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Rapid Survey: Challenges of private school parents in Delhi

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

The pandemic has brought to the fore, multiple cases of exploitation and violation of norms by private schools – hiking fees arbitrarily, coercing parents to pay fees for services not being offered, such as transport and lab fees, and cutting off access to online classes for children on non-payment of fees. At a time when [84%](#) households have suffered a reduction in their incomes, private schools have continued to hike their fees.

The situation in Delhi is no different. Repeated complaints by parents against private schools have led to the Delhi government releasing an [order](#), asking private schools to collect fees with a 15% deduction. However, violations by private schools extend beyond profiteering and arbitrary fee hikes. Instances of screening during admission and discrimination on the basis of gender, caste, religion or background, continue to be rampant. In addition, current grievance redress processes are not responsive enough to complaints made by parents, which in turn, erodes the trust of parents to file a complaint in the first place.

There are also concerns about transparency of private school expenditure. While private schools claim that the majority of funds generated through fees are used for paying teacher salaries and meeting other expenses, the Delhi government's own [petition](#) in the Supreme Court, argued that private schools have large surpluses, ranging between INR 1 to 48 Crores. As schools reopen gradually, it is crucial to learn from experiences of private school parents during and prior to the pandemic, in order to develop more effective mechanisms for private school regulation. For this purpose, a rapid survey of private school parents in Delhi was conducted, wherein details of the methodology and key findings are given below.

Methodology and limitations

Oxfam India conducted a rapid survey of 100 private school parents spread across South, South-West and North-East districts of Delhi. Data was collected through the use of structured interviews, between March and May 2021. 92% of the sample consists of those earning less than INR 20,000 per month and is largely comprised of migrants residing in slums and unauthorized areas. While the sample is small and not representative of the larger population, the findings are consistent with the issues raised by private school parents across Delhi as evidenced in prior research and recent media coverage. The key findings based on the survey, along with recommendations are given below.

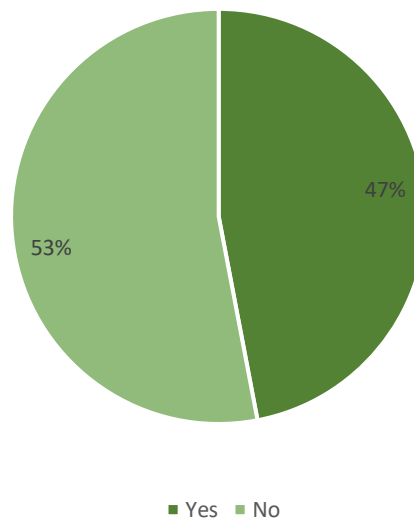
Findings and Recommendations

1. Discrimination and screening during admission process—47% parents say that their child had to appear for an entrance test

Screening/denial during the admission process on the basis of gender, caste, religion, language or background is disallowed under the Delhi RTE rules. Despite this, 5% parents reported that their child was denied admission in a private school on the basis of either gender, caste, religion, language or background. Further, almost half the parents surveyed, stated that their child had to appear for an entrance test as part of the admission process. Screening students through entrance tests is in violation of the Directorate of Education's own [order](#) (DE/15/Act-I/4607/13/2015/5686-5696), which was upheld by the Hon'ble High Court.

Delhi has clearly defined guidelines related to the admission process and criteria that schools should adopt for admission. However, a parent friendly and prompt process of grievance redress is needed to support parents and children who have faced discrimination and screening during the admission process as the current [online](#) system of GR might be challenging for parents to access and navigate. Additionally, a large-scale awareness campaign is also needed to orient parents about their rights and processes through which they can get their grievances addressed.

Parents reporting their child appeared for entrance test

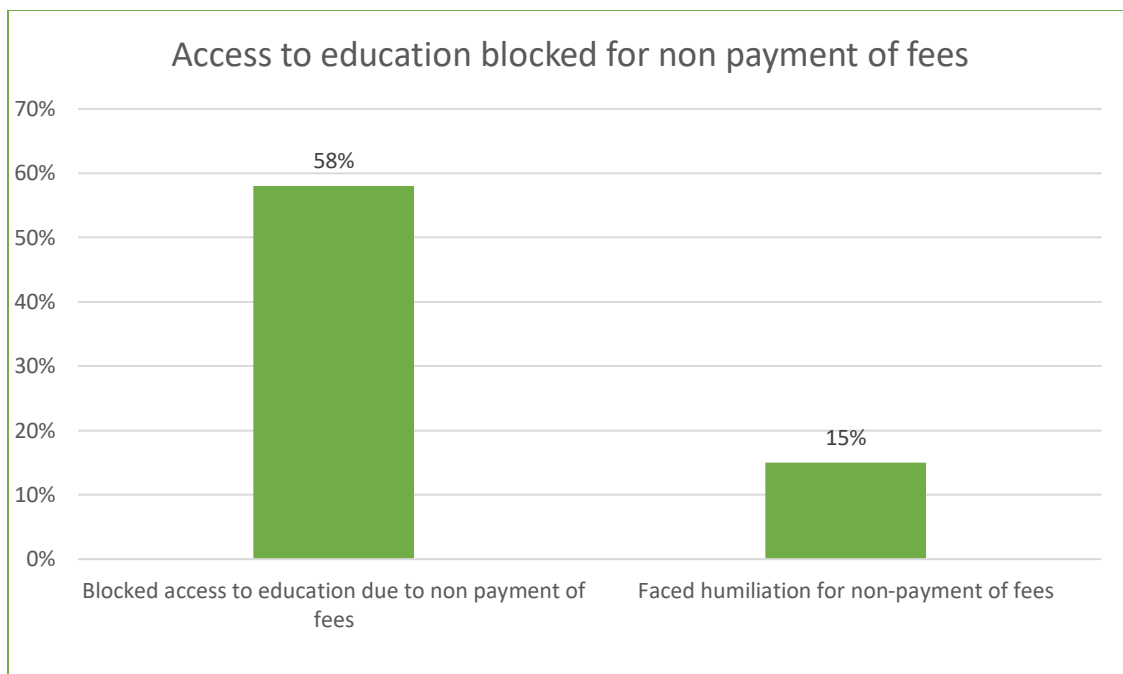


2. Access to education blocked and humiliation of children— 58% parents report that access to online classes was blocked by school due to non-payment of fees

The Delhi High Court has [ruled](#) that schools can block online classes for children whose parents are unable to prove that they are facing a financial crisis. Despite the fact that most parents surveyed reported a loss in income, 58% of those who were unable to pay fees, saw their child’s access to online classes blocked by the school. This remains an unresolved issue and needs greater dialogue between the government, parents and schools to ensure that the best interests of children are kept at the centre of any solution that is arrived at.

In violation of NCPCR guidelines which advised states to ensure that no child should be harassed by schools for non-payment of fees, 15% parents reported that their child was humiliated by the school when they were unable to deposit the fees in time. A [letter](#) by the DPS Parents’ Association to Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal stated that some parents were compelled to remove their children from school due to repeated humiliation by the school management.

A helpline should be instituted for parents to report grievances related to blocking access to education, and ensure that complaints are responded to within 48 hours. In consonance with NCPCR guidelines, child protection guidelines should be instituted to ensure that no child is humiliated by the school, and that they continue to have access to education during this difficult time.

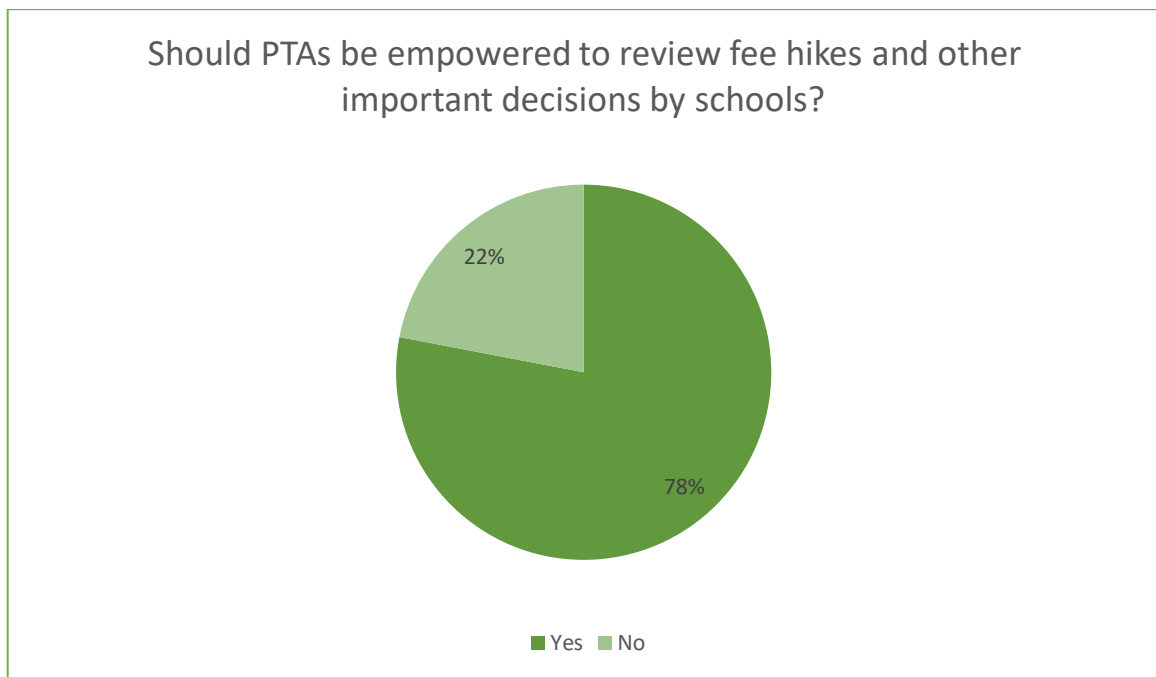


3. 78% parents feel that PTAs should be empowered to review fee hikes and other important decisions by schools that concern parents and children

Despite the existence of [guidelines](#) that require all private unaided schools in Delhi to establish Parent Teacher Associations, 70% parents reported that they were not aware if there is a PTA in their child’s school, indicating the need for awareness generation amongst parents about their rights as well as greater monitoring to ensure all schools establish a PTA, in compliance with guidelines. In addition, half the parents reported that they were not consulted about important decisions taken by the school.

Far from consulting parents, some private [schools](#) have even issued guidelines for parents on the use of social media, including removal of comments they might have posted regarding the school. This is in violation of Article 10 and 19 of the Constitution of India. To ensure greater participation of parents in school management, 78% parents were of the opinion that PTAs should be empowered to review fee hikes and other important decisions by schools that concern parents and children.

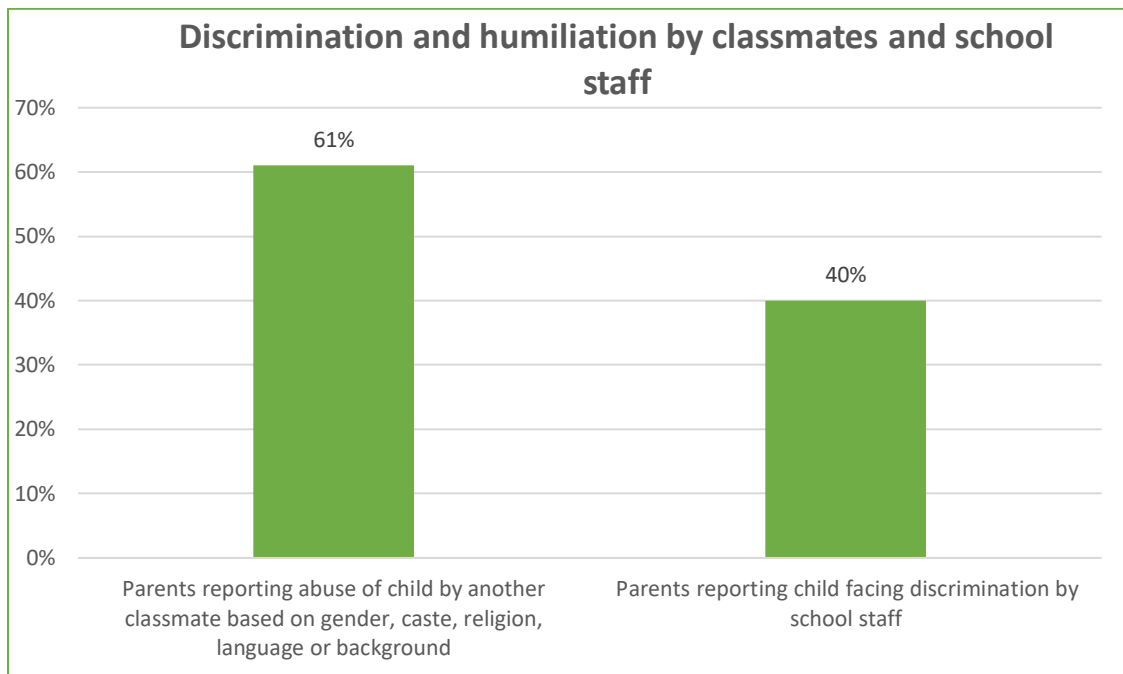
According to Delhi Education Rules and [guidelines](#) by the Directorate of Education, parent representation is needed on the school managing committee which takes decisions regarding fee hikes and other important issues. However, there is a need to increase representation of parents on the managing committee to at least 70% of the total membership. Further, clear guidelines and processes should be laid out on how frequently the committee will meet, their powers, scope etc. Clear consequences should also be specified for schools that don’t follow these processes and take decisions arbitrarily, without consulting parents.



4. Discrimination and humiliation by classmates and school staff – Almost 40% parents report humiliation of their child by a school staff member

Delhi RTE Rules clearly state that any form of discrimination, whether it be on the basis of gender, caste, religion, language or background is an offence. Unfortunately, 61% parents report that their child was abused by another classmate based on gender, caste, religion, language or background. Further, almost 40% parents report that their child was targeted and humiliated by a school staff member (including teacher) based on their identity. This finding is consistent with existing [research](#) which has found identity-based discrimination to be prevalent across private schools in Delhi.

While guidelines and laws exist to prevent discrimination, a more parent friendly grievance redress mechanism would be needed that makes parents and children feel comfortable about sharing such instances of violation. [SARTHAQ](#)¹, NEP’s implementation plan recommends a social audit of schools led by Parent Teacher Associations and students. This would be crucial to strengthen social accountability of private schools, ensure participatory governance and make private schools safe and child-friendly spaces.

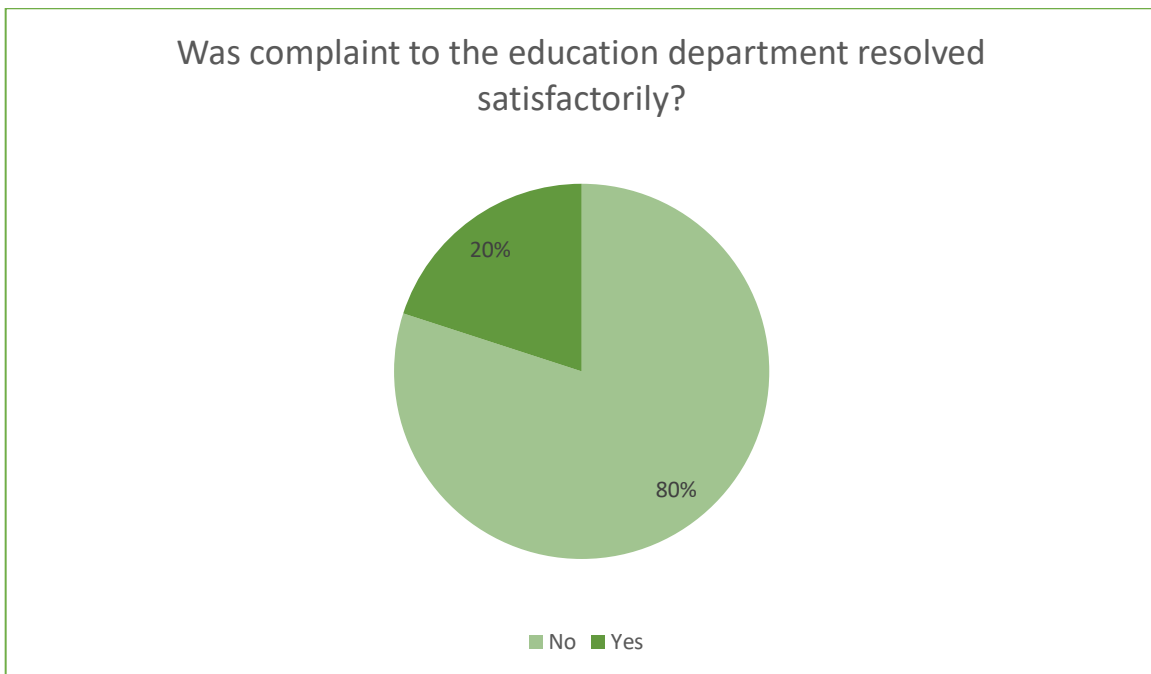


¹ Task 143

5. 80% parents report that their complaint made to the Education Department was not resolved satisfactorily

Of the parents who filed a complaint with the Education Department against their child’s private school, 80% said that their complaint was not resolved satisfactorily. The key reasons for this were: 1) No cognizance of the complaint made and 2) No action taken against the school administration. This finding is consistent with a [survey](#) conducted by the Delhi Parents Association, which found that no action was taken by the Education Department on 95% of the complaints made. An unfortunate outcome of this process was humiliation of 15% children whose parents complained to the Education Department, which might be a fear that holds a large percentage of parents back from filing their complaints. This fear is not restricted to Delhi, with a media [report](#) from Bangalore showing that parents were reluctant to file written complaints for fear of their child being targeted in class.

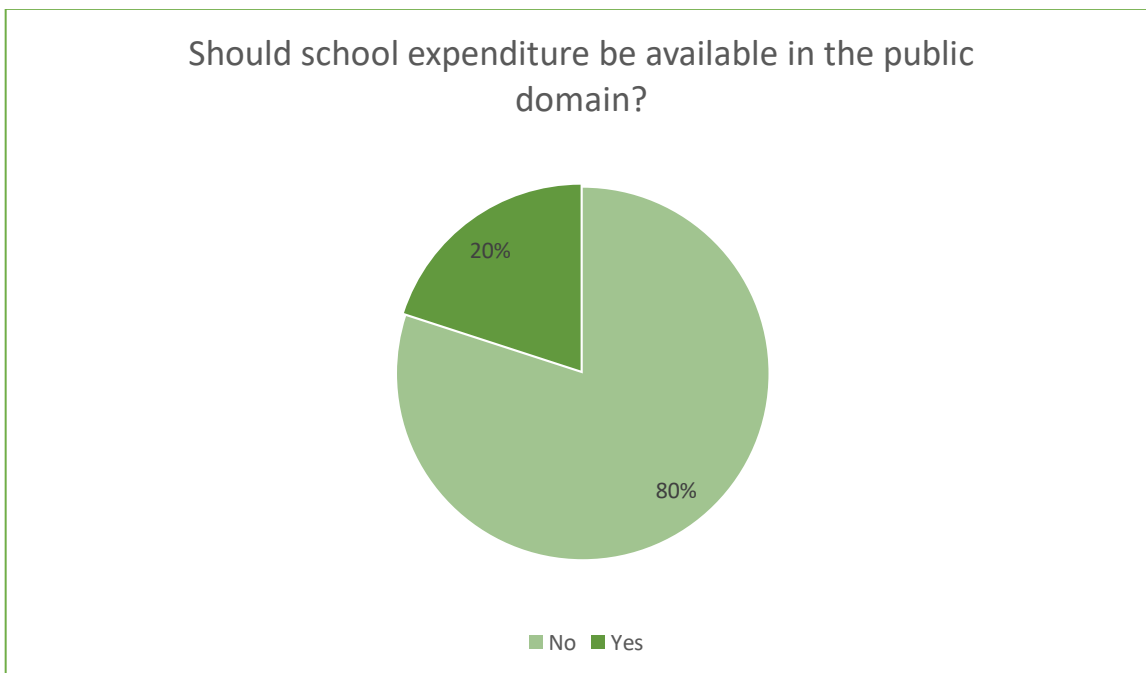
It would be helpful to seek feedback from parents on the current grievance redress mechanism, and setup a committee consisting of parent representatives along with academicians, ex-government officials to provide recommendations on an easier and more effective GR process.



6. 80% parents are of the opinion that private school expenses should be made public

Private schools claim that the majority of funds generated through fees are used for paying teacher salaries and meeting other expenses. However, the Delhi government’s [petition](#) in the Supreme Court, argued that private schools have large surpluses, ranging between INR 1 to 48 Crores. Some [media](#) reports show that some private schools spend less than 10 percent on teacher salaries. Further, anecdotal evidence shows that private schools divert the surplus revenue to a trust that runs it, instead of investing it for enhancing school infrastructure and raising staff salaries. To ensure greater transparency in private school accounts, 80% of the parents surveyed, are asking for the school’s expenditure data to be available in the public domain. The demand for audit of school accounts has come from other states as well, with the India Wide Parents Association in Maharashtra [calling](#) for an audit of school accounts.

The National Education Policy (NEP) recommends greater disclosure and transparency by schools. Delhi could consider learning from fee regulation rules of [Chandigarh](#), which require audited accounts of private schools to be uploaded on the website of the Education department, such that they can be accessed publicly. Similar provisions are also proposed in the The Delhi School (Verification of Accounts and Refund Of Excess Fee) Bill, 2015, which has unfortunately not been passed yet. We recommend either enacting this law or issuing a notification to this effect, to ensure greater transparency around private school accounts. These provisions would be crucial to ensure oversight over private school accounts by the authorities to gauge whether the fees charged are justified.



Conclusion

This rapid survey of private school parents in Delhi serves to highlight that issues with private schools extend beyond arbitrary fee hikes and profiteering. Violations by private schools begin with the admission process, with almost 50% parents reporting that their child appeared for an entrance test prior to admission. Even after admission, children suffer from humiliation by the school staff based on their gender, caste, religion or background. A responsive grievance redressal system is crucial to remedy this, with 80% parents reporting that their complaint made to the Education Department was not resolved satisfactorily.

During the pandemic where children are suffering from severe mental stress, almost 60% parents report that private schools have blocked access to their child's online classes for non-payment of fees. In addition, children were also humiliated by schools for non-payment. Parents are of the opinion that they should have a greater say in the school management to ensure that important decisions concerning parents and children are taken in a participative manner.

Lastly, parents are calling for greater transparency in private school accounts by asking for private school expenses to be made public. Such provisions already exist in states such as Chandigarh and Maharashtra, and have also been proposed in the The Delhi School (Verification of Accounts and Refund Of Excess Fee) Bill, 2015. The reopening of schools after physical closure of over 500 days is an opportunity for the government to re-think private school regulation. To do, it must learn from the challenges faced by parents and children during the pandemic as indicated by this survey, which remain relevant even now since education delivery is likely to be hybrid and challenges related to discrimination, screening and fee regulation are likely to continue.

Delhi has a history of progressive laws relating to private school regulation. As it begins implementation of the National Education Policy, it must learn from and build on existing regulatory structures such that private schools become institutions of learning where voice of parents is respected and revenue is prioritised for enhancing the quality of education in the school and welfare of its staff.