost private sector has emerged to

meet the demands of poor households."

Indeed, there is "a growing market for private education among poor households." The author of the report, Kevin Watkins, pointed to research indicating large proportions of poor children enrolled in private schools and commented, "Such findings indicate that private education is a far more pervasive fact of life than is often recognized."

I put the book down and thought, that's unexpected, isn't it? Something as surprising as large numbers of the poor using private schools is surely worthy of comment in the conclusions, isn't it? Not a bit. The fact that the poor are helping themselves in this way was deemed unworthy of further mention in the introduction or conclusions. It was all a non-issue as far as the *Oxfam Education Report* was concerned.

The consensus on this surprising phenomenon, coupled with the consensus that it lacked any real significance, struck me as incredible after my first visit to Hyderabad. That poor parents in some of the most destitute places on this planet are flocking to private schools because public schools are inadequate and unaccountable seemed to me to be hugely

significant territory for development experts to concede.

The PROBE Report showed that private schools existed and were doing a much better job than government schools, but it nevertheless concluded that we must not be misled into thinking that there is a “soft option” of entrusting elementary education to private schools.

It conceded that, although it had painted a “relatively rosy” picture of the private sector (where there was a “high level of classroom activity...better utilization of facilities, greater attention to young children, responsiveness of teachers to parental complaints”) this definitely did *not* mean that private education was an answer to the problem of providing education for all.

The more I read the more it appeared that development experts were missing an obvious conclusion: If we wish to reach the “education for all” target of universal quality primary education by 2015, as agreed to by governments and non-governmental organizations in 2000, surely we should be looking to the private sector to play a significant role, given the clear importance of its role already?

Couldn't we be the trumpeting parents' choices, rather than simply ignoring what they were doing?

*Editor's Note: This is the final part of a three-part series from James Tooley's book, "The Beautiful Tree." Copyright 2009 James Tooley. Reprinted with permission of Cato Institute Press.*

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**"Even among poor families and disadvantaged communities, one finds parents who make great sacrifices to send some or all of their children to private schools, so disillusioned are they with government schools."**

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