

Globalist Bookshelf > Global Education

The Beautiful Tree

By **James Tooley** | Tuesday, May 12, 2009

Private education might be considered a privilege for the wealthy, but in India it is often considered necessary in the face of an inconsistent public education system. In the first of a series of excerpts from James Tooley's "The Beautiful Tree," the author explores education as a means of economic development on the eve of India's national elections.

After a stint teaching philosophy of education at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa, I returned to England to complete my doctorate and later became a professor of education.

Senior government officials had impressed me with their candor when they told me it was common knowledge that even the middle classes were all sending their children to private schools.

Thanks to my experiences in sub-Saharan Africa and my modest but respect able academic reputation, I was offered a commission by the World Bank's International Finance Corporation to study private schools in a dozen developing countries.

The lure of faraway places was too enticing to resist, but I was troubled by the project itself. Although I was to study private schools in developing countries, those schools were serving the middle classes and the elite. Despite my lifelong desire to help the poor, I'd somehow wound up researching bastions of privilege.

The first leg of the trip began in New York in January 2000. As if to reinforce my misgivings that the project would do little for the poor, I was flown first class to London in the inordinate luxury of the Concorde.

Forty minutes into the flight, as we cruised at twice the speed of sound and two miles above conventional air traffic, caviar and champagne were served. The boxer Mike Tyson (sitting at the front with a towel over his head for much of the journey) and singer George Michael were on the same flight. I felt lost.

From London it was on to Delhi, Chennai and Mumbai. By day, I evaluated five-star private schools and colleges that were very definitely for the privileged. By night, I was put up in unbelievably salubrious and attentive five-star hotels.

But in the evenings, sifting and chaffing with street children outside these very same hotels, I wondered what effect any of my work could have on the poor, whose desperate needs I saw all around me. I didn't just want my work to be a defense of privilege. The middle-class Indians, I felt, were wealthy already.

To me it all seemed a bit of a con: Just because they were in a "poor" country, they were able to latch onto this international assistance even though they as individuals had no pressing need for it at all. I didn't like it, but as I returned

to my room and lay on the 500-thread-count Egyptian-cotton sheets, my discomfort with the program was forced to compete with a mounting sense of self-criticism.

Then one day, everything changed. Arriving in Hyderabad to evaluate brand-new private colleges at the forefront of India's hi-tech revolution, I learned that January 26th was Republic Day, a national holiday.

Left with some free time, I decided to take an autorickshaw — the three-wheeled taxis ubiquitous in India — from my posh hotel in Banjara Hills to the Charminar, the triumphal arch built at the center of Muhammad Quli Shah's city in 1591.

My *Rough Guide to India* described it as Hyderabad's "must see" attraction, and also warned that it was situated in the teeming heart of the Old City slums. That appealed to me. I wanted to see the slums for myself.

As we traveled through the middle-class suburbs, I was struck by the ubiquity of private schools. Their signboards were on every street corner, some on fine specially constructed school buildings, but others grandly posted above shops and offices.

Of course, it was nothing more than I'd been led to expect from my meetings in India already — senior government officials had impressed me with their candor when they told me it was common knowledge that even the middle classes were all sending their children to private schools. They all did themselves. But it was still surprising to see how many there were.

We crossed the bridge over the stinking ditch that is the once-proud River Musi. Here were autorickshaws in abundance, cattle drawn carts meandering slowly with huge loads of hay, rickshaws agonizingly peddled by painfully thin men.

Just because the middle class citizens of India were in a "poor" country, they were able to latch onto this international assistance even though they as individuals had no pressing need for it at all.

My driver let me out, and told me he'd wait for an hour, but then called me back in a bewildered tone as I headed not to the Charminar but into the back streets behind. No, no, I assured him, this is where I was going, into the slums of the Old City. For the stunning thing about the drive was that private schools had not thinned out as we went from one of the poshest parts of town to the poorest.

Every where among the little stores and workshops were little private schools! I could see handwritten signs pointing to them even here on the edge of the slums. I was amazed, but also confused: Why had no one I worked with in India told me about them?

The young men at the bean-and-vegetable counter hailed me and said there was definitely someone at the Royal Grammar School just nearby, and that it was a very good private school and I should visit.

I wondered what effect any of my work could have on the poor, whose desperate needs I saw all around me. I didn't just want my work to be a defense of privilege.

They gave me directions, and I bade farewell. But I became muddled by the multiplicity of possible right turns down alleyways followed by sharp lefts, and

so asked the way of a couple of fat old men sitting alongside a butcher shop.

Their shop was the dirtiest thing I had ever seen, with entrails and various bits and pieces of meat spread out on a mucky table over which literally thousands of flies swarmed. The stench was terrible. No one else seemed the least bit bothered by it. They immediately understood where I wanted to go and summoned a young boy who was headed in the opposite direction to take me there.

He agreed without demur, and we walked quickly, not talking at all as he spoke no English. In the next street, young boys played cricket with stones as wickets and a plastic ball. One of them called me over, to shake my hand.

Then we turned down another alleyway (with more boys playing cricket between makeshift houses outside of which men bathed and women did their laundry) and arrived at the Royal Grammar School, which proudly advertised, "English Medium, Recognized by the Gov't of AP." The owner, or "correspondent" as I soon came to realize he was called in Hyderabad, was in his tiny office. He enthusiastically welcomed me.

Through that chance meeting, I was introduced to the warm, kind and quietly charismatic Mr. Fazalur Rahman Khurrum and to a huge network of private schools in the slums and low-income areas of the Old City. The more time I spent with him, the more I realized that my expertise in private education might after all have something to say about my concern for the poor.

The stunning thing about the drive was that private schools had not thinned out as we went from one of the poshest parts of town to the poorest.

Editor's Note: This is the first 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.



Copyright © 2000-2009 by The Globalist. Reproduction of content on this site without The Globalist's written permission is strictly prohibited. [Terms of Use](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)

McPherson Square, 927 15th Street, NW, Washington, D.C. 20005