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The Shadow School System and New Class Divisions in India

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Abstract

This paper seeks to examine the growth, scale, causes and consequences of supplementary private tutoring, keeping an empirical focus on school education in India and West Bengal. Drawing on ethnographic research and available qualitative and quantitative data, we examine the pedagogic characteristics of private tutoring, study its effects on school processes and learning outcomes of tutees, and ask whether privately paid education inputs reinforce rather than reduce social inequality. We argue that in addition to the equity question, there persists a corruption-related concern: excessive commercialisation evident in the tutoring market is highly likely to corrupt non-market values that constitute the civic enterprise of education.

Key Words: Shadow education, private tutoring, commercialisation in education, inequality in education

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The Shadow School System and New Class Divisions in India

‘Multitudes of customers throng the gates of the education bazaar’

Parimal Ray, Bengali poet

I Introduction

This paper seeks to examine the growth, scale, causes and consequences of supplementary private tutoring, pithily described as ‘shadow education’ by Bray (2003, 2009), keeping an empirical focus on school education, both elementary and secondary, in India and particularly in the state of West Bengal. Attending privately-paid coaching classes is neither a totally new development, nor is it just an ‘Indian enigma’. It is a fairly pervasive phenomenon in many regions of the world, and in East and South Asia in particular. It is increasingly being perceived as ‘essential’ and ‘unavoidable’ by parents of students of all abilities—from mediocre to meritorious—for them to master even the basic skills of literacy and numeracy. And yet, this shadow education system, that runs parallel to the mainstream system of education, remains understudied; it is common knowledge and perhaps that is why assumed and kept away from closer and deeper scrutiny. This relative scholarly policy and public neglect of the roots and effects of such a pervasive practice itself has to come out of the shadow; it is this impulse that motivates our preliminary enquiry of the growing ‘culture of tutoring’.¹

More concretely, what are the manner, nature and pedagogic characteristics of private tutoring that is being practised in diverse settings, for example, in the home of the tutor or the tutee or in groups, in small or large classes or in huge lecture halls equipped with public address systems? To be sure, teaching and learning are iterative processes and students learn from many sources other than the school. Having acknowledged this, to what extent then does private tutoring help tutees in overcoming their learning deficiencies? Is the presumed beneficial outcome of extra coaching measured primarily in terms of performance in examinations rather than on the broader registers of critical thinking, curiosity and understanding? What effects does supplementary tutoring have on the school system and school processes: do schooling and coaching increasingly become extensions of each other in that they both offer drills in examination proficiency? Or are the effects of a parallel system of privately-paid supplementation less benign than just reinforcing the examination pressure? Does it create a conflict of interest between the official duty of a schoolteacher and his gainful private practice when, during private lessons, he offers for a fee to his own pupils what he is supposed to provide anyway? Again, for students from poorer backgrounds, having little scope for home support or parental guidance, does extra coaching for a fee serve as an ‘egalitarian supplement’ in that it helps them move up and out of poverty? Or does it create new class divisions between have-enoughs and have-littles so far as

affordable and quality supplemental help is concerned? Does it thus reinforce rather than reduce social inequalities? Finally, in addition to the equity issue, do various shadow and even shady business practices that seem to swirl around activities of several tutoring agencies, corporate to cottage, indicate excessive commercialisation in education which in turn damages, corrupts and deforms non-market values that constitute the civic enterprise of education?

These questions are set within a larger theoretical examination of the relationship between education and poverty which is anything but straightforward. Education is often thought to be contributing to ameliorating the problem of poverty. Poverty-reducing outcomes of education, however, are not easy to measure as they may range from immediate academic gains in the form of examination scores to long-term effects on people's livelihood opportunities (Colclough 2012). Viewed from the opposite end, however, poverty may impede educational access and participation; and under conditions of abject poverty it may be quite daunting, though not impossible, for the school to counter its effects. Clearly, the school cannot do it alone. Therefore, if we extend our analysis beyond the ambit of school education and focus on the practice of supplementary tutoring and explore its potential to reduce poverty; by extension we shall also have to examine its effect on equity. Indeed, issues of poverty are often closely entwined and fraught with those of inequality. In particular, in order to perceive the role that middle-class aspirations and values play in cultivating the social norm of tutoring in India and the process of their internalisation by underprivileged social groups, it is apt to introduce the aspect of relationality between social classes as a focal variable and thus integrate the study of poverty with that of inequality. And hence is our focus on the equity-enhancing potential (or otherwise) of private tutoring.

Methodologically, we have followed a strategy of opportunism, relying on whatever method works, especially because the shadow education system remains under-researched. It is also because some of the processes and operations associated with parallel tutoring are indeed kept in the dark, as part of a shifty economy.ⁱⁱ We have taken up ethnographic examination and classroom observation in a number of coaching centres – outfits labeled variously as Parrot Academy, GUIDE Coaching Consultancy, Career Coaching Centre and so on. We have conducted interviews and conversations with schoolteachers, private tutors and tutees in selected suburban areas near the city of Kolkata; and collected a sample of study material and notes distributed among the tutees at different coaching centres. A limited perusal of newspaper advertisements for supplementary tutoring constitutes another element of our enquiry. Finally, we have calculated, from the latest National Sample Survey data, household expenditure on private coaching to ascertain the depth of social inequalities in private expenditure on additional supplemental inputs.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. In the following section of the paper, we attempt to piece together available evidence to give a sense of the scope and scale of the shadow education system that currently exists in different parts of the country. This is followed by a discussion, in the third section, on some of its effects on school processes and learning outcomes of children. In

the fourth section we try to complicate the notion of parental choice against the backdrop of informational asymmetry between the seekers and suppliers of additional coaching and try to demonstrate, with the help of a few sample readymade notes, the highly uneven quality of the study material made available to the tutees at a variety of coaching outfits. This brings us back, in the fifth section, to examine more closely the equity effects of private tutoring, drawing on an analysis of the unit-level data on household expenditure on private coaching collected in the latest round of educational survey conducted by the National Sample Survey Organisation (GoI 2010). In the final section, drawing on a selection of newspaper advertisements put up by a number of coaching centres and an ethnographic examination of a few of their corrupt business practices, we revert back to the larger issues of commercialisation in education and its dubious influence on the public spirit and civic quality of education. We conclude by discussing, albeit in a limited manner, the need for some reasonable governmental regulations of tutoring practices, curricular and examination reforms within the mainstream school system aimed at reducing both curricular overload and examination pressure, as well as the positive role of some innovative experiments with remedial public tutoring on a voluntary basis,

II How Pervasive is the Practice of Private Tutoring?

It is important to point out that at a time when the right to publicly-provided free and compulsory elementary education has emerged as a socially accepted norm, further bolstered by the stamp of legal recognition, there has materialised at the same time an increasing expectation of individuated, private efforts at solving systemic deficiencies in education. Free education and paid tuition seem to be seamlessly co-mingling to conjure up a rather intriguing tale of rights and choice.ⁱⁱⁱ

According to the 64th round of NSSO survey on educational participation and expenditure (2010), in 2007–08, for the country as a whole the proportion of students with free education was 71 per cent at the primary level, 68 per cent at the upper-primary level, and 48 per cent at the secondary and post-secondary level of school education. A sizable proportion of students also benefited from scholarships, distribution of free textbooks and mid-day meals. Among the lowest expenditure decile families, about 80 per cent of the primary and upper primary level students in rural areas and 70 per cent in the urban areas got free education. For the highest decile class, the corresponding figures were 50 per cent and 5–10 per cent, respectively.

Interestingly, and coincidentally, there exists a counter narrative of growing reliance among school-going students on both private schools and privately paid supplemental inputs. As is evident from the same survey figures, private unaided schools are proliferating at the primary level and especially in urban India where 43 per cent of enrolled students at the primary level were found to be attending private unaided schools in 2007–08. Again, the average annual household expenditure per student was `1,413 at the primary level, `2,088 at the middle level,

and `4,351 at the secondary/upper secondary level. Importantly, the share of expenditure on private coaching in the total household educational expenditure was about 10 (rural) to 13 (urban) per cent. At the secondary/upper secondary level, the corresponding figures were 16 and 25 per cent, respectively.

To put it simply, the rights agenda seems to sit side by side with the advocacy of choice and education market (Majumdar and Mooij 2011).

To reiterate what has already been said, privately paid educational supplementation is part of the norm rather than the exception in many parts of India now, and for that matter in several other countries. In some countries, for example, spending by households on private tutoring rivals governmental expenditure on education (Dang and Rogers 2008). This is why shadow education evokes varied responses: some consider it a welcome development while others see it as something that government and society must discourage. Some ask why a little extra help, a little more room for polishing children's skills is to be seen as bad. Private tutors, after all, are not a modern invention! As a teacher put it, 'Even Alexander the Great had a private tutor'^{iv}

In most parts of India, and especially in West Bengal, it is now considered 'essential'. It is seen variously as social opium, status symbol and even an assertion of low-caste social ambition. The statistics in the Pratiche Education Reports I and II (2002 and 2009) show the picture of dependence on tuition quite clearly. Between 2002 and 2009, private tutor-dependent students in primary education have increased from 57 per cent to 64 per cent, and amongst those going to the Shishu Shiksha Kendras, from 24 per cent to 54 per cent. According to this report, 78 per cent of parents (62 per cent in 2002) think there is no deliverance except via private tutors. Of the few children who are not availing extra help, 54 per cent parents said it was because they could not afford coaching centres. So unless it is beyond the parents' capability, private tuition at the primary stage has become as necessary a chapter as going to school. Statistics from the West Bengal State Council of Educational Research and Training (2009) shows that in 2009, 71 per cent of students studying in primary schools and 80 per cent in upper-primary schools attended coaching classes.

The existence of this parallel system of course depends on the mainstream education system; it does not stand alone as an independent educational activity. Put simply, it allegedly supplements rather than replaces the school education system, and hence is the shadow of the 'main body' consisting of the regular schools. A variety of tutors—full-time tutors, schoolteachers, university students, retired teachers, university professors—offer such support for a fee. In a sense, this has become a familiar practice so much so that it has for all practical purposes come out of the shadow. It is as though schooling and tutoring are a kind of complementary 'public-private partnership'; and private tutoring is expected to provide more individualised instruction than is possible in school. It is possible, however, to complicate this picture, as is briefly attempted below, by indicating the fact that in situations where supplemental help is provided by

schoolteachers and college teachers and professors, a conflict of interest may arise between their 'official duty' and paid 'private practice'.

Intriguingly, despite the advantage of parental and other home support that private school children are likely to have, they too rely quite heavily on additional supplemental inputs. Estimates of the incidence of private tutoring and its temporal growth are not easy to come by. The India Human Development survey data show that in 2004–05, 20 per cent of children in the age group of 6–14 years reported that they had received private tutoring in the previous year (Desai et al 2010). The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) surveys are another source of data on the scope of the so-called shadow education system. As Banerji and Wadhwa (2012, p.54) state, drawing on ASER figures, 'The phenomenon of additional education inputs through tuition classes and coaching centres is very widespread and visible in India especially in secondary and post-secondary education'. ASER (2007) figures indicate that at the level of elementary education, 20 per cent of government school children and 24 per cent of private school children in rural India went for additional coaching (Banerji and Wadhwa 2012). It is of interest to note that ASER data do not reveal much difference between private school and government school children with respect to their dependence on extra coaching. In fact, according to ASER (2011), among Class IV students in rural areas of many Indian states, , children studying in private schools attend paid tuition classes in somewhat larger numbers than their peers in government schools. The case study on private tutoring in a few villages in a district of West Bengal, reported in Banerji and Wadhwa (2012), indicates how widespread the practice is in this part of the country and how well-entrenched the market for additional coaching is in the surveyed area so much so that 'each of these surveyed tutors makes well above `14,000 per month as income from tuition'. (ibid, p. 56). In Table 1, we present some details on the sweep of private tutoring activities in Khardah Municipality area – a sub-urban locality adjacent to the city of Kolkata, peopled with socially, linguistically and economically mixed groups ranging from Bengalis to non-Bengalis, Muslims to Hindus, and salaried classes to mill-hands and casual workers. Among the tutors interviewed, a few are also full-time schoolteachers; they are relatively young and qualified and tutor, on an average, a sizeable group of students, and earn a respectable monthly (and probably untaxed) income, which is in some cases as high as a little over `70,000.

Table 1: Tutors and Tutees in Khardah Municipality Area, West Bengal

<i>Tutor</i>	<i>Type of Tutor</i>	<i>Age of Tutor (in years)</i>	<i>Educational Qualifications of tutor</i>	<i>Class of Tutees</i>	<i>Fees per Tutee as Reported (per month in)</i>	<i>Total Number of Tutees as Reported</i>
Tutor 1	Full-time Private tutor	30	Masters in History	VIII-XII	170	50
Tutor 2	Part-time Private Tutor	29	Chartered Accountant	XI-XII	300	12
Tutor 3	Teacher-Tutor	35	Bachelors in Mathematics	X	150	8*
Tutor 4	Full-time Private Tutor	40	Bachelors in English	VII-XII	230 (Class VII) 250 (VIII) 290 (IX) 320 (X) 350 (XI, XII)	150
Tutor 5	Teacher-Tutor	48	Masters in English	V-XII	300**	200**
Tutor 6	Full-time Private Tutor	40	Bachelors Incomplete	IX-XII	170	187
Tutor 7	Full-Time Private Tutor	38	Masters in Bengali, Bachelors in Education	VII-XII	250	150
Tutor 8	Part-time Home Tutor	25	Bachelors in Botany	X	350	2
Tutor 9	Teacher-Tutor	48	Masters in English, Bachelors in Education	V-XII	200 (Class V-VII) 250 (Class VIII-XII)	15
Tutor10	Full-Time Private Tutor	--	Masters in Geography	VIII-XII	200	360

Notes: *The number is higher, as we came to know later. **The tutor chose not to report on this; information collected from tutees.

Source: Interviews conducted and information collected during November–December 2013 from 12 municipal wards around Rahara, a sub-urban area not far from the city of Kolkata. Seven high schools and one junior high school dot the education landscape of this locality.

III Shaping, Supplementing or Supplanting the Mainstream?

Let us now discuss the linkages between regular schools and parallel tutoring centres and the effects that the latter are likely to have on school processes and learning outcomes of students cum tutees. Do these two systems, with their comparable thrust on preparation for examinations,

feed into each other and look increasingly alike? Or do mainstream schools seem to be overpowered by the apparent salience of coaching centres in the life of a student? Do schools exist to perform merely the role of the appropriate authority in the process of certification, ready otherwise to yield place to coaching centres? Put differently, does the shadow overshadow the mainstream?

Some claim that the parallel informal system disrupts the school system; it has a negative influence on teacher development and effectiveness when schoolteachers double up as private tutors. And research shows that teacher effectiveness is the most effective predictor of student learning. In other words, if the quality of education is thought to be closely related to the quality of teacher education, their classroom energy and effort, then when schoolteachers divide up their time between teaching and coaching, it is unlikely that they will practice new pedagogies in class, regularly check the students' work and encourage creativity in the classroom. However, in the words of one teacher-tutor we interviewed, 'I give the same effort and energy to teach my students in my school as I do at the tutoring centre and give them the same study material' (interviewed on 11 December 2012). Another schoolteacher of a 'five star' private school, on the other hand, is known to be keeping two files on her computer, namely, 'tuition notes' and 'class notes'. The difference in the quality of the two sets of material, if any, is however not a part of common knowledge.

Moreover, one of the effects of the parallel system on the mainstream seems to be that the importance of schools is recognised by rendering them academically irrelevant; it is as though schools are left to serve as certificate issuing authorities. As a member of the All Bengal Teachers' Association, the principal secondary schoolteachers' union in West Bengal, remarked in an interview (20 January 2013), 'If and when tutorials are authorised to issue certificates, schools will certainly close down. Also, they may become a substitute and thereby reduce any remaining pressure for school improvement. We already notice the falling attention of students in class. As long as they can pay someone who will show them how to pass their exams, they do not need to attend classes. This damages the school system'.

The climate of cruel competition that is often encouraged in both schools and coaching centres to provide competitive advantage to their students is also a matter of worry. As a private tutor instructed his tutees, 'Think of your classmates as your tough competitors; don't share your notes with them'. Such teaching-learning processes promote rivalry among children and discourage teamwork and, above all, transform their attitudes toward academic achievement.

The effect on childhood itself is a cause for concern. As several young boys and girls we spoke to informed us, in urban areas on an average, students have three or four tutors and in some cases one for every subject they study. In rural areas usually one or two tutors teach all subjects. With the growing spread and incidence of private tuitions, the burden of work on students increases manifold—an additional ten to fifteen hours of work per week beyond school hours. We ran into

several students rushing to coaching classes immediately before or after school; they often have homework from school as well as from the tutor(s).^v

TS and SS study in Class IX. TS takes extra coaching in Life Science, Mathematics and Physical Science at two different coaching centres and in English from a home tutor. SS goes for tuition classes in English with another 35 students in his batch. It is as though he attends a parallel school having a class size not much different from the one in his regular school. He gets additional coaching from three more tutors – for Life Science; Physical Science and Mathematics; and for Bengali, History and Geography. Only on Saturdays and Sundays do they get some free time but that free time is often used in doing the home tasks assigned by their private tutors. The monthly fees that they pay for these tuition classes range from `300 to 700.

TS and SS understand the benefit of the notes on specific chapters and topics that are distributed to tutees in coaching classes, as well as of the mock tests they are made to write upon completion of every chapter. This drill in time management is what they really value, as it helps reduce their ‘exam phobia.’ MS, a student of Class XI, has a home tutor who teaches Mathematics and Physics for a monthly fee of `450. MS also attends a coaching centre to study all science subjects and English with another 65 students where he pays a monthly fee of `500. He too feels the need for private tuition ‘for technical preparation for exams’.

In a conversation with a few tutees at a coaching centre, we learnt that a student of Class X, a son of a petty shopkeeper, has eight private tutors, of whom, two are for Mathematics – one a home tutor and the other a tutor at a coaching centre. Of these eight tutors, four are schoolteachers. Coaching takes up his mornings and evenings almost every day. Another student of a so-called good school in the city has two private tutors each for English and Physics. The exclusive and readymade notes they get from these tutors and tuition centres and the regular mock tests distinguish these centres from standard schools and are considered to be the main reason for their popularity with students. No doubt, their childhood and their student life revolve around tuition classes.

In assessing the effect of supplemental inputs on student learning, it is perhaps apt not to cast an automatic vote for quality. It is because tutoring often takes the form of tutoring to prepare students for exams. Our preliminary classroom observations in a few coaching centres reveal that the pedagogy followed is mostly instruction- and study material-driven. It is passive listening and cramming rather than stimulating activities that the tutees do at these coaching classes. In the words of a schoolteacher (interview on 7 and 8 December 2013), ‘at many coaching centres what is practiced very efficiently is not a science of education, but a science of scoring, churning out “exam-smart” students.’

To understand what happens in the coaching classes, we sat in a private tutor’s evening coaching class. We present below a brief description of what transpired inside that ‘black box’.

The tutoring occurred in a small room of her house, with about seven children – from nursery to Class 7. The teacher herself goes to college. She is confident, cheerful – the first person from her family to get the opportunity to go to college. She pays for her education and her own expenses by tutoring school children. According to her, tutoring also helps her stay in touch with subjects she may no longer study herself – Bangla, English, Geography, History, Science, Maths. Her mother works as a cook in other people's houses, her joy in her daughter's success is remarkable. One cannot deny that private tuition has given this girl the opportunity to earn, and that in turn has given her confidence. How was studying that evening? The teacher gave different instructions to different students almost in the same breath, and the students had no problem understanding who she was addressing. Some copied tables from a book, some read in Hindi, a girl who goes to nursery school practised writing alphabets [*sic*], another one attempted numbers. The tutor kept talking in Hindi, "Bring this line down, then take up again (directions for the girl writing alphabets [*sic*]); cancel above, cancel below (instructions to someone doing sums); 'What had Gandhiji said about staying healthy? Don't you remember? Memorise this, he advised walking in open air (to a child studying Hindi)". The very next minute her attention came a full circle to the child in nursery, and the two started reading together rhythmically, 'I for Igloo... X for X-Ray... Y for Yacht'. There were no exchanges between teacher and student about what or where an igloo is, what manner of thing yachts are, and so on. As long as alphabets [*sic*] and words matched, it was all right. Gradually, night fell. Class was over for the day. Before leaving, the children said "good bye". I asked them, "What does this mean?" Everybody kept quiet. Only one child ventured that it meant, "I'm leaving now". My questions remained unanswered: just how effective was this study circle? (Majumdar 2011)

Coming to the issue of learning outcomes, the learning levels of students are routinely measured on a rather narrow register of how students perform in standardised tests. This admitted, some studies (Desai et al 2010, Banerji and Wadhwa 2012) show that private inputs into children's education—private schooling as well as private tutoring—have a positive influence on children's learning outcomes. It is claimed that private educational support helps weaker students to catch up and strong students to achieve more. However, while on the one hand children receiving additional coaching are claimed by ASER surveys to have better learning outcomes, on the other hand, the same survey has reported a steady drop in learning levels in several Indian states. In the meantime, the incidence of tutoring is also steadily increasing. There is a clear puzzle in our evidence and understanding in this case. Also, it is challenging to tease out the returns to tutoring, since it is not quite correct to assume that all students share the same returns to tutoring. Simply put, there are endogeneity problems here. Again, it is difficult to measure the motivation of individual students (Dang and Rogers 2008) and their innate abilities. Therefore, the use of raw or uncontrolled performance differences to deduce positive private tuition effects may be misleading (Chudgar 2012).

As already mentioned, the school of course is not the only 'location of learning'. But if there is 'dissatisfaction with formal schooling [that] has led many parents to enroll their children in private tutoring, sometimes with teachers whose job it is to teach these children in regular schools' (Desai et al 2010, p. 82). The obvious question to ask then is why they are opting for

supplemental support in the informal (being outside the remit of formal regulatory norms) yet highly organised and active education market. In what ways does such organised informality add value to learning outcomes of the tutees?

As already pointed out, the levels of learning are generally low, according to the ASER surveys, despite sizable parental expenditure on supplementary tutoring. As Banerji and Wadhwa (2012) report, in rural India about 50 per cent of children in Class V are unable to read a Class II text effortlessly. This general letdown notwithstanding, Banerji and Wadhwa (ibid, p. 60) assert that ‘supplemental help does matter in terms of learning outcomes; those who get it are more likely to have higher basic learning levels’ and that ‘children in private schools who take tuition seem significantly ahead of those going to government school and taking no tuition’. Not studying in a private school and not going for additional tuition is a double jeopardy, it seems. They further argue (p. 61) that ‘Indian schools focus on completing curriculum rather than delivering learning. As a result, many children never get a good foundation of basic learning in the early years of school’. The critical question is: to what extent does private tutoring focus on critical pedagogy and learning? Put differently, aren’t schools and private tutoring centres coming closer in their mutually reinforcing emphasis on teaching to tests and ‘covering’ the syllabus rather than ‘uncovering’ its mystery?

It seems that there is ‘dissatisfaction’ among parents not only with government schools but with private schools too, as children who study in private schools also attend tuition classes, often in comparatively larger numbers (Banerji and Wadhwa 2012). More intriguingly, the presumed lack of confidence in the quality of teaching in regular schools at times surfaces in the case of private tutors too; otherwise it is difficult to explain why some students have more than one private tutor for a subject, say, for English, Mathematics or Physics.

IV Social Determinants of Parental Demand: Informed or Ill-formed?

One may argue that the culture of private tutoring is a natural consequence of parents’ demands and the tutors’ supply (many of these tutors are schoolteachers themselves). However, this straightforward recounting of market reasoning needs to be filtered in the light of well-thought out strategies that are often skillfully deployed to generate parental demand for supplemental help for their children. That it is mere spontaneity of parental choice which lies behind the power that the culture of tutoring wields does not induce much confidence, as there remains a clear asymmetry of information about the quality of inputs on offer, between those who seek supplementary coaching and those who offer the same. For parents of first-time school goers, in particular, the private domain of tutoring is a ‘territory of informational limitation and asymmetry’ (Sen 2002). It is therefore essential to pay a closer look at the notion of parental choice which often remains under-theorised.

In theory, the expansion of consumer choice and increasing pressure of competition are likely to bring about improvements in the quality and efficiency of the goods and services in question. But it is quite doubtful whether parents, especially those coming from the lower echelons of society, are always in a position to make informed choices about paid tuition, since not much is known about the kind and quality of supplemental educational inputs that the tutees, studying at different levels of the school education system, receive from their tutors. There are a great number of coaching classes with wide variances in quality and catering to children from different social and economic backgrounds.

The issue, therefore, is not just about parental choice and its execution but equally importantly about the construction and even constriction of the choice set from which they choose (Bell 2009). Parental choice can, in principle, improve equity if it is possible for parents to select better schools for their children and better supplementary tutoring; but the set of tuition options available to parents, i.e. the choice set from which they choose, unsurprisingly differs along lines of class, caste, religion and location. Simply put, as inequalities in social capital and social network across different social groups in India suggest, there exist social class differences in resources in constructing choice sets and hence in choices. Consequently, the children of the socially underprivileged may still remain trapped in inferior schools and inferior tuition classes, raising doubts about the inevitability of positive outcomes of choice. Furthermore, apart from the fact that parents of divergent class backgrounds have different choice sets, it is also possible that even though quality may be stated as the primary reason for obtaining additional coaching, such a decision may in fact be the reflection of parents' internalised views of social status. Thus, instead of being informed and quality conscious, the choice may be a 'deformed desire' generated under social pressure. In other words, parental demand for supplemental educational support for their children is socially determined and conditioned. Finally, there is a risk of overestimating the average parent's agency in the choice of school (Jennings 2010) as also of tuition classes, since many private schools as well as 'star' coaching centres (for example, FIITJEE) conduct screening tests for prospective tutees.

Against the backdrop of these conceptual conundrums raised about the demand-side story of privately paid tuition, we present here some insights that we have drawn from our conversations with some students and teachers regarding parental choice, or the lack of it. We also present a sample of prepared notes circulated among tutees at some coaching centres from two districts of West Bengal, namely, Nadia and Kolkata, in order to show the significant variance in their quality.

Why is there a felt need for privately paid tuition among students and their parents? Conversations with students and teachers are the main source of our information here.^{vi}

In a reputed high school for girls in our sub-urban study area, the principal and several other teachers stated during a conversation with us that paying for supplementary tutoring of children has become a status symbol for many parents. Some of these parents develop an inferiority

complex when they find that their children do not have as many tutors as other students in the class and feel the need to compete likewise. It is kind of a demonstration effect leading to a milieu where students attend private coaching even the students really do not need it. They asserted that private tutoring was a short-cut method of education, ‘readymade’ for scoring marks in exams. A teacher-tutor teaching in a local school observed that in the relatively affluent neighbourhoods of the locality, many students have seven or eight private tutors. In some cases, parents move to localities where their children can get access to both a ‘reputed’ school as well as ‘successful’ private tutors. Once they complete school, parents sell off the property and return to their place of origin.

In the opinion of a full-time private tutor, ‘there is a felt need for private tuition’ allegedly because ‘students are not given sufficient notes [i.e. readymade study material which can be blindly memorised for success in exams] in school’. It seems as though the inadequacy that is talked about over and over again is about inadequate spoon-feeding in school. The popularity of private coaching and, by extension, of the usefulness of readymade notes are also a statement about the current examination system in which a very limited range of questions is being asked in exams year after year. As a retired schoolteacher observed, ‘Even meritorious students seek extra tuition to score more marks in exams. It is not clear whether the quality of teaching and learning has improved. But certainly a desperate marks race is on’. The Secretary of ABPTA, the largest primary schoolteachers’ union in West Bengal, is of the opinion that ‘For quality education private tuition is not essential, but to excel in examinations and score more marks it has become a must.’ A schoolteacher of a private missionary school who also offers private tuition classes observed, ‘That students—mediocre and meritorious—of this missionary school seek coaching is a signature of the overall educational failure of the school. So I cannot possibly comment any more’. Another teacher of the same school who is also a private tutor said, ‘An education system solely geared towards tests and test scores is one major reason for the growing popularity and even the felt necessity of private tuition. A student using his own initiative to write an answer based on his own knowledge and research is often denied a grade that a student who uses readymade notes is likely to get.’

A group of tutees of a popular tuition centre told us why they chose that particular coaching school and its tutor. SD said, ‘Many of his tutees have scored “star” marks in the school leaving exams; that is why I have followed my parents’ advice to join this coaching class. Also, I am told that 80 per cent of his suggested questions actually appear in the Board Examination question paper’. PS remarked, ‘The dictated notes in school are not adequate to secure good grades. The notes that we get in tuition classes are better in this respect.’

A popular and ostensibly competent schoolteacher offers regular coaching classes to a sizable group of students studying in Classes V to XII. In his view the growing practice of paid coaching is mainly demand driven. ‘In this hyper-competitive climate where allegedly there are no guarantees for access to “proper” education that will assure the student a cushy job and therefore where only the fittest can survive, parents are anxious to ensure their children’s educational

prospects and hence they rely on private tuition. The number of tutors a family can have of course depends upon its ability to pay for the charges. But even those who cannot afford it aspire for it, he explains.’ Such a demand-driven explanation is only partial, as it fails to take note of the well thought-out strategies that the supply side deploys to induce such demands. When this tutor was asked why his own students sought paid coaching from him outside school, he chose not to respond.

We now turn to discuss the worth and quality of a few samples of study material collected from a group of tutees (see Appendix). Samples 1 and 2 are copies of printed study material that bear the watermarks of the coaching centre, perhaps to distinguish its provenance. There are a number of mistakes in the notes, which we have highlighted. Sample 3 is a copy of a handwritten answer sheet of a tutee studying in Class XI in a village in Nadia district. The mistakes are many, even after the corrections that have been made by his tutor. It is quite evident that the quality of supplemental inputs that he is getting from his tutor is far from satisfactory. Sample 4 is a copy of a handwritten note that is dictated by the tutor to his tutees at a coaching class in Kolkata. Although these notes are clearly better in quality, the tutee has made several mistakes while taking dictation, which have remained uncorrected. This has surely detracted from the value addition to his learning that is expected from such private coaching. Finally, sample 5 is a copy of a hand-written note in Bengali answering a question in Geography on the concept of land-man ratio which is a part of the Class XI syllabus. The answer is written in the form of an equation, which understandably includes the total population as well as the amount of land available. But it also includes, quite erroneously, ‘culture’ as a part of the numerator and ‘productivity of land’ as a part of the denominator. The study material that the tutee is given in this case is conceptually imprecise and even plain wrong. It is difficult to imagine how such material can compensate for supposed teacher inadequacies in school.

It is perhaps not wide off the mark to assume that parents of these tutees are not quite aware of the poor quality of the educational inputs their children are receiving from their paid private tutors. Conceivably, there are cases in which useful and quality supplemental educational inputs help students to improve their learning achievements. But given the background of class divisions and informational limitations among divergent groups of parents as well as the lack of any regulations and quality control of the informal tutoring market, those who need such supplements the most lack them most squarely. Consequently, the social gradient between knows and know-nots persists and perhaps even widens.

It would have been useful to include in the present analysis some first-hand accounts of aspirations of parents, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, vis-à-vis their children’s educational future and especially of their motivation to provide extra coaching to their children. This, however, would have required a fairly extensive household survey and/or focus group meetings with parents from different social backgrounds – an exercise that lay beyond the ambit of the current study. Clearly, the study remains limited in this respect. This acknowledged, it may, however, be pointed out that there is likely to be a lot of overlap between the voices of

parents and those of their children which we have sought to record through our visits to various tuition classes. We also wish to add, albeit very briefly, a couple of anecdotal narratives of parental ambitions as well as ambivalences and confusions about how best to promote their children's educational fortunes and to what end.

Just as socio-economically marginalised groups try to send their children to low-fee, even low-quality, private schools when they are able to afford it (with difficulty) and thus imitate the dominant middle-class schooling decisions, in the case of supplementary tutoring too they seem to be internalising the dominant 'culture of tutoring', although they are never confident that either schools or private supplementary help can ensure social transformation for their children. Despite this discerning and cautious view about their fluctuating fortunes in the real world, financially weak parents still make the effort to get their children schooled as well as coached, motivated by aspirations and hopes, not very dissimilar to those of more affluent parents, to see their children find a decent job and settle in life. A janitor working in Kolkata Municipal Corporation shared with us his urge to ensure better schooling and employment opportunities for his children so that they can break free from the social stigma conventionally attached to their social position (interviewed on 27 May 2013). His adolescent son is now studying in Class IX; he has been going for tuition classes since Class I. The father, however, is not quite sure about how well the coaching classes are run, whether this will help his children and so on. Both his son and daughter, even with supplemental tuition, have failed to make the passing grade in the recent school exams. The father considers this to be the fault of his children, as the tutor tells him, 'I train them, yet they do not do much on their own. They will have to memorise, learn by heart, and learn by rote'.

Another parent, who earns his living by washing and ironing clothes for the families in his neighbourhood, echoed a similar sentiment about the clear necessity of tuition classes for his son, primarily because of its alleged value of disciplining and grinding their children through a strict routine (interviewed on 30 June 2013). His son, now preparing for his school-leaving exam, has three private tutors. His day begins early with a tutorial class in the morning, followed by regular school, and then by private coaching again in the evening. In the words of the father, 'Coaching is absolutely necessary; otherwise children will while away their time with friends; they will not study properly at home; it is important to get them tied to a strict routine of schooling as well as private coaching. The tutor can prepare them for tests, make them answer important questions since it is hard to cover the entire syllabus. Ideally, one should read the whole of Ramayana and Mahabharata; but in practice how many can do it? But what they absolutely need is knowledge of English and also General Knowledge'. Parental educational aspirations and their notion of the purpose and value of education increasingly look similar across social classes, although at the same time their options and opportunities to actualise those ambitions remain highly differentiated. This phenomenon of homogenisation of educational goals in terms of a narrow 'tedium' without equalisation of educational chances may have a particular bearing on the question of poverty. To put it differently, the tedium is common and therefore it likely affects

even the relatively well-off; but its burden is most intense for poorer people. The poverty of educational imagination and transformation hurts those at the margin disproportionately.

It is possible to argue that over and above seemingly honing learning skills of students, tuition classes may offer them new spaces of sociality, access to information and other social aptitudes and capitals that in turn may equip children to move up and even out of poverty.^{vii} Our limited ethnographic enquiry, however, shows little evidence of these spaces being sites of sharing and mutual enrichment. More often than not, coaching classes are themselves socio-economically stratified and segregated. In other words, as in the case of mainstream schools, here too one routinely observes a streaming of tutees between low fee, lowbrow tuition centres and highbrow, comparatively better quality, coaching institutions thereby making it that much harder to enhance social mixing and collegiality among students. Moreover, the culture that is usually promoted in many such sites is one of fierce competition among children, who are encouraged to take on an individualistic journey toward success. What is of course necessary is a much wider and deeper analysis of these vexed issues. However, we present here a few anecdotal instances, from the writings of Chakrabarty (2003), of the kind of ideas and values that some of these ‘centres of learning’ nurture about mainstream educational institutions and more generally about a shared social existence.

At the opening ceremony of a tutorial centre glamorously named ‘Global Educational Complex’, the owner remarked, ‘The school education system is under attack from all corners; it has collapsed like the World Trade Centre; to clean this mess we need the involvement of many young people. Nowadays just as new and advanced polyclinics are coming up to extend special health care facilities, in the same way ours is an educational polyclinic.’ (Translated from Bengali, p. 135.)

Again, Chakraborty quotes a teacher in a reputed college in Kolkata, who also runs his own tutorial classes in the Salt Lake area of the city: ‘You have to come to me if you want to get first class marks in statistics. That is why my rate is high’. One tutee asks, ‘Why do you charge so much? You have a big house; your wife teaches in a college, you have only one daughter; how much more do you need?’ He replies, ‘It is not a hospital; it is a nursing home, a reputable one like Woodlands or Belle View; that is why my rates are high; the poor homeless destitute do not come to study here; I only teach those who are meritorious and affluent like you. Remember, that you are being tutored by a professor of Presidency College.’ (Translated from Bengali, p. 96).

Reverting back to the point raised above regarding the possible broader social significance of privately paid educational inputs, we therefore still contend that the potential of tuition classes to reduce various facets of poverty appears quite limited.

Is Paid Tuition an ‘Egalitarian Supplement’?

Desai et al (2010) suggest that private coaching expenditures can be substantial for students attending tuition classes. The annual cost of private tutoring, according to the India Human Development Survey (IHDS) data they use, ranges from ₹630 in Class I to about ₹1,500 in Class X. It is also higher in urban areas and among well-to-do and educated families. They direct our attention to the issue of ‘social class differences’ in educational expenditures. Families in the top income quintiles spend five times as much on private coaching as compared to those in the lowest income quintile.

Our ethnographic research threw up the similar results as that of IHDS. SR, a Class XI student of a private English-medium school and son of an officer in the Income Tax Department in Kolkata, gets additional coaching from five private tutors, at an additional expense of ₹2,800 per month. FK, a student of Class IV studying in a *madrassa* and daughter of a mill worker, goes to a local private tutor for supplementary help who charges her ₹60 per month. SH and SS, students of Classes VIII and IX, respectively, come from a working class background and spend ₹400 per month to get extra coaching for all subjects from a coaching centre. SJ studies in Class X and belongs to a well-to-do family. He has three home tutors, one of them being a schoolteacher. He gets additional guidance from them in all subjects and spends ₹2900 every month for it. Clearly, the quantum and quality of privately-paid educational supplement a student gets is dependent on the parents’ ability to pay, which is highly uneven, and hence the supplement is far from egalitarian.

To get a more concrete idea about household spending on private coaching, we have analysed unit-level National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) data and present the same in Tables 2-7. It is a truism worth repeating that educational participation is socially determined. That is to say, if we focus only on the lowest and the highest income classes in India (measured in terms of monthly per capita expenditure [MPCE] quintile class) we notice a clear streaming of students into public and private educational institutions respectively, more so at lower levels of school education (Table 2).

Table 2: Social Determinants of Educational Participation in India, 2007–08
Level, Type of Institution and MPCE Quintile Class (in per cent)

Type of Institution	Primary			Upper primary			Secondary and Higher Secondary		
	Lowest Quintile Class	Highest Quintile Class	All	Lowest Quintile Class	Highest Quintile Class	All	Lowest Quintile Class	Highest Quintile Class	All
Government	83.8	26.6	67.2	80.7	34.7	64.8	72.0	39.8	56.1
Private Aided	2.0	17.4	6.4	6.7	20.7	12.3	14.7	26.2	21.4
Private Unaided	8.6	51.6	20.3	7.0	40.5	17.3	8.8	30.8	18.4

Source: Calculated from GoI (2010).

Although private unaided schools are proliferating at a fast pace in many regions of rural India, let alone in urban areas, and even though the indigent too have been found interested in low-fee private schooling options, they still largely depend on public institutions for educating their children. This is of course not surprising, as they can ill afford the huge cost of getting privately paid education.

Streaming of children between government and private schools is also palpable when we look at the participation of children from the major caste groups in India, in education. From the primary level right up to the secondary and post-secondary stages of schooling, government schools seem to be the only option available before the bulk of pupils from the Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Scheduled Castes (SCs) (Table 3). At the other end of the caste continuum, however, for a large section of students from more privileged caste backgrounds (labeled here as ‘Others’), private schools – especially unaided ones – seem to be the more preferred choice. In other words, government schools cater at the most to 50 per cent of school-going children from these relatively advantaged social groups. A similar, though a comparatively lesser degree of, dependence on private schools is evident among students from the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) too. In short, the social gradient in the revealed preference for private schooling is obvious.

Table 3: Caste Divisions in Educational Participation in India, 2007–08
Level and Type of Educational Institution (in per cent)

	Scheduled Tribes	Scheduled Castes	Other Backward Classes	Others
Primary				
Government	87.2	77.34.3	47.4	49.7
Aided	1.9	12.0	5.2	10.3
Unaided	5.9	100	20.8	33.5
Total	100		100	100

Upper Primary				
Government	83.9	74.8	65.9	50.7
Aided	6.1	8.1	11.6	15.4
Unaided	5.5	10.9	16.9	28.3
Total	100	100	100	100
Secondary/Higher Secondary				
Government	72.9	66.1	57.1	46.5
Aided	14.2	18.1	20.4	25.6
Unaided	9.8	12.1	17.6	24.4
Total	100	100	100	100

Source: Calculated from GoI (2010).

It is interesting to note that the choice regarding type of school – government, aided, or private unaided – does not appear to be starkly gendered, although the proportion of female students attending private unaided schools is slightly lower (18.2 per cent, 15.4 per cent, and 17.7 per cent at the primary, upper primary, and secondary/higher secondary levels, respectively) than the corresponding figure for male students (22.1 per cent, 18.9 per cent, and 18.9 per cent, respectively).

The choice of school notwithstanding, both government and private school students, from the poorest as well as the richest families, attend privately paid tuition classes from the primary level and right up to the post-secondary level, with a growing reliance on the same as they go to higher classes of school education (Table 4).

**Table 4: Proportion of Pupils Reporting Expenditure on Private Tutoring in India: 2007-08
Level, Type of Institution and MPCE quintile Class (in per cent)**

Type of Institution	Primary			Upper primary			Secondary and Higher Secondary		
	Lowest Quintile Class	Highest Quintile Class	All	Lowest quintile class	Highest quintile class	All	Lowest quintile class	Highest quintile class	All
Government	8.8	19.6	11.1	17.2	35.0	21.0	20.3	44.8	30.8
Private Aided	11.1	25.0	17.6	12.8	40.7	25.9	14.6	45.5	32.7
Private Unaided	5.7	23.5	15.9	8.0	30.6	22.2	12.1	39.3	31.5
All Institutions	8.3	22.7	2.2	15.6	34.0	21.2	18.6	43.0	31.0

Source: Calculated from GoI (2010).

Expectedly, of course, a significantly higher proportion of pupils from the highest income class obtain coaching as compared to their peers coming from the lowest income rung. Thus, supplemental educational inputs seem to be contributing to reproduce existing class divisions.

Table 5: Proportion of Male and Female Students Reporting Household Expenditure on Private Tutoring in India, 2007–08 by Educational Level and Type of Institution

	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
Primary		
Government	11.7	10.4
Aided	18.7	16.2
Unaided	16.0	15.9
All Institution	12.1	11.4
Upper Primary		
Government	21.3	20.6
Aided	26.6	25.1
Unaided	23.9	19.8
All Institution	21.9	20.4
Secondary/Higher Secondary		
Government	32.4	28.6
Aided	33.4	31.7
Unaided	35.9	25.0
All Institution	33.0	28.3

Source: Calculated from GoI (2010).

Although the male-female difference is not so pronounced with respect to the proportion of pupils attending paid tuition classes (Table 5), there are marked differences in this respect between the four major caste groups that are being considered here, namely, ST, SC, OBC and Others. Just as pupils from well-to-do families have far greater access to paid supplemental help than those from poorer households, students from privileged caste groups too have better access to extra coaching (two to four times) than those from underprivileged caste backgrounds (Table 6). The suffocating synergy between class and caste barriers to obtaining privately paid tuition classes is thus palpable.

Table 6: Proportion of Students Reporting Expenditure on Private Coaching by Caste Groups, Educational Level and Type of Institution in India, 2007–08

	<i>Scheduled Tribes</i>	<i>Scheduled Castes</i>	<i>Other Backward Classes</i>	<i>Others</i>
Primary				
Government	4.8	10.9	8.5	19.4
Aided	16.7	10.9	17.8	23.5
Unaided	7.9	11.4	12.6	22.0
All Institution	5.0	10.6	9.7	20.1
Upper Primary				
Government	9.3	21.7	14.6	33.2
Aided	16.3	22.4	21.8	37.9
Unaided	16.9	14.0	19.9	26.4

All Institution	9.7	20.3	16.0	31.0
Secondary/Higher Secondary				
Government	18.6	27.1	25.8	41.8
Aided	14.9	28.8	29.8	41.6
Unaided	28.5	21.6	28.2	37.6
All Institution	18.7	26.3	26.9	40.2

Source: Calculated from GoI (2010).

Social inequality in annual household expenditure on private tutoring comes out more starkly when we look at the absolute amount spent on paid tuition (especially at higher levels of school education) by the two classes located at the polar ends of the income continuum (Table 7).

Table 7: Social Inequality in Annual Household Expenditure on Private Tutoring per Reported Student in India, 2007-8, by Level, Type of Institution and MPCE Quintile Class (in `)

Type of Institution	Primary		Upper Primary		Secondary and Higher Secondary	
	Lowest Quintile Class	Highest Quintile Class	Lowest Quintile Class	Highest Quintile Class	Lowest Quintile Class	Highest Quintile Class
Government	488.5 (66)	1267.4 (44.3)	725.8 (47.9)	1974.1 (49.5)	1256.1 (45.6)	3722.4 (51.8)
Private Aided	626.6 (35.2)	1907.4 (25.2)	1428.2 (46.2)	2414.1 (36.4)	1322 (38.3)	5176.7 (47.3)
Private Unaided	683.0 (28.8)	2042.0 (21.6)	798.8 (28.1)	2813.4 (25.7)	1003.2 (26.9)	4759.3 (28.8)

Note: Figures in parentheses indicate share of coaching expenses in the total household educational expenditure.

Source: Calculated from GoI (2010).

The families in the top quintile pay four to five times more than those from the lowest quintile. What is most disconcerting, however, is the fact that the burden of additional expenditure on paid tutoring falls disproportionately on the poorest families, as this constitutes a higher (or at least comparable), proportion of their total educational expenditure when compared with the corresponding figures for the highest income class. In short, well-to-do families spend more on their children's supplemental help, but it pinches them much less than the indigent families who sacrifice a lot out of their meagre income to make available to their children what the upper class pupils get so easily. The supplement (both its quality and quantity) that is bought with such starkly unequal economic resources cannot be anything but in-egalitarian.

Equity issues are also germane to the argument that private tutoring may provide self-employment and income for tutors, especially to the educated unemployed who can earn some degree of independence and self-sufficiency by providing private tuitions. We had a conversation (20 December 2012) with a private tutor – a girl from a slum-dwelling poor family in Kolkata who teaches children whose parents are often unlettered. She has fought hard to complete her college education and now studies business management, and meets a lot of her family's

financial needs by tutoring. She recalled that her own tutor during her school days was very ‘good’, as he would resort to any amount of beating, thrashing and scolding to force her make the passing grade (*Merey, dhorey, pitiye pash kawraten*). Her problematic idea of good teaching notwithstanding, no doubt, some economic benefits ensue from her small-time self-employment drive. The dilemma that appears in this case is however more apparent than real, since one needs to take note of the co-existence of shortage and surfeit that is a peculiar self-contradiction of a country like India. More elaborately, on the one hand there is a surplus of educated unemployed people in the country, and on the other a deficit of appropriately trained schoolteachers. It is possible to make an argument that it is preferable to train the educated unemployed and recruit them as schoolteachers, than to leave them as untutored tutors taking charge of the future generations and eking out a living as informal workers.

Although one should not be too quick to equate tutoring with increasing inequality (Iversen, Saha and Saha 2007) since, arguably, supplemental educational inputs may provide an opportunity for educating disadvantaged children, yet it is hard to be optimistic about the poverty-reducing and equity-enhancing potential of private coaching. As is clear from our ethnographic research and analysis of NSSO data, those who can afford it—those with higher income and more education and who live in urban areas—certainly have better options. Admittedly, there is a view that inequalities come out of a ‘missing market’ in education. That is to say, it is the absence of a market that is thought to constrain parental choice and thus seen to deny them the opportunity to avail of quality education for their children. Simply put, from this point of view market is equity-enhancing. We tend to side with the rival view that if such a market is unregulated and informal sans any bar on quality, it may be ‘disequalizing’, that is to say, causing more inequality.

VI Commercialisation in Education

The aggressive sales pitch of many private tutors and tutoring centres is obvious. Posters are displayed in regular schools, trains, buses, metros, on lamp-posts and even on trees, = (as advertisement for a tutorial centre shows). A few samples of newspaper advertisements reveals an interesting picture, but disconcerting nonetheless:

‘Running furnished AC coaching/training centre in South Kolkata available for immediate takeover. Call: 8902792243’. *The Telegraph*, Kolkata, Tuesday, 1 October 2013.

‘Master (computerised) [Govt. Regd.] Result oriented home tutor. Any Area/Class/Sub./IITJEE. 23601643’. *The Telegraph*, Kolkata, 5 October 2013.

‘Upgrade: 9830533309/25444964 for home tutor any Board/class/area. Teachers enroll 8981374757’. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 10 November 2013.



An advertisement for a tutorial centre – even Nature is not spared

One of the attractions of tuition classes seems to be the comfort of an air-conditioned room. More importantly, quite misleadingly though, but clearly in the interest of gaining the confidence of parents regarding their credibility, some tuition-promoting agencies are claiming they are registered with the government. Also, these micro-business enterprises appear to be acting as a conduit between tutors and tutees, actively mobilising both parties to enroll with them. In one of the recent municipal elections, a candidate kicked off her campaign by identifying herself as ‘Miss X from Y Tutorial’. This sort of 'side business' is now to be found everywhere.

Mr DB, a final year MA student in Bengali from a Kolkata-based university has worked as a private tutor at a coaching centre for the past three years and has recently discontinued as he is preparing to appear for his final exams. He began his tutoring career by registering himself with the coaching consultancy centre by paying a fee of `2,500. And since then for every tutoring assignment he got through this agency he had to pay them as fee his first month’s earning. He was advised by the agency not to disclose to his prospective clients that he lives in a district town; instead he was asked to tell them some ‘mundane’ lies about his place of residence, preferably not very far from the locality in which the client resides. These are some standard business practices that are routinely followed by many coaching services and agencies in order to survive and flourish in the fiercely competitive education market (interviewed on 5 August 2013).

As in several other micro and medium enterprises, in the private coaching business, too, professional agents are active in systematically mobilising both tutors and tutees through a network that is fairly organised, yet informal, since it functions mostly outside the remit of formal norms of educational recognition and regulation. These agents, like those in the business

of housing development, ‘promote’ the supply of and demand for private tutoring by pursuing a variety of advertising techniques, some of which we have discussed here. Such arrangements and practices, at times aggressive and even coercive, conjure up a system that may be described as ‘organised informality’, functioning more as calculated commerce for earning marks and money than as a spontaneous and sincere pursuit of critical knowledge. Thus, a ‘school’ and more generally schooling—that are usually thought to be a civic institution and a civic enterprise—seem to be yielding place to a view of education as market and commerce, ‘crowding out’, to use Sandel’s (2012) pithy phrase, ‘non-market values’ (also see Henig, 1994).

Several other dubious business practices seem to be springing out of the operations of the tuition market. On a few occasions, book publishers have been seen approaching popular private tutors having 300–350 tutees and offering them adequate incentives so that they recommend and endorse their books for the tutees. What still remain in the shadow are some of these activities and strategies. It is worth probing to ascertain whether in addition to encouraging passivity among students by dulling their curiosity and critical thinking, the private coaching system is also consolidating its control over the market for textbooks, study guides, question paper banks and even over the examination system.

We will dwell on the issue of conflict of interest and corruption a little more. Excessive commercialisation in education may be seen as corrupting not in the straightforward sense of bribing, but as Sandel compellingly argues (2012), in the sense of corrupting an activity of teaching and studentship, degrading and devaluing the public spirit of education. For example, teachers may force tutoring on students – called ‘compulsory private tutoring’ (Dang and Rogers 2008); they may omit part of the curriculum during regular classroom hours and deliver part of it for a fee to private tutees. They may also give preferential treatment to students who attend paid tuition classes.

The headmaster of a high school in our study locality identified ten teachers in his school who tutor students privately. Four of these ten tutors leak exam/test questions to their tutees, he observed (interviewed on 21 November 2013).

In a conversation (on 22 July 2013) with a popular Biology teacher of a city high school who is also a much sought after private tutor in his locality, he remarked,

There is competition among schoolteachers who are attached with private coaching centres and they do not distribute their special notes to students in school. That is why students contact schoolteachers privately for coaching. But he also agreed that students are now, day by day, becoming more and more dependent on notes and suggestions. They do not have in-depth knowledge in any subject. All they have is bookish knowledge.

A full-time private tutor remarked about teacher-cum-tutors:

Those schoolteachers who also engage in private tutoring often brazenly advertise their tutoring skills within the school itself and create a demand among students for attending their tuition classes. Some of these teachers require that what is written in the exams is exclusively the material given to the tutees in their own tutorial classes and often threaten students with dire consequences if they use material from other coaching classes (interviewed on 13 December 2014).

We only got some hints of the corrupt practices that seem to have developed around teaching, coaching and paper-setting activities involving some schoolteachers, private tutors and paper setters. For example, in the words of a popular full-time private tutor, ‘Paper setters often use the question papers set by private tutors like us’. Having said this he showed us a question paper and asserted, ‘This is a draft of the question paper for a degree level examination; have a look at it. Now you figure out how this draft has come to me. And I will say no more’ (interviewed on 17 June 2013). These are of course unverified claims about inside knowledge of questions on public exams that require deeper probing. But a strong articulation of that need is an essential first step.

More generally, we echo the concerns that are powerfully articulated by Sandel (2012) and Delbanco (2013) with respect to the triumph of the market in education. The increasingly dominant social preference ‘to remake the public enterprise of education on the model of private corporations’, to infuse the allegedly over-bureaucratised education system with ‘entrepreneurial energy’ may very likely lead us to valuing education in the wrong way, as an individuated consumption activity rather than as a civic, collective, and social citizenship enterprise. It may change a ‘public activity’ into ‘business’, into a pure ‘market commodity’.^{viii}

The corrupting and degrading effects of commercialisation are surely not confined to tuitions alone; rather these tend to eclipse and deform the education system in general.^{ix} The proliferation of low-cost unaided private schools, the growing interest of private educational entrepreneurs in government schools (the principal of a reputed government girls’ high school in Kolkata informed us in an interview that upmarket tuition provider FIITJEE is interested in setting up a unit on the school’s premises) and the increasingly perceptible hands-off policy stance of state authorities under the broader gambit of ‘public-private partnership’ in education all allude to the grip of commercialisation in education in general, entailing a wider scale and spectrum of tension, than what we seek to unravel here, between what is civic and what is excessively commercial in education.

VII Concluding Remarks

After spelling out the characteristics, causes and consequences of supplementary paid tutoring that thrives in different parts of India, we now turn to briefly discuss some of the reasonable

remedial courses of action we might explore in order to rescue schooling from the stiflingly firm clutches of private coaching. In fact, our analysis of the problems associated with shadow education is closely linked with our interest in its reform and regulation. Any proposals for reform must, however, aim at improving and amending both the mainstream and its shadow. What is urgently needed is an improvement in the quality of what is offered in schools. Reducing the weight of the curricula is another primary aspect of educational reform as the Indian school education system suffers from the crippling weight of what Pritchett and Beatty (2012) describe as an ‘over-ambitious curriculum’

Also, we immediately need to stop the practice of burdening children, especially the very young ones, with ‘home tasks’. This would, hopefully, make parents – especially those without a formal education – less dependent on private tutors. The demand for discontinuing home tasks at the lower classes in school, thus, is an equity issue. Recruiting adequate numbers of schoolteachers, augmenting other critical school resources and reducing the pressure of either preparing for school entrance exams or learning in the school could also be a part of essential reforms. Examinations too need to be modeled differently to discourage passive memorisation drills for the students and to encourage instead their active and creative engagement with the learning process. There are indeed many instances of innovative examinations reform that energise rather than enervate the education system. What is critical and contingent is, of course, the actualisation of such ideas.

So far as the long-established tradition of supplementary tutoring is concerned, it would be hard to eliminate or ban it altogether (Bray 2003, 2009), although the Right to Education Act of India does ban such practices. One reasonable and feasible action would be to prevent schoolteachers from tutoring their own students privately—a measure that has been adopted in many states in India and in many parts of the globe. Its implementation is of course contingent upon not just effective policy action, but upon larger public action. It is also a matter of concern that efforts to reorient the education system to make it less dependent on a ‘culture of testing’ often evokes strong resistance from private tutors, as examination pressure is one of the main reasons behind the demand for their services (ibid).

Above all, rescuing the education system from the grip of ‘dulling drills’, practiced both in schools and coaching centres, is a collective, shared and civic burden. In that vein, offering quality public coaching for free, in a manner that the Eklavya movement has tried in several districts in Madhya Pradesh, could be part of a public, and not a private, solution to public deficiencies in education. While such innovative initiatives may not lead one to expect that the practice of private tuition would go away, these may help reclaim the public space of education as one of the principal sites to challenge poverty as well as social inequality.

To sum up, cultivating the poverty-reducing and equity-enhancing potential of education is more of a public burden than a personal responsibility. Extending this logic to our current analysis, it is well to argue that the culpability to ascertain the pedagogic value and transformational promise

of the practice of supplementary private tutoring cannot be laid at the doorstep of an individual or a family. Rather, it is a collective burden to raise questions about the content and quality of the supplement. We therefore reiterate that the kind of value addition one may expect through private coaching, and for whom, is a question worth asking. Without raising and debating this question publicly, the ‘first-order’ question, namely, the question of education’s promise to help one move up and out of poverty, will remain that much neglected and unexamined.

Endnotes

ⁱ For insightful analyses of the shadow school system, see Bray (2003 and 2009), among a handful of scholars, and the references cited therein. Also see, Banerji and Wadhwa (2012), Desai et al (2010) and Pratiche (India) Trust (2002 and 2009).

ⁱⁱ The somewhat dubious market for writing and production of textbooks, study guides and question paper banks, etc. serving the tutoring market remains outside the purview of this study.

ⁱⁱⁱ The entanglement of questions of rights and choice and the debates surrounding this are, of course, more germane to the school system itself. More specifically, the steady rise in unaided private schools for the poor on the one hand and the proliferation of upmarket private schools for the ambitious middle classes on the other in the country entails a growing, if not zero-sum, opposition between the concepts of educational rights and educational choice.

^{iv} But earlier, it was usually middle- or lower-middle class men who supplemented their meagre income from junior-level or low-paying office jobs by teaching unruly sons of rich parents. Today, the picture has changed. Large coaching centres and medium or small tutorial homes are run by enormously powerful private tutors – fathers, mothers and students are merely the objects of pity. In his book *Lekhpora Kore Je* (2003) Sudhir Chakrabarty has documented and analysed the variety of coaching classes – from the cottage industry to the small factory systems – and the methods of teaching and learning used by them.

^v Interviews with children took place between June and July 2013.

^{vi} Most of these interviews have been conducted between June and December 2013.

^{vii} I am indebted to one of the reviewers for raising this point.

^{viii} Similar concerns are also expressed powerfully by Nussbaum (2010).

^{ix} I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for raising this issue.

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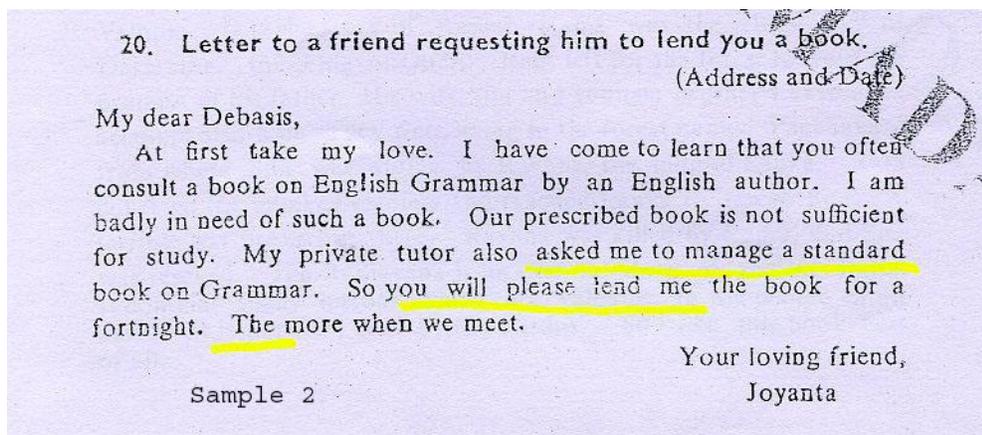
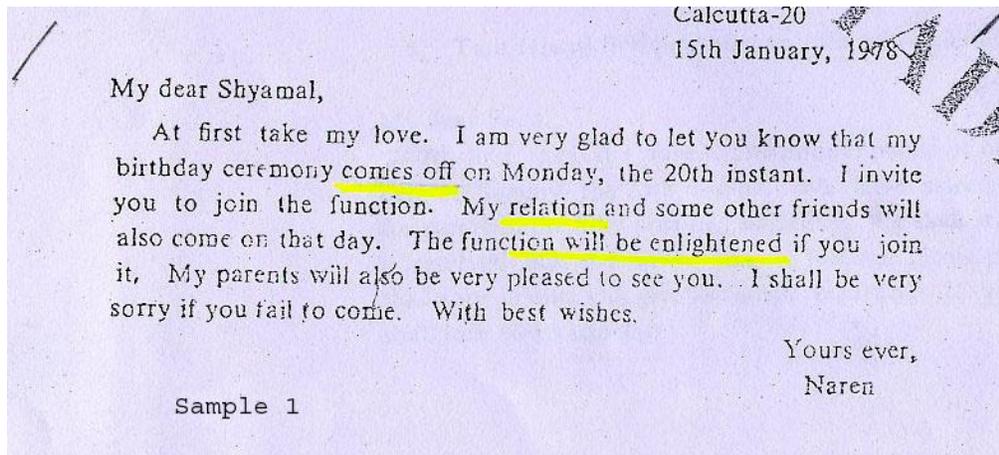
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Appendix

A few samples of study material collected from a group of tutees



Writing

⇒ The writer Jerome, K. Jerome, very proud of his packing.

1st time when he finished packing, he had to re-open the bag, because he had packed his forgotten put in his boot in.

2nd time when he was going to close the bag, he did not understand "understand". So he had to pack his tooth brush. So he had to re-open bag.

3rd time he had to open the bag, because he had packed his tobacco - punch in. This is in this way he completed his packing.

So I do not mind he was a good packer.

Sample 3

An outspoken scientist Professor Chintamani Nagesa Ramchandra Rao is a well recognized international authority on solid state and materials chemistry, who has published over one thousand four hundred research papers and forty five books. He is the third scientist after C.V. Raman and former president A.P.J. Abdul Kalam to be given the Bharat Ratna.

Professor Rao's contributions have been recognised by most scientists academic around the world through comparment of memberships and fellowships and has been honoured with several national and international awards. The official announcement says, "He currently serves as the head of the scientific advisory council to the prime-minister of India."

Sample 4

মানুষ - যেহি - অনুসৃত বলা হোব
 দেশের মোট জনসংখ্যা ও তাদের কর্মসময় এবং
 প্রাকৃতিক সঞ্চারে দেশের মোট কার্যক্ষমতা
 ও যেহি উৎপাদন ক্ষমতার যে অনুসৃত, তাহে
 হোমায়,

এই সমীচরণটি নিম্নরূপ :-

মানুষ - যেহি - অনুসৃত = ~~দেশের মোট~~

$$= \frac{\text{দেশের মোট জনসংখ্যা} + \text{তাদের কর্মসময়} + \text{প্রাকৃতিক}}{\text{দেশের মোট কার্যক্ষমতা} \times \text{যেহি উৎপাদন ক্ষমতা}}$$

উদাহরণ জরুরি বলা যাবে, ২০০৪ সালে ভারতের
 জনসংখ্যা ১১৪৪০ লক্ষ হৈ এবং তাদের কার্যক্ষমতা
 মোট জন ২৪ লক্ষ কর্ম কি. হি, উৎপাদন

মানুষ - যেহি - অনুসৃত = $\frac{114,80,00,000 \text{ জন}}{28,00,000 \text{ কর্ম কি. হি}}$

Sample 5

M. Majumdar: The Shadow School System and New Class Divisions in India
In: Working Papers of the Max Weber Foundation's Transnational Research Group India
"Poverty Reduction and Policy for the Poor between the State and Private Actors: Education
Policy in India since the Nineteenth Century"
Year of Publication: 2014