Journal of Agricultural Development and Policy, 2026
Volume 36, No. 1, 119-126
https://doi.org/10.63066/23220457.36.1.015

NAAS - 4.34
UGC CARE List Journal

Privatization of School Education: Expenditure and Enrolment Trends

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Abstract

The privatization of school education has emerged as a significant feature of the changing educational landscape in India over the past two decades. The present study is an endeavour to analyse the expenditure pattern and enrolment trends in government and private schools. For this, secondary data was procured from reliable sources such as ASER report, UDISE databases, NSSO report and relevant research report and paper. The analysis showed a continuous decline in the number of government schools, whereas private schools experienced a growth of nearly 10 percent over the past one and a half decades, reflecting the expanding role of the private sector in school education. Data observed the huge difference between private and government school expenditure at all level of education. The data indicate that the average per-student expenditure at the pre-primary level was ₹12,834 in private schools, compared to only ₹1,030 in government schools, making private school expenditure nearly twelve times higher. Further, data showed gender wise enrolment in private schools which exhibited devastating results. The highest gender gap in school enrolment was observed in private unaided recognized schools, where it was approximately 12 percent at both the national level and in Punjab. This indicated a significant disparity in the enrolment of boys and girls in private educational institutions. Caste-wise enrolment patterns further revealed that students from the general category predominantly attend private schools, whereas a majority of Scheduled Caste students depended on government schools due to their relatively weaker economic conditions and the rising cost of private education. These findings highlighted the unequal access to quality education across social groups. Therefore, there is a need to strengthen government and government-aided schools through improved infrastructure, the appointment of qualified teachers, and adequate financial support. In addition, stricter regulation of private school fees is essential to ensure equitable access to quality education, particularly for girls and marginalized communities.

Keywords: Privatization, Gender, Caste, School education, Enrolment and school expenditure.

JEL Classification: I2, I21, I210, I22, I240

Introduction

Privatization is the process of transferring the ownership of businesses from the public sector to the private sector. It involves diminishing the role and involvement of public sector entities in various fields such as health, education, employment, bureaucracy, and industries like oil and natural gas. The major objectives of privatization are to improve economic efficiency, reduce the financial burden on the government, and enhance competition in the market. The concept of privatization has its roots in the mid-1930s, when the Nazi government in Germany undertook a wide scale privatization policy for example privatizing the banks, railways, etc. After that, it gained significant momentum during the 1980s with the rise of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is a political philosophy advocating for free market capitalism and limited government intervention in the economy. It's often associated with policies like privatization, deregulation, and free trade, aiming to reduce the role of the state in society (Harvey, 2005).

Indian economic system had been suffered from severe crisis due to imbalance of payment, heavy fiscal deficit, oil price hike due to gulf war etc. in 1990s. This crisis was addressed through the Liberalization, Privatization, and Globalization (LPG) reforms, implemented by Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao and Finance Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh. These reforms aimed to revamp the Indian economy by reducing government control, opening up the economy to foreign investment, and promoting private sector participation. Thus, privatization was formally introduced in 1991 as part of the New Economic Policy under the framework of Liberalization, Privatization, and Globalization (LPG). These economic reforms were not limited to the industrial and commercial sectors but also

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influenced the education sector. Privatization have brought significant changes to India's education system, including increased private sector participation, greater institutional autonomy and the emergence of diverse educational models (Kingdon, 2007; Tilak, 2017).As a result, private participation in education increased, and privatization has become an important feature of educational reforms which is evident from the growth of private schools in India from last three decades (Pankaj *et al*., 2021).

Privatisation in education is a process that indicates the direction of change in three dimensions: ownership, financing, and control (Bray, 1998). It is often viewed as a formula to expand choice, improve quality, or boost efficiency in the educational system (Verger *et al.,* 2018). UNESCO (2020) highlights two key dimensions: Privatization "in" education – when private actors operate schools or educational services. Privatization "of" education – when education is treated as a commodity or service subject to market forces. Further, Tilak (2017) classified the phenomenon of the privatization of education based on various types: an extreme form of privatization in which education is seen as a business and profits are made by private institution and another form of it is pseudo privatization which includes institutions managed entirely privately, but financed mostly by the government.

Globally, the emergence and spread of private schools have been witnessed in countries where the government has failed to provide education of acceptable quality for all children. In such de facto privatization (Tooley and Dixon, 2006), responsibilities are transferred to the private sector rather than through reform or legislation. Privatization has so profoundly pervaded the education sector that some of its tenets are being replicated in the form of New Public Management (NPM) and Public Private Partnership (PPP) in the government schooling system. Such 'hidden' forms of privatization in government schools have existed either explicitly or implicitly in the past (Ball and Youdell, 2008). However, the establishment of for-profit, market-driven private schools changed the educational landscape in an Indian setting, thereby bringing the public versus private debate to the forefront.

Additionally, the rise in low fee private schools for vulnerable had started in decade of the nineties, where low-income groups were looking for quality education and affordable fee structure and also schools with reasonable distance (De *et al*., 2002). A main attraction of these low-cost private schools is that they purport to teach in English as a medium of instruction (Tooley and Dixon, 2003; Srivastava, 2008; Juneja, 2018). On the other hand, the government schools were declining due to awful infrastructure, low quality education, poor learning outcomes, teacher absenteeism, and inadequate physical infrastructure despite having well educated and trained teachers. Moreover, poor quality of government schools, demand of English medium education, urbanization and migration, policy support for public private partnerships, etc, are some driving factors for privatization of school education in India (Kingdon, 2020; Kumar and Choudhary, 2020). It is also stated that private school students perform better not only due to school but also due to other contributing factors. In fact, the gap between the performance of government and private school students narrows down when other factors like, parents' education, household assets, availability of private tuition etc. are taken into account (Wadhwa, 2014).

Overall, these factors motivated the privatization in school education. Consequently, there has been a steep growth in private schooling and a corresponding rapid shrinkage in the size of the government school sector in India (Kingdon, 2020). Therefore, the present study was undertaken with specific objective to analyze the expenditure pattern and enrolment trend in government and private schools in India and Punjab.

Data Sources and Methodology

The present study was based exclusively on secondary data obtained from authenticated and reliable sources. To achieve the objectives of the study, data were collected from the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER, 2008) the Unified District Information System for Education (UDISE, 2023–24)**,** and the National Sample Survey (NSS) 75th Round (2017–18; published in 2019**)**. In addition, the research report *Reach and Role of Private Schools in India* (Pankaj *et al.,* 2021) and the research paper *Educational Inequalities at Village Level in Punjab: Some Observations* (Shergill *et al.,* 2017) were reviewed to examine caste-wise enrolment patterns and assess educational inequalities in India, with particular reference to Punjab. The retrieved data were compiled and presented in tabular form to facilitate clarity and ease of interpretation. Information on the growth of private schools and student enrolment from 2007–08 to 2023–24 was analyzed to examine trends over time. Furthermore, household expenditure on school education was analyzed to compare expenditure patterns across rural and urban areas as well as across different levels of school education. This comprehensive analysis provides insights into the changing patterns of school enrolment, the expansion of private schooling, and disparities in educational expenditure in India.

Results and Discussion

This section examines the growth and expansion of private schools in India, with a particular focus on Punjab, over time. It analyses how the increasing presence of private schools has influenced household expenditure on education and explores changes in caste-wise and gender-wise student enrolment patterns.

Growth of private schools

Privatization has become deeply embedded in the Indian education system, transforming the facet of education over the past two decades**.** Table 1 presents the distribution of schools in India and Punjab by management type. The data classify schools into four categories. Government schools are fully owned, managed, and financed by the government. Government-aided schools are privately managed but receive financial assistance from the government. Private unaided recognized schools are privately owned, managed, and financed without government financial support; however, they are officially recognized and affiliated with educational boards such as the CBSE, PSEB, ICSE, or other recognized state education boards. Private unaided unrecognized schools are privately owned and managed without government financial assistance or official recognition. This classification provided a basis for analyzing variations in the distribution, enrolment, and expenditure patterns across different types of schools in India and Punjab.

Data demonstrate that India had a consistent decline in the share of government schools from 83.14 percent (2007-08) to 69.14 percent (2023-24). Similarly in Punjab, the percentage of government schools decreased from 86.4 percent to 70.2 percent (Table 1). On the other hand, a sharp increase was observed among private schools in India from 11.22 percent to 22.49 percent in 2023–24. The private schools in Punjab also had been rising from 18.4 percent in 2007-08 to 28.12 percent in 2023-24. It indicated the growing trust and demand for recognized private institutions among parents and students resulting into mushrooming growth of private schools. Some authors stated that quality of education, better infrastructure and English-medium instruction are some of factors behind parental preferences of private schools (Akhtar and Kusakabe, 2017; Narwana, 2019; Kumar and Choudhary, 2020).

Average expenditure on school education

Table 2 reveals a substantial disparity in per-student expenditure between government and private schools across all levels of school education in India. The expenditure gap widened with the progression of educational level, indicating that the cost differential became more pronounced at higher stages of schooling. At the pre-primary level, the average expenditure per student in private schools was ₹12,834, which is nearly twelve times higher than the corresponding expenditure in government schools (₹1,030). Similarly, at the senior secondary level, private schools charged an average of ₹25,852 per student, whereas government schools incurred an expenditure of only ₹7,001 per student, making private school costs almost four times higher. Overall, the average expenditure per student was consistently and significantly greater in private schools than in government schools across all educational levels. These findings suggest an increasing commercialization of school education in India, with private institutions imposing substantially higher educational costs. The continuous escalation in private school fees places a considerable financial burden on households, particularly those belonging to low- and middle-income groups, thereby raising concerns regarding affordability and equitable access to quality education.

Rural-urban difference in average expenditure

Table 3 indicates that households in urban areas incurred substantially higher expenditure on school education than their rural counterparts across all levels of schooling. At the pre-primary level, the average annual expenditure per student was ₹14,509 in urban areas, compared to ₹5,655 in rural areas. This disparity persisted across subsequent educational stages and remained pronounced at the senior secondary level, where urban households spent an average of ₹23,832 per student, whereas rural households spent only ₹9,148. The findings revealed a significant rural–urban gap in educational expenditure, which might be attributed to differences in household income, affordability, greater reliance on private educational institutions in urban areas, and varying levels of investment in children's education. These disparities highlighted the continuing socio-economic inequalities in access to educational opportunities and underscored the need for policies that promote equitable educational access and reduce financial barriers for rural households.

Expenditure on school education in Punjab

Usual Monthly Per Capita Consumption Expenditure (UMPCE) percentiles are commonly grouped into quintiles, which divide the population into five equal segments, each

Table 1: Growth of private schools in India and Punjab

(per cent)

Particulars	**India**			**Punjab**		
	2007-08	**2015-16**	**2023-24**	**2007-08**	**2015-16**	**2023-24**
Government schools	83.14	71.0	69.14	86.4	71.2	70.2
Government aided schools	5.64	7.39	5.46	1.8	1.6	1.62
Private unaided recognized schools	11.22	28.17	22.49	18.4	23.3	28.12
Private unaided unrecognized schools	-	5.28	2.90	3.4	3.8	0.05

Source: ASER report 2008, NSSO Report, 2019 & UDISE Plus Report, 2023-24

Table 2: Average expenditure of per student on school education in India

Level	Govt Schools (Rs.)	Pvt schools (Rs.)
Pre-primary	1030	12834
Primary	1253	14485
Upper primary	2181	17360
Secondary	4078	20804
Senior Secondary	7001	25852

Source: NSSO Report, 2019, Household social consumption: Education in India, 75th Round (2017-18)

Table 3: Rural-Urban difference in average expenditure per student on school education

Level	India	
	Rural (Rs.)	Urban (Rs.)
Pre-primary	5655	14509
Primary	3545	13516
Upper primary	3953	15337
Secondary	5856	17518
Senior Secondary	9148	23832

Source: NSSO Report, 2019, Household social consumption: Education in India, 75th Round (2017-18)

representing 20 percent of the distribution. These quintiles are interpreted as follows: the first quintile (0–20%) represents the poorest households; the second quintile (20–40%) corresponds to the lower-income group; the third quintile (40–60%) denotes the middle-income group; the fourth quintile (60–80%) represents the upper-middle-income group; and the fifth quintile (80–100%) comprises the richest households.

Table 4 presents the average household expenditure on school education in Punjab across different income quintiles. The findings revealed a strong positive relationship between household income and educational expenditure, with spending increasing consistently across all levels of schooling as income rises. At the pre-primary level, households in the lowest income quintile (0–20%) spent an average of ₹5,992 per student, whereas those in the highest income quintile (80–100%) spent ₹31,137, which is more than five times higher. A similar pattern was observed at the senior secondary level, where average expenditure increased from ₹10,195 among the lowest-income households to ₹43,440 among the highest-income households. These findings indicated that higher-income households possessed a greater capacity to invest in their children's education, enabling access to private schools and additional educational resources. In contrast, middle-income households (40–60%) exhibited moderate levels of educational expenditure, reflecting an increasing willingness to invest in education despite financial constraints. Overall, the results highlighted persistent socio-economic inequalities in educational expenditure, which may contribute to disparities in access to quality education, learning opportunities, and educational outcomes across income groups in Punjab.

Impact of privatization on enrolment trend in schools

The impact of privatization on school education can be more effectively understood by examining student enrolment patterns across different types of schools. The expansion

Table 4: Average expenditure on school education by households in Punjab

Level	UMPCE (Rs.)				
	0-20	20-40	40-60	60 -80	80-100
Pre-primary	5992	9559	12575	20752	31137
Primary	5483	8714	1226	19060	33467
Upper primary	6542	8765	13575	21311	37217
Secondary	7645	10189	14799	20709	39271
Senior Secondary	10195	14422	18931	26073	43440

Source: NSSO Report, 2019, Household social consumption: Education in India, 75th Round (2017-18)

Table 5: Enrolment of students by management type (6-14 age)

(Per cent)

Particulars	India			Punjab		
	2007-08	2015-16	2023-24	2007-08	2015-16	2023-24
Government Schools	75.1	65.4	66.8	70.0	47.4	58.0
Private unaided recognized schools	21.1	31.5	31.3	28.0	51.6	41.4
Never enrolled*	3.7	3.1	1.9	2.0	1.0	0.5

Source: ASER report 2008, NSSO Report, 2019 & UDISE Plus Report, 2023-24
**Those children who never get chance of admission in government or private school due to poor economic condition.*

of private educational schools has significantly influenced parental choice, with enrolment increasingly shaped by factors such as household socio-economic status, perceived quality of education, and the availability of educational facilities. Consequently, an analysis of enrolment trends provides valuable insights into the extent to which privatization has altered school participation patterns and transformed the educational landscape.

Enrolment of students

Table 5 presents the trends in student enrolment by school management in India and Punjab from 2008 to 2024. At the national level, the share of students enrolled in government schools declined from 75.1 percent in 2008 to 65.4 percent in 2016, followed by a marginal recovery to 66.8 percent in 2024. In contrast, enrolment in private unaided schools increased steadily from 21.1 percent in 2008 to 31.3 percent in 2024, reflecting the growing role of the private sector in school education. In Punjab, the decline in government school enrolment was more pronounced, falling from 70.0 percent in 2008 to 47.4 percent in 2016, before recovering to 58.0 percent in 2024. Conversely, enrolment in private unaided schools increased from 28.1 percent in 2008 to 51.6 percent in 2016, but subsequently declined to 41.4 percent in 2024. Furthermore, the proportion of never-enrolled children decreased consistently in both India and Punjab over the study period, indicating improved access to elementary education.

Although government schools continue to outnumbered private schools in terms of their overall presence, student enrolment had increasingly shifted towards private institutions. This trend suggested that the expansion of private schooling had significantly influenced parental school choice and enrolment patterns. Overall, the findings indicated that the privatization of school education has substantially reshaped the distribution of student enrolment in both India and Punjab, while the recent improvement in government school enrolment in Punjab may reflect the positive impact of policy initiatives and efforts to strengthen the public education system.

Gender wise enrolment

The growing privatization of school education has added a new economic dimension to gender inequality, as access to quality education is increasingly influenced by households' financial capacity. As private schools generally charge higher fees than government schools, household financial constraints often influence educational decisions. In many families, particularly those with limited resources, greater investment is made in boys' education by enrolling them in private schools, while girls are more likely to attend government schools because of lower or no tuition fees. Consequently, privatization may reinforce existing gender disparities in access to quality education and indicating a subtle yet continuing form of gender discrimination in education, highlighting a regrettable mindset that undermines gender equality even in 21stcentury (Azam and Kingdon, 2013; Choudhury *et al., 2025*).

Table 6 presents gender-wise enrolment patterns across different types of schools in India and Punjab for the academic

Table 6: Gender wise enrolment of students by management type, 2023-24

(Per cent)

Particulars	India			Punjab		
	Boys	Girls	Gender gap	Boys	Girls	Gender gap
Government schools	49.05	50.95	1.9	48.00	52.00	4.00
Government aided schools	51.37	48.63	2.74	51.77	48.23	3.54
Private unaided recognized schools	56.01	44.00	12.01	56.38	43.62	12.76
Private unaided unrecognized schools	53.25	46.75	6.5	53.46	46.54	6.92

Source: UDISE Plus, 2023-24

year 2023–24. The data indicated that girls had a slight enrolment advantage over boys in government schools in both India and Punjab. In Punjab, girls constituted a higher proportion of enrolment than boys, with a gender gap of 4.0 percentage points in favour of girls, compared with 1.9 percentage points at the national level. In contrast, private unaided recognized schools exhibited a marked gender disparity favouring boys. Boys accounted for more than 56 percent of total enrolment in these schools, resulting in a gender gap of approximately 12 percentage points in both India and Punjab. These findings suggested that, despite improvements in overall educational access and the expansion of schooling opportunities in the digital era, gender disparities in private school enrolment continue to persist. The higher representation of boys in private schools may reflect socio-economic and cultural factors that influence household investment in children's education, highlighting the need for policies that promote equitable access to quality education for girls.

Caste-wise enrolment

Indian society has historically been characterized by a caste-based social structure that has shaped access to social, economic, and educational opportunities. For centuries, members of the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) experienced systemic exclusion and deprivation of fundamental rights. Following independence, the Constitution of India, along with various welfare programmes and affirmative action policies, has played a significant role in improving their socio-economic and educational status. Nevertheless, caste-based inequalities and discrimination continue to persist in several spheres, including education (Shah and Shobha, 2024).

Punjab presents a distinctive social context where the influence of the caste system has been comparatively moderated by the egalitarian philosophy of the Sikh Gurus, who emphasized equality, social justice, and human dignity (Judge, 2015; Kaur, 2019). However, despite constitutional safeguards and sustained policy interventions, disparities in educational access and participation across caste groups remain evident. In this context, an analysis of caste-wise enrolment in government and private schools provides valuable insights into the extent to which educational opportunities are equitably distributed among different social groups and the role of privatization in shaping these enrolment patterns.

Table 7 presents the distribution of student enrolment by caste across government and private schools in India. The findings indicated that students belonging to the General category were relatively evenly distributed between government (45.43%) and private schools (54.57%), with a slightly higher proportion enrolled in private institutions. This pattern suggested that households from the General category generally possess greater financial capacity to access private education, which is often perceived to provide better infrastructure, academic quality, and learning opportunities.

In contrast, a substantial majority of Scheduled Caste (SCs) students (76.39%) were enrolled in government schools, while only 23.61 percent attended private schools. This heavy dependence on government schools may be attributed to the rising cost of private education, economic constraints faced by many SC households, and the availability of government support measures such as scholarships, free textbooks, uniforms, and the Mid-Day Meal Scheme (Desai and Kulkarni, 2008). Similarly, Scheduled Tribe (STs) students exhibited the highest reliance on government schools, with 84.89 percent of enrolment concentrated in the public education system. This trend reflects not only the socio-economic marginalization of tribal communities but also their geographical concentration in remote and underserved regions, where access to private educational institutions is often limited or absent.

Overall, the findings demonstrated that caste continues to influence school choice in India. While students from economically and socially advantaged groups are more likely to access private education, those belonging to historically disadvantaged communities remain predominantly dependent on government schools, highlighting persistent inequalities in educational access despite ongoing policy interventions.

Table 7 further presents caste-wise enrolment patterns by school management in Punjab. The findings reveal that more than three-fourths (76%) of Scheduled Caste (SCs) students were enrolled in government schools, while only 24 percent

Table 7: Caste-wise enrolment of students in schools by management type in India and Punjab

(Per cent)

Particulars	India*		Punjab**	
	Government School	Private School	Government School	Private School
General Castes	45.43	54.57	25.00	75.00
Scheduled Castes	76.39	23.61	76.00	24.00
Scheduled Tribes	84.89	15.11	-	-
Other Backward Classes	66.83	33.17	58.00	42.00

*Source: * Pankaj et al., 2021 and **Shergill et al., 2018.*

attended private schools, indicating a continued reliance of socially and economically marginalized communities on the public education system. Among Other Backward Classes (OBCs), the distribution was comparatively more balanced; however, a larger proportion of students remained enrolled in government schools (58%) than in private schools (42%). These patterns suggest that school choice in Punjab continues to be shaped by socio-economic circumstances and social background, with disadvantaged caste groups exhibiting greater dependence on government-funded education.

Overall, the findings indicate that the expansion of private schooling has not translated into equitable enrolment across all caste groups. Instead, access to private education remains uneven, largely reflecting existing socio-economic inequalities. As argued by Taneja and Noopur (2022), the education system is no longer divided simply into "public" and "private" sectors; rather, it has evolved into a differentiated educational marketplace that caters to distinct socio-economic and caste-based constituencies, including Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, and upper-caste communities. These findings underscore the need for policies that ensure equitable access to quality education irrespective of caste or socio-economic status.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Although the privatization of school education is not a new global phenomenon, it has gained considerable momentum in India over the past two decades. The rapid expansion of private schools, coupled with increasing enrolment in both India and Punjab, reflects a clear shift in parental preferences towards private institutions, largely driven by perceptions of better educational quality, improved infrastructure, and English-medium instruction. However, this expansion has also intensified social and economic inequalities in access to education. The substantially higher expenditure associated with private schooling has imposed a significant financial burden on households, particularly those belonging to low- and middle-income groups. In Punjab, households in the highest income quintile spend four to six times more on school education than those in the lowest income quintile, highlighting pronounced disparities in educational investment.

The study further reveals that inequalities in school enrolment continue to persist across gender, caste, and socio-economic groups. Gender disparities remain evident in private schools in both India and Punjab, where boys constitute a larger share of enrolment than girls. Similarly, students belonging to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and other socially disadvantaged communities continue to depend predominantly on government schools due to economic constraints and the availability of public welfare provisions. These findings suggest that the expansion of private schooling has not resulted in equitable educational participation across different social groups. Rather, privatization has contributed to the emergence of a segmented education system in which access to different types of schools is strongly influenced by household income, caste, and other socio-economic characteristics.

In light of these findings, the study recommends strengthening government and government-aided schools through enhanced infrastructure, adequate financial resources, and the recruitment of qualified teaching staff to ensure equitable access to quality education. In addition, a robust regulatory framework is needed to monitor private schools by ensuring transparency in fee structures, fair admission procedures, and compliance with minimum quality standards. Finally, increased public investment in education, particularly in rural and socially marginalized areas, is essential to reduce socio-economic disparities, promote inclusive educational opportunities, and achieve equitable access to quality schooling for all children.

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Received: January 10, 2026 Accepted: March 25, 2026