



RTE AND BUDGET PRIVATE SCHOOLS: WHAT WOULD GANDHI THINK?

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ViewPoint 13

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Introduction: Budget Private Schools (BPS) and Right To Educational Choice

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act sounds like a good thing. Who could be against granting people in India, including the poor, the right to education? However, in practice, RTE is doing the opposite. RTE is *denying* parents, especially the poor, the right to the education they have chosen for their children.

For state governments are closing down private schools, private schools that have been freely chosen by parents for their children. Punjab for instance is reported to be closing 1,170 schools (*Times of India*, 31 Jan 2014), while Haryana is closing 713, Tamil Nadu more than 400, and Andhra Pradesh around 400. Why are these schools being closed? Because they have not met the national RTE norms. Often this could mean something as simple as schools not paying their teachers the same as in government schools, or that the private school teachers don't have the same qualifications as those in government schools.

But the reason why such schools are not paying teachers the same as in government schools is, typically, because they are *budget* private schools, charging fees as low as Rs 150 to Rs 400 per month, affordable to the poor and low-income families. They cannot afford to pay their teachers the same as in the government schools and at the same time keep fees low. If they pay teachers higher, then their fees would have to rise accordingly, and the poor could not then afford these schools. That is elementary business economics. And equally, budget private schools cannot afford to employ teachers who are government trained – because such teachers can command these higher wages. The important point is that parents, often poor parents, have chosen these budget private schools, in preference to government schools, even though they know that the teachers are paid less and are not qualified to the same government standards.

An official overseeing the closure of the 1,170 schools in the Punjab said that India was huge, as was Punjab, so one shouldn't worry about this small

number of schools. But think about it. If each school has around 200 children, then this means at least 2,00,000 children, whose parents have made conscious choices to send their children to these private schools, are now being denied that choice. Where will these children go now? "Well of course", said the official helpfully, "they'll go to government schools". "Let them eat cake", as Marie Antoinette might have put it, with equal indifference to the conditions of the poor.

But everyone knows – including that official – that government schools are not adequate, especially for the poor. One prominent Indian politician (I won't mention his name, this election season) told me "there is not one parent in India today who sends his or her children to government school by choice".

Everyone knows this. I was in rural Gujarat recently, in a fishing village in the Gulf of Kutch. I was talking to fishermen parents, about the condition of education in the government school in the village. One father said that his son is in Class V, and has only learnt how to write the number '1', that's it. A woman gathering her four children around her told us about the school day – the teachers arrive from the city at about 9.30 am, the children having been in school for an hour, and immediately send the children home for breakfast. The children return at 10.30 am, and there is an hour or so of assembly, prayer, and chores. The teachers maybe then do something for half an hour in the classroom, or maybe not; in any case, they are gone by 12 noon. The children learn nothing, she said. And then the story which made the most impact on me, and which still makes me angry today, was that of the fisherman father, who had been so annoyed with this constant neglect of his child that he went to the school to complain. The teachers, seeing this fisherman in their school – how dare he, they must have been thinking, doesn't he know his place in society?, this dirty, illiterate fisherman, when we are government trained and accredited teachers! – phoned the police and had him arrested. His extended family had to scrimp together the money for his bail and for payment of court fees and incidentals. He won't go to complain any more, he knows his place now. But he's still not happy with his daughter's education.

This is depressing, but in India the good news is that there is an alternative. The phenomenon of budget private schools is now quite well known. I first

came across these schools in the slums of Hyderabad in 2000, and soon realised that the poor in India were not acquiescing in the mediocrity of government schools, but were doing something about it, creating their own low-cost private alternative. Ever since then I've been celebrating the achievements of these schools, including in my (briefly) best-selling book *The Beautiful Tree*¹ (Tooley, 2009). In rural India, as the latest ASER report shows, the share of private school enrolment is over 28 percent, much higher in certain states. For urban areas there has been no similar study, so the actual percentage is unknown (the considerable number of unrecognised schools means that official data will not reveal the true percentage; the ASER study uses a nationwide household survey, which overcomes this problem). However, estimates of 65 percent or higher of urban enrolment in private schools are likely to be along the right lines.

Regarding educational standards and cost-effectiveness in budget private schools, research is revealing in terms of the RTE norms debate: a recent project featured a 'unique two-stage lottery-based allocation of school vouchers' in Andhra Pradesh². The research confirmed known factors about budget private schools – that their teachers have “lower levels of formal education and training than public-school teachers, and are paid much lower salaries”. That is – the budget private schools don't meet the national RTE norms. But interestingly, the researchers showed how private schools *compensate* for these potential weaknesses, by having “a longer school day, a longer school year, smaller class sizes, lower teacher absence, higher teaching activity, and better school hygiene”.

In other words, private schools don't have to be impeded by shortfalls in any one input, they can flexibly compensate with improvements in other inputs. The RTE, and government officials enforcing it, show no such flexibility.

Again going back to Andhra Pradesh study, despite the schools not meeting the RTE norms, the study found that children who went to private schools through the voucher lottery scored 0.13 standard deviations higher, averaged across all subjects; while students already in private schools achieved 0.23 standard deviations higher. Importantly, the average cost per student in private schools was less than a third the cost in government schools. The conclusion is that

private schools are delivering '(slightly) better test gain scores than their public counterparts, and do so at substantially lower costs per student'.

Research has also shown budget private schools serving some of the most disadvantaged communities. Research conducted in remote and poor villages in Uttar Pradesh, India, revealed 42 percent of children in private schools, rising to about 54 percent in those villages that had access to private schools³. These private schools were used in considerable numbers by the most deprived groups: fully 30 percent of Muslim and Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe families used them⁴, while they were used by 31 percent of unskilled workers and 28 percent and 39 percent of families where fathers and mothers respectively had no schooling whatsoever⁵. Each of these groups can be considered among 'the poorest of the poor' in these already poor villages. Moreover, when asked whether they preferred private or government schools, the research reports a "near universal preference for private schools"⁶, with around 94 percent preferring private schools.

And it is not hard to sympathise with parents' preferences given the descriptions of visits to village schools:

*"The government schools had virtually no teaching activity. One para-teacher at one school was found to be teaching, while in another school an older child was instructing while the teachers (two were present) sat idly by. In the rest of the government schools, there was an air of chaos and neglect, as the teachers simply read the newspaper or chatted with friends, while the children came and went, played and fought in front of them. Parents reported teachers encouraging children to fight each other, or one child to corporally punish another child"*⁷

From these stories of child abuse, "by way of contrast [at the budget private schools] there was always an air of seriousness and discipline...that was found to be absent at government schools and it was this, and the fact that children learn basic material that parents seized on in their comparisons of the school types"⁸. The researcher found "the majority of families (84 percent) view government schools negatively", while 77 percent view budget private schools positively.⁹

All this is incredibly positive. In India there is an alternative for parents; budget private schools are serving the poor and low-income families better than government schools. Parents who chose them are making wise and sensible choices. Similar stories of budget private schools that are working tirelessly towards ensuring high quality education, and reducing the education gap, have been highlighted in a recently published coffee table book called '*Boondein*', edited by Parth J Shah, President of Centre for Civil Society.

However, these are the very same private schools that are now under threat from RTE. Policymakers think that the schools freely chosen by parents are "not good enough". They want to close them down, irrespective of the fact that parents have chosen them over the very government schools that officials now want to throw the children back into.

"Not good enough..." Some other officials once said that about the schools freely chosen by Indian people, including the poor. These officials too set out to close down the schools and impose different standards on the reluctant people, just as now. Just as now, these other officials may have been well-intentioned, who can say? But whatever their intentions, these other officials were completely wrong to be closing these schools down.

Or at least, that's what Gandhi argued. For these other officials were the 19th century British in India. They saw the existing schools of the Indian people, said they were "not good enough", and set about closing them down, just as the RTE officials are doing today. I believe there are lessons from that historical period which are hugely important to learn for those involved in education today in India.

I suggest that Gandhi would be *aghast* at the school closures under RTE. To see why, we need to go back to 1931, when Gandhi was in London for the Second Round Table Conference on constitutional reform for India.

Dharampal's Footsteps

I first read about Gandhi's views on education when I was lucky enough to pick up a copy of Dharampal's *The Beautiful Tree*, some 10 years ago. I found it in a second-hand bookshop in the backstreets of Hyderabad – the same second-hand bookshop indeed where the British author William Dalrymple

had also had a stroke of luck in finding some ancient Persian manuscripts that inspired his wonderful book, *The White Mughals*.

In that bookshop, I read the historian Dharampal's work. His book opens with an extended quote from Mahatma Gandhi, at Chatham House, London on 20 October 1931¹⁰:

"I say without fear of my figures being challenged successfully, that today India is more illiterate than it was fifty or a hundred years ago, and so is Burma, because the British administrators, when they came to India, instead of taking hold of things as they were, began to root them out. They scratched the soil and began to look at the root, and left the root like that, and the *beautiful tree* perished..."

At the time, I wasn't a great fan of Indian revisionism that claimed all the British brought to India was harm, so didn't think it would be a particularly enjoyable nor enlightening read. But then, as I read on, the next few sentences of Gandhi's speech began to resonate with things that I'd been finding myself, as I had researched budget private schools in the slums and poor areas of India:

"...The village schools were *not good enough* for the British administrator, so he came out with his programme. Every school must have so much paraphernalia, building, and so forth..."

But wasn't this exactly like the development experts, national governments – and those promoting RTE today – were saying *now*? That budget private schools weren't 'good enough', hence the need for programmes for 'paraphernalia, buildings, and so forth...?'

I read on, growing more curious:

"...There are statistics left by a British administrator which show that, in places where they have carried out a survey, ancient schools have gone by the board, because there was no recognition of these schools ..."

I'd never heard of such evidence of schools that existed before the British. Moreover, this was apparently British contemporaneous evidence itself and so, unlikely to fall victim to the desire to rubbish what the British had ever done in India. Gandhi concluded:

“...and the schools established after the European pattern were too expensive for the people...I defy anybody to fulfil a programme of compulsory primary education of these masses inside of a century. This very poor country of mine is ill able to sustain such an expensive method of education. Our state would revive the old village schoolmaster and dot every village with a school both for boys and girls“.

It seemed to chime with what I was thinking and finding. My thoughts rushed ahead: wouldn't it be strange if what Gandhi was proposing – to 'revive the old village schoolmaster and dot every village with a school' – was actually what I was *finding* happening in the slums and villages of India today?

I bought the book, and read it from cover to cover on the flight back to England. My normal research had taken me on journeys crossing continents. But that day, I embarked on another journey, a journey in time, back to 19th century British India. It was to take me to libraries across London, following up Gandhi's sources. What I found seemed almost as remarkable, and as challenging to the accepted wisdom, as what I'd found on my physical journeys across Asia and Africa.

Munro's Minute

In the early 19th century, Sir Thomas Munro, Governor of the Madras Presidency, wanted to do something about education in India. Everyone in England seemed to have an opinion about “the ignorance of the people of India and the means of disseminating knowledge among them”. But no one had any *evidence*. It was idle chatter, based on prejudice, “mere conjectures of individuals unsupported by any authentic documents”¹¹. Munro proposed to find out the reality, by conducting a survey of what was actually happening on the ground.

Munro's Minute of 25 June 1822 was sent out to all District Collectors. The terms of reference themselves are interesting – clearly pointing to an awareness that there were schools in the villages before the British intervened. Each collector was asked to submit “a list of the schools in which reading and writing are taught in each District showing the number of scholars in each and the caste to which they belong”.

The Collectors' reports filtered back slowly – several taking a year or more, and one taking three years! It was a very long research process. All but one of the Collectors took the job seriously: the Principal Collector for Canara complained that filling in the form “would take up a considerable time”, which would be wasted because everyone knew there are “no Colleges in Canara [nor] fixed schools and Masters to teach in them”.¹² Fortunately, his was the only report of this ilk. All of the other Collectors furnished the required information.

The data are quite remarkable. Far from there being no schooling in India before the British brought in their system, the figures show a very large number of schools and colleges existing: In the 20 Districts returning data, a total of 11,575 schools and 1,094 colleges were reported, with 157,195 and 5,431 students respectively¹³. In addition many Collectors reported that considerably more scholars and students were educated in their own homes. Although such numbers were difficult to discern, some estimates were made – for instance, the Collector of Madras who had reported 5,699 scholars in school reported that an additional 26,963 school-level scholars were then receiving tuition in their homes. That is *five times more* than were in schools. Munro suggested that such ‘home-schooling’ would be common throughout the presidency.

Satisfied that his research had not been in vain, Munro summarised the evidence in his Minute of 10 March 1826. About 25 percent of the *male* school-age population was being served by the existing indigenous schools, he wrote. But given that many more were being reported educated in their own homes, he estimated that at least one-third of the male population was being schooled. For girls the figures in school were much lower, but this could be explained by the fact that they were educated almost entirely in the home.

This level of educational enrolment, reported Munro, “is higher than it was in most European countries at no very distant period”¹⁴ – and this included England! For in 1803, the number of children in schools of any description (including Sunday schools) in England was less than 1 of the total population of 9.5 million. In the Madras Presidency, the numbers in *schools* (ignoring those in college and the home-schoolers) was 1.2 percent of the larger population. Moreover, the indigenous schooling system found by the British did not just focus on the elite, but included the *most disadvantaged and poorest*. What are nowadays classified as ‘backward castes’ in India amounted to a substantial

minority of enrolment in each district – for instance, 38 percent of the school population in Tinnevely and 32 percent in Salem and Madras.

From Madras to Bengal, Bombay and the Punjab

But there was more evidence than just Munro's. Thirteen years later, another, albeit more limited, survey was carried out in the British Presidency of Bengal, which led to the celebrated Adam's Reports, *State of Education in Bengal 1835 to 1838*, published in 1841 by University of Calcutta. Adam's first report featured his headline conclusion that there were about 100,000 village schools in Bengal and Bihar in the 1830s – something that Gandhi had announced at his talk in London. Adam noted that "it appears that the system of village schools is extensively prevalent; that the desire to give education to their male children must be deeply seated in the minds of parents *even of the humblest classes*; and that these are the institutions, *closely interwoven as they were with the habits of the people and the customs of the country*".¹⁵ Again, his work revealed an extensive system of indigenous India education, responding to the situations and needs of the poor.

Similarly, there was a report around 1820 on areas of the newly extended British Bombay Presidency which said "that there is hardly a village, great or small, throughout our territories, in which there is not at least one school, and in larger villages more". And from the Punjab, a report documented around 330,000 pupils in "the schools of the various denominations who were acquainted with reading, writing and some method of computation".

From Madras to Bengal, from Bombay to the Punjab, the accumulated evidence showed that any claim that there was no indigenous schooling worth speaking of before the British intervened was completely wrong: on the contrary, it all pointed to a vibrant indigenous system serving as high a proportion of boys at least as in other European countries, including England, just a few years earlier. This is quite an extraordinary finding. In fact, in India, there were schools in almost every village before the British replaced them with the system that provided the foundations for today's government system.

The crucial question for me as I first read Dharampal's account of Munro's survey was: how was all this schooling funded? Could it be that what Munro uncovered was similar to what we were finding today, a vibrant *privately-funded*

education system, operating underground, without any official recognition, about to be replaced by an alien system? If so, then Gandhi could be seen as an early supporter of budget private schools in India, for he had written that he had wanted a return to this system. It turned out that was exactly what it was, a system funded almost entirely by student fees, plus a little philanthropy.

Budget Private Schools in 19th Century India

How the system was funded was one of the questions Munro asked of his Collectors. Of the 21 districts of the Madras Presidency, there is an open verdict about funding from two – one because the Collector didn't take the exercise seriously, while the second didn't supply any notes on school funding. Of the remaining 19 Collectors' Reports, I could see that 16 reported the system of schooling as *100 percent privately funded* while the remaining three were predominantly private – with only a tiny proportion (from one to two per cent of schools) in each funded by government. Indeed, for one of these three the information on funding for schools and colleges is collated together, so it may well be that it was only the colleges that were funded in this way, as in most other districts, rather than schools too.

The Collectors' reports show the careful and scholarly way in which the data was collected and collated. To take one example, the Collector from the District of North Arcot, a Mr William Cooke, one of the three that reported a small amount of non-private funding, even tells us how much the cook is paid at one school and how much allowance is made for boiled rice per day! You get the feeling that he took the task assigned by Munro very seriously indeed. I've collated all his figures in Table 1.

Table 1: North Arcot – public and private funding of schools

			Private	Public					
Medium	Schools	Total Students	Free – Charity	Fees, no subsidy	Free – Public	% Public Funding	% Charity	% Fee Paying	% Private
Indian Languages	583	6,867	131	6,736	0	0%	2%	98%	100%
Persian	40	398	15	308	75	19%	4%	77%	81%
English	7	61	17	44	0	0%	28%	72%	100%
Total	630	7,326	163	7,088	75	1%	2%	97%	99%

Cooke recorded 583 private primary schools teaching in the local languages. Of these, three charged no fees, while the remaining 580 charged monthly fees ranging from 15 annas to 21 Rupees per year. There were also 40 Persian schools, 31 of which were private fee-paying schools, with 308 pupils, supported entirely by fees ranging from one Rupee 14 annas to 24 Rupees per year. Seven of the Persian schools were 'public schools', either funded by the villages, or with a yearly allowance granted by the government, while the remaining two Persian schools provided free places. Finally, there were seven English private schools, three of which were free of charge, while four charged fees, from 7½ Rupees to 42 Rupees per year¹⁶.

Similar levels of detail are given from the other Collectors. What they reveal is that, in the Madras Presidency, the extensive system of schools was more or less an entirely *privately* funded system of school education. The same conclusion also stands out from Adam's evidence for the Bengal Presidency¹⁷. What was occurring in India before the British took over and imposed their alien centralised public education system was an extensive system of private schools, catering to the masses. Or to put it another way, before the British came, the Indians had a system of private schools, including for the poor¹⁸.

The Collectors also told us something about the range of different motivations of those who set up private schools. One observed that private schools "are partly established occasionally by individuals for the education of their own children, and partly by the teachers themselves, for their own maintenance".¹⁹ Some parents, he continued, 'who are anxious to have their children educated cannot "sufficiently pay the teachers out of their own money". In which case, they "procure some other children in addition to their own for being educated and get adequate allowance to them by way of subscription from these children, from one quarter, to one Rupee each monthly". This all seemed strangely reminiscent of what my research – and now the research of others – had uncovered in India today, where some parents who want to provide what they see as a better education for their children, sometimes start a school and 'procure some other children', to make it a viable undertaking.

The Collectors also gave details of how the system was flexible to the ability of parents to pay. For instance, one noted that the school fees are paid according 'to the circumstances of the parents.' Another observed that 'school

Masters receive monthly from each Scholar from one quarter to four Rupees, according to their respective means'. Again, this flexibility about payment chimed directly with what I found in budget private schools today.

Moreover, the Collectors were clear: the schooling system had always been privately funded – it wasn't the case that the British came in to India and supplanted an effective state system of revenue collection that could have funded schooling.²⁰ Most of the collectors provided information on whether or not the funding had changed over the years. These reported – apparently from detailed investigations – that there were no records, verbal or written, of there having been any public funding in the past. A typical comment came from South Arcot, where the Collector argued "... no allowance of any sort has *ever been* granted by the Native Governments to Schools, the Masters of which are entirely supported by the Parents of the Scholars"²¹

The conclusion is clear. The 'deep-rooted and extensive' education system, catering to 'all sections of society', uncovered by Munro's careful survey of the Madras Presidency of 1822, was a private education system. Indeed, when the Board of Revenue to the Chief Secretary of Government summarised all the evidence collected on 21 February 1825 to be given to the Governor, Munro, the Secretary, agreed with this conclusion: "It will be observed that the schools now existing in the country are for the most part supported by the payments of the people who send their children to them for instruction. The rate of payment for each scholar varies in different districts and according to the different circumstances of the parents of the pupils"²²

When Gandhi spoke at the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London on 20 October 1931, I could now see more clearly what was at stake. When he said that the British came to India and uprooted 'the *beautiful tree*', he was referring to the beautiful tree of a private education system, serving the poor as well as those wealthier. Instead of embracing this indigenous private education system, the British rooted it out, and it perished. And this left India "more illiterate than it was fifty or a hundred years ago".

I was truly astounded when I discovered this, from reading Dharampal and following up the original sources in the India Office Room of the British Library. Why wasn't this extraordinary fact more widely known? And why

did people – well-meaning people, who might have known better – persist in claiming that the British brought education to India, and this, at least, was a positive legacy of colonialism? Quite a lot of the blame could be laid at the door of Sir Philip Hartog, it would seem. My journey shifted across London's Bloomsbury district, from the British Library to the annals of the University of London's Institute of Education, where I found the Joseph Payne lectures, delivered there by Sir Philip Hartog in 1935 and 1936, under the title 'Some Aspects of Indian Education, Past and Present'.

Enter Sir Philip Hartog

Not everyone was happy upon hearing Gandhi's version of events. In the audience was Sir Philip Hartog, a founder of the School of Oriental Studies, University of London and former vice-chancellor of the University of Dacca, who was positively incensed about what he heard. He questioned Gandhi at the meeting itself, and, not satisfied by the answers, entered into a long correspondence with him, culminating in an hour-long interview. Gandhi directed him to articles based on the findings noted above, from Bombay and Bengal (it would seem there were no parallel articles written about Munro's evidence from Madras). But Hartog wasn't convinced, and repeatedly insisted that Gandhi should publicly revoke his comments.

On his return to India in 1932, Gandhi was arrested and put in prison. Meanwhile, Hartog set out to prove him wrong – still parrying Gandhi for answers, who, not surprisingly, wrote to inform "of his inability at that moment to satisfy him". Hartog's endeavours, however, resulted in him being invited to lecture at the Institute of Education, University of London, aiming to "remove, if possible, once and for all, the imaginary bases for assertions not infrequently made in India that the British Government systematically destroyed the indigenous system of elementary schools, and with it a literacy which the schools are presumed to have created".²³ It seems he was quite successful at doing so.

Hartog disagreed both about the *quantity* of indigenous educational provision before the British, and its *quality*. His disagreement about the quantity is relatively easy to dismiss. First, Hartog did not appear to dispute that there had been a spontaneous 'mushrooming' of private schools in India before

the British got involved. He concurred that “English-teaching schools, sprang up all over Bengal”, prompted in part by ordinary people’s desire to learn English, and hence to enter British service. Moreover, he conceded that these schools had nothing to do with the British: the movement “received little encouragement or stimulus from Government”, for at the time, there was “no deep-seated desire of Great Britain to westernise Indian education”. No. Instead, the growth of the schools “*was spontaneous and voluntary*”. Again, all that he was writing then, resonates so strongly with what is happening in India today.

But, whatever his disagreement with Gandhi, Hartog believed that the commentators, including Munro, exaggerated the extent of educational entrepreneurship in 19th century India. In his lectures, Hartog was curt and dismissive about this evidence: “I have grave doubts as to the accuracy of these figures”. But that’s all he said to his audience about Munro’s detailed survey. Those who wanted more detail were referred to a Memorandum, published as an appendix to his book (*‘Note on the Statistics of Literacy and of Schools in India During the Last Hundred Years’*). Reading this, I could see how completely off-target his criticisms of Munro were.

For Hartog used, to dismiss Munro’s findings, the writings of only *one* out of the 21 British Collectors – that of a Mr. A.D. Campbell, collector from Bellary. Campbell, he noted, “gave figures for Bellary far below the average reported by Munro”. If Munro’s findings had been applicable to Bellary, he argued, then Campbell should have found twice as many scholars in schools. This is the proof that Hartog was looking for: “The contrast between the figures of Munro for Madras as a whole with those of Campbell for Bellary... suggest that Munro’s figures may have been over-estimated based on the returns of collectors less careful and interested in education than Campbell”. QED. Campbell showed that Munro was wrong, because Campbell found only half the schools than the average, and Campbell was the only conscientious collector.

But this conclusion seemed to me to be totally unsustainable, once the Collectors’ reports were examined in detail. Hartog noted, to support his thesis that Campbell’s report was the only one to be taken seriously, that the Collector from Bellary was ‘singled out’ by the Court of Directors of the East

India Company as "the only one among the collectors who wrote '*concerning the quality of the instruction* given at the elementary schools". However, far from pointing to a strength, this actually pointed to a major weakness with Campbell's evidence. The Collectors *weren't asked* by Munro for their subjective judgements about quality. Munro was after the facts, not opinion. Campbell, it is true, thought that the quality of education could be improved, although he wasn't actually that damning: he wrote "The chief defects in the native schools are the nature of the books, and learning taught and the want of competent master"²⁴. Hardly enough to support Hartog's assertion of the "miserably inefficient" indigenous schools. But as for the *quantity* of indigenous education, Campbell's evidence is the weakest of all the Collectors'. Whereas other collectors gave pages and pages of detailed statistical tables broken down by districts and villages, by schools and colleges, and by sex and caste of the scholars, Campbell only provided *one* table, featuring *one line of data*. That is all.

It would seem much more appropriate to turn Hartog's comment on its head. It was *Campbell* who was careless and inattentive, not the other Collectors. It's hard to concur with Hartog that Campbell's figures should be taken more seriously than, say, the Collector for Trichinopoly, with his ten pages of scrupulously prepared quantitative tables. Or the Collector for North Arcot, with his 14 pages of meticulous statistical detail. It is hard to see how Hartog could dismiss all of this and rely instead on Campbell's one line of data. It is hard to resist the conclusion that Campbell's observations reinforced Hartog's prejudices, and that's why he went with what Campbell, rather than the other, more conscientious collectors, reported.

A more objective reading of the evidence was obvious: *because of his prejudices against what he thought was low quality indigenous education*, Campbell didn't find – possibly didn't even look for – many of the schools that the other collectors *did* find. The way Campbell must have behaved seemed like the way some of my own research teams behaved, who didn't believe that unrecognised private schools existed or were worth finding if they did exist. My researchers sometimes returned with nil returns of private schools in slums or villages. Accompanying these same researchers back to the same villages, they've been surprised how many schools there actually were, if

they had bothered to look for them carefully. My guess is that Campbell, or Campbell's teams, behaved similarly when faced with Munro's request. They didn't believe the schools existed in any great number, or if they did, didn't believe they were worth bothering with, so didn't go out to look, at least not very carefully.

Hartog's objection to the Madras Presidency data on the quantity of provision was not well-founded. His similar criticisms of the data from Bengal, Bombay and the Punjab could be questioned in the same way. But could Hartog have been on stronger grounds about the *quality* of indigenous private educational provision?

Odd Bedfellows

Critics of Indian education brought together some odd bedfellows. Hartog's criticisms of the low quality of indigenous schools fit in with a prevalent set of criticisms about the low quality of Indian society and culture in general: William Wilberforce reported that Indians were "deeply sunk, and by their religious superstitions fast bound, in the lowest depths of moral and social wretchedness."²⁵ But it wasn't just British imperialists who shared such views. Karl Marx, writing in the *New York Daily Tribune* in 1853 opined about the perennial nature of Indian misery, concluding "whatever may have been the crimes of England", in India, "she was the unconscious tool of history" in bringing about "India's Westernisation", including through Western education.

But what does Munro's evidence say about the quality of indigenous educational provision? When establishing the terms of reference for his research, judgements concerning the quality of education were not something that Munro asked his Collectors to report on – he wanted the facts, not opinions. So it is not negligence that led 14 of the 20 Collectors whose evidence is usable not to give any subjective comments about quality at all. However, six Collectors did add brief subjective comments about this matter. Of these, *three* were *positive* in their comments about both quantity *and* quality of the indigenous system: a typical one noted "...children are sent to school when they are about five years old and their continuance in it depends in a great measure on their mental faculties, but it is generally admitted that

before they attain their thirteenth year of age, *their acquirement in the various branches of Learning are uncommonly great*”.²⁶

Three Collectors did note some problems with quality, although one of these was disappointed that “nothing more is professed to be taught in these day-schools than reading, writing and arithmetic, just competent for the discharge of the common daily transactions of Society”²⁷ – which instead of a criticism, sounds more like an acknowledgement of what primary school education could realistically aim for.

The other two Collectors were more critical, however. One wrote “For the most part ... attendance is very irregular. Few of the school masters are acquainted with the grammar of the language which they profess to teach, and neither the master nor scholars understand the meaning of the sentences which they repeat ... Education cannot well, in a civilised state, be on a lower scale than it is”.²⁸ And then there is Collector A.D. Campbell, from Bellary, who wrote the brief comments quoted above.

Given this, we can't make too much of the evidence of the Madras Presidency survey, either way. Those who write about the deficiencies of the system are equally balanced by those who write about its effectiveness. Both sets may have been influenced by their own prejudices and predilections about what schooling should be like. But certainly there is nothing in the Presidency survey to support claims about poor quality.

Munro, however, when summarising the submitted evidence in his Minute of 10 March 1826, although sanguine about the *quantity* of schooling, was not quite so upbeat about its quality. I looked in detail at his and other's major criticisms – particularly those taken up by Sir Philip Hartog in his damning presentation of the low quality of indigenous education. It is quite uncanny the way they parallel the criticisms made today about budget private schools, including from those officials wanting to close down schools under RTE. Interestingly, the ways in which the government at the time intervened to try to solve these 'problems' actually seemed to point to the strengths of the indigenous system, rather than its weaknesses. Again, the parallels with the way the Indian government is working today seemed quite remarkable. Do we learn so little from history?

Low-paid teachers?

Munro's only substantive criticism of the quality of indigenous education focused on teachers being underpaid – an exact parallel to the criticism of budget private schools today under RTE. Munro wrote that teachers “do not earn more than six or seven rupees monthly, which is not an allowance sufficient to induce men properly qualified to follow the profession”²⁹. The same criticism emerged from William Adam's survey in Bengal, whose disparaging assessment of the quality of indigenous education was used to good effect by Hartog (although Hartog did not endorse Adam's very upbeat assessment of the *quantity* of provision). Adam reported that the benefits of the burgeoning private schools in Bengal, “are but small, owing partly to the incompetency of the instructors... The teachers depend entirely upon their scholars for subsistence, and being little respected and poorly rewarded, there is no encouragement for persons of character, talent or learning to engage in the occupation.”³⁰

Interestingly, Adam conceded a very important point. Teacher pay, while he considered it inadequate, was not low “in comparison with their qualifications, or with the general rates of similar labour in the district”. No, for Adam it was low compared “with those emoluments to which competent men might be justly considered entitled”.³¹ In other words, the teacher pay seemed apt for the market rate, but was low compared to some alternative system to which Adam aspires. This is something I'll return to in a moment.

Low quality buildings?

Another of the criticisms, raised in particular by William Adam, was of the quality of the school buildings, or the total lack thereof: “There are no school-houses built for, and exclusively appropriated to, these schools”. Scholars, he observed, met in places of religious worship, or festivals, or village recreation places, or private dwellings, or in the open air, with a “small shed of grass and leaves” erected in the rainy season.³² This was not good, he noted, pointing to the “disadvantages arising from the want of school-houses and from the confined and inappropriate construction of the buildings or apartments used as school-rooms”³³. Here we have in embryonic form the criticism that would lead, in Gandhi's view, to the promotion of a system that was not based on what

could be afforded or efficiently utilised, but to something imposed from outside that was too expensive to be practical. Instead of a criticism, such comments about the lack of buildings could be used, as Dharampal does, to suggest that the “conditions under which teaching took place in the Indian schools were less dingy and more natural” than in Britain.³⁴ Again, the parallels with the obsessions of development experts to provide public school buildings that wouldn’t be out of place in the West, and their criticisms of present day private schools for their inadequate infrastructure, jumped out at me.

Low quality teaching methods?

Perhaps the most revealing of all of Hartog’s criticisms is of the teaching methods found in the village schools. He referred to what Adam wrote: “Poverty still more than ignorance leads to the adoption of modes of instruction and economical arrangements which, under more favourable circumstances, would be readily abandoned”.³⁵ Curiously, the potential strengths of these very same teaching methods are then elaborated at length: Scholars, Adam wrote, are taught effectively to read and write, do rote learning of tables up to 20, and to do commercial and agricultural accounts. Indeed, regarding the method of teaching reading, he says that it is superior to the methods of teaching reading back in Scotland! “In the matter of instruction there are some grounds for *commendation* for the course I have described has a direct practical tendency... well adapted to qualify the scholar for engaging in the actual business of native society. My recollections of the village schools of Scotland do not enable me to pronounce that the instructions given in them has a more direct bearing upon the daily interests of life than that which I find given... in the humbler village schools of Bengal” So what was on offer was better than that in Scotland, for equipping young people with the skills and knowledge needed for everyday life. That seemed an odd basis for criticism to me.

Other British observers, however, were entirely positive about these ‘economical’ teaching methods: a report from the Bombay Presidency in the 1820s held that “young natives are taught reading, writing and arithmetic, upon a system so economical... and at the same time so simple and effectual, that there is hardly a cultivator or petty dealer who is not competent to keep his own accounts with a degree of accuracy, in my opinion, *beyond*

what we meet with among the lower orders in our own country; whilst the more splendid dealers and bankers keep their books with a degree of ease, conciseness, and clearness I rather think fully equal to those of any British merchants".³⁶

And, indeed, the supposedly critical Campbell, Collector for Bellary, himself seemed to approve of the teaching methods. (He was also appreciative of the disciplinary methods in the village schools: "The idle scholar is flogged, and often suspended by both hands, and a Pulley, to the roof, or obliged to kneel down and rise incessantly, which is a most painful and fatiguing, but *perhaps a healthy mode of punishment*"³⁷). Campbell provided quite a bit of detail, ending with the following *commendation*: "The economy with which children are taught to write in the native schools, and the system by which the more advanced scholars are caused to teach the less advanced, and at the same time to confirm their own knowledge is certainly admirable, *and well deserved the imitation it has received in England*". What's this? The 'economical' teaching method in the indigenous Indian schools was so much to be praised that *it had been imitated in England*?

What was this teaching method? And how had it been 'imitated' in England? Collector Campbell had given a very thorough description of the method itself: "When the whole are assembled, the scholars according to their numbers and attainments are divided into several classes. The lower ones of which are placed partly under the care of monitors, whilst the higher ones are more immediately under the superintendence of the Master, who at the same time has his eye upon the whole schools. The number of classes is generally four; and a scholar rises from one to the other, according to his capacity and progress".

What Campbell was describing is a peer-learning process, whereby the brighter or older children are taught by the teacher, who then pass it on to the younger or less accomplished children, so that all get taught. Campbell saw this method in action in Bellary, near the border between present day Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Precisely the same method is described from the Malabar Coast – that part of India stretching from Goa down to its southernmost tip – by Peter Della Valle *in 1623*, some two hundred years earlier! The explorer wrote how he "entertained himself in the porch of the

Temple, beholding little boys learning arithmetic after a strange manner". The method used a combination of four children gathered together 'singing musically' to help them remember their lessons, and writing number bonds in the sand, "not to spend paper in vain ... the pavement being for that purpose strewed all over with fine sand".

In the same way, they were taught reading and writing. Peter Della Valle asked them, "if they happen to forget or be mistaken in any part of the lesson, who corrected them and taught them?" They said they all taught each other, "without the assistance of any Master [for] *it was not possible for all four to forget or mistake in the same part, and that they thus exercised together, to the end, that if one happened to be out, the other might correct him*". It was, wrote the explorer, "Indeed a pretty, easy and secure way of learning".³⁸ When I read this, I thought of the work of my colleague, TED-prize winner Professor Sugata Mitra, who is promoting similar ideas with regard to group-learning through technology today. Such methods were commonplace in the budget private schools of India, before the British stamped them out.

The Madras Method

But how did these methods come to be imitated in England? Dharampal gave a small hint in *The Beautiful Tree* that it had something to do with a Rev. Dr Andrew Bell. I ordered his books and his biography from the British Library collection at Boston Spa. The beautiful, slim, bound folios that arrived carried the exuberant titles so beloved by Regency period writers. His first book was entitled: '*An Experiment in Education, made at the Asylum at Madras; suggesting a System, by which a School or Family may teach itself, under the Superintendence of the Master or Parent*'. His magnum opus of 1823 was even more ambitiously called: '*Mutual Tuition and Moral Discipline; or Manual of Instructions for Conducting Schools Through the Agency of the Scholars Themselves, For the Use of Schools and Families, with an introductory essay on the object and importance of the Madras System of Education; a brief exposition of the principle on which it is founded; and a historical sketch of its rise, progress, and results*'.

Bell's biographer, however, went for the less flamboyant: *An Old Educational Reformer: Dr Andrew Bell*. It's a curiously unfavourable biography, written by

an author who oddly had little sympathy with his subject. The first chapter begins “Andrew Bell was born in the city of St Andrews on the 27th of March 1753”. And that is the last we hear of Bell until page six, when it is noted that “It is to golf that Andrew Bell most probably owes his moral education”. But this is the prelude to pages and pages about the virtues of the golf course at St Andrew’s, not to Andrew Bell’s moral education. And it’s not very flattering about the poor Rev. Doctor either: “The fact is, that Dr Bell wrote in a terribly lumbering and painful style, and *no one now can read his books*; but then no one can speak for another as well as the man himself – however clumsily and stupidly he may speak”. Or again, “Dr Bell was, at no time of his life, a clear or methodical writer. He said the same thing – *he had only one or two ideas altogether in his head* – over and over again in different ways, in long lumbering sentences, and with a ponderosity of manner that repelled and disenchanting”.³⁹

I found I could read his books. And his ‘one or two ideas’ seemed like dynamite. For they vividly showed how the ‘economical’ method of teaching in budget private schools in India became translated into a method that transformed education in Victorian England and beyond.

Dr Bell had arrived in India in 1787 to take up position as the principal of a school, the Military Male Orphan Asylum, in Fort St George, now Chennai (previously Madras), to teach the abandoned progeny of British soldiers and native women.⁴⁰ He found that the (expatriate) teachers in the Asylum “had no knowledge of their duties and no very great love for them”. But then he had his moment of insight: “One morning, in the course of his early ride along the surf-beaten shore of Madras, he happened to pass a... school, which, as usual with Indian schools, was held in the open air. He saw the little children writing with their fingers on sand, which, after the fashion of such schools, had been strewn before them for that purpose”. He also saw them peer-teaching, children learning from each other rather than from their masters. ‘He turned his horse, galloped home, shouting, “Heureka! Heureka!” and now believed that he... saw his way straight before him.’⁴¹

Bell first tried an experiment. He got one of the older boys who knew his alphabet to teach one of the classes that “the master had pronounced impossible” to teach. But this boy managed to teach them “with ease”. Bell

appointed him teacher of the class. “The success exceeded expectation. This class, which had been before worse, was now better taught, than any other in the school”. He tried it in other classes, and it worked again. So Bell sacked all his teachers, and the school “*was entirely taught by the boys*”, under his supervision.⁴²

Bell left India to return to London in 1797, where he published the description of his ‘Madras Method’. Following this, he came under great demand to introduce the system in British schools. First off was St Botolph’s, Aldgate, then schools in Kendal, Bishop Auckland, and others followed. The method was taken up by the new National Society for the Education of the Poor in 1811. By 1821, 300,000 children were being educated under Bell’s principles. As it became widely emulated, Bell was asked to write an extended outline of the system, which he published in 1823. His ideas were taken up around Europe, and as far away as the West Indies and Bogotá, capital of Colombia – the educational reformer Pestalozzi was apparently even using the Madras Method.

And Joseph Lancaster, who created the famed Lancastrian schools across Britain – and with whom Bell was to have a furious dispute about who really invented the system – introduced peer-learning into his first London school, in Borough Road, in 1801. The system transformed education in the Western world, and was arguably the basis by which mass literacy in Britain was achieved. But in its fundamental, ‘economical’ principles, it certainly wasn’t invented by Bell. It was based precisely on what the Rev Dr Andrew Bell had observed already happening in the budget private schools of India.

Far from being a weakness of the indigenous (private) education system, the cost-effective teaching methods used in the indigenous private schools of 19th century India were, in fact, a manifest strength. So much so, as the supposedly critical Campbell noted, they were imitated in Britain, then across Europe and the World, and did much to raise educational standards.

The Strengths of the Indigenous System

None of the key ‘problems’ with the quality of the indigenous private education system appeared substantial. However, Munro instituted reforms in Madras, with similar reforms copied in the Bengal and Bombay

presidencies, to overcome these supposed ‘problems’. But the way these reforms were instituted does much to show the *strengths* of the indigenous system, rather than its purported weakness. The way the solutions brought their own problems, again, gave an eerie resonance with what is happening in developing countries today. It doesn’t seem as though we’ve learnt much from history.

Munro’s reforms were as follows. To the problem of the inadequate number of schools – for they didn’t reach every child, only as many as in other European countries – he proposed “the endowment of schools throughout the country by Government”⁴³, that is, creating new state schools. Doing so would also begin to solve the problem of inadequate school buildings, as they would each be in their own modern purpose-built settings, properly funded. The ‘problem’ of inadequate teaching methods would be met with provision of enough teachers to get rid of the (as it turns out, even by contemporaneous observers, highly effective) pupil-teacher system. And to the major problem that bothered all the critics, the inadequacy of teacher pay, Munro proposed paying monthly salaries of nine rupees per month in the village schools, to 15 rupees per month in the towns, out of government coffers: “These allowances may appear small”, he noted, though, in fact, they were considerably higher than the contemporaneous salaries. But, supplemented by fees from students, the schoolteachers’ situation “will probably be better than that of a parish schoolmaster in Scotland”. Quite *why* this was deemed necessary for poor India was not explained.

Furthermore, he proposed creating a teacher-training college, and, to ensure quality, all of this would be overseen by a new Committee of Public Instruction that would oversee “the establishing of the public schools”, and would fix the curriculum and teaching methods to be used in them.

The Committee of Public Instruction, finally appointed on 1 June 1826, included one A D Campbell, the erstwhile Bellary district collector, whose criticisms of the indigenous system had clearly done him no harm. By 1830, however, only 84 schools had been established – 14 in the towns and 70 in the villages. This must be contrasted with the 11,575 schools provided by the indigenous system, as reported by Munro. And only four years later, the

Committee of Public Instruction was receiving submissions complaining about the inadequacies of the system. By 1835, it was recommended that the new schools be abolished – something that was effected in 1836. At the same time, the Committee of Public Instruction was replaced by the Committee for Native Education. In just a decade, Munro's reforms had failed.

The reasons for the failure are salutary – suggesting that the kind of state system being imposed was inferior to the indigenous system that it was brought in to replace. Five reasons for the failure stand out:

First, it became apparent that the hoped-for improvement in the quality of teachers, by training them through the expensive teacher training school and paying them much higher wages, failed. Contrary to what Munro and others had supposed, there simply wasn't a large group of better educated people willing to become schoolmasters in the poor villages, whatever the pay. According to statements submitted to the Committee of Public Instruction, the village schools "were rather prematurely introduced before a proper class of teachers for them had been available".⁴⁴ Just as in budget private schools today, the level of teacher pay in the indigenous schools was reflecting what was available in terms of teacher availability. The low wages were, if this observation is correct, not low at all, but simply reflected the market rate. If only those framing the RTE Act could have reflected on this simple historical observation.

Second, in the new government-funded schools it soon became apparent that political patronage, not teaching commitment and skill, was influencing the way teaching appointments were made. The Committee of Public Instruction heard that "personal or local influence would necessarily often supersede individual qualification or merit under such a mode of election". Now, the Collectors were reporting that the new state teachers were "inferior on the whole to the common village school masters, and, in general, ignorant also". In other words, the good pay and job security made the positions attractive, but not to those who wanted to teach, only to those who could be bought for political patronage. An exactly parallel criticism is raised today of teachers paid by the state, in India. Again: why couldn't those framing the RTE Act have absorbed this salutary lesson from history?

A third problem was also reported to the Committee: the new schools, completely against the Committee's explicit intentions, were excluding everyone apart from the elite, the Brahmins. Why? One source suggested that the Government "was uneasy about low-caste people being admitted to the...Schools. It was feared that, if they were encouraged, the upper classes would show resentment and withdraw their support". So the new public schools became a vehicle to promote caste privilege, rather than a vehicle for improvement of all. It would seem that the indigenous system had unnoticed strengths in promoting the education of all, including the lowest castes, just as the work of Härmä and others shows the same of budget private schools today (see end notes 3 to 9).

Fourth, one of the great problems reported to the Committee was the lack of efficient supervision. *The new state schools became accountable to no-one.* The Collectors, who should have been supervising them, were reported too busy with other business. One Collector's assessment is stark: He "doubted the efficiency of the schools which in effect were in no way superior to the already existing private schools". Munro had taken for granted that the success of his new government schools could be guaranteed – after all, they would be better funded and equipped than the indigenous private schools. He didn't take into account the problem of supervision and accountability. What he failed to consider was the way that indigenous village schools were already accountable, but not to any central administration. He had failed to note the missing ingredient of accountability in the private system, accountability to parents. This is a factor that still escapes educational reformers even today, including those who framed the RTE norms. They don't realise that budget private schools already operate under a complex, subtle and sophisticated system of accountability, to parents who pay fees.

Fifth, the new schools were, by design, to be much larger than the small, 'inefficient' private schools. They had to be large because teachers were paid much more, and so economies of scale were required to make them viable. But parents didn't like their size. One Collector observed that parents "complained of too great a number of students for the teacher to give proper attention. Hence parents wished to send their children to schools with fewer number. There were 150 private schools in the District". In other words, it was an overlooked

hidden strength of the indigenous system that it reflected parental desires for small schools and small classes. The indigenous system had organically evolved to reflect parental choice; the imposed system did not.

Because the new schools were designed to be larger, so more efficient, they couldn't possibly be available in every village. One Collector reported that "the Schools were very remote from each other", which was a problem for inspection (the Collector's concern), but also obviously for parents too, since the schools were too remote to send their children to. This conjecture is supported by evidence from elsewhere: "Schools in the district were not in a flourishing condition. Children were unable to attend from a distance".

Once more, it appears that a strength of the indigenous system, their small size – based on the reality of low teacher pay – reflected what parents wanted – namely a school in their own village, not one to which their children had to commute long distance. We can see parallels with what budget private schools are providing today, in contrast to what is provided in government schools. Parents then, as now, preferred small schools close to their homes, not large remote schools designed for the convenience of bureaucrats. The bureaucrats who designed the RTE Act, however, seem simply indifferent to the wishes of parents.

Enter Macaulay

It seemed that there was one final possible criticism of the indigenous private education system. Its quality, whatever its critics claimed, was not suspect – in fact, schools were created by villagers that adequately reflected the conditions of the villages, and used what was available in an economical and efficient manner. So much so, that its successful methods transformed what was on offer in Britain and the rest of the world. But it is true that the schools didn't reach *everyone*. Whilst they may have reached as many children as were reached in other European countries, including in England – and reached children of all castes – coverage was certainly not universal. Could it be that the British style of intervention of publicly-funded and provided education was the only way that *universal education* could be achieved?

This counter-factual question, of course, cannot be answered definitively. But there are interesting pointers as to what the answer might be. We can

see what growth was brought in by the system the British did impose, with its new government schools. We can also look at what happened in England during the same period, to see what might have happened if the British had not imposed their system.

Because of the lack of success of Munro's reforms, a new approach, with a new style of reformer, was introduced. Enter Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800 – 1859), the British poet, historian and Whig politician. Between 1834 and 1838 he took up residence in Calcutta, serving as President of the General Committee of Public Instruction for the British Presidency. Everyone in India knows his name, and his forthright criticisms of Indian culture. But what people fail to realise, is that it is to him more than any other, that we owe the government schooling system that prevails in India today. Indeed, one can go further – it is to Macaulay that we owe the sentiments behind RTE, the sentiments that are leading to the closure of budget private schools freely chosen by parents.

Macaulay's famous Minute of 2 February 1835 set the seal on a different kind of state intervention in education⁴⁵. Often he was prone to exaggeration; this character defect is evidence in his Minute, in which he was totally dismissive of Indian indigenous scholarship: "It is, I believe, no exaggeration to say, that all the historical information which has been collected in all the books written in the Sanscrit (sic) language is less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgements used at preparatory schools in England". Indian history abounded "with kings thirty feet high, and reigns thirty thousand years long". Indian astronomy "would move laughter in girls at an English boarding school". Indian geography was "made up of seas of treacle and seas of butter". And he totally ignored any contribution that the indigenous private schools might be making to education in India. Instead, he opined that "the great object of the British Government ought to be the promotion of European literature and science among the natives of India, and that all the funds appropriated for the purposes of education would be best employed on English education alone".

Macaulay laid the foundations for the public education system that is still in place in India today. He proposed a new, centralised system of education,

with publicly-funded universities in the Presidency towns, publicly-funded teacher-training institutions, public funds to maintain existing colleges and high schools, establishment of new public middle schools, and the introduction of grant-in-aid to bring some private schools under government control. It set out completely to supersede any existing indigenous provision.

How did it work in practice? Under Macaulay's system, the first publicly-funded village school was set up in April 1854. By October there were 54. Even then, some villagers were reluctant to send their children to the new state schools: "The village priests foreboded evil, and their representatives produced an undefined feeling of dread in the minds of the most indifferent and ignorant people of the lower orders".⁴⁶ Possibly from what we saw concerning the Munro schools, this sense of foreboding was right to be felt.

By 1858 this new system had delivered 452 schools and colleges, with a total strength of 20,874 in the 21 districts of the Madras Presidency. But 36 years earlier, Munro had found a total of 11,575 schools and 1,094 colleges, with 157,195 and 5,431 students respectively! That is, the new system had led to a huge decline in provision. Now, it may be that just as today, the new inspectors were simply ignoring, either through ignorance or because they weren't considered appropriate, the indigenous private schools in the villages. In any case, the official figures were certainly nothing to boast about.

Table 2: Growth in schooling, Madras Presidency, 1822 to 1900.

Madras Presidency	Population	Number of Scholars	% of Scholars to Population	Number of Scholars as % of those in 1822
1822-25	12,850,941	162,626	1.27%	100%
1858		20,874		13%
1879-80	31,308,872	268,379	0.86%	165%
1884-85	30,868,504	430,851	1.40%	265%
1895-96	35,641,828	791,634	2.22%	487%
1899-1900		862,991		531%

Source: Administrative Report of the Public Officers in Madras Presidency 1858-9, Public Instruction-P1, pp. 5-6, in Vittal Rao, 1979, p. 68.

By 1879, the official figures had recovered somewhat, but still showed a significantly lower percentage of the population in school than had been found in 1822-25. Only five years later, in 1885, can we see the figure reaching what it had been *over 60 years before*. And it continued to grow thereafter. So, did British education – Macaulay’s education – increase the numbers in school? Well, yes, it did. Sixty years later. But should this be a cause of satisfaction and celebration of Macaulay’s intervention? The answer to that depends upon the crucial question: what would have happened to the numbers in the indigenous system, had the British *not* intervened?

The Galloping Horses

There are some indications as to what the answer might be – by looking not to India, but to what happened in England itself during that period. The late Professor E G West had made his name by suggesting that universal primary education was achieved in the West not through public intervention, as was commonly supposed, but predominantly through private provision. His seminal book, *Education and the State*, points to a situation that was peculiarly similar to that which we’ve explored in India before the British took control of education. Before the state got involved, West’s research shows the vast majority of provision was privately provided – by small-scale private entrepreneurs (the ‘dame’ schools), church and philanthropy. The state intervened with small subsidies to a tiny minority of schools from 1833, but major state involvement only came in 1870. Long before this, in writing echoing what the British collectors observed in India only a decade later, James Mill, father of John Stuart Mill, wrote in 1813: “From observation and inquiry... we can ourselves speak decidedly as to the rapid progress which the love of education is making among the lower orders in England. Even around London, in a circle of fifty miles radius, which is far from the most instructed and virtuous part of the kingdom, there is hardly a village that has not something of a school; and not many children of either sex who are not taught more or less, reading and writing.”¹⁴⁷

How were such schools funded? Predominantly, it turns out, through school fees. Just as there are in India today, in Victorian England there were budget private schools. Mill noted: “We have met with families in which, for weeks

together, not an article of sustenance but potatoes had been used; yet for every child the hard-earned sum was provided to send them to school". But we don't have to be satisfied with Mill's anecdotes. Using official census data and reports, West was able to show that, by 1851, there were 2,144,378 children in day schools, of which over 85 percent were in purely private schools, that is, as the Census put it, "schools which derive their income solely from (fee) payments or which are maintained with a view to pecuniary advantage". The remaining 15 percent were subsidised by government, but only to a very tiny extent. And the 'mammoth report' of the Newcastle Commission on Popular Education, set up in 1858 and reporting in 1861, estimated that about 95 percent of children were in school for an average of nearly six years. And it was clear where the funding for this schooling came from: even in the minority of schools in receipt of some state funding, two-thirds of funding came from nonstate sources, including parents' contributions to fees, and Church and philanthropic funds. Even here, the *biggest* part of the school fees was provided by parents.

Table 3: Growth in schooling, England, 1818-1858

England	Population	Number of Day Scholars	% of Scholars to Population	Number of Day Scholars as a % of those in 1818
1818	11,642,683	674,883	5.80%	100%
1833	14,386,415	1,276,947	8.88%	189%
1851	17,927,609	2,144,378	11.96%	318%
1858	19,523,103	2,535,462	12.99%	376%

Source: 1851 Census and 1861 Newcastle Commission, in West, 1994, p. 187

For England & Wales, E G West memorably remarked that "when the government made its debut in education in 1833 mainly in the role of subsidiser it was as if it jumped into the saddle of a horse that was already galloping". Without government, he suggests, the "horses" – private schools – would have continued to gallop.

For our purposes, what is important to grasp is the huge growth of *private* school enrolment in England, before the state got involved. In the 40 years

from 1818 to 1858, enrolment in private schools in England had grown by 318 percent. But in the *60 years* from 1825 to 1885, half of which was taken up with Macaulay's new state system, enrolment in schools in the Madras Presidency increased by less than this, 265 percent. That is, growth was slower in school enrolment under the new British system in India than the equivalent growth in private schools in England. Or, to put it another way, suppose that school enrolment in the Madras Presidency had grown at the same rate as in England in an equivalent period. In the 40 years from 1825 until 1865, this would have led to the school population in Madras rising from 162,626 (as found by Munro) to 517,151. But this school population wasn't reached even by 1885 under Macaulay's system, some twenty years later, and was only to be exceeded by 1896, some 71 years later! The conclusion is clear, and painful: if the Indian private education system had been anything like the parallel system in England, (and there's no reason to think it wouldn't have been), we would have seen a *much larger growth in enrolment* than had the British not intervened at all.

An Unexpected Ally

Far from bringing education to India, as the British congratulated themselves on doing, instead they crowded out the system – the private education system – that was flourishing. The (British) critics of the Indian indigenous education system were wrong on every count. There is no substantial evidence that it was of low quality – indeed, the opposite seems to be true, it had found an organic and economical way of educating the population that was good enough in its major principles to be exported, via England, to the rest of the world. It had intrinsic strengths that the British ignored at their peril, in particular concerning the market rate for teachers and the accountability that came with parents paying fees.

The same can be said of the current (Indian) critics of the budget private school system. They also appear wrong on every count. The quality in these budget private schools is higher than government schools, irrespective of whether they meet RTE norms or not. This is because the private schools have accountability to parents as their cornerstone, and they are able to compensate for weaknesses in one area – like low teacher salaries and qualifications – by having greater inputs in other areas – like a longer school day, less teacher absenteeism and better hygiene.

But the British saw the village schools, and deemed them, as Gandhi put it, "not good enough". No, the British insisted that "Every school must have so much paraphernalia, building, and so forth...". So they established the new, centralised state system emanating from Macaulay. And this is the system under which government schools in India today, falter. This system was simply "too expensive for the people". As Gandhi wrote: "This very poor country of mine is ill able to sustain such an expensive method of education". It hasn't led to universal public education even now. In India today, there are still millions of children out of school. Would the indigenous private education system have been better? There is every reason to suppose that the system that depended upon parental fees would have been able to expand to cater for increased demand, particularly as the wealth of the people increased.

Conclusion: Gandhi, RTE and the Modern Macaulays

Those who seek to close down private schools today for being "not good enough", are modern-day Macaulays. They may be well-intentioned, as was Macaulay. They may believe in the fundamental importance of education. As did Macaulay. But they believe that ordinary people cannot be trusted to make choices on their own, as did Macaulay. And just as Macaulay denied the significance of indigenous Indian education in the 19th century, during his lifetime apparently failing to take note of what his contemporaries had observed, so too do the Modern Macaulays fall into denial about what the people are doing for themselves. Macaulay had in mind that only one system could help those in India, the model that suited the British upper classes. The Modern Macaulays think somewhat along the same lines, that all schools have to rigidly follow the same model – the one prescribed by RTE norms – and that people cannot be trusted to make judgements about what is better or worse for their own children. My journey into the history of Indian education has led me to believe that they are as mistaken today as Macaulay was then.

In conversations with journalists about budget private schools, it's clear that people often tend to think of them as having arisen as a reaction *against* something, against the perceived low quality of government schools. The lesson from history is that this is not true. In fact, budget private schools are of truly Indian vintage, an innovation that responded to the needs of the people

going back centuries. Rather, it is government education in India today that is the reaction, against the indigenous tradition of private schools.

Those who seek to close these schools go against this proud Indian tradition. I bring us back to Gandhi's quote at the beginning of this paper. "Our state", he wrote, "would revive the old village schoolmaster and dot every village with a school both for boys and girls". When Gandhi said that he wished to return to the *status quo ante*, he was saying he wanted to return to a system of *budget private schools, funded in the main by fees and a little philanthropy*. Not only has my journey into Indian history provided unexpected evidence of private education for the poor in India before the British took over, it has also provided the budget private school movement today with an unexpected ally.

The budget private schools of today, that RTE is picking out to close as being 'not good enough', are the heirs to the 19th century "village schools" celebrated by Gandhi. It is not far-fetched to say that he would be appalled at what the Modern Day Macaulays are doing to educational opportunities that are deeply rooted in India's history.

What would Gandhi have done? The year before he was in London berating the British for "uprooting the beautiful tree" – that is, closing down India's budget private schools – Gandhi was challenging the British Empire to do its worst against innocent people taking salt from their own lands, untaxed. His great Salt March, a 241 mile journey by foot to Dandi, began a mass movement of non-cooperation and civil disobedience, which ultimately led to the end of the British Raj. Echoes of the British Raj are alive and well in those seeking to close budget private schools under RTE. Perhaps we should take a leaf out of Gandhi's book and resist the closures, to win our educational independence?⁴⁸ Any 'RTE Salt March' could do worse than a march on Punjab, where officials are most energetically circumventing the free choices of ordinary people.

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Endnotes

- 1 Tooley, 2009
- 2 Muralidharan and Sundararaman, 2013
- 3 Härmä (2011)
- 4 Härmä, 2011, pp. 352-3
- 5 Härmä, 2010, p. 20
- 6 Härmä, 2011, p. 353, emphasis in the original
- 7 Härmä, 2010, p. 14, emphasis added
- 8 Härmä, 2010, p. 14
- 9 Härmä (2011), p. 353
- 10 All quotes from Dharampal, 1995, preface and p. 355.
- 11 Munro, 1822, p. 83.
- 12 Harris, 1822, p. 88.
- 13 Dharampal, 1995, pp. 18-19, pp. 34-35.
- 14 References in this paragraph to: Munro, 1826, p. 249; Dharampal, pp. 62-63; Sivaramakrishnan, 1995, p. 439; Dharampal, 1995, p. 22.
- 15 References in this section to: Adam, 1841, p. 268, emphasis added; Dharampal, 1995, p. 12; Lietner, 1883, p. 349. .
- 16 Cooke, 1823.
- 17 Adam, 1841.
- 18 Dharampal seemed to have a blind spot here. He wrote that it was the 'sophisticated operative fiscal arrangements of the pre-British Indian polity' that assigned tax revenue to 'make such education possible.' (Dharampal, 1995, p. 15). However, he admitted that this conclusion was 'still tentative, and in statistical terms somewhat speculative', (p. 15), which was odd, given that elsewhere he had always been extremely careful to avoid any such speculation. But then his *justification* for the conclusion makes it clear why he went for it, even if not based on firm evidence: '...to suppose that such a deep-rooted and extensive system which really catered to all sections of society was maintained on the basis of tuition fees, or through not only gratuitous teaching but also feeding of the pupils by the teachers, is to be grossly ignorant of the actual functioning of any system, or society,' (p. 67). In other words, Dharampal was claiming that the education system must be publicly-funded because he didn't believe a system of education could be anything *other* than publicly-funded: In my research, of course, I've uncovered precisely a fully-functioning system of education that depended *entirely* on tuition-fees and a little philanthropy. So it was not logically impossible, as Dharampal implied. It seemed, as all the evidence in his book suggested, that he'd missed a trick because of his assumption here.
- 19 References in this paragraph to: Fraser, 1823, pp. 152, 152-3; Vaughan, 1823, p. 199.
- 20 See Dharampal, 1995, p. 66.
- 21 Hyde, 1823, p. 145, emphasis added.
- 22 Dent, 1825, p. 228.

- 23 References to Hartog in this section are to: Hartog, 1939, pp. vii; p. 11 emphasis added; pp. 69ff; p. 72 and p. 15.
- 24 Campbell, 1823, p. 182.
- 25 References in this paragraph to *Hansard* June 22, 1813, quoted Dharampal, 1995, p. 75, and Dharamapal, 195, p. 75.
- 26 Murray, 1822, p. 113, emphasis added.
- 27 Vibart, 1822, p. 94.
- 28 Smalley, 1823, p. 144.
- 29 Munro, 1826, p. 249.
- 30 Adam, 1841, p. 268.
- 31 Ibid, p. 272.
- 32 Ibid, p. 273.
- 33 Ibid, p. 277.
- 34 Dharampal, 1995, p. 14.
- 35 References in this paragraph to Adam, 1841, p. 277.
- 36 Quoted Dharampal, 1995, p. 383, from House of Commons Papers, 1831-32, volume 9, p. 468.
- 37 References in this and next paragraph to: Campbell, 1823, p. 179, emphasis added; p. 182; p. 179..
- 38 Quoted in Dharampal, p. 260.
- 39 Meiklejohn, 1881, pp. 1, 6, 61, 83.
- 40 Bell, 1823, p. 25 or 21 (page numbers inconsistent in original); emphasis in the original.
- 41 References in this paragraph to: Meiklejohn, 1881, p. 25.
- 42 Bell, 1823, p. 23.
- 43 References in this and next paragraph to: Munro, 1826, p. 251, p. 250, p. 249, p. 251. .
- 44 References in this and next three paragraphs to Rao, 1979, p. 82, p. 79, pp. 81-2, pp. 83-4, p. 84..
- 45 Macaulay, 1835, pp. 721-24, 729
- 46 References in this and next paragraph to Rao, 1979, p. 192, pp. 214-5. .
- 47 References in this and next two paragraphs to: Mill, James, *Edinburgh Review*, October 1813, quoted West 1994, pp. 170, 171; 1851 Census, p. CXXXIV-V, quoted West 1994 p. 175; West 1994, p. 175; West 1983 p. 427; West, 1994, p. 173.
- 48 An interesting parallel again takes us to Gandhi: in South Africa he first used the phrase 'passive resistance' to describe what he later termed 'Satyagraha'. It is likely that the first phrase originated from British Non-Comformists protesting against the 1902 Education Act. See Guha, 2013, pp. 260-263.

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Viewpoint 13: RTE and Budget Private Schools: What would Gandhi think?

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