

Parental School Choice in Rural India

Shikha Pathak

Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, India

Abstract

With the changing face of India's school education system, that sees government, government-aided and private schools now operating in most settings, the issue of parents' school choice has become a topic of great interest. This paper summarizes the literature on parental school choice in rural and rural-adjacent contexts in India, particularly regarding the definition of "school quality," as well as parents' educational aspirations, socioeconomic resources, social networks, and the available choices. The paper adopts a focused sociological review approach and gathers empirical studies, theories and relevant institutional evidence pertaining to the subject. This body of work clearly suggests that the only reason parents may select a school is not because it is affordable, but for other reasons. Parents are considering several factors simultaneously: quality of teaching, reliability of teachers, discipline, safety, school infrastructure, medium of instruction, reputation, and proximity to their home, and implications for child's future. The advantages of private schooling become more appealing when parents think of it in relation to employment opportunities or higher education in the future, and English fluency. However, aspiration is not the same as the ability to put it into practice: families who are on low incomes, whose parents do not have a high education or who have limited access to transport or simple lack of information, are able to pursue no further education than they want. Interestingly, the literature also reveals that parents' ideas about what "quality" schooling is are not necessarily congruent with the actual, measurable attributes of schools. In order to make sense of these patterns, the paper looks to Bourdieu whose ideas of cultural capital, social capital and social reproduction are useful, as well as a sociological interpretation of aspirations as socially constructed rather than strictly personal. These factors are brought together, and the paper proposes a framework linking both cultural capital and socioeconomic position, with the formation of aspirations, the perception of quality, the actual choices that are made and the actual school choices made. The central claim is that school choice is an expression of parents' agency and a process that is influenced and limited by structural inequality. Finally, the paper calls for further empirical studies that have a specific setting – this time more in-depth studies of how these dynamics manifest in rural Madhya Pradesh.

The key words used are: parental school choices, rural India, educational aspirations, perceived school quality, government schools, private schools, cultural capital, social reproduction, social mobility, sociology of education

1. Introduction

Education is a major social institution through which knowledge, values and social expectations are transmitted. It can expand opportunities for social mobility while also reproducing inequalities when access to valued educational resources is unequally distributed. In India, the coexistence of government, government-aided and private schools creates a differentiated educational field in which families make

choices under varying economic, cultural and geographical conditions.

The policy context makes the question of educational equity especially significant. The National Education Policy 2020 emphasizes equitable access and quality education. Recent institutional evidence also demonstrates the scale and diversity of India's school system. ASER 2024 was a nationwide rural household survey covering 649,491 children in 17,997 villages across 605 rural districts, while UDISE+ 2024–25 provides national administrative information on schools, students and teachers. When you ask parents why they send their kids to one school over another, the reasons usually break down along fairly predictable lines.

Government schools win out because they're cheap and close by — practical, no-nonsense reasons that matter a lot to families watching every rupee. Private schools, meanwhile, carry a kind of aura around them: parents talk about better teaching, stricter discipline, English-medium classes, nicer buildings, and the sense that a private-school badge might count for something down the road. But here's the catch — none of this actually tells us which school is objectively better. What we're really looking at is what parents believe, shaped by everything around them — and belief isn't the same as fact.

This is where things get interesting from a sociological point of view. Parents are not passive reactors to whatever school happens to be close at hand, but are thinking, comparing, aspiring, sacrificing agents seeking to get their child into a preferred institution of education. In other words, parents have agency. It depends on how much money they have, how educated they are, who their friends are, how far they are willing to drive, whether there is such a school in their vicinity, and whether they can gather the necessary information in order to make an informed choice.

So really, the argument this paper is making is simple but important: school choice isn't just a matter of parents rationally picking the “best” option on the market, the way economists like to imagine it. It's something far more tangled — a decision shaped as much by circumstance as by preference.

2. Problem Statement

There has been much studied about the topic of school choice in India, and these factors crop up over and over again — perceived quality, affordability, accessibility, language of instruction, reputation, and parents' hopes for their children's future. The problem is there's no real evidence that makes sense together. It is dispersed throughout various states, social classes, and research practices, with each asking some variation of questions and in a slightly different fashion. The “what” of school choice is investigated more closely in quantitative studies, which focus on enrolment numbers and family background variables. Qualitative work brooks into the meanings parents make of their choices — the “why.” Institutional reports tend to be written in broad strokes which focus on the pattern of schooling, rather than on why it is the way it is. What's needed is something that unites these threads. There's a need to develop a sociological synthesis that does not simply provide a laundry list of factors that influence school choice, but actually offers insights into what happens on the ground when parents select a school — in other words, a school that offers the kind of schooling the parent wants. It is this gap this paper attempts to fill.

3. Research Gap

There is a considerable existing body of research on parental school choice in India that explores some of the critical factors such as parental perceptions of school quality and the importance of the household,

Socioeconomic characteristics, educational aspirations, English-medium education, accessibility and private-school enrolment. However, the literature remains fragmented across geographical settings, social groups and methodological approaches.

A further limitation is that these dimensions are often examined independently rather than as interconnected elements of a socially structured process. In particular, relatively limited attention has been given to how educational aspirations interact with perceived school quality, cultural and social capital, household resources and the local availability of schools to shape the realistic choice set available to rural families.

The distinction between perceived school quality and observed school characteristics also requires stronger integration into sociological explanations of school choice. Parents may make decisions on the basis of reputation, discipline, English-medium instruction or expectations of future opportunity, even if what parents THINK about a school, does not actually align with what you would measure — test scores, learning levels, etc. That mismatch is significant and is something we should sit with for a few moments and consider: School choice is not about schools objectively, it's about schools as parents perceive them to be.

In a fairly crowded conversation, then, what does this paper contribute? So primarily this — it attempts to synthesize these disparate dimensions under one sociological banner, and then, to think them through by considering what they might suggest for the larger questions:

educational inequality, social mobility, and the unspoken ways in which privilege begets privilege from generation to generation.

This paper is not saying there was no previous study of rural Madhya Pradesh. It would be an overreach: and it's not true. What it is saying is more modest — that unless there is a proper and dedicated state level review, with actual fieldwork on the ground, to identify a specific gap there can be no pointing to it for Madhya Pradesh. Now, that foundation isn't in place.

4. Research Questions

Now, this big question is: When a family of a village or rural area has to take a decision to put their child in a government school or a private school, what really is the reason? All the other parts of this paper are expended in attempts to answer this.

1. The first thread is Parents do not react to the school as it is: they react to the school as they see it through their expectations and aspirations for their child. So, how do all these perceptions about quality and parental aspirations get mixed in the decision making process?
2. The second thread relates to resources, not only financial, but social and networks to which a family can turn. Knowing that you want to send your child to private school and being able to do so are two different things. The issue then is how do these socio- economic and social factors influence not only what parents want to do, but what they can actually do?
3. The third thread Is Even a family who has both the resources and the will to select a 'better' school may be trapped by geographical constraints: no nearby school; no effective transport; or the lack of information to make a well-informed choice. So the question is how these everyday, on-the-ground constraints turn into a reduction in the real choice set available to a household.
4. But the final question brings the focus back to the research itself, asking – where are the gaps? What's yet to be studied, what hasn't been developed, and what methodological gaps must be bridged in rural

India?

These questions start with the personal (what parents think), then shift to the structural (what they have access to), and then to the academic (what we still don't know) — which is really the shape that the entire paper takes.

5. Research Objectives (The goals of the Study are to):

- Most generally, it seeks to examine the current literature on parental school choice between government and private schools in a specific context of rural India and contexts that are closely related.
- Then, it seeks to synthesize the existing, dismembered data linking perceptions of school quality and parents' aspirations into a unified pattern, rather than just picking bits and pieces out of it.
- It also examines how socioeconomic resources, social networks, and the local supply of schools influence family decisions — and not only how families would ideally make them, but how they can make them in the real world.
- The paper also attempts to distinguish between what parents think about a school and what can be observed and measured about a school; as mentioned at the beginning, parents' thinking is not always what is observed and measured.
- Finally, drawing on all of these, the paper moves towards a more general sociological understanding of school choice — one in which these everyday choices of parents are interpreted in the context of broader issues of educational inequality, social mobility, and the tendency for social advantage to be self-reinforcing over time.
- To identify a defensible agenda for context-sensitive empirical research, including future work in rural Madhya Pradesh.

6. Methodology

This paper uses a focused sociological literature-review approach. It is intentionally presented as a literature review rather than a completed systematic or PRISMA-ScR review because the evidence base was assembled for thematic synthesis rather than through a formally registered systematic-review protocol with reported screening counts. The approach is appropriate for bringing together heterogeneous quantitative, qualitative, longitudinal and institutional evidence and for developing a conceptual sociological interpretation.

- **Search scope.** The literature base emphasizes studies published from 2010 to 2026, while foundational theoretical works are retained where necessary for interpretation. Relevant literature was identified through scholarly searches and publisher/repository records using combinations of terms such as *parental school choice*, *school choice*, *rural India*, *government school*, *private school*, *educational aspirations*, *perceived school quality*, *socioeconomic background*, *English-medium schooling* and *parental choice*.
- **Inclusion criteria.** Studies were considered relevant when they addressed Indian school education and examined parental or household choice, government/private schooling, perceived quality, aspirations, socioeconomic influences, social networks or rural access. Urban and mixed-setting studies were included only where they examined mechanisms directly relevant to rural school-choice analysis.
- **Exclusion criteria.** Studies focused exclusively on higher education, opinion pieces and sources lacking sufficient methodological information were not treated as core empirical evidence.

- **Review and synthesis procedure.** Evidence was organized thematically around recurring mechanisms: (1) perceived school quality, (2) educational aspirations and future orientation, (3) socioeconomic capacity and affordability, (4) social networks, cultural capital and identity, and (5) geography, accessibility and the realistic choice set. Findings were then compared across studies according to location, method, population and substantive focus. Because the underlying search was not conducted as a registered systematic review with a reproducible database log, the paper does not claim exhaustive coverage or report invented screening counts.
- **Methodological position.** The paper does not report a fabricated PRISMA flow diagram. A future systematic or scoping review could extend this work through a registered protocol, exhaustive database searching, documented screening, formal quality appraisal and reproducible search logs.

7. Review of Literature

7.1 School Quality and Parental Perceptions

Lahoti and Mukhopadhyay (2019), studying rural schools across four states, found that perceptions of teaching-learning, discipline and child safety influenced parental choice.

Expenses were particularly important among families using public schools, while English-medium education was important among families using private schools. Their study is especially significant because it highlights a gap between parental perceptions and observed school characteristics. Kumar and Choudhury (2021) likewise examine the role of school characteristics and family background in private-school choice. The combined evidence suggests that parents evaluate both educational conditions and the signals through which school quality becomes visible.

7.2 Educational Aspirations and Future Orientation

Georgiadis et al. (2022), using longitudinal data from India and an instrumental-variables strategy, examine the relationship between parental aspirations and private-school enrolment. Their findings indicate that children whose parents aspire for university completion are more likely to attend private schools. This is important sociologically because schooling choice is connected to imagined futures: parents may select a school not only for its present characteristics but also for the educational and occupational pathways they believe it opens.

7.3 Socioeconomic Resources and Affordability

Härmä (2011) demonstrates that low-cost private schools are not necessarily accessible to the poorest households. Narwana, Gill and Vashisht (2026) similarly show that affordability must be understood through households' lived experiences and the sacrifices required to meet educational costs. Accessibility and affordability are therefore distinct concepts.

7.4 Social Position, Networks and Identity

Narwana and Gill (2022) show that school choice in a Punjab village is shaped by parental socioeconomic positionality, teachers, educational quality, learning environment, English education and private tutoring. For example, Gurney (2017) demonstrates that school choice is not merely a pragmatic choice, but also a personal choice that is linked to parents' sense of identity and life stories and how those stories inform their choices for their children. Ullah, Mukherjee and Middendorf (2025) make another point here, about the influence of informal social networks, relationships with schools and parents' expectations on the decisions they make. The studies collectively defy the notion of school choice as cold logic. Rather, they propose that it is more deeply ingrained, that it is part of people's relationships, part of their lives and part

of their concept of a “good” education, indeed what a “good” education is at all.

7.5 Choice Sets and Rural Constraints

Narayanan’s (2013) study is particularly relevant here; it’s supported by substantial evidence from 1,586 households in 274 villages in seven states in rural north India. The author develops the idea that parents have a “choice set” – that is, a range of schools that they would consider sending their children to. However, the author also recognizes that parents are most likely to choose a school from within their choice set, depending on a number of factors: distance, availability of the school, whether it meets their needs, and other relevant considerations.

Therefore, when it comes to a rural environment, the options open to parents and students are severely limited by the availability of educational institutions.

7.6 Private Schooling, Achievement and the Problem of Simple Sector Comparisons It is important to note here that Chudgar and Quin (2012) provide an important caution. They used household data from both rural and urban India and found that the performance of students in the private sector, compared to students in the government sector, was superior in the case of reading, writing and mathematics in initial regression analysis. After taking into account selection (the ways that the families of private- and government-school children already differ before a child steps into either school), the private-school benefit was essentially gone in both places, as measured by changes in test scores. They also discovered that, in particular, children in low-fee private schools might turn out just as badly as those from government schools. Not every implication is sweeping; parental attitude towards private school is a clue to their attitudes towards school quality, but it does not in itself constitute objective evidence of better learning outcomes in private schools.

7.7 Inequality and the Meaning of Private-School Choice Johnson and Bowles (2010) are able to add another layer to this image, in linking the growth of private education in northern India to wider processes of social stratification — that is, connecting it to parental beliefs and standing, rather than learning outcomes. This is taken another step by Mousumi and Kusakabe (2017) and then, in a more personal way. Their research into the experience of low-income parents in Delhi reveals that, in the typical sense, attending a private school is not really a “choice” but a dilemma. On the other hand, a local private school can attract parents with some frustration over the quality of the local public school. The quality of the local public school can be a frustration that drives parents towards the local private school, on the other hand. The other, however, is the real financial burden created by school fees that cannot simply be ignored once the decision has been made. This is confirmed by more recent research on affordability and what some are calling “defensive” school choice, which indicates that the shift to private schools is not necessarily a testament to free and confident choice, but more often than not, it is a reaction to insecurity, and a step in the direction of a bet on the government’s inability to deliver.

8. Comparative Evidence Table

Study	Location	Method/Data	Main focus	Key finding
Johnson C Bowles (2010)	Madhya Pradesh northern India	Case study; surveys/interviews	Private education; social differentiation	Expectations, accountability and social differentiation shaped private-school demand.

Chudgar C Quin (2012)	Rural urban India	Household achievement data +	Private schooling and outcomes	Private-school advantage was reduced after balancing for selection; sector superiority should not be assumed.
Narayanan (2013)	7 states; 274 villages	1,586 households + school survey	Choice sets; functionality	Parents responded to school functionality and available alternatives; local supply matters.
Study	Location	Method/Data	Main focus	Key finding
Härmä (2011)	Rural India	Field study	Low-fee private schooling; equity	Low-fee private schools were not necessarily affordable to the poorest households.
Gurney (2017)	Delhi	Qualitative interviews	Identity and biography	Parental identity and biography can influence school-choice meanings.
Mousumi C Kusakabe (2017)	Delhi	Qualitative study	Low-fee private choice	Low-income families can face a dilemma between perceived benefits, proximity and fee burdens.
Lahoti C Mukhopadhyay (2019)	4 rural states	121 schools + 1,210 families	Perceptions and realities	Teaching, discipline, safety, expenses and English were important; perceptions could diverge from observed realities.
Narwana (2019)	Haryana	Field survey + secondary data	Access, English, inequality	English mattered, but caste, gender and economic status also shaped access and choice.
Kumar Choudhury (2021)	India	Household/school data	Family background; school characteristics	Teacher attendance, local teachers, parental participation, perceived

				quality and English influenced choice.
Georgiadis et al. (2022)	Andhra Pradesh / Telangana / India	Longitudinal Young Lives	Aspirations and enrolment	Higher parental aspirations were associated with greater likelihood of private-school attendance.

Narwana C Gill (2022)	Punjab village	Interviews + FGDs	Socioeconomic milieu	Teachers, quality, learning environment, English and tutoring interacted with parental positionality.
Mousumi C Kusakabe (2022)	Delhi	38 parent interviews	Safety, proximity, values and care	Neighbourhood, safety, school relationships and socioeconomic profile shaped decisions.
Choudhury C Mousumi (2024)	Rural Odisha	Multi-stakeholder study	Government–private choice	Perceived government-school weaknesses and private-school advantages influenced choice; affordability remained relevant.
Ullah et al. (2025)	Lucknow	20 parent interviews	Networks and expectations	Informal networks, academic reputation, English and parent–school relationships influenced choice.
Narwana et al. (2026)	Punjab	Multi-stakeholder study	Affordability	Private-school accessibility should not be equated with affordability; households may sacrifice basic needs.
Kundu et al. (2026)	India	Qualitative interviews; 10 parents	Defensive school choice	Private-school preference can reflect educational insecurity, inequality and concern about public-school preparedness.

The studies are heterogeneous and should not be interpreted as a single statistical evidence base. Their value lies in identifying recurring mechanisms and contextual differences.

G. Theoretical and Sociological Framework

In order to understand all this, the paper essentially relies on the theories of Bourdieu, particularly his theory of cultural capital, social capital and social reproduction. These provide us with a vocabulary to think through why school choice is not as level a playing field as it may seem.

Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital is not limited to a type of “education. It includes how easy it is for a parent to converse with teachers using school language, how many of the school’s unspoken rules and expectations they know, or how well they grasp the various routes through which education can go. Because it affects what they know, and what they believe a “good school” must look like — and how well they can navigate the school system — fill out paperwork, speak to teachers, and understand what certain grades or what a certain curriculum means about a child — Bourdieu, 1986.

Much of what parents know about the school is not from official sources but from the grapevine of their family, neighbours, teachers and community. So a family that’s more “socially connected” — that knows

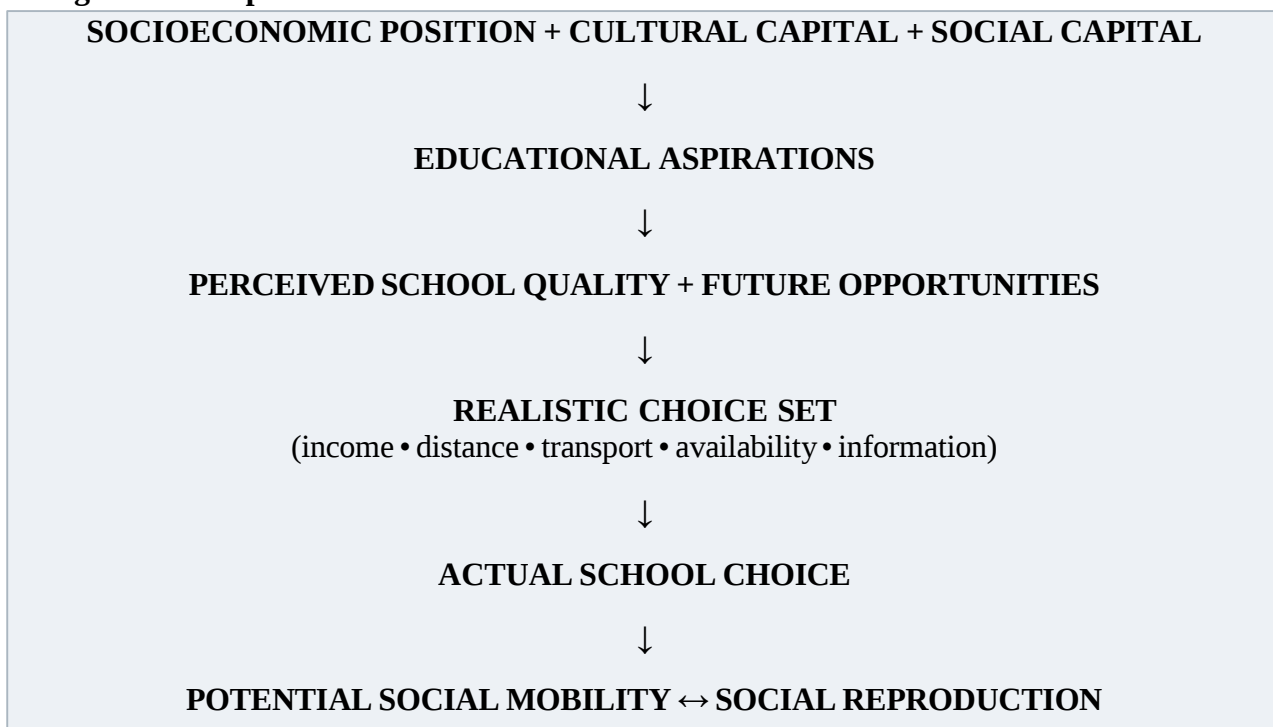
the right people or just has more conversations with people who have gone through the admissions process before — is going to get information that is not only more plentiful, but more timely and more trustworthy: which schools are well-known, which schools are accepting new students, what opportunities do they exist that a family might not otherwise know about

Social reproduction draws attention to the unequal capacity to convert preferences into choices. A family may aspire to a particular private school but lack sufficient income, transport or information. Another family may have similar aspirations but greater resources with which to act upon them. Choice can therefore reproduce existing inequalities even when the

educational system formally permits multiple options (Bourdieu C Passeron, 1977).

Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz's (1995) work further supports an understanding of school choice as socially differentiated rather than as a neutral market process. The sociology of aspirations adds a future-oriented dimension. Aspirations connect present schooling decisions with imagined higher education, employment, English competence and social status. Appadurai's (2004) concept of the capacity to aspire is useful because aspirations are shaped by social experience and access to opportunities rather than existing only as individual preferences.

G.1 Integrated Conceptual Framework



The framework emphasizes that preferences are formed socially and translated into actual choices through unequal resources and local opportunity structures. The choice set is therefore not simply the number of schools physically present; it is the set of schools a household can realistically access, afford, evaluate and consider viable.

10. Government–Private School Choice: A Balanced Analysis

The literature does not justify a universal hierarchy in which one school sector is inherently superior. Government schools can offer affordability, public provision and local accessibility. Private schools can be

attractive where parents associate them with teaching quality, discipline, English-medium instruction, infrastructure, monitoring or reputation. At the same time, private schooling can generate fee burdens and may be inaccessible to poorer households.

Dimension	Government schools	Private schools
Cost	Often lower direct cost; public provision	Usually involves tuition and additional costs
Accessibility	Often locally available, but varies	Availability varies; proximity can attract families
Quality perception	Varies considerably between schools	Sometimes perceived as stronger on teaching or discipline
Language	Varies by school and state	English-medium often valued where offered
Social meaning	Public provision, affordability and entitlement	May signal aspiration, reputation or status in some contexts
Constraint	Concerns about functionality or quality may encourage exit	Fees and indirect costs may constrain access

11. Perceived School Quality and Observed School Characteristics

A key contribution of the literature is the distinction between perceived school quality and observed or measurable school characteristics. Observed characteristics may include teacher attendance, pupil–teacher ratios, infrastructure, facilities and learning outcomes. Perceived quality includes parents' evaluations of teaching, discipline, safety, cleanliness, English-medium instruction, teacher interaction, reputation and expected future benefits.

Parents act on information available to them. A school with visible infrastructure or English-medium instruction may be perceived as high quality even if those features do not guarantee stronger learning outcomes. Conversely, a government school may possess strong A school with the same facilities and teachers as another school may not have the same reputation in the community. Reputation — that is, does not always reflect reality — it can fall behind or even be different from what the school is providing out on the ground. Lahoti and

Mukhopadhyay (2019) offer a window into the importance of this discrepancy between perception and reality for the study of school choice: parents are not only reacting to what a school is, they are reacting to what a school appears to be and those two things aren't always congruous. Rural School Choice and the Realistic Choice Set

12. Rural school choices and the realistic choice set

Rural school choice differs from urban choice because the local school market may be smaller and transport constraints more significant. Distance, road connectivity, travel safety and school availability can determine whether a preferred school is practically accessible. Parents may also rely more heavily on local social networks when comparing schools.

The distinction between preference and capacity to choose is therefore essential. A household can prefer a private school without being able to pay its fees, or prefer a government school while choosing a private school because the nearest government school is perceived as less functional. The realistic choice set is produced by the interaction of household resources and local institutional availability. Smaller markets / greater distance / less choice / higher value of English teaching: Children in rural areas were much less likely to be attending a private school than those in urban areas, principally because of larger urban market sizes and the higher value of English teaching in urban areas — and distance mattered, with children in the older cohort of the Young Lives study 16 times more likely to attend a private school in urban areas compared to rural areas.

Distance, transport, safety as barriers to access: a review of rural transportation notes distance to school, inadequate transportation infrastructure and safety concerns are high barriers to access particularly in rural and tribal areas.

13. Major Findings of the Review

- **Perceived quality is central.** Teaching-learning, teacher availability, discipline, safety, infrastructure and the learning environment repeatedly influence parental evaluations.
- **Aspirations shape the meaning of school choice.** Parents may select schools according to imagined futures involving higher education, employment, English competence and social mobility.
- **Preference and capacity are different.** A family can prefer a school but lack the income, transport or information necessary to access it.
- **Social and cultural resources matter.** Networks, parental education, language
- competence and familiarity with educational institutions influence the information families possess and how they interpret school alternatives.
- **The local choice set matters.** Rural families do not choose from every school that exists; geography, transport, availability and functionality define the realistic alternatives.
- **Private-school preference is not proof of private-school superiority.** Sector preference can reflect perception, reputation, aspiration, insecurity or dissatisfaction with public provision, while measured learning outcomes require separate evaluation.
- **Choice can simultaneously express agency and reproduce inequality.** Families actively strategize for mobility, but unequal resources shape who can convert aspirations into desirable school placements.

14. Thematic Synthesis and Discussion

14.1 Quality

Teaching-learning, teacher availability, discipline, safety, infrastructure and the learning environment repeatedly appear as important considerations. Yet the meaning of quality differs by context and social group. The sociological significance therefore lies not only in what schools provide, but also in how families interpret and rank those characteristics.

14.2 Educational Aspirations

Parents may evaluate schools according to the futures they imagine for their children. Higher education, careers, English competence and social mobility can make particular schools more attractive. Evidence linking parental aspirations with private-school enrolment supports the interpretation of school choice as a future-oriented decision rather than a response to present school conditions alone.

14.3 Socioeconomic Capacity

Income and parental education influence the ability to pay, travel, obtain information and negotiate school systems. Preference and capacity are therefore analytically distinct. The literature on low-fee private schooling demonstrates that nominal affordability does not necessarily translate into lived affordability.

14.4 Social Networks

Relatives, neighbours, teachers and community reputation shape information and perceptions. School choice is consequently embedded in social relationships. Informal networks can help families interpret school reputation and navigate decisions, while unequal network access can produce unequal informational resources.

14.5 English-Medium Education

English can function as both a perceived educational advantage and a symbolic marker of future opportunity or status. It should not, however, be treated as a sufficient explanation of choice. Its meaning is connected to parental aspirations, social position and expectations about higher education and employment.

14.6 Caste, Gender and Social Position

Choice is socially differentiated. Caste, gender, economic position and parental education can affect both the range of options and the meanings attached to different schools. A common school market can therefore be experienced differently by households occupying different social positions.

14.7 Mobility and Reproduction

School choice as a means of upward mobility, but can create the same advantages — this is a very common framing in the sociology of education (which is what Bourdieu said, and also what you’ve already cited, in the Chudgar/Quin and Narayanan studies on selection effects and disparate access. Sound.

It’s a fair, conventional breakdown of Bourdieu’s model, as it applies to school choice, and corresponds to what you established earlier two messages when you added the cultural/social capital to the message. Sound.

“The framing of agency and structure” and “parents as active but constrained” — this is directly from your paper’s central argument in the Introduction (parental school choice is a socially structured process not just an economic choice). It is consistent and not contradictory.

15. Contradictions and Complexities in the Literature

All of this literature comes to one conclusion: There is no single, uniform story that connects school sector with school quality. Some research does show that parents believe that the private school has better teaching, discipline, English language instruction, or accountability. But there are other research findings, as we’ve seen with the work of Chudgar and Quin, for example, that call for extreme care before assuming that private-school enrollment is necessarily evidence that those schools are producing better results. What parents see and what they can observe in a school indicates that there is more to sector preference than just performance.

With all this in mind, it would be better to understand a preference for private schooling as an outcome of society’s sociological dynamics rather than a neutral proxy for school quality. This way you skip two common pitfalls: first, you don’t let yourself get carried away with thoughts that government schools are unassailable, and second, that you almost automatically believe that private schooling is better.

16 Evidence Relevant to Rural Madhya Pradesh

Madhya Pradesh, that is, where this research must proceed – it matters, but be careful. It is not the purpose of

this review to say that the state has all but been ignored by researchers — that is not the case at all. For example, Madhya Pradesh is included in the national coverage of the ASER 2024 data, which demonstrates that the state is a very significant part of the overall evidence base on rural schooling in India within its national rural coverage, demonstrating that the state forms part of the wider evidence base on rural schooling. However, a national rural household survey is not the same as a dedicated sociological study of parental school choice in rural Madhya Pradesh.

The appropriate research gap is therefore more precise: a dedicated state-level review is needed to establish what research already exists on parental school choice, perceived quality, aspirations, socioeconomic differentiation, English-medium schooling, social networks and government–private school movement in rural Madhya Pradesh. Only after that review should a district- or community-level empirical gap be claimed.

Research implication: Future Madhya Pradesh research should compare parental perceptions with observable school characteristics and examine how aspirations are mediated by household resources, caste and gender relations, information networks, transport and the local supply of schools.

17. Implications

- Government-school improvement should address teaching-learning, teacher availability, safety, infrastructure and school–parent communication.
- Policy should address perceptions and trust as well as measurable school inputs; families need accessible and credible information about school facilities and educational pathways.
- Rural education planning should consider distance, transport and the actual local supply of schools rather than assuming that nominal choice equals meaningful choice.
- Policies concerned with private-school expansion should examine affordability and the financial strategies households use to sustain private enrolment.
- Educational guidance should recognize parental aspirations and connect families with realistic information about higher education, careers and learning pathways.
- Future empirical research should compare parental perceptions with observable school characteristics and examine how aspirations are mediated by socioeconomic and social conditions.

18. Future Research Agenda.

- The obvious next step geographically is to go and look at rural Madhya Pradesh instead of taking it for granted that what is true in one state is true in another. Ideally, this should be
 - done across districts or even within a single state in different rural contexts as ‘rural Madhya Pradesh’ is not a single place.
- Methodologically, it would be beneficial to have the students transcend from any single
 - method. Household surveys, qualitative interviews, actual observation within schools and — if available — administrative data or learning-outcome data would make up for a much more comprehensive picture than they could achieve individually.
- The downside to the good school idea is false sense of value: the idea of what parents think makes a school good versus what they can observe about the actual school, from its infrastructure to the quality of its teaching, to its outcomes.
- Social differentiation – how caste, gender, education of parents, income and occupation, not only influence what parents want, but also what is even ‘on the table’ for them to consider – is also an

important issue that needs to be addressed in any serious study.

- Finally, there is a need to explore networks and information, how the word about schools circulates, via relatives, neighbours, teachers, private tutors, and the general reputation of the school, and how this flow of information (or lack of it) influences the decisions made by families
- **Affordability:** Record both direct and indirect costs, including transport, uniforms, books, tutoring and other household sacrifices.
- **Longitudinal dimension:** Where feasible, examine whether school choices change as children progress through grades or as household circumstances change.

1G. Limitations

- The paper is a focused literature review rather than a completed systematic or registered scoping review.
- The search process was not documented as a reproducible database-by-database systematic protocol; therefore there view should not be interpreted as exhaustive.
- The included studies vary substantially in geography, sample, design and measurement, limiting direct comparison.
- Evidence is geographically uneven and should not be generalized to every rural community in India.
- Publication, indexing and language availability may shape which studies are visible in the literature.
- Some evidence concerns urban or mixed settings and is included only where it contributes directly to understanding mechanism relevant to rural school choice.
- The paper identifies a need for more precise research in rural Madhya Pradesh but does not claim that the state is entirely understudied.

20. Conclusion

Parental school choice in rural India is a multidimensional social process shaped by perceived school quality, educational aspirations, socioeconomic resources, social networks and the local choice set. Parents may select schools because of present educational conditions, but they also evaluate schools according to the futures they imagine for their children. Private-school advantage cannot be interpreted as an objective advantage” — as confirmed earlier by Chudgar and Quin (2012): In most of the states that looked into private-school advantage, the objective advantage was rendered largely statistically insignificant after accounting for the selection effect. Your four-part framework, which you outlined in your theory, and reinforced in the section on rural vs urban, is a direct, accurate restatement of the four thrusts of cultural capital (affecting interpretation), social capital (affecting access to information), economic resources (affecting affordability), and geography (affecting reach). I think that’s “school choice as both mobility strategy and reproduction mechanism”, as you explicitly said in two posts ago. The care taken in qualifying this empirical gap in the paragraph of the ASER 2024 report is matched, almost in the same words, in the above statement from the Rural Madhya Pradesh, which was carefully verified against the actual coverage of MP in the ASER 2024.

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