

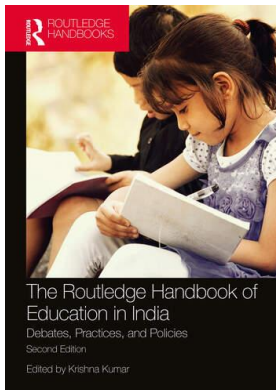
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Krishna Kumar

Access, success, and excess

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Manabi Majumdar

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Access, success, and excess

Debating shadow education in India

Manabi Majumdar

‘Nothing is your own except the spelling mistakes.’ This was what a legendary teacher in Kolkata once commented in the answer-script of a student studying in a highly reputable college of the city. What this remark underlines, above all, is the necessity to envision the purpose of learning as that of cultivating an ability to think on one’s own, and in that sense to be creative, curious, and independent in either solving an academic puzzle or thinking critically as a citizen and tending ‘imaginative empathy’ for others in a democratic society. Our intellectual and individual development and our social flourishing are contingent upon the promotion of such deeper learning.

No doubt, education is also a route to a decent career path, a ‘positional good’ likely to improve one’s social status, and a key to economic accomplishment. The right balance between these instrumental motivations of education and the more intrinsic values that are stated above is not easy to strike. This is particularly so at a time when we observe a growing conviction around us that presumes instrumental purposes to be the only driving engine of education, thereby engendering a great deal of potential to harm the creative process of learning.

It is well to note that education as an innovative process is also, quintessentially, a collective and connected human endeavour to produce and promote what Boyle (2002) describes as the ‘commons of the mind’ – a public domain of ideas that should not be fenced off. In an inequality-sequestered country like India, however, the social system of education was and to a considerable extent still is not an open and inclusive space that is accessible to all. That is why the more recent equity-enhancing education initiatives in the country, such as the Right to Education Act, have focused on the first-order question of educational access. However with such steps towards massification of basic educational opportunities, there has also grown, especially among the privileged social classes, an anxious competition to stay ahead of the masses, to be the ‘country’s first boy’, and to succeed in tomorrow’s test as well as in those to follow for a better career, higher status, and more and more social and cultural capital. Even the interest of international donors has shifted from access to learning outcomes measured mainly in terms of test scores and success in examinations. This swing from access to success in educational goals and practices has captured the popular imagination to produce, in turn, a homogeneous thinking across social classes about the credence of education’s instrumental purposes, to the relative neglect of its intrinsic values. And all this, we proceed to argue below, has engendered various

forms of excesses in education, including excessive commercialisation in education, creating in turn a new ethos of teaching and learning that is individuated and isolated rather than collective and collaborative. Teachers and students, tutors and tutees are driven to 'bowl alone' rather than work as a team. It is against this backdrop of competing pressures of educational access, success, and excess that we attempt to analyse in the remainder of the chapter the extent, effectiveness, and equity implications of supplementary private tutoring in India – a widespread practice that is described as the 'shadow' (Bray 2007, 2009; Marimuthu *et al.* 1991) of mainstream schooling. The analysis remains limited as it focuses mainly on the school education sector in the country to the relative neglect of higher levels of education; its West Bengal-centric empirical focus constitutes another source of its limitation.

Isn't private tutoring old news?

Amrita Bazar Patrika – a leading newspaper that used to be published from Calcutta (now Kolkata), the premier city of British India – regularly carried advertisements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries either seeking private tutors or offering tutoring services for students studying in schools and colleges. A small sample of these notices shown below displays aspirations, preferences, and prejudices that characterised familial as well as social educational strategies in those days.

Notice: Required a private tutor to take charge of two boys, one of whom is preparing for the next Entrance. Hours of attendance 10–30 A.M. to 5–30 P.M. He must be graduate, and possessed of experience in the art of teaching. Certificate of good moral character required. Any reasonable pay will be allowed. Apply to undersigned, stating terms. Chunder Narain Singh, 1, Elysium Row, The 22nd August, 1897.

(*Amrita Bazar Patrika* 23 August 1897)

Notice: Wanted a private tutor for the grandson of Babu Cally Kissen Tagore. Pay handsomely according to qualifications. None need apply who has no experience in coaching up sons of noblemen. Preference will be given to those who served under court of wards as guardian tutor. For further particulars candidates may apply personally to the Manager. Applications should be addressed to Babu Hem Chandra Chatterjee, Manager to the Estate of C.K. Tagore Esqr., No-1, and Darponarayan Tagore Street, Calcutta. Narendranatha Gupta, Astt. Manager.

(*Amrita Bazar Patrika* 15 March 1899: 3)

Wanted a graduate qualified in Mathematics as a private tutor. Apply to Kanay Lall Mukherjee, Hurtokeebagan, Calcutta.

(*Amrita Bazar Patrika* 29 October 1900: 13)

It is quite evident that the demand for home tutors, attuned understandably to economic wherewithal, came mainly from the privileged classes of society. Furthermore, the educated elite were not hesitant in exhibiting their class, caste, and community biases while looking for a prospective home tutor. There were clear-cut statements like the following: 'An elderly Brahmin or Baidya graduate strong in English with considerable experience in teaching will be preferred' (28 March 1905) or 'A "Shea" Mahomedan will be preferred' (23 January 1913: 3) and so on. Alongside class, caste, and community biases, there was a palpable gender bias; of those

advertisements sifted, not a single one asked for extra coaching for girl students. On the contrary, perhaps to prevent any unwelcome possibility of romance between the prospective resident private tutor and the young wife or daughter of the family, some advertisements categorically mentioned that ‘Only men ... of advanced age, good health and morals, and wearing gray beard, need apply’ (13 July 1906).

These advertisements, at the same time, indicated a clear preference for professionally qualified people, having experience in ‘the art of teaching’. Those who offered themselves as potential private tutors also stressed their professional background and competence: For example, ‘A gentleman (Indian) educated at an English University is open to engagement as Private tutor to a wealthy man’s son in Calcutta or neighbouring suburbs on reasonable terms’ (*Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 2 May 1905: 2). No doubt, paid private lessons were the preserve of the privileged and the privileged sought the help of trained practitioners for their children’s educational development.

Clearly, there is a long history of private tutoring in this country.

What is new about the present paradigm of private tuition?

Over the last several decades the demand for private tutoring has been growing around the world, and India is no exception in this respect. On the one hand there are large private tutoring industries that are now known to exist in the country; at the other end of the spectrum there exist home-based small outfits comparable to cottage industries. What is new about the recent incarnation of shadow education are its scale, scope, and salience at almost every level of education – starting from pre-school education to postgraduate level. Also, it is considered essential for students of all abilities – from underachievers to class-toppers. Parents from all social strata consider it ‘essential’ to have private tutors for their children, even to master the basics in education (Sen 2002), irrespective of their children’s needs and abilities, of the type of school they attend, and of the quality of teaching-learning available in these schools. So it is not that the students who take private tuition are only from ‘poorly’ performing state schools; rather, the majority of them are from private schools.

What is the reason behind this ‘there is no alternative’ (TINA) mentality? To boost exam results is the most truthful and straightforward answer. Also, the mainstream and its shadow increasingly look and function alike (which was not the case earlier), suggesting how education itself is being ‘recast’ (Macpherson *et al.* 2014), under the weight of commercial interests. Moreover, both mainstream and shadow schooling have become excessively test-centric; the pressure on students to perform well in examinations has become intense. They are drawn into a fierce battle to stay ahead of other students. These excesses have led in turn to an intensification of the coaching culture. Interestingly, though schools and coaching classes seem to mimic each other, at times the out-of-school supplementary tutoring service appears to create a substitution effect, that is to say, it works to reduce the formal school to a mere certification centre. This overshadowing quality of the shadow is a relatively recent change.

Again, while the well-to-do parents in the past had (as they do now) the resources and information to judge the professional competence of tutors, less affluent parents internalise the pressure to hire tutors for their school-going children but are constrained by information asymmetry and limited means to ascertain the quality of such services. As a result, though parents across the social spectrum seem to harbour homogenised thinking about the need for paid coaching, since their choice sets and their actual choices remain highly stratified – parents from disadvantaged backgrounds often employ high-school graduates or high-school ‘fails’ as tutors – homogenisation of

family strategies still does not hold promises of equalisation of opportunities, let alone outcomes. So today's massification of the culture of tutoring, which was strictly the preserve of the privileged in the past, cannot be straightforwardly taken to have an equity-enhancing potential. Wealthy parents still have the advantage to 'buy' better results for their children. The fresh inequalities that such a system is likely to generate and its pervasive nature and many forms thus rationalise the need to examine this phenomenon afresh.

It would be myopic, of course, to start with the premise that any form of private tutoring is necessarily and straightforwardly bad. Not all tutoring is about exam preparation and there can be some academic benefits of private lessons for some students. Still, it would be limiting not to pay heed to the serious negative implications of this steadily maturing phenomenon for the education system as a whole.

The scope of private tutoring

Estimates of the number of pupils going for paid supplementary coaching are not easy to come by, partly because the private domain in which transactions between tutors and tutees take place is an unregulated zone, lying beyond the ambit of any formal documentation. A handful of available studies suggest that in many parts of India, particularly in states like West Bengal and Tripura, private tuition is now considered an 'essential'. The statistics in the Pratichi Education Report I and II (2002 and 2009) show the picture of dependence on tuition in Bengal quite clearly. Between 2002 and 2009, private tutor-dependent students in primary education have increased from 57 per cent to 64 per cent, and among 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 obtaining extra help, 54 per cent of parents said it was because they could not afford coaching centres.

The India Human Development survey data show that in 2004–05, 20 per cent of children in the age group 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: 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 Centre (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).

The more recent National Sample Survey on household expenditure on education (Government of India 2015) provides figures on proportions of pupils, attending mainstream school, that also receive extra coaching, at various levels of school education (see Table 20.1). For the country as a whole, in urban India in particular, a little less than 40 per cent of students enrolled in formal school go for private lessons. In rural areas of the country the incidence of this supplementation at different levels of the school sector is comparatively lower, ranging between roughly 20 and 30 per cent. Strikingly, in states like West Bengal and Tripura, such dependence on extra coaching is near-universal among the pupils enrolled in formal school. The extent to which 'shadow education' has broken into the school life of a child in Bengal in our time is rather exceptional.

Table 20.1 Percentage of students (5–29 years) using private tuition, 2014

	Level of education	Rural	Urban
India	Primary	18.2	32.5
	Upper primary	23	36.2
	Secondary	33.3	46.1
	Higher secondary	31.2	44.9
	All	23.2	37.4
West Bengal	Primary	63.9	78.3
	Upper primary	85.3	91.3
	Secondary	89.7	93.1
	Higher secondary	88.1	95.5
	All	76.8	87.3

Source: calculated from Social Consumption in India: Education, NSS 71st Round, January–June 2014.

Private tutoring effect on learning outcomes and school processes

The impact of private tutoring on students' achievement is not easy to ascertain, since it is particularly hard to disentangle its effects from those like family and school effects; in particular, estimating heterogeneous effects of extra coaching from abilities and efforts of tutees who gain differentially from the same tutor is a challenge. Supposing we are able to take care of these methodological issues, still the available evidence of its effectiveness is mixed. Some studies indicate positive but short-term effects in improving students' test scores, but not necessarily bettering scores on the university entrance examination (Lee 2013).

In India, among the handful of available studies, scholarly analyses based on recent ASER data allude to a 'divide' between those who go to private school or coaching classes and those who do not, implicitly suggesting an advantage of privatisation in education. However, only a small proportion of that advantage, as per the same source of data, is attributable to private schooling or coaching (Wadhwa 2015).

This admitted, some studies (Banerji and Wadhwa 2012; Desai *et al.* 2010) suggest 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. Our preliminary classroom observations in a few coaching centres, however, 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.

We therefore pause here to ask the first-order question of what we are measuring in the name of academic achievement. As Kumar (2012) forcefully argues, the crude measures that usually make up the standard assessments 'mask the epistemic sterility of the curriculum, the pedagogic process and examination'. So the anxiety that our children are not learning much, even after attending school for years together, is a real concern, partly because the measuring rod itself fails to assess deeper learning. As a result, those who succeed in tests may still remain 'know-nots' in a substantive sense, let alone those who do not. And yet, the formal schools as well as out-of-school tuition classes increasingly look like mere test preparation centres. Consequently, and unsurprisingly, 'coaching to the test' may prove 'effective' as far as improving scores is concerned, but in the process can discourage 'imaginative learning'.

What effects does private tuition have on the school system and school processes? One way in which the impact can be assessed is with respect to students' attention to lessons in class. Lee's (2013) study shows some positive though nominal influence of private tutoring on students' attentiveness in class, especially in the low-ability group of students. In other words, low-achievers pay more attention to lessons in class if they go for extra coaching. Supplementary private lessons may help improve their confidence level and interest to participate in classroom activities. There are, however, counter-examples of students losing interest in classroom activities when they feel confident that they have out-of-school support to guarantee their examination success.

Similarly, teachers' attention to classroom activities, their pedagogic practices and their 'learning by doing' are likely to be affected by their engagement as private tutors, when they are so engaged. The practice of growing private tuition by teachers employed in private as well as public educational institutions is not uncommon. Some teachers maintain that tutoring improves their classroom teaching. However, a number of concerns have been raised in this respect in the scholarly literature that is available. Some claim that the parallel informal system disrupts the school system; it has a negative influence on teacher development and effectiveness when school teachers double up as private tutors. It is alleged that these teachers do not spend sufficient time teaching in the school but virtually compel the students to attend tuition classes. The Tripura High Court recently observed that 'even in government colonies where the teachers have been provided accommodation, they are running "teaching shops"' (*The Shillong Times* 21 June 2015). Indeed, private coaching is likely to create a conflict of interest between the official duty of a school teacher and his/her private practice, when during private lessons she/he offers for a fee to his/her own pupils for what she/he is supposed to provide anyway.

One relatively understudied concern relates to the extent to which school teachers stand to lose on 'peer learning' owing to their private solitary practices. To be sure, at many coaching centres there are usually a host of tutors coaching several batches of tutees. But the structure of these sessions is such that these tutors are like ships that pass in the night, coexisting but hardly interacting with each other and missing the 'camaraderie of the staff room'. But, evidence – national and international – suggests that to improve teaching and learning it is imperative to give teachers time and encouragement to collaborate to improve their work, and to receive feedback from their peers about how to teach specific concepts and content to particular students (Batra 2015; Darling–Hammond 2014–15; Kumar 1994). Such cooperative practices are harder to cultivate and sustain in an environment of competitive striving that defines the core of a privatised solution such as paid coaching in order to address what are quintessentially public deficiencies (for example, gaps in teacher preparation and teaching, in curricular and examination reforms, and so on). What a public community of teachers and educators can ideally attempt to do to improve the quality of education in the country is rendered an isolated strategy. Teaching and learning activities in mainstream school thus fail to flourish under the spell of 'shadow education'.

Two related dimensions of the mainstream education system that may be shortchanged as a result of the predominance of shadow education are the importance of teacher preparation on the one hand and of lessening of teacher isolation on the other. While a majority of policymakers and parents view frequent testing as a means of enhancing quality of learning in schools, few pay attention to the fact that to reduce the learning gap it is essential to focus on the teaching gap and by extension on teacher preparation (Batra 2015).

If the mainstream debate on the quality of education remains rather indifferent to the critical need to examine 'curriculum and pedagogic processes that prepare and support teachers' (ibid.) to not only deal with their professional challenges but also become sensitive to their social

justice mission, it is found utterly mute and unconcerned about the quality of supplementary tutoring that is available in the market in myriad forms and price ranges. It is as though the market is the final arbiter of quality. As a result, if school teachers are expected to go through at least some training, anybody is accepted as a tutor – a professional or a greenhorn or even a dropout – as long as there is a semblance of a drill that the drill master compels tutees to perform ostensibly to improve their test scores. The limitation of rote methods as a pedagogical practice is not much of a concern. Anyone, thus, can set up as a tutor by simply putting up an advertisement on the school walls, in a local shop window, at the railway or bus station, or in the newspaper.

Again, teaching is a ‘team sport’ (Darling–Hammond 2014–15). In particular, those teachers who have to teach children in poverty, and children from disadvantaged backgrounds, can benefit from working together, since there is a need for concerted thinking about how to address both pedagogical and social challenges that are involved in such instances. If the formal education system appears lukewarm to this need for professional interactions and exchanges among teachers, the structure of tutoring is thoroughly frozen to the idea of common effort. The individual tutors and coaching centres as well as the attending tutees are all engaged in isolated and fiercely competitive striving, away from opportunities for peer learning. Admittedly, learning and teaching involve a lot of personal slogging and struggle, but that is quite different from the form of isolation and cut-throat competition that private tutoring entails. Reducing the isolation of tutors and tutees does not appear to be the focus of the education bazaar. On the contrary, the private path to success that it advocates devalues learning from each other.

Choice, constraint, and compulsion

Parental choice as either school choice for their children or choice of tutors and coaching centres for them is being celebrated these days as a mark of consumer sovereignty that parents ostensibly enjoy in the education bazaar so much so that our time is defined as the age of ‘parentocracy’ (Nogueira 2010). Two issues deserve special attention here. First, is parental choice sovereign or manufactured? Second, is the choice set free from class differences? Some scholars find that the demand for private tutoring is not being manufactured by teachers, but rather by households (Brehm and Silova 2014). A few studies indicate that sometimes school teachers are approached by parents to give extra tuition to children they already teach at school, particularly in rural areas where the tutoring business is still less active.

But on the other hand, there are instances in which school teachers gently and not so gently nudge parents and suggest that their children would benefit from coaching, or more menacingly that they would fail to make the passing grade without private lessons. There is a demonstration effect and peer pressure too. The promise of personal tutoring, especially of training in English language, is regarded as highly desirable by families of all classes. Many parents feel the pressure, including marginalised families that are at risk of becoming prey to commercial exploitation. Admittedly, the middle-class households that can afford the extra lessons have some say in the matter; hence traces of a model of middle-class control over schooling processes are indeed evident. But for a large section of parents, private coaching is a kind of compulsion – a choice under constraint, since ranking in examinations determines educational future of their children and mobility later on in life.

In a response to a recent order banning private tuition by the High Court in the state of Tripura – the incidence of private tutoring is found to be among the highest in Tripura and West Bengal according to recent data – a section of students and parents came out on the street protesting against the move and demanding legitimisation of private tuition. Allegedly, teachers

involved in private tutoring had urged them to demonstrate (*The Shillong Times* 21 June 2015). It is, therefore, hard to unequivocally establish that parents are calling the shots, certainly not the disadvantaged parents; rather, the demand for paid coaching is to a considerable extent supply-induced. There exist well-thought-out strategies that are often skilfully deployed to generate parental demand for supplemental help for their children. That it is mere spontaneity of parental choice behind the power that the culture of tutoring wields does not, therefore, induce full confidence.

Furthermore, 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 socially underprivileged may still remain trapped in inferior schools and inferior tuition classes, raising doubts about the inevitability of positive outcomes of choice. Also, 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.

Is private tutoring equity-enhancing?

Since there seems to be a massification of supplementary private tutoring at least in states like West Bengal, it is apt to ask whether this is an 'egalitarian' supplement and whether the market is a means to enhance equity. Lee (2013) contends that private tutoring exacerbates educational inequality between 'high' and 'low' achievers in middle school but contributes to narrowing the achievement gap in high school. That is to say, low achievers benefit more from private tutoring in high school compared to high achievers. Given the widely yawning quality gap between various tutoring services and their instructional resources and study materials (Majumdar 2014), it is, however, hard not to suggest that the privately paid supplement, determined by the size of the purse, creates new inequality along class lines and compounds the advantages of the upper middle classes. The recent data show that the incidence of private tutoring increases with the ability to pay. Recent estimates also show that the cost of tutoring makes up a huge percentage of private expenditure of schooling. It imposes a substantial burden on low-income families. Yet, parents appear 'willing' to spend a substantial amount to 'top up' their children's education. Does it mean that schools – all sorts of schools for that matter – are uniformly deficient and that parents are frustrated with them? Or is it that parents want the 'best' for their children and hence the concerted private efforts? Or perhaps there is a larger process at work that normalises the hegemonic culture of coaching in the interest of commerce and profit-making such that both schools and families are swayed to recast and reduce the idea of education into a commodity and a paper certificate. With such a level and manner of commodification, education loses much of its equalising potential.

How much parents spend on buying private lessons for their children is difficult to gauge, as this is often deliberately kept hidden – more by the tutors – for reasons that are far from straightforward. Some estimates are, however, available from field-based studies (Banerji and Wadhwa 2012; Desai *et al.* 2010; Pratiche 2002, 2009) on this phenomenon. The recent NSSO (2015) statistics on private expenditure on extra coaching in the state of West Bengal is indicative of the substantial burden that families seem to bear on this account. On average in urban West Bengal the per capita annual expenditure on private tuition at the primary level is in the order of Rs. 2,780. Probing deeper, social and economic inequalities in private spending on educational supplement become palpable; relatedly its unequalising effect becomes easily imaginable.

For the pupils of government school, this amount is roughly Rs. 1,980, whereas for those studying in private aided and private unaided schools, the corresponding figure is Rs. 3,650 and Rs. 4,790 respectively. It is common knowledge that in West Bengal, and for that matter most parts of the country, government schools are peopled mainly with children from marginalised background, whereas fee-charging (with the exception of low-fee private schools) private schools are the preserve of the privileged. And the latter group of children also spends a much larger sum on private tutoring. It is, therefore, not a secret that the wealthy parents have an advantage, as far as the ability to 'buy' better results is concerned. The more general argument that can be made is that if the culpability for educating children is largely laid at the door of the family rather than in the public domain, then the egalitarian promise of education is that much compromised, because the actualisation of that promise is contingent upon social commitment to individual educational freedom.

Equity issues are also germane to the employment generation aspect of private tuition. Private tutoring has for a long time served as a source of self-employment for the educated but unemployed youth in the country that, however, are paid a fraction of what professionally trained and qualified teachers receive. Any reservations about the system of private tutoring are often countered from this standpoint. Two quick responses may be considered. First, the culpability for unemployment cannot be laid solely at the door of the education system and its policies. Macro-economic policies and labour market policies all have their roles to play in creating job opportunities sufficient to absorb the fresh supply of job seekers. The lacklustre performance of the economy and the state sector on that front, particularly in this era of corporate capitalism – epitomised in the pithy phrase of 'jobless growth' – cannot be lost sight of. This is indeed a concern. But need we translate this concern into an argument for informalisation and causalisation of the profession of teaching – a drift palpable in the coaching bazaar? Second, and relatedly, there is both a surfeit of untrained and half-trained self-employed private tutors (sometimes glorified as 'micro-entrepreneurs') in the deregulated and informal tutoring market as well as a shortage of professionally trained teachers in the formal school sector. There is a clear case, therefore, to be made in favour of teacher preparation and their professional development and of their absorption in the formal sector such that the country's children – especially those who are trapped in poor-quality schools and casual-coaching shops – get proper training. On the other hand, if we get too swayed by the larger neoliberal politics of the avowal of informality as a solution to the problem of jobless growth, we may end up suggesting, with a bit of a stretch of the argument, that uneducated (un)employment is better than educated unemployment, for certain social classes at least.

Commerce and corruption

Karl Polanyi (1957) wrote in *The Great Transformation* that the commodity description of labour, land, and money is 'fictitious' and that their commodification will destroy human society. With the rise of education as a commercially profitable business, it is apt to ask whether knowledge too has become a 'fictitious commodity' today rather than remaining as 'the intellectual commons'. This change in the value system has certainly affected the ethos of the formal institutions of learning, perhaps corrupting even more the centres of 'learning' that operate in the informal domain. It is against this backdrop of the growing hold of the logic of the market on education that we discuss the issues of commercialisation and informalisation of the tutoring market.

Of relevance here is also the emerging global education scenario wherein we find a steady expansion of for-profit education firms offering various kinds of services including testing and school improvement services, short-term teacher preparation kits, school chains, software, etc.

National education markets are more and more open to such trans-local service provision. Even the state is being used to the aid of the market at times. The formal school system itself seems to be veering towards the principles of the market, let alone the informal tutoring sector.

The tuition market, however, is graded, offering widely divergent services, at times with quality no bar. There are home tutors, tutors supplied through micro-entrepreneurial agencies – who function as a go-between and provide tutors' details to parents and charge a commission from the tutor – full-time teachers who offer private lessons outside of school hours, university students, and the staff attached to full-scale business enterprises – 'professionals' for whom tutoring is the main source of income. Several dubious business practices swirl around the operations of such a highly variegated tuition market. Book publishers are seen to approach popular private tutors and offer them adequate incentives so that they recommend and endorse their books for the tutees. The private coaching system in general seems to gain increasing control over the market for textbooks, study guides, question paper banks, and even over the examination system. Corrupt business practices sometimes take starker forms such as sheer profiteering, outright violation of norms and ethics, such as impersonation at examination halls and the leaking of question papers, etc. In the Vyapam scam that is currently rocking the country, a large number of 'solvers' – candidates who appeared on behalf of real candidates in medical entrance exams and who have appeared on the radar of the investigative agencies – teach at coaching centres. As a newspaper report states,

Most solvers were either medical students or doctors. Some were unsuccessful candidates who could not crack the pre-medical test and later lost on the eligibility criteria because of the age factor but started teaching in coaching centres and became solvers.... The middlemen offer 'solvers' amounts ranging from Rs 200,000–300,000 for one exam.

(The Hindu 24 August 2015)

All these deeply disturbing practices disproportionately harm the already disadvantaged and restrict rather than expand their educational opportunities. A few more general concerns are powerfully articulated by Sandel (2012) and Delbanco (2013) with respect to the triumph of the market in education. They contend that the increasingly dominant social preference 'to remake the public enterprise of education on the model of private corporations', to infuse the allegedly over-bureaucratized education system with 'entrepreneurial energy' may 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'. 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.

Concluding remarks: private solution as a social priority?

No doubt, there are deficiencies in the public system of education; no doubt, there are learning gaps among students; and no doubt, parents are bound to address these trouble spots according to their ability and means. This is the right diagnosis. But what is the right treatment? Is seeking a strictly private solution – inequitable and expensive – to this public deficiency the correct response? In her recent book, Nussbaum (2010) compellingly argues that education is not for profit. Hence, distributing education as a market commodity in a profit-driven delivery system is likely to lead to a number of distortions. Simply put, educating children is an activity that has to be pursued in a predominantly non-profit system.

This is by no means to suggest that private efforts have no place in this scheme of things. The moot point is one of maintaining a sense of proportion and balance. If societal commitment to education evaporates in the face of individualised aspirations of families for a ‘good-quality’ education, and of their arduous pursuit to access personal tutoring services for their children’s educational success, then there is a problem. The excesses that we allude to in the discussion above relate to this loss of balance between a strictly ‘family strategy approach’ on the one hand and an idea of common effort to professionalise, de-commercialise, and equalise educational opportunities on the other.

More concretely, proposals for egalitarian educational reform must aim at improving and amending both the mainstream and its shadow (Majumdar 2014). 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’. Reducing the pressure of success in examinations could also be a part of essential reforms. Examinations too need to be modelled 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 time-tested proposals of innovative examinations reform that energise rather than enervate the education system. What is critical, of course, is 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 school teachers from tutoring their own students privately – a measure that has been adopted in many states in India and in many parts of the globe.

Above all, a balance has to be restored at the level of public discourse and popular imagination itself. That education has to be a cooperative endeavour seems to be steadily fading away from public consciousness. The limits imposed by the dominant discourse of individuated choice for a ‘fictitious commodity’ of education seems to be detracting from bringing people together around a common project of improving and reforming the public delivery of education. Excessive focus on educational success seems to be weakening the common and united effort to solve the first-order problem, namely, the lack of creativity and critical thinking in teaching-learning processes that the college teacher in Kolkata, whom we have quoted at the beginning of this chapter, so succinctly and poignantly articulated several decades ago. To secure individual and social flourishing through education, the urgent task is to resist the modern-day enclosure of the commons of the mind.

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