The overarching theme for this year’s NISA School Leaders Summit was Budget Private Schools: Challenges and Opportunities.

Priyanka Anand Chadha, Manager, Advocacy, Centre for Civil Society, presented Boondein: Stories of Hope from Budget Private Schools, and gave an overview of the BPS sector in India.

Rohan Joshi, Associate Director, NISA, Centre for Civil Society, gave a brief introduction of the history of National Independent Schools Alliance (NISA) and its journey so far.

NISA started in 2011, and has now grown to have a presence in 20 states, comprising 26 private school associations, supporting 36,400 schools and impacting 9.35 million children. The current focus of NISA’s work is:

- Supporting the growth and development of the budget private school (BPS) sector
- Improving quality of education imparted in BPS

With this focus in mind, the central theme for SLS 2014 was ‘Budget Private Schools: Challenges and Opportunities’ and discussions through the day focused on understanding regulatory challenges faced by these schools, interactions with and impact of the media on building the image of these schools, and government perspectives of budget private schools.

Parth J Shah, President, Centre for Civil Society, then took the stage to Centre for Civil Society’s (CCS) work, and vision. In India, children that belong to lower income families go to three different kinds of schools: government, budget private and high-fee private (through RTE Act, Section 12(1)(c), 25% Opportunity Seats). CCS is committed to developing and improving of all type of schools that serve the poor. BPS is very important for the country’s education system—we often forget the role that private institutes and organisations have played in improving access and quality of education in India. To illustrate, between 1991 and 2001, India’s literacy rate increased by 13%, which is the highest increase in any decade in India’s history. However, over the same period, the government’s spending on education steadily declined (until 1997-98). The question that begs to be answered is—what happened during this time that led to the rise in literacy levels? One important reason behind this was the growth in the number and reach of low-fee private schools or BPS. This is the contribution that BPS has made to the education sector, and therefore, it is imperative that they be supported.

A major limitation of the RTE Act is its focus on
inputs into education, and lack of emphasis on learning outcomes in schools. CCS constantly endeavors to shift focus of the RTE and other regulation towards learning outcomes, and student performance. Government’s focus on inputs has resulted in the closure of more than 1,100 schools in Punjab, which has in turn resulted in the loss of choice for poor parents.

In order to support and improve the state of BPS in India, NISA has also made norms for every school to comply: (a) safe building, (b) comfortable seating with 9 square feet of space for every child, (c) safe drinking water and good quality toilets, and (d) good learning outcomes.

Dr Shah ended by saying that he was looking forward to a day of discussions on issues pertinent to empowering budget private schools in India, and to create a policy environment that is conducive to their continued development.

MR. VIJAY GOEL

Mr. Goel began his keynote by saying that BPS educate the poor, and that it is certainly true that these schools play a pivotal role in educating. No government can do everything on its own, and therefore it must depend on the private sector for provision of services, education is no exception.

Mr. Goel stated that since he is an educator himself, he understands the issues faced by a private school—the Department of Education is concerned about what private schools are doing and what they’re not doing—with regards to their infrastructural set up such as classrooms, playgrounds and libraries. They are not concerned about the government schools, as a result of which these schools are not up to the mark; most government officers want their own children to go to private schools.

Private schools are themselves so competitive – every school is trying to give better facilities. The government doesn’t need to further regulate them. Government schools are spending more per child than what private schools are charging. According to Mr. Goel, there was a time when government schools were good, but today the situation is vastly different. Every parent wants to send his or her child to a ‘public school’.

How did government schools deteriorate so badly? The smartest teachers are going to primary schools, which is probably due to the salary and security, only. Mr. Goel believes that private entrepreneurs would in all probability run our schools much better than the government.

He went on to say that the concept of free education is not correct – anything that is free has no value. However, the need of the hour is to change the image of BPS. The misconception is that they are just minting money, and this is something that we need to work upon.

But, both government and private schools need to improve their quality. Why don’t we motivate our teachers to teach? We need to invest in moral education as well in our schools.

Mr. Goel believes in the potential of organisations...
such as NISA, and suggested that they place their logos on schools that are performing well. NISA logo should mean that these are honest schools. It means that these schools are worth the charge they make. Additionally, schools should obtain feedback from parents on values such as – respect, hygiene, manners, punctuality, cleanliness etc. His other ideas for improving school performance and optimize utilization of resources include running afternoon / evening schools in an existing school.

Mr. Goel expressed his willingness to take up the issue of school closure, and RTE amendment in Parliament, and will work towards supporting BPS.

REGULATORY CHALLENGES FACING BUDGET PRIVATE SCHOOLS

Panelists: Dr Archana Mahendale, Independent Researcher; Kulbhushan Sharma, Vice President, Advocacy, NISA; Vikramjeet Banerjee, Advocate

Chair: Amit Kaushik, Director, IPE Global

BPS face many challenges, which are not only a result of the RTE Act. Mr. Amit Kaushik, who chaired the session, provided an overview of the mismatch between the intentions while drafting the Act, and the on-ground implementation and rollout of the same.

He stated that, the intentions of the RTE Act were very noble. For example, the reason behind the infrastructure norm was safety and security of children. However, it has now become a tool that is used to perpetuate corruption (it is an excuse for education inspectors to take bribes). Today, 20,000 schools have closed or are about to be closed. The Act never intended to close schools, however, what was intended to be the last resort has become the first option. The informal, coercive power of the State is being used much more than its formal power and this is where things go wrong.

Another issue Mr. Kaushik highlighted was the way we look at education. He said that a Supreme Court judgment that education has not been philanthropic in the past does not imply that it should not or cannot be commercial in the future. This simple assumption is the reason why things are not happening / moving in the education sector. He believes that have to start viewing education as a social enterprise—chargeable but useful.

Mr. Kulbhushan Sharma spoke next, bringing up how the RTE was supposed to improve schools, and while the government didn't shut down schools, it created conditions that would inevitably lead to school closures.

According to him, schools were running well before the RTE. There were issues, which were dealt with effectively at the local level. He emphasised that the school closure clause should be removed from the Act, or the norms be relaxed, or the compliance period be extended. In his opinion, more than 90% of private schools are good—there's a reason why BPS are chosen by the people!

He also pointed out that it is interesting how no one wants to talk about the quality or the outcomes that
BPS deliver, and everyone chooses to focus only on compliance with norms and standards stated by the RTE.

BPS owners and leaders are in court because the government is focused more on defaming BPS, than taking responsibility for education. In practice, the RTE isn't being extending to children who are in real need of free and compulsory education, but is instead coming down heavily on schools that are otherwise doing well.

He concluded that a review committee should be formed that will have representation from budget private schools. With the RTE norms and standards, only smaller schools are going to suffer, and therefore it is imperative that this committee be formed, and their voice be raised through platforms such as NISA.

**DR. ARCHANA MEHENDALE** spoke about the problems of the Indian education, which she believes and complex and therefore, we cannot be dogmatic and only propose one single solution. Private schools as well as the regulatory framework have some issues.

Private schools are a mixed bag, and therefore we should not be talking about them as homogenous group. The only real stratification in the private schooling sector is aided and unaided. There is no conclusive evidence / argument to support the claim that BPS have better quality education.

The education system is a triad comprising the state, the parents and the schools. Private schools are an important educational subset of the growing private education system in the country.

Dr. Mehendale believes that it is important to recognize that the framework is a very large growing body of rules, notifications and judgments coming from all three, legislature, executive and judiciary. Decisions are made on the basis of Government Rules (GR), which are inaccessible, and often not even available with the government. The language in which these are written is also quite difficult. Therefore, there is often confusion. She further explained that there are multiple actors that make decisions at different levels – centre, state, district, officials, government committees, etc. This is the underbelly of the regulatory framework.

To add to this, there is the old regime, which has been there before the RTE Act, and there are norms, which go along with the RTE. These regulate schools, teachers, curriculum and so on.

She believes that if the RTE Act is compared with previous regulation and policies, the Act itself does not talk about anything that is very new. Most of it has already been there at the state regulatory level. In fact, the RTE has tried to dilute some of the state regulations, such as recognition norms, withdrawal rules etc. To illustrate her point, she gave the example of Punjab, Haryana, Sikkim, Meghalaya and Maharashtra, where there is a recognition withdrawal committee, which consults with SCPCRs to withdraw the recognition from a school. According to her, those who are on these committees are often arbitrarily chosen. SCPCPR cannot issue judgments – that is not their role. They can only make recommendations to the education department, which then has the authority to withdraw recognition.

**MR. VIKRAMJEET BANERJEE** began by asking “What do courts think about BPS?” He believes that is a vital question, and something that we need to be cognizant of. Most courts are aware that the points raised in the discussions are true, but in their judgments they do not agree either. He claimed that while we believe and know that BPS are for the poor, the courts feel that they are against poor.

According to Mr. Banerjee, the first round of RTE litigations were fought very well. The Attorney General had accepted that such schools are important and should be protected. However, in the written submissions something else was stated. However, the 2nd round of litigations were not presented well, were backed by inadequate
research, and the correct issues were not highlighted. He highlighted the important lessons that these 2 stages of litigation have taught us:

1. High quality research to support the issues
2. Well-defined legal strategy, and a lawyer that understands the constitution and issues, both political and theoretical, in education. A famous, commercial lawyer isn't the answer, and can often give the court an impression that the lawyer is not a pro-poor social lawyer, especially if he charges a high fee.
3. Adequate and positive media coverage of BPS, which was missing during the 2nd round of litigations, and therefore making it difficult to build support for these schools.
4. Clear understanding of the workings of the courts and a will articulated case. The attitude of the court is usually pro-State, and while the court feels that it is pro-poor, it is generally not.

He ended by saying that courts have to understand that the world is changing and our methods are often archaic, traditional and outdated, and there is need to change.

Mr. Amit Kaushik closed the session by stating that we should be concerned that courts have tended to be towards pro-state. They've all been to schools, after all!

---

**THE MEDIA AND BUDGET PRIVATE SCHOOLS**

**Panelists: Ms. Seetha, Journalist; Mr. Gurcharan Das, Author, Consultant and Public Intellectual; Mr. Tej Paul Singh, Secretary General, PPSo**

**Chair: Mr. Dilip Thakore, Editor, Education World**

Mr. Dilip Thakore began the session by stating that the media has been a disappointment when it comes to reporting on education. He referred to the last two issues of Outlook that carried bad reports on education, which are biased against private schools. In addition to this, he also lamented the fact that today the same license/permit/quota raj that plagued Indian industry is siphoning the potential and destroying the education industry. It is because of these 2 reasons that Education World was started 15 years ago.

Mr. Thakore believes that BPS play an important role in education, and (arguably) the 7% growth that India has witnessed in the recent past is because of BPS. Therefore, when the sector is doing such a good job, it is important to get the story out there through press releases and media interactions. He highlighted the fact that education is an issue that affects every single household, and if the media is only interested in popular stories with maximum outreach (and TRPs), then it is important that they cover education stories.

He also believes that it is the government's responsibility to support schools that have clearly been chosen by parents for their children. They should therefore give soft loans for upgrades.

Mr. Gurcharan Das spoke next and said that the issue is that of quality, and not quantity. He believes that we have forgotten that in the last 5-10 years, India has risen fast, and in the last 10 days, there have been very refreshing newspaper reports on the real issues in education. According to him, this is probably because of the amendment that Rajasthan is bringing out in their Right to Education.

The good news, according to Mr. Das, is that we have now slowly started realizing the need for reporting about the real issues. He asked why there is a bias against the BPS. The same person who is a teacher in a government school, the regulator in the ministry of HRD and the other babus – all of them send their children to private schools, but still there is a prejudice against them.

He firmly believes that we need to break this hypocrisy.

According to Mr. Das, this prejudice has been there for a very long time, and main reason for it is the belief that the government should be the prime
mover of the society, and although this prejudice is a worldwide phenomenon, the fact is that not many countries have transformed or grown solely on the basis of government education.

If the government schools could be reformed, and their quality could be raised – Mr. Das believes that this would be ideal. He also holds that Narendra Modi is a modernizer, and his whole approach to get the government functioning is a welcome change. The new government has a great faith in high performance.

How do we then break the hypocrisy? Mr. Das believes that communication is the answer. According to him, our reformers have never discussed the idea of competition with the people. There is a difference between pro-market and pro-business. The idea is to promote competition, which is about choice and quality. Stories from Boondein should be appearing in the media everyday. But, there's a need to talk about competition as well, and highlight why these schools are performing better than government schools.

The view that dukaandaar chor hai has to be challenged and changed, and Mr. Das believes that this can possibly be done through ranking BPS via a national competition – identify the best 100 schools in the country, which offer the best education in India for INR 500 or less, thereby giving them more credibility.

There is a belief that education should be free, which according to Mr. Das is very seductive and attractive. But he believes that we need to work every day to make people understand that when something is free, it always leads to deterioration. The idea of having classes on a train, for example, where a person chooses a class based on ability to pay, should be adopted in the education system.

Ms. Seetha spoke next and discussed the fact that education and health do not interest the media, and that in the past reportage has mostly focused on government babus and their speeches. This is why education reportage has been completely off the radar. Even when the media talks about private schools, they only talk about the elite schools. She believes that there is a prejudice against the budget schools – they're either completely ignored, or just written off as ‘teaching shops’. A lot of people in the general media are still caught up in the socialist mindset, and can't imagine a private involvement in the education and health domains. They talk about how the government is running away from its responsibilities, but never about the good things that BPS are doing. She stated that most journalists have been brought up to believe that ‘low cost means low quality’, but this has to be changed.

She feels that while talking to people about reforms might help, showing live examples of reforms, and how it's working is going to make a lot of difference. The focus should be on showcasing examples of BPS, and informing the public that it is not all about Modern School, Vasant Valley or Dhirubhai Ambani schools, but also about the BPS. Elite schools play an important role as they often set standards that the entire schooling system follows. The media shouldn’t completely ignore them.

Ms. Seetha advised BPS to send letters to editors, and press releases to highlight their good work.

Mr. Tejpal Singh highlighted the fact that BPS charge 10% less than government expenditure in Punjab, and outcomes are 10-15% better. He asked why can’t schools be classified into grades, and parents choose between them. According to him, in the United Kingdom, 94% of the children go to government schools, and private schools charge 30-35 lacs per student.
In India, the ‘Education for All’ initiative has been extended till 2030 and therefore, there is a lot of money involved, leading to vested interests. He ended by asking when an individual has the right to vote, why not the right to choose a school?

**GOVERNMENT PERSPECTIVES ON BUDGET PRIVATE SCHOOLS**

**Panelists:** Mr. Gaurav Gogoi, MP, Lok Sabha; Dr. Udit Raj, MP, Lok Sabha; Mr. Mohammed Anwar, Co-Founder, Empathy Learning Systems

**Chair:** Mr. Shekhar Shah, Director General, NCAER

Mr. Gaurav Gogoi began by speaking about the impact that BPS have had on the Indian education system. He believes that they have emerged as a solution/idea to the challenges of the system, and are now being proposed as solutions, which can be the future of Indian education.

He believes that the challenges of the education sector can actually be viewed as opportunities for improvement, and therefore a positive approach towards the problems is important.

Mr. Gogoi believes that there are some assets in our system including our focus on increasing enrolment, with a special emphasis on enrolling girls, through a number of initiatives (now we are at a level where girls are outperforming boys), the improved levels of school infrastructure, expansion in geographical presence, and better pay levels for teachers. While there are still many issues with this, the current condition of education is much better. He also believes that the Indian culture puts a premium on education; there is great emphasis on education in our value system, and this is very positive.

He then highlighted our problems, which include dropouts, high rates of teacher absenteeism, lack of teaching in classes and poor learning outcomes, and lack of resources and well-trained teachers.

He believes that it is embarrassing to see that in a country that has produced such great leaders and academicians, we rank far behind countries that rank far lower than India on economic parameters.

After discussing the problems, and assets, Mr. Gogoi then focused on discussing the education systems in different countries in the world. He highlighted that there are 4 Asian countries in the top 10 countries that are leading in education – South Korea, Hong Kong, Japan and Singapore.

Mr. Gogoi focused on the South Korean story: the country was devastated in 1960s, and had to rebuild themselves from scratch. They have done a remarkable job in a short duration by focusing on –

1. Society: they have great regard for teachers in their school
2. Salary: their system values higher education because it has the potential for better jobs
3. Economy-based skills: education is directly linked to the skills required for the economy, which is increasingly becoming an industry-economy.

According to his, focusing on education is part of the economic strategy of South Korea. Teachers are the 10th highest-paid in the world (OECD), and the unions are empowered – they can directly go and talk to the Prime Minister. South Korea spends only 3.4% of its GDP on public education, and if private and informal schools are included, it becomes 10%.

Mr. Gogoi referred to Amartya Sen who notes that health and education are the two most important factors for the economy of any nation. These three – health, education and the economy – are linked.

Mr. Gogoi also believes that being a budget entrepreneur in India is not easy, and any successful entrepreneur cannot depend solely on subsidies, they must depend on profits. BPS shouldn’t be viewed as a magic pill/panacea to our education system. He concluded by saying that India should increase investments in education, and should look at expanding both public and private education.

Mr. Mohammed Anwar spoke about the potential that BPS have to transform a community; they...
operate in regions where there are no schools, and have a substantial impact on the community. These schools employ people from the community, work with local service providers and educate children of the community. Through their work, poor children, who struggle to afford three meals a day, can become doctors and engineers and go places – without any scholarships and high-fee education.

**MR. SHEKHAR SHAH** who chaired the session, believes that the term ‘budget private schools’ doesn’t capture the essence of these schools.

**DR. UDIT RAJ** spoke about his personal experiences. Dr. Raj comes from an extremely humble background, from a village that had no roads, no electricity and no buildings in the schools. He believes that government schools have failed in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, which is one of the main reasons why the BPS came up, and English is a big attraction in these schools. However, he claimed that we copy the western culture blindly, which is not appropriate. America has a different education system – all schools are mostly alike. Europe has free education till PhD.

He believes that both government schools and BPS are failing, and the exemption of children from exams till grade 10 has created havoc. He suggested that there could be a separate board for BPS? He asked why there are a number of different kinds of schools in India. Basic things such as gender equality, cleanliness, religion, caste system etc. should be explained to children right from the beginning. The right kind of knowledge should be provided to children, in all kinds of schools. He concluded by expressing his support for NISA, and said that we should just sit in a hall, but instead do dharnas to spread the word, and demand change.

**MR. SHEKHAR SHAH** concluded the session by stating that education is both a business and service, and we just need to make the business more profitable and the service more effective.

**MR. KULBHUSHA SHARMA** closed the day by thanking all the speakers, NISA members, delegates attending the event, and CCS.

---

**ORGANISERS AND EVENT PARTNERS**

**NATIONAL INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS ALLIANCE** (NISA) is a platform that brings together budget private schools (BPS) from across the country to give them a unified voice to address their concerns about legislations and bye-laws which apply to them and to facilitate quality improvement in schools. As of today, NISA represents over 8,000 schools from 19 states reaching out to 20,00,000 students. School-level, as well as systemic level change is what NISA is striving for. With its focus on building a strong platform, creating awareness around Budget Private Schools (BPS), achieving policy change and improving school quality, NISA aims to:

- Advocate the immediate concerns of low-fee and budget private schools via the media and other channels to build evidence for their relevance
- Create an ecosystem for school Quality Improvement by partnering with different organisations working in the education space.