Understanding School Choice: How Parents Negotiate Quality and Policy Contexts

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Abstract

The global discourse on school choice is extensive, highlighting its prominence as one of the most widely debated public policies worldwide. However, the complex structure and variety of school types have left parents and students grappling with the decision-making process when choosing schools. The emerging debate over school selection suggests that consumer educational choice is a new concept. The debate is not confined to the dichotomy between private and public-funded schools, but also extends to concerns about employability and the potential of courses to equip graduates to address future challenges after exiting formal education. Building on this understanding, this paper examines how parents rationalise school selection and the parameters they consider when evaluating schools before admitting their children. An ethnographic method was used to address the research questions, which were framed to understand the problem, employing tools such as an interview schedule, focus group discussions, and observation. The study's findings indicate that factors such as competition, trends, and socio-economic disparities influence school choice decisions, sometimes overshadowing considerations of rational choice and educational quality. It provides policymakers with critical insights into the complexities of the education system and constructive strategies to address the challenges faced by government schools in Ladakh.

Keywords: School Choice; Quality Education; Private Vs Government Schools in Ladakh

Introduction

School choice is a complex phenomenon (Ball, 2003). The diverse structures and availability of schools worldwide have left parents and students in a dilemma about which school to choose for their wards. The emerging debate on school choice suggests that consumer-driven educational choice is a relatively new concept (Foskett & Hemsley, 2001). This debate is not limited to the binary of government versus private schools; it also includes deeper concerns about employability and the relevance of the curriculum in preparing students for future challenges beyond formal education.

Ladakh, a region that struggled to fulfil basic amenities until recently, saw parents and communities reluctant to send their children to formal schools. However, the region is now facing new challenges. By the early 2000s, Ladakh had expanded its network of schools to almost every single village. But today, the very existence of these schools has become a growing concern, particularly for rural communities and families from poor socio-economic backgrounds. The closure of publicly funded schools in rural areas, coupled with the mushrooming growth of private schools, has intensified these concerns. Given the current situation, understanding the challenges facing schools, especially those related to school choice, is crucial. It is important to explore why public schools are failing to retain students and how parents and students perceive quality education. These issues are highly relevant and demand attention from policymakers, educators, and other stakeholders. Hence, this study was undertaken, employing the Rational Choice Theory of Levin & Morgan (2004) and Friedman's (1955) theory of Competition, as these frameworks illuminate how parents evaluate alternatives, maximise perceived benefits, and respond to competitive pressures within the schooling landscape.

Theoretical Framework

The education system in the Indian context faces multiple challenges (Tilak, 2023). The situation is quite similar when it comes to school choice, as also found in the studies of public schools in the United States (Maranto et al., 2018). The growing complexity of formal schooling has led many to explore alternatives. Concepts like 'alternative schools' have gained ground in public discourse (Pathak, 2016; Sliwka, 2008, Pathak, 2002, 190). Alternative schools are those that do not follow the conventional school system. They adapt innovative pedagogies and flexible

curricula to meet learners' diverse needs. Experimental schools such as Rishi Valley and J. Krishnamurti Schools are a few examples. However, such privilege is not available in rural and remote regions. The only choice is government or private schools, forcing parents to choose between the two.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that school choice is not merely about desire; rather, people make decisions based on existing schemas or prior experiences. Often, people make spontaneous decisions without much deliberation. However, when it comes to long-term, life-impacting decisions such as choosing a school, individuals tend to make more systematic, conscious choices, a concept grounded in *Rational Choice Theory* (Levin & Morgan, 2004). This theory emphasises long-term benefits and reduced risks. Schooling, which shapes a child's future, has long-term implications; therefore, choosing a school is a deeply considered decision of the stakeholders (Gabay-Egozi, 2007). Several studies confirm that school selection is among the most widely debated public policy issues worldwide (Balinski & Sönmez, 1999).

Friedman's (1955) *theory of Competition* adds another layer to this discussion. He argues that education has become a commodity, where public and private schools compete to attract parents and students by promising quality education and better future outcomes. Under the lens of Friedman's theory, the widening gap between public and private institutions is visible. Private schools often showcase attractive facilities, better results, and well-structured plans to gain parental trust.

The rise of globalisation has further intensified this competitive dynamic. Terms like 'global citizen' have influenced educational needs at the local level. Global education models are increasingly designed to prepare students for future competition (Toffler, 1970). In this context, schools that fail to adapt to the demands of the modern market may continue to decline (Weiss, 1998). Many scholars agree that school choice is closely linked to future economic prospects (Garcia, 2018). Today, schools are often compared to industries that process raw material (students) into finished products (skilled workers), a metaphor articulated by Toffler (1970). Parents are more aware than ever that the school their child attends can significantly impact their future. Rational Choice Theory suggests that parents seek long-term outcomes, such as quality of life and social mobility, rather than short-term gains, when deciding where to enrol their children.

Grounded in these theoretical syntheses, the present study focuses on two major frameworks: *'Rational Choice Theory'* and *'Theory of Competition'*. It aims to

understand how parents and students rationalise their school choices, and which factors they consider important, such as curriculum quality, future employability, school reputation, and accessibility, before enrolling their children.

Need and Significance of the Study

School choice has recently become a focus of academic interest in India (Muralidharan & Sundararaman, 2015; Tooley, 2013), particularly in Ladakh, where the present study was conducted. As such, the trend of sending children to private schools is becoming a new fashion, especially among the middle and lower-middle-income groups. Parental attitudes towards private schools are more positive as they believe their children's social status would be elevated if enrolled in expensive private schools. A study quoted thus, 'Private schools are efficient, providing better, in fact, very superior quality education' (Tilak, 2023). It was found that between the years 2014-15 and 2023-24, the number of private schools in India rose by 14.9 per cent, adding 42,944 schools to the total. This mushrooming growth in private schools in India indicates that quality is weighed more by the amount of money spent on education (Kingdon, 2020). The obsession with private schools is no longer solely an issue in cities. These trends have reached even small, sparsely populated regions like Ladakh, creating a pressing need to understand their implications for government schools.

An adobe of 3 million people, most of whom are tribal, with a 94 per cent population, the region (Ladakh) is more isolated and remains cut off from the rest of the country for four to five months due to the closure of motorable roads. The people mostly live in inaccessible, barren, small villages and hamlets. The literacy rate of the region was 22.02 per cent in the 1981 census, rising to 74.67 per cent in the 2011 census. The recent trend of school growth in the Ladakh region speaks volumes about these tribal people's prioritisation of education. At present, a total of 961 schools cater to the needs of 57,107 students at various levels of education, including 366 at the foundational and preparatory level, 428 at the middle level, and 166 at the secondary level (UDISE+, 2024-25). Therefore, this study was undertaken to explore how such evolving dynamics are impacting government schools in small and marginalised regions such as Ladakh.

Research Questions

- How do stakeholders perceive the role of schools as an institution, and how do contextual factors in Ladakh shape their school-choice decisions?
- What factors do parents and students take into account when choosing a school?
- What are the current enrolment trends in both public and private schools?

Methodology

Considering the nature of the study, which aimed to address the above research questions, drawing on the theoretical framework, and engaging in in-depth and rigorous interactions with stakeholders, the qualitative research design (Tisdell et al., 2025) was deemed the most suitable and appropriate approach. Therefore, the study adopted an ethnographic method (Mlinowski, 2013; Smith, 2021) to generate in-depth, context-rich insights using tools such as an interview schedule for administrators and teachers, semi-structured interviews with parents, focus group discussions with students, participant observation in schools and communities, and a field diary. Data were collected during field visits conducted over 11 months in the year 2022 and 2023, visiting various villages and schools in the Union Territory of Ladakh (India). The researchers interact with various stakeholders, including heads of institutions, teachers, students, parents, and community members, to understand the dynamics of school choice. To support the qualitative findings, numerical evidence was provided, which is an important component of the qualitative design. As Becker (1970) states, one of the greatest faults in most qualitative studies has been their failure to make explicit the quasi-statistical basis of their conclusions. When numbers and numerical figures are introduced in qualitative analysis, does it change the methodological approach or shift it toward mixed methods? Maxwell (2010) clarified that using numbers or figures doesn't make a study quantitative; rather makes qualitative claims more explicit and valid. Thus, numerical data were drawn from various secondary sources, including UDISE (2024-25), PGI 2.0 (2021-22), OECD (2023), and SOTTTER (2023), to understand the nuances and rationale behind the narratives and perceptions.

Population and Sample of the Study

The population under investigation in this study comprises the rural inhabitants of the Kargil district in the Ladakh Union Territory, located to the northeast of the Great Himalayas. According to the 2011 Census, a significant majority, accounting for 88.39 per cent, reside in rural areas. The district is administratively subdivided into

seven tehsils to facilitate governance. For the current study, a 'Cluster Sampling' technique was employed, and two tehsils were selected. The number of respondents and tools used to extract information is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Number of Participants and Tool Details

Respondent	No of Respondents	Tools Administrated
Teachers	15	Interview Schedule and FGD
Students	170	Focus Group Discussion
Parents	8	Semi-structured Interview and Communication Interview
Community Members	7	Communication Interview
Total	200	

Findings and Discussion

The collected data were thematised and discussed under the following themes, centred on the determinants of school choice. However, it is essential to discuss the historical trajectory and key challenges of schooling in the region (Ladakh) to familiarise the reader with the broader context within which these themes are situated.

Historical Trajectory and Initial Challenges of Schooling in Ladakh

Ladakh is known for its multiple layers of marginalisation, border tensions with China and Pakistan (Aggarwal, 2004), harsh terrain, dense tribal populations (Van Beek, 2003), and limited working seasons (Gupta, 2023), as the region remains isolated during winter when roads remain closed for almost 4 to 5 months. Despite early efforts to introduce formal education, such as the establishment of the first government school in Ladakh in 1882 (Sheikh, 2005) and a private school by Moravian missionaries in 1889 (Smith & Gergan, 2015), schooling initially struggled to gain acceptance, as families prioritised agriculture and domestic responsibilities. Consequently, by 1900, student attendance remained extremely low, with only 14 students in Leh, 20 in Skardo, and 48 in Kargil (Sheikh, 2005).

Furthermore, with a vast area of 59,146 sq. km and only three lakh people spread across 240 villages, setting up schools, especially beyond the primary level, posed logistical challenges. It took nearly a century for Ladakh to reach a literacy rate of 22.02 by 1981, with only 7.74 per cent of women literate. Scholars reported the changes in the 1990s as an expansion of elementary education. By 2011, Ladakh achieved a literacy rate of 74.67 per cent, surpassing the national average. Accordingly, UDISE (2021–22) indicates that 978 schools serve 59788 students. Yet, quality remained a concern, with curricula often designed by outsiders unfamiliar with the region. Consequently, the enrolment patterns of government schools in Ladakh have been significantly impacted, as demonstrated by the enrolment rate and trends in the data.

Data Trends and Reflection

Although government schools are fulfilling the basic facility criteria proposed under the policy schemes of SSA (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan) and RMSA (Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan) enrolment has been a concern. Contrary to the number of government schools (85 per cent), the number of students enrolled in government schools (46.39 per cent) shows that government schools are not a favoured option for parents and students. In Ladakh, 84.52 per cent of schools are owned and maintained by the government, compared to 11.46 per cent by private institutions. But when it comes to the enrolment ratio, it was found that 11.46 per cent of private schools have more students than 84.52 per cent of government schools. Among the total 57,107 students, 30,484 (52.38 per cent) are currently enrolled in private schools, while 24,492 (46.39 per cent) are in government schools. The highest number of students is enrolled at the primary level, with 9,227 students in 379 government schools, compared to 13,145 in 55 private schools. This means that, on average, there are 24 students at the elementary level in government schools, compared to 239 in private schools. The pre-primary education scenario also does not bode well for government schools; in the 331 government schools, 4,690 students are enrolled, whereas in 24 private schools, 6,028 students are enrolled. This shows that the average number of students in government school pre-primary levels is 14, whereas in private schools, the ratio is 251. In a similar connotation, the scenario of the upper-primary and secondary levels has shown similar results. In the upper-primary level, the average number of students is 64 in government schools and 244 in private schools, while 52 and 115 students are enrolled in secondary schools in both types, respectively. At the higher-secondary level, parents again

prefer to enrol their children in government schools, with both categories having equal numbers of students: 149 and 147, respectively.

The UDISE+ 2024-25 data repository reports that India has a large school system. From the Foundational to the Secondary level, around 24.69 crore students are receiving education in various schools. Numerous factors are involved in selecting the most suitable school from a wide array of educational systems. The synthesis of existing scholarly works and qualitative findings also brings a hazy picture of the selection of schools for children in this study. Within this theme, the researchers further examined the quantitative data collected from various sources. Currently, there are 961 schools in Ladakh, comprising government, government-aided, and private schools. However, Government schools dominate Ladakh's educational landscape, accounting for 84.52 per cent. Private and government-aided schools make up the remaining share, with 11.46 per cent and 4.02 per cent, respectively. The data also reflects that Middle schools hold the largest share at 44.6 per cent, followed by Foundational + Preparatory schools at 38.1 per cent, and secondary schools hold 17.3 per cent of the total strength of the schools.

The scenario indicates that the government has implemented a productive process of establishing schools and making education accessible to all. It also highlights the important indicator that, on average, there are two primary and upper-primary schools available in each village. To ensure the effective functioning of these schools, the availability of teachers in accordance with standard norms should be the basic requirement. Stakeholders, especially parents, have voiced concerns about teacher availability and commitment in schools, indicating a perceived lack of seriousness in fulfilling their responsibilities.

To further understand this issue, the researchers analysed various documents and reports and found that Ladakh is one of the regions in the country with pupil-teacher ratio 8:1. The educational needs of 57107 students are managed by 6908 teachers across both private and government schools. A significant proportion of these teachers is employed in government schools, with 88 per cent working in rural areas (SOTTTER, 2023). Conversely, there are 1,593 teachers in private schools within the region.

The norms of the Right to Education require the Pupil-Teacher Ratio (PTR) to be calculated and maintained at the school level. A PTR of 35:1 at the school level indicates a need for additional teachers, while a PTR below 30:1 suggests a possible

surplus of teachers. Nationwide, 24 per cent of schools have a PTR greater than 35:1, indicating a likely teacher shortage. Of these schools, 66 per cent are government schools and 20 per cent are private schools. Additionally, 81 per cent of schools with a PTR greater than 35:1 are located in rural areas (UDISE+ 2024-25, SOTTTER, 2023)

Further, it is pertinent to note that government schools in Ladakh have the most favourable PTR ratio compared to their counterparts at both the regional and national levels. The data indicate that the national average PTR is 29:1, whereas the trend in rural and urban areas is 28:1 and 29:1, respectively. The government schools at the national level show a PTR ratio of 31:1, compared to the private counterparts at 21:1. In Ladakh, the performance was found satisfactory at both government and private schools, with average PTR ratios of 6:1 and 18:1. What could be the cause of lopsided PTR ratio was analysed and factors such as marketisation, systemic shifts, parental aspirations were factors impacting parental choice.

Marketisation and Systemic Shifts

Data revealed that a key factor in private school growth in Ladakh was the widening gap between government schools and society. The absence of a concrete mechanism to assess school performance and maintain community trust had weakened parents' confidence in enrolling their children in government schools. Narratives and field observations suggest that people now view education mainly through an employment and monetary lens. In this scenario, private schools have an edge in convincing parents due to their flexible policies and clearer roadmaps. Therefore, it can be stated that in their pursuit of better educational opportunities, many Ladakhis are now willing to abandon their villages and move to urban centres. Furthermore, it was found that parental school choice is not always grounded in rational deliberation; rather, it is significantly shaped by market forces, societal expectations, and parental aspirations, leading to migration.

Educational Migration and Parental Aspiration

During the field visits to various villages across the region, it was found that in most cases, only unskilled, elderly women and grandparents were present and living in the villages. In one of the visits to the village, an elderly man was living with his two daughters-in-law. This village was located 68 kilometres away from the district headquarters. The earning members and the children studying in school were living

in a rented house close to their workplace. A participant mentioned the reason for his children living away from the family. He stated,

> "...Both sons run a bakery in Kargil town, and my grandchildren are living with them. They are enrolled in a private school there. We live in the village to take care of the house and cattle."
>
> - Fieldwork, Ladakh (July 2023)

The excerpt indicates that employment and education were common factors for intra-regional migration in these villages. Families who stayed back in the village due to financial constraints or preference, their children did not attend formal schooling. It was also observed that families who migrated to urban areas preferred sending their children to private schools rather than government schools. For instance, in one village comprising 124 households and 824 people, only twenty-eight students were enrolled in high school (from pre-primary to X grade). Consequently, many rural schools were abandoned, with only a single student. Such findings support the causes for the lopsided Pupil-Teacher Ratio mentioned earlier.

During the focused group discussion and interview with the participants, it was found that most children in the village preferred migrating for education at an early stage of schooling. For example, in one of the tehsils, 179 students were enrolled in pre-primary, but this number dropped to 82 in first grade. Similarly, in another tehsil, the number was 108 in pre-primary and remained only 54 in first grade. The narrative below shows that after completing the pre-primary level, many students leave government schools.

> "Parents admit their children to government schools for one year. This is because many private schools only admit children from Class I. Therefore, to meet the eligibility criteria for admission to private schools, parents register their children for one year in government schools. At the end of the academic session, they withdraw their children and enrol them in private schools."
>
> - Fieldwork, Ladakh (August 2022)

The belief in private schools was found to be strong across the community, irrespective of geographical location. Another reason for the preference for private schooling and the low enrolment in government schools across the region was that

education was primarily viewed through a market and monetary perspective. These parents believe that students attending private schools have better employment opportunities and a higher standard of living, as illustrated in the narration below.

> "I work as a labourer, and I have three children. I enrolled my children in a private school so that, like the children of the rich, they could study in good private schools and become successful. Like the children of rich people, our children also have an interest in learning and achieving higher positions in society by becoming successful officers."
>
> - Fieldwork, Ladakh (November 2023)

The narrative reflects parental school choice that fostered a more positive perception of private schools. In the 1980s, access to private education was exclusively for the elite, while the poor were excluded due to poverty and a struggling economy (Dame, 2018). These elites later pursued higher education outside the region and secured top positions locally (Vasan, 1027, 43; Richard, 2015, 38). Over subsequent decades, private schools became symbols of success and prestige, encouraging families to migrate to urban areas to secure their children's future. As the theoretical lens suggests, competition shapes the education landscape, and in this competition, public schools are slowly losing their position while private schools are gaining a competitive edge. As a result, the idea of schooling has shifted from collective social development to personal advancement, diverging from Dewey's (2013) vision of schools as spaces for deeper societal engagement.

Rise of Tiny Schools

Another factor influencing school choice was the rise of *tiny schools* in the villages of Ladakh, where the pupil-teacher ratio had dropped to approximately 8:1. Harsh climatic conditions and limited accessibility to schools resulted in poor enrolment, and several government schools were eventually identified for permanent closure due to zero enrolment (UDISE+ 2024-25). The subsequent merger of schools created distrust among parents, who perceive the schools as unstable and lacking long-term viability. These developments make it important to bring the discourse of school choice into academic discussions and to understand how isolated, tribal-dominated regions like Ladakh conceptualise schooling and justify their choices of particular types of schools. Here, the perspective of Levin and Morgan (2004) on rational school choice has been challenged. Furthermore, the migration trend indicates that

villages are being deserted and that agriculture is no longer a reliable source of livelihood. The analysis also suggests that not only are the rich and elite classes moving to cities, but poor and middle-income families are shifting as well in search of better opportunities. **Collectively, these factors shape parental school choice.**

To justify the trend of schooling, it is argued that education is viewed as a public good worldwide, where children begin their journey of learning and understanding the world (Locatelli, 2018). Dewey, in his seminal work *Democracy and Education* (1930), argues that school represents a miniature version of society, not just the individual. Recognising the vital role of education, many countries have declared it a fundamental right. The widely adopted Prussian model of education laid the foundation for free and compulsory schooling for all (Schleunes, 1979). In India, the inclusion of Article 45 and the provision of free and compulsory education post-independence were the first steps toward mass literacy. Subsequent commissions stressed the need for Universalisation of Elementary Education (UEE). The 86th Constitutional Amendment, which introduced Article 21-A, marked a turning point by making primary education a fundamental right. Under the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA, 2001-02), the government focused on opening schools in every village. However, during fieldwork, respondents reported that many of these schools, especially in remote areas, are now at risk of closure due to low enrolment. This policy of school closure or merger has been rationalised in various Indian states. For example, Malik (2021) discusses its impact in Rajasthan, while Smart (2023) highlights similar measures in Maharashtra. Minutes from the Project Approval Board (PAB) meeting for 2023–24 under the *Samagra Shiksha Scheme* confirm that single-teacher schools are being merged or rationalised by the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Councils (LAHDCs). These documents also note a rise in single-teacher schools at the primary level. Moreover, a report by *JK Newsline* (2023) states that 116 schools were shut down in Ladakh, and Ahmad (2025) reports that 139 more schools in Ladakh are at risk of closure due to low enrolment, which may negatively impact early-grade learning, especially for economically disadvantaged children who may drop out. Although local authorities claim success in increasing rural enrolment through reforms in selected schools, these successes are limited to just 12–15 schools and remain in the early stages.

The lack of clearly defined rationales among parents for preferring private over government schools reveals a deeper issue. Many parents cite *"quality"* but often lack a clear understanding of what it entails, adopting socially constructed notions

that equate private schooling with better education, without assessing actual learning outcomes.

Conclusion

The decision of choosing a school is becoming more complex due to the evolving dynamics of the education sector. While education is essential, we must also consider market demands when discussing schooling. The results of this study strongly suggest that private institutions have effectively promoted market needs through advertising and media to build rapport and trust with parents; similar findings were also reported in the study by Milliman & Maranto (2009) on the role of organisational trust in school choice. Quantitative data indicate that government schools have sufficient school buildings, infrastructure, and teachers, but are facing challenges in maintaining enrolment levels. Similar findings are evident in the literature from various countries. The education sector is currently at a critical point in its history, where the importance of accessing knowledge and information outside traditional schooling cannot be overlooked. This concept was highlighted by Harari (2018) in the book '*21 Lessons for the 21st Century,*' emphasising the need to make sense of information in a world where already far too much information is available without school textbooks and teachers. Despite the abundance of information available beyond textbooks and teachers, the choice of schooling remains a widely debated public policy globally.

Critics argue that modern schooling is more inclined to fulfil market demand for manpower than to produce the 'ideal person' promised. In this race of market-oriented education, private schools are holding a strong position due to their flexible market-oriented policies. It is because private schools readily incorporate new subjects and trends into their curricula, whereas government schools face more bureaucratic processes. This complexity makes it challenging for government schools to adopt new educational approaches and trends.

The study's evidence suggests that factors such as competition, fads, and socio-economic disparities can influence school choice decisions, sometimes overshadowing considerations of rational choice and educational quality. In the growing competition among educational institutions to attract students, it is essential to recognise that sparsely populated regions like Ladakh are among the first to suffer from the marketisation of education. Poor and marginalised families are either compelled to migrate to urban areas to secure their children's admission to the best

possible schools or are left to struggle amid the forces of educational market competition. The data trends and narratives presented in this study offer critical insights to help navigate these challenges and frame concrete, practical policies. It indicates that more pragmatic, region-specific policies are required. Hence, policymakers must move beyond homogeneous frameworks and address region-specific challenges, particularly in contexts like Ladakh.

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