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## Schools in the Slums of Hyderabad (Part II)

By **James Tooley** | Wednesday, May 13, 2009

*Slum-dwellers in India often do not have the means to gain a good education — but private sector pioneers in the city of Hyderabad are working to change that. In the second excerpt from James Tooley's book, "The Beautiful Tree," the author introduces us to some of the men on the frontlines of global education.*

Mr. Fazalur Rahman Khurram was the president of an association specifically set up to cater to private schools serving the poor — the Federation of Private Schools' Management, which boasted a membership of over 500 schools all serving low-income families.

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Once word got around that a foreign visitor was interested in seeing private schools, Khurram was inundated with requests for me to visit.

I spent as much time as I could over the next 10 days or so with Khurram traveling the length and breadth of the Old City, in between doing my work for the International Finance Corporation in the new city. We visited nearly 50 private schools in some of the poorest parts of town, driving endlessly down narrow streets to schools whose owners were apparently anxious to meet me.

(Our rented car was a large white Ambassador — the Indian vehicle modeled on the old British Morris Minor, proudly used by government officials when an Indian flag on the hood signified the importance of its user — horn blaring constantly, as much to signify our own importance as to get children and animals out of the way.)

There seemed to be a private school on almost every street corner, just as in the richer parts of the city.

I visited so many, being greeted at narrow entrances by so many students, who marched me into tiny playgrounds, beating their drums, to a seat in front of the school, where I was welcomed in ceremonies officiated by senior students, while school managers garlanded me with flowers, heavy, prickly and sticky around my neck in the hot sun, which I bore stoically as I did the rounds of the classrooms.

So many private schools, some had beautiful names. Like Little Nightingale's High School, named after Sarojini Naidu, a famous "freedom fighter" in the 1940s, known by Nehru as the "Little Nightingale" for her tender English songs. Or Firdaus Flowers Convent School, that is, "flowers of heaven." The "convent" part of the name puzzled me at first, as did the many names such as St. Maria's or St. John's.

It seemed odd, since these schools were clearly run by Muslims — indeed, for

a while I fostered the illusion that these saints and nuns must be in the Islamic tradition too.

But no, the names were chosen because of the connotations to parents — the old Catholic and Anglican schools were still viewed as great schools in the city, so their religious names were borrowed to signify quality to the parents. But did they really deliver a quality education? I needed to find out.

One of the first schools Khurram took me to was Peace High School, run by 27-year-old Mohammed Wajid. Like many I was to visit, the school was in a converted family home, fronting on Edi Bazaar, the main but narrow, bustling thoroughfare that stretched out behind the Charminar. A bold sign proclaimed the school's name.

Through a narrow metal gate, I entered a small courtyard, where Wajid had provided some simple slides and swings for the children to play on. By the far wall were hutches of pet rabbits for the children to look after. Wajid's office was to one side, the family's rooms on the other. We climbed a narrow, dark, dirty staircase to enter the classrooms.

They too were dark, with no doors, and noise from the streets easily penetrated the barred but unglazed windows. The children all seemed incredibly pleased to see their foreign visitor and stood to greet me warmly.

The walls were painted white but were discolored by pollution, heat, and the general wear-and-tear of children. From the open top floor of his building, Wajid pointed out the locations of five other private schools, all anxious to serve the same students in his neighborhood.

Wajid was quietly unassuming, but clearly caring and devoted to his children. He told me that his mother founded Peace High School in 1973 to provide "a peaceful oasis in the slums" for the children. Wajid, her youngest son, began teaching in the school in 1988, when he was himself a 10th-grade student in another private school nearby.

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Having then received his bachelor's in commerce at a local university college and begun training as an accountant, his mother asked him to take over the school in 1998, when she felt she must retire from active service. She asked him to consider the "less blessed" people in the slums, and that his highest ambition should be to help them, as befitting his Muslim faith.

This seemed to have come as a blow to his ambitions. His elder brothers had all pursued careers, and several were now living overseas in Dubai, London and Paris, working in the jewelry business. But Wajid felt obliged to follow his mother's wishes and so began running the school. He was still a bachelor, he told me, because he

wanted to build up his school. Only when his financial prospects were certain could he marry.

The school was called a high school, but like others bearing this name, it included kindergarten to 10th grade. Wajid had 285 children and 13 teachers when I first met him, and he also taught mathematics to the older children.

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His fees ranged from 60 rupees to 100 rupees per month (\$1.33 to \$2.22 at the exchange rates then), depending on the children's grade, the lowest for kindergarten and rising as the children progressed through school.

These fees were affordable to parents, he told me, who were largely day laborers and rickshaw pullers, market traders and mechanics — earning perhaps a dollar a day. Parents, I was told, valued education highly and would scrimp and save to ensure that their children got the best education they could afford.

*Editor's Note: This is the second part in a three-part series from James Tooley's book, "The Beautiful Tree." Copyright 2009 James Tooley. Reprinted with permission of Cato Institute Press.*

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