

# School Choice and Implementation: Survey Evidence Across Indian States

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## Abstract

Research on implementation of basic services points out that the upwardly mobile seem to be exiting the public system for private alternatives, straining the capacity of the public system to serve the poor. But is this national narrative representative of implementation across the various states in India?

Based on questions of school choice from a national survey, we argue that respondents' choice of public or private service seems to be affected by state-level patterns that are obscured by both individual background characteristics from below and the national narrative from above. We argue that background characteristics do explain current school choices but do not fully explain ideal school choices. If ideal school choices are considered akin to the demand side of implementation, then our study shows that both societal and state-level patterns matter as we identified certain underserved populations that still aspire for public services, and who typically get obscured by national-level explanations.

## Keywords

School choice, public service delivery, implementation

## Introduction

Over the past few years, evidence-based policymaking has drawn much attention from policymakers in India and around the world (Pal, 2019). The idea of evidence-based policymaking seems to focus on questions of the type of interventions and field experiments to accurately estimate outcomes. However, there is also a concurrent resurgence of interest around questions of implementation (Andrews, 2013). Such implementation studies focus on state capacity to deliver public services where the question of the choice of intervention is important but nevertheless secondary.

This article seeks to better understand questions of implementation through citizens' choices around the type of intervention. We rely on scholarship and data from the field of 'school choice' in the area of education. We make two arguments. First, there is a sizeable section of India's population that seeks to

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move out of private schools and into public schools. Since they are being underserved by the private system, they seem to be slipping through the cracks between the private and public systems—an implementation lacuna that the government should fill. Second, understanding implementation in India at the national level tends to oversimplify questions that affect implementation as it obscures the vast variation across and within India states.

The article has the following sections. The next section summarizes the literature on implementation and on school choice in India. The third section provides some basic information about the data, sampling, summary statistics and the results from the logistic regression. We point out that our data aligns with the available evidence on actual school choice (the school to which children currently go) in India, but explaining ideal school choice (the school to which parents would like to send their children) and the gap between the two (actual vs. ideal) requires looking at state-level factors. The fourth section draws our attention to some possible explanations at the subnational level. The fifth and final section provides some conclusions.

## Literature Survey

Extant studies on implementation of public services point to three salient features of state capacity in India. The first can be characterized as a debate between interventions and institutions at the system level, wherein some scholars would argue that well-understood interventions coupled with adequate experimentation can overcome ‘plumbing’ problems (Duflo, 2017), while others would argue that well-understood institutions can overcome contingencies that can influence the best understood interventions (Andrews et al., 2015; Rodgers et al., 2020; Sandfort & Moulton, 2014). Second, it is well known that subnational factors play a crucial role in service delivery, comparing cases across India over many decades (Jenkins, 2004; Kohli, 1987), though recent studies show that this intermediate space requires more attention to be able to frame subsequent comparative studies (Tillin et al., 2015).

Third, frontline factors hold a key role in delivering services provided by state and private agencies. Frontline workers develop discretionary heuristic strategies (Lipsky, 1980) and risk aversion behaviours (Aiyar & Bhattacharya, 2016). Their behaviour is also historically shaped, socially embedded and carry implicit biases, all of which put together can directly shape citizens’ preferences for services (Corbridge et al., 2005). Improving frontline service delivery, hence, is a complex function of increasing the state–society synergy through sandwich approaches (Rao et al., 2017), bureaucratic rationalization of programmes (Chand, 2006) and provision of a combination of high-powered and low-powered incentives (Besley & Ghatak, 2007).

Finally, studies based on surveys of service delivery of utilities (electricity, water) and services (education, health) overwhelmingly show that the access issue may have been overcome but the quality of service is wanting (The World Bank, 2006). Second, state capacity for welfare may itself be flailing because the upwardly mobile middle urban classes are opting out of public provisioning and migrating to (or coping with) privately organized services, which consequently puts the state in a fiscal squeeze to serve the underclass, especially because they simply cannot afford services that are not subsidized (Pritchett, 2009).

From the aforementioned studies, we know that any national-level narrative around the implementation of public services is rather simplistic because analysis at such a level will necessarily remain parsimonious unless we attempt to break the narrative down into various intersectional contexts in which service delivery is located. The kind of information we need to know now is more granular—which

groups, in which state, for what type of claim and upon what kind of service.<sup>2</sup> Such an approach can help us integrate perspectives at different levels of explanation to provide a more relevant national narrative.

We seek to better understand a relatively understated but a critical part of implementation—citizens' perceptions of service choice—which can explain much of how they access and interact with the supply side of implementation. If all people want essentially the same things from a service provider, what are the underlying demographic and systemic factors that make 'x' or 'y' provider as being perceived as better off in providing the same? We explore citizens' perception of service choice in the context of 'school choice' across states in India to analyse the interrelationship between citizens' perceptions and implementation.

We understand school choice within public choice theory as being driven by decisions between consumers (parents) and various kinds of public and private suppliers (Forsey et al., 2008; Henig, 1995; Muralidharan & Sundararaman, 2015), but our motivation is to understand if there are those who are being systematically underserved, which is the challenge for public service implementation. Our results in fact show that there is indeed an underserved population whose expectations are met neither by public nor by private schools.

As context, the evolution of the types of educational institutions is important to understand the complexities around school choice. During the mid-1980s and through the 1990s, upper and lower middle classes shifted from the public education system to the private sector (Kingdon, 1996; Nambissan, 2009; PROBE Team & Centre for Development Economics (Delhi, India), 1999), leaving public schools to cater largely to the disadvantaged and the minorities (Hill et al., 2015). Concurrently, low-cost private schools, especially targeted at economically disadvantaged families (Tooley & Dixon, 2007), mushroomed across the country (Kingdon, 1996; Srivastava, 2007), giving many parents, ostensibly, an actual opportunity to choose what kind of school their child would go to.

Consequently, much research has tried to understand the key drivers behind decisions regarding the type of school a child attends (Carvalho Filho, 2008; Huisman & Smits, 2009; Mingat, 2007; Rana et al., 2005) and even the question of choicelessness (DeSouza et al., 2009). Any decision within a family related to schooling, especially the choice between public and private schooling<sup>3</sup> in such a stratified education system (Härmä, 2010), is influenced by several factors, including parents having to consider several realities of 'self' such as their religion, caste, class and gender (Gurney, 2017). Equally important is the perceived quality of education, which is closely linked with the medium of instruction, availability and access to a school, affordability or cost, the gender and birth order of the child (Härmä, 2010; Lahoti & Mukhopadhyay, 2019; Srivastava, 2007).

Quality of a school perceived by a parent is an ambiguous category, with parents not being sure as to what constitutes good-quality education (Nambissan, 2012). Some parents equate quality to good infrastructure, while others consider examination results a mark of excellence. Evidence also shows that irrespective of quality parameters, there is no significant difference in the learning attained in either a public or a private school (Chudgar & Quin, 2012; Karopady, 2014; Wadhwa, 2014). Also, there are examples of public schools which are better equipped than nearby private schools, but the demand continues to be for the latter. Discipline, manners and safety also shape parents' perceptions of quality and influence their school choice (Lahoti & Mukhopadhyay, 2019).

Instruction in English (Nambissan, 2012) and parental expectations that are more complex than questions of class size and teacher–pupil ratio (Hill et al., 2015; Srivastava, 2007) are other factors that affect

<sup>2</sup> Chhibber et al.'s (2004) earlier attempt provides this kind of evidence.

<sup>3</sup> The private education space also includes several non-governmental organisations that provide important educational services to underserved communities. For more, refer to Blum (2009) and Nawani (2000).

school choice. It is well known that there are also factors that affect school choice, which have little to do with parental aspirations. Proximity to a school matters, with private schools being more concentrated in urban areas and government schools in remote areas; the ability to pay for a private school is an equally important factor, with gender (boys going to private schools) and birth rank (first child to a private and the rest to government schools) (Härmä, 2009; Hill et al., 2015; Nambissan, 2012, 2016) guiding these decisions.

In sum, we argue that citizens' perceptions of school choice mirror perceptions in implementation studies as well. First, that upwardly mobile urban citizens tend to move on to private services, with rural voters left to access government-owned services because markets are scarce there. Additionally, in areas where governments do not fill the gaps (such as urban poor areas), low-cost schools have emerged to serve the urban underclasses. Second, it is not so much a question of access as much as a question of 'quality/good education' for parents, but what is under that label can be quite varied (learning factors, classroom factors and teacher capacity).

Our article shows that school choice is an interesting case to study implementation because, conceptually, while much of the standard variables can explain actual school choice, it is only by problematizing the gaps between ideal and actual school choice can we understand demand-side gaps in implementation at the state level. Also, since contemporary education literature has focussed more on parental perceptions to explain gaps, our article adds to that literature by focussing on patterns that describe the gaps between actual school choice and ideal school choice. Our data shows that there is not just sub-national variation but also that while the standard narrative of parents wanting to exit the public system is true, there is a sizeable number that wants to be served by the public system, which to us, is an implementation gap.

## Data and Sampling

Data are collected from three rounds of a nationwide survey on Politics and Society between Elections (PSBE) in India. The survey was part of a research collaboration between Azim Premji University and Lokniti conducted across 23 states in India and the National Capital Territory of New Delhi, from 2017–2019, with a total sample size of around 48,000 respondents.<sup>4</sup> We focussed on three questions that were part of the survey as they directly dealt with the questions of school choice.

The rationale for our analysis of the school choice is two-fold. First, we show that the PSBE data conforms to the larger trends identified by literature on school choice. We do this by cross-tabulating demographic characteristics and school choice. Second, we model actual and ideal school choice as functions of these demographic characteristics to show that ideal school choice is not as well predicted as actual school choice. Our aim is to indicate that, notwithstanding demographic variables, other sub-national characteristics may explain preferences for government and private schools. From these results, we move to exploring state-level trends in actual and ideal school choice.

PSBE survey contained three questions relevant to school choice. The first question that we were interested in understanding was the simple matter of what the parents would choose as the school type that they aspire their child to be in. The question was 'If you had a choice, would you send your child to a private school or a government school?', with any one of these choices: (a) private school, (b) government school or (c) don't know/can't say. The second question we asked was 'Do your children go to a

<sup>4</sup> See <https://crpe.azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in/about-psbe>

government school or private school?'. The respondent had to choose one option among (a) government school, (b) private school, (c) some schooling from government schools and some from private schools, (d) few children go to government schools and few go to private school, (e) does not go to school any more, (f) no children of school going age and finally and (g) not applicable. The third question was aimed at understanding the contextual factors explaining current school choice.<sup>5</sup>

These questions were asked to a total of 40,772 respondents across 20 states. The summary statistics of actual and ideal school choices across different demographic categories of the respondents are presented in Table 1. Columns 1 and 2 list the demographic variables and their categories. Column 3 represents the overall proportion of each demographic category in the survey. Columns 4–7 present the actual school choice proportions of respondents in each demographic category.<sup>6</sup> Columns 8–10 present the ideal school choice proportions. Pearson's chi-square values were calculated to test the statistical significance of the cross-tabulations.

The analysis from Table 1 confirms that school choice is related to demographic/structural variables along the lines of extant research. Table 1 shows that 54 per cent of the respondents were male, with more than two-thirds from rural areas. About 68 per cent had education up to matriculation or less and one-fifth were not literate. OBCs had the highest proportion in caste composition.<sup>7</sup> Others (Sikhs, Christians and other religious minorities) made up 17.23 per cent of the respondents. About 30 per cent of the respondents were classified as 'poor',<sup>8</sup> and roughly, 50 per cent of the sample was split equally among lower and middle-class categories.

In actual school choice (columns 4–7), 36.28 per cent of the responses were government schools, whereas 22.6 per cent reported sending their children to private schools, 4.62 per cent went to both, 36.5 per cent did not have a valid response, and all these proportions were similar across genders. In terms of demographics, rural–urban, education, caste and income factors seem to matter in explaining actual school choice and are along predictable lines (Bery et al., 2009; Muralidharan & Kremer, 2009; Tooley & Dixon, 2006). The proportion of rural respondents sending children to government schools was higher in comparison to urban respondents. Similarly, less educated households and lower-class households had higher proportion of respondents choosing government schools. SC and ST groups had higher proportion of households choosing government education in comparison to other caste and religious groups. Other religious groups and upper castes had the highest proportion of households choosing private schools.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> This question explored contextual factors of school choice and included choices related to proximity, affordability, mid-day meals and quality. About 80 per cent of the respondents in the government school choice group cited proximity of the school, affordability and mid-day meal availability as reasons for actual choice. A similar ratio of respondents cited perceptions of better quality, that is, facilities, teachers and discipline, as reasons for choosing private schools for their children. These were not included in the logistic regression model, since these questions were asked only in the context of actual school choice.

<sup>6</sup> Column 6 in Table 1 combines actual school choice responses wherein respondents sent children to both government and private schools (some schooling from government and private schools and few going to government, few going to private school). Column 7 in Table 1 combines responses wherein respondents did not have a valid answer (not going to school, no children of school going age and not applicable).

<sup>7</sup> We note that the proportion of OBCs is less than the representative proportions in the population, which we believe is because of self-identification and reporting by the respondents at the time of survey data collection. While such underreporting can affect the regression results, we also note that other proportions (especially of Dalits and Adivasis) are representative of proportions in the overall population.

<sup>8</sup> Respondents were categorized into different economic classes based on a combination of indicators related to monthly earning, house type and assets owned.

<sup>9</sup> The enrolment proportions by type of school are in line with District Information System for Education (DISE) data (2016–2017), National Sample Survey Report (NSS) 75th round (2017) and Annual Survey of Education Report (ASER) reports of 2018 and 2019.

**Table 1.** Demographic Profile of Respondents

Description	Categories	Proportion	Actual School Choice							Ideal School Choice		
			Government	Private	Both	No Answer	Government	Private	Don't Know/Can't Say			
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10			
Gender	Male	54.28	35.64	22.66	4.76	36.94	38.1	49.5	12.4			
	Female	45.63	37.28	22.5	4.48	35.74	37.62	48.54	13.85			
	Others	0.09	31.43	34.29	5.71	28.57	42.86	42.86	14.29			
Location*	Rural	68.45	42.54	17.4	4.91	35.15	41.47	45.9	12.63			
	Urban	31.55	23.03	33.87	3.99	39.11	30.1	55.9	14			
Education*	Non-literate	20.71	45.24	12.03	3.89	38.84	39.75	44.3	15.95			
	Up to primary	18.49	46.2	16.54	4.16	33.1	41.09	45.93	12.98			
	Up to matric	29.44	37.65	23.96	5.28	33.11	37.94	50.2	11.86			
	College and above	31.36	22.96	32.58	4.86	39.6	34.13	53.98	11.89			
Caste/religion*	Upper caste	21.33	27.78	27.75	4.56	39.91	36.09	51.63	12.28			
	OBC	25.68	39.08	20.82	4.61	35.49	44.37	42.76	12.87			
	SC	13.23	45.57	15.44	4.48	34.51	40.25	47.18	12.56			
	ST	7.62	51.31	11.27	2.8	34.62	37.8	47.36	14.84			
	Muslims	14.91	42.02	21.82	5.53	30.63	41.66	48.32	10.02			
	Others	17.23	24.47	30.06	4.83	40.64	25.38	58.08	16.54			
Class category*	Poor	31.27	48.71	12.4	3.48	35.41	40.67	44.27	15.06			
	Lower	24.75	37.81	20.8	4.63	36.76	36.82	49.75	13.44			
	Middle	25.77	32.28	26.16	6.12	35.44	49.57	49.57	11.44			
	Upper	18.21	19.09	37.52	4.44	38.95	32.97	55.61	11.42			
Total			36.28	22.6	4.62	36.5	37.88	49.06	13.06			

**Source:** Politics and Society between Elections Data 2017–2019.

**Note:** \* The chi-square values were statistically significant with  $p < 0.01$

The demographic trends in actual school choice were visible in ideal school choices also and predictably, with a pronounced preference for private schools (columns 8–10). Close to 50 per cent of parents ideally choose private schools. Less educated households, OBCs and poor households had relatively smaller proportions preferring private schools in comparison to other groups. And, although respondents belonging to urban areas, having college education and belonging to upper castes and upper classes had higher preference for private schools in comparison to other demographic categories, the majority of respondents across all demographic variables also preferred private schools.

We conducted logistic regression to compare the relative explanatory roles of these demographic characteristics in predicting actual and ideal school choices.

The logit models used in the study are:

$$\text{Choice(actual, ideal)} = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 \text{Location} + \alpha_2 \text{Edu} + \alpha_3 \text{Caste} + \alpha_4 \text{Class}$$

The dependent variables, that is, actual school choice and ideal school choice, were converted into binary values, with 0 denoting government school and 1 denoting private school choice, dropping other responses. Location, education, caste and class variables were categorical variables as shown in Table 1. Both logistic regression models were run using state weights to balance the sampling proportions across the states. The state weights were computed as a ratio of the state's population proportion in the country over the state's sample proportion in the overall samples. Regression model for actual school choice included 23,479 valid observations, and for ideal school choice, 21,777 valid observations were included,

**Table 2.** Results of Logistic Regression

Explanatory Variables	Odds Ratio	
	Actual School Choice	Ideal School Choice
Location (base value = rural)		
Urban	2.18***	1.23***
Education (base value = no education)		
Up to primary	1.17**	0.77***
Up to matric	1.61***	0.86***
College and above	3.12***	1.01
Caste (base value = SC)		
Upper caste	1.69***	1.06
OBC	1.34***	0.93
ST	0.67***	1.10
Muslims	1.24***	1.13
Others	1.60***	1.10
Class (base value = poor)		
Lower	1.69***	1.17***
Middle	2.13***	1.01
Upper	3.11***	0.90*
_cons	0.12***	1.18***
Observations	23479	21777
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.13	0.01
Area under ROC curve <sup>#</sup>	0.76	0.59

**Source:** Politics and Society between Elections Data 2017–2019.

**Note:** # Area under the receive operating characteristic curve was calculated using the same logistic regression without using weights. \* $p < 0.1$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , and \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

each spanning 20 states. The models were run using Stata software. Table 2 shows the results of the logistic regression.

The results of the logistic regression confirm two major findings reported in the literature on school choice. First, the association between actual school choice and demographic factors is along expected lines, with a comparatively larger area under the curve (AUC) value. In comparison to respondents with no education, respondents with matriculation level of education are 1.6 times more likely to send their children to private schools, whereas the likelihood increases to 3.12 times in the case of those with college education. Similar interpretations hold for other demographic categories like caste and class.

Second, our results are also in line with literature which notes that school choice aspirations are much more difficult to explain than actual choices of schools. Many demographic variables are not significant in predicting the ideal school choice, and the AUC value for the model is much lower, indicating that aspirations are not fully explainable by these structural factors alone. While urban respondents are more likely to prefer private education, higher levels of education among respondents (up to matriculation) do not correspond to higher preference for private education, in comparison to respondents with no education. Similarly, class variation does not significantly change the likelihood of preference for private education. Further, likelihood of ideal school choice does not show statistically significant differences across different caste groups; that is, while caste, class, gender and urban locations can explain much of where a child is studying, they seem to have little explanatory value in explaining where the parents would ideally like their children to study. We see this gap between present conditions and aspirations as the potential space that service delivery, particularly public service delivery, should fill. Further, our analysis seems to suggest that a state-level factor can explain public and private perceptions of service delivery.

While ideal school choice is a difficult parameter to predict/explain, it shows interesting trends across states and indicates potential lurking subnational explanations that shape choice of public and private services. Hence, ideal school choice and associated trends across states and differences in actual and ideal choices may serve as important indicators for implementation research, as explained in the sections below.

## The Lurking Subnational Pattern of School Choice

From the scholarship on school choice, we do know that one can find state-level explanations for school choice in India. Table 3 shows the tremendous extent of variation across states in terms of school choice. At one end, almost 75.67 per cent of Kerala's respondents prefer government schools, while on the other end, 86.02 per cent of respondents in Nagaland prefer private schools. Taking these two states as extremes, we arrayed the remaining states in terms of government choice in descending order (or private schools in ascending order). And Bihar seems a middle case being relatively more divided compared to the rest of the states. One can draw a rough pattern and say that all central and southern states (excepting Assam) prefer government schools whereas all northern and eastern states (excepting Telangana) prefer private schools.

Literature does provide some indicative explanations. Kerala has always had a strong education system, where a large proportion of private schools are government aided schools, and since 2013, it has actively worked on improving infrastructure of government-run schools (Jacob, 2019; Joseph, 2016). This has led to a steady increase in government school enrolments (ASER, 2019). On the other hand North Eastern states have always had a strong presence of missionary schools (Biswas, 2008) that have

**Table 3.** Citizen Preference for Public and Private Schools (in %)

State	Government	Private
Kerala	75.67	24.33
Maharashtra	65.26	34.74
Assam	64.88	35.12
Andhra	59.50	40.50
Jharkhand	58.08	41.92
Madhya Pradesh	57.05	42.95
Tamil Nadu	56.81	43.19
Bihar	54.26	45.74
Chhattisgarh	41.54	58.46
Punjab	41.34	58.66
Telangana	40.56	59.44
Rajasthan	40.35	59.65
West Bengal	39.83	60.17
Uttar Pradesh	29.93	70.07
Jammu and Kashmir	29.47	70.53
Uttarakhand	29.27	70.73
Mizoram	23.29	76.71
Delhi	20.53	79.47
Tripura	19.71	80.29
Nagaland	13.98	86.02

**Source:** Politics and Society between Elections Data 2017–2019.

provided education in English, making government schools not a very attractive choice. Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal are seen to have failing and corrupt public education systems colouring parents' perceptions on the same<sup>10</sup> (Bagchi, 2017; Yadav & Manani, 2020).

However, we found no evidence of statistical significance between school choice and state-level variables such as public and private school enrolment, pupil–teacher ratio, student–classroom ratio, infrastructure variations in public and private schools, teacher vacancy and per capita expenditure on education.<sup>11</sup> Clearly, while the overall pattern from the survey seems to align with the scholarship of subnational school choice, further analysis is required to establish the state-level variables that can explain or correlate with the variation.

And so, we turn to understand the state-level variation differently. From Table 2, we inferred that we can explain actual school choice, but the standard demographics do not explain ideal school choice sufficiently. We can arguably make the case that ideal school choice is reflective of the demand side of implementation of service delivery, that is, this is the type of service respondents wish they have. First, we explore whether there is a gap between their actual situation and their ideal choice (particularly, public service delivery) and, second, whether such a divergence could indicate potential sites to expand public service implementation. Standard explanations say that urban respondents are voting with their feet away from public services, leaving rural populations with no choice but to be 'underserved' with

<sup>10</sup> The proportions in Delhi look contradictory to the perceived impact that recent reforms in the public schooling system by the ruling AAP had on the recent Delhi elections. Resolving this puzzle would require looking at the Delhi data more closely, which is beyond the scope of the article.

<sup>11</sup> Data for this analysis was sourced from DISE for school enrolment and infrastructure data (Bhattacharya & Kundu, 2017), and for expenditure data.

**Table 4.** Actual Versus Ideal School Choice

Actual School Choice	Ideal School Choice		Total
	Government	Private	
Government	Group 1: Settled-government 29.2%	Group 3: Underserved-government 32.7%	13,803 61.94%
Private	Group 4: Underserved-private 13.3%	Group 2: Settled-private 24.8%	8,481 38.06%
Total	9,457	12,827	22,284

**Source:** Politics and Society between Elections Data 2017–2019.

public services or low-quality private services when the latter is also not available. If aspirations diverge from current conditions, does it suggest that there are potential ‘markets’ for public service delivery which varies by state because state-level factors seem to matter?

Table 4 integrates the conditional and aspirational choices of all respondents in India. We used a  $2 \times 2$  matrix to understand the construction of perception gaps in the target populations. Using a form similar to the social construction of target populations frame introduced by Schneider and Ingram (1993), we argue that there are four types of target populations in the context of school choice. The first group (top left) can be labelled as the settled-government group of respondents whose children are and prefer to be in government schools. The second group (bottom right) can be labelled as the settled-private group whose children are and prefer to be in private schools. The third group (top right) is the one where most of the attention in implementation research has been because they may very well vote with their feet if the right option comes along—those whose children are in government schools and aspire to be in private schools—which we can label as the ‘underserved’ target population. While this population gets most of the attention, we explore if there is a population who still aspire to be in government schools but are underserved in a private system for reasons beyond their control (bottom left). It is this last group—i.e., those that are enrolled in private schools but prefer government schools - that get lost in the attention given to the population in group 3. Thus, we expect to find two groups—one set of respondents that we can together classify as ‘settled’ in that they are in and comfortable with government or private schools, and another group named ‘unsettled’ as they are keen to move out of their current choice to their aspirational choice.

Our data reinforces much of the prevalent understanding regarding school choice in India but also tells us a little more that is worthy of further research for better implementation. On the one hand, 54 per cent of the respondents are settled in either government (29.2%) or private schools (24.8%). On the other, 46 per cent of the respondents are unsettled because they seek to exit out of their current school choices. In this group, 32.7 per cent want to exit the government system, which is not surprising but surely a cause for alarm. More interestingly, 13.3 per cent prefer to exit private schools. While the first group has gained much attention, the second is sizeable and deserves attention from education policymakers.

For now, a statewise disaggregation of the above data reveals three interesting patterns.<sup>12</sup> First, southern states such as Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh<sup>13</sup> (including Maharashtra and Assam) seem to

<sup>12</sup> Preliminary analysis suggests that these patterns within states do not disaggregate by social characteristics such as class, caste and educational levels.

<sup>13</sup> Karnataka was not included in the survey rounds that had questions on school choice.

be settled with government schools and northern and eastern states such as Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Mizoram and Nagaland (including Telangana) seem to be settled with private schools. Second, there is sizeable volatility (government to private and vice versa) across states such as Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Tripura, West Bengal, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh. Third, states showing mobility from government to private are Tripura and West Bengal and those that want to enter government are Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand, and then, there are states which have volatility on both sides, namely Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Bihar.

Three figures in Appendix A show location, caste and classwise disaggregation of Table 4. Figure A1 shows two interesting patterns. Both rural and urban respondents are almost equally divided among those who want to exit the government system and those who are satisfied with it. Second, counter-intuitively, urban respondents want to enter into the government system and not the other way around. Figure A2 starkly shows not only that the upper castes and OBC respondents had the highest proportion of households wanting to move into government schools, but also that their proportions are more than 1.5 times of all other social groups and are spread across all states. Also, more than half of the ST respondents and 42 per cent of SC respondents are underserved in government schools.<sup>14</sup> Figure A3 shows a clear and surprising pattern that higher income groups aspire to exit private schools.

We should, however, qualify that it looks like these patterns stem from factors that can also be related to state-level attributes; that is, aspirational moves seem to be conditional upon factors that are primarily influenced by policies at the state level; for example, even though Uttar Pradesh and Bihar are neighbouring states and Uttar Pradesh is demographically comparable to Maharashtra, 47 per cent of Uttar Pradesh respondents are settled in private schools; 57 per cent of Maharashtra respondents are settled in government schools; and 46 per cent of Bihar respondents are underserved in government schools. Similarly, even though respondents from Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh are comparable demographically, 48 per cent of Andhra Pradesh respondents are settled in government schools whereas 77 per cent of respondents in Madhya Pradesh are unsettled.

Some evidence from the education studies and the field allow for some speculative insights into these patterns. States in Group 1 top the school education quality index (NITI Aayog, 2019), and Assam has seen significant improvements starting at the pre-primary level, with 80 per cent total enrolment, and 70 per cent enrolled in government Anganwadi centres (ASER, 2019). States with majority of respondents in Group 2 are symptomatic of public system failures alluded to earlier, juxtaposed with the perception of good quality seen in private schools.

In the unsettled states, it may be that parents are either underserved with poor quality government schools or are being served by private unaided schools that are also of poor quality. Recent anecdotal evidence, for example, suggests that Delhi, through a huge makeover of its government schools and Karnataka, through its novel Karnataka Public School (KPS) model, have seen the group wanting to come back into government system and indeed do so (Bhatnagar, 2017; Santhakumar et al., 2018).

## Summary and Conclusions

To summarize, we have shown that the implementation narrative of urban populations exiting public systems and accessing basic services by coping with private markets instead, and thereby inadvertently causing a fiscal and administrative squeeze upon public systems to serve both urban and rural populations,

<sup>14</sup> Most respondents from Mizoram and Nagaland are identified as Christians and classified into 'Others' rather than ST.

is an incomplete explanation.<sup>15</sup> The data does not show that markets clear up government inadequacies, but in fact that there is a group that slips through the cracks because there are market participants who want to (re)enter the public system.

We attempted to make this case by showing that our data set aligns with standard explanations of actual school choice but proves inadequate to explain ideal school choice. Third, since ideal school choice can be a proxy to understand citizens' aspirations, which is another way of seeing the demand side of implementation, we identified whether these aspirations are to identify potential 'markets' for public system implementation. Fourth, we found that a state-level attribute matters more to explain the gaps between actual and ideal school choices. It is important to go further and explain which state-level pattern explains reverse volatility, for example.

In conclusion, our article clearly makes the case that national data on school choice masks state-level divergences and a substantially large undeserved population, which together undermine the upward mobility narrative that influences most studies on implementation in India. Such explanations require further specification at the state level to better understand the context and aspirations of the underserved.

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<sup>15</sup> The World Bank Report (2006) points to implementation challenges in India in the key areas of utilities and basic services in both urban and rural areas. Bahl and Linn with other authors have been making this case in the context of urban public finance for several years (Bahl et al., 2013).

Appendix A

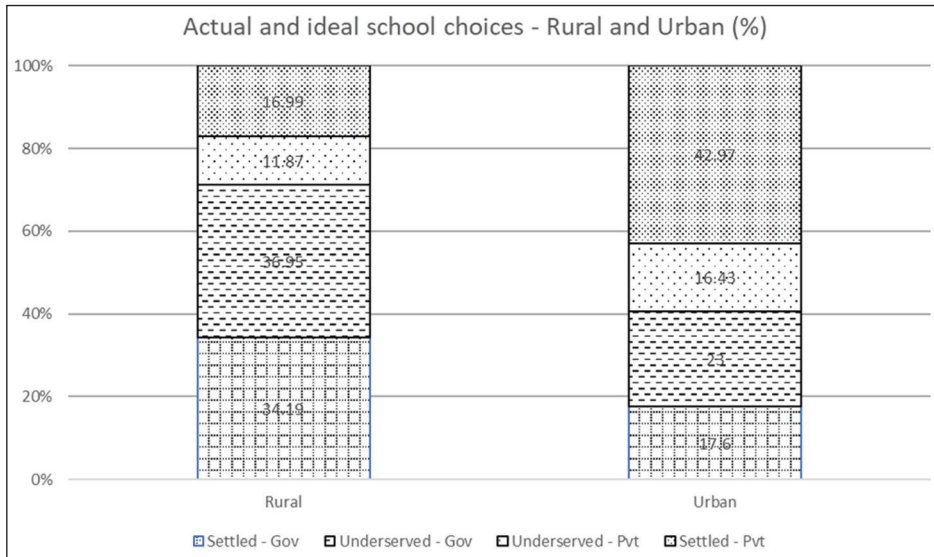


Figure A1. Proportion of Actual and Ideal School Choices Among Rural and Urban Respondents

Source: The authors.

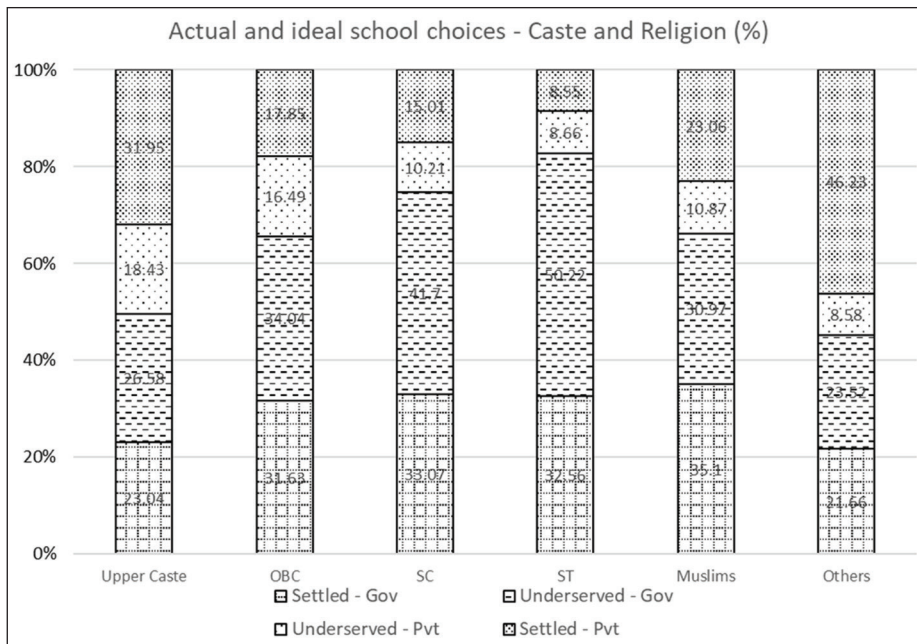
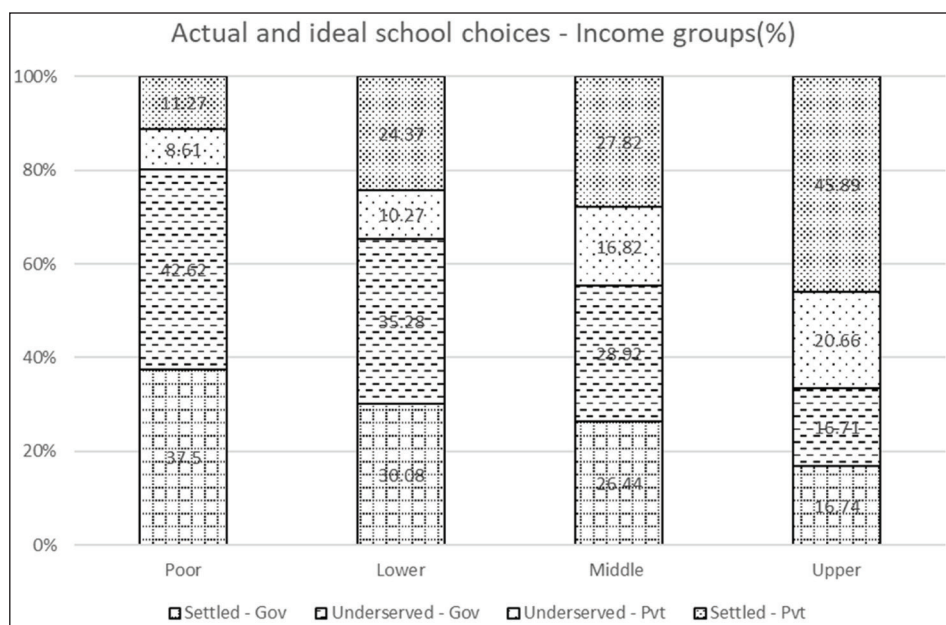


Figure A2. Proportion of Actual and Ideal School Choices Among Respondents of Different Social Categories

Source: The authors.



**Figure A3.** Proportion of Actual and Ideal School Choices Among Different Income Groups

**Source:** The authors.

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