

# Opinion | The 'OEPS' phenomenon is undermining education

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Unity in diversity—it's one of those phrases that takes me straight back to my school days in the 1970s and 1980s. Pasted, printed and pushed in all sorts of places, from road signs to textbooks, it was one of the most visible slogans about India's identity. The phrase was part reality, part aspiration and part exhortation to go from that reality to the aspiration.

As I have travelled across the country in the past 30 years, I have seen some kinds of unity grow continually. And not all this unity is on aspects that the nation builders may have dreamt of. "Oxford English Public School" is one of the most ubiquitous symbols of such unity. From the bazaar kasbas in the Garhwal Himalayas to the unending chain of small towns merging into big villages in Tamil Nadu, you will find such a school in each place. These are unlikely to be mistaken for a nationally scaled-up chain of schools, with their dilapidated small buildings, a general air of neglect, and scores of kids packed into rooms that can't hold even 10. Let's call them OEPS, the abbreviation of their actual name. The infrastructure of the OEPS are in a range, from ones with cracking walls to those with faux chrome and glass frontages, whatever is the minimum required to sell.

OEPS are businesses of local entrepreneurs, in the guise of schools. Anyone with some capital, mostly in the form of a building, takes a tried and tested business formula, and sets up the local OEPS. OEPS is a generic term for similar schools, the names may vary a bit. The dons at Oxford should demand a brand-sullyng fee from these schools because they can't stop them from mushrooming.

Their business formula hinges on the visceral appeal of the words English and Oxford to the sociocultural aspirations of all classes of Indians. The word "public", which here means private, fans these aspirations. Costs are cut to the bone, including by paying teachers lower than minimum wages. The highest expenditure is on aggressive marketing with tall claims.

Once students enrol, they become the fount of multiple revenue streams.

From their fees, to the charge for their uniform and books, all are priced at the maximum of what the parents can bear. Education is absent in these schools. If there is anything, it is cram and rote. When children from these schools move to the real public (government) schools, because such schools are only up to grade five or eight, or for other reasons, they struggle. The learning levels and standards of the real public schools are usually much higher.

Most on-the-ground observers of school education know the details of this OEPS phenomenon, including why parents choose to send their children to such schools. With our work in multiple districts across the country, we have seen the same. To develop a systematized understanding on this matter, we conducted a study, "School choice in low-information environments (2018)", across 10 sites in four states, as a part of the Azim Premji University field studies series. The study did not discover anything new, but did methodically validate what is known anecdotally.

The study finds that choosing a school is a complex process. Many considerations are involved in the parents' choice of school. These include perception about teaching-learning, discipline and safety of children. They, for whom expenses are an important factor, send their children to public schools. The medium of instruction of the school, being English, is an important factor for many, and they send their children to private schools, the OEPS kind.

The study also finds that these choices are very often not based on accurate information. In reality, most of these schools are not English-medium, despite their implicit or explicit claims. Also, parents seem to form notions about teachers, which are often different from reality.

Significant weight is given by parents to easily noticeable but educationally irrelevant factors which reflect their sociocultural aspirations, such as children speaking a smattering of English, the school having "proper" uniform, and insisting on "disciplined" behaviour. These parents also believe that such easily visible parameters help in distancing themselves from the poorer families who choose public schools. The fact that most real matters of quality of education are hard to observe and discern for anyone is not considered.

The OEPS-type private schools do sustained marketing and image-building efforts for enrolments in neighbouring areas. These marketing efforts target the very same educationally unimportant but easily visible criteria that chime with parents' aspirations. As a result, such visible non-educational parameters often become the most important determinant for many parents in the decision-making. This study is now available publicly.

The OEPS phenomenon is undermining education. More deeply than many other matters. Because it is systematically reinforcing false notions of education quality, many of which are directly detrimental to good education. It also exacerbates inequities. This is unsurprising. Education is a field of severe information asymmetry. Smooth operators will always find way to make a quick buck from education, and education and equity be damned. Private operators and markets cannot improve any education system. Public education must improve to deliver real high-quality education to all.

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