



School Choice and Changing Enrollment Trends in Khatima Block of Udham Singh Nagar

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the sociological nuances of parental school choice in the Khatima block of Udham Singh Nagar, Uttarakhand, a region characterised by its sensitive borderland geography and diverse social fabric. Utilising a mixed-method approach, data was collected from n=120 households, covering a total universe of 196 children (6-15 years) through stratified random sampling. The findings reveal a significant flight from public education, with 58.2% of children enrolled in private institutions, driven primarily by a perceived lack of teacher accountability in state schools (70.8%) and the lure of a veneer of quality associated with English-medium branding. The research highlights a stark gendered investment gap, where 70.6% of boys access private schooling compared to only 44.7% of girls, validating that families prioritise private education as a high-stakes financial investment for sons while viewing it as a prestige marker for daughters' marriageability. Furthermore, the study identifies a unique spatial constraint in the borderland, where the availability of private transport (51.7%) acts as a safety proxy, effectively forcing parents to pay a geographical tax for physical security. Qualitative thematic analysis suggests that school choice in Khatima is not an unconstrained freedom but a tactical negotiation shaped by class hierarchies and the desire for social de-labelling among tribal communities. The study concludes that the marketisation of education is deepening social stratification, resulting in



the ghettoisation of government schools and reinforcing traditional patriarchal structures under the guise of modern educational progress.

Introduction

In the intricate socio-educational fabric of modern India, the term choice is commonly used as an alternate word for freedom, however it can be deeply deceiving. In actuality, choosing is rarely an unconstrained decision; it is a tactical negotiation made while traversing a minefield of financial restrictions and social expectations. As such, it works as a critical lens through which we can evaluate the friction in contemporary social life (Goswami, 2015). In the Khatima block of Udham Singh Nagar, Uttarakhand, the traditional dependence on state-provided schooling is being challenged by a fast-rising private educational market. This trend shows that the social space in which parents decide where to enrol their children is being radically rebuilt, frequently at the expense of a communal sense of education as a public benefit.

A considerable contradiction emerges between the framing of education as a private consumption choice and the broader social forces that define opportunities. Scholars have long stressed that the inclination to select is not distributed equally; it differs drastically based on class hierarchies and gendered parenting practices (Ball & Vincent, 1998; Bowe et al., 1994; Reay, 1998). In a border district like Khatima, which is home to a sizable Tharu tribal population and a diverse mix of agricultural settlers, the act of picking a school is an attempt to gain a foothold in a competitive economy while often struggling with a sense of cultural estrangement.

The Financial and Social Weight of Gender

One of the most persistent threads in the sociology of Indian education is the gendered nature of school investment. Data consistently show that a larger proportion of boys, compared to girls, populate private school classrooms because such schooling is viewed by many as a high-stakes financial investment in the family's future security (De et al., 2011). However, the simple cost of tuition does not tell the whole story. We must account for the subtle, multifarious ways in which class, gender, and community identity are reflected in these decisions (Goswami, 2015).

In many agrarian communities, schooling is used to manufacture cultural capital. We see parents adopting strategies where daughters are sent to high-cost private schools not necessarily for academic excellence alone, but to construct a refined feminine identity suitable for the globalised marriage market



(Chopra, 2005; Nambissan, 2010). In Khatima, this dynamic is particularly visible as families attempt to balance traditional seclusion norms with the modern necessity of a prestigious education.

National Foundations: The Legal Framework for Equity

The changing enrollment patterns in Uttarakhand are tethered to a robust national legal architecture that seeks to transform education from a privilege into a fundamental right.

The Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009

The landmark RTE Act and its inclusion in the Constitution as Article 21-A represent the most significant state intervention in schooling. Specifically, Section 12(1)(c)- which mandates a 25% reservation for economically weaker sections in private schools- was designed to provide choice to those who were previously excluded by their wallets. However, as Edara (2025) argues, this policy often creates a dual-citizenship within the classroom, where marginalised children may be physically present in elite spaces but socially and culturally excluded. In Khatima, the implementation of this quota is a key driver for families moving away from government schools.

National Education Policy (NEP) 2020

The NEP 2020 further complicates the choice landscape by advocating for foundational literacy in the mother tongue. For the diverse population of Udham Singh Nagar, this creates a dilemma. Parents are forced to weigh the pedagogical benefits of learning in a familiar language against the social brand value of English-medium private institutions (Sarangapani & Winch, 2010).

Global Mandates: Education as a Human Right

The local trends in Khatima are a microcosm of global educational shifts and international human rights commitments.

Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4)

The United Nations' SDG 4 demands inclusive and equitable quality education for all. Yet, worldwide, the marketisation of education has led to a peculiar paradox. While the goal is equity, the reality is often increased stratification. Govinda and Bandyopadhyay (2012) have noted that as the aspiring poor exit the public system, government schools risk becoming ghettoised institutions for only the most destitute.



The Rise of the "Budget" Private Sector

On a global scale, the proliferation of Low-Cost Private Schools (LCPS) is frequently framed as an act of resistance by the poor against a failing state bureaucracy (Tooley, 2009; Tooley et al., 2007). In Khatima, the emergence of these small, unregulated private schools reflects a belief that teacher accountability and physical safety for daughters are higher in the private sector, even if the actual learning outcomes remain unverified.

Socio-Cultural Drivers and Local Realities in Khatima

The concept of choice must be examined in a social context which is necessarily an interaction of class, caste, and gender (Goswami, 2015).

Identity, Seclusion, and Safety

Decisions regarding the future of a child are deeply influenced by household hierarchies of sex and age. In South Asian societies, children's upbringing is often governed by ideologies of seclusion and segregation (Dube, 1997). These identities are reflected in a plural society where different communities- like the Tharus or the local Paharis- have their own methods of preparing children for adulthood.

Research has highlighted the deep linkages between family structures, marriage norms, and schooling (Chanana, 1993; Hasan & Menon, 2005; Seymour, 1999). In a border block like Khatima, the choice of a school for a daughter is often a negotiated decision, where the school's reputation for discipline and its physical proximity are prioritised over its academic curriculum (Tooley, 2009). While these low-cost options provide a sense of security, scholars like Sarangapani (2009) warn that they often provide a veneer of quality that masks poor pedagogical standards.

The Border Dynamic

The geographical position of Khatima adds a layer of spatial constraint to the choice debate. In many border villages, choice is a luxury that physical distance destroys. When the nearest government school is under-resourced or too far away, a local budget private school becomes the only functional option, regardless of the family's philosophical or economic preference. This interaction between geography and the educational market remains a significant gap in the sociology of Indian education (Goswami, 2015).



Literature Review

The phenomenon of school choice has evolved from a marginal policy debate into a central theme of educational sociology in India. A literature review of this field reveals a complex interplay between market forces, state policy, and deeply entrenched social hierarchies. This section reviews the existing body of work concerning the global shift toward educational marketisation, the specific Indian experience of public-private dichotomies, and the socio-cultural determinants that dictate enrollment trends.

Theoretical Frameworks of Choice and Marketisation

The global discourse on school choice is largely framed by the tension between educational consumerism and social reproduction. Ball and Vincent (1998) provided a foundational critique by identifying two types of knowledge parents use to navigate school markets: cold knowledge, which is formal and objective (e.g., brochures and government rankings), and hot knowledge, which is informal, social, and network-based. They argued that middle-class parents are better equipped to utilise hot knowledge, thereby reinforcing their children's social advantages.

Similarly, Reay (1998) and Bowe et al. (1994) highlighted that choice is a class-based practice. Their research demonstrated that while choice is presented as a neutral opportunity, the capacity to exercise it and the inclination to do so varies significantly with the cultural capital of the household. In the context of Khatima, these frameworks suggest that the flight to private schools may not be a simple search for quality but a strategic effort by certain classes to distance themselves from the perceived commonality of the state system.

The Indian Context: The Public-Private Divide

In India, the decline of the public school brand has been documented extensively. The PROBE Revisited Report (De et al., 2011) highlighted a stark reality: even the poorest families are increasingly abandoning government schools in favour of private institutions. This shift is driven by a perceived lack of teacher accountability and poor infrastructure in the public sector. Govinda and Bandyopadhyay (2012) furthered this argument by noting that the exit of the aspiring classes leads to the ghettoisation of government schools, which are left to serve only the most marginalised segments of society.

However, the quality of the private alternative is under intense scrutiny. Sarangapani (2009) and Sarangapani and Winch (2010) argued that the private sector in India is highly stratified. While elite



schools provide high-quality education, the burgeoning Low-Cost Private Schools (LCPS) often provide a veneer of quality, focusing on rote learning and discipline that masks poor pedagogical standards. This is a critical point for the Khatima block, where many private schools are unregulated budget institutions.

The Agency of the Poor: A Counter-Narrative

A significant counter-argument to the critique of marketisation comes from James Tooley (2009). Through his extensive research across India (notably Hyderabad), China, and Kenya, Tooley argued that the growth of private schooling for the poor is a triumph of grassroots agency. He documented how the urban poor are acting as rational agents by rejecting failing state-controlled bureaucracies in favour of schools that are more responsive to their needs. Tooley et al. (2007) emphasised that for parents in high-conflict or underserved regions, the private sector provides a sense of security and reliability that the state system often lacks.

Gender, Kinship, and Educational Strategies

The sociology of education in India cannot be understood without a deep dive into gender relations. Dube (1997) and Seymour (1999) established that child-rearing in South Asia is governed by ideologies of seclusion and sex-segregation. These ideologies directly influence school choice. Chanana (1993) and Hasan and Menon (2005) noted that the decision to enrol a girl in a particular school is often negotiated around the proximity of the institution and the perceived safety of the environment.

Chopra (2005) provided a nuanced view of educational investment, suggesting that in land-owning agrarian communities, private schooling for girls is often a form of investing in a globalised marriage market." In such cases, the school is selected to produce a specific "feminine identity" that carries high social value. Nambissan (2010) supported this, noting that schooling processes are not just about learning outcomes but are constitutive of the gender relations within the family.

Research Objectives

1. To identify the socio-economic and cultural factors influencing parental school choice in Khatima Block.
2. To analyse gendered enrollment patterns and family investment strategies within the borderland context.



Research Methodology

The present study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design utilising a mixed-method approach to bridge the gap between statistical trends and sociological narratives. This methodological framework is chosen to satisfy the dual objectives of identifying socio-economic determinants and exploring the nuanced gendered strategies within families. The universe of the study is the Khatima Block of Udham Singh Nagar district, Uttarakhand, which was purposively selected due to its unique borderland status and its pluralistic social structure, comprising the indigenous Tharu tribe, partition-era settlers, and local hill communities. To ensure a representative sample, a multi-stage stratified random sampling technique was employed. Initially, four representative clusters- two predominantly tribal and two semi-urban- were selected to capture the district's diversity. From these clusters, a total of 120 households were sampled based on the criteria of having at least one child within the school-going age group of 6 to 15 years.

Data collection was facilitated through a triangulation of primary and secondary sources. Primary data was gathered using a structured interview schedule administered to heads of households to collect quantitative data on income, occupation, and enrollment status. This was supplemented by semi-structured in-depth interviews with select parents and students to capture qualitative narratives regarding perceptions of school quality, safety concerns for daughters, and social prestige. Furthermore, non-participant observation was used to assess the physical and pedagogical environment of both government and low-cost private schools in the area. Secondary data was sourced from authentic records, including UDISE+ reports, ASER Uttarakhand, and Census of India district handbooks. The resulting data was analysed using a combination of statistical cross-tabulations for quantitative trends and thematic coding for qualitative insights.

Results

The findings presented in this section are derived from primary data collected from 120 households in the Khatima Block of Udham Singh Nagar, covering a total universe of 196 children in the school-going age group (6–15 years). The analysis utilises a mixed-method approach, blending statistical trends with qualitative thematic insights to explore the nuances of school choice in a borderland context.

5.1 Enrolment Status and the Public-Private Dichotomy

The data indicate a definitive shift toward the marketisation of education. While the Right to Education (RTE) Act seeks to strengthen the public system, the local reality in Khatima suggests a significant "flight" toward the private sector.

**Table 1: Distribution of Children by School Type (\$N=196\$)**

S. No.	Category	Frequency	Percentage
1	Private School (English/Budget)	114	58.2%
2	Government school	44	34.7%
3	Out of school	28	7.1%
	Total	196	100%

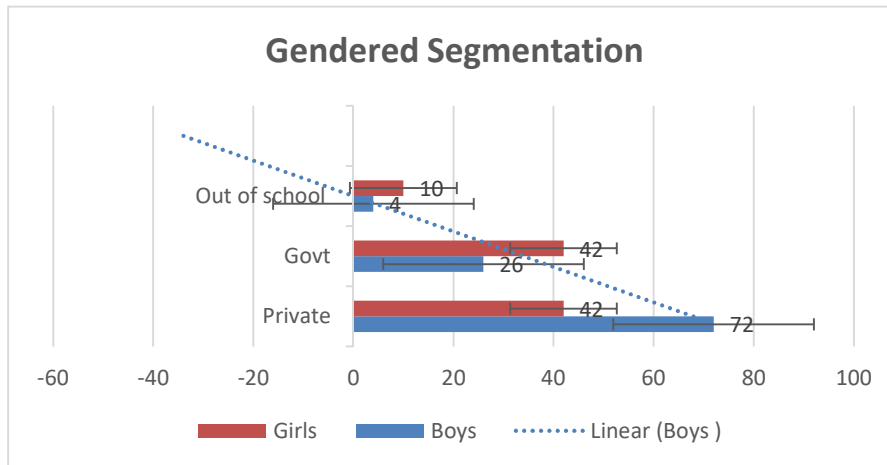
Source: Field work, 2026

School Type	Boys (n=102)	Girls (n=94)
Private school	72 (70.6%)	42(44.7%)
Govt school	26 (25.5%)	42(44.7%)
Out of school	4 (3.9%)	10(10.6%)

The findings reveal that nearly 60% of the sampled children are enrolled in private institutions. This confirms the ghettoisation of government schools, which are increasingly left to serve only the most marginalised. The 7.1% out-of-school rate, primarily concentrated in the remote border clusters, highlights the persistent "spatial constraints" where geographical isolation overrides educational mandates.

5.2 Gendered Segmentation of Educational Investment

A core objective of this study was to analyse how gender influences family investment strategies. The data reveal a "stratified choice" model where sons are prioritised for high-stakes private schooling.



Source: Field work, 2026

The stark disparity- where 70.6% of boys access private schooling compared to only 44.7% of girls- validates that private education is viewed as a financial investment for future employment for sons. For daughters, the equal distribution between government and private sectors suggests that their schooling is governed by a logic of "negotiated seclusion." Families prioritise private schooling for girls only when it provides a safety proxy (like transport) or enhances social capital for the marriage market.

5.3 Primary Drivers of School Choice: The Perception-Reality Gap

The "inclination to select" a mix of perceived quality and functional necessity drives a school.

Table 3: Primary Motivations for School Selection (n=120 Households)

Motivation	Frequency	Percentage
Teacher regularity	85	70.8%
English medium instructor	78	65%
Safety & transport	62	51.7%
Social prestige	45	37.5%
Physical infrastructure	30	25%

Source: Field work, 2026

The leading driver, Teacher Accountability (70.8%), reflects a deep-seated lack of trust in the state bureaucracy. However, the high ranking of Safety and Transport (51.7%) is a unique finding of the Khatima borderland. It suggests that the private sector "wins" the market not necessarily through superior



pedagogy, but by solving the logistical crisis of the border geography through door-to-step transport services.

5.4 Thematic Analysis: Navigating Choice in the Borderland

Beyond the statistical correlations, the qualitative data reveal the underlying "social logic" governing parental decisions. Three core themes emerge that define the educational landscape of the Khatima Block.

Theme I: The 'Veneer' of Quality and the Performance of Discipline

Field observations and interviews suggest that for many parents, the "quality" of a school is not measured by learning outcomes, but by its performative aspects.

The Logic: In the absence of formal pedagogical knowledge, parents use "proxies" for quality. The requirement of a necktie, a printed school diary, and strict morning assemblies are viewed as indicators of a "better" environment.

Several parents in the semi-urban clusters equated English-medium instruction with "civilizing" the child. Even when teachers in budget private schools were found to be under-qualified, their "regularity" (attendance) and the school's insistence on a strict uniform code were cited as reasons for the 70.8% preference for private institutions. This reflects a shift from education as *learning* to education as the *acquisition of a modern discipline*.

Theme II: The 'Safety-Mobility' Paradox in the Border Geography

A unique finding in this study is how geography "shrinks" choice. In the border villages of Khatima, the decision to enrol a child is often a negotiation with the landscape.

The Logic: The "choice" is rarely between two different curricula; it is between a school that provides transport and one that does not.

For daughters, the private sector "wins" because of the School Van. In interviews, mothers expressed a deep-seated fear of "lonely roads" and "lack of supervision" in the commute to distant government buildings. Here, the private school functions as a protected enclosure. The fee paid by the parent is not just for tuition, but for a "safety guarantee," suggesting that in conflict-prone or border regions, physical security is the primary commodity of the educational market.



Theme III: 'Educational Dualism' and the Marriage Market Logic

The most profound theme is the strategic use of schooling to maintain or bridge social status, which varies significantly between sons and daughters.

- **The Logic:** Households often practice a "split-strategy" where the family's economic capital is exhausted on the son, while the daughter is placed in the state system or a lower-cost private option.

Among the agrarian and settler communities, a private school certificate for a daughter is increasingly viewed as a "dowry-substitute." It is not intended to lead to a career, but to manufacture a "refined feminine identity" that increases her value in the globalised marriage market. For the son, however, the private school is a "battleground" for future employment. This dualism confirms that "choice" in Khatima is not a neutral act but a tactical move to reproduce traditional gender hierarchies under the guise of modern education.

Theme IV: The Tharu Identity and the 'Flight' toward Mainstreaming

In the tribal-dominated clusters, the move toward private schooling represents a desire for social de-labelling.

- **The Logic:** Government schools are often stigmatised as "schools for the poor"

For the aspiring Tharu family, enrolling a child in a private school is an attempt to escape the "cultural estrangement" of the state system. By choosing an English-medium budget school, they are attempting to trade their "tribal identity" for a "middle-class identity," seeking social mobility in a competitive plains economy that often marginalises indigenous backgrounds.

These themes suggest that in Khatima, school choice is an act of resistance against a failing state system, but it is an act that simultaneously reinforces class and gender inequalities. The "choice" is a tactical negotiation made within a minefield of financial restrictions, geographical dangers, and social expectations.

Discussion

The findings from the Khatima block illustrate a complex educational landscape where "choice" is less an expression of freedom and more a tactical negotiation within a field of structural constraints. By applying the lens of Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital, it becomes evident that the high migration to private



schools (58.2%) is an attempt by families to acquire a "refined" social identity that the state system currently fails to provide. This shift aligns with the critiques of Ball and Vincent (1998), who argue that school choice is a class-based practice; in Khatima, even the "aspiring poor" are forced to utilise "hot knowledge" and visual cues—such as uniforms and English-medium branding—to navigate a market where pedagogical quality remains unverified. This "veneer of quality" (Sarangapani, 2009) seduces parents into believing that private schooling is the only path to social mobility, effectively turning education into a private consumption good rather than a public right.

Furthermore, the unique geography of the Khatima borderland introduces a "spatial tax" on educational access. While global marketisation discourses often prioritise academic outcomes, the data here suggests that physical security is a primary driver of choice. The high reliance on private school transport (51.7%) reflects a "safety-mobility paradox" where the state's failure to provide secure transit to government schools forces families to pay private fees as a safety premium. This geographical constraint is particularly acute for daughters, whose educational participation is often "negotiated" around the proximity and perceived seclusion of the institution. Consequently, the private sector in this border region succeeds not necessarily through superior teaching, but by filling a logistical vacuum, proving that in sensitive frontier zones, physical safety is as much a commodity as literacy.

The deeply gendered nature of this investment strategy—where boys are prioritised for private schooling at a rate of 70.6% confirms that the "inclination" to select is governed by patriarchal logic. As noted by Nambissan (2010) and Chopra (2005), private schooling for sons is viewed as a high-stakes investment for the labour market, whereas for girls, it often serves as a strategy to enhance "marriage market" value. This "educational dualism" ensures that even when families participate in modern educational markets, they do so in a way that reproduces traditional gender hierarchies. Ultimately, the resulting "ghettoisation" of government schools (Govinda & Bandyopadhyay, 2012) creates a "dual-citizenship" in the classroom, where the most marginalised children are left in under-resourced state institutions while the mobile classes exit the public sphere. This stratification in a strategic border district like Khatima is not merely an educational failure but a sociological crisis that risks deepening social fragmentation in an already sensitive region.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that school "choice" in the Khatima block is not a simple exercise of consumer preference, but a complex, tactical negotiation shaped by the intersections of gender, class, and borderland geography. The findings reveal a significant "flight" from public education, driven less by



verified learning outcomes and more by a "vener of quality" and the perceived accountability of the private sector. However, this marketisation has led to a fragmented educational landscape. While sons are pushed into private institutions as high-stakes investments for the labour market, daughters are often left in the state system or "budget" private schools that prioritise physical safety over academic excellence. Ultimately, the "spatial constraints" of the border region and the persistent reliance on gendered investment strategies suggest that without a robust revival of the public school "brand," education in Khatima will continue to function as a site for the reproduction of social inequality rather than a tool for democratic mobility.

Recommendations

Based on the empirical evidence and thematic analysis, the following interventions are recommended to bridge the equity gap in the Khatima block:

- *Strengthening Public School Infrastructure and "Brand"*: To counter the "ghettoisation" of government schools, the state must invest in the visible markers of quality that parents currently seek in the private sector. This includes the introduction of English-medium sections, mandatory school uniforms, and strict teacher accountability frameworks to regain parental trust.
- *Safe and Regulated Transport for Border Clusters*: Since the "School Van" is a primary driver for private enrollment, the Uttarakhand government should provide dedicated, safe transport facilities (similar to the "Bal Vahini" schemes) for children in remote border villages. This would remove the "geographical tax" on parents and ensure that safety concerns do not lead to the educational exclusion of daughters.
- *Targeted Support for the Tharu Community*: Given the higher "Out of School" rates in tribal clusters, there is a need for culturally responsive pedagogy and localised outreach. Strengthening the "Ashram" schools with modern amenities and digital labs can help bridge the gap between tribal identity and mainstream aspirations.
- *Effective Implementation of RTE Section 12(1)(c)*: The 25% reservation for economically weaker sections in private schools must be monitored more strictly to ensure it does not create "dual-citizenship" within the classroom. Social audit mechanisms should be introduced to ensure that marginalised children are socially and culturally integrated into these elite spaces.



- *Gender-Sensitive Financial Incentives*: To address the "split-enrollment" strategy, the government should introduce direct benefit transfers or scholarships specifically linked to the retention of girls in secondary education. This would help shift the perception of the daughter's education from a "social liability" to a "long-term asset."

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