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## SCHOOL CHOICES, FAMILY STRATEGIES AND COMPETITIVE SCHOOL MARKET (S): A STUDY OF WORKING CLASS FAMILIES OF ALWAR CITY IN RAJASTHAN

### *Abstract*

*This paper contributes to the debate of school choice by interconnecting dots of working class school choices, family strategies and the competitive school market(s). Based on an empirical study of working class in Alwar city of Rajasthan, it seeks to answer few pertinent questions such as; what are the school choices available to working class in a provincial town like Alwar in the state of Rajasthan? How are the choices of working class families being shaped? How do the working class families articulate their choices, strategise and take decisions to meet their aspirations of selecting a school for their wards? It is observed that the factors like social network, gender, religion, notions of kismet (luck) and trust significantly shape working class's search for schools, strategies and decision making. The study suggests centrifugal pattern as one of the possible ways to explain the working class school choice behaviour which is imbued with a subtle process of self-elimination and creation of 'the other' both inter-community and intra-community.*

**Keywords:** *School choice, family strategies, working class, Alwar, school market.*

### **Introduction**

The question 'why even poorer sections are choosing private schools in India' has been one of the most sought after concerns for scholars working on Indian school education system. In last couple of decades, especially after 1990s when India liberalized its economy that has led to a drastic shift in the 'political economy of education' and the 'discursive regime' around it (Sarangapani 2018), a massive expansion of enrolment in low fee private schools<sup>1</sup> has been witnessed. Parents seem to have imbibed a commonplace belief that the private schools offer quality education, however the viability of such purported claims by 'unregulated or partially regulated' private schools always had been under question (Drury, 1993, Philipson 2008, Nambissan 2010, Goyal

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and Pandey 2012, Sarangapani 2018). Nonetheless, the large number of parents with low socio-economic status has been found to choose private schools over public schools because the later are seen as dysfunctional and unable to meet parental expectations (Philipson 2008, Goyal and Pandey 2012). Parental preference for private schools is thus now often construed as ‘pan Indian phenomenon’ (Kingdon 2007). In newly evolved market ecology of schooling, the vocabulary of choice, market and for-profit schooling appears to define the emerging scenario in India school system. Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (2021) observed that the private sector in education is growing at much faster rate as compare to government sector. Private sector claims over 25 percent share in total schools and over 40 per cent share in the total enrolment (DISE 2017-18). Pertinently, the private sector in k-12 school segment<sup>2</sup> offers range of educational services claiming to make learning worthier and easy-going process. Perhaps for the same reasons, during COVID-19<sup>3</sup>, the country witnesses significant expansion in school market. Specifically, two prominent developments demonstrate this fact candidly. First, the country experienced a significant budget cuts, to the tune of 65 per cent, as per the World Bank (2021). Second, a large number of oligopolic education companies like Byju’s, Vedantu, ODA, etc., with huge turnover and market base have started to emerge to offer varied educational services suiting to the needs and comfort of learner and parents. Flipside of this prevailing phenomenon is that education has now entered into the arena of commercialisation, and a palpable competitive market has emerged with diverse types of schools including ‘low cost private schools’ as affordable choices for urban poors. Some studies have rather claimed that in ‘free market of education’ scenario even lower classes<sup>4</sup> can use their agency and make choices for better schooling of their wards (Tooley and Dixon 2005, Muralidharan and Kremer 2008). This argument however has been refuted based on the reasoning that such advocacy of ‘availability of choices for lower class’ does not take into account the larger institutional context of Indian society (Nambissan 2010) and such purported claims and advocacies are likely to endanger the policy goal of equal educational opportunities. In this critical framework, choice making is distinctively considered as a ‘classed phenomenon’ and a ‘sorting mechanism’ that separates children along class lines (Stephen Ball 2003: 35).

Choices are decisions made from a social and economic vantage point. In Bourdieu’s framework of practice, the volume of capital (social, cultural, economic and symbolic) available at one’s disposal is the driving force that shapes preferences (taste), decision making and success trajectories in a bounded social milieu (field). The ‘field’, which Bourdieu (1984) calls a ‘structuring structure’ (p.168) shapes the boundaries within which one can move, traverse through possibilities or impossibilities and make critically important decisions. It is thus one’s past (family history) that directs and forms one’s present through everyday processes of strategising, decision making and negotiations. Choice, seamlessly intertwined with ‘logic and taste’ (Ball 2003:59),

is thus “not a simple one-off moment of action, it is rather part of the construction of a complex trajectory of one’s achievement and failure” (p. 59). Pertinently, school is one such site where existing social inequalities are exercised and materialized prominently. In neoliberal market ecology, private schools compete and influence their prospective clientele (parents). Similarly parents do make (and/or rather made to do) choice of schools by treading cautiously to meet their aspirations. Making choice of schools is a very complex social phenomenon. Choice is thus often viewed as a vicious cycle of pressures, incentives and constraints (Ball 2003). With regard to the fact that citizens are turned into consumer citizens or compulsive consumer in an overwhelming neoliberal landscape (Pathak 2021), one of the most pressing questions emerge; is school choice a cathartic journey of reluctant subjects<sup>5</sup> as choice being an off-shoot of market induced compulsions on working class families? This question rather holds much significance when we turn our gaze to life and livelihood struggles of working classes in small provincial town like Alwar in India. It is thus essential to locate school choice discourse within the frequently formed binaries such as; public versus private, freedom versus compulsion and success versus failure with regard to aspirations and prospects any urban locale offers to its struggling working class populace. The present research paper attempts to make a comprehensive understanding of choice behaviour of working class. Looking at the idea of choice critically with regard to negotiations and constraints in the long drawn struggle of school selection, the paper focuses on working class school preferences by conceptually situating choice as complex decision making process, school as a consumable service, education as a commodity and parents (instead of learners) as clientele within the neoliberal framework.

### **Working Class School Choice in India: Review of Literature**

In last couple of decades especially after 1990s, a number of studies have been conducted on the issues of privatisation of school education, mushrooming of low-cost private schools and an emergence of ‘diversified markets’ purportedly offering choices for the parents of very low socio-economic status. The issues of quality, equity, efficiency, accountability, class and caste dimension of parental preferences for private schools have also become the focus of many such researches (Drury 1993, Kingdon 1996a, Mehta 2003, Singh and Sridhar 2002, Weidrich 2005, Aggarwal, 2000, Tooley and Dixon 2003, Muralidharan and Kremer 2006, Philipson 2008, Tilak 2012 Nambissan 2013, Kumar and Choudhary 2020, Harinath and Nagaraju 2021). Researchers have examined the shrinking role of public sector, growing interest of non-state actors in imparting education and more recently the role of technology especially in the times of COVID-19 which has further added to the k-12 school market wherein foreign investment is pouring in and new technology based startups are opening giving more choices and platform for consumer parents (users) even at their door steps or in the comfort of their drawing room to meet their

aspirations to succeed in thriving competitive global economy.

One of the first researches mapping the role of family and availability of choices in Indian context was conducted by James Drury in Kanpur in 1980s. Drury, while using metaphor of 'cottage industry' for massive expansion of private schools, highlighted the issues of poor quality of education, craze for English medium schools and a growing imperative for 'decision making strategies' of parents to make better schooling choices for their wards. He observed classed phenomenon in decision making and utilization of education credentials, and, also take note of the ways in which "perceptions, goals, information, logic, resources and social relations underlie the decision making process" (p. 3). He looked into determinants of demands, factors shaping family school choices, material constraints while juxtaposing school preferences of both middle and working class families in an urban social milieu. He attempted to address the question like 'why working class children end up in working class jobs, and why education gets left behind along the way'. In this way, Drury made pioneering attempt to situate class disadvantage and choice induced reproduction of social inequalities in the arena of schooling.

From 1990s onwards, Geeta Gandhi Kingdon has studied efficiency, quality and equity-effect of private schooling which eventually started witnessing a tangible presence in urban areas initially and in rural parts of India subsequently. Kingdon (1996a) found 'rising income' and 'breakdown in the functioning and quality of government schools' as two significant reasons for the rising demand of private schools. She argued that private schools offer superior quality of education, and are much more efficient as compare to their counterpart public schools. Such arguments were however refuted by researchers with the counter-arguments that the 'private' is much diversified (Sarangapani 2018) and, it being purely a 'commerce driven enterprise' (Jha 2018) which does not take into account the larger purpose of education (Nambissan 2013).

In late 1990s and 2000s, the work of James Tooley and his associates did research on low-cost school, parental choices and strategies of working-class families in slums in Hyderabad. Later on, they replicated similar researches in some other places like Delhi and Andhra Pradesh. Such researches, replete with neoliberal agendas, advocated the usefulness of low-cost schools through 'choice campaign and scaling up voucher system in India' in coordination with the likeminded global education institutions, policy entrepreneurs, think tanks and financial institutions. However, the work of Tooley and his ilk was squarely refuted by scholars like Stephen Ball, Geetha Nambissan and others on the account of India's unique social and institutional context, and the adverse ramifications of the 'market driven schooling' for equal educational opportunity and social justice.

Geetha B. Nambissan (1996) in her research on schooling of poor and

marginalized emphatically pointed out the inadequacies in the functioning of government schools. She highlighted the issues of poor infrastructural facilities and the lack of effective pedagogical support to the children of dalit communities. While making a deeper reading of the state's changed intentions, she argued that the government is abdicating its responsibility to generate equity. Private school's unbridled constituency to the elite or the people who can pay would not only curtail the equity but also would encourage the 'privatisation of quality education for the elite' (Nambissan 1996: 1015). This trend would demean the very policy goal of 'equalization of educational opportunity'. She ferociously criticized the arguments of Tooley and his associates who advocated the low cost private schooling under the guise of offering 'choice' and decision making prowess to the poors and projecting the low cost/budget schools as efficient, cost-effective and 'equitable solutions' to the education of the most marginalized sections of the society (Nambissan and Ball 2010). Padma Sarangapani in her research has similarly examined the issues of choice, multiple market niches of private schools, quality and class dimensions. In her most recent work focusing on the 'Hyderabad's education market' (2018) she has examined the riveting diverse private school market that lies in sync with the segmented and stratified Indian social system. She explores how the pro-liberalisation scenario cultivated at provincial level has led to the growth of diversified markets. In this process, she has also critically examined the nexus between existing private unrecognised schools and the government bureaucracies, catchment areas of the private schools, shrinking enrolment of government run schools, and the competing growth pattern or 'a business niches' of fee charging schools versus government run free public schools based on the five quality dimensions such as aims, provisioning, curriculum, pedagogy and accountability.

In recent times, many research studies have also highlighted the issues of parental decisions making in low information scenario (Azim Premji Foundation, 2018), determinants of schooling decision of the parents (Kumar and Kumar 2020), availability of 'choices' and preference for private schools among dalits (Harinath and Nagaraju 2021). Such studies have vigorously examined the newly emerging scenarios of prevailing private schooling wherein the parents, apparently though, exercise their agency and pay to avail education for their wards.

In lieu of the identified research gaps, the research studies so far conducted have primarily focused on quantity, quality and equity aspects of private schooling in India. Some studies have seemingly focused on the class preferences; however these studies could not delve into the deeper family dynamics and nuances of decision making especially in terms of non-economic factors such as kinship, religion, and imaginaries like *kismet*, trust and emdeddedness of intra-class exclusionary dynamics. The present paper, in an attempt to fill in the gap, explores the dynamics of intra-class social exclusion,

and, underlines a 'pattern' to demonstrate the finer nuances of school choice behaviour of working class.

### **Field Setting and Methods**

This paper is part of researcher's doctoral work (2016) undertaken on the issue of school choice in Alwar town of Rajasthan. The paper specifically focuses on the working class school choices and strategies by attempting to answer few pertinent questions such as; what are the school choices available to working class in a provincial city like Alwar in the state of Rajasthan? How are the choices of working class families shaped? How do the working class families articulate their choices, strategise and take decision to meet their aspirations of selecting a school for their wards?

Rajasthan is one of the quick takers of privatisation of school education in India. In the state of Rajasthan, almost half of the children (49.22%) at elementary level are enrolled in private schools (including government aided and unrecognised private schools) (DISE 2017-18 report). Notably, Alwar city has been witnessing mushrooming of the private schools especially those who offer extra classes or coaching on the line of schools-plus-coaching<sup>6</sup> in Kota city<sup>7</sup>. As per State Education Records (2015-16) the city has a total of 365 schools. Private sector constitutes 75 % of the total schools in the city, and claims a share of 81 % in total children enrolled. Besides numerous low cost private schools, the presence of various elite private schools such as Delhi Public School, Aravali Public School, Lords International Public School, Missionary schools and various well known Schools plus Coaching like Career Point, Bansal Classes, Career Maker, Kota Classes, etc. have opened their branches in the Alwar, indicating a thriving competitive school market in the city. Clearly, the city is growing on the line of Kota, as it has been witnessing a rampant growth of diverse categories of private schools offering range of choices for working class and middle class families.

### **Sampling, Respondents' Profile and Social Class**

Data collected from 51 families from Divakiri and Mannaka localities in Alwar city forms the base of this study. Respondents' families spreading across these two localities are engaged in different low earning occupations. These were reached out through snowball cum purposive sampling techniques. Of the total 51 families, 31 respondents were from Divakiri and 20 from Mannaka. In terms of responses collection from the parents, it may be noted that the researcher largely interacted with male parents (22 Divakiri and 17 in Mannaka). Only few female parents (seven) were interviewed in Divakiri. In Mannaka, only male parents were interviewed. However, in some cases, both male and female parents were interviewed such as two in Divakiri and three in Mannaka. To understand the school side story of family strategies and the growth pattern of education market in the city, 35 schools operating

under different managements (public and private) were approached for data collection.

**Table 1: Social composition of respondents**

Social Groups	Location		Sampled Families
	Divakiri	Mannaka	Total
Scheduled Castes	26 (51%)	—	26 (51%)
Other Backward Classes	3(6%)	20 (39%)	23(45%)
General	2(4%)	—	02(4%)
Total	31(61%)	20(39%)	51(100%)

Source: Field Data

As shown in Table 1, majority of the respondents belongs to Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Classes. Only two respondent families in Divakiri belonged to General caste category. Divakiri and Mannaka are predominantly inhabited by Scheduled Castes and Muslim minorities respectively who are mostly engaged in low earning occupations such as daily wage labourers, driving, barber, tailor, rickshaw puller, vegetable vender, small tea owner and menial work. Snowball sampling was used to reach out to the parents having school going children. This sampling method was further supplemented by the purposive sampling technique as parents with diverse occupations were specifically needed so as to elicit the data required to understand their school choices, strategies and decision making processes.

**Table 2: Education profile of the parents**

Education level of respondents	Divakiri		Mannaka	
	Father	Mother	Father	Mother
Not Literate	8 (26%)	26 (84%)	4(20%)	20 (100%)
Literate but below primary schooling	2(6%)	3(10%)	1(5%)	0
Primary and Upper primary	11(35%)	2(6%)	12(60%)	0
Higher and senior secondary education	10(32%)	0	3(15%)	0
Total	31(100%)	—	20 (100%)	—

Source: Field Data

As Table 2 shows, most respondents in the selected localities have low educational profile. In Divakiri, majority of the male parents were educated up to higher secondary, whereas a large number of parents in the same localities were illiterate. In Divakiri, most female parents were illiterate. Here only a couple of female parents had studied up to primary or upper primary level. In case of Mannaka, the educational status of parents was found to be quite low. Most male parents in Mannaka were found to be educated only up to upper primary level. Only three male parents were having education in the segments of higher and senior secondary schooling. Notably, in both the localities none of the parents were Graduate or above which shows a poor condition of education in both the localities across social groups.

Occupation is often considered as composite of one's education, income and societal status as it decides one's taste, choices and monetary decision making capacities which Weber (1964) calls 'life chances'. Various scholars (Otto (1972, Vaid 2004, Goldthorpe and McKnight 2004) have used occupation as defining indicator for social class. In this paper, occupation is used as main criteria to define the term working class which is constituted of two sets of occupations viz skilled and semi-skilled occupations. First set of occupations involves skilled occupations such as mason, drivers (truck, auto rickshaw), barber and tailor. The income range here is falling in the range of Rs. 3,000 to 11,000 per month. The average income in the group is Rs. 6,000 per month. Another set of occupations includes unskilled (manual) categories of occupations such as vending, rickshaw puller, sweepers and peon. The income range in this group is between Rs. 12, 00 to 5,000 per month. The average income in the group is Rs. 3000 per month. Both the groups, having low profiled occupations, seemed to have similar life style. They lack resources and many of them go for low cost schooling for their wards in the local vicinity itself. However among the working class too, differences appear in terms of income, resources and aspirations. The study is aware of the heterogeneity among working class, hence the term 'classes' has also been used while reflecting on the issues of parental aspirations, strategies and selection of schools.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The field work for the study was conducted in 2015-2016<sup>8</sup> in multiple phases with different intervals. Data was collected from parents, teachers and members of school management and various stakeholders including local educational authorities or administrators. The self-administered interview schedule was used to elicit in-depth information and views of different stakeholders. The interview schedule contained questions on social background of the families, occupation and education of parents and children, factors influencing parental decisions, schools available as options to make choices, parental social network and sources of information, allocation of family resources on education of children, nuances of planning and decision making in the family. Both close and open ended questions were asked to collect information on variety of indicators to meet the aim of the study. Data in the form of verbatim, narratives, children's pathways of learning, case studies and the brief histories of the families were collected to grasp numerous nuances, trajectory and contestations on the issue.

### **Findings and Analysis**

#### ***Availability of Choices and Boundaried Social Milieu***

In terms of the availability of school choices, both Divakiri and Mannaka had one government school each and a total of 15 low cost private schools and



few tuition centres. Schools located in nearby localities and at the periphery of the city cater to the needs of parents from Divakiri and Mannaka. Of the total (51) respondent families, only 12 families were sending their children to government schools, 35 to private schools<sup>9</sup> and only four families were being catered by both government and private schools. This obviously demonstrates the fact that parents are engaged in making choice between various types of schools. Notably, choices were made not only between government and private schools, but mostly among different types of private schools. It was observed that the school plus coaching institution, earlier a forte of middle classes, has been becoming one of the most sought after choices among working class families as well. Parents see such schools as 'all in one' solution given the fact that such type of schools combines both schooling and coaching in one, and hence offer better prospects by training children to take admission in elite engineering, medical and commerce institutes of the country.

The study observed that the working class families relatively have larger number of choices of schools than that of their middle class in the city. So, working class 'choice basket' appears to be much wider than those of the parents placed in high income groups or better earning professions such as business, bureaucrats or professionals like doctors or professors. However, most parents in working class families found to be less satisfied with the schools they have chosen, for reasons such as low quality teaching-learning practices, lack of teachers, poor pass percentage, etc. Consequent to such felt concerns, many parents even re-admitted their wards in government school or another private school. Notably, shifting of the children occurred not only due to low learning levels, but many a times due to certain contingencies like piled up fee caused by the loss of livelihood or the heavy expenses incurred in marriage in the family or any other untoward instances that take toll on the family budget. Such contingencies most often force working class families to precipitous withdrawal from the school, and at times cause a total breakdown in the schooling of their wards. Furthermore, the study also observed that some families among the working classes were compelled to choose among a very few low cost private schools (restricted choice basket scenario), while some others had no options except to go for a government school (no choice scenario). Clearly, both these scenarios demonstrate an aspect of 'field' where people's competitive efforts are marked by social closures, and consequently one's habitus is either enabling or disabling them to obtain breakthrough in prospective decision making (Bourdieu 1984). For instance, during fieldwork, many parents in their interactions, exhibited higher aspirations, but they expressed their inability to achieve these aspirations. Madan, a vegetable vender from Divakiri, said 'I want that my child become Superintendent of Police today itself, but this is not possible'. Similarly, many parents in Mannaka also shared their lived experiences about their sense of insecurity and systemic bottlenecks. Their unease on corruption, systemic exclusion and inability of their children to compete with those studying in high fee charging English medium schools

reflects a prevailing scenario of confidence deficit, indicating the prevailing weak habitus and restricted actions in the field. For instance, Kale, a labourer from Mannaka, shifted his two children to government school from a private school not only due to poor economic capital but largely due to low confidence in the system. Similarly, Meenu, a factory worker from Mannaka, shared that he could not even think to admit his children in a private school for the same reasons. Thus, it emerged that schooling decisions and choices, embedded with systemic constraints and contingencies, are made within a confined and boundaried social milieu.

### Social Network and Information

Parental social networks such as friendship circles, relatives, neighbour, etc. help to collect information, known as 'grapevine' or 'hot knowledge' in school choice literature (Ball 2003). Such information helps parents in taking better decisions by assessing available options, taking a final call about a school and finally bargaining with the school management for fee, etc. Since some schools are preferred over others, getting to know and taking admission into such schools is a competitive process. Hence, parents with wider social networks gain an advantageous edge over less connected one. Ball and Vincent note that parental access to various informal or unofficial means of knowledge is 'socially structured and patterned' (1998:392). Social class acts as a filter and it selectively opens up the opportunities to relate with the wider society (significant others or various sources of information).

**Table 3: Significant others the family rely for consultation**

Social networks	Family consultation
Relatives	10 (20%)
Friends	3 (6%)
Neighbours	2(4%)
Did not consult anyone	36(70%)
Total	51 (100%)

Source: Field data

As Table 3 suggests, majority of parents (36/51) mentioned that they did not consulted anybody while searching and selecting a school for their wards. Probably, one of the most important reasons for this is that the most low-cost schools were available within the locality or adjacent localities. Hence, parents were not only quite familiar with the schools but also in many cases school owners were very well known to them. Almost half of the respondents consulted somebody close to them in matters related to schooling of children. Some families (10) found to rely mainly on relatives and only few (three) approached friends. It appears that the role models for the working class families in this case were their immediate kith and kin, rather than people surrounding in neighborhood or at workplace.

### Perception of 'Good School' and Decision Making

Since most parents carry perceptions of 'good or bad' school, they often start their search with such preconceived conceptions in mind. However, it is pertinent to note that such conceptions and articulations differ invariably within the working class families. Table 4 presents factors related to parental conception of a good school.

**Table 4: Determinants in parental selection of schools**

Determinants of choice	Family responses
Good teacher	26(51%)
Facilities	3(6%)
Result/reputation	5 (10%)
School fee	4(8%)
Discipline	7 (14%)
Distance	4(8%)
Overall all development of child	1 (2%)
English as medium of instruction	1 (2%)
Total	51 (100%)

Source: Field data

As shown in the Table 4, the variable 'good teachers' emerged as the first and foremost factor in selection of a school by working class parents. Good teacher is however not defined in terms of pedagogical framework, but in terms of regularity and behaviour. The second most important factor is maintaining discipline in determining the parental choices of school. Some families consider results of the school, which also probably reflect the school's reputation, as one of the significant factors in their decision making. School fee and distance are also matter of concerns for working class families as these incur monetary burden on their family budget. Even though many parents see elite or expensive English medium schools as desirable, however they immediately discount them out of their reach. This however seems to cause some sort of soul searching among working class parents, and forces them to go for similar or somewhat matching choices such as low cost English medium or school plus coaching.

The middle class school choice appears to shape the choices of working class significantly. Ray (2002) notes 'poors do desire to be rich' even though at times they feel that the goal of becoming so is unreachable. Income gap and social inequalities often act as social closures that led to anxieties and frustrations. Market however attempts to capitalise on such gaps and unequally stratified 'parent body' by 'pricing children' differently. Sharma (2008) in her study of schools in Delhi notes that schools even at times labeled parents as 'profitable' and 'wasteful' and thus dealt with them accordingly. The opening of low cost schools or coaching type schools (school plus coaching as commonly

referred), low cost English medium schools in Alwar City indicated the fact that the school market attempts to address the aspirations which working class parents harbour. Parents wish their children to enter into the well-paid jobs in the emerging India's liberalized economy. They want their wards to attend English medium education since they see it as a gate pass to better paid job. LaDousa in his ethnographic study of schools and language markets in Varanasi aptly notes "the value of English for people in lower class positions emerges from the ways in which they find English useful, outside the school" (2014: 156). For instance, the phrases such as, '*English have better Scope*', '*English is an international language*,' '*ab English ka hi zamana hei*' (Now the world belongs to English), '*angrezi ke bina bhavishya adhura hei*' (incomplete future without English), etc. were commonly heard among parents in Alwar. Schools are capitalizing on such parental perceptions to create their niche in the competitive school market. For instance, M.S. Bhutani, a Principal of the private schools in Alwar, said, 'As per the need of the time, we had to open new schools with English medium. Though we had fewer students initially in English medium as compare to students in our Hindi medium school, now parents are coming in large numbers to admit their children in English medium. Some people from our own Hindi medium school are shifting their wards to our English medium school'.

In school choice discourse, gender also figures as one of the prominent factors in parental decision making. It is observed that the parents often look for school which is nearer, and/or preferably a 'girl school' for their girl child. Parents' keep their conception of '*izzat*' (honour) on high pedestal. Hence, it does not matter if the girl child has to be sent to a low cost private school or a government girl school. Hatcher (1998: 7) sees these transition points as 'sites of social selectivity'. He further notes, "the social selection results not only from decisions made by the institution, but also by processes of self-selection by pupils/students and their parents" (ibid). Parental notion of good school for girls are distinctly defined based on the discipline, distance, behaviour of pupils and teachers and safety concerns (Maitra, Pal, and Sharma 2014). Many respondents in Alwar clearly put forth their disdain for particular schools (well-known ones) citing the concern that the environment in these schools is not good for girls. Such perceptions however found to be cross-cutting across social class and religion. Parents preferred better schooling for boys as compared to girls. In families where the first child is a boy (or in case, the boy is the only child) the families prefer to choose what they consider as 'good private school'. Moreover, working class families frequently invoke the notion of '*kismet*' (luck) when asked whether the chosen school is good or will ensure success to their child. Notably, *kismet* here in the form of a weak habitus squarely reflects the subtle and historically situated recurring contingencies and shaking foundations of working class aspirations and decision making capabilities. For instance, Bodhram, a daily wage labourer in Divakiri, whose both children are working in a factory while also attending a school, said, "I will allow them to study as

much as they want. I am more concerned about my elder son. I will get him educated as much as he wants. My younger son is not much interested in study. *Uska dimmag mota hei* (he is weak in studies). It seems his *Kismat* is bad”.

### **Suppliers (school) Side Factors Influencing Working Class Choices**

The schools use numerous strategies to influence parents, create an ‘image-oriented notion’ of being good, and thus ‘reap the benefit’ (Shukla and Joshi 2008: 41). Sarangapani notes that the schools competitively maintain their ‘catchment area’ drew their ‘clientele’ and create a ‘business niches’ by engaging in ‘impression management’ and ‘showcasing qualities and achievement of the schools’ (2018: 247). She observes, ‘the high fee schools have larger catchment areas, low-fee schools having local clientele whereas the ‘coaching type schools’ selectively focus to attract better performing students (Sarangapani 2018: 168). To maintain their catchment areas and sustain the competitive edge, schools in Alwar found to promise like guarantee of high percentage marks, safety, better discipline, all round development, better English medium education to prepare child to go for higher education and better job opportunities. School selection, change and/or shift are often done by parents based on such promises. For instance, Imrat Lal, a small shopkeeper in Divakiri, changed the school of his child because the child failed in 10<sup>th</sup> board exam in the Saravasti Public School, he then admitted him in Sarasvati Public School in the city as the school took guarantee to pass the students and ensuring disciplined behaviour (*sanskaar*) in the child. Winch (2018: 74) aptly notes that the private schools in sync with the parental expectations ‘recognize the ‘duty of care’ wherein school claim to give special attention on child development or educational needs.

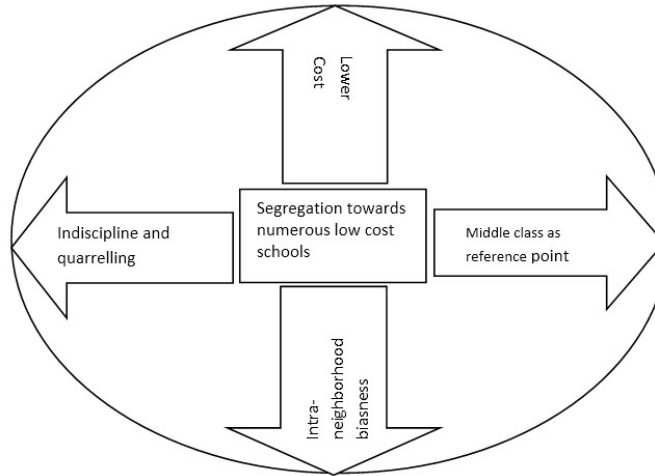
To maintain catchment area which Ball calls ‘entrepreneurial localities’ and keeping the pool of admissions intact, schools work ‘by virtue of trust and shared values’ (2007: 85), weaving ‘narrative of enterprise and entrepreneurship’ (2007: 148). In case of low cost schools in Alwar, most school principals were found to go to visit prospective families, and also send their school teachers to target localities in teams to convince parents. Quite often the owners of the schools or school principals visit families in target localities for courtesy visits at time of festivals or certain ceremonies and attempt to build trust and rapport among the parents. Caste, nativity and religion are invoked to gain support in the locality and influencing parents invariably. At times, parents also use nativity and religious affiliations for negotiation and bargaining with the schools. For instance, a good number of parents in Mannaka readily send their children to newly opened school, by the locals, as it started offering religious education as an ‘add on’ along with government recognised syllabi. In so doing, the schools are also engaged in ‘brand building’ through roadside hoarding, wall-painting, pamphlets and news in local newspapers, and also by distributing school logo

printed diaries, calendars, wall-watch, school books or school dress' and even by 'training children in certain qualities' (Sharma 2018: 256). Schools in Alwar city found to be engaged in such activities which they say is the key to create space in the competitive education market.

### **Working Classes School Choice: The Emerging Pattern**

As the foregoing discussion suggests the 'choices' are inherently embedded with structural constraints, opportunities, distinct familial dynamics and various supplier side factors. According to Ball (2006: 174), "parents are oriented culturally and materially towards the education market". Even the expectations, value attachment, motivations and the goal orientation of parents in same social class group may differ which suggests a distinctive pattern of choice behaviour. In the words of Ball "pattern of choice are generated both by choice preferences and opportunities and capacities" (2006: 174). Based upon specific readings of choice behaviour of working class in Alwar city, this study proposes centrifugal pattern<sup>10</sup> as an explanatory model. This proposition however may be seen contextually limited and 'dynamic relational model' (Ball, 2003:117). Here the aim is not to generalize the wider educational landscape in the country, rather the proposed pattern based on the field view specific to the small town context, tentatively presumed to explain working class choice behaviour in the given urban social milieu.

**Figure 1: Working class school choice behaviour pattern**



Source: Authors' own work

It was observed that the parents often do not prefer the company of their neighborhood children for their wards due to the fear that their children will be engaged in quarrelling or fighting by forming a gang as they often do in the neighborhood. Parents attempt to define school culture as distinctly modern and pristine. They do not want the school culture symptomatic of their neighborhood environment. Hence, they try to maintain this distinction diligently by creating the category of the 'other' even within their own class of people, locality or community as well. Interestingly, even within (extended) family, some parents found to prefer to send their children to two or three different schools<sup>11</sup>. The company of children from the neighborhood (in school) or from their own extended family (in few cases) is seen as counterproductive to realise their educational and career aspirations. They seem to believe that their child, being away from neighborhood and family environment, would learn modern etiquettes and requisite soft skills. For instance Jamaluddin, a resident of Mannaka, while reflecting his views about the school of his own locality, says, 'the School itself has become Mannaka as most children of the locality are going in this school'. Incidents of Children-quarrelling take place so often. He vociferously mentioned that, "*School mei gund gol hogo* (All village seems have gathered to fight in the school itself). Many parents, both in Divakiri and Mannaka, informed that the children quarrel and learn bad manners. Husain Khan, a shopkeeper from Mannaka, preferred to send his children to boarding school at the periphery of Alwar town so that 'the children are away from neighbourhood atmosphere and hence they could study well and be well mannered, he said. Notably, for many such parents middle class acts as a frame of reference and, thus, anticipate becoming, 'like them' by getting rid of the 'people like us' which is a practice of habitus (Reay 2004).

## Conclusion

The study explored interconnections among social class, networks and parental choice of school. Clearly, a good number of choices are available for working class to make decisions regarding school of their wards. However such choices seem to be repleted with multiple constraints and contingencies. Despite the fact that the working class families relatively have larger numbers of choices in their choices basket, many of them were dissatisfied with the school they have chosen. Parents thus often engaged in shifting their wards from one school to another school, in most cases from one private to another private school, and in some cases from private schools to government schools and the vice versa putting their wards at the risk of low academic achievement. Notably, in this entire process, various non-educational factors such as trust, *kismet*, religion, kinship and nativity are found to be determining factors in parental choices and decision making. Private schools are capitalizing on all such non-educational factors to create their space and the niche in the competitive education market. In nutshell, the combined force of school as supply side regime and parents as aspiring regime has led the Alwar city to

witness an overarching 'regime of school choice' wherein the competitive market forces have emerged as 'major arbiter', 'influencing futures of children' creating diverse market niches, and are, thus, sharpening the existing social inequalities. Notably, the working class choice pattern, a tumultuous landscape, is marked by intra-class segregations riveting through labeling, constraints and thus reflects an incipient though, but a subtle process of self-elimination and further creating 'the other' both inter-community and intra-community. It may thus be argued that the competitive education market is embedded with an unusual paradox as it has an incessant craving for profiteering, but simultaneously it is also engaged in an incipient project of creating 'the other' based on inter-community and intra-community fault lines.

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### ***Notes***

- 1 Private schools here refer to various types of schools owned by individuals, trust, charitable bodies or commercial enterprise. The terms like low cost schools, budget schools, considered synonymous and thus have also been used interchangeably in this study.
- 2 The term K-12 refers to schooling that includes grades from lower kindergarten up to senior secondary schools.
- 3 Corona Virus Disease 2019 pandemic, an infectious disease caused by SARS-COV 2, primarily originated in China and subsequently spread to rest of the world in multiple waves and took lives of millions.
- 4 The terms working class and lower class are used interchangeably. Further, the study is also aware that the working class is not a homogenous category rather there is diversity within which further impact their schooling decisions.
- 5 The term is used in the context that a significant number of parents appear to be compelled to choose private schools primarily due to the absence of good quality government school. Most parents in Alwar have raised their concern and told umpteen stories on how schooling has taken severe toll on their family budget.
- 6 This is a unique form of schooling that combines both schooling and coaching. Hence, these schools name themselves as 'school plus coaching'.
- 7 Kota, a city in Rajasthan, is considered a hub of educational coaching institutions preparing students for entrance examinations to enter into various elite institutions of India such as IIT, AIMS, etc. See Rao, S. Srinivasa (2017) Production of an 'Educational' city: Shadow education economy and re-structuring of Kota in India in W.T. Pink, G.W. Noblit (eds.), Second international handbook of urban education,



Springer international handbooks of Education, Springer International Publishing Switzerland, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-40317-5\_24

- 8 Researcher initiated his initial engagement with the field in the year 2009. With many subsequent visits, pilot study and then, after some break in the study, actual data collection took place. The field was however concluded in the year 2016 at the time of submission of thesis. The researcher is however continuously in touch with the field to make a longitudinal assessment on the issue of parental school choices.
- 9 This number includes government aided, unaided and unrecognized private schools.
- 10 In science, the term centrifugal refers to the movement where the forces move outwards, whereas in centripetal the forces mover outwards. Berry and Kasarda (1977) talk of centripetal movement and centrifugal movements in relation to housing settlements, jobs, retail activities and administration related movements in an urban center.
- 11 This however goes with the exception of girl students as security in such case often becomes the prime concern of parents. Girl students are thus preferred company of children of the family or the neighborhood.

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