

Looking Beyond Schools: Analyzing Private Tuition in Schools in the Context of West Bengal

Abstract

There is an increasing growth of the informal education market in school education of which private tuition is one form and this relatively has garnered less attention in research in India. Private tuitions pose a threat to the idea of 'education for all' as mandated by RTE (2009) because it privileges the ones who can afford it at the cost of others. By taking the case of West Bengal, the paper establishes how private tuitions have a variety of implications and effects on society. This includes affecting the school system, the family dynamics and then also creating social unrest among different sections of the society. It has been found that across districts of West Bengal there is variation in terms of percentage of students going for tuition that indicates variation in the determinants of demand. As schools and private tuitions are interdependent, what a child learns in tuitions affect school outcomes particularly because school teachers are also found to be part of this market. Section 28E of RTE (2009) prohibits school teachers from providing private tuition and it needs to be implemented to increase accountability of school teachers, which would partly solve the problem of increasing reliance on private tuition.

Introduction

The debate on school education in India has in recent time been centered on the issue of learning outcome. It has moved away from the long debated issue of access. The has intensified since the inception of sustainable development goals (SDGs), which were laid out by UNDP in 2016. Quality education is paramount to achieving these goals, a lot of attention in the policy circle is moved around improving the quality of school education. But improving school quality does not only depend on focusing on what a child learns in school but also on what she learns outside and that includes out of school tuitions. It is a common observation that many students mediate between formal (school) and informal (private tuition) learning spaces. If we lose sight of the growing private tutoring market that affects learning, achieving quality education would be a distant dream.

Apart from quality, the issue of access also becomes pertinent again when the private tuition market is analysed based on this market affordability being created between the haves and the have nots (Majumdar, 2014). It also poses a challenge to the Right to Education Act (2009) that mandates equal education for all indian school education system is beset with contradictions. On the one hand, eight million children are out of school (The Economic Times, 2014) but on the other hand, one out of every four students goes for private tuition (NSSO, 2014). This raises doubts on the functioning of the school system and means for school going children the private cost of education is high as out of school expenditure is also necessary (Azam, 2016). What is more intriguing is that the poorer section of the population also goes for private tuition (about 30% of the lowest income quintile group according to NSSO, 2014) does some.

Besides (although) although the burden of tutoring falls heavily on the poorer parents as expenditure on tuition constitutes a high proportion of their educational expenditure (Majumdar, 2014). Research focusing on informal outgrowths has been very few in India (Sujatha, 2014; Azam, 2016) and it is time that it is discussed in policies before we fail to keep track of its pace.

While the overall percentage of students going to tuition in India is 25.4% in India, the pattern and growth of private tuition (across India also known as shadow education) has not been uniform across states. Tripura (82.3%) and West Bengal (79.2%) have been found to have a large section of students going for private tuition according to the NSSO data (2014). These states also have a higher percentage of students going to government schools. Studies based on tutoring (Dang & Rogers, 2008; Davies, 2004) suggest a possible linkage between Government schools and private tuition where government schools and private tuition are taken as one combined strategy versus the enrolment in private school. The states have their own histories of private tuitions and it is important to study the growth and the emergence of the market within their specific context. The paper is therefore an attempt to foreground the burgeoning rise of private tuition in the state of West Bengal reported by NSSO (2014) data by looking at various districts and through media reports. In the next section, the meaning and pattern of private tuition has been explored through various studies in the literature.

Private tuition as a form of 'shadow education': Some insights from the literature

This market which is commonly known as the 'shadow education' market or 'hidden market' or informal market has attracted attention from researchers until recently when the market which was once an informal business organized through personal networks among individual tutors and

students got transformed into an industry marked by franchising, marketing and corporate strategies (de Castro & de Guzman, 2014). The tutoring industry is growing at a rate of 7% per year in some countries and globally, is set to surpass \$100 billion by 2018, according to Global Industry Analysts Inc, a research firm in San Jose, California.¹ In India the coaching industry is a 6.4 billion dollar industry.² The proportion of students taking private tuition gradually increased from 18.8 % in age group 6-24 in 2007-08 to 25.9% in 2014 (NSSO, 2007-08 and 2014-15). The increasing participation in private tuition by students and the growth of the coaching industry cannot but make us ponder on the kind of impetus it provides to its 'customers' for its smooth functioning. This necessitates probing deeper into the nature of the market and what forces are central to fostering this market by taking parents/students and providers together. Private tuition, also known as shadow education³ can be defined as a "set of educational activities outside formal schooling that are designed to improve a student's chances of successfully moving through the allocation process" (Stevenson & Baker, 1992).

This market has the elements of the commodity market in it. It is easier for a parent to change the tutor if he is not satisfied with the service provided, just as a consumer can change brands of goods if he is not satisfied with the product i.e. the exit cost is low. Operating outside the ambit of formal schools, this market is providing inputs to the students for examinations and jobs. Thus the learning outcome of a student is no more a derivative of schools alone but 'outside' school inputs as well.

1. Accessed on 1st September, 2017 from website: <http://www.bbc.com/capital/story/20131016-the-global-tutoring-economy>

2 Retrieved from the website: <http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/education/in-india-private-coaching-is-65billion-business/article3606716.ece>

3 Although 'shadow education' is a broader term encompassing all types of tutoring including coaching industry, in this study the shadow education and private tuition is used interchangeably.

This is worrisome as it also sometimes leads to teachers losing motivation to teach in the class and incentivizes them to teach poorly (Biswal, 1999; Jayachandran, 2014).

According to studies one of the reasons that has led to the incidence of private tutoring in developing countries is the poor functioning of government schools (Baker et al., 2001; Glewwe & Kremer, 2006; Chaudhury et al., 2006) and poor pay of teachers, who then look for additional income. But recent studies in Indian context suggest that it is students from private schools who mainly go for private tuition (Azam, 2016; Banerjee and Wadhwa, 2012). This challenges the assumption that tuition is the preserve of government school students and tuition and govt. school goes together. This poses the question whether this implies that the school system as a whole has failed? Dreze and Sen (2013) have pointed out that teachers' salary in India is much higher than that in China and other East Asian countries and this raises the question about their engagement with tuition. Focusing on the demand side, Sen (2009:14) pointed out in the context of West Bengal that we quote "this development is seen as having resulted from the pursuit of the perceived *competitive* benefits to privately tutored children over others". This "artificially generated essentiality" as Sen (2009) points out is harmful for first generation learners who cannot afford tutoring. There is also an obsession with getting higher marks in exam races which might also be a cause for the reliance on private tuition in the Indian case. As the number of prestigious institutions like IITs is few in numbers, the competition of getting into these institutions is high which results in the high demand for coaching centres. Therefore in the context of China Zhang & Bray (2017) assert that the market has reduced learning into performativity and professionalism and ethical commitments have been devalued in the face of market principles and institutional survival. In Canada, the market is also seen as a school choice by default (Davies, 2004).

It is found that families with better resources are able to secure not only greater quantities but better qualities of tutoring (Bray & Kobakhidze, 2014; Bray, 2007). Some families invest in tutoring for gaining a competitive edge and some (low achievers) see it as a way of passing the exam (Bray, 2007). The difference in the attitudes towards tutoring prompts one to ask how aspirations are different across families coming from different class structures. It is also important to ask how the existence of differentiated nature of the market from high end coaching centres to low end tuition centres is exacerbating inequality in the market. Given the hierarchical nature of the market with different types of providers, the question is how far the families from different backgrounds are able to exercise choice outside the formal schooling market. There is an individuated effort that has surfaced in the sphere of school education wherein parents spare an extra amount either to remedy the learning gap or to provide a competitive edge to their children. The additional expenditure that is incurred indicates that a parent can easily use the 'exit' option instead of raising 'voice' if he is unsatisfied with the service delivered by the school. This can have a serious bearing on school ethos and on people who lack the ability to pay. Thus this market acts like any other goods market where a person can be denied basic right on the basis of his affordability.

The case of private tuition in West Bengal

West Bengal as a case is particularly interesting because of the fact that it has the highest proportion of private tuition goes at the secondary and higher secondary level among the states with a large proportion of students opting for tuition from different institutions. The percentage is 79.45% from government schools, 82.36% from private aided and 72.40 % from private unaided schools. In the context of West Bengal, what we see in general is that students opt for

tuition irrespective of the type of institution (private or government). This questions the relevance of schools in imparting education. As students avail tuition from all types of institutions, it is imperative to ask whether different providers are serving different types of 'clients' located across different institutions. In other words, is the nature of the tutoring market in different types of institutions (private aided, private unaided and government) different and is there a hierarchy in the market for tuition? The market is segmented along income lines as there is a difference of Rs. 1000 in terms of per capita monthly consumption between those who are availing tuition from Government school vis-à-vis private unaided school (calculated from NSSO, 2014-15). One can thus expect that the type of tuition varies between institutions.

If one wishes to extract the possible linkage between the government school goers and private tuition in the districts of West Bengal, one may fail to find such linkages. Table 1 shows the distribution of students across various institutions in

several districts of West Bengal and the percentage of private tuition goers in each district. It shows that within the districts of West Bengal, Nadia district (93.7%) has the highest number of private tuition goers and Uttar Dinajpur has the lowest number of private tuition goers (49.8%). This reflects variation within districts. Among all the districts, Bankura makes an interesting case as it has the highest number of students in Government schools and has the second lowest tuition goers. On the other hand, Kolkata has the highest number of students in private unaided schools and is one of the districts with a higher percentage of private tuition goers. This possibly suggests that government schools have been functioning well in Bankura due to which the phenomenon of tuition is less in that district as compared to Kolkata. Also, this argument that the school system solely determines demand for private tuition is clearly false and also questions the rhetoric that private schools function better than government schools. This calls for taking into account the cultural dimension of private tuition apart from looking at schools.

Table 1: Distribution of students across various types of schools and percentage of students going for private tuition

District	Students in Government School (%)	Students in Private aided School (%)	Students in Private Unaided School (%)	Students attending private tuition (%)
Darjeeling	34.41	29.48	36.11	72.9
Jalpaiguri	90.19	1.57	8.25	68.2
Cooch Bihar	98.24	0.00	1.76	73.9
Uttar Dinajpur	94.30	2.52	2.29	49.8
Dakshin Dinajpur	98.24	0.17	1.59	76.9
Maldah	91.18	2.22	5.56	70.9
Murshidabad	95.42	1.36	1.53	77.0
Birbhum	95.47	0.61	3.92	81.6
Bardhaman	88.89	6.49	4.61	91.5
Nadia	94.27	1.34	4.39	93.7
North 24 parganas	78.51	6.30	14.54	84.3
Hooghly	90.89	5.44	3.67	82.0
Bankura	99.58	0.09	0.33	63.3
Puruliya	99.54	0.18	0.28	74.7

District	Students in Government School (%)	Students in Private aided School (%)	Students in Private Unaided School (%)	Students attending private tuition (%)
Howrah	89.35	4.76	5.42	93.0
Kolkata	41.24	18.45	40.31	81.6
South 24 Parganas	77.46	9.87	6.33	83.5
Paschim Medinipur	92.10	0.77	3.56	75.6
Purba Medinipur	94.28	0.43	5.29	82.9

Source: Author's calculation from NSSO (2014)

Table 2 provides further insights by giving percentages of private tuition goes across each type of institution in various districts. It shows that Bankura has all of the 0.09% students going to private tuition from the private unaided schools as against 63% tuition goes from the total number of schools. In Kolkata, it is mostly students from Government schools who opt for private tuition (90%). Thus the two districts provide us with two contrasting cases- in Bankura students from private unaided schools are more reliant on private tuition while Kolkata presents just the opposite picture. These two contrasting cases pose questions on location, type of schools and type of private tutors available at the two sites. The demographic features of the two are different in the sense that Kolkata is urbanized whereas Bankura has 12 Urban Towns (District Census Report, 2011, West Bengal) and urbanization has

been slow here. So the question is it the location or absence of suppliers or presence of good quality government schools which makes Bankura different from Kolkata? Also we should ask, if only Urban Bankura and Kolkata were to be compared, would the difference be less stark? These questions need to be answered through qualitative surveys. Literature from other sources, suggests that private tuition is more prominent in the urban areas (Brehm and Silova 2014; Kim & Lee, 2010; Tansel & Bircan, 2006) but it does not throw light on the difference between two urban sites that have different contexts. The difference in tutoring at these two urban sites can illuminate the supply side story. It would be quite interesting to see how the market response at the two different sites might be different due to reasons specific to the particular setting.

Table 2: Percentage of students attending private tuition within each type of school

District	Students in government schools attending private tuition (%)	Students in private aided school attending private tuition	Students in private unaided schools attending private tuition
Darjeeling	66.74	89.57	65.22
Jalpaiguri	68.77	61.14	63.48
Cooch Bihar	74.13		61.30
Uttar Dinajpur	48.89	56.72	62.31
Dakshin Dinajpur	77.25	0.00	62.16
Maldah	70.28	67.06	77.36
Murshidabad	76.16	85.67	98.63
Birbhum	80.93	74.84	100.00
Bardhaman	92.81	76.16	88.21

District	Students in government schools attending private tuition (%)	Students in private aided school attending private tuition	Students in private unaided schools attending private tuition
Nadia	94.34	93.50	78.94
North 24 Parganas	87.70	81.44	66.43
Hooghly	83.85	55.00	77.37
Bankura	63.23	32.83	100.00
Puruliya	74.61	100.00	100.00
Howrah	94.72	86.31	72.72
Kolkata	90.37	83.24	71.90
South 24 Parganas	82.94	94.40	73.26
Paschim Medinipur	75.05	81.38	85.39
Purba Medinipur	83.93	87.03	63.28
West Bengal	79.45	82.36	72.40

Source: Author's calculation from NSSO (2014)

The Question of Family Dynamics

Another case which merits attention in the context of West Bengal is the issue of gender. Contrary to the case of India, where there is a bias in favour of boys in the investment decision of private education (Azam, 2016; Sahoo, 2017), West Bengal shows that the decision to invest in private tuition is in favour of girls at the secondary (94.7% girls and 91.5% boys)⁴ and higher secondary level. Given the fact that private tuition expenditure is discretionary in nature, it can be expected that girls' participation will be less as compared to boys as labour market returns are considered less for girls. The perception generally is that as girls are married off, the returns from girl's education does not accrue to the family but that is not seen here. This observation has to be explained and situated in the context of West Bengal. We can ask if it is a response to the marriage market where educated brides are more in demand for child rearing? As Donner has said that the logic of spending on girl children might be a project of making "ideal committed mothers" who are expected to take charge of child's education as a full time job which requires skills (Donner 2016).

⁴ Calculation based on NSSO data (2014-15) for school education

This perspective holds true for the middle class mothers in Kolkata as Donner (2016) pointed out. This observation also prompts us to ask how the macro picture of no real gender bias at higher levels of education reflects at micro reality. It is important to probe deeper into the class position of the student, the interaction between choice of school and expenditure on tuition and the type of tutors assigned for the girl child. This involves looking at intra household decision making.

West Bengal gives a different picture where more than 85% students from the lowest quintile group (calculated from NSSO, 2014-15) opt for tuition implying that they are able to afford some form of tuition in this differentiated market.⁵ As the market is segmented, it is interesting to see how the aspirations of the people from different social backgrounds meet at the education marketplace where the providers range from high end coaching institutes, to school teachers to unemployed youth. In trying to understand choice, decisions within the family with respect to allocation of resources

⁵ Based on NSSO (2014-15) it has been calculated that even within a particular urban space (Kolkata) private tuition expenditure (annual) varies from Rs.4853.9 in the lowest quintile to Rs.24771 in the highest quintile.

will be of particular interest as West Bengal has more percentage of girls going for private tuition at the secondary level (94% girls as against 91.5% boys). This questioning the kind of tuition availed by them, the expenditure incurred on them and the interaction between the type of school they attend and the type of tutor they avail, would be interesting.

Tracing the root of private tuition in West Bengal

In order to understand the tuition market in West Bengal, it is pertinent to historically trace the developments in education policies in West Bengal which are responsible for shaping the culture of tutoring. In 1983, the Left Government abolished English at the primary level as a strategy to increase enrolment and to decrease dropout mainly for students of rural Bengal. Although the policy increased enrolment it had a far reaching effect which was seen in the increase in private tutoring to supplement learning of English (Roy, 2014) as English is valuable in terms of getting entry into the labour market. The policy was revoked in 2004 with reintroduction of English but by then the demand for tutoring had already set in. Attempts have been taken by the Government of West Bengal to curb the practice of tutoring students by school teachers. In 2001 the Government banned private tuition of regular teachers in government and government aided schools and colleges (SCERT, 2009), but the ban did not seem to be effectively implemented as tutoring became an everyday phenomenon in the lives of children and there are instances of coercing students into tuition classes (*The Telegraph* 2010). Yet another time the ban was reintroduced in 2010 which covered the school teachers of all the boards in Bengal (*Times of India* 2010). Section 28 E of the RTE (Right to Education) Act, also states school teachers' private gain outside the school as a punishable offence. Despite these attempts, private tuition is growing and it appears to be deeply entrenched in the education system.

What is more noteworthy is that the incidence of private tuition has brought about social unrest in some parts of West Bengal between the unemployed youth and the school teachers. In Islampur, members of Unemployed Private Tutors' Association filed a complaint with the head teachers of schools against the school teachers as the school teachers are depriving them of their means of livelihood by taking coaching classes (*The Telegraph* 2007). Similar incident occurred in Murshidabad where unemployed young men moved to the high court to demand action against school teachers engaged in tutoring (*The Telegraph* 2006). Clearly, in West Bengal where the number of educated unemployed is quite high (2.5 million applicants for 6000 government jobs)⁶, private tuition is a boon for the unemployed youth as it continues to give them income until they hit a job. On the other hand, there are vested interests in the market in the form of 'star' coaching centres which are remarkably getting visible in urban Kolkata.

Private tuition market in West Bengal thus narrates a complex tale of helplessness of unemployed youth, aspirations of parents from different backgrounds, passage to earn 'extra' income for school teachers, lucrative business opportunities for coaching centres and above all a crisis in the education system.

Some Concerns

The increasing use of 'market' metaphor in education raises concern about the ways school education is changing. While there are changes happening in the mainstream education market with the application of market principles, there exists a parallel market which is growing like a shadow with the mainstream and changing the way education is envisaged today by making children and parents as consumers in the education market. To use Brown's (1990) words, 'parentocracy' characterizes the

⁶ Accessed from <http://www.livemint.com/Politics/Oa4T5XSitV4uugtonxzijL/25-million-compete-for-6000-govt-jobs-in-West-Bengal.html> on 2nd November, 2017.

education system wherein education that the child receives is a function of parents' wealth and wish and not ability or effort of the children. The parallel market i.e. the private tuition market is thus a gateway to exercise choice outside the formal schooling with the ideology of 'parentocracy' paving way for a 'customized' education market based on ability to pay. The culture of competition fuelled by globalization has resulted in families viewing investment in education as a way to get entry into the labour market (Bray, Kwo & Jokić, 2016). On the other hand, there are vested interests in the education market which gets reflected in the growth of various forms of tutoring centres and franchises catering to the demand for customized education (Aurini, 2004). In Japan, Canada, Korea, the United States, Taiwan, Brazil, Australia, corporations such as Kumon, Sylvan Learning Center, Academy for Mathematics and Science, and Oxford learning center have opened hundreds of sites across the country (de Castro & de Guzman, 2014). These forces operating outside the formal schooling shape the decision making

and outcomes of formal schools which merit attention because it can have serious bearing on school ethos and reinforce the existing social inequality. There is also an element of coercion with school teachers engaging in tutoring children where the parents are not left with enough choice. The market thus presents us with the complexities of choice or to quote Majumdar (2018) 'there is no alternative (TINA)' situation.

As unemployment has pushed many educated youths to become suppliers in the private tuition market, the market is increasingly becoming one's source of survival as well. There are various ways one can think of tackling this problem. One is to fill the vacant positions in various schools which are under staffed and absorb the unemployed youth. The other is to implement section 28E of RTE (2009) from time to time so that school teachers do not engage in private tuition. If school teachers continue to teach outside school as tutors this would make school education ineffective and will render schools only as certificate issuing authorities.

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